



Communication AND political crisis

Media, Politics
and Governance
in a Globalized
Public Sphere

BRIAN McNAIR

Communication and Political Crisis explores the role of the global media in a period of intensifying geopolitical conflict. Through case studies drawn from domestic and international political crises such as the conflicts in the Middle East and Ukraine, leading media scholar Brian McNair argues that the digitized, globalized public sphere now confronted by all political actors has produced new opportunities for social progress and democratic reform, as well as new channels for state propaganda and terrorist spectacles such as those performed by the Islamic State and Al Qaeda. In this major work, McNair argues that the role of digital communication will be crucial in determining the outcome of pressing global issues such as the future of feminism and gay rights, freedom of speech and media, and democracy itself.



Brian McNair (Ph.D., University of Glasgow) is Professor of Journalism, Media and Communication at Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia. He is the author of twelve previous books, including *Journalism and Democracy* (2000) and *An Introduction to Political Communication* (5th edition, 2011). His books have been translated into fourteen languages, including Russian, Spanish, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese.

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Communication and Political Crisis



Simon Cottle
General Editor

Vol. 16

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the highest quality standards for content and production.



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PREFACE

No book is ever entirely finished, and from this distance my 2006 study of *Cultural Chaos* seems more like the beginning of a project than its end. Much of what was written there was necessarily speculative and hypothetical, making connections between media control and power—rooted not in hard data but instead in what I presented as reasonable inference, given the methodological complexity of studying media effects and impacts. This book resumes the discussion, with the benefit of a decade's observation of global political communication and its relationship to the crises which have unfolded over that period in Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Africa and the Americas. There are no 'proofs' of direct media impacts on the conduct and evolution of global politics in the following pages, because causation is, for practical purposes within a chaos paradigm, impossible to isolate from the broader environment within which the communication process unfolds. I hope, however, to have marshaled in the following pages enough evidence to substantiate the thesis that more communication—globalized, digitized, networked communication—in circulation around the world reinforces the tendencies towards global democratization seen since the late twentieth century.

I also hope to have presented a case that these same trends and tendencies permit us to imagine a future for the human race in the decades ahead that is

more optimistic and progressive than the media's more dramatic representations and narratives of present-day conflict and looming environmental collapse suggest. If, to again employ a metaphor I found helpful in *Cultural Chaos*, the world in both its natural and social dimensions appears gripped by stormy weather and turbulence, the underlying direction of evolutionary change is not without grounds for optimism and hope for bluer, calmer skies ahead.

I am grateful to Simon Cottle and Mary Savigar at Peter Lang Publishing for their patience in waiting for this book. The research and writing were unavoidably delayed by a move from the United Kingdom to Queensland University of Technology in Australia and a subsequent period of departmental headship. Even though the extra time has allowed, I believe, for a richer and more timely text, given the many political crises now afflicting the globe, I am grateful to Simon and Mary for allowing the project to proceed at its own pace and never making me feel under pressure to deliver.

I would also like to acknowledge the support offered by my colleagues in the Creative Industries Faculty at QUT. When John Hartley urged me to accept the Chair in Journalism, Media & Communication there, he assured me that I would not regret moving to QUT's 'high-performance culture'. He was right about that. I have been inspired by the intellectual environment in Brisbane and the collegiality I have found there. I trust that this book is up to the high standards set by my QUT colleagues.

Brian McNair

Brisbane, April 2016

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PART I
TRENDS AND THEORIES

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Cultural Chaos, written in the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist *spectacular*, was inspired by that event's visceral demonstration of two phenomena which, if not unique to the digital age, have been dramatically enhanced by it. First, the events of September 11 2001 demonstrated the capacity of marginal political actors with an understanding of how media images work on the political environment to seize control of the global news agenda by *asymmetrical* means¹ and thereby to publicly challenge dominant or elite ideological frameworks in unprecedentedly direct ways (Freedman, 2014).

Second, 9/11 showed the capacity of the emerging globalized public sphere (GPS) to disseminate those images and the subversive messages they seek to communicate instantaneously (or as near as makes no difference) to the entire world. Through internet, satellite and cable TV channels, the attacks were witnessed live as they happened by hundreds of millions, if not billions, of people. For this author in Australia it was late in the evening when the attacks began; in the UK it was early afternoon, and in the Middle East early evening. But thanks to the erosion of *time-space distantiation* facilitated by the technologies available for communication by 2001 (Giddens, 1986), we all watched the same event, wherever in the world we were and whatever time it was. Different types of media covered the events of 9/11 in many different ways (Zelizer and Allan, 2002), and those who watched it responded differently according to their views on the political issues Osama bin Laden claimed to be addressing. Some celebrated, most were shocked and alarmed, but all shared in that spectacular moment of terror targeted so precisely at the symbolic and corporate heart of the liberal capitalist system.

This was a mediated terrorist event of an unprecedented kind—unprecedented both in the destruction it caused on the mainland of the United States and in the scale and reach of its impact on global politics, which was to generate an immediate and intense sense of crisis in the United States and amongst its allies. As news broke of the attacks, and even before national security agencies fully understood what was happening, President George W. Bush was interrupted while visiting a school in Florida and whisked away on Air Force One, in the same manner as if nuclear warfare had just broken out (this scene, like so much of what made up the 9/11 events, was recorded on video and subject to subsequent analysis—for clues as to what the president was thinking when he heard the news and of the nature of his reaction). Vice President Dick Cheney was installed securely in a White House bunker, and US air transport came to an abrupt halt as some 10,000 civil aircraft were immediately grounded.

The economic damage inflicted by the attacks, including the immediate damage to the World Trade Center towers, the Pentagon complex in Washington, the four United Airlines aircraft and the economy more broadly in the days ahead, was estimated at hundreds of billions of dollars. As to the human casualties, more than three thousand people lost their lives that day, and hundreds of thousands more would do so in the 'war on terror' which followed once the dust had settled in downtown Manhattan. From the cost of military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq to the heightened security measures imposed on all air travellers after 9/11, it is no exaggeration to assert that trillions of dollars have been spent as a direct consequence of what Al Qaeda's suicide soldiers did that day (at a cost to themselves and their organisation estimated at around \$500,000).²

Those impacts are still resonating around the world as this book goes to press, having defined the intervening years in terms such as 'axis of evil' and 'clash of civilizations' (Huntington, 1993). Such language was contentious even in the white heat of 9/11's aftermath, but it nonetheless signalled a global political crisis of greater proportions than anything seen since the height of the cold war. The initial invasion of Afghanistan to destroy Al Qaeda's bases there and the Taliban regime which had hosted them was widely understood to be a legitimate response to 9/11, and was supported by the United Nations. The 2003 invasion of Iraq by the US in alliance with the UK and a few others to remove Saddam Hussein had no such support, ending the brief period of international solidarity with the US which the 9/11 attacks had brought forth.

The war in Iraq subsequently came to be seen as a grave error from which Bush's successor in office, Barack Obama, withdrew, though not before huge casualties were inflicted on mainly civilian Iraqis. The reputations and public opinion ratings of key US allies such as Tony Blair were irretrievably damaged by their role in the intervention, which generated an ongoing domestic political crisis for the UK's New Labour government (see chapter four).

That crisis emerged chaotically. Beginning as a war of prevention and liberation, or at least neutralization of an enemy and source of instability for the region, Operation Iraqi Freedom evolved into a morass of sectarian civil warfare which rapidly engulfed the entire Middle East and much of northern Africa. Salafi Islamic fundamentalism was immeasurably stronger in 2015 than in 2001, and the complexity of the crisis had increased exponentially, networked with the communications of its myriad actors.³

The turbulence in Iraq led to an increase in sectarian violence in the region, and the rise of extremist Sunni and Shia Muslim militias who hated