

Sample Essay #4

Raymond Bonner, Robert McChesney and Marwan Kraidy, offer their interpretations on the significance of digital communication, specifically within the context of tragedies and political motives.

In the reading titled, *The Media and 9/11: How We Did*, Bonner critiques journalistic coverage of the post-9/11 attacks, stating that “journalists were swept up in the national feelings of fear and outrage -- and failed to do their job.” Bonner’s accusation is bold to say the least, considering that 9/11 was a devastating and catastrophic event that claimed the lives of almost 3,000 people. One can understand why reporters wavered between professionalism and strong emotions given the circumstances. However, Bonner continues his criticism, arguing that the press heavily exaggerated public sentiment on consecutive 9/11 anniversaries by “spewing forth endless retrospectives.”

Bonner believes that the media isn’t exempt from professional accountability and that journalists need to evaluate their post-9/11 reporting. He cites media coverage from the Cold War as a precedent to journalists’ current shortcomings, arguing that the politician-generated communist hysteria was propagated through journalists that didn’t want to be branded as anti-American. Bonner believes that it’s important to have periods of reflection because it can later lead to a change in journalistic practices. He wants the media to stop providing the federal government with a platform to push its propaganda. Not long after 9/11, the media was aiding and abetting the Bush administration’s military tactics by applying euphemisms to the term “waterboarding torture,” and refusing to conduct any investigative reporting on civil liberties. Bonner adopts a patronizing tone, reminding that the media must be the purveyor of truth and provide additional checks and balances on the government’s power. He acknowledges the media’s patriotic sentiment given the tone of 9/11, but argues that it shouldn’t impede objectivity, it is till one’s duty to provide the facts, and ask the tough questions to those in control.

Depending on the stressful nature of the event, do journalists have an ethical obligation to report on that situation from a moral standpoint first? Journalists have been accused of being too detached when reporting on tragic events because of the level of professionalism they have to maintain. Although Bonner’s criticism is understandable, journalists have to find a way to navigate between compassion and credibility (depending on the event) in order to achieve successful reporting. Frankly speaking, objectivity simply doesn’t exist.

Meanwhile, McChesney’s criticism of the mainstream media’s post-9/11 coverage is harsher. McChesney is not a reporter, so his analysis offers a different perspective on the media’s 9/11 coverage, almost to the point where he seems like dissatisfied audience member. In his article, *September 11 and the Structural Limitations of Us Journalism*, he states, “September 11 may be changing a lot of things about our world, but with regard to journalism it has merely highlighted the anti-democratic tendencies already in existence” (p. 102). McChesney reveals that his distaste for the mainstream media was in place before the 9/11 attacks, and the tragedy merely

confirmed his attitudes. He implies that the media is advocating for the role as the 4th estate by instilling more checks and balances on power. However, he argues that the mainstream media has establishment bias due to their failure to ask more intrusive questions about the government's post-9/11 militaristic approach.

McChesney details the archaic model that journalists have been using for over a century, which is using the elites as credible sources. He implies that journalists regurgitate elitist statements and incorporate them into their stories without further investigation. Meanwhile, the people in power are serving their own political interests. This is true to an extent, but I believe the media has become more skeptical of this elitist agenda, especially after the election of President Donald Trump. Reporters now invite political analysts to speak on the Trump Administration's tactics, and uncover the ulterior motive behind his policies.

McChesney's primary focus is on the media's bias when covering the government's response to 9/11. He exposes the weakness of the U.S media as being propagandistic on the subject of war coverage in Afghanistan and argues that in the scope of international politics, the phrase of "official sources is interchangeable with elites" (p. 108). He says, "in a case like the current war on terrorists, where the elites and official sources are unified on the core issues, the nature of our press coverage is uncomfortably close to that found in authoritarian societies with limited formal press freedom" (p. 108). McChesney's arguments are valid, the mainstream media is privatized, engaged in lobbying and has corporate interests of their own. They also advocate first amendment principles despite embedding other factors into their coverage.

The important piece McChesney is missing though, is the role that social media has played in allowing the public to have some discernment between what is fact, and what is inherent bias in the mainstream media. Social media specifically, has become a platform for unfiltered democracy, something that authoritarian governments still lack. The vast communication between American citizens has allowed for a public outcry in the face of propaganda and injustice. Despite McChesney's assumptions that Americans are "entirely ignorant of global politics" and are "educated primarily by Hollywood movies featuring Arnold Schwarzenegger" (p. 104). Americans who regularly use social media are allowed to have open discussions about the content displayed online, offering their personal thoughts and opinions without the interference of the mainstream media. Technology provides a faster and more accessible way to get news, with the digital content typically being uncensored. A vast majority of the public also relies on sites such as YouTube, to provide educational materials that students fail to learn from the media or schools. For instance, people now believe that 9/11 was a conspiracy perpetuated by the Bush administration as a justification for going to war, similar to what McChesney states in his article.

The rapid popularity of social media has shaken the core foundations of mainstream media, leading them to adopt new journalistic practices. One could argue that the mainstream media has benefited from social media. Outlets like CNN, The New York Times, and ABC, have created their own social media accounts to further connections with their audience, therefore allowing them to be more candid with the American public.

Meanwhile, in *The Projectile Image: Islamic State's Digital Visual Warfare and Global Networked Affect*, Kraidy discusses the role of strategic communications in Islamic extremist groups. Terrorists have weaponized the capitalist model of western media to achieve their own political aims. Kraidy coined the term 'image warfare' to mean "the means of images deployed to shock and traumatize the enemy, images meant to appeal and demoralize, images designed to replicate themselves endlessly and to infect the collective imaginary of global populations" (p. 1195). In other words, Islamic extremist groups are capitalizing off of their infamy to facilitate a message. One could say that they are copying Bernays P.R strategy by encapsulating emotion into widely circulated products, that product being digital content. Kraidy says that there is a "systematically applied policy" (p. 1195) to the extremist groups' production of these digital images. The disturbingly graphic nature of the images serves as a form of "shock value" entertainment to grab the attention of the viewer.

Extremists organizations are emulating the western capitalist media structure by installing multiple "media outlets" in various locations (p. 1202). They use different shots and angles when filming their victim, and zooming in and out during the right moments to capture the fear on the captive's face. They also watermark their content as a form of branding their videos for professional use, similar to what traditional media outlets do. I found it ironic how during the execution of the pilot, they blurred out the nude parts of the victim, but they didn't censor the actual execution, which is more appalling and graphic.

I find the media strategies of the extremist groups to be equally fascinating and terrifying. Terrorists are manipulating consumerist culture for their own benefit, which also serves as a proverbial form of warfare. Kraidy states, "communications capitalism relies on networks that generate and amplify enjoyment, IS image-warfare exacts harm and generates terrorism as a blend of fear and anxiety" (p. 1205) similar to a consumer digital society, extremists want to offer the viewer an embodied experience so they too, feel the terror and pain. Kraidy mentions how the September 11th attacks illustrates the ability of "terrorist groups to create iconic global visuals like the collapsing twin towers" (p. 1196). The phenomenon of using image warfare continued into the 2003 Gulf War, where states and media corporations were unable to control these disturbing images or their circulation, at least not on a global scale.

The use of digital images as a form of global warfare reveals the dark side of technology. While social media allows the rapid dissemination of information, it can also allow for extremists' groups to distribute their content on a global scale. Due to the vastness of the internet, it's also easy for the content to become elusive, in order to prevent immediate removal. The operative nature of the digital images can be seen as a decisive military tactic. Extremist groups are playing the game by adopting the same capitalistic principles America embodies, and using them to promote their own propaganda. The concept of digital warfare allows one to reflect on the impact of the consumerist culture we live in and what the checks and balances should be on monitoring digital content.