

Is there a Bin Laden in the Audience? Considering the Events of September 11 as a Possible Boomerang Effect of the Globalization of US Mass Communication

RENÉ-JEAN RAVAUT

ABSTRACT *The images of America exported by entertainment and information media companies have created very high expectations in foreign audiences. Some recipients overhearing American media want to immigrate to the US and/or study in Western universities. In the process, a few of them encounter difficulties deceiving their high expectations. Their frustrations have been exploited by some fanatic ideologues for their own agendas, resulting in anti-American terrorism. The American media should be aware of the unintended consequences of their global exhibition of media, and more careful attention should be given to the way immigrants or graduate students sojourning in the US live their day-to-day encounters.*

Keywords: global communication, American entertainment products, deception and frustration, global integration, integrative and informative functions of the media, US melting pot, sustained cultural identities.

American Media: A Double-edged Sword

The products of American information and entertainment media, as well as the promotional artifacts distributed by US institutions for the export of American culture, overwhelm global communications.¹ These products show an inclusive, cosmopolitan, universal image of the United States.² Members of foreign élites exposing themselves to these products find them very appealing and are seduced by the American way of life so attractively depicted. Many of them attempt to get closer to the US by trying to immigrate or by wanting to get a diploma from a US university. Most of these people, ultimately, find happiness as integrated immigrants in the US, or as partly educated in the West citizens of their own country, but a few find the gap too large between the first impressions they constructed out of the American media and their day-to-day perception of 'reality'. They then justify their own failure through an enlargement of their preprogrammed criticism of the American way of life.

If these deceptions and frustrations are articulated and, in some way, legitimized and embellished through an emotional 'rational' provided to these misfits by a return and an aggravation of the anti-American rhetoric inscribed within their local indoctrination, they can end up posing aggressive and terrorist gestures against the United States. This return rhetoric is often facilitated by the perverse use of telecommunications. Finally, the American media, originally conceived of to seduce immigrants and foreigners, may be used by these misfits as a source of information and/or legitimization in their decision-making processes leading to their terrorist deeds.

Media Globalization: Fostering Frustration

We believe that we are now living in a global age because our means of communication allow us to get in touch with people located on the opposite side of the globe. We can get access, in real time, to data provided to us by databanks located in many countries around the world. However, if we look more critically, we can see that most people do not get nearer to the rest of the world than they—or their ancestors—were years, decades, and centuries ago. For instance, it could be argued that people using cellular phones to get in touch with their next of kin or loved-ones have a larger tendency to ignore the presence of other human beings immediately surrounding them in day-to-day activities and business life.

Thus, through telephones and the Internet, immigrants may considerably slow down their integration into the host country. Not only do they remain, for a generation or two, amongst the members of their own diaspora,³ but now, thanks to the telecommunications, they stay in touch with their former friends and/or significant members of their interpersonal networks with whom they used to live in their country of origin. They watch their own countries' TV signals portraying entertainment, news, and religious programs from abroad instead of exposing themselves to local programs and local people. For instance, 'Telenovellas' from Brazil and Argentina, relayed through Mexico and TV satellites, are watched almost exclusively by immigrants who recently came from Latin America.

Remaining exposed to the community of origin's language, culture, values, beliefs, and attitudes through the consumption of imported mass communication products and/or the use of Internet and international telephone lines may contribute to the maintaining and development of obstacles to an adequate melting within the citizens of the host society. This situation is aggravated if some of these communication products do not fit well within the American way of life or, worse, if these significant members of the community of origin are hostile to the United States.

Most mass communication theoreticians consider that whomever owns the media controls the content and, more importantly, their effect upon audiences, whatever the cultural background of the members of the audiences could be. However, a closer look shows that when foreign recipients take into account American-made mass communication products, they transform them simultaneously into significant and relevant 'messages'. The memory they keep of these products and the meaning they get out of them are co-constructed by the recipients' 'weltanschauung', or world view.⁴ This weltanschauung of foreign recipients has been shaped, structured, and programmed⁵ through previous face-to-face, coercive and seductive, interactions with the significant members of their communication networks that constitute their community of identification.

Consequently, the way foreign recipients select American media and decode their contents depends much more upon the coercive and seductive power of the significant members of the interpersonal networks that structure their community of origin than upon the alleged 'might' of the American communication media and products.

Many students of the globalization of US mass communication have criticized US communication industries for promoting the American way of life and US historic ideals, as well as the interests of capitalistic American enterprises.⁶ Others, less critical of neo-liberalism, have seen the globalization of US media as a contribution to the triumph of democracy around the world.⁷ In spite of criticism and of dramatic failures,⁸ the notion of creating empathy towards democracy, capitalism, and other US values or ways of life through exposure to American media⁹ has worked out, and is still working out pretty well, for some members of local élite in the Third World, especially in the Middle East.

Following exposure to American mass communication and education products, many students in the Middle East decided to go to the United States or other Western countries to obtain graduate education. For instance, we know that when the Shah of Iran was overthrown by the revolution of 1979, Iranian students constituted the largest body of foreign students in the United States. Some of them returned to Iran when the Ayatollahs took over and helped to decipher the shattered documents of the CIA in the students' occupied embassy of the United States in Tehran.

Indeed, it seems that we may have overlooked the fact that most of the terrorists who were directly involved in the hijacking of the four commercial airplanes on the morning of September 11 sojourned a long time in the US or other countries of the West. Not only did some of them learn how to fly planes in the US but, most of them studied there before getting involved in terrorist plans. It is highly probable that it was during this time that they became frustrated and angry to the point of getting in touch with terrorist organizations somehow connected to their religious network. The same itinerary, marked with a long sojourn in the West, seems to have been followed by the Pakistani extremist Ahmed Omar Saced Sheikh, the terrorist whom authorities suspect masterminded the plot to kidnap the *Wall Street Journal* reporter Daniel Pearl. Sheikh was born and raised in London, England.¹⁰

A revealing history of what happened to some of these people before they became either terrorists or Islamic fundamentalist ideologues, is provided by Jonathan Raban, in an article published in *The New Yorker*.¹¹ According to Raban, it seems that Qutb's sojourn¹² in the United States and exposure to local media played an important role in his morale conditioning. This conditioning was the intellectual counterpart and prelude to the physical training terrorists received in Al-Qaeda camps. Raban writes: 'Like many homesick people, living outside their language in an abrasive foreign culture, Qutb aggrandized his loneliness into heroic solitude . . .' From Raban's article, we can see that for some people born and/or raised, at least for some time, in a context in which they find themselves belonging to an ethnic community, religion, and culture which are marginalized, terrorism may become an answer to their frustrations. This occurs even though the host nation seems to be very open through its media and political rhetoric and is perceived as more or less closed in its day-to-day intercultural face-to-face encounters. The situation worsens if the souvenir or the electronic contacts keeping them in touch with the significant leaders of their culture of origin 'aggrandize their loneliness into heroic solitude', as Raban, again, saw it.

Once the decision to get involved with terrorist organizations is taken, exposure to the media and to the people of the host culture becomes something of a 'spy game'. Once such a drastic change has occurred, boomerang theories can help us understand how these potential terrorists use American media, be they mass media or telecommunications.

Since the end of WWII, a few theoreticians and politicians like Soekarno¹³ and, more recently, Chirac¹⁴ have pointed out that in intercultural, transnational, and global communication situations, the impact of internationally broadcast communication products conceived of within a specific community of interpretation or 'épistémè' may or may not be received and interpreted by foreigners in the way it was intended and designed for. This phenomenon has been convincingly explained by a few researchers. Shils and Janowitz¹⁵ studied the way Madison Avenue propaganda for Allied forces was twisted around by the Wehrmacht during WWII. Stuart Hall¹⁶ pointed out the multiple possibilities of mismatch, distortion and reversal between coding and decoding popular TV in multicultural England. Hamid Mowlana¹⁷ and Majid Tehranian¹⁸ underlined how the Westernized media of the Shah and US universities contributed inadvertently to the Ayatollah's revolution in Iran. Tzvetan Todorov, a French semiotician and an historian, demonstrated how the conquistador, Cortes used his knowledge of Moctezuma's communication ecology in his successful and unlikely conquest of Mexico.¹⁹ In my research, I pointed out how, between 1945 and 1980, West Germany and Japan used the information about the American way of life and consumption provided to them by US communication and cultural hegemony to accomplish their economic 'miracle' on the back of the United States.²⁰

The terrorist attacks on America of September 11 demonstrate that global communications saturated with images of the United States can dramatically backfire when used by global terrorists for their own ends. There are some lessons to be learned that might help lessen the chance for future attacks.

Global Exhibitionists Beware!

Being globally seen by unintended and unscrupulous audiences is more a cause of worry, uncertainty, and danger than global admiration and fascination. This situation is made worse when these audiences have been culturally and ethno-religiously programmed through *the* networks of coercion and seduction that *crisscross* their communities of origin and of interpretation. Thus to avoid this problem, one solution for the United States might be to keep silent like the Swiss bankers, for whom 'silence is golden'. However, this is not realistic.

A more practical solution is to understand the origin and nature of the gap existing (or invented) between the expectations created within foreign audiences through exposure to American media and the way immigrants or graduate students sojourning in the US live their day-to-day encounters. This is especially relevant when these foreigners have been indoctrinated with non-American values and ways of life during their socialization and acculturation processes.

The media should not provoke frustrations through a global exhibition of the American rich and famous. Other indicators for social success like human solidarity, loyalty to one's own friends, a global quest for equity and fairness, spiritual development, and happiness in solitude as well as in sociability should be equally promoted. The United States should not monopolize simultaneously all the powers, be they military, financial, economic, intellectual, spiritual, moral, and

religious, leaving the disenfranchised with the only perceived option of killing themselves in terrorist acts.

Finally, students of international communication should not neglect the careful study of human and cultural factors. Ethnography research about the ritualistic aspects of day-to-day life should be part of research and the teaching curriculum in communication studies.

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