

# Terrorism & Media

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"Is any given bombing...the work of leftist extremists, or of extreme right-wing provocation, or staged by centrists to bring every terrorist extreme into disrepute and to shore up its own failing power, or again, is it a police-inspired scenario in order to appeal to public security? All this is equally true and the search for proof, indeed the objectivity of the fact does not check this vertigo of interpretation. We are in a logic of simulation which has nothing to do with a logic of facts and an order of reasons."

—Jean Baudrillard, *Simulations*

Was the bombing of the West Berlin disco the work of Libyan agents, as alleged by the Reagan administration, or Syrian operatives, as West German and Israeli security forces charge, or, perhaps, the work of German neo-fascists who wished to destroy a hang-out of blacks and Turks? The dizzying pace of allegations and charges cannot be attributed to a "logic of facts," but as Baudrillard points out, to a "vertigo of interpretation."

We are caught in the word and image politics of what Edward Said in *Covering Islam* has called "communities of interpretation," each with its own agenda for influencing public consciousness. Thus, a "terrorist" bombing in West Berlin becomes the pretext for an American air attack on Libya, which, in turn, becomes a pretext for further Mideast conflict and attendant spillover into Europe.

Throughout the imperial prancing and ideological posturing, the simulated world of Mideast politics casts its shadow in the hyperreality of media America. The binary opposition of the West versus "Islam" is part of the ideological coding in media politics. Everywhere we look the media generates the message that America must embark on a new crusade to save civilization from the infidels and barbarians.

Cast as the shining knights of order and justice (through the American frontier way), the Reagan administration and its media sycophants project their racist fantasies and paranoid delusions onto the battleground of Mideast politics. Terrorism becomes for the policy-makers both a handy scapegoat for their failures and a ritual for national purification.

## The Role of the Media

To understand the role of the media in all this is to understand not only the nature of contemporary politics but also what we mean by reality. The media inhabit a world in which most discourse and its linguistic roots have been shattered by the alienated structures of everyday life. Nothing appears to exist outside of the code of the media, and it is only the hyperreality of the media that we are left with when the message appears.

Fortunately this one-dimensional world is not airtight; no code is so totalistic that we are left in a world without contradictions. As Todd Gitlin demonstrates in *The Whole World Is Watching*, while the official discourse reflected in the media during the 1960s tried to convince the American people that the U.S. was winning the war ("winning the hearts and minds of the Vietnamese"), the visual presentation of GI's slogging around and dying in the jungles

of Southeast Asia contradicted the purported “light at the end of the tunnel.” Thus, critics of the war were partially vindicated by the mixed messages in the media. Those mixed messages continue today in the form of U.S. allusions to “surgical air strikes” in Libya versus vivid pictures of civilian death and destruction.

Such media contradictions not only can generate certain kinds of oppositional thinking, but also engender a wider form of cognitive dissonance that can alienate the public from administration and media newspeak. Nonetheless, the power of the state and the media to set the agenda creates a circumscribed discourse that the public may repeat even though they are not convinced or assured of what they think.

As Michael Parenti contends in *Inventing Reality*, “The media may not always be able to tell us what to think, they are strikingly successful in telling us what to think about.”

Critics of the media all agree that the power of the media resides in its framing mechanism, that is, the way in which things are brought into view or excluded. While there are obvious differences between print and electronic media, both forms follow certain narrative codes that reflect structural and cultural limitations. Time and space considerations as well as cultural biases dominate mainstream media. In particular, international reporting invariably reflects both government agendas and ethnocentric biases.

Thus, the coverage of the Iranian hostage situation was focused on American grievances and non-recognition of the political context of the Iranian revolution. As Said has made clear, the American news media reinforced the political rhetoric of American innocence and justifiable vengeance, and for the most part failed to explore the real issues behind the “hostage crisis.” Instead, the “crisis” became a test of American will power.

## **Manufacturing Consent**

The media will always perform the role of reinforcing state ideology because the media are crucial agents of legitimacy. The media, therefore, attempt to manufacture consent, particularly in the area of foreign policy.

From this perspective the media are the critical vehicle for staging and framing the simulations of terrorism. Terrorism at this level of media hermeneutics reflects the attempt of the Reagan administration to realize its ideological agenda. From the earliest moments of this administration terrorism was the centerpiece for its foreign policy.

Concocting stories about Soviet-sponsored terrorism, the media helped to disseminate the disinformation of the Reagan administration. As Edward Herman has amply documented in *The Real Terror Network*, this disinformation helped to revive the cold war mentality and divert attention from the roots of pressing domestic and international issues. “Retail terror,” as Herman calls the individual bombing, hijacking and assassination, was “overblown for political reasons, to distract attention from more substantial terror (namely that of the National Security State clients of the U.S.), and to allow a manipulation of public fears and a more efficient ‘engineering of consent.’”

While an ideological agenda sets the frame for the official construction of terrorism, the image of terrorism resonates in the public mind because the media simulation lacks both content and context. Both the electronic and print media decontextualize events and issues. We are seldom presented with an in-depth analysis of any situation. Instead, constrained by ideological and structural limitations, the news media present simplified pictures of the world. Thus, moral outrage becomes a natural consequence of the images that proliferate in the media stories about terrorism. Images from bereaved widows to concerned relatives are flashed across the screens and pages of the news media until it seems perfectly “logical” to pursue a vengeful policy.

## **Fabricated Reality**

Television is the central vehicle for all image politics, but no administration has so single-mindedly pursued a TV-first policy as Reagan’s. Manufactured and staged events, what media critic Alexander Cockburn has called “electronic Nuremberg rallies,” have been at the heart of the “Great Communicator’s” strategy, and TV has played the willing role of accomplice to such fabricated reality. Terrorist dramas, re-enacted by TV news media, have provided the necessary backdrop to and justification for military maneuvers against Libya even though the facts of

Libyan involvement in such affairs as the Achille Lauro and the airport attacks at Rome and Vienna are missing. Since the truth is not important to this anecdotal and doddering President or to the logic of simulations, TV continues its obfuscatory role.

As the command center for the new epistemology which has abandoned dialogue, reason, ambivalence and subtlety, TV develops what Neil Postman calls (in *Amusing Ourselves to Death*) “anti-communication.” We are no longer informed or even misinformed; we are deformed into the kind of characters who are the victims and heroes in the playing out of media and political fantasies. Then we are asked to respond as characters to lines that have been scripted for us. The world has become a stage, full of sound and fury signifying nothing and, unfortunately, everything.

It no longer matters what is the historical context or content of an event in this imaginary social world. We are the world and we are the children—literal-minded, cognitively retarded, bloated with images with no sense of continuity. There is no past, only the omnipresent media now; we rally around the tube for the evening ritual of the ahistorical idealization of good and evil. In the binary opposition of the code embedded in the media, Reagan squares off against Qaddafi—the avuncular upholder of civilization against the swarthy archfiend of oriental chaos. Yet, the binary opposites feed on each other, and, in fact, mirror each other in remarkable ways.

Television’s dramatic image of terrorism is a mystification of the essential terrorism that stalks everyday life in modern industrial capitalism. Since the recognition of this real world of terror is too painful, we fixate on the image of terrorism created by the media. Terrorism in the media becomes a kind of stimulant to the dull and deadened shadow existence of a dying culture. It’s another recreational drug with its ups and downs, its flights of fancy and its bad trips.

Resenting being denied their right to despoil any place on earth they choose, Americans long for those vicarious voyages free from the nasty and brutish reality of the return of the repressed. Media addiction and terrorism feed off each other. Terrorism looms large in the imaginary social world created by the media and the hyperreal politics of the American Scene. But the media-magnified acts of retail terrorists can’t compare with the pervasive horrors of modern everyday life. No image, no media presentation can contain this imploding terrorism.

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