Article 2

Limning Terror: Seams in the Discourse of 'Terrorism'

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Abstract

Generations of social science and critical scholars have documented the interdependency among capitalism, the media, and government. The media-constructed world of threatening 'others' systematically skews reality in phallogocentric, ethnocentric, nationalistic ways that reinforce government power, reify disparities of gender, wealth and influence, and perpetuate and amplify perceived differences and enmities. Growing social, economic, politic, ethnic, religious, and even familial globalization nonetheless increases reliance on mass communication as a source of 'objective' information about the world beyond individual reach. Despite the promise of democratic, public media or multiple, niche media to offer diverse, balanced perspectives, mainstream media continue to dominate and direct information flows. Based on evidence taken from media coverage of terror, the author suggests individuals, particularly women, resist the hege*mani*c force of media by offering mainstream journalists new information and alternate visions that exploit seams within government-propelled narratives to help diffuse the self-perpetuating, media-hyped cycle of global violence.

Keywords: manufacturing "terror", media coverage of "War on Terror", rhetorics of terror, phallocentricism, hege*manic*, nationalism

We ourselves feel that what we are doing is just a drop in the ocean. But the ocean would be less because of that missing drop.

Mother Teresa of Calcutta[1]

Introduction

In July 2008, I was sitting in the shaded courtyard of a lovely old stone farmhouse in the suburbs of Paris speaking with more senior, Catalan academics about the impossibly drawn-out U.S. presidential election campaign. The discussion focused on whether U.S. citizens were more willing and likely to elect a woman or a black man, and whether a black man had a chance to survive, literally survive, the campaign trail until the election some four months away.

Now, almost a year later, we know the answer to both of these questions. In the rather overblown and simplistic fashion we have come to expect from the media, Hilary Clinton's departure from the presidential campaign was widely proclaimed as evidence of the chauvinism that continues to dominate U.S. society. In contrast, the election of Barack Obama as the nation's 44th president has been repeatedly and loudly hailed as ushering in a "new day" in U.S. politics, a "new era" of U.S. international diplomacy and "the end of racism" in the United States. In November 2008, I appeared to be one of the few liberal U.S. citizens who was somewhat more cautious in my optimism about the new administration. This research examines how the U.S. posture on global terrorism and the media's role in shaping both international perceptions and the actual directions of the U.S. War on Terrorism encourage such caution.

But first, let me go back to Massy, France. In that tranquil setting, I was rebuked for asserting that the nations of the world had failed in their duty to protect themselves and each other by standing mutely by while George W. Bush

2

systematically augmented the unilateral power of the U.S. presidency and simultaneously dismantled the U.S. commitment to human rights through his so-called War on Terror. For the first time in my life, I said, I viewed the U.S. path as parallel to that of pre-war Germany, where a misguided megalomaniacal leader with great rhetorical savvy was leading the nation, and the world, into one of the most catastrophic conflicts of our time.

As one might expect, my hosts found my concerns exaggerated and my comparison to Hitler odious. Perhaps they were right. Perhaps my readiness to adopt such an extreme position was a reflection of the exaggerated nationalistic narcissism that tends always to position the U.S. at the center, at the lead and as the significant influence in the world. But today, under the guidance of a new leader, I am only slightly less concerned about the path the U.S. government has chosen in its struggle against global terrorism. And I am only slightly more confident that President Obama actually will move forward aggressively to end the most horrific U.S. practices against so-called terrorists performed in the name of international security and justice.

The constructed "public"
But what is the source of my caution or even skepticism? My reservations about a "new day" in the U.S. are rooted, in significant part, in the profound mutual dependence and largely uncritical embrace of the media and the government in the U.S. and around the world. To begin, let me quote a key paragraph from the Council of Europe's 2005 Recommendation 1706 on Media and Terrorism. The Council (2005, June 20) wrote: "The spread of public terror, fear and feelings of chaos depends largely on the images and messages being carried by media reports about the terrorist acts and threats. The omnipresence of the mass media at the global level frequently exaggerates these effects out of proportion" (para. 2).

This exaggeration is not accidental. For some three decades, the U.S. government and its military have understood the power of such

messages; they have understood "that they [are] in the communications business, not in the business of waging war" (Lapham, 2002, p. 27). To highlight the primacy of the government's "communication business" is to say both that the United States recognizes the primary role of communications in all of its endeavors and to acknowledge that concerns of the market, of global capitalism and of an international and interdependent economy exert a significant influence on U.S. government policies and actions. In Iraq and the global War on Terror, in Granada and Kosovo, and in so many other sites of global violence, U.S. leaders are worried, "for the most part…about the sending of signals, about the transfer of symbols and about 'America's credibility in the world'" (Lapham, 2002, p. 27). To address these concerns, the government and the media collaborate in the construction of an "empire of fear,…a domain of spectators, of subjects and victims whose passivity means helplessness and whose helplessness defines and sharpens fear" (Barber, 2003, p. 216).

This promotion of fear is an exercise in social control, "prompted and exploited by leaders for their own survival and policies" (Altheide, 2006, p. 8). and "socially constructed, packaged, and presented through the mass media by politicians and decision makers [as a means] to 'protect us' by offering [them] more control over our lives and culture" (p. x). "The pandering media", to use Benjamin Barber's (2003, p. 27) phrase, serve as the primary tool by which government's ambiguous and open language is employed to misinform a bewildered and frightened people, to elide and obfuscate rather than clarify international concerns and national priorities (Kellner, 2007). Phrases such as "the War on Terror," coined by the government and repeated *ad nauseum* by the media, magnify and "reflect a nation's worry" ([American Dialect Society](#) as cited in Barber, 2003, p. 31) and enable "fear's dominion [to colonize] the imagination", producing a malleable and subservient nation (Barber, 2003, p. 215). These open signifiers also serve to positions "us" against an external enemy or enemies and, so, simultaneously draw us together and define those who are "against us". They perpetuate the myth of U.S. "exceptionalism" (Lapham, 2002, p. 39) in

which "we" alone perceive the path of truth, justice, and democracy.

In this construction, we are always gendered, always unequal, always asymmetrically seen, empowered, and voiced (Fröhlich, 2006). It is a cliché perhaps that "in the coverage of war, it is the stories about women's lives that often go untold" (Hardjono, 2001, para. 2), or that "there [are] hardly any women in any of the reports" (Joseph, 2001, para. 2). When present, women are bystanders who provide "color" but rarely have individual voice and almost never speak in an "official", authoritative capacity (Fröhlich, 2006). Or, as Friedman (2005) has found, women are exploited strategically as tools of propaganda (see, also, Klaus & Kassel, 2005; Kumar, 2004; Stabile & Kumar, 2005), as was the case when coverage of Private Lynndie England's role in the Abu Ghraib scandal helped mask systemic military culpability (Howard & Prividera, 2008).

A well established and growing body of "research on women and war suggests that war magnifies already existing gender inequality and women's subordination" (Turpin & Lorentzen, 1998, p. 15) through narratives that perpetuate "oppressive gender norms" and package war as emblematic of masculinity, the ultimate machismo (Brison, 2002, p. 437). Dominant media narratives gender violence and "reproduce an ideology that (ab)uses women…by making them tools of (self)oppression" (Howard & Prividera, 2008, p. 307). Media's archetypal renderings present women warriors or terrorists as aberrant, fallen, desexualized, manipulated, victimized, or second-class (see, e.g., Struckman, 2006). The marginalization of women in media coverage of war is so taken-for-granted that few scholars or public intellectuals attend to "the ways in which 'culture' and 'tradition' are often used during times of political tension and strife to curtail women's human rights" (Joseph, 2001, para. 4).

The complicity of the media in disfavoring women or rendering them as iconic members of a passive public has been well articulated since Walter Lippmann (1922) published his seminal work on public opinion shortly after World War I. In *Public Opinion,* Lippmann argued that the primary role of mass

5

communication was to direct the "bewildered herd" of citizens to follow the more informed and purposive direction of their leaders. He also argued (1927) that "the public" was mired in petty grievances and self-interest and yearned for guidance, and so the media benignly corralled public opinion to placate the masses and to achieve political ends. Some three decades later in her 1951 classic, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Hannah Arendt developed this functional view of the media into a critique of the manipulative powers of the government. She identified propaganda and the fear it generates as an essential tool in government's ongoing transformation of the people into reactive masses. She granted terror an immense mystical force by and through which leaders manipulate their people.

The thesis of these two intellectuals has been joined and expanded others, perhaps most notably Noam Chomsky and Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, to limn the pervasive and pernicious effects on individuals, women, society and the world of the mass-mediated manufacture of fear. Today it is the media, perhaps followed closely in certain places and among certain groups by religion, but today it is the media that is the opiate of the masses. It is the media who, as "collaborators" (Robin, 2004) and partners with governments, stir the people into what Winston Churchill so aptly called "war fever", a frenzy that perpetuates gross inequities and the subordination of women.

While many media professionals seem unwilling or incapable of accepting the responsibility they bear for providing the tools of global dominance and violence, the lesson of media effects has not been lost on those who wish to exercise, expand or maintain power. In today's hyper-mediated global environment, George W. Bush and others who would wield self-interested power understand the tools of communication that feed the media's galvanization of the reactive masses. Today's political superpowers are masters in the art of fear, injecting it into all aspects of society and every political debate. It is this collusive partnership between media and government that has positioned the United States today as "not only the sole global power, [but] its values inform a global

consensus, and it dominates to an unprecedented degree the formation of the first truly global civilization our planet has known," in the words of Walter Russell Mead (as cited in Barber, 2003, p. 20).

I would take issue with the concept of a single "global civilization", but I agree that U.S. government and media leadership in the rhetorical production of pervasive public and international fear has, throughout the past six decades, repeatedly yielded a world willing to acquiesce to unilateral violence and to accept a mounting and horrific list of atrocities around the world and against women. In many ways, headlines matter as much as the act, in political terms (Norris, Just, & Kern, 2003). As the fearful public accepts mounting horrors in other nations, so too does it acquiesce to the ongoing abandonment of the legal protections designed to prevent the rise of tyrants and constrain the spread of tyranny at home. For, as Benjamin Barber (2003) has so eloquently said, the constant messages of fear and violence have enabled "terrorists otherwise bereft of power [to bore] into the American imagination, seeding its recesses and crannies with anxieties,…producing an empire of fear inimical to both liberty and security" (pp. 15, 18).

Yet the power wielded by the U.S.—the power to shape rhetoric and to use brute force, to bully, and to demand—is built upon a fault line that threatens the very security it seeks to achieve. The fault line of fear spreads from the profound vulnerability of a nation that insists on its independence in an interdependent world. It is a fault line that feeds irrational acts of war abroad and increasing loss of freedom at home. To argue, as Barber does, that fear is the only weapon of terrorism is then, perhaps, to say too little; it grants too much power and too particular a status to terrorism. Is it not true, rather, that fear is the only weapon and the primary tool of *power*? For in a world without fear, what would be the role of military power and of the nation, and what would be the status of women?

It is from this position—the position of a U.S. woman of privilege, of both race and status—that I offer the following critique of how and to what ends the

7

media and national governments collaborate to inscribe fear in the hearts and minds of the world. But, first, let me make it clear that I do not wish to claim or suggest that all of the violence and erosion of human rights and liberties in the world can or should be laid at the feet of the media. Rather, I wish to sketch here the vital though partial role played in this murderous political game by "mainstream", "objective" news media, and the spaces of resistance that exist in the seams within this discourse (Moeller, 2008).

Rather than focus on the pervasive and successful use of terrorism discourse to call up nationalist loyalties and essentialist hatreds, this work scrutinizes the edges of effective terrorist discourse to expand theoretical understanding of the transmission of fear messages in order to uncover the potential of such discourses to serve as a site of counter-hege*man*ic resistance. Grounded in an array of empirical studies, this essay directs attention to the cracks and fissures in the terrorism discourses employed by *The New York Times* during the six months surrounding the U.S. presidential elections in 2004 and 2008 to identify where it's persuasive logic frays or breaks down. More centrally, it seeks to illuminate the extent to which media messages of terror may, at times and at the borders, offer new opportunities for alternative communicators and contrary perspectives.

As a context for understanding the limits to the power of the U.S. media's fear-mongering construction of a global War on Terror and the opportunities for media to serve as a site for resistance, the essay opens with a brief and partial survey of the relevant scholarship.

Manufacturing terror

The rhetorical power of "terrorism" to manufacture public fear and mobilize consent derives from its ability to rouse feelings of dependency and impotence in the audience and to differentiate between the audience as victim and the terrorist other as brutal and evil. As an open signifier, to borrow Laclau's (2007) term, terrorism acquires its signified in the context of discourse. Terrorism's

8

meaning is not entirely open; the term consistently calls up and plays upon a particular dehumanizing, frightening and brutal set of images, myths and narratives (Steuter & Wills, 2008). Nor is the meaning of terrorism fixed through clear and objective definitions (Tuman, 2003; Ross, 2001). Rather its meaning is shaped through its social and communicative context; the "what" and "who" of terrorism are defined within the play of discourse and subject to the influence of context and messenger "expressions" (Goffman, 1959).

The media perform a central and highly influential role in the transmission of terrorism messages and metaphors to the public. "Terrorism, unlike traditional war, is about the mind more than it is about the body. It impresses through rumour [sic] and panic;" it thrives on publicity (Snow, 2007, p. 19). But it is not only the "terrorists who need publicity like they need oxygen"; the "marriage of convenience" between newsrooms and terrorists is a *ménage a trois* with ample room for politicians as bedfellows (Snow, 2007, p. 21).

Scholars have identified the "historical necessity" of terrorism as an ages-old device (Perry, 1986), and contemporary research documents how images and discourses of terror further political strategies (Altheide, 2007). Much contemporary scholarship has identified terrorism discourse as crucial to the march to war by both Bush presidents (see, e.g., Conners, 1998; Kellner, 2005). Under the tutelage of the first Bush president, entertainment communication and political cartoons joined forces with bellicose, jingoistic news coverage to dehumanize the enemy and "mobilize an American public to tolerate the killing of over 100,000 people in Iraq" (Artz & Pollock, 1995, p. 121). The rhetoric of terrorism also galvanized public support for a war against Iraq when the Bush II administration was "unable to make an intelligent and objective case" for war (Kellner, 2005, p. xiv).

Terrorism discourse is a powerful strategic political tool precisely because of the malleability of its meaning (see Altheide, 2007) and its fluid adaptability to the prerogatives of the day. As former U.S. national security adviser Zbigniew

9

Brzezinski (2007) wrote recently about the War on Terror:

> The phrase itself is meaningless. It defines neither a geographic context nor our presumed enemies.…The vagueness of the phrase was deliberately (or instinctively) calculated by its sponsors. Constant reference to a 'war on terror' did accomplish one major objective: It stimulated the emergence of a culture of fear. Fear obscures reason, intensifies emotions and makes it easier for demagogic politicians to mobilize the public on behalf of the policies they want to pursue. (para. 2)

Yet the transmission of messages is always imperfect, partial and interactive (see, e.g., Harrison et al, 2008). Fear, anger, public trust in the messenger and a number of other message, messenger and recipient attributes significantly contribute to and alter the transmission to and incorporation (adoption) of terrorist threats by the public (Altheide & Michalowski, 1999; Lerner et al, 2003; McComas, 2006; Meredith et al., 2007). Audience agency is always in play, but it also consistently is undermined by the force of dramatic narratives and story lines that imbed meaning and naturalize particular interpretations and outcomes (Entman, 2003). As Jamieson and Waldman (2003) point out, "By arranging information into structures with antagonists, central conflicts and narrative progression, journalists deliver the world to citizens in comprehensible form" (p. 1) that leans toward particular meanings that favor elite interpretations of reality.

The influence of media discourse is multiplied because media's performance of power—its own and as a handmaiden of government—is always cloaked. As Goffman (1959) said, "Power of any kind must be clothed in effective means of displaying it.…[T]he most objective form of naked power…is often neither objective nor naked but rather functions as a display for persuading the audience; it is often a means of communication" (p. 241). Terrorism's recurrent ability to "surprise" leaders provides cover, justifies abrupt policy changes without loss of face and permits extreme (re)actions that, under "normal"

conditions, would be unacceptable, immoral, and/or illegal (Alexander, 2008, December 4). At the same time, the continuous engagement of the audience in interpreting and occasionally resisting terrorism discourse contributes to its pervasive rhetorical power as terrorism becomes naturalized and normalized through multiple intertextually reciprocating and reinforcing messages across media and through time (see, Altheide, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004).

The play of terrorism discourse is seemingly everywhere and all the time, but the constantly evoked danger is also under control, in the good hands of "our" government leaders. Thus, "television anchorpersons [alternately] comfort us with flags and fairy tales" of U.S. exceptionalism and act as "terror entrepreneurs" perpetuating the "mantra" of a world of shadows and terrible danger from which we need aggressive protection (Brzezinski, 2007). The U.S. response to 9/11 through its global War on Terror is discursively cast as an emblem of valor and glory, action and virility, power and retribution (Faludi, 2007). Omitted from the tale of American cowboys riding into the sunset to overcome threats and shame is the sadness, loss and destruction so easily and conveniently erased from the U.S. history at home and abroad.

Seams in the discourse of terror

While media tend to frame events and issues in relatively static and pro-elite ways, the amount of coverage of particular topics ebbs and flows in "waves" (Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006) that "define or redefine the way the public responds to an issue, a political party, or other political objects" (Pollock, 1994). Key moments and major events, such as the Sept. 11 attacks or hotly contested national elections, can trigger frames shifts (Kepplinger & Habermeier, 1995; Ross & Bantimaroudis, 2006; Wolfsfeld & Sheafer, 2006). The frequency of media coverage is directly related to the power of media representations to construct social reality; increased reportage of key events strengthens the impact and often alters the nature of media coverage (Wolfsfeld, 2001). It is noteworthy, therefore, that *The New York Times'* coverage of the "War on Terror" during the

six months surrounding the November presidential elections in 2004 and 2008 plummeted from 90 (or one story every other day) during the second Bush II election to 30 during the Obama election period.[2] Nearly 90 percent of these stories mention George W. Bush. For context, during the first Bush II election in 2000, more than a year before the attacks on the Pentagon and New York and the inception of the U.S. War on Terror, *The New York Times* offered its readers twice as many stories on terror as four years later–192 stories, or more than one a day.

The nature of the shift in coverage of the War on Terror between the election periods in 2004 and 2008 is suggested by the fact that fully 55% of the stories in the first time period tied terrorism directly to the presidential election as an overt topic of the campaigns of George W. Bush and John Kerry. Part of this reportage comprised the longstanding practice of *The New York Times* to serve as a "newspaper of record" by disseminating the complete, unedited and unannotated texts of certain government pronouncements, in this case the president's State of the Union Address, and the transcripts of the presidential and vice-presidential debates in 2004, all of which included multiple references to the War on Terror. In marked contrast, the presidential election campaign and the Bush administration perspective are virtually absent from the discourse on terrorism and the War on Terror in *The New York Times* during the six months surrounding the 2008 presidential election.

Within the 2004 campaign coverage that includes discussion of terrorism and the War on Terror, President Bush's position is articulated more extensively, more often, and sometimes independent of other views. President Bush's position on the War on Terror appeared prominently in all but three of the 50 campaign stories that mentioned terrorism, and his position was presented in every story in which John Kerry was mentioned. Mr. Kerry appeared in one-third fewer of the campaign stories discussing terrorism than did the president.

As an example of the exclusive voice given to President Bush, even when

Mr. Kerry is mentioned, one campaign coverage story, titled "In his own words", excerpts a Bush campaign speech to report exclusively on Bush's representation of John Kerry's position on the War on Terror. The title is particularly ironic given that the account apparently provides Kerry's "own words" through the vehicle of a Bush speech. The first paragraph shapes the story: "Senator Kerry says that Sept. 11 did not change him much at all, and his policies make that clear. He says the war on terror is primarily a law enforcement and intelligence-gathering operation" (Bush, 2004, October 26, p. A-20). The second paragraph and the remainder of the piece counter-position the two candidates: Mr. Bush as the decisive leader of clear vision and deep experience, and Mr. Kerry as a wistful dreamer or ill-informed idealist who misunderstands the gravity of world terror and "longs for…a shallow illusion of peace" (p. A-20). Here and throughout, the texts present a persistent and pervasive challenge to Mr. Kerry's credibility and potential for leadership.

Another Bush campaign-speech excerpt story appeared under a headline referencing "the war in Iraq" and focusing entirely on the War on Terror. The story opens with this quote from Mr. Bush (2004, October 7): "We've had many victories in the war on terror, and that war goes on" (p. A-30). The story then quotes several paragraphs describing "our" need to confront "the ideology of hate" to achieve "our victory" over terrorism, and then moves into several paragraphs in which Mr. Bush expresses his belief that his "opponent" will "weaken America and make the world more dangerous." The story closes with this quote: "In the world after September the 11th, the path to safety is the path of action. And I will continue to defend the people of the United States of America" (p. A-30). This last phrase, as well as the entire piece, positions Mr. Bush as successful, a man who has and "will continue to" protect his people.

A few days later, *The New York Times Magazine* ran a lengthy campaign story titled "Kerry's Undeclared War." (Bai, 2004, October 10). The piece opens with a vignette of Mr. Kerry striding "calmly down the steps" of the Capitol amid throngs

13

of "distraught" visitors and congressmen rushing out of the building after being informed of the Sept. 11 attacks. In the next paragraph, Mr. Kerry tells the reporter: "I remember feeling a rage, a huge anger, and I remember turning to somebody and saying, 'This is war.' I said, 'This is an act of war.'" Three paragraphs later in this 8,200-word story, the author writes:

> With the terrorist attacks of 9/11, the geopolitical currents that Washington had spent half a century mastering shifted all at once. It isn't clear how long it took Kerry -- a senator for nearly 20 years and, in September 2001, an undeclared candidate for the presidency -- to understand the political magnitude of that change. George W. Bush and his advisers got it almost instantly. (sec. 6, p. 38)

The two subsequent paragraphs establish, once again, the contrasting position of the two lead players in this story. In the author's own words, the next paragraph opens: "Before the smoke had even dissipated over Manhattan, Bush presented the country with an ambitious, overarching construct for a new era in foreign relations." And the next paragraph begins: "While Bush and much of the country seemed remade by the historic events of 9/11, Democrats in Washington were slow to understand that the attacks had to change them in some way too" (sec. 6, p. 38). Clearly, Mr. Kerry is subsumed within this group of slow-witted Democrats, a conclusion foreshadowed by both his reported unnatural calm and uncontrolled rage in the wake of the 9/11 attacks.

Another pre-election piece (Halbfinger & Sanger, 2004, October 25), this time focused on the Kerry campaign, opened with the following: "Senator John Kerry used the Bible on Sunday to accuse President Bush of trying to scare America, and said his own Catholicism moved him to help those in need but not to 'write every doctrine into law.' The Scripture teaches us—John says, 'Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.' … What these folks want you to do is be afraid. Everything that they're trying to   do is scare America" (p. A-17). Before

continuing its focus on the role of religion in Kerry's campaign, the story shifted to excerpts from Bush speeches that attacked Mr. Kerry as weak and unable to lead a nation at war on terror.

Within the context of election campaign news coverage in which the quantity of reporting strongly favors Mr. Bush, stories purportedly about Mr. Kerry also routinely offer strong support for Bush policies and ideologies. The reverse is not true. Stories about Mr. Bush consistently challenge or undermine Mr. Kerry's experience, expertise and insight. However, during this six-month period, *The Times* seasoned its overall pro-Bush coverage with critical stories of U.S. "rendition" and military detention of suspected terrorists; the security of vital U.S. infrastructure and ports; the policies and actions of the president, vice president and secretary of state; the actions and inactions of the CIA, the Department of Justice, and the Office of Homeland Security, and more. The totality of *Times'* reporting on the War on Terror during this period clearly included both harsh critiques and strong justifications of the legal, political and rhetorical positions of the Bush administration and the methods employed by the U.S. against terrorism at home and abroad. Yet, the stories favoring the Bush position dominate. Moreover, while individual *Times'* reports frequently presented the Bush position without critique, alternative or dissent, stories critical of the War on Terror and its methods invariably gave clear, credible and prominent play to the opposing, Bush administration perspective.

In 2008 and 2009, during the three months before and after the election of Barack Obama, *The Times'* coverage of the War on Terror offers little of this overt political campaign reporting and deals primarily with the multiple costs and harms and the potential redirection of U.S. anti-terrorism policy under a new president. In addition to reports on topics such as the impact of terror on India and the effects on Pakistan of the War on Terror, the much more limited *Times'* coverage of the War on Terror during this election period provided a handful of stories explicitly challenging and deconstructing the phrase "War on Terror".

These accounts do not question the existence of terrorism in the world but rather object directly and from multiple perspectives to the ways in which the U.S. is employing the term to target disfavored groups, to exert political pressure, to justify military intervention, and to target Muslims worldwide. The stories repeatedly and explicitly question the tacit presumption that U.S. denomination of a group as terrorist is founded on reasonable evidence or substantive facts.

For example, in January 2009, *The New York Times* ran a column on the op-ed page under the headline "After the war on terror" (Cohen, 2009, January 29). Its first sentence concluded: "The war on terror is over." After stating that President Obama has ended the war on terror to focus on the strategic challenge of defeating terrorism, a distinction it says "matters", the column states that Obama was correct when he said: "The language we use matters." The language matters, the author writes, because "Bush had the ideological framework wrong." Obama's new language represents a changed approach and a new U.S. embrace of "respect" and "realism," the column says. "That's a significant ideological leap for an American leader, from the post-cold-war doctrine of supremacy to a new doctrine of inclusiveness dictated by globalization—from 'the decider' to something close to 'mediator-in-chief.'" The text is redolent of an underlying narrative of peaceful revolution and the myth of a new leader ushering in a new day.

Another story, published in February less than two months after Mr. Obama was sworn in as president, ran under the headline "Disentangling Layers of a Loaded Term in Search of a Thread of Peace" (Slackman, 2009, February 26). The word "loaded" provides a potent double entendre, referring both to the arming of a lethal weapon in preparation for firing and the use of language to carry multiple meanings and negative connotations. The phallocentric term also offers U.S. Americans a vulgar, colloquial reference to male virility and subtly suggests that the former president "shot" his "load" impotently. An eye-catching photograph of homeless Palestinians in "Gaza's War Aftermath" accompanies the story with a

caption that reads, in part, "The war was a reminder of the wide perception gap of the terrorism label" (p. A-8). The 1100-word news story opens with this sentence: "If President Obama is serious about repairing relations with the Arab world and re-establishing the United States as an honest broker in Middle East peace talks, one step would be to bridge a chasm in perception that centers on one contentious word: terrorism" (p. A-8).

The unapologetically critical story, reported from Gaza and Cairo, gives voice to several former ambassadors to the U.S. and the U.N. who challenge the U.S. use of the terrorist label as a form of politics that has undermined U.S. standing in the region. The challenge to the U.S. discourse of terror is recurrent and overt. The reporter writes, without attributing the claim to any source, that "the issue of who is a terrorist often stirs strong emotions and fuels diplomatic conflicts." The story quotes a Palestinian newspaper publisher who says: "If you are with the Americans, you are a legitimate fighter, you are a hero, but if you are fighting against a country supported by America then you are a terrorist." It references unnamed "analysts" who are concerned that "the use of the term 'terrorist' has become a simplistic point/counterpoint offensive of its own" that impedes more substantive discussions and "fuel[s] each other's paranoia."

This news account does not limit its criticism to the voices of elite analysts, government officials, high-ranking journalists and the newspaper's own presuppositions. It also summarizes the perspective of "people interviewed in Egypt, Gaza, Saudi Arabia and Lebanon [who] said they saw nothing but hypocrisy in the way the West applied the terrorist label," and it quotes a street vendor in Gaza who says, Americans use terrorism "as another word for Muslim. In your mind, every Muslim is a terrorist, and that's it."

The explicit deconstruction of terrorism language in *The New York Times* did not always offer a critique of the U.S. position, practice or ideology. An opinion column in December 2008, while George W. Bush was still president, appeared under the headline "'Terror' is the enemy". Here the author (Bobbitt,

2008, December 14) says, "The 'war on terror' is not a nonsensical public relations slogan" but may seem so to many people simply because "we are so trapped in 20th-century expectations about warfare" (p. WK-10). This piece also parses distinctions between terrorists, terrorism and the war on terror and redefines the "war" to encompass whatever new directions the struggle to end terrorism might take under the leadership of the incoming administration. But whether the examination of language favors or disfavors the policies and strategies of the outgoing administration, *The Times'* practice of closely scrutinizing the administration's rhetoric during the 2008 period was not evident during its coverage of the 2004 election.

Discussion and conclusion

Until recent months, the dominant role of *The Times'* texts has been to give credibility to U.S. claims of a world of fear and to perpetuate and amplify the "orgy of fear" that is being produced by and through elite rhetorics of terror, terrorism and the War on Terror (see, e.g., Kimmage, 2004). Here as in numerous other studies, *The Times'* relied heavily on male, government administration sources that directed the focus and language of news coverage to cultivate and catalyze public fear as a resource for enactment of political will (see, e.g., Altheide, 2006). Dominant and pervasive government voices consistently constructed a world in which government actions, however weakly supported and poorly conceived, were presumptively rationale, justified and indeed necessary. Their discourse of a ubiquitous yet ill-defined threat of terror— ever around the corner, ever surprising in its newest manifestation—naturalized a call to action and, at the same time, positioned government as the only "insider" able to recognize and take the right course. These discourses of fear and terror ceded government absolute authority and control over the articulation of what constituted "terrorism" and how best to fight it, excluding women and alternative voices. They undermined both empirical and rhetorical challenges to the war on terror and its daily implementation by positioning voices of opposition outside the halls of power where their oppositional claims easily could be dismissed as ill

18

informed or foolhardy or worse.

The discourse of terror in *The New York Times* surrounding the 2004 and 2008 U.S. presidential elections exhibits several well-established characteristics of news coverage. At a minimum, it confirms prior studies and again finds that: 1) Reporting privileges the policies and perspectives of government and the seated administration; 2) The quantity of coverage of a topic fluctuates through time and differs even around similar key events (here U.S. presidential elections); 3) The quantity of coverage is tied closely to, indeed almost directed by, the privileged male officials' public attention to an issue; 4) "Balance" in news coverage, in the sense of offering two opposing perspectives on a given issue, is partial and arises primarily as a counter-argument within anti-administration stories or in autonomous reports that make only oblique intertextual references to the alternate, privileged and predominant perspective; 5) Coverage tends to parrot and amplify administration catch phrases but may, at times and after some delay, dissect administration rhetoric to bring forward the subtle subtextual work it accomplishes for the government; and 6) An increase in criticism and scrutiny of administration policies and language coincides with the rise of strong, "newsworthy" sources to give voice to positions of resistance or opposition.

The texts analyzed here and the confirmation of prior research they offer once again portray the media as handmaidens to the hege*man*ic efforts of governmental elites in power. Yet while this study reiterates the social control function of this self-described elite news medium, *The New York Times*, the texts also demonstrate the flexibility, fluidity, malleability and openness of terrorism discourse that offer opportunities for agents of resistance. The scarcity and selectivity of intertextuality across different perspectives, different stories and different time periods reflects the abundant power held by individual reporters, newsrooms and institutions to reshape news content, to reframe news coverage and to rearticulate the foundational journalistic notions of "newsworthiness", "balance", "fairness", "objectivity", and more.

If terrorism's "imagined" nature leaves it open to political gaming and mass media influence, it also provides terrain for audience resistance. If terrorism is discursively constructed around a set of intangible and malleable themes that are never static but are continually being reimagined and reinvented, then a critical reading can uncover the persuasive and manipulative work being done through the discourse. As this study demonstrates, the empire of fear and the discourse of terror are pervasive, but not absolute. They are dominant but not seamless. They are powerful but not determinative. The societies in which these discourses appear and thrive, the audience that ingests this diet of fear and hatred, and the individual women and men who inhabit the globe each have power; each is daily engaged in the decoding of media messages and the re-construction of their own reality. Their injection of new voices and new ideas alongside new perspectives and critiques from journalists themselves offer the potential for a counter-hege*man*ic discourse and an alternative to the mind-numbing obeisance and collaborative embrace of a domain of terror.

If Michael Ignatieff (2003) is correct, if today "the idea of human universality rests less on hope than on fear, less on optimism about the human capacity for good than on dread of human capacity for evil, less on a vision of man as maker of his history than of man the wolf toward his own kind," then the media can help to reframe our sense of ourselves and of what it means to be human and to belong to the collective that is humanity. If anxiety, and a sense of vulnerability, anomie and isolation, insularity and consumerism, now plague our collective existence and enable the continuing subjugation, objectification and abuse of others (See, e.g., Asher, 2003), then perhaps Lewis Lapham (2002) offers one strategy out of this global morass. "The more people who become fully human in the world, the fewer the hostages to fortune, and the less seductive the voices prophesying war" will be, and the more potent will be our voices of cooperation, common good and human dignity (p. 44). If "fear of terrorism, orchestrated and manipulated by the powerful [and promulgated in the media], is being used to reorganize the structure of power in American society, giving more to those who already have

much and taking away from those who have little" (Robin, 2008, p. 25), then we, the people, the women who have so long been excluded and subordinated must take back the discourse, reclaim the language, reframe the debate, and escape the culture of narcissism that poisons our nation and the world.

Notes

[1] This Mother Teresa of Calcutta quote is cited in Lander (2009, August 29). See also article 1 in this issue, On Nourishing Peace: The Performativity of Activism through the Nobel Peace Prize, by Victoria Ann Newsom and Wenshu Lee.

[2] Data were drawn from a Nexis search of *The New York Times* for "'war on terror' and atleast5(terror***)" between October 2004 and March 2005 and for the same period in 2008-2009.

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