

Televised Media: Supporting the War on Terror and the Impending War on Iraq

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Table of Contents

Introduction	pg. 1
Background: The War on Terror and the War on Iraq	pg. 2
Indirect Support for War: The Advocacy of Violence in the Media	pg. 4
Direct Support for War: The Practices of Broadcast Journalism	pg. 6
Cause for Concern: The Dangerous Power of the Media	pg. 12
A Call for Action: What are Peacekeepers to do?	Pg. 14

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Introduction

In America, television is considered a cultural necessity. Research shows that over 98% of households own at least one television, that the average American watches over four hours of television per day, and that Americans spend more time watching television than they spend in school, reading, or engaging in physical activity¹. Such findings have lead researchers to conclude that Americans' use of television is so large that it "could qualify as a full-time job"² and as a result of television's prevalence, the majority of America's population relies on television as its primary source of information and entertainment.

However, the relationship between television and the American public is not an entirely positive one. Since the invention of television, there has been a reduction in community activities and social interaction, as well as an increase in "excessive commercialism" and "sedentary lifestyles."³ Furthermore, research shows that massive television viewing reduces academic achievement, promotes violence, and "squashes" political awareness.⁴ Despite these findings, the media industry has continued to grow as the American public has made little effort to change its television consumption practices. As evident from research, the American public is a population reliant on television, and as a product of this reliance, television has the power to disseminate popular knowledge, construct public reality, change public opinion, and rally or discourage public support for various causes.

Recognizing the immense power of television, one would hope that it is a power used to promote tolerance, noble causes, and the global good, however this is not always the case.

¹ <http://www.tvfa.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/Facts%20and%20Figures.pdf>

² <http://ibelgique.ifreance.com/sociomedia/tvstats.htm>

³ <http://www.tvfa.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/Facts%20and%20Figures.pdf>

⁴ <http://www.tvfa.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/Facts%20and%20Figures.pdf>

Rather, a large percentage of media programming, both directly and indirectly, promotes violence, intolerance, and an anti-peace campaign, which carries huge implications for government foreign policy, a possible war on Iraq, and the current War on Terror.

It is important to note that this paper does not attempt to judge the current wars, it does not make the claim that war is accepted by all, nor does it intend to imply that all individuals are equally influenced by the media. Rather, this paper attempts to address the power of the media and how it is projecting support for war in order to increase public support, as well as to acknowledge the concerns and potential dangers that surround this practice. Finally, this paper puts forth a call to action to change these practices arguing the importance of objective dissemination of information, socially responsible business practices, democracy, and peace.

Background: The War on Terrorism and The War on Iraq

On September 11, 2001, 19 members of the al Qaeda network, under the guidance of its leader, Osama Bin Laden, flew two hijacked airliners into the towers of the World Trade Center, one into the pentagon, and crashed one into a field in Pennsylvania. The effects of the attack were devastating as 3,031 lives were taken, America's economy was shaken as billions of dollars were lost, and the world transitioned from a relative time of peace, to one of tension and looming war. In the history books, academics, historians, and politicians agree that September 11th will be remembered as "the day that the world changed."⁵ In response to September 11th, the Bush Administration declared the War on Terror, which focused on defending freedom and bringing justice to al Qaeda, and other terrorist groups, whose "goal is remaking the world -- and imposing its radical beliefs on people everywhere."⁶ Bush has declared war on "every radical

⁵ <http://www.september11news.com/DailyTimeline.htm>

⁶ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

network of terrorists, and every government that supports them” and has made it clear that, “our war on terror begins with al Qaeda, but it does not end there. It will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated”⁷

In the wake of September 11th, the Bush Administration has used the current goals of the war on Terror to justify a war on Iraq. According to the Bush Administration, Saddam Hussein, dictator of Iraq, is guilty of assaulting freedom, hoarding weapons of mass destruction, and of supplying such weapons to terrorist networks, “our” recently sworn enemies.⁸ As presented by the Bush administration agenda, war on Iraq is an extension of and is justified by the War on Terror.

It is important to note that both wars have been met with resistance. In a discussion on Terrorism with Fiona Adamson, an expert in “Non-State Actors,” she pointed out several issues with the War on Terror, including the lack of geographical location and lack of definitive leadership among terrorist groups, making it difficult to target the “enemy.” Ms. Adamson also noted that terrorism is not an attackable ideology, but is a strategy of violence. These aspects of terrorism and terrorist networks make it impossible for the Bush Administration to claim any sort of “victory” or definitive end to this declared war (Discussion 2/20/03). Furthermore, critics complain that there has been very little evidence that substantiates a link between Saddam Hussein and terrorist networks, making it appear as though war with Iraq is unjust, and, instead, is a priority of the Bush Administration Agenda.⁹ In light of this knowledge, several protests have been held, including a massive rally in San Francisco and a massive student strike against war entitled “Books not Bombs.” While the political push for war is strong, it is important to acknowledge that the public is not in full support. However, as the following sections will point

⁷ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>

⁸ <http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/iraq>

out, in times of war, the media has been shown to turn drastically pro-government and pro-war, to join the political push for war, in attempts to alter public dissent.

Indirect Support for War: The Advocacy of Violence in the Media

Current support for war is indirectly supported by the excessive projection of violence on television that increases the aggressive nature of the American culture, it's society, and its politics. The media's projection of violence has been well documented by Gerber, who has found that "yearly analyses of televised violence report a stable violence rate of more than seven assaults per hour, with approximately 80 percent of dramatic programs containing some form of violent activity" (Bandura 266). Findings by Calder also note that by the end of elementary school, "the average child watches around 8,000 television murders and 100,000 violent acts"¹⁰ The presentation of violent and aggressive models influences individuals' aggressive behaviors and acceptance of violent acts.

Extensive research has documented television's power to change individuals. A classic study by Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1963) demonstrated an individual's ability to watch violent television, learn behaviors and verbal expressions from the presented model, and later apply such violent behaviors to appropriate situations. This phenomenon has been documented in children's aggression towards peers after watching violent cartoons, in case studies of violent murders, like the Manson murders, inspired by violent TV movies, and in the occurrence of copy-cat crimes, such as high-school shootings that mimicked the Columbine High School Massacre (Bandura 266-287).

⁹ <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/un-powell-iraq.html>

¹⁰ <http://www.calder.net/dinfo/television-statistics.html>

While Albert Bandura has documented media effects on behavior, a study by Bryant and Zillman (1982), offers evidence of the media's ability to desensitize the public and increase their acceptance of violence. In their study, Bryant and Zillman exposed men and women to massive amounts of television programming that contained violent pornographic material and found that such exposure induced both men and women to increase their support for viewing pornography, to reduce their support for the women's liberation movement, trivialize the action of rape, and to decrease their convictions on the strength with which rapists should be prosecuted. Finally, Noam Chomsky has found that the methods of presentation of violent war material and accompanying commentary in the media leads the public to apathy and detachment from inhuman and intolerable actions they are witnessing (Manufacturing Consent). Clearly, viewing aggressive television affects individuals and larger populations in a variety of ways.

The impact of violent television creates a culture that accepts and practices violence as the preferred form of conflict resolution (Bandura 266). This is evident in the dominant cultural attitudes toward law enforcement, capital punishment, parenting practices, and manifests itself in politics and foreign policy. Currently, approximately two-thirds of the American population support the death penalty, and while research shows that this rate is declining, reasons for an opinion change are cited as "increasing use of DNA testing and growing concern over whether innocent people are being executed"¹¹ rather than as a concern over the inhumanity of the death penalty. Furthermore, when the public was polled as to whether law enforcement should be allowed to torture suspected terrorists, over 59% agreed that it is appropriate to torture terrorists for information¹² Violence is also seen as an acceptable form of conflict resolution with children. Research by Straus found that "at least 90% of American Parents hit their toddlers"

¹¹ <http://www.cnn.com/2000/ALLPOLITICS/stories/06/02/bush.deathrow/>

¹² <http://www.e-thepeople.org/a-national/article/10427/view>

(Straus 6). When asked to justify their use of violence, one parent commented, "If we can use milder punishment, then I'm for it. But sometimes it doesn't work, and I can't let them just take over the house" (Bryant). Finally, Michael Moore's documentary "Bowling for Columbine" offers an excellent visual history of the aggressive and violent nature of American foreign policy, including the War in the Persian Gulf, Vietnam, and our creation and control of foreign governments. The practice of violence as a means of maintaining power and achieving justice appears to be a pillar of American society.

Direct Support for War: The Practices of Broadcast Journalism

In addition to changing behaviors and beliefs, the media, in the form of broadcast journalism, advocates specific support for the War on Terror and war on Iraq.

The term broadcast journalism refers to news media in which information and current events are presented in the electronic media, primarily through television news programs and twenty-four hour cable news networks. CNN Headline News, Fox News, and MSNBC are all well-known examples of broadcast journalism and have been the focus of my research. In a single evening, it is estimated that tens of thousands of viewers are tuning into these news stations for daily updates on current events. However, the attraction to such news programs is concerning as these news stations comprise an entertainment industry, guilty of sensationalizing current events to increase ratings and profits (Bandura 2/11/03). In a lecture on the influences of broadcast journalism, Albert Bandura, Stanford Psychology professor and expert on the power of the media, described broadcast journalism's 3 strategies for turning news into captivating drama. He noted that first, broadcast journalists present stories around conflict, selecting to present on extreme or radical groups with colorful leaders over groups known to be peaceful, rational, and

calm. Second, broadcast journalists utilize negativity to create and instigate conflict to further dramatization, and, finally, journalists use emotive language as much as possible (Bandura 2/11/03). An article by George Krimsky, entitled "The View from abroad" agrees with Bandura's observations, noting that in the current anticipation of war "coverage is maddeningly predictable. . . as underlying subtexts creep into even breaking news reports . . . [for example,] most younger [American] reporters seem unable to resist this wonderful chance to be prophets, ending their pieces with forecasts of doom" (3). Such sensational and biased journalism in America has lead foreign journalists to claim that as a result of their biased media, "the American community is arrogant, backward, and lacks any knowledge about other countries" (Krimsky 3). The current dramatization in American media is a cause for concern.

Furthermore, the news industry is not an objective institution, but is comprised of private companies, owned by corporate conglomerates and rich business men, who push and encourage media sensationalism. It is a well-known fact that General Electric and Microsoft have joint ownership of MSNBC, that Rupert Murdoch owns the Fox Network, and that Ted Turner runs CNN. Their control over the content of these news stations is demonstrated by Rupert Murdoch, deemed the "leader of the new 'Napoleonic era' of communications (Gomery), who commented that his competitor CNN "is too liberal, and moving further and further left. . . I don't know whether it happened with my friend Ted marrying Jane Fonda or giving up lithium, but one thing or another, [CNN] has changed very greatly in these past couple of years. . . [In comparison with CNN,] we'll provide *objective* news coverage" (Gomery). Murdoch's ability to control media content has also been demonstrated by his choice to give political candidates free airtime, which some have estimated to be worth over 70 billion dollars.¹³ Murdoch is motivated to pay top dollar for cable shows and to give politicians free airtime in order to reach his goal: To have "his

media empire, embracing all technologies and content forms, dominate mass media markets all over the world” (Gomery). Clearly, market place pressure and men like Murdock encourage the dramatization and sensationalism that dominates televised news.

The major news stations like Fox, CNN, and MSNBC, sell themselves on their ability to provide the most recent and up-to-date news coverage. However, as pointed out by Leon Sigal “because of the need for news stories everyday, the scarcity of money and staff, and the readiness of government agencies to put out information in the form of ready transcript, more newspapers and wire services allocate more of their national staffs to covering Washington than any other place” (Sigal 7). Because of news media’s dependence on government, a favorable relationship and biased relationship forms, in which “people, [and the government,] who are routine sources for the press are also more likely to be favorably portrayed in the news” (Sigal 28). This biased relationship between news and government is evident in the media’s compliance with the government’s censorship requests¹⁴, in the FCC’s anticipated decision to reduce the few regulations that exist for network empires¹⁵, and in the government’s admitted use of the media as “ a part of the [information distribution] process... a tool that law enforcement can use to convey information to the public... and an integral part of the solution” to political issues (Cochran).

Having clearly acknowledged the lack of objectivity in the news and its relationship and dependence on the government, it should come as no surprise that news media glorifies support for the current war. Current news broadcasts disseminate biased information and present selective imagery, thereby constructing an inaccurate public reality and legitimizing violent political practices in attempts to rally public support for the War on Terror and a war on Iraq.

¹³ <http://www.tvfa.org/images/facts&figs/factsheets/Facts%20and%20Figures.pdf>

¹⁴ <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/network-pressure.html>

Examples of this practice include the media's depiction of Islam and the Middle East, its dissemination of threat and fear, and its misrepresentation of public resistance.

Through news segments that portray the Islamic religion and the Middle East, the news partakes in the creation of a fictitious enemy and an intolerable "other." While it has been stressed that terrorists, Islam, and the Middle East are not closely related terms, the media has continued to misrepresent each one. The most blatant anti-Middle East imagery was utilized on the day of the terrorist acts when images of cheering Afghanis were flashed on the screen in between images of the collapsing world trade towers. Such images have been toned down over time, but broadcast journalism still creates and perpetuates stereotypical images the Islamic religion. It has failed miserably to represent the diversity among those who practice it, glossing over the fact that of the 1.2 billion Muslims in the world, only 20% live in Arab-speaking countries, while the largest population resides in Indonesia.¹⁶ In an article on the fundamental misunderstandings of Islam, Sam Hussein remarks that "there are approximately 5 million Muslims in the U.S. – nearly as many as there are Jews, and more than there are Episcopalians. . . yet there's rarely a mention of Muslims in the media that doesn't have to do with violence. In day-to-day coverage, they are largely absent" (Hussein 1). Furthermore, news media commentary is dotted with racist commentary, like that of journalist like Steve Emerson, who commented that, "The level of vitriol against Jews and Christianity within contemporary Islam, unfortunately, is something that we are not totally cognizant of, or that we don't want to accept. We don't want to accept it because to do so would be to acknowledge that one of the world's great religions-- which has more than 1.4 billion adherents--somehow sanctions genocide, planned genocide, as part of its religious doctrine" (Hussein 2). Finally, since the declaration of

¹⁵ <http://www.fair.org/activiem/fcc-networks.html>

¹⁶ www.cair-net.org

the War on Terror, the most common images associated with Islam and the Middle East contain the rocky Afghanistan landscapes, tapes of al Qaeda training camps, pictures of Saddam Hussein's face, and the released tapes of Osama Bin Laden. The presented images and associations made between Islam, terrorism, the Middle East, and War fail to offer an accurate representation of Islam and the Middle East to the public.

In a book entitled The legitimization of violence, Sandra Ball-Rokeach discusses societal acceptance of violence and war as contingent upon achieving "preferred states of existence. . . [which include] security and survival, social control, progress and growth, or winning and success" (Ball-Rokeach 107). In addition to creating an inaccurate public reality, news media attempts to gain social acceptance of war by disseminating threat, making the public feel vulnerable, and by projecting insecurity and instability, there-by addressing Ball-Rokeach's public criteria for war. In the wake of 9/11, excessive amounts of media coverage and media speculations, motivated men and women all over the country to buy supplies and gas in anticipation of another attack. The ability of the media to disseminate threat and fear was also particularly evident during the Anthrax scare as well, in which it appeared that "the terrorists behind it appeared to be operating on the axiom: If you want to scare the wits out of America, scare journalists first" (Ricchiardi). Writer Sherry Ricchiardi notes that "During in these trying times, the media created panic and fear by the content and tone of their reporting," inducing a panicked public, glued to news programs and afraid to check their mail (Ricchiardi). The presentation of insecurity has also been a tool used to gain support for the current move for a war on Iraq. Currently, Saddam Hussein is presented to the public as a potential terrorist, capable and willing to use weapons of mass destruction against the Americans.¹⁷ The majority of news media, as well as the white house, argue that if we do not stop Hussein, more American lives will

be lost (Zimbardo 3/5/02). The media's failure to offer reassurance and security presents war as a necessary means for peace and security that undoubtedly generates support for war.

Finally, several of the major media stations are guilty of misrepresenting public resistance to war. In an article in the San Francisco Chronicle, Reader's Representative, Dick Rogers voiced public frustration over the misrepresentation of protestors against a war on Iraq in the news. In a protest on January 18, police estimated the presence of about 55,000 protestors, while the Chronicle itself estimated 200,000, while MSNBC estimated only 45,000¹⁸ protestors. Readers cried out, asking, "Why should we tolerate politically biased guesswork that always gives counts too low or too high?" (Rogers). Free-lance writer Bruce Mirken observed that "Increasingly, those of us who want to understand the full ramifications of the U.S. 'War on Terror' are finding that big chunks of the story are severely underreported—or missing entirely—in the US media" (Krimsky 1). Foreign journalist Krimsky agrees noting that "An informal survey of foreign press and Internet coverage since September 11th indicates that foreign media are indeed covering aspects of the conflict largely ignored or unseen by their American counterparts" (Krimsky 1). Finally, in an article on the need for media scrutiny, a journalist from the FAIR reporting organization, sites examples in which Andrea Mitchell of NBC News Nightly, Dan Rather, and William Schneider of CNN Live Today, all present Powell's speculations about Iraq weapon possessions as of February 5th as "undisputed fact."¹⁹ The prevalence of politically biased reporting is an unethical practice that misinforms the public.

Each of these discussed practices generates support for the war on terrorism and is part of the process of social legitimization and justification of aggression and violence. Currently,

¹⁷ <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/un-powell-iraq>

¹⁸ http://soma.about.com/library/bl_war_10_26_02.htm

according to the most recent Gall-up polls, over 80% of Americans support the war on terror, while about 59% support a war on Iraq.²⁰ While public mobilization and support can be necessary in the pursuit of justice for intolerable violations of human rights (i.e. WW II), the power of the media to mobilize support for a “questionable” war can also lead to devastating global disasters.

Cause for Concern: The Dangerous Power of the Media

The power of the media to generate support for war and to induce support for possible disasters is not a new phenomenon. Its abuse has been documented in several events throughout world history. In the book The Gathering Storm, Winston Churchill illustrates Hitler's abuse of the media, describing his ability to generate the idea of Arian superiority, to create German enemies, to increase his personal political power, and to induce war. In the documentary, “Manufacturing Consent” Noam Chompsky discusses similar tactics of the media applied to the Vietnam War and the Persian Gulf War, in which the wars were constructed by “the club of academic intellectuals.” Chompsky argues that these wars took place as a result of a submissive and compliant media, which failed to present the public with the possibility of alternative peaceful and diplomatic resolutions. In the text “Do the Media Govern?” Shanto Iyengar sums up the media's power to govern politics, construct social policy, and motivate the public as an issue of framing, in which “the contexts in which political issues appear is critical to how people think about these issues . . . [and that] the framing of political issues is a powerful form of social control that circumscribes the national debate over public policy” (281-2).

¹⁹ <http://www.fair.org/press-releases/un-powell-iraq.html>

²⁰ <http://www.gallup.com/poll/releases/pr030307.asp>

Noam Chompsky would agree with Iyengar's assessment, arguing that this form of social control is held by the "elite network of corporate conglomerates which staff elite government positions and control much of the way life is run" (Manufacturing Consent). In the documentary "Manufacturing Consent," Noam Chompsky claims that the intended purpose for the media is to give the public the power to voice their opinions and control the government, however, this is not the case. Instead, as revealed by Noam Chompsky, the American media industry is comprised of "myth makers" who shape, control, restrict, and frame information which moves the public to apathy and detachment, allowing the elite to run the country as they please. According to Chompsky, the unregulated control of those who own the media pose a threat to democracy and freedom, values that we must mobilize to protect.

Finally, in a talk on media regarding the current War on Terror and the War on Iraq, Noam Chompsky recognizes the dangers of the media noting that, "humans are an endangered species and given the nature of their [media] institutions they are likely to destroy themselves in a fairly short time."²¹ With the knowledge that the media can be used as a tool of destruction and used as a tool to motivate support for unjust practices, we must ask ourselves: Why are we going to war? Why are we risking peace? What are the benefits and consequences of the current War on Terror and the impending war on Iraq? The media should be used to explore these questions, not to answer them. Acknowledging the dangers of a biased media, its unregulated practices, and monopolized control, the use of the media must be contingent on responsible practices, caution, and regulation.

A Call for Action: What are Peacekeepers to do?

Just as the media serves as a tool to promote violence and war, it can also serve as a tool that discourages it. In order to reverse the current escalation to violence, the current stereotyped

images and the dissemination of irrational threat need to be stopped. Albert Bandura, suggests that individuals write letters to television companies, attempt to alter station profits, work with non-profit and public TV stations to model ideal unbiased news practices, advocate for the socially responsible behavior of corporate enterprises, and appeal for government intervention and regulation of violent programming and inappropriate media practices (Bandura 278-9). Bandura believes that the media is a tool through which present attitudes toward violence and war can be changed (Lecture 2/11/2003).

Other issues that must be discussed include the power of those in control of the media and the content they choose to display. How can we keep the media and the corporate conglomerates in charge from controlling social policy and public opinion? How can we project unbiased media? And what methods can we use to keep media moguls from over stepping moral bounds in their quest for profits? Media researcher John Manheim attempts to answer such questions in his article, "Putting Media Effects research to Work," in which he suggests that we "take television as it now exists, biased and consumed, with warts and blemishes, and mindless pursuit of meaningless stories, and work with it daily. Use all the skills of creative advocacy to fashion stories in ways that let [these] themes shine through" (394). Needless to say, this is an area of media research that deserves much more time and attention to create practical and applicable solutions.

Another media changing tactic is the mobilization of star power. When the public chooses role models, they choose individuals who exhibit behaviors and attitudes that are functionally valuable, earn positive rewards, and achieve social status (Bandura 66-7). Through their demonstration of wealth, public popularity, and social power, Hollywood stars are the public's favorite role models and are often successful in rallying public support for political

²¹ <http://www.zmag.org/GlobalWatch/chomskymit.htm>

causes. An excellent example of the utilization of Star power in efforts to promote peace and resilience to fear was the September 11th memorial, "Prayer for America" held at Yankee Stadium, hosted by Oprah Winfrey. Joined by Bette Midler, former-Mayor Rudy Juliani, and actor James Earl Jones, the message was to endorse peace, remembrance, and faith. In the opening ceremony, James Earl Jones commented, that "today we reaffirm our faith in the essential dignity of every individual . . . What we share as Americans and as human beings is far greater than what divides us."²² The content and message of the memorial moved the thousands that attended and millions of those watching to tears. Another example of mobilized star power included the presentation of the "Win-without-war" Letter to the Bush Administration and the public on December 11, 2002²³. Signed by 104 actors, including Susan Surandon, Matt Damon, Mike Farrell, and David Ducoveyney, the letter was an attempt to "stress diplomacy in confrontation with Iraq"²⁴ However, the current star adovcation of peace does not speak over the current war rhetoric in the media. Hollywood stars who have the means, influence, and motivation to promote peace, like Martin Sheen, Oprah Winfrey, and Matt Damon need to take larger and more frequent actions to promote political and social change.

However, until we can change the violent, war-promoting media and broadcast journalism's biased practices, the responsibility falls on the public to monitor, evaluate, and criticize media programming and news coverage. We must educate people to be critical consumers of the media and of its information and must advocate self-empowerment towards information gathering and opinion formation, as well as reduced public dependency on television

²² <http://www.artaid.org/artaidCNNYankeeStadium.html>

²³ <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/10/sproject.irq.celebrity.letter/>

²⁴ <http://www.cnn.com/2002/ALLPOLITICS/12/10/sproject.irq.celebrity.letter/>

as an information source. Through widespread education about the dangers of the media, we can hopefully reduce its power and influence.

In conclusion, if we fail to change biased, profit-oriented media practices, we are at great risk of supporting terrible crimes against humanity, instigating world disasters, and increasing global dissent with America. Just as the media can be used to disseminate incorrect, biased, and war supporting information, it can also be used to disseminate correct and unbiased information, and promote peace. As concerned Americans, it is our responsibility to take actions in order to facilitate these necessary changes in the media industry.

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