

News and Entertainment Media: Government's Big Helpers in the Selling of Counterterrorism

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Abstract

This article explores how mass media depict overt responses to terrorism, such as military actions, and covert acts, such as the torturing of captured terrorists or suspected terrorists in the context of American politics and policymaking. Contrary to most studies of media and terrorism, this paper examines both entertainment and news media's depiction of counterterrorism and how this might affect public and elite perception of the government's responses to the threat of terrorism.

Keywords: *media, propaganda, counter-terrorism, United States*

Introduction

Mid-March 2014. A digital clock is counting down. Days, hours, minutes, seconds. 48:07: 45:09. Appropriate advertising for the return of the counterterrorism thriller series "24" and Jack Bauer, whose life as super-agent of a U.S. Counter Terror Unit was dramatized in 24-hour real time countdowns during each of its eight post-9/11 seasons. A few short trailers of the renamed new series ("24: Live Another Day"), available on the Fox.com site, depict horror scenes in burning London streets and Bauer, pistol in hand, trying "to thwart an unthinkable terrorist attack in London that could change the world forever." [1] If you want to be sure not to miss the new counterterrorism drama, you are invited to click the "Remind Me to Watch" button and provide contact information. The Fox Channel promises to alert you so that you don't miss the opening episode or subsequent shows. Eight weeks before Jack Bauer will return to the television screen, the search term "24: Live Another Day" produces more than 44 million results on Google.

While Hollywood embraced all along the notion that extraordinary events, including heinous crimes and terrorism call for extraordinary responses, this manifested itself in the dramatic proliferation of brutality and torture in prime-time network television following the 9/11 attacks.[2] Moreover, before 9/11 the bad guys were the ones displaying brutality, after 9/11 the good guys tortured for the common good in the so-called war against terrorism. FOX's "24" went particularly far in its frequent torture scenes. Typically, there was a ticking time bomb or some other kind of imminent attack and a captured suspect who knew of the plot. By torturing the villain, Bauer and his team would extract information that would be crucial in preventing another man-made catastrophe.

The action thriller *Zero Dark Thirty* about the daring raid by SEAL Team Six that killed Osama bin Laden in his hide-away in Pakistan was among the many Hollywood productions that contributed to the idea that torture works. Starting with the torture of a major Al Qaeda figure, there was up front the implication that information gained during that torture was instrumental in finding and neutralizing bin Laden. Among those who immediately protested against what they considered a non-factual association between information gained through torture and the capture of bin Laden were Senate Intelligence Committee chair Dianne Feinstein, a Democrat, and Senator John McCain, a Republican. When such controversies arise, movie-makers tend to defend themselves with the argument that Hollywood narratives are not real and that audiences know the difference between reality and fiction; but in her eloquent critique of "entertainment violence" (in motion pictures/TV shows/computer games) and "media violence" (especially in TV news)

Sissela Bok (1998, 37) rejected that argument. “A killing in a movie is watched by real people on whom it may have real effects.” [3] Similarly, one could argue that Jack Bauer and his brethren in their all-out fight against terrorists are watched by real people on whom it may have real effects.

The Propaganda Model and Hollywood

There is good reason to open our article with references to entertainment media and first discuss how Hollywood fiction has portrayed the fight against terrorism and terrorists before moving on to news media. After all, screen heroes like Bauer, their successful ways of “tuning up” terrorists, and the fictitious ticking-time-bomb scenario have influenced America’s post-9/11 debate about homeland security and in particular about the treatment of captured terrorists or suspected terrorists—perhaps more than news reports (Downing 2007; Kamin 2007; Nacos 2011). Commenting on a tidal wave of motion pictures “so viciously nihilistic that the only point seems to be to force you to suspend moral judgments altogether,” David Edelstein (2006) coined the term “torture porn” and recognized the possible impact of these sorts of movies in post-9/11 America. “Fear supplants empathy and makes us all potential torturers, doesn’t it?” he wrote. “A large segment of the population evidently has no problem with this. Our righteousness is buoyed by propaganda like the TV series 24, which devoted an entire season to justifying torture in the name of an imminent threat: a nuclear missile en route to a major city. Who do you want defending America? Kiefer Sutherland [Jack Bauer] or terrorist-employed civil-liberties lawyers?”

With few exceptions (Entman and Rojecki 2000; Hoskins and O’Loughlin 2007) media and communication researchers tend to focus either on the news or on entertainment, not both in one and the same research project and topic. Yet, both observation and research findings suggest that film and television fiction are as potent as news media in affecting audiences’ understanding and views of public affairs. Nearly a century ago, based on his observations, Walter Lippmann (1997 [1922]: 61) hypothesized that links exist between film images and movie-goers perception of reality, when he wrote,

The shadowy idea becomes vivid; your hazy notion, let us say of the Ku Klux Klan, thanks to Mr. Griffiths, takes vivid shape when you see The Birth of a Nation. Historically, it may be the wrong shape, morally it may be a pernicious shape, but it is a shape, and I doubt whether anyone who has seen the film and does not know more about the Ku Klux Klan than Mr. Griffiths, will ever hear the name again without seeing those white horsemen.

Similarly, the Intelligence Science Board, a group of expert advisers to the U.S. intelligence community, noted in its extensive 2006 report on interrogation, “Prime time television is not just entertainment. It is ‘adult education.’ We should not be surprised when the public (and many otherwise law-abiding lawyers) applaud when an actor threatens the ‘hostile *du jour*’ with pain or mayhem, unless he or she answers a few pointed questions before the end of the episode.” [4]

Research confirms such observations. Michael Delli Carpini and Bruce Williams (1994: 793) found that participants in focus groups referred slightly more often to fictitious TV shows than news programs in political discourse about the environment. They concluded that “understanding the full impact of television on political conversations and on the public opinions formed during them requires expanding the definition of politically relevant television to include both fictional and nonfictional programming” because “when subjects draw on media in their conversations, they make few distinctions between fictional and nonfictional television.” Robert Entman and Andrew Rojecki (2000, 208) concluded, “Although we have distinguished between news, entertainment, and advertising, there is little reason to believe that such distinctions significantly shape people’s responses. The *overall patterns* of images and information establish the mental

associations, the schemas, used to process the social world. The most relevant differentiation is not between genres but between different patterns of communicated information and prototypes they construct.”

The blurred lines between entertainment and news in audience perceptions exist as well with respect to counterterrorism. Based on their research of post-9/11 television news and Hollywood entertainment like the American “24” and the British “Spooks” TV dramas Andrew Hoskins and Ben O’Loughlin (2007, 148) reckoned that “it is not surprising that when our audiences talk about news and actual events in the War on Terror, they lapse into dialogue about movies and TV drama.”

The majority of Americans are not aware or do not want to admit that entertainment programs affect their understanding of public affairs, including terrorism and counterterrorism. A few months after 9/11, when pollsters asked survey respondents whether they “learn something about terrorist attacks or the war on terrorism from late night TV shows such as David Letterman and Jay Leno,” 17% answered “regularly” or “sometimes,” 23% “hardly ever,” and 63% “never.” Among 18- to 34-year olds the result was different in that 24% told pollsters that they learned regularly or sometimes from late night comedian shows about terrorism and counterterrorism, whereas 22% said hardly ever and 53% never.[5] Rejecting the conservative argument that Hollywood is “a den of leftist skills” Michael Parenti (2010, x) characterizes the films and TV productions of what he calls “make-believe media” as providing “political entertainment [that] makes political propagation all the more insidious” (Parenti, 1992, 3). Concentrated corporate ownership and the influence of Pentagon, CIA, NASA, and other government agencies on war movies in particular ensure according to Matthew Alford (2010a, 4) that “Hollywood generates considerable sympathy for the status quo and, indeed, frequently glorifies US institutions and their use of political violence.”

What Hoskins and O’Loughlin (2010) and others (e.g., Frank 2010; Westwell 2010) concluded after analyzing post-9/11 TV dramas and films is in part compatible with Alford’s (2010b) model that is borrowed from Edward Herman and Noam Chomsky’s (2002) propaganda theory designed for analyzing and explaining mainstream news media in the United States. After examining post-9/11 motion pictures Alford concluded that the propaganda model “is equally applicable to mainstream US cinema” and that, thanks to Hollywood entertainment “a cultural framework was laid for the war against terrorism that fitted neatly with the broader objectives and narratives of the US government” (2010b, 88).

That was reflected, for example, in America’s public debate about torture. The public bought to one degree or the other into the fiction that torture could be used for a good end, namely the extraction of information to prevent terrorism; merely a minority rejected torture categorically. Indeed, the public’s pro-torture sentiment was highest after bin Laden’s death (2011) and after the 2013 release of *Zero Dark Thirty* (see Table 1).

Even more important was that Jack Bauer was a hit with top decision-makers. John Yoo, for example, the lead-author of the Justice Department’s infamous “torture memos” wrote in defense of his role in the Bush administration’s war on terrorism, “What if, as the popular Fox television program 24 recently portrayed, a high-level terrorist leader is caught who knows a nuclear weapon in an American city. Should it be illegal for the President to use harsh interrogation short of torture to elicit this information”(Yoo 2006, 172)? His and the administration’s answer, as reflected in the “torture memos” was in favor of torture, not “short of torture” although they called it “enhanced interrogation techniques.”

Or take U.S. Supreme Court Justice Anthony Scalia. In a 2007 panel discussion on terrorism and the law in Ottawa, a Canadian judge said, “Thankfully, security agencies in all our countries do not subscribe to the mantra ‘What would Jack Bauer do?’ Scalia disagreed and argued forcefully, ‘Jack Bauer saved Los Angeles . . . He saved hundreds of thousands of lives. Are you going to convict Jack Bauer? Say that criminal law is against

him? Is any jury going to convict Jack Bauer? I don't think so!"[6]

Table 1: Torturing Terrorists and the Public

Do you think **the use of torture against suspected terrorists in order to gain important information** can often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified?*

		Often Justified	Sometimes Justified	Rarely Justified	Never Justified	DK/ Refused
Date	Source	%	%	%	%	%
2004	PEW	15	28	21	32	4
2005	PEW	15	31	21	30	5
2006	PEW	18	28	19	32	3
2007	PEW	16	31	23	28	3
2008	PEW	17	31	20	30	2
2009	PEW	17	32	19	27	5
2011	PEW	19	34	18	24	4
2013	AP/NORC**	18	32	22	25	3

Source: Authors.

*When the question was asked more than once per year by Pew, we present a yearly average (for 2005, 2007 and 2009);

** AP/NORC question's wording: "How do you feel about the use of torture against suspected terrorists to obtain information about terrorism activities? Can that often be justified, sometimes be justified, rarely be justified, or never be justified? "

Indexing, Propaganda Model, and Counterterrorism News

Although we devoted the opening section of this article to entertainment media, we certainly do not discount the importance of the news media as important source for public affairs information. Just as the news media, in spite of terrorists' use of the Internet, continue to be central to the terrorist publicity calculus (Nacos 2007), governments in democracies depend on the news media for enlisting public support for their counterterrorism policies. Because of the constitutionally guaranteed freedom of press and expression, the American press has been characterized as an extra force or branch in the governmental system of checks and balances between the administrative, legislative, and judicial branches. Indeed, the American Society of News Editors (formerly the American Society of Newspaper Editors), the professional organizations that pioneered codified journalism ethics, declares in its "Statement of Principles" that "freedom of the press belongs to the people" and, most important, that "the American press was made free not just to inform or just to serve as a forum for debate but also to bring an independent scrutiny to bear on the forces of power in the society, including the conduct of official power at all levels of government." [7]

Contrary to those ideals which are shared by other journalistic organizations, the mainstream media do not always exercise their declared freedom and independence when reporting on public affairs. Recognizing this, W. Lance Bennett's (1990) "indexing" approach speaks to the media's tendency to make news decisions based on their assessments of the power dynamics inside government, especially, as these dynamics can be discerned at the major news beats in the administration (the White House, Departments of Defense and State) and in Congress. Decisive here is that the levels of agreement or disagreement among Washington's

most influential officials will be reflected in the news. While the “indexing” theory recognizes the influence of government insiders to frame the news, shape mass-mediated policy debates, and ultimately policies themselves, it does not go as far as the propaganda or hegemony model. The latter explains the American news media as an instrument of the power elite, among them the upper crust in politics, business, and the military. In C. Wright Mills’ (2000 [1956], 215) view, the media are important instruments of power in the hands of the powerful with some in the media either part of those elites or in prominent roles among their hired hands. In their initial explanation of the “propaganda model” Herman and Chomsky (2002, xi) write that “among their other functions, the media serve, and propagandize on behalf of, the powerful societal interests that control and finance them.” While the indexing theory is more nuanced than the propaganda model and the two schools of thought emphasize their differences, both recognize decision-makers’ influence on the media agenda in major foreign policy matters and especially during foreign policy crises.

Media scholars tend to distinguish between news of foreign/international politics and policies on the one hand and domestic politics and policies on the other. In the age of globalization the once distinct domestic-international demarcation has become increasingly blurred in a multitude of areas, including trade, environment, health, and financial markets (Deese 1994; Huntington 1997). This convergence of the domestic and international spheres has been particularly compelling with respect to transnational terrorism and counterterrorism—even before the beginning of rapid globalization processes in the 1990s. Thus, whether we consider the wave of anti-American terrorism incidents in the 1980s or the catastrophic attacks of 9/11, the actions by transnational terrorist groups and American reactions to those had dramatic effects on U.S. domestic politics and policies as well as on international relations and foreign policy. For this reason, the propaganda and indexing models or a synthesis of both seem suited to examine counterterrorism reporting, to what extent this news takes its lead from government insiders, and how this is reflected in public opinion data.

Counterterrorism: Limited Military Deployments

In the face of an international crisis that involves the United States and challenges the president, Americans tend to rally around the flag and their president in what seem nearly automatic reflexes of patriotic passions. But scholars (Mueller 1985; Brody and Shapiro 1989; Hugick and Gallup 1991) found that not all such crises trigger “rallies-‘round-the-flag.” Even quite similar incidents, for example the 1968 seizure of the USS Pueblo by North Korea and the 1975 seizure of the SS Mayaguez by the Khmer Rouge resulted in different reactions by the American public. While President Lyndon Johnson’s approval dropped after the Mayaguez incident, President Gerald Ford’s public approval increased. After studying such discrepancies Richard Brody and Catherine Shapiro (1989; Brody 1991) explained that rallies occur when the news reflects that “opinion leaders,” such as administration officials and members of Congress, support the president or refrain from voicing criticism. However, when the news reflects disagreement on the part of “opinion leaders,” the public will not rally. To be sure, leading media voices qualify as opinion leaders as well and thus contribute to news content that determines public reactions in this respect.

The rally phenomenon is most likely in the face of a major national security crisis, such as the events of 9/11, wars, and limited military deployment. Scholars suggest a range of minimum approval increases in the first post-incident surveys to qualify as rallies with percentages between 3% and 5% (Edwards 1983; Hugick and Gallup 1991). Moreover, robust rallies require further approval gains in the second poll after the particular event. In the following, we examine three cases in which Presidents Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, and Barack Obama deployed the U.S. military for quick strikes abroad against transnational terrorists and terrorist sponsors in the name of counterterrorism:

The 1986 Bombing of Libya: Immediately after taking office in January 1981 and with an implicit reference to the just resolved 444-day Iranian Hostage Crisis, President Reagan warned, “Let terrorists beware that when the rules of international behavior are violated, our policy will be one of swift and effective retribution.”[8] In the following years, as terrorist attacks against Americans increased, especially in the Middle East, there was no “swift and effective retribution.” By the mid-1980s, the Reagan administration was eager to respond. While the Lebanese Hezbollah was involved in a wave of bombings, hijackings, and kidnappings, Washington did not target its sponsor, Iran, but rather the not quite as strong Libya and its ruler Muammar Qaddafi. Indeed, Qaddafi was according to President Reagan and his administration’s propaganda what Osama bin Laden became in the wake of the 9/11 attacks for President George W. Bush, the world’s number one evil-doer. The opportunity to finally do something arose in April 1986, when a bomb exploded in a disco in Berlin, Germany, killing two U.S. servicemen. Claiming that Libyan agents were involved in the bombing, the Reagan administration had now “a smoking gun” against Libya. Expecting retaliatory strikes, American media organizations beefed up their presence in the Libyan capital Tripoli and were ideally situated to report live when the bombing raids on Tripoli and Benghazi began on April 14th. More importantly, media opinion was strongly in favor of the bombings although the victims were predominantly Libyan civilians. As the *New York Times* editorialized one day after the raids, “Even the most scrupulous citizen can only approve and applaud the American attack on Libya...” Another *Times* editorial noted that with the bombing America sent the message, “The tiger bites.”[9] News organizations reported also extensively about the overwhelming congressional support for President Reagan’s decision. Not surprisingly, Ronald Reagan’s general public approval increased from a solid 62% before the bombing to 67% thereafter while 70% or more Americans approved the bombing raids (Table 2).

Table 2: Presidential Approval and Military Counterterrorism – Three US Presidents

Reagan				Clinton				Obama			
Bombing of Libyan Targets				Missiles Strikes against Afghanistan and Sudan				Commando Raid that Killed Bin Laden			
1986	General		Incident Specific	1998	General		Incident Specific	2011	General		Incident Specific
Date	%	% change	%	Date	%	% change	%	Date	%	% change	%
4/11-14	62		-	8/6	70		-	4/25-27	47		
April 14/15 – Announcement of Air strikes on Tripoli and Benghazi				August 7 – Announcement of Missile Strikes				May 1—Pres. Reveals Raid on Bin Laden hideout			
4/17-18	67	+5	-	8/11-13	67	-3	-	5/2-3	57	+10	85
4/24-28	-		72	8/17	68	+1	-	5/5-8	54	-3	
4/30-1/5	68	+1	-	8/19-21	-		71	5/20	-		85
5/15-19	-		70	////////	////////	////////	////////	////////	////////	////////	////////

In the absence of oppositional voices among influential officials inside and outside the administration, the Congress, and within the media, the president's agenda was reflected in the news and a public very supportive of Ronald Reagan.

1998 Missile Strikes Against Targets in Afghanistan and Sudan: Two weeks after terrorists drove car bombs into U.S. embassy compounds in Kenya and Tanzania causing hundreds of deaths, the U.S. military targeted Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and what was described as a "chemical weapons related facility" in Sudan with 79 Tomahawk missiles. The counterterrorism strikes were launched three days after President Clinton had publicly admitted an affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky. Opinion leaders, especially the president's adversaries in Congress, claimed that Clinton had ordered the strikes in order to draw attention away from his sex scandal. Not only were those political attacks covered by the news media, reporters, too, expressed skepticism about the president's motives. Characteristic for the media's stance was an exchange during a press conference at the Pentagon. Secretary of Defense William Cohen was asked by one reporter whether he was familiar with the *Wag the Dog* movie in which an American president cooks up an imaginary war for the purpose of deflecting interest away from his sexual encounter with a teenage girl. "Some Americans are going to say this [the missile strikes] bears a striking resemblance to *Wag the Dog*," one reporter said. "How do you respond?" Cohen replied that "the only motivation driving this action today was our absolute obligation to protect the American people from terrorist activities." [10]

Along the lines of Brody and Shapiro's findings, the mass-mediated disagreement among opinion leaders was reflected in the news and not lost on the public. As Table 2 shows, President Clinton's general approval decreased slightly whereas his decision to strike back at terrorists and their supporters had solid public support.

Hunting Down Osama bin Laden: On 1 May 2011, shortly before midnight, it was already May 2 in Pakistan, President Obama stunned the nation and the world with the following televised announcement: "Good evening. Tonight, I can report to the American people and to the world that the United States has conducted an operation that killed Osama bin Laden, the leader of al Qaeda, and a terrorist who's responsible for the murder of thousands of innocent men, women, and children." [11] As the *New York Times* reported the next day,

The President "drew praise from unlikely quarters on Monday for pursuing a risky and clandestine mission to kill Osama bin Laden, a successful operation that interrupted the withering Republican criticism about his foreign policy, world view and his grasp of the office. Former Vice President Dick Cheney declared, "The administration clearly deserves credit for the success of the operation." New York's former mayor, Rudolph W. Giuliani, said, "I admire the courage of the president." [12]

A huge majority of the American public, 85%, expressed approval for President Obama's handling of the raid on bin Laden's secret compound and his general approval for his performance as president jumped 10 percentage points from 47% before the Al Qaeda leader's death to 57% thereafter (see Table 2). This was reason enough for Republican media figures and opinion-makers to wonder whether these approvals would translate in support for Obama in the 2012 presidential election. Before long, these circles made and repeated the claim that President George W. Bush deserved credit for the undoing of bin Laden. Their point was that the intelligence community would not have found the hideaway in Pakistan without exposing captured terrorists to "enhanced interrogation techniques." As Lanny Davis, a Fox News contributor told Bill O'Reilly, "I wrote today that we have to give credit to George Bush and those that used these techniques for getting information that directly or indirectly led to the death of Usama bin Laden. I don't think there's any way to deny that." [13] It was telling that President Obama's general approval dropped 3 percentage points in the

second post-raid poll. Two weeks after bin Laden's demise Fox News commissioned a survey that asked respondents, "Do you think President Obama has been personally taking too much credit for the killing of bin Laden, the right amount of credit, or not enough credit?" A majority of Americans (53%) thought that Obama had taken the right amount of credit, 31% said he had taken too much and 12% too little credit with 4% not voicing an opinion.

The commando mission against bin Laden became more of an issue during the 2012 presidential campaign. Just before the first anniversary of the raid to get bin Laden and before Massachusetts Governor Mitt Romney won officially the Republican Party's nomination, the Obama campaign aired an ad that strongly implied that the presumptive GOP candidate would not have given green light for the operation, using Romney's own words against him. Romney fired back with the claim that "the decision to go after bin Laden was a clear one and that 'even Jimmy Carter would' have made the call." [14] In the end, it is impossible to figure out whether and to what degree the media's reporting on the bin Laden coup may have factored into President Obama's reelection.

Mass-Mediated Counterterrorism in the Post-9/11 Years

Nothing reinforces people's fear of terrorist strikes more than heavily covered threat warnings issued by government officials on the one hand and by known terrorists on the other, in the wake of major attacks. The months and years after 9/11 were a case in point. Besides around the clock coverage in television, radio, and the print media that highlighted the horrors of the attacks and the likelihood of more terrorism, there were many reports of threat warnings issued by administration officials and Al Qaeda leaders. Appearing before a Joint Session of Congress eight days after 9/11 President George W. Bush spoke about the threat against America. "Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack," he said. He told the nation, "I know many citizens have fears tonight and I ask you to be calm and resolute, even in the face of a continuing threat." Pointing to the enormity of what had "just passed," the president said that it was "natural to wonder if America's future is one of fear" before promising that "this country will define our times, not be defined by them." [15]

In the same speech, Bush announced the appointment of Tom Ridge to head up the Office of Homeland Security. First as head of that office and later as Secretary of the newly created Department of Homeland Security the former Governor of Pennsylvania became a key figure in what he himself characterized as "the politics of terrorism" but what was more precisely a politics of counterterrorism. [16] In this role, he and his staff disagreed repeatedly with other administration officials' eagerness to issue public terror alerts indicating that attacks were likely or even imminent. Central in such discussions was a color-coded terrorism alert system with five levels that Ridge introduced in early 2002 to the public. While confusing to the public, it was exploited by certain administration officials a useful prop in a threat manipulation scheme.

Before Memorial Day 2003, for example, Ridge and Attorney General John Ashcroft held press conferences on the same day. In response to questions about threats and security, Ridge told reporters that there was no reason to heighten the alert level. A few hours later, Ashcroft warned publically of an imminent, major attack on the United States by Al Qaeda. President Bush was not pleased with Ridge's assessment; in their next regular meeting in the Oval office he told the Secretary of Homeland Security that he wanted a united front (Ridge 2009, 228). Obviously, besides President Bush some of Tom Ridge's colleagues understood the usefulness of threat alerts in America's "war against terrorism."

When it comes to analyzing intelligence, reasonable people can differ about the meaning of often sketchy information and the credibility of sources. In discussing threat assessments on the part of those who fight

terrorism, Albert Bandura took note of the likelihood that such judgments can be influenced by the desire to justify counterterrorism policies. As Bandura (2004, 129) put it:

Lethal countermeasures are readily justified in response to grave threats that inflict extensive human pain or that endanger the very survival of the society. However, the criterion of “grave threat,” although fine in principle, is shifty in specific circumstances. Like most human judgments, gauging the gravity of threats involves some subjectivity... Assessment of gravity prescribes the choice of options, but choice of violent options often shapes evaluation of gravity itself.

Not surprisingly, Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld was a strong advocate of raising the threat level at any opportunity. Inside the Pentagon, Rumsfeld made no bones about his motives. In his so-called “snowflakes” memos to his staff the Secretary “wrote of the need to ‘keep elevating the threat’...and develop ‘bumper sticker statements’ to rally public support for an increasingly unpopular war” (Wright 2007, 1).

As Brigitte Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon and Robert Shapiro (2011) documented, the news media was something like a supporting cast in the selling of the administration’s formal terrorism threat alerts and the more frequent informal threat warnings. True to the media’s tendency to highlight disconcerting news, the three leading TV-networks ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast all 23 announcements of increases in the national, regional, or local terrorism alert levels and all of them were reported as lead stories at the top of newscasts. But the three networks reported decreases in threat levels much less prominently, airing only 13% of such announcement as lead stories and 87% further down in their broadcasts. When the Bush administration raised the nationwide terrorism alert, the networks devoted an average of 5 minutes and 20 seconds to such reports; when the terror alerts were lowered, the average news segment lasted only 1 minute and 34 seconds. The difference was even more pronounced for regional or local alerts: the average airtime for raised threat levels in these cases was 2 minutes and 56 seconds versus only 20 seconds for segments reporting on the lowering the official alert level. When the three networks aired reports about threat advisories that did not involve changes in the color-code scheme, the average length of these stories was still fully 2 minutes and 20 seconds. In addition, the frequent threats from bin Laden and other Al Qaeda leaders received prominent and extensive coverage as well. John Mueller (2006, 26) warned that “the harm of terrorism mostly arises from the fear and from the often hasty, ill-considered, and overwrought reaction (or overreaction) it characteristically, *and often calculatedly* [emphasis added], inspires in its victims.” The media bought into the administration’s threat scheme and became the government’s helpers in keeping the American public’s fear of more terrorism alive (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011, chapter 2). As David L. Altheide (2007) noted, “Notwithstanding the long relationship in the United States between fear and crime, the role of the mass media in promoting fear has become more pronounced since the United States ‘discovered’ international terrorism on 11 September 2001.”

Nisbet and Shanahan (2004) found in the post-9/11 period that people who paid “high level” attention to television news about national affairs and the war on terrorism were far more convinced that another terrorist attack would occur within the next 12 months than were “low level” and “moderate level” news consumers. Based on their experiments and survey analyses, Jennifer Merolla and Elizabeth Zechmeister (2009) demonstrated how perceptions of threat trigger authoritarian attitudes, lead to intolerance toward disliked groups, increase social distrust, curtail support of civil liberties, increase the likelihood of support for leaders dealing with the threat at hand, and affect opinions towards foreign policies. This is precisely what happened in the post-9/11 years, when the drum-beat of threat alerts and warnings by the administration and compliance by most opinion leaders inside and outside the media gave President Bush and his aides *card blanche* for their extreme counterterrorism policies from the USA PATRIOT Act’s curbing of civil liberties to the invasion of Iraq and human rights violations in the treatment of terrorists or suspected terrorists.

For the months and years immediately following 9/11, both the indexing and the propaganda model explain the mainstream media’s pertinent reporting. Indeed, during that period “officials in Washington— especially President Bush and members of his administration—were able to set the media agenda when that was their intention” (Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011, 183). When administration officials held news briefings, gave interviews, delivered speeches, and found plenty of other occasions to go public, TV-networks and other media provided them with ample opportunity to sell their agenda.

When, on the other hand, the White House and other administration officials did not make strong efforts to promote certain counterterrorism measures, the news reflected this low level engagement and offered other sources access, albeit without the prominence and frequency granted to top-Washingtonians. A systematic study of post-9/11 news about terrorist threat alerts and warnings, civil liberty policies, the selling of the Iraq War, terrorism prevention in the homeland, and preparedness for terrorist strikes showed the following (see Table 3): The president and high administration officials were crafty in using the media to publicize the terrorist threat and the need to invade Iraq in order to prevent terrorist attacks. In both cases, the TV networks “indexed” the news mostly within the narrow range of Washington opinion leaders as far as domestic sources were concerned. The administration was least active with respect to prevention of terrorism at home and preparedness for other terrorist emergencies. As a result, there was only a moderate amount of news about those important but rather complex and not particularly dramatic policy areas. Finally, the administration’s public engagement in issues arising from civil liberty restrictions in the name of security was less intensive compared to the hype surrounding the build-up to the Iraq War and the overblown messages about terrorist threat warnings but more rigorous compared to the modest selling and reporting of prevention and preparedness(Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, and Shapiro 2011, ch. 7).

Table 3: News Messages by Domestic Sources in TV-Networks’ Post-9/11 Terrorism Coverage

	Threat	Civil Liberties	Build-Up Iraq	Prevention	Preparedness
	%	%	%	%	%
President/Administration	21	18	26	8	5
Members of Congress	5	12	1	7	5
Experts	16	10	6	22	20
Local/State Officials	8	4	—	5	8
Other Domestic	9	23	6	6	17
Public/Public Opinion	9	7	—	15	3
Media	33	26	35	36	43

Source: Nacos, Bloch-Elkon, Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and the Public*. University Press of Chicago. –% = percentage of total sources (Note: because foreign sources are not included in the table, the listed sources do not add up to 100% in all cases).

Ever since 9/11, presidents, high administration officials, and the intelligence community left no doubt that the terrorist threat remained. Yet, they did not launch campaigns to urge the public to make sensible preparedness arrangements and seek information about their communities’ emergency preparations. The news rooms of leading media organizations were not interested either. Thus, in the three years from Jan. 1, 2010 to December 31, 2013, *The Washington Post* published 98 stories and *The New York Times* 84 about or mentioning both terrorism and preparedness; during the same period, the CBS Evening News aired 6,

CNN's "The Situation Room" 10 such segments. An analysis of those stories revealed that only a fraction of them were exclusively about the state of preparedness in the U.S. or some particular measures to prepare emergency responders and/or the general public for terrorist strikes. Yet another example that the news media, not all the time but to a large extent, follow the government's agenda: what is high on that agenda will be reported prominently, what is low will not be reported much or at all. As a result, a solid majority of Americans consider their communities' terrorism preparedness "inadequate" or are "unsure." [17]

Conclusion

After they examined some of the Bush administration's most drastic post-9/11 measures taken in the name of counterterrorism, Bennett, Lawrence and Livingston (2007, 137) concluded that "the administration assumed it could bend mass perception of reality even against massive evidence to the contrary, with only occasional challenges from the press and dissident sources." Indeed, the mass-mediated politics of counterterrorism policy was a case of news "indexed to power" (Ibid, 174) that also met the propaganda model's criteria of a power elite using the media to manufacture consent (Herman and Chomsky 2002). Eventually, major news organizations regained their footing, in the cases of *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* admitting their failures. But neither a mea culpa nor the return to professional journalists' self-proclaimed ethics codes could turn back the time clock and undo the damage inflicted abroad and at home. Instead, the immediate post-9/11 era demonstrated that in crisis times the press must bark like a watchdog and not cozy up to the power elite like a lapdog.

Similarly, Hollywood's post-9/11 entertainment productions—not all but many of the most popular ones—spread the message that extraordinary threats require extraordinary responses. In this respect, films and television shows fit perfectly into Washington's counterterrorism propaganda built around the permanent and at times allegedly imminent threat of more terrorist attacks inside American borders.

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Notes

- [1] Fox web site <http://www.fox.com/24-live-another-day/>, accessed March 18, 2014.
- [2] Whether dealing with terrorists or criminals, television drama series became far more violent and torture scenes far more numerous after the events of 9/11. In the four years before 2001 (1997 through 2000) there were 47 torture scenes in prime-time network television, in the four years after 9/11 (2002-2005) there were 624 such scenes according to Human Rights First. See: http://workersrights.humanrightsfirst.org/us_law/etn/primetime/index.asp, accessed August 3, 2010.
- [3] Bok, 37. Howard Gordon, the lead writer of "24," insisted, however, that people are able to differentiate between a television show and reality.
- [4] Intelligence Science Board. "Educating Information." May 2006, ix. The full document is available at <http://www.fas.org/irp/dni/educing.pdf>, accessed August 10, 2010.
- [5] Survey by Pew Research Center for the People & the Press, conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates, November 13–November 19, 2001 and based on 1,500 telephone interviews. Retrieved April 6, 2014 from the iPOLL Databank, The Roper Center for Public Opinion Research, University of Connecticut. http://www.ropercenter.uconn.edu.ezproxy.cul.columbia.edu/data_access/ipoll/ipoll.html, accessed April 6, 2014.
- [6] Reported on the Wall Street Journal's Law Blog, <http://blogs.wsj.com/law/2007/06/20/justice-scalia-hearts-jack-bauer/>, accessed Feb. 12, 2009.
- [7] The statement is available at <http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=24&sl=171&contentid=171>, accessed May 18, 2014.
- [8] Quoted by David C. Martin and John Walcott, *Best Laid Plans: The Inside Story of America's War Against Terrorism*. New York: Harper & Row, 1988, 43.

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- [9] "The Terrorist and his Sentence." *The New York Times*, April 15, 1986, A30; "The Bombs of April." *The New York Times*, April 16, 1986, A26.
- [10] News briefing by William Cohen, Secretary of Defense, August 20, 1998, according to FDCH Political Transcripts.
- [11] "Obamas Remarks on Bin Laden's Killing." *The New York Times*, May 2, 2011, accessed May 5, 2014.
- [12] Jeff Zeleny and Jim Rutenberg, "Obama Finds Praise, Even From Republicans." *The New York Times*, May 2, 2011, accessed May 5, 2014.
- [13] The O'Reilly Factor, Fox News, May 5, 2011. Retrieved from the Lexis/Nexis electronic archives, May 4, 2014.
- [14] "Romney: 'Even Jimmy Carter' would have ordered bin Laden attack. *CNN*, April 30, 2012. See article at <http://www.cnn.com/2012/04/30/politics/campaign-wrap/index.html>, accessed May 6, 2014.
- [15] From President George W. Bush's speech before a joint session of Congress, September 20, 2011. The transcript is available at <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2001/09/20010920-8.html>, accessed May 6, 2014.
- [16] The U.S. Department of Homeland Security was established on November 25, 2002, by the Homeland Security Act of 2002. In his memoir, Tom Ridge writes extensively about the politics of terrorism and counterterrorism inside and outside the Bush administration, especially, in chapter six ("The Politics of Terrorism, Part I" and chapter 14 ("The Politics of Terrorism, Part II).
- [17] According to a 2011 poll commissioned by the Mailman School at Columbia University and conducted by the Marist Institute for Public Opinion. In early 2014, this was the last available poll about terrorism preparedness.