

# Images of the enemy: Post 9/11 reprise

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*The title of this article refers to a book published two decades ago (McNair, 1988) just as the Cold War was coming to an end. Mikhail Gorbachev was still firmly in power and Ronald Reagan was serving out his last months as president of the United States. Peace was breaking out between the superpowers and fears of a nuclear confrontation between east and west were receding after more than four decades of tension.*

Images of the Enemy was based on a PhD thesis and research conducted earlier in that decade. It explored UK TV news coverage of the cold war, and related stories such as the campaigns of the international peace movement to halt the deployment of Cruise missiles at Greenham Common in England. The title referred to the book's argument that, far from being impartial, balanced and objective, as required by the regulations which govern public service TV in the UK, British broadcast journalism reported the Soviet Union in terms which tended to reinforce the assumptions of the cold warriors in Washington and London.

In words and pictures the USSR was portrayed not only as a threat, but an enemy, an image based on often spurious data about the size and sophistication of its military forces, and alarmist speculations about its intentions vis à vis Europe and other theatres. The Soviet Union was portrayed in the news as an 'Evil Empire', responsible for 'barbaric acts of terrorism' such as the shooting down of the Korean Airliner 007 in 1983.

The causes of this pattern of coverage were complex - professional routines which lead to journalistic over-reliance on official sources of information; a focus on the human right abuses of the USSR and its client states, alongside a downplaying of similar or worse abuses occurring in US client states such as El Salvador and Chile; the failure of the Soviet government, until Gorbachov reformed it with glasnost, to compete effectively for global public opinion with the Reagan and Thatcher governments.

Whatever the explanations, the resulting coverage failed, I argued then, to provide an objective account of the superpower stand-off, and contributed to a climate in which the US administration could talk about the real possibility of fighting 'limited nuclear war' in Europe, and Ronald Reagan could advance the construction at vast expense of a 'Star Wars' style missile defence system. News media represented the Soviet threat in terms which reinforced the cold war rhetoric of the US and the UK (the Soviet media did the same from the opposite perspective, of course, although Pravda and Izvestia, unlike the BBC or The Times, made no claims to objectivity).

Images of the Enemy reflected a moment in time when the world was divided into two armed camps, each with the capacity to inflict nuclear destruction on the other, supported on both sides by media which tended to service their respective political and military elites' propaganda needs, consciously or otherwise. This was an era when Chomsky and Herman's 'propaganda model' for understanding how the media worked seemed to fit the facts quite well (1979). The media did indeed seem to report these key geo-political events in terms which reflected the interests and needs of the National Security State, as Chomsky and Herman called the media-military-industrial complex they argued to be in control of public opinion.

And then everything changed. Gorbachov's campaign to reform the USSR from within, the fall of the Berlin wall in November 1989, the success of the Velvet revolutions and the disintegration of the Soviet Union itself, ushered in a new era, a 'new world order' indeed, as east and west, north and south, came together to force the ejection of Saddam Hussein from Kuwait in the first Gulf war. 'Images of the enemy' were replaced by a decade of ideological and geo-political dissolution, in which the divisions between left and right, and good and evil were blurred. Wars still happened, regrettably, but could no longer be reported within cold war paradigms. The enemy was no longer the Soviet Bear, or monolithic state socialism, but resurgent nationalism and religious sectarianism, advanced by means of genocide (Rwanda), ethnic cleansing (the former

Yugoslavia) and terrorism (Chechnya).

### **The media and terrorism**

Throughout the 1990s Islamist terrorism in Russia, the Middle East, Africa and Asia was a factor in the emerging new world order, if not a particularly visible one, remaining low on the news agenda. Following the success of the Mujahideen in expelling the Soviets from Afghanistan, a radical Wahhabi leader called Osama Bin Laden was already active with his Al Quaida movement, but he and his followers were peripheral to public consciousness and journalistic news values. There were Islamist terrorist attacks on the World Trade centre in 1993, and the USS Cole in October 2000, but these were not perceived as evidence of a 'global terror threat', requiring a 'war on terror' in response.

In the 1990s terrorism, as it had always been, was represented as an irritant, and a violent aberration in democratic societies, but never a strategic threat. In the United Kingdom, the sectarian terrorism which had afflicted Northern Ireland and the rest of the British Isles for thirty years was giving way to the Good Friday peace process, and the transformation of IRA leaders such as Gerry Adams and Martin McGuinness into democratic politicians and statesmen, feted by journalists as much as politicians.

During the Clinton presidency attempts were made to destroy Al Quaida bases in Afghanistan and Sudan, but these failed, and the problem was not regarded by either Clinton or his successor as a political priority. The Oklahoma bombings raised the spectre of Islamist terrorism in the United States and caused a brief panic, but when it emerged that the perpetrator was a US citizen called Timothy McVeigh, attention moved elsewhere, to the problem of domestic right-wing extremism. When the Bush administration took over from Clinton in early 2001 the problem of Islamist terrorism was low on the list of its priorities.

September 11, 2001 changed that. An audacious, devastating attack on the economic, military and political symbols of US power brought terrorism 'Islamist terrorism in particular' to the top of the political agenda not just in America, but the entire world, where it has remained. The concepts of 'global terror threat', 'war on terrorism' and 'clash of civilisations' have become familiar and pervasive, shaping the foreign and domestic policy of governments, and driving military interventions. The media have been the main vehicle for the dissemination of these concepts, just as they were the vehicle for Al Quaida's assault on the Twin Towers. The war on terror, indeed, is a media war like no other before it, in which 'images of the enemy' have again emerged as a highly visible and often contentious feature of our journalistic culture, amplified by the rise of 24-hour 'real time' news and the internet.

### **The media and terrorism ? a brief historical review**

Terrorism 'which I will define here as political violence inflicted against civilians by non-state actors such as ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque for 'Basque Homeland and Freedom') the Irish Republican Army (IRA), and Al Quaida' has been referred to as 'the theatre of cruelty'. The term highlights the fact that terrorism is a kind of performance, an act of communication as much as a physical attack on people or buildings. Attacks such as that of September 11, 2001, or the attempted car bombing of Glasgow airport on June 30, 2007, are often described as 'spectaculars', precisely because of this property. More important than the horrifying deaths of 3,000 people in New York on 9/11 was the message the spectacle of the burning towers and their collapse communicated to the world 'that we, the perpetrators and their sponsors, can strike at the heart of US power, and dispense death to its population on a huge scale.

The IRA's 1980s bombing campaign in the United Kingdom was also a form of political communication. Pub bombings in Birmingham and London said 'no one is safe'. The attack on the Conservative Government which nearly killed Margaret Thatcher in 1983 was a demonstration

of the vulnerability of state power. If British troops are in Northern Ireland, the IRA was saying, then we are in the UK, bringing the war to your doorstep.

Underpinning the violence, of course, were and are political objectives ? for Al Quaida, the end of US influence in the Middle East and the overthrow of regimes in Saudi Arabia and elsewhere; for the IRA, the end of British ?occupation? of Northern Ireland, and in the longer term, union with the republic. Terroristic violence seeks to grab the attention of the public, literally to terrorise them, in the hope that the resulting pressure on politicians will lead to policy change. In this respect, it is more than just criminality, although governments and the media will frequently seek to label it as such.

Terrorism is a weapon in asymmetric warfare, i.e. warfare in which non-state actors engage with the forces of their own or another state. The former are usually relatively resource-poor, lacking the military power and infrastructure which is at the disposal of the state. Instead, they use the symbolic power of attacks on civilian, ?soft? targets which, if they are of little importance militarily (even the shock of 9/11 was quickly absorbed by the US and world economy), are effective in shaping public opinion.

The spectacular, symbolic quality of terrorism, and its importance as a political tool, has grown with the evolution of the media in recent decades. Some observers, indeed, attribute the late 20th century?s growth of insurgent terrorism against civilians to the development of media which give it unprecedented coverage and publicity. If terrorism is the theatre of cruelty, modern media of mass communication comprise a stage with global reach, encouraging the planning and execution of acts which terrorise audiences across the world. Exploiting the news values of media organisations ? which tend to stress the dramatic and the conflictual ? insurgent groups are able to induce fear and panic amongst mass populations with spectacular acts designed to capture the media?s attention.

The September 11 attacks exemplify this trend. On that day, as usual, the proliferating number of real time, 24-hour news channels serving America and the rest of the world (CNN, Fox, BBC World) faced the challenge of filling their airtime with interesting, newsworthy stories. And the Al Quaida attacks were the ultimate breaking news story, commencing with confusion and chaos, before ending in apocalyptic scenes of death and destruction in downtown Manhattan. And all of it on the doorsteps of the world?s most powerful media organisations.

Both the manner of the attacks, and the targets, were carefully selected to maximise their impact as media events. Their success, which was partly a function of their sheer unexpectedness, meant that throughout that day, and for many days afterwards, the global TV audience was exposed to endless reruns of planes smashing into buildings, people falling or throwing themselves out of buildings, and buildings collapsing. In the era of the Hollywood action blockbuster, 9/11 provided a global audience with visceral spectacle on a scale and of a kind never seen before. The attacks on America provoked in turn the ?war on terror? which President Bush and his advisers declared against Al Quaida.

Coverage of September 11 was immediate, and round-the-clock, thanks to the existence of 24-hour news channels. In the UK the BBC?s coverage attracted 33 million viewers, and billions watched events unfold around the world. And then, too, there was the internet, and the blogosphere, still then just a trendy word for something which few people participated in. September 11, and the fevered political debate which followed it, fuelled the rise of the internet as a global communication medium, supplementing 24-hour news with its much more participatory, personalised and uncensorable modes of communication.

All over the world people used the internet to debate and access information about the meaning of these events, and the ?clash of civilisations? (Huntington, 1996) they seemed to portend. Between them, the internet and 24-hour news signalled a new era of ?cultural chaos?, as I have called it elsewhere (McNair, 2006), in which Al Quaida and other groups could intervene in and set the agenda of the global public sphere as never before in the history of terrorism.

The internet was also increasingly used by the terrorists themselves, most dramatically in the context of disseminating jihadi websites and graphic footage of decapitations of hostages and other acts. This tactic developed most clearly during the occupation of Iraq, as Al Quaida and sunni insurgents fought against the Coalition forces and others whom they perceived to be collaborators with the US and its allies. Daniel Pearl in Pakistan; Ken Bigley and Margaret Hassan in Iraq ? the executions of these and other hostages were filmed and put on the net, from where the obscene images they presented spread around the world like viruses.

Today, the internet is a key organising tool for terrorist organisations, uniquely resistant among all the media to censorship and policing. Jihadi websites may be closed down at one point in the global online network, only to open up elsewhere. The liberatory communicative power of the net is available to all.

### **Criticising the media**

If few observers questioned the need for a determined response to Islamist terrorism post-9/11, many have accused the media of exaggerating the threat which it poses, and of reinforcing the alarmist neo-conservative doctrines of a White House which saw jihad as a threat to the security of Middle East oil and its favoured regimes in that region (perceptions shared by the British government under Tony Blair). If images of the enemy had been about the Soviet Threat during the cold war, post-9/11, it was argued by some, they had taken the form of an illusory ?global terror threat?, on the basis of which America and its allies went to war and caused, directly or indirectly, the deaths of thousands of civilians in Afghanistan and Iraq.

The media, it was argued, accepted too readily official sources of information about such matters as the presence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq. As Adam Curtis 2005 film *The Power of Nightmares* eloquently put it, the disorganised, relatively ramshackle band of jihadis who made up the Al Quaida network were constructed in the media as a threat hardly less significant than that of the Nazis in the 1940s or the USSR during the decades of the cold war ? a strategic threat to civilisation and democracy. On this basis the ?war on terror? had been allowed to gather momentum without adequate critical scrutiny, even to the point of the invasion of Iraq.

The media were also accused of failing to provide sufficient context for the 9/11 attacks, and for the roots and causes of Islamist terrorism in general. The role of the Israel-Palestine conflict; the corruption of the Saudi government and other pro-western regimes in the Middle East; the perception of the US and its allies as unwelcome, imperialist forces in the Arab world over many decades ? these issues were rarely addressed in mainstream news media, it was argued, allowing public opinion on the merits or otherwise of the war on terror to develop without key qualifying background.

So are post-9/11 images of the enemy comparable to those which characterised so much media coverage of the cold war, and can they be criticised in the way that Noam Chomsky and others have done? In some ways, yes. By over reliance on official western sources ? most notoriously in the build up to war in Iraq ? the media have participated in threat inflation, and created the conditions which allowed something like Abu Ghraib to develop. The media?s image of Saddam Hussein as a uniquely evil dictator who deserved to be removed from power by force recalled many of the alarming features of cold war news, right down to the archive footage of Iraqi military forces parading through Baghdad as if invincible. In the event, Iraqi military power was an illusion, and melted away with hardly a fight when confronted by a serious opponent, only to be replaced by a much more dangerous enemy.

On the other hand, the western media since September 11, and since the invasion of Iraq in particular, have been critical of many aspects of the ?war on terror?. If media coverage of the war on terror may have created the conditions in which something like Abu Ghraib could happen, journalists like Seymour Hersch were proactive in exposing it. In Britain, Coalition abuses of human rights and other matters have been central to media coverage of the war on terror. The

stance of the Blair government in respect of Iraq's alleged possession of weapons of mass destruction was questioned by many media organisations, including the BBC, before the invasion of the country took place.

The actual invasion and subsequent occupation, legitimised by 'dodgy dossiers' and other unreliable (as it turned out) official sources and intelligence, produced a constant stream of critical coverage from 2003 onwards. Some media, in some countries, were more critical than others (public service broadcasters like the BBC and ABC in Australia were more likely to criticise Coalition policy than Rupert Murdoch's Fox News in the USA, for example), but there has been frequent scrutiny of and debate on the merits of the 'war on terrorism', and on broader issues such as the usefulness of the term.

Many media organisations did accept the criticism that they had failed to provide adequate context to their coverage of Islamist terrorism, and organisations such as the BBC and Channel 4 in the UK responded with a number of documentaries on topics such as the psychology of the suicide bomber, or on the long and tangled history of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Journalists struggled, however, with the question of how to be 'objective' in their coverage of a conflict which was, indeed, a fundamental clash of world views – how to be professionally detached with respect to a theocratic ideology dedicated to the overthrow of liberal democracy and the persecution of Jews, women, homosexuals, and non-Muslims in general (Barbie and Zelizer, eds., 2002). Writing two days after a failed terrorist attack on Glasgow airport which, had it succeeded, would have killed hundreds of people going on their family holidays, that dilemma remains.

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