

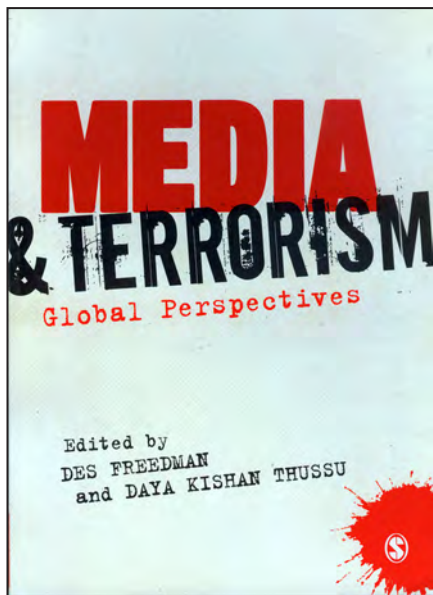
DR PHILIP CASS is postgraduate programme leader in the Department of Communication Studies at Unitec in Auckland.

Manipulation that we now take for granted

Media and Terrorism: Global Perspectives, edited by Des Freedman and Daya Thussu. London: Sage. 2012, 336 pp. ISBN 9781446201572 (pbk).

IT CANNOT have been a coincidence that the bombs and missiles that rained down on Baghdad at the beginning of the American invasion of Iraq on 20 March 2003 fell just where the world's television cameras could capture the resulting explosions. President Bush had promised shock and awe and there it was, carefully designed to look as spectacular as possible for the journalists beaming pictures and descriptions from the Palestine Hotel.

It was a deliberate piece of media manipulation intended to remind the Arab states, Pakistan and Afghanistan, of American military might. This kind of manipulation and the relationship between the media, the military and governments lies at the



centre of this book. Most of what the book says is not new, of course. We take it for granted that when a government is at war it will manipulate the media and lie to obtain its ends. There have been endless debates about this process and many, many, books and articles on the subject. What marks this book as different is the range of geographical views it uses, with contributions from Arab journalists and scholars and Russian, Indian and Scandinavian academics bringing different perspectives.

Media and Terrorism takes a very broad view of what constitutes the relationship between terrorism and the media. There are the usual criticisms of the US news media, but there are

also discussions of films about the CIA, explorations of the way French media have covered Arab migrants and the way in which Indian news stations have occasionally—to use Daya Thussu’s term—Bollywoodised stories about terrorism.

The war on terrorism, initially presented as a US-led crusade against the perpetrators of the attacks on New York in 2012, but really an excuse to finish George Bush Snr’s job and invade Iraq, has been taken up as a frame of reference with which to report on or explain any number of conflicts. It is a fairly simple frame, but no less simplistic than the ones normally used to explain other conflicts.

The civil war in Syria, for instance, has so far been reported largely in terms of the Arab Spring, but already the involvement of Saudi and Iranian-backed groups has had some Western media (such as a recent article in *The Australian* by Greg Sheridan) warning about terrorists infiltrating the anti-Assad conflict.

Of course, whether these groups will continue to be regarded as terrorists if they contribute to an outcome desired by Western or other governments remains to be seen.

Media and Terrorism reminds us that the very concept of terrorism has been manipulated by governments so that opponents they find inconvenient can be labelled as terrorists. Both

the United States and the Russians have done this with the Taleban and the Chechens and the process will continue.

Certain threads run throughout the book; the way in which whole civilian groups have been identified with terrorism and the way in which the very conduct of war has had an effect on its reporting.

Some of the non-Western perspectives in *Media and Terrorism* will be new to Western readers. Vartanova and Smirnova’s piece on Russian media coverage of terrorism shows that official silence has backfired, by driving media outlets towards unofficial sources and eyewitnesses.

This is a book about media processes, so there are times when the journalists who gather the news sometimes disappear from view. Norhstedt and Ottosen explicitly negate the role of journalists by dismissing Knightley’s seminal work, *The First Casualty* ‘because of its foundation in an individualised concept of journalism’. They then declare that they will abandon the idea of using truth as their ‘analytical point of departure’. To dismiss the individual role of journalists and to regard the fundamental question of whether something is true or not seems breathtakingly arrogant.

Fortunately, Dahr Jamail’s chapter offers an account of his experiences as a freelancer in Iraq which

makes it clear how important the work of individual journalists can be and that not everything can be obscured by government manipulation.

In general, *Media and Terrorism* is a useful primer for academics and students wanting to read about the relationship between the media and the current 'war on terrorism'. The book offers a range of theoretical and geographical perspectives and does a good job of putting the present crisis into a broader perspective than has hitherto been available in one volume. A number of authors raise, directly or indirectly, the question of whether the events now taking place are really part of a discrete quasi military/economic struggle, or simply the latest episode of longer struggles.

It is to be hoped that somebody will eventually write a similar book about how terrorist threats, real or imagined, in this region, have been covered by the media. Beginning with the panic over Barak Sope's efforts to establish relations with Libya in the 1980s to the coverage of the 2007 Urewera raids by New Zealand's anti-terrorist squad, one is struck by how eager some governments have been to claim that they too face a terrorist threat.

As Greener-Barcham and Barcham (2006) argued in the *Australian Journal of International Affairs*,

representing the South Pacific as a potential breeding ground of terrorism has been a useful tactic for gaining support for interventions such as Operation RAMSI and releasing funding for security purposes.

However, while the New Zealand media has been critical of the farcical aftermath of the Urewera raids, it only seemed to recognise as an afterthought the 'enormous powers our spies and terror laws can have over people without requiring evidence' when reporting on the case of Hamilton man Mark Taylor who has been subject to restrictions under anti-terrorism legislation without having seen any evidence against him (Gower, 2011). Any criticism of New Zealand's presence in Afghanistan remains highly contentious.

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