



## 9-11

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**It should not be a mystery** to readers of this journal that White House spokesman Ari Fleischer told Americans to “watch what they say” instead of “don’t watch Bill Maher” after the infotainment talk show host questioned White House hyperbole. One of the first casualties in the television war on terrorism was free inquiry on the news and public affairs programs on the major U.S. networks. When the canary in the informational coal mine is Bill Maher, however, you know Fleischer’s warning is more than a call for judicious journalism. After all, the White House spokesman did not go after Susan Sontag, who echoed Maher’s remarks in a *New Yorker* article. Television news and public affairs programming, even the quasi-comedic formats, are the primary means for U.S. residents to know the world (truly sorry, Susan).

Although decades of downsizing international news operations in the five networks should have produced the strategic silences desired by the Bush administration, the dialectics of commercialization worked instead to increase the demand for sensational imagery, including an unedited statement by Osama bin Laden that all the networks greedily rushed to buy from the Qatar-based Al Jazeera satellite news (which was reportedly charging U.S.\$20,000 per minute to the U.S. networks for use of its exclusive reporting from Afghanistan). The ratings soared for news as ad time diminished. In an effort to banish *all* dissenting opinion from the airwaves, Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, brought the White House agenda directly to executives at ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, and Fox. Do not show “inflammatory” messages from bin Laden or the Al Qaeda group again, she told them. They agreed. Monitoring the effect of White House

pressure on the corporate media, Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (2001a) found that the television networks had “apparently acceded” to the White House agenda. “In deciding what to air,” said CNN’s official response, “CNN will consider guidance from the appropriate authorities.” Rupert Murdoch added that News Corp. would do “whatever is our patriotic duty”—although he did not say to which of his nations his duty belonged. In contrast to the networks, a similar request from Fleischer to major newspapers was greeted with some resistance, notably by the *New York Times*.

The Bush administration’s key claim—that a military attack on Afghanistan was central to punishing the guilty and to the defeat of terrorism—is, even within its own terms of reference, open to a barrage of questions. Why no military attacks on the other countries in which Al Qaeda operates, but whose governments are closer to Washington’s? How effective is an aggressive military response in reducing (rather than increasing) terrorist activity? Why does the Bush administration continue to oppose global treaties that might facilitate a “war on terrorism”? What role does the U.S. government’s support for various undemocratic and repressive regimes play in fostering anti-American sentiment? And yet the U.S. news media have, by and large, not only accepted the view that to ask such questions is unpatriotic, they have solidified that view.

Hollywood, too, aggressively promulgated the White House agenda—and with good reason. Within hours after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, Disney theme parks in California and Florida were shut down. A few days later, U.S. attorney general John Ashcroft told Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) president Jack Valenti to gather studio bosses for an emergency meeting with the FBI, who warned that Hollywood would be targeted for future attacks. With typical contempt for history, Hollywood marketers rushed to the press with news that heightened security was needed because religious fundamentalists wanted to eliminate a symbol of decadent civilization, or as lapsed libertine Michael Douglas gushed, “Our Western culture is part of what these terrorists want to target and destroy.”

In November 2001, White House political adviser Karl Rove and Bush media adviser Mark McKinnon met with the heads of Viacom, Disney, MGM, Fox, Warner Bros., and Paramount, whose chairman, Sherry Lansing, cohosted a gathering that also included representatives from the television and film actors, directors, and writers guilds. This was an intelligence briefing designed to bring the Hollywood power elite up to date on the White House’s war aims and talk of ways to retrofit the screen machine for more explicit propaganda purposes. MPAA head Jack Valenti coorganized this meeting, which he rather baroquely described as “quite affectionate to behold” and played dumb about the outcome: “I will say again, there was

no mention of content." Lansing put it slightly more honestly: "We have taken the wonderful ideas that Mr. Rove has said, which have nothing to do with content." Ideas without content. This is, after all, the work of George W. Bush's top political adviser (Calvo 2001).

This is a dangerous situation for independent inquiry. Although Hollywood will not admit it, the television networks have talked about how they have been asked to censor content not welcome by the White House and the Defense Department. In addition to network/Washington disquiet with Al Jazeera broadcasts, executives at CNN and Fox have also issued warnings to their reporters about showing civilian casualties of war. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (2001b) suggested that the absence of images of dead or wounded civilians on CNN adds credence to the Pentagon's "repeatedly stressed" claim "that it is trying to minimize" civilian deaths in Afghanistan. On Fox, Brit Hume wondered whether civilian casualties should "be as big news as they've been." And Fox's Michael Barone said civilian deaths are not news but side effects that merely "accompany wars" ("Civilian Casualties Not News"). On November 12, in a deadly effort to silence news from the war zone, the Pentagon fired a missile at Al Jazeera's Kabul office, destroying one of the locations from which images of maimed Afghan children were being broadcast to the world; other U.S. missiles damaged the Kabul offices of the Associated Press and the BBC (Malik 2001).

The Pentagon has ensured that the informational void it created will be filled with its message alone. Before bombing began, it had already hired a public relations firm called Rendon to "make sure," as Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld put it, "that people are not confused as to what this is about" (quoted in Solomon 2001). Rendon's clients have included the CIA, for which it did media campaigns for the anti-Saddam Iraqi National Congress, the Kuwaiti government and oil interests, Monsanto Chemical Company, and trade groups in the United States, Bulgaria, Uzbekistan, and Russia. Its job for the Defense Department this time is to generate a public relations spin on the U.S. war in Afghanistan and distribute it to media outlets in 79 countries (Solomon 2001).

Corporate media and Hollywood studio chiefs' reactions to the 9-11 crisis, along with their self-serving visions of cultural power, should not obscure the long history of links between the U.S. government and the culture industries. Commercial radio in the United States was born out of the union of interests of the U.S. Navy, which sought to nationalize a foreign-owned wireless radio system for strategic ends, and GE, AT&T, Westinghouse, and United Fruit, whose patents would increase in value if they could control the usurped British firm, American Marconi. The result was, of course, RCA, which called again on the U.S. Congress in 1927 to give commercial radio (then dominated by its two NBC networks and by its

duopolistic partner CBS) a leg up in the new broadcasting field by creating a regulatory environment that would make it nearly impossible for non-commercial operators to survive.

By 1934, commercial broadcasting had become an entrenched system, largely thanks to the parallel interests of the commercial press, lawmakers, and pro-corporate lobbies and lawyers who fought to marginalize educators and other promoters of noncommercial radio. The leadership at NBC, CBS, and ABC (created from one NBC network as a concession to anti-trust forces in the government) has sustained a "go along to get along" attitude toward the government ever since: supporting U.S. propaganda efforts during World War II, conforming to House Un-American Activities Committee investigations and McCarthyism, standing by in the 1950s while the Dulles brothers turned staged pseudo-events into the sine qua non of political reporting on bloody U.S. foreign policy, shutting their lenses to the realities of Vietnam until a divided Congress and U.S. public opinion turned against the war, allowing Reagan's PR presidency to further elevate image over substance, and finally allowing the Pentagon to have absolute control of the flow of information during the Panama invasion and the Gulf War. All the while they were pushing for profit-driven entertainment to overtake the schedule, budgets, and eventually content of the news. At least in the Gulf War a few chosen news reporters were allowed into the U.S. media pools; in Afghanistan, there are no pools. As MacArthur (2001) argued, the current White House information policy is not really remarkable, "given that all governments lie in wartime and all governments try to stem the flow of bad news." We expect this to some degree in times of crisis. "What is remarkable," says MacArthur, "is the passivity of the U.S. media." As we see it, this passivity is a chronic condition induced by the political-economic pas de deux of corporate media and government.

This passivity is cemented by a news culture reliant upon government sources for its foreign news. What has distinguished the BBC news from CNN is not the line that comes from their respective governments (which stood "shoulder to shoulder" throughout) but the comparative diversity of voices informing the BBC's coverage and the lack of perspective on CNN. The BBC's attempt to report a range of Muslim opinion within and outside the United Kingdom is in stark contrast to CNN and the other U.S. news networks, for whom diversity means doing the rounds of the State Department, the White House, the Pentagon, and Washington-based think tanks. For those Americans watching, it is hardly surprising if the world is unintelligible when their world view is so remorselessly limited.

Likewise for Hollywood. Hollywood has never been a laissez-faire industry that waits until exceptional times to fall into the embrace of Washington's policies. Like the corporate broadcasters, Hollywood is dependent on all levels of government aid all the time, not just when U.S. foreign

policy needs propaganda films, or the FBI and CIA need a public relations campaign. The U.S. market is truly a protectionist's paradise. Decades of tax credit schemes, State and Commerce Department industry defense, Small Business Administration loans to support independents, and oligopolistic practices in domestic buying keep the U.S. film market closed to foreign competition, and in turn help foster the U.S. audience's woeful ignorance of the world they live in. Moreover, the United States has a vast array of state, regional, and city film commissions (at least 205) offering hidden subsidies to the film industry (e.g., local tax breaks, free police services, annexed public thoroughfares). By comparison, little evidence exists (beyond Hollywood's propaganda and the work of gullible academics and journalists) that Americans' popular taste causes the closure of U.S. borders to imports. As *Canadian Business* magazine archly, and with a deeply endearing hypocrisy, put it, these are the fortunes of "Hollywood's Welfare Bums."

Federal and local government largesse means more than a hefty handout in the domestic market, since Hollywood's global presence depends on Washington's ability to implement and enforce its foreign policy. Recent protests by Indonesian filmmakers against Hollywood that drew the support of their government saw Washington threaten retaliation against Indonesia via a vast array of industrial sanctions, and the United States pressured South Korea to drop its screen quotas as part of 1998-99 negotiations on a bilateral investment treaty. Copyright limitations and aggressive U.S. sanctions through intellectual property trade laws prevent the free flow of information, and foreign funds have been raised at different points in history through overseas tax shelters and the Informational Media Guaranty Program's currency assistance.

These examples are merely part of a long list of unnatural advantages that the U.S. government has given Hollywood: the U.S. Congress has condoned overseas trusts that are illegal domestically but are needed globally to protect Hollywood's international distribution cartel—the Motion Picture Export Association (MPA), the setter of export prices and terms of trade. The MPA called itself "the little State Department" in the 1940s, so isomorphic were its methods and ideology with U.S. policy and politics. One producer, Walter Wanger, trumpeted meshing "Donald Duck and diplomacy" as "a Marshall Plan for ideas" that meant the state needed Hollywood "more than the H bomb." Exporters have been aware since 1912 that demand was created for other U.S. goods wherever Hollywood films traveled. Commerce Secretary Herbert Hoover praised the industry in the 1920s for putting forward "intellectual ideas and national ideals" for its trade earnings and for being "a powerful influence in behalf of American goods." Then-MPAA head Will Hays, who helped Hoover deal with recalcitrant foreign powers, said at the time that "every foot of American film sells \$1.00 worth of manufactured products some place in the world"

(Miller et al. 2001). So there is great continuity in the links between the U.S. government and its cultural allies. In late 2001, it was clear to one and all that the "Washwood" alliance was in harness once more, this time to counteract terrorist bombs rather than trade barriers.

To conclude: in tracking events in the aftermath of the World Trade Center attacks of September 11 until the fall of Kabul, we have identified six casualties of war in the media sphere. Independent inquiry was the first under threat, already rendered vulnerable by a century of interlocked interests of government, news and media corporations, and Hollywood. The chill on independent inquiry has caused corresponding damage in five other areas of vital national interest: public knowledge of war conditions in Afghanistan, the threat of anti-terrorist laws to harm civil liberties, the invitation to war profiteering in U.S. economic stimulus laws, the use of polls in the propaganda effort, and the mangling of history.

Several days after the attack of 9-11, the U.S. government began to articulate a series of emergency measures to ensure swift criminal investigation that would reveal ongoing plans for further terrorist attacks in the United States. In a parallel effort, emergency legislation for economic recovery was initiated. In both areas, the corporate media mostly accepted without question the official description of these efforts as necessitated by the war on terrorism. With limited freedoms in the main informational resources in the United States, it has become harder to find information on the potential harm of emergency legislation for economic recovery and the fight against terrorism. War profiteering has thereby slid below the radar of American television news, as has a vast extension of surveillance and policing powers. Public knowledge of the conditions of war in Afghanistan has also been directly affected by these official pressures, as news organizations ill equipped to report international events comply with White House demands to cease coverage of any casualties, including Afghan civilians and U.S. and British ground troops. The use of polls has been a significant part of the media coverage, and while always susceptible to misuse and abuse have had an unusually powerful role to play in the propaganda war.

Finally, historical knowledge has been damaged, not only by the imaginary story of an independent media and laissez-faire Hollywood coming to the aid of the U.S. government but also in the manner in which the media have used history to frame the events of 9-11 and the war on Afghanistan. The expert analysis of secret codes in Al Jazeera tapes of bin Laden, for instance, turned again and again to a fractured version of history that Americans were never taught in school or on television: Islam is already *in* Western civilization—in mathematics, science, philosophy, medicine, and so on—and the United States is already *in* Islam—in wars training the Mujahadeen and the Iraqi secret service, decades-long military and political relationships with the Saudi royals, and so on. In place of these missing

histories, we are invited to recall World War II and memories of the good fight, reruns of old war movies, and even one fantasy pro-war Vietnam film, *Green Berets*, which is now playing on the Turner Broadcasting System (AOL-TimeWarner). We hope these essays help readers puzzle through these dilemmas.

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