

# Conflict Media Strategies and the Politics of Counter-terrorism

Shlomo Shpiro

*Bar-Ilan University, Israel*

This article argues that the events of 11 September 2001, and the subsequent 'war on terror', have highlighted the role of the media in both the coverage and conduct of modern conflict. The article concentrates on the 'conflict media strategies' pursued by belligerents and examines the development and refinement of such strategies over time, from the Second World War through to the conflict in Afghanistan. Using data from Vietnam, the Falklands, the Gulf, Kosovo and other conflicts, I argue that an effective conflict media strategy is an essential tool of warfare that is used by states and terrorist groups alike.

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In the current conflict against radical Islamic terrorism, the media has become a crucial battlefield. The fight against terrorism is carried out not only in the hills of Afghanistan but also on television screens in the United States, Europe and Asia. Past experience in many regions, including Israel, Northern Ireland, Spain and Peru, amply demonstrates that terrorism can rarely be beaten only by military means. An effective media policy has become an integral part of the politics of conflict and an essential element in the international effort against terrorism. While global media pluralism negates much of the effectiveness of traditional propaganda and censorship, post-Cold War conflict media policies developed into an integral part of conflict management. In Somalia, Bosnia-Herzegovia, Kosovo and Macedonia, to name but a few, conflict media policies have become an integral element of Western military plans and operations.

The terror attacks of 11 September 2001 have dramatically, and visually, altered the perceptions of millions of people around the world towards terrorism and radical political violence. Western governments, and primarily those of the United States and the United Kingdom, enjoy a much higher degree of public legitimacy for their use of military force in Afghanistan than in other conflicts during the past decade. A major policy challenge posed to Western governments by the current campaign is how to conduct the war against terrorism in an open and democratic way that would promote the confidence of the media and, ultimately, that of the citizen as well. The global media, for its part, struggles to maintain its democratic responsibilities by providing the public with extensive information without awarding the terrorists with a worldwide stage for their propaganda.

This article explores the changing patterns of 'post-11 September' conflict media policies, against the background of the development of conflict media strategies in past decades. It argues that, rather than being an adjacent element to conflict politics, media policy has become a major determinant in conflict politics and the use

of armed forces. The article examines the development of conflict media policies, explores recent terrorist, Taliban and US counter-terrorism media policy and concludes by discussing the affects of conflict media policies on the interaction between media and politics.

## **Conflict media policies and strategy**

Modern wars are fought on the screen as well as on the battlefield. Media coverage of warfare and conflict has often influenced not only the policies of other nations but also public opinion back home. This influence has expanded as technological developments enabled the media to present more information, at a faster rate and of a better quality. Speed plays a critical role in global news coverage. While the newsreels of World War II could be edited and censored for several days or even weeks before being publicly screened, the audience of present-day conflicts demands media reaction time measured by hours and even minutes. Media outlets that, for technical, political or financial reasons, cannot supply the most up-to-date news coverage lose out in a field saturated by intense competition.

The element of coverage speed meant that media policies for a given conflict had to be planned ahead, if those policies could hope to have effect. One result of media influence, real or perceived, is that military operations now include significant elements of media policies. As Susan Carruthers observes, while academics still debate the tangible effects of the media on conflict, the military certainly show no doubt that those effects are very real and act accordingly (Carruthers, 1999). Conflict media policies are the means and methods adopted by the political and military leadership by which the media aspects of a campaign are handled. The range of those policies is wide, encompassing such components as propaganda in its different forms, censorship, denial of access, technical or legal restrictions, to the provision of information and the creation of news. Conflict media strategy defines a coherent mix of media policies set to bolster or enhance the political aims of a campaign. Such a strategy could develop on an ad hoc basis, as a crisis forces military action at short notice, such as during the 1982 Falklands War. A conflict media strategy could also be planned well in advance, alongside the preparations for military action, such as NATO's 1999 Kosovo campaign.

The interaction between media and conflict has been the subject of considerable academic research. As early as 1927, Harold Lasswell contended that 'government management of opinion is an unescapable corollary of large-scale modern warfare' (Lasswell, 1927, pp. 4–5). Studies in the 1950s and 1960s focused on specific policies of conflict media strategy, particularly on propaganda and censorship, two main characteristics of media strategies in the two World Wars (Dovring, 1959; Lasswell, 1971; Childs, 1972). Wider investigations into the media–conflict interaction took off in the 1970s, often influenced by media coverage of Vietnam and the political affects attributed to this coverage on the outcome of the war. Philip Taylor's works marked significant milestones towards a better and more comparative understanding of the roles of media in conflict (Taylor, 1992, 1995 and 1997). Carruthers, who began by examining British conflict media strategy in the colonial wars of the 1960s, later expanded upon Taylor's earlier works and

consolidated different theoretical approaches into an extensive overview on 'the media at war' (Carruthers, 1995 and 1999).

Conflict media policies developed in several phases over the past three decades. Governments traditionally sought to control the flow of information during wartime. During both World Wars, propaganda and censorship were used to steer the media towards required forms of coverage while preventing the publication of defeats or embarrassments. Propaganda also played a major role in authoritarian regimes, such as Nazi Germany. The pace of media work in those times enabled long lead times for information to be manipulated, censored, reprocessed and then published.

It was, however, the Vietnam War, credited as being the first 'television war', which brought for the first time the full horror of modern warfare almost in real time into every American home (Hallin, 1989; Marr, 1998). At the outset of the conflict, the US administration adopted a policy of giving journalists free access to every part of the fighting. This policy reflected not only the traditional American liberal view towards freedom of the press but also an effort to convince the public at home that the United States was winning the war. However, this freedom of movement also meant that journalists could go everywhere and report on things the military would rather keep hidden. A horrifying example of such a cover-up was the 1968 massacre at the village of My Lai, where US troops killed hundreds of innocent civilians. Information about the massacre was suppressed by the authorities, but exposed a year later by energetic investigative journalists who heard rumours of the cover-up (Bilton and Sim, 1992). The ensuing media outcry forced the US military to court-martial some of the men involved in the killing. It also undermined public belief in the news emanating from military sources in Vietnam.

US decision-makers, and primarily President Lyndon Johnson, believed they were fighting two wars, one in the jungles of South-East Asia and one on the 'media front' at home. The overall US commander in Vietnam, General Westmoreland, believed that the young generation of anti-war journalists covering Vietnam confused objective reporting with trying to influence policy (Carruthers, 1999). The failure of the US armed forces in Vietnam made US security policy planners very suspicious of the media. After Vietnam, the US military perceived journalists as a force to control, not to assist, and this approach dictated much of the US conflict media policies for over two decades.

Not only the US but also the British government was affected by US media experience in Vietnam. Following the Argentine invasion of the Falklands in 1982, a British naval taskforce was dispatched to the South Atlantic to retake the islands. The British Ministry of Defence, caught by surprise, had little in the way of a formal 'information policy' (Foster, 1992). The ensuing campaign was covered by a small group of only 29 British journalists, ostensibly picked by their news organisations but under the watchful eye of the authorities, who joined the taskforce at short notice. The journalists accompanying the taskforce faced not only daunting technical difficulties in delivering their copy but also firm official 'advice' on its content (Carruthers, 1999).

The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, in August 1990, marked a clear change in US conflict media strategy. The fundamental perception that 'the media lost the war in Vietnam', attributed to the freedom of movement journalists enjoyed while covering the conflict in South-East Asia, was to be prevented. As American political and military decision-makers planned their media policies for the coming war with Iraq in early 1991, they sought to control the access of journalists in the war zone, as a way of preventing what they perceived as potential adverse coverage. These policies were echoed by President George Bush, asserting that US troops would not be required to 'fight with one hand tied behind their back' (Taylor, 1992). The US administration was determined to limit media access to the battle areas in Saudi Arabia and Kuwait.

Only journalists approved by US authorities were allowed to report from the Coalition's 'information environment', an elegant euphemism for a tightly controlled work regime (Carruthers, 1999, p. 133). Only about 120 reporters were allowed to cover the entire Coalition forces in the Gulf and their movements were strictly controlled, as was their access to satellite phones and broadcasting equipment. Since Iraq had expelled almost all foreign journalists before the outbreak of fighting, the world depended on the dramatic reports of CNN's Peter Arnett, invited by Saddam Hussain to remain in the bombarded Baghdad, for covering the Iraqi side of the conflict (Arnett, 1994; Carruthers, 1999, p. 133). Television coverage of the Gulf War was also markedly different than that of Vietnam. While viewers during Vietnam were treated to a steady stream of blood, burned bodies and massive casualties, Gulf War audiences received sanitised pictures of precision 'smart bombs' hitting their target. The blurred images of missile cameras made war more similar to harmless computer games than to a human tragedy. The use of the term 'surgical air strikes' made war sound like a medical procedure, not the massive application of firepower and destruction.

While some countries were determined to restrict media access to military operations, others sought to expand it. In Germany, political reluctance to use military force outside the national borders has slowly declined in the 1990s as German forces began to participate in UN multinational operations. As means of enhancing public legitimacy and support for a wider foreign policy role for the military, the German Defence Ministry embarked on a policy of openness towards media coverage of military operations overseas. The first major deployment of Federal German forces overseas, in 1993 as part of the UNSCOM mission in Somalia, was accompanied by a media contingent almost outnumbering the soldiers (Shapiro, 2001). Their reports helped soften public opinion in Germany, especially among many left-wing voters who previously rejected military force as a foreign-policy instrument. As German participation in multinational military operations expanded, Bundeswehr generals complained about sensationalist media reporting, which often failed to present the real German contribution to the success of the missions (Goebel, 2000). Analysis of German media coverage of military operations overseas clearly demonstrates how profoundly the presentation of military force changed in a period of less than a decade, between the Gulf War and the 1999 Kosovo campaign. While in the early 1990s military power was generally presented in the mainstream media as essentially negative, several years later it became an acceptable, and indeed often presentable, part of foreign policy.

NATO planning for the 1999 Kosovo campaign incorporated a clear conflict media strategy from the outset. Since the media was bound to show great interest in the war, NATO officials were determined to create so much news that it would dominate the headlines. NATO Headquarters in Brussels masterfully staged extensive daily press briefings that were broadcast live all over the world, reporting the successes of the alliance against Serb forces in the province (Jertz, 2001). Another new element in NATO's media policies was the active silencing of the opposition's media. Serbian television studios, offices and transmitters were bombed in an attempt to silence Belgrade's media machinery. In the absence of reporters inside Kosovo, expelled by the Serbs, war coverage by the media has often turned into little more than repeating official statements. Many officials perceived the success of NATO's media strategy as a crucial element in ensuring a high level of public support for the campaign. However, the humanitarian tragedy of the Kosovo refugees overshadowed the fact that many of NATO's initial claims proved a far cry from battlefield reality. Hundreds of Serb tanks reported destroyed were later shown unharmed as they crossed the border into Serbia when the fighting ended. NATO claims of a 'clean war' in Kosovo created media expectations that simply could not be fulfilled under conditions of modern warfare (Shpiro, 2000). The lack of willingness to admit accidental attacks on civilian convoys undermined media confidence in NATO's statements and raised criticism over the possible manipulation of the media.

## **Terrorism and media policies**

Millions of people all over the world watched, with shock and dismay, the live television coverage of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. The international news media had cut across distances, national boundaries and time differences, and brought the horrors of terrorism into almost every house around the world. Communication technology developments, such as digital satellite broadcasting, cellular communications and the internet, have turned terrorism into a live show, which could be seen unfolding stage by stage, much like a prepared script. Although both aircraft that crashed into the World Trade Center took off almost simultaneously from Boston, the terrorists delayed the impact of the second kidnapped airplane on the North Tower, ensuring that every television camera in New York would be focused on their murderous activities.

International terrorism has always sought to achieve a very high media profile for its actions. Especially in Europe, terrorism seemed to develop since the 1970s into a means of attracting public attention to political grievances of marginal extremist groups. The element of violence in terrorism often seemed secondary to that of dominating newspaper headlines and television coverage. Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams defined terrorism at its best as 'armed propaganda' (Sharrock, 2001). Some European terrorist groups, notably the IRA and the Basque ETA, developed a policy of minimising casualties by alerting the police before a bombing attack so that people could be evacuated in time. However, such alerts were often accompanied by calls to the local press, ensuring that journalists and photographers had sufficient time to reach the scene before any spectacular explosion. Perhaps the most audacious terrorist media attack in recent years was the bombing of the BBC offices

in London in March 2001, attributed to the 'Real IRA'. The bombers, who parked a taxi filled with explosives in front of the BBC building, called their intended target to ensure the evacuation of the building but also the placement of camera crews at a safe distance to capture the explosion live on air.

In their interaction with terrorism, journalists and media editors had to find a precarious balance between satisfying the public demand for ever more information and providing the terrorists with a willing stage for their violent acts. If terrorism is aimed at gaining media coverage, some argued, then a responsible democratic media must reduce its attention to terrorism as a means of preventing more attacks. This approach, however, ignores the high level of competitiveness in the media branch, which ensures that terrorists would always find an open ear at some newspaper or television channel even when rejected by others.

While radical Islamic terrorists of recent years showed little concern for human life, they nevertheless clearly design a strategy aimed at massive casualties with maximum media exposure. Osama Bin Laden had obviously prepared his own media strategy well before the September attacks. Those preparations included the making of video films, to be broadcast after the attack. Video as a medium of communications has long been in use within extremist terror groups. It is not only a visual tool capable of arousing emotions but also authenticates, to a large degree, the origin of the message. While intelligence services have been known to fabricate phony and misleading written orders to terrorist cells, a videotaped message is much less susceptible to manipulation. Shortly after the US campaign began, the Arab al-Jazeera television channel, based in Qatar, broadcast pre-recorded interviews with Bin Laden and his followers calling for a holy war against the United States. Bin Laden sought to spread his message through a Western media eager for 'hot' news relating to the conflict. His media policy was highly successful. Every new video was broadcast at primetime on all the major international news networks.

Compared to Bin Laden's media policy, that of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan has been a dismal failure throughout the conflict. Being an unrecognised regime, the Taliban information machinery was centred on its only overseas diplomatic representation, in Pakistan's capital, Islamabad. This Taliban embassy served as a 'forward base' for press conferences presenting the Taliban case to the world media. Those conferences, attended by numerous reporters of the international news media, were initially aimed at denying US allegations over Bin Laden's involvement in the terror attacks and denying knowledge of Bin Laden's whereabouts. As evidence against Bin Laden mounted, including his own video recordings, the Taliban representatives tried to focus more on the plight of civilian casualties of US bombings in a last-ditch attempt to rally Western public opinion against the war. These attempts, however, were swamped by an overwhelming sense of media sympathy towards the United States and the casualties of the New York and Washington attacks. Taliban media efforts in Pakistan were also marginalised due to difficulties in communicating with their political masters back in Kabul and Kandahar. The loose political structure of the Taliban almost negated the formulation, let alone implementation, of a coherent media policy based on a steady flow of information.

## Attack at primetime

The recent terror attacks in the United States were followed by a huge surge of media coverage on terrorism and its causes. The inherent media contradiction between providing the public with information and serving the purpose of terrorist propaganda was well illustrated by US President Bush's appeal to the global media to refrain from showing speeches made by wanted terrorist Bin Laden. As early as the Second World War, innocent-sounding radio broadcasts were used by intelligence services to send coded messages to agents in the field (Mendelsohn, 1989). While President Bush cited possible instructions to terrorist 'sleeper' cells as his main concern, minimising the media impact of Bin Laden and his followers has clearly turned into an integral part of US counter-terrorism policy. The timing of the first US military strikes against the Taliban seems to have been planned according to television primetime rating schedules and not only by military necessities. The first US strikes against Afghanistan took place on a Sunday, when most Americans are home, free to watch more television. Even the name of the military operation was changed in an effort to enhance its receptivity. On 26 September 2001, the Pentagon announced that operation 'Infinite Justice' would now be called 'Enduring Freedom', illustrating the importance attached by the US administration to the semantics of media coverage of its counter-terrorism campaign.

In military planning, an effective conflict media strategy comprises three main elements: supplying the media with information to report on time and on site, admitting mistakes and explaining both their cause and remedy, and establishing a level of openness towards the media that would enhance mutual confidence (Shapiro, 2001). Military media strategists must take into account the needs of the media, not only of the military. Elements such as press and production deadlines, technical requirements, filming opportunities, broadcasting standards and legal requirements need to be taken into consideration in establishing a working environment that would assist and encourage effective media reporting. As every journalist knows, no news or old news means bad news – at least for those officials trying to pretend otherwise.

During the initial phase of the Afghanistan campaign, the US administration attempted to copy its success in the Gulf War by focusing on aerial 'precision strikes', distancing media coverage from civilian casualties. The sheer magnitude and massive loss of life in the 11 September attacks seemed to have exerted a moderating effect on media reports over the plight of civilians caught up in the conflict. As the strikes against targets in Afghanistan were expanded, the US administration seemed to have again adopted a restrictive media strategy. Few reporters received access to US Special Forces operating inside Afghanistan. Pentagon press conferences have not achieved the success of NATO's Kosovo performances and remained modest affairs, often limited to repeating clichés and success stories but providing little battlefield information. Admittedly, some information pertaining to military operations must be withheld from the public if military success depends on surprise and stealth. Enjoying the floodlights of a generally sympathetic home and global media, the US administration could afford to create a blanket cover on facts rather than release some information that could have resulted in negative coverage or criticism.

Two noteworthy elements in recent US counter-terrorism media policies are the personal demonising of Bin Laden and the emphasis on the plight of women in Afghanistan. While conflict media policies have almost always sought to demonstrate the moral, legal or religious superiority of one side in the conflict, public legitimacy was also often sought by demonising the enemy. During both World Wars, Allies propaganda portrayed the Germans, and also to some extent the Japanese in the Second World War, as a nation of evil, emphasising the collective responsibility of a nation for its politics. While the leadership of such 'bad' nations received special notice, the main focal point for media demonising was aimed at the wider group or nation.

The trend of demonising nations, however, gave way in recent conflicts to that of demonising political leaders, the policy principle being to suggest that it was the leadership, rather than the general population, who is responsible for 'negative' policies. Thus portrayed, a conflict turns from being a struggle between nations to a question of leadership. Perhaps the first political figure to be portrayed as personally evil while leading a peaceful population was Pol Pot, leader of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia. Pol Pot was responsible for the deaths of over 2 million civilians while ruling Cambodia in the 1970s (Haas, 1991). Pol Pot received enormous media attention after losing power in 1979 as the crimes of his movement became the focus of worldwide media coverage (Thürk, 1990; Kiernan, 1996). Iraqi President Saddam Hussain, closely supported by the United States during the 1980s as a counterweight to revolutionary Iran, was demonised after invading Kuwait in 1991 (Karsh and Rautsi, 1991; Jentleson, 1994). For over a decade, he has remained one of the most negatively portrayed political leaders in the Western media. Serb President Slobodan Milosevic, while never a favourite guest at any Western reception, was welcomed as a partner in the Dayton Peace Accords. Often portrayed as one of the main causes of war and instability in the Balkans, Milosevic became an 'official enemy' following NATO's 1999 campaign in Kosovo. His arrest and trial before the International War Crimes Tribunal in The Hague paved the way for resumed diplomatic relations and economic aid to Serbia.

The current 'demon' in US policy is, without doubt, Saudi-born Osama Bin Laden. Already implicated in the 1998 bombings of two US embassies in Africa, he became the focus of global media interest after the September attacks. US authorities were often at pains to point out personal flaws that could negatively reflect on his character or morals. The discovery and later broadcast, on 13 December 2001, of a videotape featuring Bin Laden in a private conversation with guests, boasting about the success of the World Trade Center terrorists, depicted a different image from the one he sought to project in his edited messages. The publicity surrounding this tape was a media coup for the United States, which went a long way towards damaging Bin Laden's credibility abroad and especially in secular Islamic countries.

Another emphasis in US media policy was an emphasis on the plight of women in Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. The Taliban regime has restricted women in an inhuman and degrading manner, forcing them out of jobs and depriving them of education. The US administration criticised the Taliban over these policies during the build-up phase for the military operation. The focus on women, however, has already featured in US conflict media policy during a previous conflict, the 1991



Gulf War, when Iraq was criticised for its harsh restrictions on women in occupied Kuwait. However, once that war was over, the US administration conveniently forgot the issue of women, who are denied basic civic rights and political participation in liberated Kuwait (Mughni, 1993).

## Conclusions

Conflict media policies developed in ways that made them an integral part of the politics of conflict. While the debate over the real influence of the media is far from over, it is the perceptions of political and military decision-makers that often determine their attitudes towards media and media policy at wartime. The technological expansion of mass communications makes coercive forms of official censorship almost impossible to maintain. The digital flow of information, whether on the internet, or through cellular or satellite phones, enables instantaneous and constant news coverage. Given such coverage, many decision-makers find it expedient to design military campaigns with more media appeal. Distancing war from its uglier components is often achieved by restricting access, trumpeting patriotism or creating alternative news. Nevertheless, war remains a destructive activity, no matter how precise the missile camera pictures may be. As the US campaign in Afghanistan is far from over, it is difficult to estimate the effectiveness of the current US conflict media strategy. Early signs point to a high level of public support, both at home and abroad, for US military strategy. It remains to be seen whether this support could also be translated into economic aid for the new Afghan government and for the rebuilding of that war-torn country.

The fight against international terrorism promises to be long and circuitous. A free media is an essential part of a democratic society but also has a role to play in defending the freedoms of democracy. The independence of the media ensures that a pluralistic range of views is heard on any debate. Some forms of military operation could require withholding information from the public as an inherent element of tactical surprise or deception, but military authorities must realise that the provision of information to the public serves not only to enhance confidence in government policy but also to strengthen the moral base of the fight against terrorism. The international effort against terrorism requires not only a co-ordinated media strategy among the governments involved but also a global media that is aware, more than ever, of its democratic responsibilities. Objective and critical reporting do not contradict a commitment to the very freedoms the terrorists are trying to destroy. An effective conflict media strategy against terrorism must ensure that the freedoms we wish to defend are not sacrificed in the effort.

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