International Journal of Communication 1 (2007), Book Review 184-187 1932-8036/2007BKR0184

Nitzan S. Ben-Shaul, **A Violent World: TV News Images of Middle Eastern Terror and War**, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006, 167 pp., $27.95 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Courtney C. Radsch
American University

The whole world watched as the two planes hit the World Trade Center on the morning of September 11, 2001. In the United States, the images of that day were replayed countless times throughout the months and years following the attacks, with the single picture of a tower on fire coming to represent the guiding ideology for the new century: terrorism. Yet as Nitzan Ben-Shaul watched the endless coverage of the suicide attacks, he was struck by the difference between what he saw on CNN versus Israeli television, and the near absence of coverage on Palestinian television. These observations planted the seed for his new book, *A Violent World: TV News Images of Middle Eastern Terror*, in which he analyzes how coverage of terrorism differs in these three different media systems.

Underpinning Ben-Shaul's analysis and occupying the first half of the book is a theoretical argument about the nature of the global system and the way in which global processes influence the production of news. In the first chapter he lays out the political economy of globalization — reappropriated from Wallerstein — that explains the interdependence between core elite and the dependent, exploited periphery. With the fall of the Soviet Union and the rise of post-Fordist capitalism as the dominant economic paradigm, a new superstructure has emerged that has blurred the geographic lines between core and periphery of the prior era but continues exploitive relationships through the processes and institutions of globalization. He argues that post-modernism, the inherently de-centered, dominant American ideology deriving from globalization, conceals configurations of political economic power and the dominant ideology that is embedded in television as a medium and news as a format.

The central argument of *A Violent World* is that television news encodes the dominant ideology of national elites, thus perpetuating the hegemonic status of those interpretations and the position of those elites in the global power structure. Following Gramscian notions of hegemony through the works of Stuart Hall and Robert Fiske, Ben-Shaul argues that elite interests, presented as universally beneficial, are encoded in the audiovisual news texts, producing a dominant ideology that works to make legitimate the state apparatus. Thus, the United States can maintain global relations in which peripheral elites engage in "double talk" aimed at maintaining the autonomy of the state apparatus while enlisting the support of the superpower. This argument is not a new one for the author and there is a clear continuity with his previous work.

In arguing that television news encodes the dominant ideology of national elites, Ben-Shaul rejects both the liberal "freedom of the press" approach and what he calls its "neoliberal postmodern recouching" in which the news is indeterminate to any interpretation through multiple, open, hybrid readings. Indeed, one has only to recall the impassioned broadcasts of leading American broadcast journalists like Walter Cronkite or the field reporters who wore American flag lapel pins wore on-air to see how the ideal of objectivity is contingent and ultimately limited and thus expendable. Nor does Ben-Shaul accept the post-modern turn toward the unchecked agency of the audience. He rejects the idea that media reception can subvert the politico-economic context in which it is produced by engaging in hybrid, negotiated readings where televisual text holds no interpretive determination. Rather, he says, there can be incorrect readings that represent misunderstandings rather than resistance (p. 52). His wholesale rejection of an active audience, though, is problematic since it offers no explanation for change.

Nonetheless, the book's second half focuses on the actual content analysis of the “War on Terror” news coverage and the Al Aksa Intfada on three different networks: the American Cable News Network CNN, the Israeli Broadcasting Authorities’ Channels 1 and 2, and the Palestinian PATV. The first conflict represents a “direct core-periphery conflict” and the second, an indirect one. Both, however, are examples of the violent turn due to “rise of non-constitutional violent activism” by “subnational groups driven by religious ideologies” (1). As a professor in the film and television department of Tel Aviv University, Ben-Shaul is perfectly positioned to conduct this study and does an admirable job of maintaining a balanced, disconnected perspective on a topic that is so contentious, where the very fact of labeling an incident as terrorism is fraught with controversy.

Drawing on his background in cinema, Ben-Shaul use critical media theory and qualitative and aesthetic approaches to analyze how television news frames these particular terrorist incidents, relying heavily on images and the visual so that these pictures dominate any interpretation to drown out commentary. He acknowledges that there are significant differences between film studies and news analysis, but finds points of convergence that offer interesting insights into how the flows and format of this audiovisual medium impact framing. News, however, as a particular frame of reference that claims to represent reality, is a fundamentally different format than cinematic, oral, writing or other “modes of embedding” because of its audiovisual nature (53). Ben-Shaul makes a compelling case for studying audiovisual formats because in terrorism coverage, as a particular sub-genre of news, the primacy of the visual overwhelms the oral commentary (45). In his analysis of CNN’s coverage of the Bin Laden tapes, for example, he describes how the audiovisual content of the tapes belied the perspective presented by the reporter, a reflection of the dominant elite discourse promoted by administration officials that the U.S. faced a dangerously sophisticated global enemy.

From Ben-Shaul’s nuanced study, several interesting findings emerge about Israeli and Palestinian television news coverage. It is on these two fronts that his work makes the greatest contribution. While several studies have focused on CNN, there are far fewer that focus on the content of Israeli television news and even fewer on Palestinian; unfortunately, it feels as though the analysis of CNN outstrips the others. One of his most noteworthy findings is that Israeli television covers terrorist attacks within Israel differently from those against settlers. According to his reading, the coverage of suicide bombing attacks in Israel are frantic and chaotic, promoting the idea of the unity of Israelis across ethnic and political lines. They are framed as the work of evil Palestinians who can have no possible motive other than anti-Semitism and hate. Settlers, however, are portrayed as outsiders and any attacks against them are covered in a similar way to Palestinian attacks on military targets. This audiovisual coverage apparently “contradicts the settlers’ constant appropriation of the siege ideology to justify their messianic territorial interests.”

Two frames dominate the "violent world" portrayed in the news coverage of PATV and the two Israeli channels. The first frame works to devalue the emotional standpoint of the other side and to embed the dominant ideologies of their respective elites. On the Israeli channels, this frame depicts Israelis as besieged victims, and on PATV, it depicts a sense of heroic sacrifice. On PATV, the ideology of martyrdom (shahada), which can be traced back to radical Islamist movements, is explicitly intertwined with religious and national symbols appropriated by Arafat and the secular Palestinian Authority. The second frame is employed to garner support from the American superpower, reinforcing the exploitative nature of the core-periphery relationship even as the dependent elites attempt to maintain the autonomy of their state apparatus.

Admittedly Ben-Shaul's project is to explain how and why coverage of terrorism differs across different media outlets, locating explanatory variables in huge global processes like post-Fordism and globalization. He concludes that the dominant frames support the production of a post-Fordist globalization discourse in which the ideologies of core (American) elites and dependent peripheral elites (Israeli and Palestinian) are embedded. But by focusing on the macro level, he misses the critical role that domestic political systems and professional and organizational logics play in determining the nature of news coverage indelibly influencing not only the ways in which news is covered, but the very definition of what constitutes a piece of news.

Nonetheless, *A Violent World* is a valuable contribution to critical media studies and more specifically to a better understanding of comparative international media. By broadening the concept of framing to include the ways audiovisual choices in news coverage provoke certain responses, Ben-Shaul points out the way for further research not only of television framing, but of other multimedia platforms like the Internet. By exploring the complex interconnection of national and transnational news frames and the way they are intertwined with very local sensibilities and huge global contexts, Ben-Shaul makes valuable theoretical connections between the political economy and the aesthetics of media.

References

Appadurai, Arjun. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, *Public Worlds; V. 1*. Minneapolis, Minn.: University of Minnesota Press, 1996.

Bae, H. S. "Product Differentiation in National Tv Newscasts: A Comparison of the Cable All-News Networks and the Broadcast Networks." *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 44, no. 1 (2000): 62-77.

Ben-Shaul, N. S. *Mythical Expressions of Siege in Israeli Films*: Edwin Mellen Press, 1997.

Ben-Shaul, Nitzan. "Tv News." *Third Text* 19, no. 2 (2005): 145-53.

Bourdieu, Pierre. *On Television*. New York: New Press: Distributed by W.W. Norton, 1998.

Hallin, D. C. and P. Mancini. *Comparing Media Systems: Three Models of Media and Politics*: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Johnson, R. N. "Bad News Revisited: The Portrayal of Violence, Conflict, and Suffering on Television News." *Peace and Conflict: Journal of Peace Psychology* 2, no. 3 (1996): 201–16.

Kraidy, Marwan. *Hybridity, or the Cultural Logic of Globalization*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2005.

Reynolds, A. and B. Barnett. "This Just In... How National Tv News Handled the Breaking “Live” Coverage of September 11." *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 80, no. 3 (2003): 689-705.

Schudson, Michael. *The Sociology of News*, *Contemporary Societies*. New York: Norton, 2003.

Wallerstein, I. *The Modern World-System*: Academic Press New York, 1974.

Williams, Raymond. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. [Middletown, Conn.]

Hanover, N.H. Wesleyan University Press; University Press of New England, 1992.