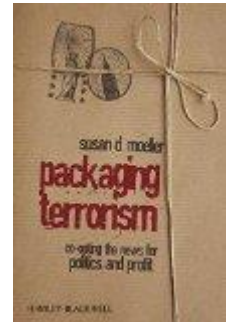


Susan D. Moeller. *Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit.* Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009. 240 pp. \$19.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-4051-7365-0.



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Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit

Susan D. Moeller's well-researched book *Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit* (2009) appeared as the country was transitioning from nearly eight years of George Bush's "War on Terror," amid global condemnation for the invasion and occupation of Iraq, to the administration of newly elected Barack Obama. In the three years since its publication, Osama bin Laden has been assassinated by U.S. troops; President Obama has wound down the war in Iraq and is seeking an exit from Afghanistan as he runs for reelection; and the political landscape of the Middle East has undergone dramatic transformation. The changes of the past three years might tempt a 2012 reader to pass it over: today's audience likely has less appetite for accusations of media complicity with Washington in "fear-mongering and hate mongering" (p. 184). Nevertheless, Moeller's multifaceted analysis often makes for pertinent reading and still provides a needed in-

sight into how the terrorist narrative plays out on average consumers of news.

The book's core emerges from its analytical data on how the media's use of language--starting with deployment of the word "terrorism" itself--narrowly shapes its audience's sense of meaning. Moeller connects this to evidence documenting how mainstream news outlets in the United States and United Kingdom have generally allowed policymakers to frame the narrative on terrorism, especially when reporting breaking news. As a result, the violence of the "War on Terror" becomes, predominantly, a political story, rather than a story of trauma experienced by victims of terrorist events (including wars waged in revenge for terrorist acts). By defaulting to how such attacks play back into domestic political policymaking, Moeller argues, the media engage in "Big Story" patterns of reporting, closing a circular loop that leaves readers and viewers with a skewed sense of the impact of war and violence, an overall sense of ali-

enation from “others” (e.g., Iraqi civilians) and, ultimately, a sense of powerlessness in terms of social change.

As director of the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda at the University of Maryland, Moeller conducted interviews with journalists, media critics, and academics and spent years analyzing public surveys of media consumption, extending her previous affective research on media coverage of international events. [1] Moeller’s attention to trauma, especially compelling in her analysis of key linguistic terms and horrific images, differentiates her line of analysis from the dozens of other articles and books critiquing media coverage that followed in the wake of the September 11 attacks. Instead of insightful reporting on such human repercussions of terrorism, too often the news gets “co-opted for politics and profit,” as her subtitle claims (see also p. 127).

Citing several studies in psychology and communication, for example, Moeller observes: “Both media and government frame terrorism policy and terrorist attacks by using the same terms as the other one does” (p. 127), and using these same terms, over and over, creates a “truth effect” (pp. 125-126). “What matters is frequency, recognition, and familiarity.... What that means is that whoever first states a claim is the one who has the most power in shaping public opinion—even if that claim later turns out to be entirely false” (p. 126). Such an assertion is pivotal to understanding why Americans almost counterintuitively continue to believe a particular “truth,” even after it has been proven wrong.

While such discussions aren’t exactly new, the book provides an important combination of a moral argument with more straightforward media analyses.[2] The focus on how suicide bombings are reported globally is a case in point, contrasting how media framed four major attacks: March 2004 in Madrid and October 2004 in Taba, Egypt, July 2005 in London, and November 2005 in Jordan. The repetition of particular terms and the

general lack of follow-up on the victims of the attacks, delivers more fear than truth, Moeller claims. It constructs a meaning for the audience intended to maximize viewership and hence profit for the big media companies, and to maximize the dominance of an official policy perspective and hence political advantage and power. She may be right in such an assertion. After all, it’s not much different from a more sophisticated theoretical analysis going back at least as far as Guy Debord’s *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967) along with a number of more contemporary updates (Jean Baudrillard and Slavoj Zizek come to mind). While Moeller attempts to discuss complicated issues with straightforward, non-theoretical language—which may make the book especially appealing for students and general readers — it has also opened the book to legitimate criticism, including oversimplification, U.S. ethnocentrism, and even conspiracy theory.[3]

Moeller’s organizing strategy is, indeed, simple: the three substantive chapters that form the core of the book are titled with questions such as “What is Terrorism?” and “How is Terrorism Covered?” Arguably the most compelling chapter in the book is chapter 3, “What Are the Images of Terror?” It traces the historical “management of images” (p. 129), starting in World War I and leading to the “falling man,” Abu Ghraib, and Colin Powell’s use of satellite images during his 2003 U.N. speech justifying the Bush administration’s decision to go to war in Iraq. This is an insightful and emotionally charged chapter, drawing the reader inside key uses of the “war of images” that includes beheadings of journalists and other terrorist propaganda films, the construction of Pvt. Jessica Lynch as a made-for-TV hero, and other indelible images of the past decade. The analysis of coverage of a 12-year-old Iraqi boy, Ali Ismail Abbas, whose parents and siblings were killed during a U.S. bombing raid around Baghdad, presents another case study of Moeller’s primary point: coverage of terrorism must include substantive, non-sensational reporting on how lives are disrupted

on the ground. Her conclusion that Abbas's story wasn't ready for prime time, lacking an opportunity for martial music promos and the other trappings of contemporary broadcast coverage in particular, is a salient one.

In spite of its moments of reductiveness and general lack of theoretical sophistication, *Packaging Terrorism* would be of especially good use in the media and society, media criticism, or reporting classroom. As other reviewers have also noted, the book is highly accessible to a general audience and would go a long way to improving news consumers' media literacy regarding the coverage of terrorism. Moeller's emphasis on the power of words and images to shape our perspectives of the world, whether they are ultimately true or not, is one that bears repeating, especially perhaps for the Facebook generation.

Notes

[1]. See, for example, "Regarding the Pain of Others": Media, Bias and the Coverage of International Disasters," *Journal of International Affairs* (Spring/Summer 2006), and *Compassion Fatigue: How the Media Sell Famine, Disease, War and Death* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

[2]. See some of the countless critical analyses on this topic that Moeller includes in her notes. There are additional contributions to this discussion that should probably have been included but are strangely absent, among them: Barbie Zelizer and Stuart Allen, eds., *Journalism after September 11* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Daya Kishan Thussu and Des Freedman, *War and the Media* (London: Sage, 2003); the conversations with journalists collected in Stephen Hess and Marvin Kalb, eds., *The Media and the War on Terrorism*

(Washington, DC: The Brookings Institution in collaboration with the Shorenstein Center on the Press and Public Policy at Harvard, 2003); and Allison Gilbert, Phil Hirschhorn, Melinda Murphy, Robyn Walensky and Mitchell Stephens, eds., *Covering Catastrophe: Broadcast Journalists Report September 11* (Chicago: Bonus Books, 2002).

[3]. In a review for the media and culture Web site M/C Reviews, Stephen Crofts calls it the best book on the "War on Terror" he's read. Nevertheless, the book reveals a "US ethnocentric bias," he suggests, despite its many international comparisons (<http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=3426>). Another reviewer, Fouad Touzani, praises the book, noting its simplicity and "compelling argument." But he notes that the book "fails to link the approach of packaging terrorism to the image of the U.S. in the Muslim world, especially when Islam is explicitly or implicitly linked to terrorism" (*International Journal of Communication* 3 [2009]). Former British foreign correspondent Colin Freeman accuses Moeller, fairly or unfairly, of spinning conspiracy theories in his review for *British Journalism Review* 20, no. 3 (2009).

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