Chapter 4
Understanding Media During Times of Terrorism

Robert Hackett
Simon Fraser University, Canada

ABSTRACT

Political violence, including terrorism, can be regarded as a form of (distorted) communication, in which media spectacles play an integral role. Conversely, mass-mediated communication can be regarded as a form of violence, and even terror, in several respects. Media are often propagandistic facilitators to state terror. More broadly, they may help to cultivate a political climate of fear and authoritarianism, contributing to conflict-escalating feedback loops. Even more broadly, beyond media representations, dominant media institutions are arguably embedded in relations of global economic, social, and cultural inequality—constituting a form of structural violence. Notwithstanding its democratic potential, the Internet does not comprise a clear alternative in practice, and neither censorship of terrorist spectacles nor the intensified pursuit of dominant forms of journalistic "objectivity" offer viable ways to reduce the media's imbrication with violence. Three potentially more productive strategies explored in this chapter include reforming the media field from within through the paradigm of Peace Journalism, supporting the development of alternative and community media, and building movements for media reform and democratization.

INTRODUCTION

The deformed human mind is the ultimate doomsday weapon (Thompson, 1980, p. 52).

I was reminded of that stark warning by the late British historian E.P. Thompson while listening to Canadian Broadcasting Corporation radio host Rex Murphy in November 2011. On his program *Cross-Country Checkup*, Murphy was interviewing Terry Glavin, a journalist and writer, about Glavin's (2011) latest book (titled *Come from the Shadows*), on Canada's so-called "mission" in Afghanistan. That is, following 9/11, Canadian troops participated in the subsequent invasion of Afghanistan, on the basis of a shifting rationale that arguably had never been adequately debated. Was it about preventing further

attacks, overthrowing the Taliban regime, protecting women's rights, rebuilding a failed nation, or other unstated geopolitical objectives?

Murphy's telephone caller was a military man from Winnipeg. Asked whether he thought the "mission" was "worth it," the caller indicated it was good for the Canadian armed forces, because it gave them a chance to put their training and tools to "practical" use. On the face of it, that is an extraordinary statement from the perspective of human morality. It appears to justify invasion, bombing and war, and the massive organized spending of blood and treasure, on the grounds that they give the military a chance to try out its weapons. Would anybody argue for burning villages as a means of testing new fire engines? Interestingly, Rex Murphy did not challenge the caller's answer, but instead simply thanked him for his service to Canada.

That brief radio exchange, I suggest, is part of a broader pattern. Since the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and particularly the advent of the Conservative government of Stephen Harper, there has been a well-funded effort to militarize Canada's culture (Richler, 2012). That campaign helps to explain why recent official Canada Day celebrations are festooned with tanks and military equipment on which youngsters are invited to play; why the Harper government is rescuing from its erstwhile historical obscurity the War of 1812 against the U.S. as a symbol of Canadian identity, to take its place alongside the battle of Vimy Ridge during the inter-imperialist slaughter of World War I; and why professional hockey teams have special games honoring the military (Shipley, 2013). Canada's hegemonic media have often followed suit, providing prominent, respectful, and often emotive treatment of the 158 Canadian men and women who have died in the Afghan "mission" since 2002, while paying far less attention, for example, to the approximately *10,000* Canadian workers who have died on the job in the same time period.

Emerging debates around such shifts towards militarization are linked to Canada's involvement in war and armed conflict. However, as the internationally respected Norwegian peace scholar Johan Galtung (1990) has tirelessly argued, the trajectory of war begins long before the first shot is fired. War is typically preceded by euphemisms, lies, the glorification of combat and military, desensitization to violence, and a process of "othering" vis-à-vis a designated enemy. Cultural violence helps to lay the groundwork for the physical violence of war. The form of public storytelling known as journalism, along with other genres of mediated communication, are central to contemporary cultural processes.

Therefore, it is not absurd to ask whether media and terror are two entirely separate categories. Or might they be two sides of the same hideous coin—mediated terror, terrorizing media, or simply, media terror?

VIOLENCE AS COMMUNICATION

Violence can sometimes be acknowledged as a form of communication. Distorted, limited, destructive, immoral, counterproductive perhaps, certainly monologic rather than dialogic, but a kind of communication nevertheless. Long before 9/11, two European peace researchers argued that a defining characteristic of insurgent terrorism was the use of politically motivated violence against victims who were not the primary targets of the action (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982). Rather, the targets are other groups—typically, enemy governments or publics or rival groups and potential supporters. Schmid and de Graaf (1982) saw it as no coincidence that the mass media and modern insurgent terrorism (the Russian social-revolutionaries' use of "propaganda of the deed") emerged at the same historical moment—towards the end of the 19th century.

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