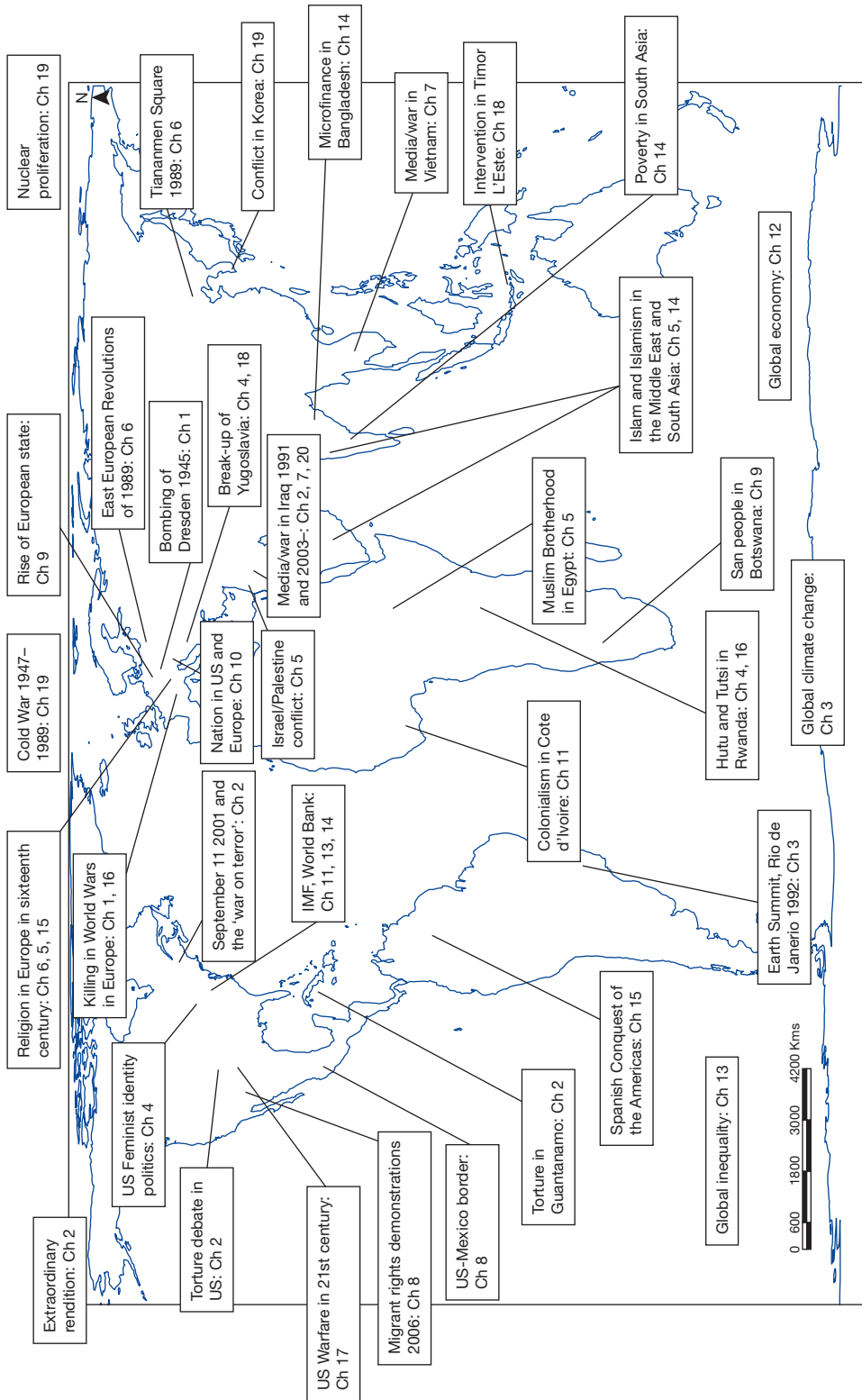


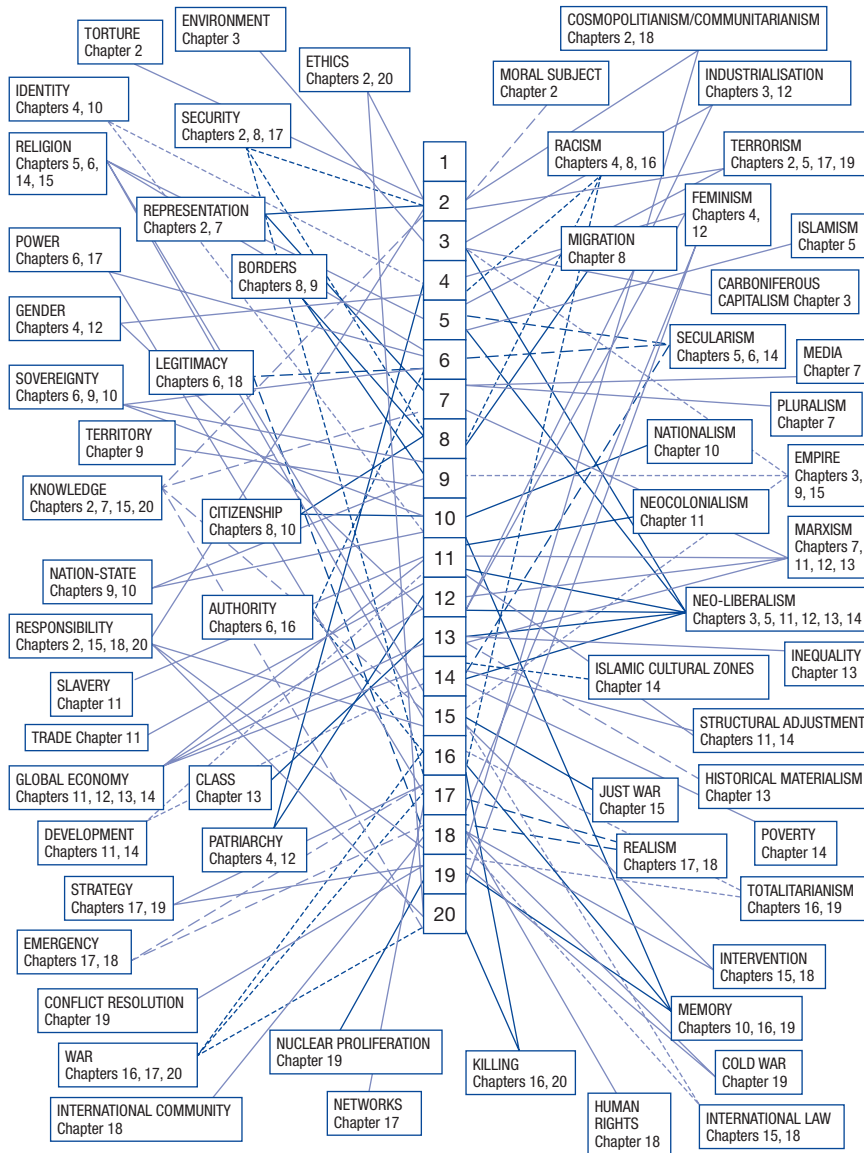
GLOBAL MAPPING OF PLACES AND TOPICS



HISTORICAL MAPPING: Philosophers and world events

1483–1546	Martin Luther	Reformation	Chapter 6
1485–1546	Francisco de Vitoria	International law	Chapter 15
Reformation in Europe 1517 Spanish conquests in South America			
1588–1679	Thomas Hobbes	Leviathan	Chapters 6, 10
Peace of Westphalia 1648			
1711–1776	David Hume	Political thought	Chapters 5, 10
1723–1790	Adam Smith	Political economy	Chapters 5, 12
1724–1804	Immanuel Kant	Cosmopolitan law	Chapters 5, 18
French revolution 1789–92 American revolution 1763–83			
1780–1831	Carl von Clausewitz	Strategy	Chapters 16, 17
Industrial revolution in Europe Slave trade Colonial empires in Africa and Asia			
1809–1892	Charles Darwin	Evolution	Chapter 4
1818–1883	Karl Marx	Capitalism and Communism	Chapters 12, 13
1844–1900	Friedrich Nietzsche	Philosophy	Chapters 10, 19
First world war 1914–18 Russian revolution 1917			
1856–1939 Freud	Sigmund Freud	Psychoanalysis	Chapter 4
1858–1917	Emile Durkheim	Sociology	Chapter 6
1864–1920	Max Weber	Sociology Protestant ethic	Chapters 6, 9
Second world war 1939–45			
1888–1985	Carl Schmitt	Political theorist and jurist	Chapter 18
1889–1951	Ludwig Wittgenstein	Philosophy	Chapter 2
1891–1937	Antonio Gramsci	Marxist theory	Chapters 1, 7, 12
UN Charter 1945 Indian subcontinent: Partition and independence 1947			
1901–1981	Jacques Lacan	Psychoanalysis	Chapter 4
1921–2002	John Rawls	Political theory: Justice	Chapter 2
1925–1995	Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari	Philosophy	Chapter 10
Korean War 1950–53 18 African states regain independence 1960			
1926–1984	Michel Foucault	Power/knowledge	Chapters 1, 4, 6, 9, 17
1927–	Samuel Huntington	Clash of civilisations	Chapters 5, 8
1929–	Jürgen Habermas	Cosmopolitanism	Chapters 10, 18
Vietnam war 1959–75			
1930–2002	Pierre Bourdieu	Sociology	Chapter 10
1930–2004	Jacques Derrida	Philosophy	Chapter 20
1931–2003	Neil Postman	Media & cultural theory	Chapter 7
1932	Stuart Hall	Cultural theory	Chapter 7
1935–2003	Edward Said	Orientalism	Chapter 5
End of the Cold War 1989 Failure of Chinese democracy movement			
1935–	Michael Walzer	Communitarianism	Chapter 2
1936–	Carol Gilligan	Feminist ethics	Chapter 4
Gulf war 1991 Break-up of Yugoslavia 1991–			
1942–	Giorgio Agamben	Philosophy	Chapter 14
1948–	Patricia Hill Collins	Intersectionality	Chapter 4
1956–	Judith Butler	Performativity	Chapter 4
September 11 2001 and the war on terror Iraq war 2003–			

MAPPING OF CONCEPTS
 An intricate network of overlapping concepts, theories and ideologies is covered in the book



CHAPTER 7

How do we find out what's going on in the world?

Debbie Lisle

- *The question*
THE MEDIATION OF INFORMATION
- *Illustrative example*
MEDIA BIAS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR
- *Responses*
FREEDOM VS. CONTROL: THE MEDIA AND POWER
- *Broader issues*
HOW TO READ THE MEDIA
- **CONCLUSION**

THE QUESTION **THE MEDIATION OF INFORMATION**

All of our questions about global politics – about war, famine, migration, protest, violence – assume that we *already know* something about world events. Too often, discussions and debates about global politics assume that we are all-knowing and God-like creatures – swirling around the heavens and looking down on all sorts of fascinating activities. Much as we would like such omniscient powers, the reality is that we are all stuck here on earth, each of us rooted to a particular time and place, and each of us armed only with specific and partial knowledge about the world. Moreover, nobody has first-hand access to activities going on outside their specific and immediate context. That information must be gathered, constructed and sent to us through various forms of technology (for



Of course, we may think we have exclusive knowledge that we should convey to others
[see Chapter 15](#)

example television, the internet, the radio, mobile phones), and we must have the appropriate equipment and skills to receive and understand this information. This chapter explores this process of communication by looking at how information about global politics is gathered, constructed, represented, disseminated and interpreted. In short, it looks at what happens to information as it moves through the media.

Some form of media – some technology of representation – is necessary in any form of communication. As Neil Postman argues, we couldn't know anything in the world without different forms of media to convey information:

The information, the content, or, if you will, the 'stuff' that makes up 'the news of the day' did not exist – could not exist – in a world that lacked the media to give it expression. I do not mean things like fires, wars, murders and love affairs did not, ever and always, happen in places all over the world. I mean that lacking a technology to advertise them, people could not attend to them, could not include them, in their daily business.

(Postman 1987: 7–8)

Of course global politics is about many things as well as these, as the various chapters in this book show.

What happens when we apply Postman's argument to the study of global politics? We see that the objects, issues and events we usually study (for example, wars, revolutions, invasions, treaties) do not even exist without the media – without the technologies of communication – to express them. So while it is certainly important to study objects, issues and events in global politics – the 'stuff' that makes up 'the news of the day' – it is also important to study the process by which we receive information about such objects, issues and events. Indeed, most of us do not form our opinions about global politics by going directly to Baghdad, or Kabul, or the Pentagon (the US Department of Defense). But we do form our opinions based on what we receive about these events from the media. But even those people who do travel directly to war zones – diplomats, soldiers, journalists, experts – form their opinions and create solutions based on information they receive from the media. Another way to say this is that all objects, issues and events in global politics are mediated. That is, we know about them, and formulate our opinions on them, by consuming media representations. Surely, then, it is important to explore how our opinions about global politics – about whether it was right to intervene in Iraq, about whether human rights should be universal, about the extent of American dominance – are shaped and influenced by the media.

It is important to study the media because the information we get from it is never neutral or innocent: it is always – and I mean *always* – biased. Whenever we talk about bias, we mean that a media product 'leans towards a particular view of a given issue' (Burton 1997: 226). This notion runs counter to our usual understanding that the media – especially the news media – is there to deliver the

BOX 7.1 NEIL POSTMAN

Postman was one of the pioneers of media and communication studies, and wrote a very important book entitled *Amusing Ourselves To Death* (1987). He was interested in how television, as a specific technology of communication, shapes the information we receive. Postman argues that American television privileges image over content, and therefore feeds the audience 'dumbed-down' entertainment rather than rational political argument. As an example, Postman offers the following:

it is implausible to imagine that anyone like our twenty-seventh President, the multi-chinned, three-hundred pound William Howard Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today's world. The shape of a man's body is largely irrelevant to the shape of his ideas when he is addressing a public in writing or on the radio, or, for that matter, in smoke signals. But it is quite relevant on television. The grossness of a three-hundred-pound image, even a talking one, would overwhelm any logical or spiritual subtleties conveyed by speech . . . You cannot do political philosophy on television. Its form works against the content.

(Postman 1987: 7)

In short, a fat person – no matter how persuasive their views – would never be elected President because he or she would not look good on television. Postman's argument is that we have allowed television to set the agenda for political debate, and because television favours image-friendly sound-bites, we ignore many sane and viable political ideas that may not be easily conveyed through such an image-conscious medium. For Postman, the *form* that this information passes through (that is, television) is shaping the *content* of political debate (that is, it only allows those arguments that can be made quickly by beautiful people relying on images and sound-bites). He contrasts the current situation of television with nineteenth-century public meetings when large audiences regularly gathered to listen to political debates that lasted up to seven hours (Postman 1987: 45–50). Can you imagine that? *Seven* hours! Postman argues that television has shrunk our attention span so much that we can barely focus on political issues for seven minutes, let alone seven hours.

truth. My point is that bias in some form is built into all forms of communication and operates across all styles of media – from the most factual news programme to the most innocent children's cartoon. Indeed, *all* media representations come from somewhere, and try to advocate a particular agenda. The media never have access to some clear, unmediated truth that they can deliver to us unchanged and untainted. Every story the media tell, every image they construct, every sound bite they repeat is shaped in a way that advocates a pre-existing agenda – a dominant picture of the world that privileges some people and excludes others. Does this mean that the media is biased because journalists are lazy and doing their jobs badly? That if only they *searched harder* they would be able to break

We all have strong views on particular issues, which are inevitably partial or biased. This is because whenever we begin to think about the world we operate with already established pictures of the world that influence and shape our thinking, often without our realizing it
[see Chapter 2](#)

through all this bias and find the truth in all its shining glory? No. This means that it is *impossible* for any journalist – even the best and most respected – to represent the world in an unbiased, neutral or objective manner. Bias is not something the media can escape from – there is no way to represent the world in a way that doesn't also advocate a particular – and necessarily biased – picture of the world.

The question of bias is important in the study of global politics because it reveals a very difficult and ambivalent relationship between the media and the government. In the UK, for example, the media are understood as the 'Fourth Estate' – they are the fourth most important political body after the clergy, the House of Lords and the House of Commons. But the media are different from all these other official institutions because they act as a kind of watchdog on the government, and are therefore seen to advocate the public interest. But the media's ability to act as a check and balance on the government is seriously tested during times of war. Often, the government puts pressure on the media to support its decision to go to war and help to mobilize public support in their readers, viewers and listeners. In other words, the government wants to discourage the watchdog tendencies of the media during times of war. Governments can do this by protecting and classifying information in the name of national security – in effect, they practise a form of official censorship. When the media fail to question such efforts by the government, a rather cosy three-way consensus is established between government policy, media stories and public opinion. In this mode, the media do not act as a 'watchdog', but rather as a mouthpiece for the government. It is as if the government is willing to tolerate the pesky watchdog antics of the media during the normal course of events, but when we go to war the media must get in line, stop asking difficult questions and act as a mouthpiece for the government's decision.

ILLUSTRATIVE EXAMPLE

MEDIA BIAS: REPRESENTATIONS OF WAR

To further examine the conflicted role of the media during war, let us study three modern conflicts and ask how the government tries to use the media as a mouthpiece to generate consensus, and how the media would rather act more like a watchdog.

The Vietnam War (1960–75)

This war was an important lesson for any government that seeks to control the media during times of war. The historical context of the war is important: it was

BOX 7.2 DON McCULLIN, WAR PHOTOGRAPHER



FIGURE 7.1
Portrait of a shell-shocked marine,
Hue, Vietnam, 1968.
Photo: Don McCullin

Don McCullin started his photography career on the streets of North London, but became famous for covering conflicts in Cyprus, Beirut and Vietnam. This image of a shell-shocked US Marine was taken in Vietnam during the Battle for Hue City in 1968. Like many photographers, McCullin started out by wanting to get close to the action: 'I don't believe you can see what's beyond the edge unless you put your head over it; I've many times been right up to the precipice, not even a foot or an inch away. That's the only place to be if you're going to see and show what suffering really means' (Bannon and George Eastman House 2003: 677). But after years of covering war zones, McCullin became depressed about the morally ambiguous position of the war photographer: if you are a witness to such suffering, shouldn't you try and help instead of standing back and taking pictures? McCullin himself has done both – he has helped wounded soldiers, but he has also taken pictures when he could have intervened. This tricky position made McCullin seriously question the morality of his chosen profession and he spent much of the 1990s taking pictures of the tranquil Somerset landscape. Recently, however, he has turned his lens on wider social issues such as AIDS in Africa.

taking place at the same time as the mass media were developing with unprecedented speed in the Western world. Radio was still popular, but television quickly became the medium of choice; indeed, Vietnam is often referred to as the first television war. As well, this was the era when photojournalism flourished, and many photographers such as Tim Page, Larry Burrows and Don McCullin became famous when their picture essays were published in broadsheet newspapers and Sunday supplements.

What makes the Vietnam War significant is that journalists, photographers and cameramen had unprecedented access to the battlefield and covered all aspects of the war. While they started off in mouthpiece mode, writing stories that generally aligned with military policy, they became much more critical as the war dragged on. After 1968 the media shifted into watchdog mode and grew increasingly critical of American military action in the region (Hallin 1986: 3–12). As this shift in the media's position was taking place, audiences were confronted with increasingly graphic images of conflict every morning in their newspapers and every night on the evening news. These media stories were much different from the

Even though the 'patriotic newsreels' did not show this, World War II was extremely violent

see [Chapter 16](#)

patriotic newsreels people remembered seeing at the cinema during World War II, and soon audiences began to turn against the war. One of the most famous images that galvanized anti-war sentiment across the world was taken by Nick Ut in 1972. It shows a young girl named Phan Thi Kim Phuc running down the street fleeing a Napalm attack. Her clothes have been burned off, and her face conveys both shock and terror.

It was images like this that prompted media theorist Marshall McLuhan to state that 'Television brought the brutality of the war into the comfort of the living room. Vietnam was lost in the living rooms of America – not on the battlefields of Vietnam' (1975). The shift in the media's position – from mouthpiece to watchdog – and the public's negative reaction to the images disseminated by the media taught the American government two valuable lessons: (1) never allow the media unprecedented access to the battlefield; and (2) always practise news management by controlling the stories that are given to the media and, by extension, to the public.

The Gulf War (1990–1)

By the time the Gulf War started in 1990, the American government had fully taken on board the lessons it had learned during the Vietnam War. It created a new body – the Department of Defense News Media Pool (DoDNMP) – that was put in place to effectively control and manage the media's access to the



FIGURE 7.2
Napalm attack.
Photo: Nick Ut, AP

battlefield. Structurally, this involved organizing reporters into official pools with military escorts, giving official news briefings about military operations, restricting the travel and movement of journalists and subjecting all copy written by journalists to a 'formal security review' (Tumber and Palmer 2004: 3). Unsurprisingly, this situation was very unpopular with the media, who argued that they could not do their jobs properly – as watchdogs – if they were not given direct access to the battlefield. As war correspondent P.J. O'Rourke explained at the time:

You may wonder what the job of being a Gulf War journalist is like. Well, we spend all day broadcasting on the radio and TV telling people back home what's happening over here. And we learn what's happening over here by spending all day monitoring the radio and TV broadcasts from back home. You may also wonder how any actual information ever gets into this loop. If you find out, please call.

(O'Rourke 1992: 196)

What is important to remember about the Gulf War is that despite these practices of news management, the overriding relationship between the media and the government was consensual. Either because the media were successfully managed – and even censored – by the military or because they agreed in principle with the military intervention, the media generally supported this war.

But it is also important to remember that the media-military relationship changed significantly in the Gulf War. If Vietnam was the first television war, then this was

BOX 7.3 THE CNN EFFECT

Piers Robinson defines the 'CNN effect' as 'the ability of real-time communications technology, via the news media, to provoke major responses from domestic audiences and political elites to both global and national events' (2002: 2). Certainly there are significant historical examples of media images provoking public and government action – Vietnam, for one – but also the images of the Ethiopian famine in 1984 that mobilized millions to donate money and put pressure on their governments to send aid (Philo 1993). After the Gulf War, however, the media seemed to have more power to determine foreign policy decisions. For example, Robinson argues that the infamous media images of a dead American marine being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu prompted President Clinton to immediately withdraw American troops from Somalia (2002: 46–63). The CNN effect continues to be debated by media analysts, military press officers and governments. There is disagreement over how the CNN effect can be measured, and many argue that the media only speed up foreign policy actions that were already in preparation.

the first information war, where, for the first time, news was broadcast 24/7 all around the globe. This meant that news was conveyed in real time on channels like CNN, and people could watch live footage of scud missiles being launched, bombs exploding and troops firing weapons. Journalists, reporters, military press officers, editors and news producers were forced to adapt to a drastically reduced news cycle in which they responded to ‘live-feed’ images without the usual context or background – and they did this around the clock. Such intense media saturation during the Gulf War increased the power of the media to determine how governments respond to international crises. Indeed, throughout the 1990s people identified the ‘CNN effect’, in which the military no longer works in a *pre-emptive* mode (that is, controlling and censoring reporters during war), but now works in a *reactive* mode where it is forced to respond – sometimes militarily – to issues raised by the media.

The Iraq War (2003)

At the time the decision to invade Iraq was taken, the world was still recovering from one of the biggest media events in history: the attack on the Twin Towers on 11 September 2001. The intense media scrutiny that surrounded this event carried over into the reporting of the subsequent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. Once again, the US military sought to re-establish its control over the media – this time by implementing a system of embedding more than 600 US and international reporters, who lived, worked and travelled with selected military units.

Indeed, by offering ‘a first-hand, up-close view of combat missions’, the military used the strategy of embedding to get the media back ‘on side’ after the contentious relationship that had developed between the two during the 1990s (Pfau *et al.* 2004: 75). But the strategy of embedded journalism actually allowed the military to exercise a new and more subtle form of information management. For example, all embedded journalists had to sign a lengthy contract which restricted what they were allowed to report (for example nothing on future operations, no photographs of prisoners of war) and prevented them from carrying private mobile phones or satellite telephones, or travelling in their own vehicles (Tumber and Palmer 2004: 16). Such strategies of information control seriously compromised the media’s ability to act as a watchdog. Each reporter effectively became a member of the military troop – they bonded with soldiers and often used ‘we’ in their stories – and were entirely dependent on the military for transport, food and security. As a result, even the most experienced journalist became, in effect, a propaganda tool for the government (McLane 2004: 82–3).

11 September 2001 was followed by the ‘war on terror’, and the Iraq War is part of that
[see Chapters 2 and 19](#)

One of the things that distinguished the Iraq War from previous conflicts was the increasing use of internet news sources and blogs. For those fed up with the spin emanating from Western news agencies and looking for war coverage not compromised by embedded reporting or vetted by the Pentagon, it was possible to access news from independent media sites such as the Independent Media Centre (www.indymedia.org), or from Arab media sources such as Al Jazeera (<http://English.aljazeera.net/News>). Moreover, many people were taking control of this medium in an active way by posting ideas, images and commentary on web pages and blogs. Indeed, the Iraq War ushered in the era of the 'warblog', where established journalists (for example Arianna Huffington on www.Huffingtonpost.com/theblog), soldiers stationed in Iraq (for example 'My War: Killing Time in Iraq', at <http://cbftw.blogspot.com>) and concerned citizens offered personal interpretations and generated web-based discussion about the war. One of the most popular warblogs during the conflict – 'Where is Raed?' (http://dear_raed.blogspot.com/) – was run by Salam Pax, an ordinary Iraqi citizen who uploaded reports about daily life in a war zone. It was on these websites and warblogs that the information war charted a new course. This was where infamous images from the war – digital photographs of American soldiers torturing and humiliating Iraqis at the Abu Ghraib prison, video clips of Al-Qaeda beheading one of its kidnap victims and mobile phone shots of Saddam Hussein being hanged – were circulated and discussed. This is not to suggest that the internet is always truthful or accurate, but it is to recognize that during the Iraq War the internet became a crucial forum where ordinary people could access both official and alternative news sources, participate in online discussions about the war, and disseminate controversial links and images. As James Der Derian (2001) has argued, we can no longer understand the operation of modern war without examining its *virtual* character – how military organizations, diplomats and statesmen are making use of computer technology and virtual networks in order to better mobilize for combat.

These examples of the changing media/military relationship during war are instructive, for they provide a powerful example of how information is transformed during the process of communication. Whether it is the government trying to control journalists' access to the battlefield, or reporters trying to reveal the military's less palatable actions to audiences back home, it is clear that nobody remains neutral in their efforts to use and abuse information during war. Winning 'hearts and minds' is a serious business, especially when people's lives are at stake. But the experience of war reporting is significant in a wider sense as well: it reveals a fundamental contradiction that underscores the role of the media in society. Are they able to act effectively as a watchdog on government? Or are they only ever beholden to power, and therefore consigned to the role of mouthpiece?

For more on what happened at Abu Ghraib and how this became possible see [Chapter 2](#)

BOX 7.4 JAMES DER DERIAN'S MIMENET

James Der Derian argues that we can no longer think of society as a simple 'military-industrial complex' in which the government, business elites and the military run things in a cosy triad. Contemporary society must now be understood as a 'military-industrial-media-entertainment-network' – or MIMENET – in which technologies such as computer simulations have erased the line between the virtual world and the real world. He explains, for example, how Hollywood has joined forces with the military to produce computer-generated 'simulation-based training environments' in order to make combat *more real* for soldiers in training. Why practise killing 'fake' enemies when you can kill very realistic computer-generated ones? Such simulations are also shaping the thoroughly digitized battlefield as soldiers now rely on computer technologies to transform foreign territory into fully functional 3-D images that help them effectively track, expose and target their enemies. Der Derian is concerned with how all this computer technology effectively sanitizes the consequences of war: what happens when enemies are reduced to pixels on a screen – when war is effectively reduced to a video game? He argues that we are living in an age of *virtuous war* where violence is actualized and executed 'from a distance – *with no or minimal casualties*' (Der Derian 2001: xv). This distance radically changes the soldier's moral proximity to the enemy, who has now become thoroughly dehumanized and digitized. As Der Derian argues, 'virtuous war has an unsurpassed power to commute death, to keep it out of sight, out of mind. Herein lies its most morally dubious danger. In simulated preparations and virtual executions of war, there is a high risk that one learns how to kill but not to take responsibility for it' (Der Derian 2001: xvi).

RESPONSES

FREEDOM VS CONTROL: THE MEDIA AND POWER

It seems there is no way to resolve the contradictory position of the media in society: it will always be both watchdog and mouthpiece. At the heart of this debate is a fundamental disagreement over the extent to which the media can influence government actions – especially with respect to foreign policy. Those from the Pluralist tradition argue that the media are only ever there to serve the public interest and keep democratic values alive. In this sense, the media are always in watchdog mode, keeping an eye on the government and making sure it doesn't get out of control and neglect what the electorate want. Those from a more Marxist tradition argue that the media operate primarily as a mouthpiece for government interests. Because the media are beholden to those in power, they use its influence to persuade the masses that the government's decisions are the *right* decisions for everyone.

Pluralist perspective

The Pluralist position is really an acceptance of, and a belief in, the values and realities of liberal-democratic societies. In essence, Pluralists see the media as simply an extension of the public sphere in ancient Greece, where people went to receive information and debate the issues of the day. For pluralists, the media performs two crucial democratic tasks: (1) it informs the public and (2) it acts as a watchdog on those in power. What is interesting, of course, is that all governments, no matter what their ideological orientation, always accuse the media of exploiting their position as the fourth estate and filing deliberately biased reports against them. So, for example, while the Clinton Administration claimed to be fighting a right-wing bias in the media throughout the 1990s, Figure 7.3 illustrates the Bush Administration's current belief that the media has a left-wing bias against its policies in Iraq. For Pluralists, such balanced accusations demonstrate that the media are getting it right: they should *always* keep the government on their toes.

Along with the protection of free speech, the reduction of government interference in the media and an increase in people's access to information, Pluralists advocate the principle of consumer choice. For example, if a newspaper or news channel is too right-wing for you, then you can choose a more left-wing broadsheet or television station. Pluralists always emphasize the range of media products available to the consumer – from small circulation newspapers like *The Socialist Worker* to broadsheets like *The New York Times*. Pluralists accept that each different media outlet presents a partial and slanted view of the world, but it is the consumer who ultimately decides which partial view prevails and becomes

The Greek city–state or *polis* was one of the earliest forms of political unit in Europe
see [Chapter 9](#)

Bill Clinton was President of the United States from 1993 to 2001. Donald Rumsfeld's role in the US Administration during this period is discussed in [Chapter 17](#)

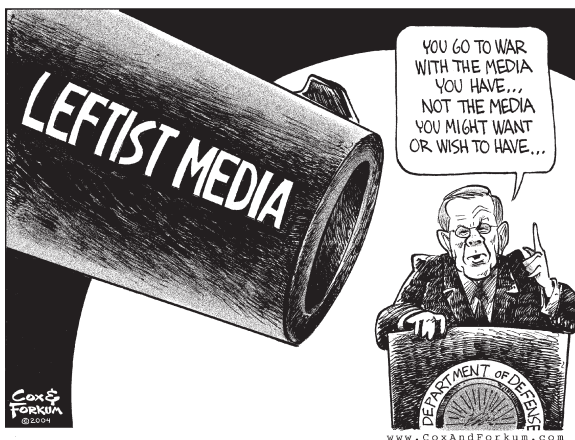


FIGURE 7.3

'Leftist media'. Cox & Forkum © 2004. In a town hall meeting with soldiers at Camp Buehring in Kuwait on 8 December 2004 Donald Rumsfeld said, 'You go to war with the army you have. They're not the army you might want or wish to have'. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/articles/A132-2004Dec14.html>

Media that promote different views arguably don't offer a simple choice as we are not necessarily aware of the 'picture' of the world which informs what we can see and think
[see Chapter 2](#)

accepted by the mainstream. In this approach, a basic symmetry exists between media outlets and their audiences. If a marginalized viewpoint is unpopular, it is squeezed out and becomes commercially unviable. As O'Sullivan *et al.* argue, such a variety of media outlets 'act as a barometer of changing tastes and preferences. Diverse audience interests are reflected in a diversity of media choice. If there is a demand, media corporations will respond' (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2003: 146). In this sense, Pluralism is founded on the notion of consensus: there is a consensus on the predominant social values in society, which is reflected in mainstream and popular media.

Marxist perspective

You'll come across Marx and his ideas in a number of chapters in this book: [Chapters 11, 12 and 13](#), for example.

Those who approach the media from a Marxist perspective start from the assumption that we live in a hierarchical society where power is concentrated in the hands of only a few people at the top. This does not just mean those in government, but also those who control wealth (business leaders) and those who control information (media leaders). These elites make up the membership of the ruling class. The basic assumption of Marxist approaches is that the media will work to secure the interests of this ruling class. In effect, the media operate as a mouthpiece for elite power by *encouraging* the idea that the hierarchical structure of society is beneficial for everyone (including those at the bottom) and *discouraging* the idea that the ruling class benefits disproportionately from such a social structure. For Marxists, the ruling class uses the media as a tool of persuasion: they try and convince everyone that the hierarchical structure of society is serving *everyone's* interests, not just their own.

For a discussion of power and authority
[see Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 13](#) looks at inequality within the United States.

This does not mean that the media relinquish their role as the fourth estate. Indeed, a Marxist approach argues that the media are perfectly capable of attacking the occupants of political office; that is, whatever party and group of politicians happens to be in power at any particular time. However, this watchdog role is very limited. While the media *are* able to critique politicians, they are *not* able to critique the foundations and structures of political power itself. This is how the media works in tandem with elite power: it offers superficial critiques of particular parties and policies (for example, 'George Bush's foreign policy agenda is flawed'), but it never goes so far as to question the foundations of the system itself (for example, 'If we live in an egalitarian society, how come so many families still live in poverty?') And this is why the hierarchical and unequal structure of the system – a structure which, remember, serves to protect the dominant position of the ruling class – continues to persist. Marxists argue that the media give the *impression* of being a check on governmental power and stimulating debate, but what it actually does is control and confine the terms of that debate so that the foundations of the system are never questioned. In effect, the media work to engineer consent from the public – they manages and controls public

debate so that the fundamental structure of society is not disrupted (Wheeler 1997: 19–26).

Given their view that the media are members of the ruling class, it is not surprising that Marxists are very concerned with questions of media ownership and influence. If the media are effectively a mouthpiece for elite power, any information that does not serve their ruling class values will be suppressed. This suppression can be active, direct and violent; for example, in totalitarian regimes press freedom is replaced by a system of propaganda. But, more often, the manipulation of information to serve ruling-class needs is more subtle and difficult to detect. We saw an example of this in the Gulf War when the close relationship between the media and the government resulted in a widely held consensus in which dissenting voices were silenced. Many Marxist scholars argue that the same kind of consensus is currently being established between the Bush Administration and powerful media conglomerates such as Rupert Murdoch's News Corporation. Indeed, Robert Greenwald's documentary *Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism* provides a compelling argument about how private media conglomerates like Murdoch's manipulate news content – especially about the 'war on terror' (www.outfoxed.org). When this kind of cosy relationship between elite groups is established, citizens are discouraged and actively prevented from asking difficult or subversive questions. Graphic artist Micah Wright's 'Propaganda Re-Mix Project' (<http://homepage.mac.com/leperous/PhotoAlbum1.html>) effectively illustrates how the American media is complicit with Bush's pro-war policies.

YOU WRITE WHAT YOU'RE TOLD!



THANKS, CORPORATE NEWS!
We Couldn't Control The People Without You
A MESSAGE FROM THE MINISTRY OF HOMELAND SECURITY

FIGURE 7.4

'You write what you're told'. Micah Wright poster from the Propaganda Re-Mix Project. Poster © 2008 by Micah Wright, courtesy of AntiWarPosters.com

The power of the audience

One of the limitations of the Pluralism vs Marxism debate is that it doesn't pay enough attention to the power of the audience. Pluralists assume that audiences interpret media products according to the same dominant values of consensus, whereas Marxists believe that audiences are so pacified by cultural products that they are not able to identify how the media reproduce elite power. Cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1993) offers a compelling alternative to this debate in his encoding/decoding model.

BOX 7.5 STUART HALL



FIGURE 7.5
Stuart Hall. Stuart Hall

Stuart Hall is one of the most prominent Cultural Studies theorists of our time. His work analyses how cultural and media products are part of a struggle between elites who want to secure their hegemonic (or dominant) position in society and those who want to stop them. The media, of course, are central to this struggle; indeed, this 'representational arena' is where the struggle for hegemony takes place. For example, the media bolster the elite's position when they construct 'moral panics', reproduce stereotypes and scapegoat non-mainstream identities, but they also challenge that elite position when they give voice to marginalized groups and individuals (Hall *et al.* 1978; Hall and Jefferson 1993). For Hall, much depends on the audience, who *may* read cultural and media products in a passive and uncritical manner or *may* actively construct alternative and oppositional meanings. While Hall's work, which draws on that of Italian Marxist Antonio

Gramsci, is indebted to Marxism – indeed, he claims to always be 'within shouting distance of Marx' – he remains uncomfortable with how some Marxists privilege the category of class and neglect our complex identity negotiations of race, gender and sexuality. Much of his later work examines how these negotiations play themselves out in the 'circuit of culture' where representations are produced, disseminated and consumed (Hall 1997: 15–63; Du Gay *et al.* 1997). For example, newspaper representations of black British athletes reveal a much wider struggle over multiculturalism and national identity in Britain (Hall 1997: 223–34). When these athletes are winning races, newspapers emphasize their British qualities – but when they are losing races (or, worse, when they are failing drug tests), newspapers accentuate their identities as black men and women. Central to all of Hall's work is the idea that hegemonic elites intervene in the 'circuit of culture' to produce and stabilize dominant or consensus meanings. The job of any critical reader is to identify, analyse and resist those moments of domination by offering independent and critical readings.

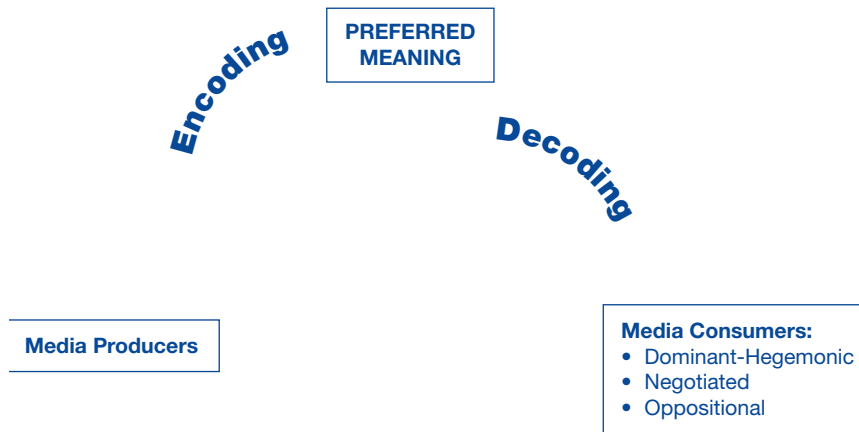


FIGURE 7.6
A simple formulation of Hall's model of encoding/decoding. Stuart Hall

Hall argues that any media message is made up of codes, or signs. During the process of communication, media producers arrange these codes so that they convey a preferred meaning, which is then sent through media channels and delivered to audiences. Hall makes two important moves here. First, he suggests that all media texts are *polysemic*; that is, each document – a television show, a photograph, a novel – contains a number of possible interpretations. What happens in the process of communication is that all these different interpretations are gathered up and squashed into a preferred meaning that serves dominant political agendas. Second, he suggests that there is no guarantee that the preferred meaning encoded into a media text by its producers will be by read in the intended way by its consumers. Certainly many people will ‘get the message’, but many people will not – and some will deliberately refuse it. For Hall, this is because the audience can never be seen as a homogenous group. When consuming the media, each audience member will take up a different position depending on their own context.

People who watch and read the media uncritically are in the Dominant-Hegemonic position: they decode and accept the preferred meaning because it accords with their own political values. People in this position do not question the motives or agendas behind a media product, but simply enjoy it as an innocent leisure practice. People who watch and read the media with some critical awareness are in the Negotiated position: that is, they accept the basic message of a programme or story, but they may differ or disagree on certain specific points. These critical moments can arise when the reader has more personal knowledge or experience than is being expressed. So, for example, you may read a newspaper story about why Britain is being ‘swamped’ by refugees and asylum seekers, and while you may agree that this is a growing political issue, you may disagree with

You may in fact wonder why people cannot simply choose where they wish to live
[see Chapter 8.](#)

the judgemental tone of the story. In this case, you may have written an essay on this subject for one of your classes, and you may have discovered a number of alternative reasons why refugees and asylum seekers are now a permanent feature in global politics. Hall argues that most audience members adopt this negotiated position with respect to the media. Finally, people who watch and read the media with a critical eye are in the Oppositional position: they understand perfectly well what the preferred meaning of the story is, but they deliberately reject it and draw on alternative values. This last position is important for Hall, for it suggests that audiences are not the passive and duped creatures that Marxist approaches would have us believe. Rather, audiences have the capacity to resist the preferred meanings in any media text, and therefore question any consensus that might develop between the media and the powers-that-be.

BROADER ISSUES

HOW TO READ THE MEDIA

To follow through on Hall's understanding of audience interpretation, let's analyse competing reactions to a popular media representation of war – Stephen Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan* (1998). This film depicts the famous Allied D-Day landings in Northern France during World War II. It follows a group of soldiers who have been assigned a special task: to locate and retrieve a Private



FIGURE 7.7
Tom Hanks, Matt Damon and Ed Burns in *Saving Private Ryan* (1998), dir. Stephen Spielberg. Dreamworks SKG, Paramount Pictures and Amblin Entertainment. Ronald Grant Archive

Ryan, whose three brothers have been killed in action, and who is to be returned home to his mother. The preferred meaning of the film, encoded by Spielberg, is about the courage, bravery and heroism of ordinary American soldiers during World War II. Those who enacted a dominant-hegemonic reading of the film were swept away by Spielberg's narrative – not just the awesome and 'realistic' visuals of the opening D-Day landing scenes, but also by the touching moments of male camaraderie as a disparate group of soldiers banded together for a humanitarian mission. Viewers in this position were deeply moved not only by the graphic horrors of war, but also by the many sacrifices made by American soldiers in the name of freedom. As one veteran of the D-Day landings explained, 'Spielberg has given us what we used to call an optimistic tragedy. We come away sobered but feeling better about the strength of our democracy' (Metcalf 1999: 46). Those who enacted a negotiated reading were also moved by the narrative trajectory of the film, but were able to point out some inconsistencies in Spielberg's project. For example, the film makes it seem as if the Americans were the only forces involved in D-Day, and effaces the participation of British, Canadian and other European troops. Indeed, French viewers reacted badly to the 'Americentric' portrayal of war, especially the patriotic flag waving at the beginning and end of the film (Hedetoft 2000: 278–97). Those who enacted an oppositional reading of the film took issue with Spielberg's claim that the horrific and detailed opening landing sequence constituted an anti-war statement – the idea being that after seeing such horrors on screen nobody would ever support war again. As World War II veteran Howard Zinn explains, the film does nothing but glorify and romanticize the myth of combat: 'I disliked the film intensely, indeed, was angry at it. Because I did not want the suffering of men in war to be used, yes, exploited, in such a way as to revive what should be buried along with all those bodies in Arlington cemetery – the glory of military heroism' (Zinn 1998: 138). For critics like Zinn, the film was not in any way critical of the military establishment and, as a result, worked like all seductive Hollywood war films – as a recruitment tool for the military.

This example is particularly interesting because it demonstrates how two veterans of World War II – men who actually fought on the European battlefields – derived totally different meanings from the same film. This brings up the question of whether we *know* something better if we are there, experiencing an event first hand. But by the time both Metcalf and Zinn watched *Saving Private Ryan* in 1998, their 'first-hand' experience of World War II had been filtered, refracted and shaped by over fifty years of media and cinematic representations of that event. Indeed, these representations helped them transform the incoherent, traumatic and terrifying experiences of battle into a clear and concise narrative of 'what happened'. For Metcalf – and for many people who live in Allied countries, including Steven Spielberg – World War II was a heroic, noble and just battle against an evil enemy. Indeed, this is the *preferred meaning* of the film. But Zinn rejects this message and takes a more *oppositional* stance: no war – not even World

How we should remember wars is itself a significant question
[see Chapter 16](#)

War II – is ever worth the sacrifice and loss of innocent life, and all patriotic and uncritical commemorations of such events should be resisted. Here we have two radically different interpretations of World War II – there is not just disagreement over ‘what happened’, but also disagreement over the meaning of such an event, and how that meaning is conveyed in a film like *Saving Private Ryan*.

When we study the effect of the media, it is very tempting to think that the answer to such disagreements – indeed, the answer to any bias, misrepresentation or propaganda – is to actually go there and witness a key event in global politics for yourself, or to privilege accounts of people who were actually there and witnessed or participated in these events. But this is not a satisfying answer – not least because we can’t all be budding journalists dashing around the world in order to encounter key events first hand. Rather, it is not a satisfying answer for two main reasons. First, when we tell stories about important historical events, those stories are directly shaped by the issues of *the present* rather than the past. Very simply, it is not some overarching, finally settled and uncontested notion of ‘the truth’ that dictates how we talk about the past – it is our *present* concerns and struggles that shape such discussions. In this sense, *Saving Private Ryan* is much more about conflict in the 1990s than it is about World War II: it encourages us to remember a ‘good and just’ war in order to *forget* the moral complexities of recent interventions (for example Kosovo, Somalia, Afghanistan, Iraq). Media representations such as *Saving Private Ryan* are absolutely crucial in shaping the past according to more contemporary concerns and agendas. Second, none of us – not World War II veterans, not journalists, not soldiers, not victims – can stand outside the media and claim that they don’t affect our political judgements. We are, all of us, profoundly shaped by the information we receive in the media every day: there is no magic place outside their reach and influence where we can deliberate and come to the *right* conclusion in an unmediated sense. Rather, our own personal views on global political issues have been shaped by all the television news programmes, newspaper articles, movies, advertisements, photographs and stories we have seen, heard and read over the years. More importantly, major political decisions are also shaped by this condition of media saturation: foreign policy advisors, security consultants, Navy Seals and seasoned diplomats all formulate their decisions about an event, in part, from the media sources they watch, read, download and listen to. Now, such an intense form of media saturation wouldn’t be a problem if the information delivered by the media was neutral – if it came to us untouched by producers, editors, comptrollers, focus groups, governments and advertisers. But as we know, all media information comes from somewhere, and is trying to advance someone’s agenda. This is why Stuart Hall’s insistence on critical reading strategies is so important. It is only by identifying the dominant agendas being encouraged by the media – especially in the area of global politics – that we can challenge those moments when dominant agendas masquerade as ‘the truth’ in order to squeeze out, exclude and silence more uncomfortable or unpalatable accounts of global events.

Is it a bad thing that all media information advances someone’s agenda? Is it a bad thing if they pretend not to have an ‘agenda’?

One of the difficulties of studying the media is an assumption that our responses to it are always rational, judicious and measured. This is, of course, seldom the case: we react to media representations instantaneously and emotionally. Think of the way avid sports fans watch their favourite teams compete live on television: they shout at their own players to do better (and they swear at the opposition for being terrible); they scream and whoop and jump and go crazy when victory is assured; they are outraged when ‘unjust’ refereeing decisions are awarded; and they sometimes weep with depression when their beloved team loses. It is almost as if they believe that if they shout loud enough at the television their favourite player will listen to their tactical suggestion (crafted carefully from the sofa), or the referee will reverse a penalty decision. This is not rational behaviour by any means. But it is one example of how *all* audience members – including you and me – become emotionally engaged in media representations. When media producers are trying to convince us of something – the *rightness* of a policy, the *hilarity* of a pratfall, the *guilt* of a prisoner, the *trauma* of a victim, the *joy* of a victory, the *pain* of a death – they don’t do it by appealing to our rational natures. They do it by appealing to our emotions. And it works: we giggle, we scoff, we roll our eyes, we bury our head in our hands, we laugh out loud, we raise our eyebrows, we look away when it gets scary, we shout and cheer, and sometimes we cry.

This introduces a very important question: does the media facilitate a genuine expression of emotion? Or does it deliberately manipulate our emotions for political ends? Let’s go back to the way *Saving Private Ryan* uses the past to reshape present anxieties about military intervention. I remember being entirely moved by this film the first time I saw it on its release in 1998. I was pinned to my seat for the initial D-Day landing scene, I fell half in love with the wise but tough Captain Miller (played by Tom Hanks), I hated the Germans – especially the traitorous prisoner of war, I was full of admiration for a military that wanted to protect Mrs Ryan’s only remaining son, and I wept buckets at the film’s rendering of heroic sacrifice. But I was very perplexed at this response: why was I so moved by this film? I wasn’t alive during World War II, and I didn’t personally know anyone who fought during that war. This was a different world from my own. And then I started thinking about how *Saving Private Ryan* related to the world I was living in – a decade in which violence was returning to the global stage with great force, but a decade in which the moral justifications for violence were, at best, hopelessly complex. In fact, my overblown emotional response was precisely what Spielberg ordered: his nostalgic commemoration created a ‘comfortable surrogate’ for the uncomfortable world I faced every day when I watched the television news or read the newspaper headlines (Kolker 2000: 257).

I was shocked, to say the least, at the way I had been so successfully manipulated by Spielberg’s story. In every subsequent viewing, I discovered another layer to this deception: the rather obvious musical score, the cynically timed combat sequences punctuated by slower narrative elaboration, the faceless German

Can you think of a film you’ve seen recently that has appealed to you emotionally in these sorts of ways?

enemy, the stereotypical troop of ‘characters’ (that is, the wise-ass from the Bronx, the innocent rookie, the thoughtful doctor) and the unabashed patriotism of the American flag. Every time I watched it I got angrier at Spielberg’s ability to manipulate the audience. And yet, despite all this ‘rational’ knowledge, I still could not help but be moved, somehow, by the larger themes of sacrifice, brotherhood and heroism. This contradiction frames all my media encounters with warfare. On the one hand, I am desperate to work out how such representations are manipulating me and trying to convince me of someone else’s political agenda. But, on the other hand, I am moved when I see images depicting the consequences of war – when people’s cities are destroyed, when their loved ones are killed and when their homelands implode in violence. Images such as these invoke empathy, compassion, anger and concern – not rational responses by any means, but incredibly powerful *emotional* responses.

My point is not to deny such emotional responses; indeed, these are precisely the kind of feelings that connect people across the world and inspire many common practices in global politics (for example aid packages, debt relief, humanitarian interventions). My point is simply that we must look carefully at how the media mobilizes both our reason *and* our passion in trying to put its point across. Too often, emotional appeals mask the dominant political agendas that are being served by the media. By all means, we must maintain the capacity to be moved by powerful media representations – to be inspired into debate, discussion and action. But we cannot exempt the media – as a political institution – from critical examination in this regard. We must call attention to those moments when the media deliberately manipulate our emotions in an effort to encourage a specific political position (that is, going to war)

The emotions set off by witnessing others’ suffering raise questions: what can we do to stop people harming others? And what issues arise when we believe that we know what is good for them?

[see chapters 18 and 15](#)

CONCLUSION

There is, of course, an easy answer to the question ‘How do we find out what’s going on in the world?’ Very simply, we ask questions. This is always the first step – be curious and take an active role in discovering the ins and outs of global politics. But this chapter has taken a further step by asking us to think about *where* we direct our questions, about the forum within which we discover, debate and discuss global politics. And this forum is undoubtedly the media in the broadest sense – television, radio, film, magazines, the internet, pod casts, advertising, etc. The main point of this chapter has been to demonstrate that the media do not constitute a neutral space; rather, they play an active role in shaping and influencing our opinions about global politics. The influential role of the media is nowhere more apparent than during times of war: indeed, there are many examples of the media acting as a mouthpiece for government during war, to the point of becoming a vehicle for propaganda. In this sense, we cannot leave it up to the media to provide a balanced view. We, as consumers of the media, need

It might be worth asking where the questions we ask come from. Are they neutral, or do they come from who we think we are, and what we think is important, before we start asking questions?

to develop critical reading skills so we can identify when and how the media try to manipulate and shape our views about the world.

FURTHER READING

Lawrence Grossberg, Ellen Wartella and D. Charles Whitney (1998) *Mediamaking: Mass Media in a Popular Culture*, New York: Sage Publications, is the most comprehensive introduction to the complex relationship between the media and society in general. It develops a politically sophisticated account of the media, and provides good examples and illustrations of the main theoretical concepts.

John Fiske (1990) *Introduction to Communication Studies*, London: Routledge, and Dennis McQuail (2005) *McQuail's Mass Communication Theory*, London: Sage Publications, both give a more in-depth look at the theoretical framing of communication. They help to explain the complicated transfer of information from producers, through the media, to the consumer, and both books tackle the difficult question of how meaning is generated in this process.

Mark Wheeler (1997) *Politics and the Mass Media*, Oxford: Blackwell. Chapter 1 provides a good review of the main debates between Pluralist and Marxist approaches to the media.

Georgia Chondroleou's (2002) 'review article 'Studying the Media and Politics in Britain: A Tale of Two Literatures?', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 2, 2:359–73, gives a fuller account of the main differences between Pluralist and Marxist approaches and their respective strengths and weaknesses.

Tim Allen and Jean Seaton (1999) *The Media of Conflict: War Reporting and Representations of Ethnic Violence*, London and New York: Zed Books and Susan Carruthers (2000) *The Media at War: Communication and Conflict in the Twentieth Century*, London: Palgrave, are good starting points that provide general accounts of the relationship between the media and war within the context of global politics. There are numerous books about the media's role in specific conflicts (for example Vietnam, Kosovo), and given the increasing importance of information during war, there will be many more books published in this area.

WEBSITES

Communication, Culture and Media Studies Infobase, <http://www.cultsock.ndirect.co.uk/MUHome/cshtml>
Also known as 'Cultsock'.

Media Communication Studies site at the University of Aberystwyth, <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media>
These two sites are the best of some very good websites that provide a comprehensive introduction to the theories, debates and methods of media studies.

Indymedia, <http://www.indymedia.org>

A collection of independent media resources.

Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, <http://www.fair.org/index.php>

A media watch group.

There are a variety of websites dedicated to independent media reporting, of which these two are among the best.

The War and Media Network, <http://www.warandmedia.org>

The Global Media Project at the Watson Institute for International Studies at Brown University, <http://watsoninstitute.org/globalmedia>

Interdisciplinary research into the role of the media during war is developing rapidly, and these two websites in particular help to navigate, foster and promote this work.

The Iraq War Archive, <http://www.iraqwararchive.org>

More specifically, a useful website about media coverage of the Iraq War.

OTHER RESOURCES

Outfoxed: Rupert Murdoch's War on Journalism, Documentary by Robert Greenwald
(www.outfoxed.org)

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