

To what extent does the media affect the portrayal of terrorism by ‘Manufacturing Consent’

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Abstract: The research explores to what extent does the media affect the portrayal of terrorism by “Manufacturing Consent” through the use of language. This idea was brought to life by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in their book *Manufacturing Consent*. It focuses on “manufacturing consent” in the portrayal of terrorism and terrorists in mass media. Due to the nature of terrorism being reported usually by news media the essay focuses on the way news media presents terrorism. There are many elements to the presentation by news media, but this essay focuses on the use of language. The question is focused on the language part of the news presentation; it doesn’t include visual presentation, which is one of the strongest manipulators of audience. The research suggests that mass media uses language very efficiently for portrayal of stories. In the case of terrorism, the term “framing” is used to describe how news media takes stories and filters them to manufacture agreement within society and audience. Language is used with the help of semiotics to engrave the audience’s mind. It is effective as the media provides just one perspective of the issue; since the majority audience does not experience terrorism first hand, it is easy for the news media to show a perspective to the audience that they want the people to see and believe.

Keywords: Manufacturing Consent, terrorism, portrayal, media affect, presentation.

I. INTRODUCTION

*Manufacturing Consent*¹ is a book written by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky. The book analyses how the news media is more of a business. It uses the propaganda model to demonstrate the competition and commercial dominance that is strived by corporate news mass communication media. The book also goes on to talk about the bias and the censoring that takes place depending on the intervention of government and the extent of the intervention.

I chose this topic because it interested me when we learnt it in our Language and Literature course. The concept of “manufacturing consent” was just a little aspect of our mass communication unit and along with that we watched a documentary named ‘Outfoxed’ which talks about the way Fox News manufactures consent with the public. The reason I chose this topic is so that I could expand my knowledge on this subject and get a more in depth look into the concept. The topic also allows me to look at terrorism and look at how mass media has affected the views of the general public.

The idea of “the manufacture of consent” was coined by Walter Lippmann in a book called *Public Opinion* in 1922. The concept of the theory is that manufacturing consent is to create an agreement with the public on matters or things that they would not otherwise be in agreement with. Lippman suggested that this “manipulation of minds” should have been regressed, however it only became stronger as the methods of propaganda improved with the improvement of democracy. These new methods and advances in psychological science provided the government with newer better techniques to create and manufacture consent with the public. This has been used around the world and still is used to help the government to do things which would otherwise be against the views of the public.

Terrorism is defined as “the threat or use of violence, often against the civilian population, to achieve political or social ends, to intimidate opponents, or to publicize grievances.”² Terrorism has been a global issue for a very long time. It

¹ Herman, Edward S. and Noam Chomsky. *Manufacturing Consent*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2002. Print.

² “Terrorism” *The Columbia Encyclopedia*. 6th ed. The Columbia University Press, 2012. Print.

usually consists of bombings, hijacks, assassinations, etc. Independent from military actions, terrorism is used for political or social purposes. In the late 20th century and throughout the 21st century, the fear of terrorism is said to have risen due to the media coverage. There are several terrorist organizations around the world which are specifically devoted to a certain social or political cause. Some of the examples of terrorist organizations include Irish Republican Army, Al Qaeda, Aum Shinrikyo, Shining Path, and several others. These groups include extremists who organize attacks to strike fear or make a statement against the opponent. Some governments may also aid terrorist groups by protecting and supporting some organizations. The UN Security Council called for international cooperation in fighting terrorism in 1999, and persuaded governments against aiding terrorist organizations. Many governments retaliate to terrorist acts through military force, such as the case after the attack on September 11 on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the United States.

Terrorism is currently a global issue that concerns many people around the world. While most people are not subjected to terrorism in person, they rely on the news media to gain knowledge about any terrorist attacks or actions. The way people view terrorists and terrorism relies on their opinions and perspectives of the events that occur around the world. A person's opinion should be shaped without any intervention of a 2nd party. They should be able to make up their own mind on an event by seeing what everyone who was part of the event without it being altered in the way it is presented.

This topic is very significant in my opinion because this concept was very prominent for the war in Afghanistan and Iraq. The news media was responsible to get the American audience to agree with going to war against the terrorism that had attacked the country with the events of September 9, 2001.

News media includes a lot of mediums and has grown immensely in the 21st century. News today can be attained in several different forms. These include television, radio, internet, podcasts, newspapers, magazines, and other periodicals. All these new, and old, mediums of news make it very easy for people to be subjected to the current world issues and events. The role of all these mediums in a democracy is very simple. They are there to report and inform the public on current event and issues. Although the news media does this at the moment, they do so with an extent of bias in their reports. Democracy is based on a principles of social equality. Therefore all the public in the democracy should be provided with fair unbiased report.

However, in a democracy, the government is elected and also partly run by the public decision. Therefore, the media works with different parties of the governments to create consent towards their party's decisions and actions.

II. NEWS MEDIA

With this question, I will be looking at the way the media portrays terrorism and frames it. There are a lot of speculations as to which side the media takes (Norris, Kern, and Just 3). It is very important to know which side the media takes because the media has a huge influence on the audience, which is the general public. The way news media shows terrorism and terrorists will shape the way people see a terrorist act, such as the 9/11 attack. The media can make terrorists look justifiable and create consent with future terrorism. However, the media can take the side of the government to create "support for political leaders and the security policies they implement." (Norris, Kern, and Just 3). Furthermore, the media is also victim to the manufacture of consent from the government. The government can issue false information to the news media or give out information in their favor to create consent with the public. In several ways the way information is presented to the audience can be altered easily. It is important for the people to be careful and not assume everything presented to them is true or valid. Many news corporations are known notoriously to twist the news they provide in favor of their personal beliefs. Fox News is a great example of a news corporation that changes facts or uses various presentation methods to manufacture consent.

In the case of the United States, the media took sides with the government to promote the strength of the government and change the way Americans saw terrorism. The radical changes to the foreign policy and security measures within the U.S. have been conveyed to the public eyes as a means to show that the risk of terrorism has risen. The U.S. State Department provided evidence that international terrorist threats have fallen over the past decade (Norris, Kern, and Just 3). However, the Americans fear the risks have increased and that America is in danger. This rising concern has affected the country largely as it has allowed the government to spend taxpayer money to finance several increased security measures over the past decade. Not only this, but the taxpayers have also financed several wars in the middle east. The U.S. Government had to ensure that the media coverage of these wars were in their favor in order to avoid any conflicts with the people of the country who are paying for it.

The September 11 attack on the United States of America is a great example of how the media can provide separate perspectives rather than one focused report which provides the truth to the audience. News corporations such as CNN and Al Jazeera both had an impact with the coverage of the response by the United States. Right after the attack of 9/11 the American mass media was in charge of “selling of the plan” (Norris, Kent, and Just Chapter 7 113); the plan was the response of the U.S. policy makers. The military action of the United States was broadcasted across the Middle East with the use of the news corporations native to the region, such as Al Jazeera.

Framing:

*Framing Terrorism: The News Media, The Government, and The Public*³ describes the term news framing. It is done by selecting some parts of an issue, organizing them, and presenting them in a way that makes the information seem real, without the need of rest of the story. This happens because a news corporation can take one side of the story or look at a single perspective and present it to the audience. If the whole mass media across the region uses this same “framework” then the audience has no other source to another perspective and therefore the media can shape the perspective and the opinion of the public. Another aspect that the media can use is the credibility of a source. The media has the option to choose between the sources and the public is more likely to accept the information from a more credible source.

Another term that is important to look at while analyzing news media is “Agenda Setting.” In the book *Understanding Audiences: Learning to Use the Media Constructively*⁴ agenda setting is explained to be the process where “news reporters and editors are trained to communicate information that unfolds across the timeline of history using standardized selection and presentations criteria.” (Wicks 76) Setting the agenda in journalism usually includes gathering of information that looks for “who, what, where, when, and less frequently how and why.” (Wicks 76) This means that what is presented in the news may not particularly show what exactly happened. News is intended to provide the public with an unbiased view of an event which the audience cannot experience personally. Agenda setting however can intervene as it allows the media to select what to present and what not to present. This is related to framing and could almost be considered one of the processes of framing.

Framing is further explained in the book *Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat*⁵. The book² explains that news stories are not just presented to the audience as they are received. The stories go through a process which intends to produce a story which entices the audience. “News stories are organized according to standard production formulas; television audiences need not only to be informed but also seduced, entertained, and in the proper state of mind for advertisers.” (Dobkin 27) This quote brings up an important key word which is advertisers. Television stations rely on advertisers for a major portion of their revenues. Without ads, the television stations would have very low revenues and may go bankrupt. This gives the advertisers some power to alter the presentation of the news in order to ensure audiences are alert when their ad comes up on their screens.

Another explanation of framing suggests that the presentations are also based on the producers and journalists. Every person has a different way of judging and interpreting. News stories are highly influenced by the way producers and journalists judge the story. Their personal views on the story is presented in their presentation. So apart from the advertisers, producers can alter the journalists presentation to manufacture consent with their view points. This is all done behind the scenes, so there is no way for an audience to see the alterations when the story is presented. A major part of “framing” or “shaping” the news story occurs from judgments and interpretations. However, another key aspect is the way news corporations want the audience to perceive the stories. For example, if the news corporation is influenced by a government party, it is very likely that they are going to present stories in favor of the party.

Semiotics:

Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat refers to semiotic approaches to the stories presented in news. Semiotics is the study of signs and symbols and how they are used or interpreted. The book states that

³ Norris, Pippa Montague Kern, and Marion Just. *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government, and the Public*. New York: Routledge, 2003. Print.

⁴ Wicks, Robert H. *Understanding Audiences: Learning to Use the Media Constructively*. Mahwah: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2001. Print.

⁵ Dobkin, Bethany A. *Tales of Terror: Television News and the Construction of the Terrorist Threat*. New York: Praeger, 1992. Print.

“semiotics can provide a focus on verbal and visual linguistic techniques of depiction in the creation of consensus.” (Dobkin 29) This is very important to understand the way news stories are generated. The events themselves do not provide the story for the network. Semiotic analysis shows the way news stories have been generated and the way they were meant to be interpreted. If we look at the semiotics of news stories, it becomes clear how the consent is produced with the audience. Generally the stories produced are influenced by the culture and social norms of the audience. To create consent with the audience the news media appropriates events and the presentation to support public view and opinion. However, in many instances the appropriation is carefully executed not only to build on the public opinion but it is done to shift public opinion “to reinforce public support for decisions made by a limited group of policy-makers in government” (Dobkin 30)

In the book *Media Representations of September 11*⁶, it is suggested that after the incident of September 11, CNN in particular, used very powerful terminology to influence the public opinion. (Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 86) The news was presented with words such as “Horrific, Extraordinary, Unprecedented.” helping the retaliation of the United States military seem reasonable as well as necessary. (Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 85) This is an example of how the news media can use rhetoric to get the audience to comply with the wishes of government or the news corporation itself. In this particular case, CNN used repetition of harsh and strong words to present the incident as a horrendous event that needs immediate attention of the military forces. If the Commander in Chief of the United States, president in other words, is implementing war on another nation, the public support is very crucial for the government. Without the public support, the military will get lower recruitment, there will be conflicts possibly leading to demonstrations, and the citizens would be angered.

The book focuses on CNN for the analysis. The reason behind this was based on surveys that suggested CNN to be the major source of news outlet for the American people. According to the book, “Surveys by the Pew Research Center report that 90 percent of Americans received news about the 9-11 terrorism attacks from television; of those, 53 percent turned to cable, led notably by CNN. Further, a previous analysis of 9-11 breaking news coverage on ABC, CBS, NBC, and CNN showed strong similarities in coverage among the four media outlets.” (Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 86) Because so many Americans were dependent on televised news media it was easier for the news media to broadcast the event in a way which would swerve the public opinion. Since a single source was prominent the government could use it to promote the message they want to be promoted, which in this case was that military action was necessary to avoid future terrorist attacks.

Language:

Language plays a key role in the framing of any event or issue that is being presented to the audience. The news media in particular tends to use a lot of repetition and use a certain set of descriptors. Going back to CNN’s coverage of the September 11 attack, the analysis showed several repetitions of keywords that trigger a certain emotions within the audience. CNN used several harsh descriptors throughout its coverage of the events. They used words such as “disturbing, extraordinary, terrible, unbelievable” to describe the scenes of the incident. These descriptors are mostly words used to describe something harsh. The use of these words suggests that CNN was trying to portray strong emotions against the attackers or terrorists. This is a subtle way of the news media telling the public that there is no other way of retaliation but by military measure. Descriptors are used to create images in the audience’s mind. With words such as these, CNN did create a “horrific” image of the incident and was successful in giving the audience the same perspective.

Another way language was used to frame the event was through the use of repetition of keywords. Repetition usually emphasizes a certain point to the audience. All news media use repetition successfully to convey a point, however sometimes, they repeat certain “symbolic keywords to contextualize the events.” (Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 92) After the attack was confirmed to be terrorist actions, CNN started using patriotic keywords such as “America, God, pray.” The reference to the United States of America simply as America instead of U.S. or United States created a personalized perspective of the event. When journalists used “America” it made them one of the public, instead of a formal reporter. A sense of patriotism is evoked and this way the audience believed and complied with the coverage more.

⁶ Chermak, Steven, and Frankie Y. Bailey, and Michelle Brown. *Media Representations of September 11*. Westport: Praeger, 2003. Print.

Both of these methods allowed the news coverage to show the American people that the terrorist attack was a major action against the whole nation. CNN journalists also used another important keyword which was “war.” It “was heard 234 times In 12 hours” followed by describing the terrorists as “cowards and madmen.” (Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 92) All of these methods allowed the news media to create a clear image of what happened and what needs to happen in order to avenge the attack. The use of the word “war” subtly foreboded to military retaliation that was due in order to respond to the terrorist attack.

Perspective:

The whole coverage of the event gave a single perspective for the American people. It created an image of the terrorist being evil and a brute force that needs to be stopped before it destroys more. Visual images of the scene were important, however the use of language allowed CNN and other news corporations to manipulate the perspectives of the audience. It allowed the news to strike fear within the American people and showed that terrorists would not stop on their own. The only option was to go to war, and since the news media convinced the audience that this was true, it was easy for the president to declare war and send off troops abroad with the support of the public.

III. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the major news networks such as CNN use methodical ways and take steps to shape the story that they present. In the case of terrorism and terrorist attacks, the news agencies try to increase the level of insecurity and fear in the public view against the terrorist attacks. By slipping in subtle clues and using certain jargon, the news agencies can create consent of the audience with the government. As mentioned before, the public concern and fear of terrorism in America has risen since September 11. This is despite the fall in dangers from international terrorism, which is a conclusion drawn from evidence provided by the U.S. State Department. This example is a valid proof of the media intervening and using their framing techniques to portray terrorism. With the public opinion in their favor, policy-makers can easily create radical policies that they have been planning to implement for a long time.

It is easy for the news media to manufacture consent in many ways. Firstly, the use of television has escalated in the 21st century. Televised news is one of the more popular mediums of news available today. Due to major news networks such as CNN and BBC being available internationally, their broadcasts can be very influential to public opinion. It is less work for the news corporations to shape their story as a single slot of airtime is broadcasted across the globe. For events of terrorism, immediate news is very critical for first impressions. Newspapers have to wait till overnight to print the stories and the next morning to send out the news to the public. Meanwhile, televised news can be instant and in many cases live. This gives the televised news a major advantage in creating consent. In the case of terrorism, this is crucial. If the only perspective of the attack is through the television screen or being subjected to the attack in person, it becomes easy to shift public opinion across a country or internationally. A news network can easily broadcast stories and interpretations in favor of the perspective they are trying to promote, and audiences are likely to see the event in the same way as they have no other window to see the event through.

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