Discourses of Sociotechnical Error and Accuracy in U.S. and PRC News Media: The Case of the 1999 Bombing of the Chinese Embassy in Belgrade

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The North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) 1999 bombing campaign against Yugoslavia featured the first operational use of Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) "smart" munitions. The accuracy of these weapons promised a new and more responsible form of warfare, with surgical strikes against military targets. In practice, the campaign featured extensive targeting of nonmilitary targets, including the bombing of the People's Republic of China (PRC) embassy in Belgrade. This article explores the deployment of sociotechnical error in media coverage of the bombing in the United States and PRC. Drawing on recent scholarship in science and technology studies and media studies on the anthropophobia of contemporary militarism's investment in automation, I read U.S. and PRC media coverage of the bombing against the formal prohibition on striking civilian targets. I argue that by carefully pursuing the nature of the sociotechnical error it represented, U.S. media constructed the bombing as anomalous, naturalizing NATO's practice of selecting civilian targets. A discourse of sociotechnical error is shown to have precluded normative questions of target selection in the United States and clandestine operations in the PRC.

Keywords: sociotechnical error, accuracy, humanitarian war, U.S.–China relationship, media and war

In 2000, Mike Wallace interviewed then-Chinese-president Jiang Zemin on *60 Minutes*. Wallace was arch, relishing the chance to play hardball with the paramount leader. In the interview, he calls Jiang a dictator to his face. Jiang grins, gamely wrangling with Wallace over the term. Later, Wallace narrates:

The President's aids suggested it would be unfair to show pictures of the violence at Tiananmen Square . . . but they were glad to give us pictures of their embassy in Belgrade, which had been demolished by American bombers during NATO's air war. (Anderson, 2000, 11:25)

Wallace then asks if Jiang can *really* believe that the bombing was intentional, as maintained by protesters in China. Jiang's smile flags as he responds that the U.S. military apparatus is so high tech that calling the bombing an error is "absolutely unconvincing" (Anderson, 2000, 11:45). Wallace asks what motive the United States could have for such an attack. Jiang switches to English: "That, for me, is also a question" (Anderson, 2000, 12:19). Why would the United States do this to China?

On May 7, 1999, a B-2 stealth bomber dropped five Joint Direct Attack Munition-guided bombs on the Chinese embassy in Belgrade, killing three and injuring at least twenty. As the exchange above illustrates, U.S. media narrated the bombing as an error, while PRC (People's Republic of China) media narrated it as an intentional attack. In both cases, accuracy was the preferred framework for narrating the bombing: U.S. media insisted that the CIA had inaccurately recorded the address of both its intended target and the PRC embassy (CNN, 2000; Gordon, 1999), and PRC media insisted that U.S. intelligence and weapons systems were too accurate to miss ("NATO Bombing," 1999; Ni, 1999). This article asks what it means to say, in the context of NATO's air war against Yugoslavia, that the bombing of an embassy was a "major error" (Tenet, 1999). I argue that state actors in the United States and PRC both had strong incentives to adopt this framework of accuracy, given competing evidence that the causes of the bombing may have involved target selection (Schmitt, 1999; Sweeney et al., 1999): normative questions of what should or should not constitute a legitimate target.

With the rise of drone warfare, scholars in science and technology studies (Asaro, 2019; Suchman, 2020), media studies (Packer & Reeves, 2020), and philosophy (Massumi, 2015) have excavated the anthropophobic underpinnings of the U.S. military's pursuit of autonomous weapons, capable of selecting targets with minimal human input. The case of the Belgrade bombing indicates that discourses of sociotechnical error, themselves the basis for this anthropophobia (Kindervater, 2017, pp. 29, 33–35; Packer & Reeves, 2020, pp. 16–19), can be deployed to obstruct public discussion of how wars should be fought. By inviting the citizen back into a deliberative role in the fighting of wars, normative questions of target selection could threaten the increasing autonomy of the post–Cold War security state.

Precision Strikes on Civilian Targets

U.S. media amplified official characterizations of the embassy bombing as an anomalous error and investigated how it had occurred (Thussu, 2000, pp. 352–353) but did not explore the reasons why it qualified as an error in the first place. The two most relevant clauses in international law are the principle of distinction, which requires combatants to always distinguish between civilians and noncombatants and refrain from targeting the latter (Benvenuti, 2001, pp. 514–516), and consular immunity, which places diplomatic missions under the jurisdiction of their sponsoring country (Shi, 2019, pp. 689, 694).

While readers might assume that the primary reason the bombing qualified as a "major error" was that it resulted in the deaths of three noncombatants at a site where no military personnel were present, the nature of NATO's bombing campaign makes clear that this is not the case. NATO targets included bridges, power stations, hospitals, a sanatorium, a television station, a refugee camp, a bus, and other nonmilitary sites (United Nations, 2000, p. 5). Media coverage of this practice was scant in the United States, where such strikes were rarely considered errors (Ackerman & Naureckas, 2000). Days before the Belgrade embassy bombing, a *New York Times* article even included quotes from General Naumann, then NATO's senior military officer, suggesting that the air campaign was hamstrung by its determination to avoid "collateral damage" (Whitney, 1999). The standard for measuring error was not, then, the targeting of noncombatants. More likely, U.S. media assumed that NATO forces respected consular immunity.

By contrast, airstrikes on civilian infrastructure were routinely condemned in PRC media ("What NATO Bombing," 1999; Yang & Yuan, 1999). PRC media responded to the embassy bombing differently not only for nationalist reasons, although these were important, but because journalists had correctly noted from early in the war that NATO was intentionally striking civilian targets. For PRC media, NATO's precision bombing of the embassy seemed consistent with this practice ("Is It Humanitarianism," 1999), even if the May 7 violation of consular immunity (and by extension PRC sovereignty) demanded more severe condemnation ("International Community," 1999; Yu et al., 1999).

Sociotechnical Error as a Depolitical Framework

In October 1999, the *Guardian*'s sister paper, the *London Observer*, published an article with *Politiken*, a Danish newspaper. The article begins, "Nato [sic] deliberately bombed the Chinese embassy in Belgrade . . . after discovering it was being used to transmit Yugoslav army communications" (Sweeney et al., 1999, para. 1). Rumors to this effect had appeared in left-leaning alternative U.S. media as early as May 11 (Democracy Now, 1999), and on June 25, the *New York Times* ran a story by Pulitzer Prize–winning journalist Eric Schmitt. The article was headlined, "Two victims in US raid reportedly were spies," and claimed that, according to unnamed Pentagon officials, the specific part of the embassy bombed was "the compound's intelligence-gathering nerve center," and that "'That's exactly why [the Chinese] don't buy our explanation'" (Schmitt, 1999, para. 3). Subsequent coverage did not engage this narrative.

The Observer's investigation contradicts the dominant U.S. media narrative that the strike was the result of inaccurate targeting practices. It also contradicts the dominant PRC media narrative, which takes for granted the embassy's neutrality. This alternative narrative answers Jiang's implicit question to Mike Wallace: "Why would the US do this?" PRC media could hardly report that the embassy was targeted because it was the site of an ongoing intelligence operation.

In U.S. media, embracing sociotechnical error as a framework made discussion of what constitutes a legitimate target seem unnecessary. Engaging the embassy bombing as a successful, accurate airstrike would require a discussion of how targets were selected. Even if an explanation were given that the embassy had concealed an intelligence operation, the extraordinarily provocative move of striking a PRC diplomatic mission would invite discussion of how the decision had been made and of what qualifies as a military target.

This is an interdiscursive relationship that Lucy Suchman has identified in the celebration of precision-guided munitions (PGMs). The valorization of PGMs in terms of their accuracy precludes a discussion of ethical target selection (Suchman, 2020, pp. 182–183). Granted that there is the technical question of whether a bomber can strike a given target, "why is it right for us to kill whom we mean to kill?" (Zehfuss, 2010, p. 562). Twenty-five years after the Belgrade bombing, it is also clear that vast increases in sociotechnical accuracy, both in terms of locating targets and striking them, has not reduced the suffering of noncombatants (Conetta, 2004, p. 19).

Scholars like Peter Asaro (2012; 2019), Katharine Kindervater (2015; 2017), and Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves (2020) have also pointed to the increasing investment in automaticity in target

selection as exemplary of the evacuation of the human, long maligned as a source of error, from warfare. In 1999, the U.S. military's interest in artificial intelligence was more theoretical than it is today (Johnson, Moses, & Psotka, 1998), but the media life of the Belgrade bombing offers a bridge between scholarship on military automation and an older trajectory: the insulation of warmaking against politics. In the United States, the steady expansion of presidential power, especially in terms of foreign policy (Schlesinger, 1973), along with the transition to an all-volunteer force, insulates war from democratic control. More recently, the W. Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations each pushed the envelope in terms of unilateral war powers, expanding the role of special operations, which are particularly free from civilian control (Michael, 2017, pp. 62–66). In the PRC, New Left scholars like Dai Jinhua (2018) and Wang Hui (2006) have theorized a general depoliticization of Chinese politics, with public discussion shifting from questions of what ought to be done to questions of "development" and performative government "effectiveness" (Ding, 2022, pp. 6–10) against the backdrop of an ongoing military buildup (Bommakanti & Amjad, 2023).

In media studies, scholars like Roger Stahl, Tim Lenoir, and Luke Caldwell have elaborated the postpropaganda figure of the "citizen spectator" (Stahl, 2010, pp. 20–31, 42–48) or "virtual citizen-soldier" (Stahl, 2010, pp. 139–142), whose ideal relation to warfighting is constructed as the consumption of combat images (Stahl, 2010, pp. 31–35) or the playing of (virtual) combat experiences (Lenoir & Caldwell, 2018, pp. 102–103, 153–157). This is the civilian dimension of the anthropophobic and technophilic military tendency described by Asaro (2012, pp. 699–702), Kindervater (2017, pp. 28–31), and Suchman (2020, pp. 177–178, 181–183). The dual evacuations of the human from targeting and the citizen from war are sustained by discourses of accuracy. The case of the Belgrade bombing shows us that, by constructing error as anomalous, discourses of sociotechnical error can serve the same function. Both discourses foreground the sociotechnical question of targeting capability at the expense of political questions of target selection: How are legitimate targets decided on? In the case of the Belgrade bombing, the insistent recourse to sociotechnical error as the explanation for the violation of consular immunity must be read against the glaring absence of coverage of the routine bombings of other civilian infrastructure.

Conclusion

The dominant narrative in U.S. media was that the Belgrade embassy bombing was the result of a complex series of sociotechnical errors. CIA databases did not record accurate addresses for the intended target or for the embassy, an analyst used an improper technique to determine the actual address, and this error was not detected. PRC media contested this assessment, asserting that the bombing was intentional and accurate, but could not provide an account of the motive. Based on the investigations of Schmitt (1999) and Sweeney and colleagues (1999), this is likely because any discussion of motive risked drawing attention to intelligence activities at the embassy, complicating a narrative of pure victimhood.

NATO likewise benefited from widespread disinterest in the account proposed by Schmitt (1999) and Sweeney and cohorts (1999): no matter what was going on inside, an intentional strike on an embassy would raise questions regarding NATO's broader practice of targeting civilian infrastructure. In the case of the Belgrade embassy bombing, debates about the nature of sociotechnical error

complemented new claims of accuracy by securing for the bombing the status of an exception. Exploring how the error took place in sociotechnical terms of databases, techniques, and protocols took place at the expense of discussion of the policy of targeting civilian infrastructure. The unwillingness of U.S. media to engage this question persisted throughout the United States' subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

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