

Media, terrorism, and a culture of peace

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Is there a significant relationship between the mass media, especially the entertainment industries, and the ideal of building a viable culture of peace? The following article argues complicity and the need for radical change.

Towering Inferno is the name of a 1974 cinema shocker by John Guillermin in which Muslim suicide pilots fly passenger planes into the Pentagon and the towers of the World Trade Centre. In John Frankenheimer's *Black Sunday* of 1977 a female Palestinian terrorist forces a pilot to steer a Zeppelin carrying 500 kilograms of plastic explosives into a crowded football stadium. Yet another film in this horror-and-disaster genre is Edmund Zwick's *Siege* of 1988. A series of terrorist attacks by radical Islamists results in a state of emergency being declared in the United States; tanks roll across Brooklyn Bridge, Arab-Americans are interned in camps. In the film *Die Hard*, 1995, the whole district of Manhattan is cordoned off after a bomb attack.

As we can see, neither the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, nor its treatment in the mass media, are anything new. Be it air attacks on skyscrapers, a war against radical Muslims in Afghanistan (as in *Rambo III* with Sylvester Stallone, 1987) or anti-Muslim prejudices, the US-American dream factory Hollywood has for some time now been using all three as ideological set-pieces. Cinema is fantasy, regression and anticipation, accelerator and catalyst, all at the same time.

To be able to understand the communications aspect of terrorism, it is meaningful to imagine a triangular relationship between terrorist, victim and target group, whereby the victim, normally linked in some way with the target group, is a kind of instrument used for getting a specific message across to that target group, i.e. for communicating with it. The victim of terrorism is supposed to traumatise, demoralise the target group, to exert an influence on it in some way. Given that usually only two of the three poles in this triangular relationship are present in an act of terrorism, communication assumes an important role: it is communication that involves the third pole in a relationship with the other two poles in the triangle.

The language of terrorism is not new. For a 19th century Russian social revolutionary his bomb was also his language. He used that language to oppose an unjust and inhumane political order offering neither freedom of the press nor freedom of assembly. In the 19th century the anarchist-terrorist bomb of an assassin or an emperor-murderer had a correspondence to an unofficial hand-printed anarchist underground newspaper. At that time such underground media could easily compete with the official media. Many 19th century newspapers only had a circulation of several hundred, at best a thousand copies, and they often comprised only a few pages. Using

public speech a single anarchist in Hyde Park could pit himself against both the available media and the reader market.

This relationship altered once economic and technological changes resulted in just a few newspapers which had huge circulation figures and thus addressed millions of readers. The moment when *public* discussion took place in *private* media, when (due to economic constraints) a newspaper was interested less in readership and more in advertising, a terrorist could no longer get a hearing using normal means of communication. A terrorist opponent of the dominant capitalist culture could not expect the mass media to listen to him or to grant her advertising space. Parallel to this development, the terrorists' own media had to remain small: their niche media were no longer taken any notice of in the public domain.

Terrorism is a very specific form of communication

This form alters according to historical and cultural circumstances. The outrageousness of the terrorist attack on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001 is rooted in the fact that the superpower USA was wounded on its own terrain, that the two destroyed buildings had great symbolic character, and that the event was processed in the media directly, globally, and in real-time. In reality and in the media, the three poles of terrorist, victim and target group merged into one. In other words, because television repeatedly showed the images of the two burning towers of the World Trade Centre it assumed the function of a secret accomplice of the horrendous images.

When children pluck out their eye-brows, that is to say, behave in a self-aggressive manner, when they stop eating and when they entertain thoughts of suicide, this is often symptomatic of disruptions in communication between them and their parents. Such symptoms demand public communication. The same applies in the case of the phenomenon of terrorism. In 1975 the Austrian-American psychologist Friedrich Hacker analysed terrorism in the following terms:

'The terrorist act is an appeal to the environment for help, a drastic challenge to a disinterested, blind and deaf world, which ignores the justified desires and requirements of the unjustly treated, disregarded terrorists. The signal points to a hitherto insufficiently realized emergency and announces that the terrorists are no longer willing to tolerate any longer the past neglect' (Hacker, 1975: 220-221).

This kind of evaluation can be readily applied to the media. Richard Francis, the former Director of News and Current Affairs at the BBC, says this explicitly. His analysis of terrorist violence in the Northern Ireland conflict in the 1970s is as follows:

'The history of broadcasting in Ireland, and in Northern Ireland in particular, will suggest, I believe, that it was the omission from our air during the sixties of the voices of extremism and the proper examination of the legitimate aims of Republicanism which led to the troubles that have been going on for the best part of ten years' (quoted in EBU 1978: 31).

In a world of disinterest, blindness, deafness and omission, the terrorists of 11 September 2002 communicated that they had reached a point of extreme despair. Their message to the world reads: Take an interest in us. We do not want to be made blind and dead by you any longer, we finally want to be perceived and seen by you. Their objective could be aptly described by allusion to the title of a book by the black author Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*, published in 1952: We do not wish to remain 'invisible' any longer.

In our international communications disorder, in which much more than half of humankind cannot get a hearing in the mass media, there is a correspondence between the extraordinary, unique and extreme communicative message of the terrorists of 11 September 2001 and the normal, commonplace mass media overkill in the richest country on earth. In the USA today there are 17,000 newspapers, 12,000 magazines, 27,000 video libraries, 350 million TV sets and more than 400 million radios. Every year 40,000 new books are printed, every day 41 million photographs are taken, every year 60 billions letters are dropped into American letter boxes, and every week the country exports film material for 150,000 hours of TV programming to the rest of the world (fifty times more than twenty years ago).

Yet the international media world after 11 September 2001 revealed that this media overkill from the USA is as effective as it is helpless. While for reasons of censorship the USA deliberately intended the Afghanistan war to be a war without images, the Arab TV station Al Jazeera broke away from this US monopolisation of images and their interpretation by showing the videos of Osama bin Laden. And because there were only very few video images of Osama bin Laden, and because they looked so aesthetically old-fashioned, rigid and patriarchal, and because they were only shown a few times, and often censored, in the western industrial countries, for these very reasons they assumed an iconographic significance in the global public domain of a kind surely never achieved by the images broadcast by CNN.

A culture of peace urgently requires completely different media structures. In a report of mine published by the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ) in Eschborn, Germany, I listed the following eight demands of a media culture of peace:

- More publicising of information that facilitates a peaceful solution of conflicts.

- The dismantling of prejudices that denigrate the opponent.

·A greater awareness of hidden misconceptions, especially to do with controversial themes.

·A new definition of the mass media as a kind of social early warning system pin-pointing potential flash-points.

·Inclusion of the opponent in proposals for a peaceful solution of conflicts.

·More, and more positive, reports on peace-makers.

·Promotion of a climate of reconciliation in the public domain.

·Initiation of dialogue and communication with the peace-makers on the opposite side.

As long as we fail to work seriously on a media culture of peace, the mass media are destined to remain both a plaything and a secret accomplice of terrorism.

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