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The Balkanization of the Media

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AVON HILLS SALON

Thoughts from the Avon Hills

Noreen Herzfeld on “The Balkanization of the Media”

MARCH 3, 2017

Noreen Herzfeld

To those who are familiar with the wars in the Balkans, much of Donald Trump’s rhetoric sounds eerily familiar. Trump’s promise to his base that “You will never be ignored again” brings to mind Slobodan Milošević’s promise to the Serbs on the field of Kosovo Polje: “You will never be beaten again.” Milošević, like Trump, was an old hand at presenting “alternative facts.” Reporter Peter Maas writes, “Milošević existed in a different dimension, a twilight zone of lies, and I was mucking about in the dimension of facts.”

Sound familiar? How are these leaders able to bring so many others into their twilight zone? What makes neighbor turn against neighbor?

Your initial answer might be, “The Balkans were a special case. Those people have hated each other since the fourteenth century.” Don’t believe this oft repeated canard. Before the war, 30% of marriages in Sarajevo were between partners from different ethnic groups.

Far more to blame was a polarized media, one that did the bidding of politicians exploiting ethnic differences for personal power, allowing, indeed, forcing ethnic groups into separate realities. Christopher Bennett, reporter in Belgrade at the time and current director of the

International Crisis Group's Balkan Project, notes: "More important than what was or was not actually happening in Yugoslavia in the run up to and during the war were perceptions of what was taking place. These depended not on real events but on an atmosphere created by the rival media. As the various republican leaders adopted increasingly antagonistic positions, so did the media they controlled."

As media outlets became increasingly separated by ethnicity they also became increasingly separated from reality. Bennett gives an example: "On March 2, 1991, armed Croats and Serbs faced each other. . . The media were also there in force and, though shots were fired, both militias backed down and the day passed off without casualties. Nevertheless, Radio Belgrade reported six Serbs had been killed." With few alternative sources, each side believed only what they read and heard from their own media outlets. Newspapers and radio stations quickly purged staff of the "wrong" ethnicity or those who did not tow the party line. The media became "arguably . . . the most destructive weapon in the wars of Yugoslav dissolution."

Over the past 25 years, AM talk shows, cable channels, and the advent of social media have brought a similar "Balkanization" to the US. Fake news played a significant part in our election last November. Such news was weaponized by Republicans, Democrats, and a meddling foreign power. Russia is now seeking to play a similar role in upcoming European elections. The European Union has put together a team to identify and debunk stories coming from Russian troll factories. In the past 16 months this team has identified more than 2,500 such stories.

This raises several questions. First, is there any way to guard against such weaponization of the media? Fake news (or illicitly obtained material such as the DNC emails) is almost impossible to source. "What makes cyberattacks so sexy for foreign powers is that it is nearly impossible to find a smoking gun," notes Hans-Georg Maassen of German intelligence.

If you can't stop it at the source, can social media platforms be better regulated? Unlikely. While Facebook editors are directed not to deliberately "trend" a story that appears only in a single source, such as Breitbart, much of what is trending is determined by algorithms that look not at sources but at numbers. While Mark Zuckerberg denies that Facebook played any determining role in the US election, one must ask whether social media sites such as Facebook are publishers or simply platforms. Proprietary algorithms that pick and choose what come up on your news feed or Twitter log suggests the former.

A second question: Given the prominence of Russia and other former Eastern Bloc countries (including, ironically, parts of the former Yugoslavia) in the generation of fake news, is this an act of cyberwarfare? The nonpartisan military and technological think tank PropOrNot published a white paper recently that identified more than 200 websites as "routine peddlers of Russian propaganda during the election season, with combined audiences of at least 15 million Americans" and estimated that on Facebook alone 213 million posts had their origin in Russia's troll factories.

This is disinformation on a massive scale. Propaganda such as this would have been considered a weapon of war in a conflict such as WWII. We are, of course, in no such conflict

with the Russians. Yet one has to ask how war and its definition are changing in a world in which so much happens online.

We in the US currently have a president who lives as much in the virtual as in the real world, getting his information from cable TV and proposing policy in 3 AM tweets. Meanwhile, Trump fulminates against the mainstream media as an “enemy of the people,” and “the opposition party.” Like Milošević, Trump employs his staff to provide “alternate facts” which are taken uncritically by his base. In a recent article in the New York Times, former rightwing commentator Chris Sykes stated that “the more the fact-based media tries to debunk the president’s falsehoods, the further it will entrench the battle lines.”

Feodor Dostoevsky wrote: “A man who lies to himself, and believes his own lies, becomes unable to recognize truth.” So do such a man’s followers. We all know what Milosevic’s words led to. Yugoslavia went through five years of war, ethnic cleansing, rape camps, and the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees, most of whom have not returned to their ancestral homes. Bosnia remains a failed state, with deeply entrenched ethnic factions and power structures that fan division rather than promote unity. Guardian writer John Naughton labels the Internet the same way, as a failed state, deeply divided on partisan lines, a place where crime and deception has reached “astonishing levels.”

We cannot yet say the same thing about the US. But have we started down the same road?