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Media, Culture and Society

24th March 2020

Media and the Global War on Terror

War is a very broad term in its true nature. From day to day wars amongst people that lead to state conflicts, and then colloquially war lead mental wars due to being overburdened with work and information. War is an extremely broad term. Political administrations have declared war on crime, war on drugs, war on racism and more recently, a war on the coronavirus pandemic. The war is one of the most widely used metaphor in the United States (Record 2).

The Greek Philosopher Heraclitus wrote on the broad nature of War – ““War is the father and tsar of everything, it made some human beings Gods and some human beings – people, it made some people slaves and other people free” (Egorov 3) In the case of the Global War on Terror or the GWOT as we know it was less about the term Global but more of a war between the United States and the Terrorist Groups. Ex-President George Bush was the leader and initiator of this concept and the target were the Terrorist Groups, primarily the Muslim Terrorist groups. Many critics believe this was an act of propaganda towards the president in order to classify him to be the “God” as Heraclitus would put forward while characterising the terrorist organisations as the “slave” of the god.

Due to the political nature of the GWOT, the way media reported before, during and after the 9/11 attacks has a significant role to play in the way media has been represented. One of the major observations of how media reporting changed after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and how country wise media reports became largely conflicting in nature. For instance, different analysis being released by the United States and shockingly different reports being released by foreign press. In the United States' war on Terrorism, several media houses and journalists began to ignore the innocent lives taken and the atrocities committed in the attacks as they didn't seem to be newsworthy or rather be politically appealing for the United States government. There seemed to be a sort of pressure to be patriotic while ignoring the reality (Finnegan 107).

One of the British Journalists Richard Parry who reported on the US bombings on Afghanistan and Iraq (Post 9/11) noted that "115 men, women and children were killed" in a single village at a point of bombing. However, sadly "American Journalists were more cautious, even after seeing the damage." (Finnegan 107).

Another key observation to note is how the media began to increasingly get divided on the same issue: There was a rise in American media, then global news began to get further sub-divided into British Media, Australian Media, South Asian media each releasing their reports on the GWOT. This in one sense increased the global involvement of the news industry in the matter of terrorism and crime.

Though most of the nations and its media showed solidarity with the United States on the GWOT but there was media that were critical of U.S policies on the matter. For instance, some French reporters and critics felt that George Bush's response would be ineffective and

might lead to further enmity, as their reports were also influenced by the initial anti-unity and anti-global treatises that the ex-president released at the beginning of his presidency (Kellner 126). However, most reports released by American media houses seemed to be patriotic to the United States, and the president as though their war and battle was only successful, while neglecting the innocent lives taken.

In addition, due to the 9/11 attacks and the Global War on Terrorism, anti-Islam beliefs had widely spread amongst the global audience. There was a rapid rise in the number of hate crimes and racist crimes towards Muslims, Islam and Sikhs with Temple and Mosque shootings as being some of the tools used to express hatred and the ‘war’ on terrorism. As a result of this cumulative hatred, media is also blamed to be influenced by the prejudice often expressing disbelief to Muslim sources and rampantly putting Islam in to the bad light since the 9/11 shootings.

Plus, the Media also plays a significant and immense role in promoting or combating prejudice within a society. Moreover, we must realise that commercial media rooted from the beliefs of its funders and advertisers who might be prejudiced (as a form of solidarity to the GWOT) might lead the news to be prejudiced as well which could be problematic. The goal of profit making can be conflicting to the ethics of socially responsible journalism especially during a conflict itself (Curran 49).

One of products of this islamophobia in the media is the widely reproduced TV show produced by Fox News: 24, as analysed in Journalist and TV critic James Poniewzxik’s piece on the tv show 24. There are other examples as well where Muslims and their culture and beliefs are represented to be triggering terrorism in the world. And thus such portrayal leads

to further negative thoughts and racist perceptions worldwide. Media cannot be entirely blamed as free speech and free media are integral tools of freedom for the producers and also output cannot be censored always as free speech is part of the constitutional framework. Advocates of Free Speech and opinion would argue that “Everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression” as mentioned in the Article 19 of the UN UDHR 1948. But the problem arises when the free speech and opinion creates formulations other people’s opinion that leads to hatred and violence. This is what has been happening with media as well whilst reporting on war on terrorism post the 9/11 attacks. Conflicts are reported but often blanketed with religious beliefs and prejudice which is unethical.

To combat such a problem and similar unethical practices in Journalism, the need for a ethical framework came up which created the “Journalistic Code of Ethics” as part of The Media Self-regulation Guidebook presented by OSCE in 2008. While analysing the issues of War and Terrorism, the guidebook explicitly mentions that the Journalist must avoid the term “Terrorism” in the first place while reporting a conflict. The guidebook says “The word ‘terrorist’ itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. Journalists should try to avoid the term without attribution. They should let other people characterise while they report the facts.” (26). It also adds that the word itself might be interpreted in sometimes opposite ways. This is something that Journalists are hopefully adopting while reporting conflicts as this becomes important in a society where the word terrorism in the first place has several predominant notions. The guide book has also provided the reader the methods journalists must deploy to avoid prejudice and opinion in interfering in their output.

The term ‘Terrorism’ itself has added a cosmic degree of fear and apprehension in the minds of the viewer and the audience, especially since the 9/11 attacks. This is another reason

why journalists and reporters must be very careful while using the word in reporting conflicts in the first place. Readers are becoming increasingly concerned about terrorism around the world as it in some form impacts the reader as well because of how businesses and economies are increasingly interlinked today. Also, the fear of a terrorist attack coming to the reader where ever they may be is perpetually existent. For instance, it can be noted that since the 9/11 attacks, “viewers are paying more attention to international news” (Thorson 16). Dan Dennison, the news Director at KOAA has noted that “International news is more important now, especially news related to the war on terrorism” (Thorson). This overall shows how terrorism as an issue has come into greater limelight since the 9/11 attacks.

In some ways it can also be argued that the way Terrorism, wars and conflicts as a whole are defined today are products of Media itself. Media and Journalism have defined it for us. Without such a mass audience of Terrorism, Terrorism might have not existed in the first place (Farnen 252). The act of conflict is declared by the media to be terrorist attack and the attention terrorists are receiving in the first place are in fact fulfilling the motives behind terrorism. Could we say that media is fuelling the conflict? No, not directly but indirectly, yes. This is a vicious circle to which there is no clear answer. However, it is certain that since the Global War on Terrorism, the word “Terrorism” like the word “War” is for certain widely and heavily used on an extremely large scale.

The sheer negligence in the reporting of the War on Terrorism discussed earlier in this paper is not new. The influence of the government in cases of terrorism has always been existent, even in cases of conflict closer home in India itself, before the 9/11 attacks as well. An example of such a censorship are the guidelines the government of India had drawn in 1992 on “media reportage on terrorism”, which was never published to open public (Noorani

1301). The topic of terrorism being of such a sensitive nature is bound to be controlled by the government under most circumstances. However, the downside to such reportage is that often information is blanketed and not revealed or is sides to a certain party, government and administration. The same can be said for the Bush administration and the post 9/11 reportage.

To come to a conclusion, the positive outcome of the above events and circumstances in the Media industry globally has led to an increased focus on self-regulation, which provides journalists with greater freedom to report, especially useful to topics and matters like terrorism, conflicts and war. Whether or not independent reporting has increased or decreased, but the issue of self-regulation and freedom of the press has come into greater discussion. In a report by Joanne Myers in the CPJ, she explains how the international climate post the September 11 attacks has made it easier to “curb on independent reporting in the name of fighting terrorism”. She also mentions how many countries have imposed anti-terrorism laws post the 9/11 attacks that have further threatened independent reportage. A self-regulation system of reportage refers to a system “independent of the state and legislation” (Media Guide 2015) and where the responsibility lies with the journalist, which is something more media houses, journalists and reporters should aim for, especially in a post conflict environment.

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