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RESEARCH ARTICLE



Between Cultural Engineering, Media Sensationalism and Memetic Propaganda: A Curious Case of Erratic Obituaries for the Late American Secretary, Madelaine Albright

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Abstract

A controversial and grotesque obituary for former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright appeared on 25 March 2022, at the door of the Sokol House building in Banja Luka, the capital of the Bosnian Serb Republic. A similar obituary was found in Arilje, Serbia. Both obituaries quickly circulated on social media and became headlines in Serbian mass media, demonstrating the power of memes in spreading complex cultural information. This incident is being studied to understand how memetic content can be used in culture wars and public diplomacy and how the American government and Serbian-American relations are represented in Serbian public political discourse, particularly in relation to Albright's death. The study inspects the literature on memetics and thanatopolitics while introducing a rigorous research methodology (rhetorical criticism and mediated discourse analysis) in order to study the mentioned obituaries and accompanying news articles. Our findings suggest that using memes as collective memory anchors (or taking a meme's eye of view approach) can be effective in propaganda activities, particularly in culture wars. We argue that the analyzed case represents an instance of memetic propaganda, as it encompasses a sophisticated fusion of media sensationalism with memetic/cultural engineering techniques.

KEYWORDS

Memes; thanatopolitics; public diplomacy; culture wars; U.S.—Serbia relations; discourse analysis; Internet memes; propaganda

Introduction

The Latin phrase “Mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est” is well-known for its translation, “Nothing must be said about the dead except the good”. This aphoristic guidance remains pertinent today and is often cited as a reminder to show respect for those who have perished away. In legal contexts, however, the phrase is used to convey the opposite meaning. Defaming a deceased individual is not considered a criminal offense in many jurisdictions, although it's considered insensitive to criticise someone who has recently passed away. The phrase encourages people to focus on the positive aspects of a

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person's life and legacy. Nonetheless, people do not consistently choose to follow this particular path.

For instance, "You left, you did not try the sarma ... The dog/bitch is whining, and I think it is you" (sr. "Otišla, si sarmu probala nisi ... Kuče cvili, a ja mislim ti si")—these are some of the verses that were written on the obituary dedicated to the former US Secretary of State, Madeleine Albright (see Figure 1). This controversial obituary appeared on 25 March 2022. It was attached to the door of the iconic Sokol House building in Banja Luka—the capital of the Bosnian Serb Republic (sr. Republika Srpska). Among the signatories were those employed in this establishment and their relatives. Simultaneously, an obituary with similar content appeared in the city of Arilje, which is located in Serbia (see Figure 2).

Both obituaries began to circulate on social networks within a few hours so that in the following days, they would find themselves as one of the headlines in the mass media. This further intensified their propagation—admittedly in the form of online and offline news. This particular example could serve as a suitable case study for the convergence power of memes, that is, the circulation of complex cultural information in the media space. This study provides some perspicuity into how memetic content can be used in culture wars and public diplomacy. Furthermore, it concentrates on the imagery of the American government in Serbian public political discourse.

The first part of the paper will delve into an in-depth review of the literature on culture wars and public diplomacy, emphasising the contextual explanation surrounding post-Yugoslav Serbia and United States relations. Following this, fascinating fields of memetics and thanatopolitics are examined. In the second part of the article, the authors introduce



Figure 1. Obituary for Madeleine Albright—released in capital of Republika Srpska, Banja Luka.

Source: <https://www.republika.rs/svet/region/349896/medlin-olbrajt-umrlica-banjaluka>.



Figure 2. Obituary for Madeleine Albright—released in town of Arilje, Republic of Serbia.

Source: https://www.instagram.com/arilje_oglasna_tabla/.

rigorous research methodology and the research questions the study aims to address, followed by a discussion of the results. The authors aim to provide valuable and thought-provoking insights into the subject matter.

Literature review

Culture wars, mass media & public diplomacy—post Yugoslav Serbia and U.S. context

For this scientific inquiry, it is essential to provide a brief overview of the political and historical circumstances concerning the NATO intervention in the Former Republic of Yugoslavia (short: FRY), as the late Albright played one of the pivotal roles in it. Furthermore, it is necessary to explain the concept of cultural wars.

At the end of the twentieth century, the political order in international relations underwent significant disruptions, breaking the multi-decade bipolarity and leaving the United States (USA) as the only dominant world power in global politics. The USA tried to use the moment of unipolarity (created by the collapse of the Soviet Union) to consolidate its dominion (see Krauthammer 1990) and to create the path for the rationalisation of NATO's further role in international politics. This particular period, the last decade of the previous century, Serbia and the rest of post-Yugoslav space, has been exceptionally convulsive, with the rise of nationalist movements in all republics (Bakić 2011, 81–88) and wars in Croatia, Bosnia & Herzegovina, and Kosovo & Metohija. The continued existence of Yugoslavia, as an Eastern Bloc country with a socialist regime in power, was unacceptable to the world led by the USA after the collapse of the USSR. Although Yugoslavia was faced with numerous internal problems and with growing and destructive particularistic nationalist movements in all republics, it is not possible to talk about the disintegration of this

state without reference to the international context in which its disintegration occurred (see Szczesio 2021).

As previously mentioned—at the end of the twentieth century, the Western world, guided by neoliberal ideology and capitalist ideas, made efforts to dominate global politics. On the way to achieving that goal, there were regimes, nations, and states that Huntington described as “opposed civilizations” (see Huntington 1996), among which was Yugoslavia (Serbia). Although neoliberal theorists such as Francis Fukuyama discussed the “end of history” and the undeniable victory of the neoliberal-capitalist-oriented world (see Fukuyama 1992), the Yugoslav wars revealed that in the practical world of politics, it is still not possible to speak of the “end of history”. Particular identities, such as national and religious ones, still hold significant influence in parts of the world that have not followed the political, economic, and social trajectory inherent to the Western world. Taking into account the importance of the diversity of moral, cultural, religious, and other values in the internal policies of states, the authors conclude that the concept of culture war should not be limited exclusively to the internal affairs of states but that it can also serve as a theoretical framework for explaining the phenomena that take place in contemporary interstate relations, especially when it comes to dichotomous relations between proponents of neoliberal ideas and traditionalists (Webb 2006).

The term “culture war” is initially associated with the German language (“Kulturkampf”). The term was later adopted and popularised in American sociological and political literature, and it gained greater resonance with the publication of James Hunter’s book “Culture Wars, The Struggle to Define America” (1991). Hunter posited that culture wars (conflicts) represent an expression of socio-political disagreements based on opposing systems of moral understanding (see Hunter 1991). This type of cultural clash primarily referred to the American internal political context. It reflected the sentiment that America has prominent internal divisions based on ideological differences. This division is evident in real-world political scenarios through conservative and liberal policies.

Culture wars imply several segments that must be present: struggle, an antagonistic relationship between the parties, identity and emotions (Sánchez-Prieto 2023). These aspects of the cultural war can be observed in the NATO and FRY conflict in 1999, as it also carried an ideological dimension. By participating in the disintegration of Yugoslavia, NATO symbolically put an end to the period of communism in Europe. In October 2000, following the bombing, democratic reforms occurred in Serbia, leading to the ousting of Slobodan Milošević’s regime. This formally marked the end of the communist era in Serbia, signifying the collapse of the final remnants of communism in Europe and the triumph of the Western-led block.

On the other hand, the concept of “public diplomacy” refers to the ability of a country to engage its soft power resources, such as culture, political values, and foreign policies, in order to attract the public of other countries through positive promotion of such resources (Nye 2008, 94–97). The post-Cold War era was characterised by ongoing globalisation, the rise of social networking, and the growing importance of media. Parallel to that process, NATO’s tendencies to redefine its role in the newly established international order grew (Potter 2002). In the globalised era of influential and powerful media chains, countries aiming to exercise their public diplomacy potential strive to spread information and messages to audiences around the globe (Sheafer and Shenav 2009, 277) to frame public opinions on their foreign policies (see Entman 2008), and sometimes even wage

culture wars (see Weir 2018). Since the Western media chains have the most influential capacity to reach a significant number of audiences worldwide and thus can shape the broader range of public opinions on foreign policy matters, it is not surprising that the reporting on the NATO campaign in Yugoslavia was mainly oriented towards justifying the aims of campaign through uncritical and unidirectional discourse (Kishan Thussu 2000, 8–11).

Albeit there is a significant difference between propaganda and public diplomacy, which rests on the opposed dichotomies: misinformation vs. information, simplified representations vs. comprehensive understanding, and delegitimized image of counterparty vs. objectiveness (see Brown 2008), it is necessary to emphasise that Western media strived to spread unverified and incomplete information about the campaign in Yugoslavia and thus legitimize its goals through the dehumanisation of the Yugoslav counterparty. Positioning the discourse in the context of the “us” verses “them” dichotomy was the agency used by both NATO and the Serbian regime. The utilisation of these resembling practices can be explained by the contesting power positions and struggle for the dominant positions (see Chilton 2004).

In that context, it is evident that both sides employed media sensationalism as a powerful tool for broadening the gap between “us” and “them” and offering a simplified view of realities in order to gain widespread support for its policies and legitimize its actions. Media sensationalism usually includes techniques that play “the emotions card” (see Sloan and Mullikin 2002) for the sake of awakening solid reactions of the audience (see Slattery, Doremus, and Marcus 2001). In other words, sensationalism can be described as a proclivity in the mass media coverage of events to embellish and amplify details with the aim of capturing public interest and enhancing auditorium numbers. As it will be discussed later, the death of the US Secretary of State, who was indeed an active proponent of the intervention in Serbia, encouraged the (Serbian) media to use sensationalistic tools in their reporting.

The culture war led by the Yugoslav side focused on the incitation of social cohesion through the broadcasting of highly patriotic music arrangements, organisation of mass protests against the NATO campaign, and media targeting of the most prominent U.S. and other NATO officials responsible for the campaign (including U.S. Secretary of State, Albright). These events served not just to strengthen social cohesion and solidarity but also to enact the victimhood of Serbian people vis-à-vis NATO enemies. Self-victimization is a common strategy in conflicting occasions- denying the responsibilities of “our” group and assigning negative and sometimes exaggerated attributes to the “other” (see Mijić 2021).

The beginning of the twenty-first century was marked by turbulent political occurrences in Serbian society- mass protests and the removal of Milošević regime in 2000 (Vladisavljević 2016), the difficult path of democratisation and reforms, the assassination of Prime Minister Đinđić in 2003 and the restoration of relations and cooperation with West. The new democratic regime faced unresolved problems- the Kosovo¹ crisis and the dilemma regarding negotiations with Kosovar political leaders and status resolution.

The process of normalising relations with the West has been questioned during violent and ethnically motivated Kosovo riots in 2004 and Kosovo’s declaration of independence

¹This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ opinion on Kosovo Declaration of Independence.

in 2008. Since Kosovo's independence was widely supported by Western countries, Serbian public opinion reawakened old animosities towards the West, seen as a critical factor in the dismantling of the Serbian state in Kosovo. Western support for Kosovo independence brought to the surface the collective memory of the NATO bombing, which was marked by attacks on the U.S. embassy during protests against the independence of Kosovo.

The concept of "collective memory" is fundamental in the context of Serbian trauma regarding the NATO bombing and the Kosovo issue because it reflects the way society perceives past events and underlines a sense of its victimhood and past injustices (see Staub and Bar-Tal 2003), while the collective status of the victim is being transferred to younger generations (see Bar-Tal et al. 2009). It is possible to shape the collective's beliefs and memories about specific public events and figures through sophisticated propaganda activities, such as memetic engineering, as will be explained in the following section.

Memetics: memetic/cultural engineering in the service of thanatopolitics

Before embarking on a more detailed analysis of the mentioned obituaries, it is necessary to refer readers to specific terminology that concerns *memetics* as a discipline and the term (Internet) *meme*. The term *meme* itself could refer to any cultural information that is transmitted between minds, intragenerational and intergenerationally (Wang and Wood 2011). In other words, any cultural pattern or even a mental image of a particular culture could be designated as a meme. In that broader sense, memes themselves could be marked as the connective tissue of folklore, that is, a culture, which is a "living organism" and to whose impoverishment or enrichment individuals within and outside that culture contribute with their actions (Dawkins 2016; Pimple 1996).

The etymological origin of the word itself can be traced to ancient Greece. Namely, even antique philosopher and thinker Plato has noted that in the world of ideas, there is a constant tendency towards mimicry (Greek *mimesis*), i.e. *imitation* (Belfiore 1984). However, he approached the process of imitation quite critically: mimicry inevitably leads to moving away from the original idea—imitations are the shadows of ideas. Contrary to Plato, Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist who was the first to use the coin *meme* in his capital work, "The Selfish Gene", notes that the replicative power of memes is based mainly on imitation. In other words, memes represent a kind of "cultural codes" that behave like genes. During their lifetime, their structure can significantly change through various mutations, while their fundamental properties (content, formativeness, ideological positioning, and replicability—cf. Auth) remain unchanged. So, an idea lives as long as it is replicable. As stated earlier, memes are transmitted within a generation through the processes of socialisation and resocialization, but also between generations, mainly through tradition, parental upbringing, and education (see Wang and Wood 2011; Wang and Wang, 2015). Moreover, just like ribonucleic acid (RNA), which represents the information agent within the cell unit, whose carrier is deoxyribonucleic acid (DNA), memes are transmitted through social individuals (human beings), but also all other mediums of social communication, such as tradition, oral tradition, art, mass media such as press, television, and radio, as well as information and communication technologies.

It is essential to point out that the rise of new technologies and the Internet contributed to a significant acceleration of communication flows. Thus, the processes of cultural evolution (memetic transmissions) became more pronounced and radical—memes, after all, just like genes, fight for survival! Dawkins compared memes to gangsters— they almost always appear in groups that fight each other for limited resources (in the case of public diplomacy and political communication, it is human attention that is both fixed and limited resource!). Human attention is one of the crucial resources (see Stroud 2017), which is required for political actors and memes to survive in the modern, attention-based political economy. The first prerequisite vital for further transmitting these bundles of socio-cultural information is securing the attention of potential agents, i.e. individuals who enable their further cultural *épopée*—most frequently through imitation and innovation (see Blackmore 2001; Pech 2003).

In line with this, particular awareness should be yielded to Internet memes, a set of virtual items that share common attributes (content, attitude, and form). These items are generated with the awareness of the existence of other memes that social media users imitate, transform, and propagate (Shiffman 2013). One of the most common qualitative features we could encounter in (Internet) memes is that they contain humour and satire. Given the opiate nature of laughter (Dunbar et al. 2012), it is not surprising that (Internet) memes propagate significantly faster compared to other types of digital media messages (Beskow et al. 2020). Furthermore, as an extensive study shows (Rogers and Giorgi 2024), Internet memes are sensitive to the environment in which they propagate—their technical properties get adapted according to the user interface of the application/platform through which they circulate. Precisely because of this, they can be expedient as a kind of innovative guerilla discursive tool (Cervi and Divon 2023; Zheng and Li 2024), which can bypass surveillance walls. Following this, we could possibly mark them as one of today's "deadliest" propaganda tools, as they blindly follow the logic of "*Survival of the fittest*".

Nevertheless, the process of cultural engineering is, however, quite complicated—because when we talk about a memetic ecosystem, we are talking about a constellation of mutually competing complex systems of memes (i.e. cultures). Those systems are primarily based on diverse identities and ideological-value bases (see Drout 2007), and sometimes it seems almost impossible to fully discern all the processes concerning cultural evolution. This is, among other things, because human beings are prone to mimicry—imitation is the primary way of (social) learning (Bandura 1962). The first words most of us say, after all, are—mom and dad—arrived at by instinctively repeating/imitating the syllables/sounds (ma-ma; pa-pa/dad) we hear from our parents/guardians (see James 1890/1962, 405–406). We often resort to imitating others in interpersonal relationships—whether we are talking about romantic, collegial, friendly or family relationships—for various reasons (see Chartrand and Van Baaren 2009; Farley 2014). Apart from that, entire nations are sometimes inclined to resort to the strategy of *mimicry* for survival. Jovan Cvijić also recorded that during the administration of the Ottoman Empire, the local folks (sr.; tr. *raja*) were inclined to imitate the Turkish way of life to avoid violence and oppression (see Cvijić 1922).

Yet, the concept of memes as social viruses and their incorporation into epidemiological models of cultural transmission, as outlined by Wang and Wood (2011), has been met

with significant critique from theorists of participatory culture, including Henry Jenkins and his colleagues (Jenkins et al. 2009). One particular issue raised by Jenkins is the complexity of human agency, underscoring the importance of clarifying the role of agency in memetics with respect to cultural propagation. Moreover, Jenkins argues that culture depends on individuals for its continual development and sustainability, highlighting the inability of culture to replicate itself independently. However, evidence shows that mobile technologies, especially messaging groups, can promote the organisation and rally of individuals through memetic transmission mechanisms (Ling and Lai 2016). Furthermore, a recent study (Seiffert-Brockmann, Wiggins, and Nothhaft 2023) argues that memetic transmission is a valuable paradigm—particularly when studying political collectives and strategic communication. It is also worth mentioning the study that deals with the role of memes in shaping the prevailing discourse in international relations (Breuer and Johnston 2019).

For the purposes of our study, it is worth introducing the Lukasz Swiatek's 2016 research which explores the utilisation of memes in assembling cultural memory, focusing on the context of Nobel Prize ceremonies (Swiatek 2016). The study posits two main arguments: cultural memory can be deliberately constructed through memes, which may appear as texts, artifacts, or practices. The second argument suggests that large aggregates of these memes, termed "memeplexes", can facilitate societal engagement in remembrance while also shaping future behaviours and attitudes. Memes are products of human creativity, which require the input of individuals and groups for their creation. This implies they can also be intentionally developed. Furthermore, memes are constructs shaped by society and culture and, as such, are entities that are continuously interpreted, communicated, and reconstructed. Therefore, memetic/cultural engineering encompasses the deliberate creation and reconstruction of cultural elements through any planned activity that can be imitated (see Swiatek 2016).

Taking all that into account, the authors believe that focusing on the digital sphere, that is, exclusively on the online memetic space, would provide an incomplete picture regarding the construction of Serbian-American relations. Instead, the authors propose a holistic approach—and the obituaries mentioned above, as pieces of culture that have gone viral, can serve as a starting point of reference in our analysis. Especially because *death*, as one of the universal ideas/truths, has a potent symbolic capital that can be manipulated to strengthen intercultural social cohesion and form a collective mental representation of another culture. Birth and death, after all, are events through the instrumentalization and ritualisation of which group adhesion and cohesion are achieved, whether we are talking about family relationships or a wider socio-political community (see Murray 2006; Repo 2016). As such, they represent fertile ground for memetic engineering activities.

Finally, it is important to stress that digital platforms and algorithmic automation processes share many similarities with traditional rituals while heavily intertwined in the age of networked society. They are structured, repetitive, and can influence human behaviour. Activities such as checking notifications, posting updates, and engaging in online interactions often follow a predetermined pattern or algorithmic logic, mirroring traditional rituals' repetitive and structured nature. For instance, liking, commenting, and sharing content on social media platforms can be seen as a ritualised behaviour guided by algorithms and automation. According to Cui (2019), we should consider using the term

mediatised rituals when we discuss media and human communication in the modern age. Namely, mediatised rituals involve incorporating media technologies into social life, leading to the ritualisation of everyday practices (Cui 2019). This is apparent when individuals engage with digital platforms, where specific actions and behaviours become ritualised through repeated use and reliance on algorithms. Similarly, Kwon (2022) discusses how digital technologies (devices and IoT) have become integral to our daily routines and practices, creating a ritual of everyday digital life while stressing that “one’s rituals are constructed and performed in a linkage of actions to create an episodic event” (Kwon 2022, 38). Gibson (2015) explores the concept of automatic and automated mourning, focusing on how digital platforms and technologies have transformed how we grieve and remember the deceased. Finally, as is evident in our case, for the production of (printed or online) obituaries, specific templates are often used, the content of which can be modified through a digital software—and the said obituaries for American secretary, in a certain sense, can be treated as a kind of Internet memes. Rintel (2013) posits that the templateability of online memes results from people’s skill in deconstructing ideas into content and structure and subsequently manipulating these aspects within a specific context. This contextual manipulation is effectively communicated through the practical, methodical, and tangible templating process.

As noted by Todor Kuljić (2014) in his comprehensive work dealing with the sociological-historical analysis of the political use of death, the political use of death is also dealt with by several scientific disciplines (from historiography to political science), of which the most interesting for us (and our particular study) are those that connect the use of death with the interests of ruling groups. In the colourful contemporary social science research on death, most rituals are described, and their integrative and symbolic role is observed through the lenses of interpretativism (see Kuljić 2014). At the centre of various historical, ethnological, and even sociological research is the role of death and dying in the integration of society, as well as the symbolisation, thus ritualisation of death.

Furthermore, ritualisation forms a matrix of social behaviours and practices that signal “something” to other individuals. At the same time, a subtle exchange of information is carried out, while this interaction enables the mutual exploitation of individuals (see Dawkins and Guilford 1997; Guilford and Dawkins 1991) by turning individuals into vehicles for the transmission of (cultural) codes. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that ritualised behaviour is purposeful for convergent evolution in animals and humans (see Lorenz 1966). In other words, physiological and emotional responses are encouraged through ritualised procedures to help channel aggression and stimulate group cohesion (see Lorenz, Latzke, and Salzen 2021). Without cohesion, the extension and survival of the species are almost impossible.

This is especially visible when it comes to “prominent” public figures who perform a specific function of broader social importance. For example, the deaths of great politicians are, as a rule, accompanied by numerous ritual actions (vigil, obituary, funeral, commemoration, memorial) in which the organisers try to involve the public through all possible channels of information (obituaries, news; see Reimers 1999). It is worth mentioning that non-conventional information channels—such as graffiti and murals—are sometimes used for thanatopolitical purposes in the post-Yugoslav area (see Moskovljevic 2022).

At last, in Serbian society (see Pavićević 2015), when someone passes away, the community comes together to perform a *post-mortem ritual*. This ritual begins with a public

announcement of the person's death. In towns, this announcement is usually made through obituaries published in newspapers, while in villages, the community is informed through personal invitations and the sound of church bells ringing. The obituary serves not only to inform people about the death but also to compensate for the missed farewell, which may have been missed due to the person passing away in a hospital, away from their community. Through this ritual, the community comes together to mourn the loss of a member and honour their memory. According to Pavićević's (2015) research, ethnologists hailing from the former Yugoslavian region conducted a thorough analysis of newspaper obituaries in the late twentieth century. Surprisingly, there has been a significant dearth of comparable studies in the twenty-first century, raising questions about the possible reasons for this shift. Therefore, we hope that this research—apart from illuminating new directions of research in the domain of memetics, thanatopolitics, and political propaganda—will trigger a renewed interest in researching such material.

Methodology and research questions

The main objective of this study is to explore the utilisation of memetic content in the context of culture wars and public diplomacy and to answer the primary research question (RQ1), which is "How can memetic content be employed in these contexts?". The second research question (RQ2) pertains to the representation of the American government in Serbian public political discourse, specifically concerning the imagery being constructed in the memetic contents surrounding the death of Madeline Albright.

The study aims to answer these inquiries using multimodal discourse analysis (see Al Zidjaly 2017; Carbaugh 2007) as the principal method. To be more specific, we will also be relying on the Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA). Mediated Discourse Analysis (MDA) is an approach to critical discourse analysis that is action-oriented and focuses on sociocultural activities (see Wohlwend 2014). Unlike other approaches, MDA looks closely at physical actions as the unit of analysis instead of ethnographic events or language strips. In this way of thinking, every action is seen as co-located within a local embodied community of practice and a far-reaching nexus of practice that defines the expected and valued ways of interacting with materials among people.

The primary goals of MDA are threefold. Firstly, it aims to locate and make visible the nexus of practice, a network of commonplace practices and shared meanings that bind communities together but can also produce exclusionary effects and reproduce inequitable power relations. Secondly, MDA seeks to demonstrate how these practices are made up of multiple mediated actions that appropriate available materials, identities, and discourses. Finally, MDA aims to reveal how changing the most minor everyday actions can bring about social change in a community's nexus of practice.

To achieve these objectives, the analyst must first locate a rich site for ethnographic study, leading to close discourse analysis of core actions that are most significant to the people participating in that site. This approach provides a deep understanding of the sociocultural activities of a community and the factors that shape them.

Before we elaborate on the particulars concerning the examination of the both primary and secondary data, we must discuss the strategies employed to interpret (Internet) memes. Memes are complicated and have various interpretations due to their structure, which frequently includes several allusions from different (cultural) texts. Because of their

intricacy, they are intriguing cultural texts and performances that encourage subversive involvement. However, this complicates their analysis. Memes' complex meanings enable certain groups to communicate discreetly via inside jokes. In other words, memes serve as a type of "vernacular criticism" by encouraging particular meanings and interpretations based on specific cultural events and common points of reference (Newman 2016). As Silvestri (2018) demonstrates in the study on the rhetorical function of Internet memes as a memory anchor, rhetorical criticism is an analytical strategy quite suitable for their analysis. In our study, we partially rely on it. Rhetorical critics often refer to their methodology as close reading, emphasising the researcher's interpretive role and recognising the text's autonomy as a signifier in its own right, independent of the producer's intention. Within this analytical framework, the text (in our case, meme) is interpreted as an intricate collection of discursive practices that are temporarily established and positioned within a continuous battle for significance.

Our research primarily delves into the analysis of two specific obituaries. We were interested in exploring the locality where they initially materialised and the historical and symbolic significance of those localities. Additionally, we examined the characteristics of the language used in the obituaries, such as its socio-linguistic properties and the spirit of the message conveyed.

Alongside these two obituaries, we also analyzed secondary material (online news and comments) produced as a by-product, further enhancing the scope and depth of our analysis. How news events are discursively constructed indicates that an event transcends the confines of a single article. To analyze how extensively news outlets report and in which manner on the same event, it is crucial to examine all articles that pertain to that event rather than concentrating solely on an individual news article (see Trilling and van Hoof 2020).

When it comes to newspaper articles, it should be noted that we took into account not only those concerning obituaries but also those in which the news of the death of a former American state secretary was reported. When analyzing the content of the news, we paid particular attention to the nature of the source. We inquired whether a medium that has reported on death/obituaries is close to the Serbian government—as the news media, owing to its societal significance in shaping public opinion, serves as a conspicuous medium for disseminating propaganda (Zollmann 2019). The number of newspaper articles found in our corpus of analysis is 17—we collected them through a search of newspaper aggregates, in which several criteria guided us: we made sure the news report was published in the period from 23 March to 30 March 2022; we made sure that the source of news was Serbian media; we ensured that the article contained the keyword of Madeleine Albright. By analyzing newspaper articles, we tried to determine how the information about the death of Madeleine Albright was conveyed, as well as how a memetic "packages" of information got incorporated into them.

Beyond the newspaper articles previously mentioned, our study includes an analysis of the comments related to these articles, amounting to 908 from the news comment sections. This was conducted to capture the essence of public opinion surrounding the news in question. Researchers have observed that the sections dedicated to user comments play an important role in shaping public opinion perceptions for individuals who read through these comment threads (see Kubin et al. 2024). Additionally, to broaden our

insights into dominant public feelings, we monitored comments on several Facebook posts from the official pages of the news organisations, which disseminated articles about Albright's passing and associated memetic obituaries.

Findings and discussion

The collective sense of victimhood was reawakened once again when the Serbian news outlets broke the story of Albright's death. Media coverage of Albright's death was accompanied by reminders of her part in the NATO bombing of Serbia, as well as allusions to the date of her death, which coincided with the anniversary of the bombing. A few days after her death, the Serbian mass media briefed Albright's statements about the casualties of NATO's actions in Yugoslavia. In that way, the media shaped the public dialog about Albright's role in the NATO campaign, followed by grotesque obituaries and highly negative comments on social networking sites. Those developments confirmed the thesis about the importance of the media in modern society, which is reflected in their power to shape public opinion and encourage a directed type of action and discourses by tentatively conveying information in a desired tone (see Philo 2008; Šahinpašić and Džihana 2021).

We will discuss our findings in two sections: in the first, we will deal with "memetic" obituaries, while in the second, we will deal with newspaper articles and commentaries.

"Memetic" obituaries

Madeleine Albright, as the first woman who had the opportunity to serve as Secretary of State of the United States of America, was sent off with the highest state honours, as well as the presence of the highest state officials—at least when it comes to the United States public discourse. In their eulogies, President Biden, former President Bill Clinton, and former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton hailed Albright's decades-long influence on American foreign policy and highlighted freedom as the highest value Albright stood for. The ceremony was held in the Washington National Cathedral a month after the former secretary of state passed away and was broadcast live on several American television channels.

However, in contrast to the American public, the news about the death of the former US Secretary of State was marked by the Serbian public in a slightly different tone—noticeable from the attached obituaries. Namely, Madeleine Albright, as one of the leading spokespersons for the NATO intervention in Yugoslavia in 1999, was marked as a political enemy (lat. *hostis publicus*) of the Serbian people. It is essential to note that both obituaries' text is written in Cyrillic script. Cyrillic represents the "original" Serbian script, and according to certain theorists of political culture, it should be interpreted as an ideological-political symbol in this particular case (Jovanović 2016).

However, both obituaries transmit slightly different signals. The original obituary (see Figure 1) was attached to the entrance of the Sokolski dom building in Banja Luka. From a historical point of view, falcons' homes, i.e. sokolane, are buildings built throughout the Kingdom of Yugoslavia and designed to host various cultural-sports-recreational activities under the patronage of the "Soko Kingdom of Yugoslavia" organisation. This organisation

acted for the moral and physical education of Yugoslav citizens and served the purpose of cultural propaganda of Yugoslavism and Pan-Slavism (see Zec 2015). In other words, it served to popularise Yugoslav nationalism. Banja Luka, at the time when this building was built (1934), was the centre of Vrbaska Banovina, while today, it is the capital of the Republic of Srpska—an entity in Bosnia and Herzegovina that Serbs mainly populate. Unlike the first obituary, the second one has a much shorter text (see Figure 2; Table 1)—and among the signatories are the “*thrilled Serbian folks*” (sr. *Veoma obradovani srpski narod*). What is striking is the word “dropped” (sr. *ispuštila*), which is written in the Zeta-Raška dialect, which is mainly spoken in the southwestern parts of Serbia (in the Raška region), as well as in the southeastern and northeastern parts of Montenegro. This is important because the third death obituary (with the same content as the second one) appeared in Nikšić, Montenegro (see Figure 3). If we consider that mental and social mapping can be done through ritualisation and via the careful use of language (see Bahna and Talmont-Kaminski 2022), it could be argued that all these obituaries also achieve a function of mental mapping of the Serbian world (see Ljubomirovic 2023). Among other things, this is supported by the addressing of Serbs “of all colours and nations” in the first obituary (see Figure 1; Table 1).

Moreover, as we mentioned earlier, the death certificates in question could be seen as a type of hybrid Internet meme, particularly when considering that these obituaries are a product of advanced compression of intricate cultural information using computer software. Namely, in the former Yugoslav republics, the repertoire of posthumous customs also includes the printing of specific obituaries (see Medojevic 2023; Pavićević 2015), which are primarily made in a template manner—whereby certain textual elements and visual elements are modified (depending on the religion of the deceased). In our particular case, what is unusual is the nature of the message (in both cases)—which is written in a mocking, festive tone. Furthermore, unconventional symbolism was used in both situations instead of traditionally used visual insignia (usually a cross or a crescent moon if the deceased was of the Islamic religion). The first death certificate shows an inverted cross

Table 1. Translation of two obituaries (From Serbian to English).

	Original text in Serbian	English translation
Obituary no. 1/ released in Banja Luka, R.Srpska (BiH)	Sa radošću obaveštavamo Srbe svih boja i nacija da je Madlen (Josefa) Olbrajt rođ. Korbelova sa velikim zakašnjenjem ili napokon, hvala Bogu, preminula 23.03.2022. u 85. godini života Iskreno se saosjećamo sa crvima koji će je morati provariti i Hitlerom koji će je voditi u posjetu njihovom zajedničkom poslodavcu Sotoni. Teško zemlji pod koju je bace. “Otišla si sarmu probala nisi, Kuće cvili a ja mislim ti si ...” Ozareni (spisak imena)	We are happy to inform Serbs of all colours and nations that Madeleine (Joseph) Albright née Korbel with a long delay or finally, thank God, passed away on 23 March 2022. in the 85th year of her life. We sincerely sympathise with the worms who will have to digest her and with Hitler who will take her to visit their common employer, Satan. Woe to the earth under which they cast her. “You left, you did not try the sarma ... The dog/bitch is whining, and I think it is you ...” Joyful/ Delighted (list of names)
Obituary no. 2/ released in Arilje, Serbia	Medlin Olbrajt- Avetinja Crkla je sotona i goreće u paklu. Ispuštila je svoju poganu dušu u svojoj 85oj godini. Čeka je večni roštilj. Veoma obradovani srpski narod.	Madeleine Albright- The Scarecrow The Satan dropped dead and will burn in hell. She let out her nasty soul in her 85th year. The eternal grill is waiting for her. Very delighted Serbian people.



Figure 3. Obituary for Madeleine Albright—somewhere in Nikšić, Montenegro (link: <https://x.com/bajostanisic/status/1507438838431600647>).

(by which the deceased is marked as an enemy of the Serbian world—according to this doctrine, Serbian ethnicity and the Orthodox religion are complimentary). In contrast, the second necrolog has embedded the NATO logo (which reminds the audience of the deceased's role in the bombing from 1999).

Furthermore, let us remember that Internet Memes can be described as intricate collections of culturally encoded information that are created with the intention of being shared among users in the digital realm. These memes undergo modifications as they are propagated through various channels. Previous attempts to define Internet Memes have highlighted their multimodal nature, encompassing different forms of media and content. Notably, scholars such as Shifman (2013) and Wiggins (2019) have explored the evolution and characteristics of Internet Memes. However, the notion that Internet Memes solely pertain to online content is subject to debate. Recently, there have been cases of memetic content emerging outside of its original habitat, namely the Internet and social media platforms. This phenomenon has been observed and discussed by researchers like Brennan (2016) and Moskovljevic (2023). Admittedly, in our specific case, we are talking about a complex set of information that originally appeared in the material world in the form of two obituaries and was later circulated to a more significant number of users with the help of media portals and social networks.

For our study, it is essential to underscore the definition of Internet Memes as “spreadable media” (Jenkins et al. 2009). Specifically, as media artifacts that can be easily circulated, these bundles of information encompass two key attributes: fidelity and fecundity. Fidelity refers to the capability of a given set of information to preserve its original content as it is shared with others. Simultaneously, fecundity pertains to the ability of that set to generate new replicas of itself (Jenkins et al. 2009). The analyzed obituaries meet the mentioned conditions.

Finally, these “memetic obituaries” serve to reinforce narrative frameworks regarding the collective recollection of the 1999 bombing—which is in line with Silvestri’s (2018) thesis on memes as memory actants. This is reflected in their publication, which was timed to make the most of the momentum of the secretary’s death. Namely, the former secretary of state passed away the day before the 23rd anniversary of the NATO bombing, and most Serbian media that reported the news of her death mentioned that in their reports. This is especially important to take into consideration because the bombing, per se, is collective trauma. In political culture, collective traumas occupy a vital place as historical events around which national mythologies and identities are spun (see Aydin 2017; Singer and Kimbles 2004). Shared suffering is a shared memory—that is, collective memory, and in the Serbian collective consciousness, NATO and the emissaries of the 1999 bombing are remembered as criminals. What leads us, as researchers, to conclude that this “vernacular creativity” should be approached as probable propaganda rather than typical folkloric creativity is that pro-government portals exclusively propagated news about obituaries.

Online news and comments

The authors analyzed newspaper articles about the news of Albright’s death and the news about obituaries to determine the dominant tone of the media covering these topics. The research involved analyzing texts and comments from 7 online news portals related to Albright’s death and 4 online news portals related to the news about the appearance of obituaries. The authors concluded that the prevailing tone of the media reporting on these topics was tabloid-style. This means that the media did not just provide information but also included negative and biased reviews designed to provoke negative

emotions from the audience. These negative reviews were related to Albright's role in the bombing of the FRY. The media which relied on this reporting style are considered to be "regime media", closely associated with the current regime in Serbia. Most of these articles also demonise the late Secretary—which is not so surprising, particularly from the propagandist point of view. Namely, propaganda serves a central purpose in times of war, as identified by Lasswell (1971 [1927], 195): to incite intense hatred towards the enemy. This objective is achieved through a specific type of propaganda referred to as demonisation, wherein the oppositional country is portrayed as a menacing and murderous aggressor (Lasswell 1971 [1927], 195). The media's simplified representation of the intervention, caused by many factors, was biasedly reduced only to the personal level—Albright's participation and contribution. The way the media reported on Albright's death is exceptionally sensationalistic since it engages with superficial and overly simplified reporting styles (see Esposito 1996). Nevertheless, this way of reporting is expedient for the demonisation of the "enemy side"—Albright is presented as the embodiment not only of the United States of America but also of NATO. Demonising Albright facilitates the demonisation of the both US and NATO.

Furthermore, through a more detailed analysis of the content of the comments on the virtual announcements about the death of Madeleine Albright, as well as on the comments on the mentioned obituaries, we noticed that one of the most frequent motifs in the comments is: *Milica Rakić*, a three-year-old girl who was killed by a cluster bomb that, by an unfortunate combination of circumstances, hit her family home in Batajnica (Serbia). This is particularly important to present because, in the thanatopolitical sense, these are profitable deaths, that is, deaths that carry colossal symbolic capital (see Kuljić 2014) that can be skilfully exploited. In the collective subconscious, the image of a girl who died prematurely appears against the image of an older woman who lived to a ripe old age and who indirectly led to the death of the same girl through her public actions and advocating military intervention. This mental image is further strengthened by comments on social media posts that remind the deceased's statement that the death of "half a million Iraqi children was a particularly difficult choice, but that it was a price worth paying". In this way, anger and aggression are additionally directed towards the external enemy, which simultaneously strengthens the sense of community among citizens who share a collective trauma memory.

When the discussed obituaries appeared in the Serbian memetic space, alongside various news articles, a text appeared on one of the alternative information portals (Texter.rs) entitled "*Madeleine Albright: How did the neighbor's milk cow?*" The text which Dimitrije Krstić signed is accompanied by an Internet meme that could adequately summarise the entire situation (see Figure 4). For those who are not familiar with all the references—this meme compares the entire episode of Albright's obituaries to one of the most remembered scenes from the cult film of Serbian domestic cinematography, the film "*Marathoners Run the Lap of Honor*".² Shortly, the scene depicts an inappropriate reaction of one movie's protagonist (who's family is in the funeral business) to a death announcement—as it brings money, thus joy, to his family.

To summarise, in the *Serbian public discourse and memetic space*, NATO and the promoters of military intervention in FR Yugoslavia are labelled as public enemies. This implies

²The scene can be viewed at the following link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F_5JbU8oVY



Figure 4. Internet Meme depicting reaction of Serbian people to announcement of Albright's death (eng. Madeleine Albright: *drops the spoon*; Serbs: / SOURCE: texter.rs).

that both Clintons and Biden, Albright's close associates, are also marked as such among the people. In a certain sense, the American Democrats have also been labelled that way. Recently, the USA has been trying to improve its image in the Serbian public discourse through many economic donations, yet the results are questionable, as Serbian citizens remain quite skeptical when it comes to the strengthening ties between the countries (IRI 2024).

Concluding remarks

This article delves into questions concerning the use of memetic content in culture wars and public diplomacy. It also examines how the Serbian public political discourse portrays the American government and Serbian-American relations, focusing on the context of Madeleine Albright's passing and grotesque obituaries circulated by online Serbian news outlets and netizens. In our focus were two obituaries created following the creative logic characteristic of Internet memes. We examined supplemental online newspaper articles and comments alongside the obituaries, employing mediated discourse analysis and rhetorical criticism.

Madeleine Albright was one of the leading advocates of the bombing of FRY during her post as American Secretary of State. This intervention had an ideological ground as it could be seen as the elimination of communist remnants in Europe, and the authors decided to look at this specific case through the prism of cultural wars and memetics. Our findings suggest that using memes as collective memory anchors (or taking a meme's eye of view approach) can be effective in propaganda activities, particularly in culture wars. The analyzed case represents a case of memetic propaganda, as it entails

a deliberate fusion of media sensationalism with memetic/cultural engineering techniques. However, it is challenging to ascertain the specific actor responsible for releasing the obituaries. It is plausible to suggest that these obituaries may be a product of intentional propaganda efforts by entities close to the Serbian government. This suggestion is grounded in the reporting behaviours of media outlets that circulated information about the obituaries, particularly considering the vital indications of their affiliations with governmental entities.

Taking into account Serbia's geopolitical position and balancing between Eastern alliances and Western partners, we recommend conducting research that will focus on the representations of Russian and Chinese leaders in Serbian media. Conducting such research could contribute to a comprehensive understanding of the directions and goals of the Serbian foreign policy and its relations with the East and West. Additionally, similar research could contribute to understanding the intersection between the Serbian government and its influence on the leading broadcasting channels and online media. In addition, we believe that research on the manner of reporting the death of Madeleine Albright in the American press (and perhaps other states, such as Iraq) would contribute to the achievement of new knowledge in the domain of thanatopolitics and memetics.

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