

## Media Wars and the Humanitarian (non-)Interventions

### An Interview with Tom Keenan

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tk: What is your opinion about media rights formulated in terms of the right of access, of bandwidth?

gl: It is a good idea to stress the topic of the politics of cyberspace. Not merely the ritual formulations about the need for universal access, which has become a slogan in the United States. Not just 'We Want More Bandwidth' but a claim for bandwidth as such as a right. When you and I met at the Hybrid Workspace at Documenta, X Saskia Sassen had spoken about electronic space and the formation of new claims. She talked about a host of new political actors, both of the corporate multinational type and the local disadvantaged groups. I was troubled by her notion of presentation, which seemed to suggest that the public space, the city, was somehow effectively a space of presence, a space into which actors enter and present themselves. But the idea of 'self-presentation' brings with it the concepts of the Self, identity and essence, foundation, which seem to have become increasingly questionable, even unreliable. 'Because I am who I am, I make this demand for articulation, expression, access... bandwidth.'

After 30 years of philosophical criticism, the fabled deconstruction of the metaphysics of presence, maybe we have developed new ways of thinking and practicing what a claim is. Cyberspace, among other things because it's not something simply present, makes this clear. For me, calling something a 'right' means: precisely because I don't have and cannot take for granted something that is mine as a naturally given possession, precisely because it is not here now, I claim it. That is a claim without any ground or basis in the present. It takes place in public, but the public is the space of appearance, of persuasion, of force and argument -- not of presence and grounds. That's what a claim is: baseless, in this sense. It is a projection, a desire, articulated in relation to something absent. This does not mean that I just want it for me. It would be an achievement, an attainment, a conquest to get bandwidth. It will be the object of political struggle. It will be a creation, not something which was already yours, but which you just did not have yet. It will cause trouble, it will invent something,

disrupt; it will fabricate something new. And maybe it will sound a little strange: as we are editing this interview, CNN correspondent Satinder Bindra is reporting on my television from New Delhi about the 'digital divide,' and a 'lobbyist' identified as Dewand Mehta tells him: "There should be a constitutional right that every adult citizen should get two Mbps of bandwidth, and this is the vision we have for the next five years."

tk: What was your topic of your 100 days lecture at Documenta X?

I spoke about the role of television news media, and a so-called crisis in the public sphere, during the conflict in the former Yugoslavia, and especially in Bosnia. We now understand that fighting takes place not just on the street, between bunkers, with artillery, but with the 'artillery of the press,' the media as weapon. I was trying -- I still am -- to understand two conflicting interpretations of the role of media in contemporary warfare. If we look at the history of traditional humanitarianism (intervention against famines, for instance), or the Gulf War and the conflict in Somalia, we might delight in or worry about the causal power of images, but we can say with some confidence, as Kouchner said, 'without media, no humanitarian intervention.' If something shows up on television, then something is bound to happen. Starving people, and dead soldiers, in Somalia, did indeed get things going. Sarajevo seems to present the counter to that argument. The more things were shown on television, the less anything happened. Hence the notion that television induced a narcosis, a stupor or voyeurism, which deprived us of the capacity for action, rather than spurring us. I spoke about an example from Snipers Alley in Sarajevo, where cameras and reporters of the international news media waited for people who were almost certain to be shot if they walked across this street in daylight. I was particularly interested in one analysis, by a reporter himself (Roger Cohen of the New York Times), which suggested that this voyeurism became somehow generalized in Bosnia: the camera team, and the UN, and the victim who had a videotape of his attempted murder, were all in more or less the same voyeuristic position -- as were we. There is a generalized pleasure in viewing. A strange kind of intervention. One has a sense here of an omnipresence of media as entertainment, even for the so-called victims.

tk: The war in Bosnia did not have a mobilizing effect. People could not identify themselves with any one of the parties. They all seemed victims and guilty at the same time. There was a similarity between the 'passive' behavior of the television viewers and the incapability of France, the UK and the UN to stop this war.

gl: There is a direct analogy between the semi-distanced position that defines that of the news media, and what seems like the non-intervention of the 'international community.' That is part of a 'journalistic' ideology and self-understanding: not to get too involved. Certainly in Bosnia journalists played with this. A lot of them became less than detached. A feeling of involvement

emerged, but structurally, the position of the media remained analogous to a military force that intervenes on humanitarian grounds alone, claiming strict neutrality between all the so-called warring factions. We treat this one the same as that one, which is exactly the structure of the camera that looks at all potential subjects with a levelling force. It does not distinguish between the images that it presents. But, that said, I think we still need to refine the notion of passivity. There is no such thing as passivity or inaction. The arrival of the cameras, like the arrival of thousands of soldiers, hundreds of NGOs, relief agencies, Red Crosses, does something, like it or not. All of those interventions transformed the situation on the ground and on the screen. In the same way as the presence of the camera induces certain events. There is a magnetic appeal there, drawing out speech and performance, helping things to happen. Likewise, the passivity of the humanitarian, inadvertently, leads to a transformation of the situation.

tk: Still, we have to face the fact there was no large anti-war movement as there was in the days of Vietnam.

gl: The outcry did not occur. What energy there was, was largely -- sometimes almost immediately -- rechannelled into a humanitarian response. Rather than saying, 'We need to intervene, we need to stop the genocide', we said, 'Poor, suffering people need food, help, shelter, convoys, blue plastic sheeting.' Humanitarianism was an opportunity, a vehicle of expression, to resist injustice, but in Bosnia it inadvertently allowed itself to be enlisted in aggression, even genocide -- somehow a pro-war movement, a movement that prolonged the war by rewarding the aggressors. This is the great insight of analysts like Rony Brauman and David Rieff. The humanitarian intervention came in fact to prolong the war by stabilizing certain zones of conflict, by rewarding the clearing of populations on ethnic grounds. By financing and feeding, the humanitarian efforts rendered unnecessary a military and political intervention and offered an alibi.

tk: The situation in Bosnia is contained now, but a lot of the issues are still open, not only the media question. New facts are being brought up, as in the case of Srebrenica, where the Dutch battalion 'witnessed' the slaughter of thousands of civilians.

gl: You are certainly right about the unending character of Bosnia -- the catastrophe of Srebrenica, the round-up and execution of so many thousands of men, under the extremely watchful but utterly helpless eyes of the Dutch peacekeepers, is a rebuke to us all, and one that will stay with us for a long time. The memory of Rwanda should stay with us even longer: the most temporally concentrate mass killing in recorded history, in a place (again) watched over by a UN peacekeeping force. I do not think we yet know how to address the problems inside the conceptual and practical logics of peacekeeping and humanitarianism to prevent this happening again. The UN

may try to reform the way it operates -- and certainly the interventions in East Timor and in Kosovo represent new steps -- but until we confront the irreducibly political, and not simply humanitarian, character of the actions that are called for we won't get very far.

tk: The NGO-branch in many countries is booming. Should their growth be of any worry?

Critics complain about a "lack of accountability" on the side of the civic sector -- and you are one of them. Is a legal framework missing here? At the third Next Five Minutes conference, in March 1999, we discussed this topic around the notion of the Post Governmental Organization, which are more focussed on the level of global networks than on the ruined bodies of the nation state. Obviously Greenpeace, the Soros Foundations, Rockefeller and numerous other funding bodies with grass roots affiliations can set the agenda in certain fields. Yet, their size is tiny compared to global corporations. What are we talking about there? Please put this phenomena in perspective for us.

gl: One place where some of that new thinking about politics is happening is, as you point out, in and because of the NGO movement. Today, it is not an exaggeration to say that international politics can be and are conducted by non-state, civil society, actors. Foreign relations are no longer the province only of states, diplomats, militaries or of transnational corporations. Other parties can cross borders in an organized way and intervene. The risk that this brings with it is the ideology of humanitarian neutrality or non-partisanship: only the properly unbordered can cross borders freely, it seems. But when they intervene, these would-be neutrals, they always take sides, they are helpless not to, and that gives the most aid, material or spiritual, to the dominant regional force, the bad actor. The logic that intertwines and divides humanitarianism and politics is amazingly complex: James Orbinski of Medecins sans frontieres charted it beautifully in his speech accepting the 1999 Nobel Peace Prize:

"Humanitarianism occurs where the political has failed or is in crisis. [...] For MSF, this is the humanitarian act: to seek to relieve suffering, to seek to restore autonomy, to witness to the truth of injustice, and to insist on political responsibility." But along the way, especially if you are unarmed and bringing only food and medicine, you must make arrangements, even compromises, with the dominant power. So, no neutrality, in fact, but also no accountability. What is astonishing is the profound immunity of these agencies from critique. If there is a contemporary sacred cow, it is humanitarianism, or civil society, or conflict resolution and human rights organizations. Almost the only ground, at least in the United States, for criticizing a humanitarian agency is that it wastes money. 'For every dollar we gave to Save the Children, 50% of it went to pay staff,' or whatever. That's not the point. In fact, many organizations are too effective. Their effectivity consists in handing over relief goods to the parties that are by and large responsible for causing the shortage of food and medicine. And they answer, most of the time, to no one -- only to the 'facts on the ground,' not to

those they seek (honestly, I believe) to help, not really to their donors, not to any organized or transparent political process.

Obviously, I don't think they should be re-absorbed by the nation-state organisms they quite properly displace and challenge (and one worrisome tendency is in fact the transformation of many NGOs, particularly, relief agencies, into sub-contractors of big governments), nor by the logic of representation (for instance, Parliamentary) that they by definition break with. (Michel Foucault already pointed this out in June of 1981, at a press conference for the Comité international contre la piracie.) But new mechanisms of response, responsibility, new kinds of contracts, need to be invented. That is where a critique would have to begin. To their credit, there are some human rights organizations which have begun to question the new politics of humanitarianism, and of the human rights movement. I would mention African Rights in London, which published in November 1994 an important and still underrecognized white paper called 'Humanitarianism Unbound', which tries to understand the lack of accountability of NGOs in crises like Bosnia or Rwanda. This critique is expanded in an important book by one of the paper's authors, Alex de Waal, called "Famine Crimes," which begins to elaborate a logic of 'contract' that might take us some way toward an answer.

We could also begin to invent this critique, and to imagine responses to the bind it articulates, in the case of the thing called 'independent media'. We have inherited the notion of independent media from the campaigns against communist dictatorships, where the state was seen as absorbing or preventing the creation of any public sphere or civil society. What was privileged, and supported by Western or transnational agencies, was the notion of independence in relation to the state, which was seen as a totalizing force. Independent media were, simply and powerfully, the anti-state press, voices of an alternative which could not but be an opposition. Now the number of non-state actors in the former communist states has multiplied in a way which is hard to calculate. The UN, EC or Soros have a very hard time understanding what 'independent' might mean in relation to a state which is no longer simply totalitarian. We spoke about this in Potsdam, especially about the case of former Yugoslavia and projects like Zamir, which as successful as they were in opening channels and getting people talking, and as important at the micro-level as they were, never quite achieved their objectives. Communication, open channels, alternative voices, are necessary but not sufficient conditions for democratic or anti-nationalist political action. This is also, strangely, the lesson from the big media in Bosnia too: dead Sarajevans in the street don't automatically generate political responses, even if dead American soldiers in the streets of Mogadishu seemed to.

Media, and especially independent ones, are critical for 'transitions,' but they are no substitute for all the other necessities too, most notably politics. And simply supporting other voices for the sake of their otherness can become quite

politically dangerous, now that the threats to freedom do not stem simply from the state. In Rwanda, one of the outcomes of the 1991 Arusha peace agreement (between the Hutu government and the largely-Tutsi Rwandan Patriotic Front), was a considerable amount of international support for independent media, especially radio. Much of the money went to extremist political media -- very successful from a pluralist point of view, lots of independence from the state, many voices represented, etc., -- and when the radical parties and their militias were ready for the 'final solution to the Tutsi problem,' the independent radios were the primary means of organizing and mobilizing the population for the most concentrated and swift experiment in political killing we have ever seen.

tk: The general mood on the Internet has been very tense during the months of the Kosov@ crisis, in the March-June period of 1999. We both were heavily involved. How do you look back on the media aspect of this conflict? It all seemed so different compared to the Gulf War. Yes, there was propaganda, from both NATO and the Milosevic regime. What did surprise you?

gl: Has enough time passed already for a 'look back'? It feels as if Kosovo is not quite over yet. But, to precipitate things: what surprised me was the excitement about the 'first Internet war,' and the hopes it raised. First off, I liked very much your insight (in the Bastard special issue on the war) that everything's different in wartime. "It seems hard for the advocates of independent media and free cyberspace to acknowledge, that in times of war there is little or no role for this famous civil society to play. [...] Obvious, one would say. But we still have rather high expectations of, for example, b92, or even from Kosovar Albanians hiding in Pristina.' Why do we have those expectations? First, as you point out, because we still tend to amalgamate 'the media,' and fail to distinguish between big and little, global and independent, media ... which, we should add, is also a difficult distinction to make in wartime, when those rare pieces of camcorder footage smuggled from Pristina or Izbica are broadcast virtually unedited on global satellite networks, and when the websites of NATO, b92, the KLA, and the BBC are effectively interlinked. And second, because we still hope that the independent media and especially the Internet will do for us what politics seemingly will not: connect people, open channels, promote understanding, tell the truth, raise awareness, create solidarity and consensus, induce responsible action, and so on. But as long as we keep expecting that the media will replace politics, and replace it wisely, cleanly, and efficiently, which is to say, as long as we keep hoping we can get rid of politics, we're bound to be disappointed. (Here's where the distinction between propaganda and free media is especially powerful and difficult: the more we keep defining free media as nothing more than not-propaganda, the higher our expectations for it rise and the more bitterly we'll be disappointed.) It was as if people thought, on the model of the adage that the net treats censorship as damage and routes around it, that we could simply treat war as damage too, or imagine at least that the primary thing war did to information was censor it.

The Internet didn't stop the war, nor did it win the war. It emerged as a conflict zone itself -- what we called a 'data conflict' in Potsdam some years back -- and that is, in a sense, what and how it should be. Of course the mood was tense: there was a war going on. Advocates for the combatants, and sometimes the combatants or at least the targets, were exposed rather directly to one another. What we were doing on the net -- whether on big lists like nettime and syndicate or on smaller ones like JustWatch -- was, as the nettime motto has it, 'filtering' -- selecting, interpreting, reacting, commenting, recycling and amplifying, interrupting and diverting -- words and ideas, stories and positions, and not merely from outside the conflict. No war is fought, at least not today, without those words and ideas, justifications and challenges, and their meanings are never given in advance. So the Internet emerged as a new space in which those contexts and meanings could be argued over, addressed and redistributed. It was also a space, and a time, in which the war could be, not just overheard or watched, but witnessed. And engaged in: whatever else was conventional about the war, the emergence of hackers, which is to say a proper information battlefield, was new. The net was not only a space of representation and dialogue but of action at the level of its own language, of its framing devices, instructions and addresses, its mode of presentation, before and sometimes at the cost of the 'information' which was presented.

Of course, a lot of people and buildings and data went missing in the war, and a lot of messages were not returned or even received, but there were few mysteries in Kosovo. Pretty much everything was entirely predictable, predicted, and still the political response was late, slow, halting, high-altitude, not quite finished. On the ground and overhead, technical means were necessary, but they were not sufficient. I don't think that the technologies of virtuality converted us into voyeuristic spectators, but neither did they solve our political problems for us. Is this a surprise? Media and new media, free information, even with their unprecedented opportunities, are never enough for politics. Looking back, at this very short range, only this rather ordinary conclusion emerges: perhaps we need to radicalize these information flows, not in the vain hope of replacing or circumventing the political, but in order to discover it.