Whose Media Are We? Notions of Media and Nationality Challenged by the "War on Terrorism"

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You are the ranking naval officer aboard the U.S.S. Enterprise. Your sailors and aviators are actively engaged in the undeclared "war on terrorism." Bombing runs and surveillance flights are taking off hourly from the decks. At the request of the Pentagon, you already have on board a media "pool" of journalists and photographers representing ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, Associated Press and People Magazine. Also aboard are journalists from Reuters and the BBC, two of Britain's most reputable news organizations. You have been told these are "responsible" journalists, carefully selected by their organizations and vetted by the Pentagon for this extraordinary duty during military action.

The media pool is one of many scattered around the Afghanistan theater, dispatched pursuant to an agreement among the news organizations and the Pentagon reached after the 1991 Gulf War. These journalists have agreed to guidelines governing their safety and the flow of information to and from the Enterprise.

A senior officer approaches you with a fresh message from Washington. It is a request that you accept another group of journalists in your media pool. The message says it's up to you; the Pentagon will support your decision. The applicant reporter and crew are from al-Jazeera, the Arabic language all-news network operating out of Qatar. It is the same network which, on the first day of U.S. bombing of Afghanistan, received and aired a lengthy videotape from Osama bin

Laden, Washington's primary target since the attack on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

Do you welcome the al-Jazeera team on board the Enterprise, along with the other media in the pool? You know that since the fighting began, al-Jazeera has broadcast several statements by bin Laden and his associates. You can see the network in your cabin, because its signal is distributed by satellite throughout the Middle East. It looks like a CNN pretender. Your public affairs officer says al-Jazeera has been generally sympathetic to the Arab cause and frequently criticizes U.S. policy in the region.

Your first responsibility is to the American people, and among them, your own service personnel. You are as outraged as anyone by the World Trade Center and Pentagon carnage of 11 September. Bin Laden's venomous videotape messages were pure propaganda, serving no purpose but to inflame enemies of the United States. It is hard even to give the media pool request serious thought.

You remember, though, that CNN, Fox, and other news networks also aired the bin Laden tapes. You also recall the public statements made by your Commander-in-Chief. The President said the United States is at war with terrorists and those who harbor them, not with the Afghan people, or with Islam. You know Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld has been making the rounds of key friends in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Pakistan—all countries with predominantly Muslim or Arab populations. He has been trying to shore up support for the war on terrorism, and he has been telling leaders they and their people have nothing to fear from the U.S. military deployment. If the White House wants to get messages to the Muslim and Arab worlds, you think, they'll get more from al-Jazeera than from an item in People Magazine or the *New York Times*.

You decide to take on the al-Jazeera team, issuing instructions that they are to be subject to the same restrictions being imposed on the rest of the media pool. You privately decide to agree to an interview, if they ever ask for one. You have a few choice words you'd like bin Laden – and the rest of the Muslim and Arab world – to hear.

You send a cable to Washington, explaining your rationale for accepting the Arabic network crew on board. The message Washington wants to get across includes the following elements:

- The United States will retaliate for the barbaric attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.
- The United States will use its considerable military and political might to fight the war on terrorism.
- The United States is not engaging in a war against Islam, against Arabs, or against the people of Afghanistan or Pakistan.

- The United States will use its most sophisticated and careful military techniques to wage this war, designed to avoid civilian casualties.
- The United States will behave in a compassionate and humanitarian way toward those not responsible for the terror attacks but will be ruthless in its assault on those who are responsible and on those who assist them.

You suspect the people who should hear this message are not regular readers of the *New York Times* or viewers of ABC News. They are more likely to be viewers of al-Jazeera, whose broadcasts are in Arabic and whose programs are often picked up by other media in the Muslim and Arabic world.

You know that even the American news organizations aboard your ship are denied access to the most sensitive information about your operations, and you know that even if al-Jazeera were not aboard, some of the material filed by American journalists would end up being seen on the Arabic network anyway.

Finally, you suspect that information delivered over al-Jazeera will be considered more credible in the Arab and Muslim world than material from Western media. So you decide that if you can tell the U.S. story directly to an al-Jazeera crew, at least some of it will reach its most important audience without being considered tainted by Western news organizations.

Two days later, you are dismayed to learn that National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice has asked the American networks not to broadcast bin Laden's tapes as seen on al-Jazeera. Conservatives in the U.S. are calling al-Jazeera "the enemy network." You wonder if your decision will be second-guessed in Washington.

A week after you sent your cable, you breathe a sigh of relief when you observe that Rice, Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld have all granted interviews to al-Jazeera. So has British Prime Minister Tony Blair. Later, you note that the United States has pulled a former American ambassador to Syria out of retirement to offer statements and commentary to al-Jazeera in Arabic.

Several weeks after the U.S. attacks began, Washington was waking up to the need to influence media coverage beyond the news organs directly linked to the United States.

Global Media/National Media

The globalization of the news media has added new twists to old assumptions about media issues in times of war, not only for the United States government, but also for journalists themselves. These new twists prompt anxious debates within and about the media. Simple answers fail under scrutiny.

It seemed natural when, on 11 September, U.S. news organizations in-

stantly adopted patriotic red, white, and blue symbols for their print and broadcast products about the terror attacks. American networks unfurled graphic flags on their screens, and newspapers flew banners such as "America Under Attack." Patriotism soared, encouraged, and assumed by the news media. Television stations across the country devised patriotic on-screen logos and musical themes; some news anchors suddenly sported flag pins and other symbols of national unity. The all-news cable TV channels were no exception.

As events unfolded for the first couple of days, CNN's live, continuous coverage from New York, Washington, and abroad was simulcast over the network's domestic and international signals. But as the red, white and blue motif became increasingly prevalent, managers of CNN's international network balked. Viewers in Pakistan, the Middle East, and elsewhere (including the Muslim world from Manila to Casablanca) would not relate well to news programs being draped in the American flag. They had become accustomed to the global network as an independent news service, albeit one tied intimately to American journalistic and social values and economic principles.

CNN International broke away from CNN USA's programming. It adopted a neutral color and logo scheme and reverted to its normal programming production environment, based on internationally-oriented producers, writers, and anchors. Gone were the "we" and "our" being used by domestic network anchors to refer to the American people and government. In its place, the extent of reporting from abroad increased.

The challenges quickly became more sophisticated and more difficult. On Sunday, 7 October, when bin Laden's first videotape coincided with the start of American bombing of Afghanistan, U.S. networks and newspapers treated the tapes as news. Most either played the tape in its entirety or published extensive excerpts. After all, it was the first time since the World Trade Center and Pentagon attacks that the world was hearing from the man accused by the United States of orchestrating the worst terrorism in history.

In the almost frenzied atmosphere of patriotism that had developed by then, however, some Americans considered the playing of bin Laden's recordings a near treasonous act. A caller to a National Public Radio talk show in which the author was a participant on 8 October declared that because most Americans are unaware of the profound hatred felt by bin Laden and his supporters towards the United States, they should not be subjected to his videotaped bile spewing out over American TV news channels. The author agreed 100 percent that most Americans were unaware of the depth of bin Laden's hatred; that is precisely why they should hear every word he uttered on the tape.

Within days, the White House was pressuring the networks to refrain from publishing bin Laden's tapes, and government officials were darkly suggesting the messages may have contained secret instructions to his loose al-Qaeda network.

By the time bin Laden's third recording was released a month later, the Fox News Channel network was puffing that it would not dream of airing the "propaganda" of a terrorist. Even CNN had been cowed by public and government pressure into reducing the tape to a 15 second excerpt. A top ABC News executive issued a public apology for suggesting he was unsure whether the Pentagon could be considered a legitimate military target of terrorists.

American news organizations had not balked at playing up the Pentagon's own carefully government-edited night vision videotape of U.S. troops rummaging through Mullah Omar's sock drawers at Taliban headquarters in Kandahar. The extent to which the U.S. government intended to manipulate the American news media became apparent two months later, when, in early December 2001, yet another bin Laden videotape surfaced. The Pentagon edited it and *distributed the tape* to U.S media outlets. The tape, said to have been discovered in Afghanistan by U.S. troops, showed bin Laden chuckling and gloating about the World Trade Center attack which killed thousands. The U.S. government had it translated and superimposed English subtitles on the tape before feeding it to broadcast and print media. In this reversal of policy, the U.S. government was openly encouraging broadcast of bin Laden's rhetoric. Despite the U.S. government's goal of influencing Arab publics, the Pentagon did not distribute an unedited Arabic language version t Middle East media

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Information Challenges Within the Military

The military itself confronts challenging new questions of information management, only partly related to the news media. Consider this scenario: New technology allows tiny video cameras on helmets and on guided missiles to relay almost instantaneous field information about the Afghanistan campaign. Who gets to see those pictures? Some of the answers are obvious, but others really are not. Field commanders, for sure, must see what those "electronic eyes" can show them, and so should theater commanders. Should the Pentagon see them? Some military leaders would prefer not to have the Joint Chiefs of Staff electronically peering over their shoulder at all times. Does the White House get to see real-time images from the battlefield? After all, the President is the Commander-in-Chief. If civilian leaders see them, what about Congress, which has the constitutional power to declare war? Would you want 535 elected representatives constantly

second-guessing military operations? How about the CIA? Do intelligence analysts see live pictures from the field?

If live pictures from the war front are being transmitted back to Washington, when (if ever) do the American people or the news media get to see them? When the Pentagon says it's OK? (Would that have been a satisfying rule during the Vietnam War, in instances such as the U.S. storming of My Lai?) If the media get to see the pictures, even occasionally, what happens if a 14-year-old computer hacker in Canada figures out how to tap into the military's video stream from the battlefield? Are the images posted on the internet? Do they become available to al-Jazeera?

These examples only hint at some of the information tests facing news organizations and government and military leaders in an age of global media. Consider satellite photography, for example, which is directly related to the media. Americans cheered when CNN managed to broadcast live from Hainan Island, China, earlier in 2001 after a U.S. military intelligence aircraft was forced to land there. Chinese authorities had held the American crew for days by the time CNN's ground staff succeeded in showing pictures and a correspondent near the secret Chinese base via videophone and satellite. A private U.S. company, Space Imaging, Inc., also made available a crystal clear photograph of the American plane sitting on the runway, guarded by Chinese military vehicles. Print journalists and broadcasters alike used both kinds of images. China not only objected to the espionage effort by the U.S. government, but also to the intrusive journalism of American news organizations, which had neither sought nor obtained China's permission to show scenes from the top security military base.

A year earlier, the *New York Times* had spectacularly used satellite imagery to disprove Russian government claims that it was acting with restraint against the rebel stronghold of Grozny, in Chechnya. Unable to get reporters on the ground into Chechnya, the Times bought two images of downtown Grozny, taken by the private firm two months apart. The images powerfully exposed Moscow's lies about that war. Grozny had been literally pulverized in a withering air campaign between December 1999 and February 2000.

Space Imaging also captured clear satellite photos of the south Asian region where the war on terrorism is being fought. The Pentagon, however, outfoxed the news media by buying exclusive rights to all such satellite imagery, effectively censoring the media's ability to report on the war from the sky (denying the media the ability to use such photos to verify U.S. and Taliban claims about the military campaign and to determine the extent of refugee streams resulting from the war).

Presumably, Americans would not have cheered if newspapers and broadcasters showed independently acquired aerial images of the war on terrorism, as they had of the Chinese air base or of the Chechen capital.[1] Imagine the outcry if

non-government satellite images had been used by the news media to report on the Gulf War in 1991.

The media widely published the limited overhead pictures of U.S. bombing raids issued by the Pentagon, showing the success of those raids at destroying Taliban air bases and alleged terrorist training camps. The Pentagon did not reveal casualties suffered during some of its operations in Afghanistan until weeks after they occurred.

Propaganda or Information Warfare?

For international news organizations and the U.S. government alike, tensions have arisen about publishing news products produced by new technology. During the Gulf War, members of Congress criticized CNN for its broadcasts from Baghdad, claiming they represented little more than the propaganda of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. During the war on terrorism, pictures and live reports obtained with new technology from the ground in Afghanistan, often obtained by news organizations operating independently of the U.S. military and sometimes supplied by al-Jazeera, have prompted similar charges.

News organizations have been escorted to Afghan villages where U.S. attacks are said to have caused civilian casualties. Images of injured children, fleeing refugees, and a burning Red Cross supply warehouse were not among those issued by the Pentagon, but were widely seen around the world. Some Americans accused the news media of playing into enemy hands and undermining the U.S. military effort with such reporting. Others said, in effect, "We know war is hell; spare us the gory details." The idea was that Americans didn't need to see the consequences of the U.S. attacks. Under pressure from conservatives even before 11 September, CNN's management issued a directive after the war began ordering program producers and writers to "balance" reports of the effects of U.S. attacks with reminders of the World Trade Center and Pentagon terrorism. Reminding media of the rationale for U.S. military action is more appropriately the role of government, to which journalists may–or may not–choose to respond.

This issue has again sparked political debate over so-called "moral equivalence." Journalists are sometimes criticized, usually by conservatives, of somehow "equating" the morality of U.S. military attacks and policies with the horrific acts of terrorists or with repugnant policies of other governments. (This phenomenon occurred during the Gulf War and at the end of the Cold War as well.) But journalists rarely think in such terms. For the most part, reporters, editors and program producers do not structure their newscasts around moral weights and measures.[2] Events are chronicled and combined with recent and historical context, so readers and viewers can understand why things happen. Explaining to American news consumers why many Muslims resent the U.S political role in the Middle

East or the presence of American military forces on the same soil as Islam's holiest religious sites does not amount to wearing an "I Love Osama" tee-shirt, as a cartoonist in the *Wall Street Journal* implied on 5 November 2001. It merely serves to help Americans understand the powerful emotions that might lead someone to attack the United States.

Global Audiences

In today's global news environment, however, news organizations such as CNN International have audiences far beyond the United States. If Americans were spared the images of the effects of the attacks, such as suffering refugees, injured civilians and devastated villages, U.S. news consumers would be among only a few in the world who might remain ignorant of them. If an American embassy in the Philippines or an American business in Indonesia were attacked because those images inflamed passions abroad, Americans would wake up, as they did on 11 September, shocked at the anger of others in the world.

The question of a global audience is among the most difficult for today's news organizations. Should a news product designed for consumption in the United States be the same as one intended for global consumption? That does not matter very much to the most popular American television networks (ABC, NBC, and CBS), whose programs are not widely seen abroad. Nor does it matter to local newspapers or television stations, whose product is tailored purely for domestic consumers. But it is of crucial importance to organizations such as CNN, whose exposure to 160 million households in more than 200 countries and territories vastly outnumbers even its potential audience within the U.S. That is why flying the American flag on an anchor's lapels or over news video is unacceptable to CNN International, even though it might seem natural to a network with a U.S. audience.

The notion of a global audience has other important implications; it raises questions about national security and national loyalty. U.S. news organizations operate under U.S. law, according to American journalistic traditions and with the free speech protection of the First Amendment. But those rules don't apply elsewhere. During the 1980s, CNN pruned its international broadcasts reaching Great Britain about a book published in Australia that revealed secrets about Britain's intelligence agencies. British law sanctions press censorship in national security cases, and CNN was fearful that its large London office might be shut down for violating the secrecy law. Viewers elsewhere could see reports of the book, but on the CNN signal which reached Britain, the content was modified to avoid running afoul of British law. In China, a new network owned by AOL will avoid news altogether, in deference to Chinese sensitivities.

National Security and National Interest

During the war on terrorism, to whose national security should the global media respond? The United States'? Britain's? (British forces have also been involved in the fighting.) Afghanistan's? Pakistan's? Saudi Arabia's? Whose sensitivities should an international network, newspaper, or website take into account? Those of Americans justly enraged by the hideous terror attacks on New York and Washington? Those of Muslims around the world for whom Osama bin Laden is an anathema? Those of Arabs angry at U.S. support of Israel's occupation of Jerusalem? Those of Pakistan's majority, who did not vote into office a military government now siding with the United States? Those of pro-Taliban Pakistanis who once received covert U.S. aid in their fight against the Soviets?

Complicating this scenario even further is the intricate web of corporate connections binding American media companies to the interests of other countries. For example, AOL—the corporate parent of CNN—may be as interested (or more) in selling HBO's "Sex and the City," music by Madonna, and Warner Brothers or New Line Cinema movies to markets abroad as it is in worrying about the content of CNN's news channels. These interests suggest a more global approach to "national security" than most news organizations consider. Furthermore, in the global market for news and information, CNN competes with Fox News Channel, owned by an Australian media mogul, whose "national security" interests may not always coincide with the United States', no matter how many American flags Fox displays on its screen.

Patriotic citizens everywhere will have to come to new, perhaps more sophisticated understandings of how the news media work, especially in times of political, economic, and military conflict.

Today's global media managers often find themselves negotiating with foreign leaders about the content of news broadcasts and publications. For years, China's government sent its ambassador to Atlanta to demand that CNN stop repeating video of the Tiananmen Square massacre. This was important to China outside of the United States, as well. China's worldwide image was shaped in part by CNN's visual reminders of the bloody events of 1989. Middle East leaders routinely contact U.S. print and broadcast executives to influence coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict. And American news organizations frequently wheel and deal with foreign countries over access to international transmission facilities and news content. Illustrating the tension between U.S. national interests and the interests of the news media, CNN in the late 1990's negotiated with the Belgrade government of Slobodan Milosevic for permission to set up a CNN editing and trans-

mission shop inside Serb TV headquarters, a building later bombed by the United States during the Kosovo war. CNN personnel were not in the building when it was struck.

In Afghanistan, CNN and other global news organizations negotiate with Taliban and the Northern Alliance for access to the war zone, even as journalists from the same organizations deal with the Pentagon over access to U.S. troops and ships for the American perspective on the war. In Pakistan, global news operations depend on security provided by the shaky military government, an ally of the United States, while maintaining journalistically useful links to pro-Taliban leaders in Peshawar.

Today, in a phenomenon nonexistent as recently as five years ago, major news organizations also publish their product on the internet, in a form viewable by people far from the political epicenter of the newsroom's headquarters country. The *New York Times*, the *Washington Post,* and CNN are just a few of the web-based media whose internet audiences now form a significant portion of news consumers. Whose national interest should these internet media consider in the content of their product? U.S. allies? Enemies? Economic friends?

When news organizations were more clearly identified with and tied to their countries, when audiences more consistently were of a single nationality, and when the media were confined by technology and politics to the security of their own country, many of these difficult notions of mixed media loyalty did not exist. But as the technology and economy of globalization pervades the news media, and as people around the world come to depend on the same media for news and information, these questions of national interest will become increasingly troublesome for media managers and government leaders alike. Patriotic citizens everywhere will have to come to new, perhaps more sophisticated understandings of how the news media work, especially in times of political, economic, and military conflict.

Notes

1. Private American companies who acquire and sell satellite photography are licensed by the U.S. government, which retains the right to exercise "shutter control" in national security instances. Another unique licensing rule limits the photography which may be taken of Israel. To date, the Pentagon has not exercised its right to control the shutter. Foreign companies (and other governments) acquiring and selling satellite images are not subject to such U.S. national security limitations.

2. Here it is important to distinguish between news reports and political commentary. Journalists who write commentary, who engage in deliberately-provocative television talk shows, or whose positions allow them to express moral opinions do so within the framework of their assignments. It is a mistake to lump the majority of journalists, who do not have such assignments, into the same category as those who express opinions.