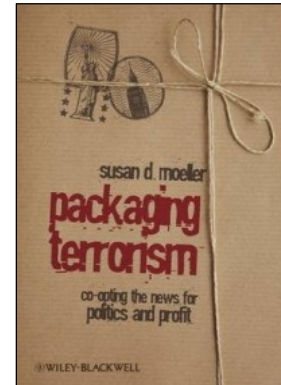


Susan D. Moeller, **Packaging Terrorism: Co-opting the News for Politics and Profit**, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009, 248 pp., \$89.95 (hardcover), \$15.56 (paperback).

Reviewed by
Fouad Touzani
Central European University

The so-called “war on terror” has always enthralled and obfuscated even those who are not interested in politics. It is in the cacophony of outrage, fear, and confusion which followed 9/11 that this abstract war was launched by the Bush administration. Moeller’s premise is *very simple* and yet very compelling. Terrorists, media, and politicians strive to sell “terrorism” by packaging it differently in an attempt to communicate their aberrant ideas and market their culpable agendas. As Moeller *simply* puts it, “It’s not the acts of terrorism that most matter in the post 9/11 world;” rather, “it’s what we are told to think about the acts of terrorism” (p. 1). Packaging terrorism in a particular manner remains these players’ most effectual way to attract the audience’s attention; to put it differently, it is the sellers’ most efficient marketing strategy to draw the consumers’ attention.



After swiftly skimming over the book’s main sections and sub-sections, one might easily notice a recurring pattern. Most of the titles and sub-titles are framed as straightforward questions — questions to which Moeller has ambitiously attempted to offer tentative answers. The central questions are: What is terrorism? How is terrorism covered? And what are the images of terror?

The first question is unquestionably a contentious one. Definitions of “terrorism” continue to proliferate, designed to meet specific needs and reflect definite ideologies. For example, a relatively hackneyed study conducted by the U.S. Army in 1988 revealed that more than 100 definitions of the term “terrorism” have been in use. Moeller wonders whether terrorism is a tactic or an ideology. Is it a crime or an act of war? Is pre-emption an acceptable method of stopping terrorism? I think that Moeller successfully provides cautious answers from various perspectives by way of overemphasizing the fact that definitions of terrorism are made up and packaged to serve political and economic ends. Moreover, the most important point in Moeller’s account is that such questions should still be asked and debated, despite the fact that there is no agreed-upon definition of terrorism. On the other hand, Moeller fails to link the approach of packaging terrorism to the image of the U.S. in the Muslim world, especially when Islam is explicitly or implicitly linked to terrorism. If packaging terrorism in an Islamic disguise post-9/11 results in convincing Americans of the preemption approach, who is to blame for the anti-American sentiments that sprouted in the Muslim World after the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, which were part of the “war on terror”? Such sentiments were often translated in terrorists’ attacks on U.S. interests in many Muslim countries. To put it differently, while Moeller, astonishingly, succeeds in outlining the political and profitable goals of the packaging approach, she says little about its negative repercussions on the image of the U.S. in Arab and Muslim countries.

"How is Terrorism Covered?", the book's second main question and the longest section, deals with the ways the media package the U.S. "War on Terror," especially in Iraq. She argues that the U.S. media supported Bush's agenda through framing the *war* as a struggle for a global "democracy" and by emphasizing the importance of this war for politicians and policy-makers, rather than highlighting death and destruction. It is puzzling how the U.S. media and the U.S. government can frame an essentially complicated issue using poetic language, such as "spreading democracy" or "finding" the never-found WMDs in Iraq. This reductionism in approaching terrorism was well described by Moeller; however, she says little about the importance of the Arab media's role, especially that of Arab transnational broadcasters, such as Al-Jazeera, in offering a different frame for the "war on terror." This different frame humanizes and personalizes the victims in Iraq rather than providing mere statistics on the numbers of deaths and casualties. Furthermore, if the purpose of the U.S. government and media is to co-opt the news for politics and profit, what, then, would be the goal of the Arab media? A clear answer to such a question would have added more depth to Moeller's thorough analysis. In sum, while Moeller's U.S. case seems compelling, it is unclear whether her argument can be generalized to the Arab media.

The third section in the book attempts to answer the following question: What are the images of terror? This section examines the ethical controversy over the explicit visual coverage of 9/11 victims; the beheadings, such as that of Daniel Pearl; and the images of burnt bodies, such as that of Ismael Abbas, the 12-year-old Iraqi boy. Moeller also revisited the story of Jessica Lynch, the fake American heroine. Lynch's case not only provides remarkable insight into the real influence of Hollywood producers on the Pentagon's media managers, but it also serves as a prototype for the way America hopes to portray its future wars on terror. Furthermore, Moeller ventures into comparing and contrasting the U.S. and Arab TV networks' coverage of the war in Iraq. She broadly categorizes the way the war was framed into "war of liberation" versus "war of occupation." While Moeller's comparison remains helpful in understanding the broad difference between the Arab and U.S. media in terms of framing the war in Iraq, the Arab media cannot be considered as a homogenous entity. A quick skim over different Arab media outlets reveals some striking differences in framing issues related to the war in Iraq. For example, some Arab TV networks refer to victims in Iraq as martyrs, while other networks consider them as mere victims.

As far as the methodology is concerned, the use of content and discourse analyses remains typical for media and communication studies; in fact, Moeller makes an efficient use of this method to support her arguments. She states that "the media made appalling errors in covering terrorism" after 2001 (p. 186). She further attributes these errors to an increasingly concentrated media ownership, which, as Moeller argues, limits the public debate. In so saying, Moeller questions the role of the U.S. media as the fourth estate and its ability to uphold an informed and open society. In addition, Moeller demonstrates a keen understanding of journalistic norms, such as sourcing, news values, editorial concerns, deadlines, corporate profit, and media ownership. She displays a knack for quoting and referencing print and visual material, as well as institutional guidelines on journalistic ethics. However, one might be skeptical about Moeller's selective references. In other words, although Moeller succeeds in selling her arguments by using different materials and quoting various sources, one might be skeptical about the selection of these sources and whether they were singled out to support a particular argument, resulting in a selection bias.

All in all, the book is well-written, very informative, and engagingly convincing. Moeller develops a compelling argument on how politicians and media corporations package terrorism to attain political and economic ends. Moeller's argument can be summarized in three words: "Terrorism is theatre," the famed aphorism coined by Brian Michael Jenkins of the RAND Corporation. Moeller's book can resonate with various kinds of readers. In fact, many readers might find the book to be one of the best analyses of the media's coverage of terror.