Chapter 9

Media–Related Strategies and “War on Terrorism”

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ABSTRACT

Terrorist events are breaking news for the media whose ethical responsibility can be debatable. Tactics of terrorism vary from kidnapping, hostage-taking, hijackings, and others up to mass destruction, including the use of nuclear weapons. Media responses and coverage strategies of such tactics also vary, with some reluctant to provide terrorists with the “oxygen of publicity.” Some striking similarities have appeared recently between the build-up to the war on Iraq begun by U.S. President George W. Bush’s administration in 2002, culminating with the start of war in 2003, and the 2012 push by current U.S. President Barack Obama for action to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In the earlier case, the presumption was established in the public mind, without adequate evidence, that Iraq possessed or was about to possess weapons of mass destruction, and had the will to use them against the United States. In the latter case, the background presumption is that Iran is actively seeking to produce a nuclear weapon, with Israel as a potential target. This claim also lacks solid evidence at the time of writing, but has come to be accepted in some media as an uncontroversial fact. This chapter looks at aspects of how different English and French Canadian newspapers, as examples, covered the push for war on Iraq. It includes reflections on the use of language in reporting on the war itself. The central concern is with the media role in fear-mongering and propaganda for war.

INTRODUCTION

Terrorist events are breaking news for the media whose ethical responsibility can become ambiguous, divided between the need to inform the public and the unwillingness to provide the “oxygen of publicity” so necessary for terrorism’s success. Tactics of terrorism vary from kidnapping, hostage taking, hijackings, and others up to mass destruction, including the use of nuclear weapons. Media responses and coverage strategies of such tactics also vary, and can include endorsement of a “War on Terrorism” in the case of major threats, including nuclear or other weapons of mass destruction. In the wake of a terrorist attack public opinion is likely to be angry against the perpetrators and
fearful of further attack. Extremist attacks bring about extremist responses and normally reasonable people who see themselves as terrorism targets tend to prefer their safety to upholding due process and civil liberties. Governments in this situation tend to yield to such extremism and in some cases welcome and harness it, because it allows them to expand their powers. In this situation the media have a hard time resisting such extension of powers because they may alienate readers and be blamed for being “soft on terrorism” if they are seen as restraining government by demanding due process and defending civil liberties in a time of emergency. It is easier to be critical of government when the emergency is past.

This chapter does not focus on the immediate media responses to acts of terrorism, but the media responses to government fear-mongering, war-mongering, and expansion of power in the wake of a terrorist attack, specifically 9/11. In these media responses, some striking similarities have appeared between the build-up to the war on Iraq begun by U.S. President George W. Bush’s administration in 2002, culminating with the start of war in 2003, and the 2012 push by current U.S. President Barack Obama for action to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon. In the earlier case, the presumption was established in the public mind, without adequate evidence, that Iraq possessed or was about to possess weapons of mass destruction, and had the will to use them against the United States. In the latter case, the background presumption is that Iran is actively seeking to produce a nuclear weapon, with Israel a potential target. This claim also lacks solid evidence at the time of writing, but has come to be accepted in some media as an uncontroversial fact. It is often a cause for alarm how easily mainstream media cooperate with government and private think tank efforts to affect public opinion in ways that promote war.

There appears to be a pattern of behavior wherein media are uncritical of government allegations leading to war. After the war is launched, the media become more self-critical and work to regain credibility. However, when the government embarks on a similar program of persuasion in a new war, the pattern is repeated (Altheide & Grimes, 2005). This chapter examines how the Canadian media reported on the build-up to the war against Iraq launched by U.S. President George W. Bush in March 19, 2003.

Many Americans reacted with surprise and dismay when Canada failed to join the so-called Coalition of the Willing—countries bent on ousting Saddam Hussein’s regime and thereby forcing Iraq to comply with UN requirements relating to weapons of mass destruction. A brief understanding of Canadian political history reveals that a large segment of the French-speaking population has long resisted calls to arms in defense of what they see as imperial interests. Without UN backing, a U.S.-led coalition might seem indistinguishable from imperial designs on Middle East oil. Had Prime Minister Chrétien made the leap he would have handed a vote-getting issue to the flagging “indépendantiste” parties, founded to seek Quebec independence, the Parti Québécois, and the Bloc Québécois. A poll conducted by Ipsos-Reid in late March 2003, revealed that about 83% of Quebec residents were glad Canada stayed out of the war, whereas only 52% of respondents felt that way outside the mainly French-speaking province of Quebec (McCarthy, 2003). The French media of Quebec reflected this strong anti-war stance.

Canadian media coverage of the war build-up is fascinating not just for the English/French divide, but also for the role played by what at the time was the most powerful media conglomerate in English Canada: CanWest Global Communications Corporation. The owner of this conglomerate (no longer in existence in the same form, having been split up and parts sold off) was the Asper family, headed at the time by Israel “Izzy” Asper, a long-time supporter of the then ruling Liberal Party of Canada, and of Zionist causes (he died in October, 2003). The Aspers built up a television network and in 2000 acquired the cross-Canada

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