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Bush versus Bin Laden in *Time*: reflections on the binary opposition(s)

ABSTRACT

This article is based on qualitative research, which structurally analyses commentary on the September 11 (2001) attacks on America and the divide between the American administration and the Al-Qaeda network (personified respectively by President George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden) in Africa editions of *Time* magazine for a period of six months following the September 11 (2001) carnage in the United States. The structural analysis focuses on the identification of the binary oppositions at play, uncovering the cultural code predominant at *Time* through its viewpoint and essay columns. It was found that the cultural code translates into: the United States and the Western World are the beacons of democracy and freedom, while Islam (more specifically Muslim fundamentalists) represents authoritarianism, repression and bondage. It appears that *Time* in its commentary role in the aftermath of the attacks was an able and willing partner of the United States administration in predominantly naming the world along American lines, and attempting through words to impose the named world on adversaries.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The September 11 (2001) attacks on America have long not been forgotten. At the time, of course, the mass media gave widespread coverage to the attacks and ensuing events. *Time* magazine, an international news medium icon with a huge readership in South Africa, also played its part and is the subject of investigation here.

The research question posed in this article is what was the qualitative nature of *Time's* commentary on the attacks and critical issues related to them. After all, it is firstly the quality and not the quantity of coverage that should concern media critics.

In this vein and more specifically, *Time's* commentary on the attacks and on the divide between the American administration and the Al-Qaeda network (personified by President George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden respectively) is structurally analysed by focusing on binary oppositions in the texts and relating them to a governing cultural code in order that one may come to an understanding of *Time's* views on the underlying conflict between the United States and followers of Bin Laden.

The article begins with a brief situational perspective on the divide between the United States and the Al-Qaeda network, and a typification of *Time*. This is followed by the framework of analysis adopted in the research. Finally, the findings and conclusions of the investigation are provided.

2. TOWARDS CLIMATE-SETTING CLARIFICATION

Mowlana (in Mowlana & Wilson, 1990:xi) points out that almost no American (or, for that matter, nobody in the West) would have credited the traditional people and leaders of Iran with the ability to inspire a large-scale revolution in 1978. Few foretold the resurgence of Islam and its consequences in the region. The Middle East has been a battlefield ever since.

On September 11, 2001 America itself was attacked by operatives from the Al-Qaeda network led by Osama bin Laden. The West and many of us here in South Africa were shocked - shocked to the bone. Perhaps shocked by the mass destruction and loss of life in New York City and at the Pentagon, but perhaps also more shocked by the very magnitude of hatred shown by Bin Laden and parts of the Islamic World (also by segments of the population in South Africa) towards the United States.

Scholarly literature almost forewarned an attack. In reading Saikal (2000) now, one is left with the impression that much of Washington's developmental policies in the Muslim

Middle East-Central Asia-North African area fuelled the September 11 carnage. The United States had come to be regarded by Islamic fundamentalists as the superpower intent on imposing its will on those forces that were dedicated to rebuilding and renewing Arab societies according to Islamic values but free of any bondage to the West.

One such influential Islamic fundamentalist opposed to the United States is Osama bin Laden, a wealthy Saudi who settled in Afghanistan in the mid-1990s. According to Saikal (2000:171ff), Bin Laden came to resent deeply what he viewed as the United States' maintenance of the Saudi regime to subjugate Islam's holiest land, and its support of Israel in enabling the Jewish state to control East Jerusalem in particular and suppress the Palestinians in general. Bin Laden's beliefs have been widely shared across the Arab world in particular, and the Muslim world in general. These beliefs have focused public discontent on both Israel and the United States to justify armed actions against them.

After following the drama that unfolded in the United States that fateful Tuesday, *Time* magazine's subsequent commentary on the attacks came into play. After all, *Time* reflects the broad thinking of American policy-makers. It is an international liberal-capitalist news magazine icon with about 80 000 weekly readers in South Africa alone (Lipson, 2002), and therefore influential in telling these readers what to think about.

Established in 1923 by Henry Luce and Briton Hadden, *Time* today has typified itself as a general interest news magazine. As Isaacson (1998:103-104) explains: "...we try to put events into context, anticipate trends, add new insights and facts, tell the behind-the-scene tales and explore the questions others forgot to ask... Although our stories often have a strong point of view, we try to make sure they are informed by open-minded reporting rather than partisan ideas... *Time*'s emphasis is on narrative storytelling as a way to put events into context... Part of the process is telling the news through the people who make it. As *Time*'s prospectus puts it: 'It is important to know what they drink. It is more important to know to what gods they pray and what kind of fights they love'".

The principles and objectives of *Time* as stated by Isaacson (1998) above are commendable - nothing wrong with them. By putting events into context, anticipating trends, adding new insights and facts, and telling behind-the-scenes tales and exploring the questions others forgot to ask, a news magazine would pave the way for dialogue to take place.

3. TIME AND THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACK: THE FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

In the research done for this article, commentary published in the viewpoint and essay columns of *Time* on the attacks on America and the divide between the American administration and the Al Qaida network were structurally analysed.

Every Africa edition of *Time* featuring the subject-matter in one way or another on the cover page for a period of six months following the September 11 (2001) carnage in the United States was specifically chosen for investigation.

The Africa edition was taken because of general availability. Focusing on those editions that featured the conflict in one way or another on the cover page is valid, since one would expect stories highlighted on the cover page of a magazine to be supplemented by commentary within. Commentary in the form of viewpoint columns and the like are of course intentionally placed by editors, and would reflect their approach to, among other matters, putting events into context and adding new insights.

A total of 26 editions appeared during the period of investigation (11 September 2001 – 11 March 2002) 18 (virtually 70 per cent) of which featured the subject matter in one way or another on the cover page and in which 23 relevant pieces of commentary appeared.

Interestingly, the attack on America was one of the rare events featured simultaneously on the cover of all six editions of *Time* – the other five editions are for the United States, Canada, Latin America, Asia and Australia. The Africa edition, jointly edited by Ann and Don Morrison, is part of the Europe and Middle East edition, although the versions differ – see Lipson (2002).

3.1 On structuralism

Structuralism or structural analysis is derived from structural linguistics, the basis of which was laid by Ferdinand de Saussure in the late 19th century (cf. Berger, 1982:14-43). Since the 1960s it has been used extensively as a method for analysing the meaning of messages (Woollacott, 1982:92).

By employing structural analysis to mass communication research, one is primarily interested in the meaning of media messages and the universe that they constitute.

Structuralism is basically an immanent analysis, which concentrates purely on the internal structuring of a whole text and the relationships between the elements within

the text. In determining the relations between elements in a given media text, one applies the principle of binarism (Barthes, 1979:80-82; Roelofse, 1982:84-85). Binary oppositions are created. For example, before something can become a symbol of evil, it has to be associated with something good - the exact opposite of evil.

Once the immanent analysis has been done, a second stage of analysis is necessary to uncover, for example, ideological motivation or hidden meanings in the mass media being studied. As Burgelin (1972:317) points out in a definitive chapter on the subject matter, this could be done by integrating the immanent analysis of the contents of the mass media into a general analysis of the culture under consideration.

The main purposes of the whole process are to uncover the cultural code governing the meaning of media messages, and to discover how the product (for example, news column) fits into the totality of the cultural universe of the mass media institution (or the consuming public for that matter). The cultural code is the system of signs governing the values, activities and products of a human group through which it responds to its conditions of existence.

The very act of interpreting a text (which is, of course, part and parcel of this research process) will always remain problematic. It would seem safe to say that the reader or researcher:

- Interpret, as a unique individual the text within the context of his own personal circumstances and attitudes;
- draw on his own existing factual knowledge about the subject matter;
- group together all the different aspects of the text to form the consistency of which he will always be in search;
- in seeking consistency within a text, open himself up to the meanings of the text, and may thus leave behind his own preconceptions about the subject matter; and
- have to make a decision about the meaning of a text from several possible and differing interpretations (cf. Iser, 1974:274-294 in this regard).

Subjectivity on the part of the researcher is also minimized. However, one should take into account that news items are written and/or aired within the confines of the established "news frame" (the politico-ideological, socio-economic and administrative boundaries within which the principles of journalistic practice are exercised at media institutions) - cf. Tuchman (1978). So, for example, Time itself has admitted through the Morrisons that a United States focus predominates in its "news frame" (Lipson, 2002).

4. FINDINGS

Commentary in the September editions of *Time* following the attacks was typified by pointed binary oppositions. Those highlighted were that:

- The United States represented the civilised world, and Al-Qaeda the uncivilised world.
- The strong and united (United States) could sometimes be hurt by the weak (Islamic fundamentalists like Osama bin Laden).
- The United States embodied the power and glory of globalisation whereas the attackers represented traditionalism. With globalisation, Westernisation is the major lifestyle; capitalism is the major economic system; English is the major language; and tourism is the major industry – all a threat to Pan-Islamic schemers like Bin Laden.
- The United States stood for the good in the world and Osama’s followers for evil.
- The United States and its Western allies provide democracy and freedom while Islamic fundamentalists provide a twisted ideology and bondage.

Commentary in the October 1 edition takes an opposite line. It differentiates between a Liberal Muslim and a Fundamentalist (fanatic) Muslim. In pieces entitled “Being the enemy within” and “The True, peaceful face of Islam” the idea is put forward that a new understanding between the United States and the Islamic World is essential. A rush to mutual demonisation must be avoided. There are good, peaceful Muslims and violent, evil Muslims such as Bin Laden. The US needs a deeper understanding of the causes of anti-American feeling among so many in the world. Globalisation is seen by millions as yet another system that enriches the privileged and entraps the powerless. This is not simple envy but genuine outrage about equality. Americans and other Westerners have not shown concern for ordinary suffering Muslims around the world.

A week later in “The case against evidence”, pressure groups who first want conclusive proof that Bin Laden was behind the attacks on the United States were branded anti-Americanist, and those who followed Bush’s lead, Americanist. The critical issue of whether America’s foreign policy was the root cause of September 11 was commented on in the October 15 edition. Here, binary oppositions were also at play. The United States was typified as democratic and modern in contrast to the authoritarian and often tribal Arab world, which did not understand that everything couldn’t always be America’s fault.

In the ensuing editions that commented on the divide between the American administration and the Al-Qaeda network, the following binary oppositions were employed predominantly:

- While Al-Qaeda stood for the chaos of terrorism, the United States embodied a sense of order.
- Reason and hence rational thought were held high in the United States, whereas Bin Laden and his followers were irrational.
- Despite Al-Qaeda's pronouncements to the contrary, the United States had protected Muslims. It liberated Kuwait in the Gulf War and safeguarded Saudi Arabia from Iraqi invasion. The United States also ended the genocidal killing of Muslims in Bosnia and Kosovo. It also underwrites Egyptian military and economic security with two billion dollars a year.
- The Western (American) press is good while the Islamic press is bad in that it spins a world view in which the United States and Israel conspire to undo Muslims the world over.
- The United States, which is democratic, believes in the future, while Islamic fundamentalists are repressive and believe in the past.
- Pilots from hell attacked the (heavenly) United States.
- Muslims must adopt Western tastes and styles while respecting Islamic principles.
- Israel, which the United States supports, stood for peace in the Middle East whereas the Palestinians, supported by Al-Qaeda, were only interested in war.

The cultural code in *Time*'s commentary on the September 11 attacks and thereafter was quite clear: the United States and the Western World were the beacons of democracy and freedom while Islam (more specifically Muslim fundamentalists) represented authoritarianism, repression and bondage.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Exactly six months after the September 11 attacks, *Time*'s cover for the March 11, 2002 edition read: "CAN WE STOP THE NEXT 9/11? Inside the CIA and FBI scramble to prevent another terrorist attack".

A four-pronged strategy is outlined. Firstly, the United States must learn to spy again. Secondly, the intelligence agencies must work together and share information. Thirdly, once intelligence has been collected, analysed and shared, it must be acted on. Fourthly, possible future attackers must be hit first.

Nowhere is the value of self-criticism and permanent dialogue with Islam mentioned. And this is a major communicological problem. It is always us (the West) and them (Islam). The ideal of opening oneself up to the other is simply not on, although sooner or later all will have to live together in relative peace.

Interestingly, the idea of dialogue was also mentioned pertinently in the Christmas Eve edition last year, but was shelved thereafter. Communication between the enemies has not been on the public agenda. The clash of civilisations is on the agenda. It is essentially a clash between fundamentalists. Bush's pronouncements that everyone who is not in favour of his new war against terrorism is against him and that American democracy is the only real democracy are typical of a fundamentalist approach (Louw in Smith, 2002).

It seems a simplistic and dangerous conclusion that self-interest, power, ideology and propaganda are to reign supreme. The "purple American fury that does not leak away in a week", which *Time* spoke of in its September 11 (2001) edition seems to guide Bush's policies towards Islamic fundamentalists.

Trust is a complicating factor on both sides. Al-Qaeda caused the death of about thirty thousand innocent people in the attacks on America. Likewise, the United States caused the death of thousands of innocent Iraqi children in the Gulf War (Duke, 2001).

The fact of the matter is that much of the underdeveloped world, including parts of the Islamic world, do not buy into the liberal-capitalist approach to developmental issues, which focus on American capitalism and American technology as the world's engine of change, and tend to ignore "the dimensions of cultural relativity and displaying lack of knowledge and awareness about culture, tradition, and history" (Mowlana & Wilson, 1990:68). For them, it has essentially widened the gap between the rich and the poor, and has come to be regarded as another form of American cultural imperialism.

The (American) liberal-capitalist approach to development emphasises the role of the economic elite in development while paying particular attention to the factors of information, knowledge and technology.

Mowlana and Wilson (1990:63) suggest that the liberal/capitalist model of development is essentially made up of the following four elements:

- economic growth through industrialisation and accompanying urbanisation;
- capital-intensive technology mainly imported from the more developed nations;
- centralised planning, mainly by economists and financial experts, to guide and speed up the process of development; and the
- assertion that the causes of underdevelopment lay mainly within developing countries themselves.

Within the framework of this model, the mass media is recognised as a fundamental organising power. There is less concern about the traditional form of communication and infrastructure.

With regard to *Time*'s commentary role in the aftermath of the attacks, one can conclude that it was an able and willing partner of the United States administration in predominantly naming the world along American lines, and attempting through words to impose the named world on adversaries. It appears that if the United States were to be regarded as one huge multinational corporation, *Time* would be an able and loyal subsidiary.

This is not a radical statement. Western editors and correspondents have been accused of failing to decide which will come first in the media's coverage of the September 11 attacks: America or journalism.

Personal attacks on journalists questioning the roots of 9/11 soon followed. As Robert Fisk, the Middle East correspondent for the London Independent, says: "I am not really sure what anti-Americanism is. But criticising the United States is now to be the moral equivalent of Jew-hating. It's OK to write headlines about 'Islamic terror' or, my favourite French example, 'God's madmen', but it's definitely out of bounds to ask why the United States is loathed by so many Arab Muslims in the Middle East. We can give the murderers a Muslim identity; we can finger the Middle East for the crime – but we may not suggest any reasons for the crime" (in Radebe, 2001).

This is a recipe for continued conflict and the suppression of dialogue and the equal right to name the world. It is through dialogue that participants in communication have the equal right to name the world by speaking. When one group dominates the right to use words and name the world, imposing the named world on the others, dialogue stops and one-way communication in the form of monologue or manipulation begins.

Mind-sets have to change and traditional channels of communication as well as the modern mass media have to be used. Change must proceed in full knowledge of the cultural, religious and traditional core values of the societies in play. If not, further alienation will surely follow.

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