

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

## Student Feature – Theory in Action: Poststructuralism and Media Representations of Terrorists

<https://www.e-ir.info/2019/09/09/student-feature-theory-in-action-poststructuralism-and-media-representations-of-terrorists/>

AISHLING MC MORROW, SEP 9 2019

**This is adapted from *International Relations Theory* (2017). Get your free copy of the textbook here.**

The media is a prime example of a site where discourses within regimes of truth are (re)produced and can be identified. How we receive information and the way that news events are presented to a society shapes how we conceptualise and react to political events. As such, if we want to observe how people have come to conceive and frame both terrorism and terrorists, the poststructuralist can analyse media accounts in order to analyse the discursive construction of these political actors and associated terrorist events. As the defining global terrorist attack of the twenty-first century, the attacks of 11 September 2001 on the United States can be used to convey how dominant discourses, instigated by governmental elites, were perpetuated and reinforced by the media. In newspaper reports – specifically, in the week after the attacks – the terrorists were presented as evil and irrational, their stated political motivations were effaced and instead terrorists were repeatedly spoken of as crazed and apolitical. The terrorists were plagued by ‘inexplicable neurosis’ and driven by ‘ethnic, superstitious and tribal madnesses’ (Toynbee 2001). Additionally, these terrorists were set apart as different from more traditional forms of terrorism that the world had previously witnessed through the highlighting of the lethality and deadliness of mass murdering transnational terrorism – a move which heightened the emotions of fear and anxiety further.

“Why are wars not being reported honestly?” John Pilger.

David Campbell explains the practice of embedded journalism.

George W. Bush Operation Iraqi Freedom Address to the Nation delivered 19 March 2003, Oval Office of the White House, Washington, D.C.

To underscore this link to death and destruction, the media narrative also consistently linked both the acts and actors of 9/11 to images and metaphors of pestilence and disease. In contrast to this, was the cultivation of the idea of ‘American innocence’ (Boswell 2001) that was ‘vulnerable to hate’ (Boyd 2001), coupled with the persistent repetition and reminder of the suffering of the victims of 9/11 and the heroism of the first responders. Interspersed with this, the widespread international outcry to the attacks simultaneously worked to further emphasise the immorality and inhumanity of these actors. Themes of patriotism and civility were deployed within the media to further distance the cohesive ‘us’ from the generic barbarian terrorist. The official discourse across an event, although powerful, never fully accounts for the reading of the entire situation.

*Beyond the Frame (Watching the Media): Alternative Perspectives on the War on Terrorism* by Robert Jensen

The importance of the recognition of this discourse is *not* to attempt to present these political actors – the terrorists – in a better light, but to recognise how the consistent and universal portrayal of them as evil and irrational made certain reactions and foreign policy actions more amenable and immediately cut off other methods of responding to

# Student Feature – Theory in Action: Poststructuralism and Media Representations of Terrorists

Written by Aishling Mc Morrow

these terrorist attacks. From this, poststructuralism critically questions what purpose did the construction, by both the media and the government, of a dominant discourse that posited the terrorists and the society that they belonged to as evil and barbaric serve? How did the positing of an unbridgeable chasm between the civilised society and the primeval terrorist, within this regime of truth, favour elite agendas? One answer has been the identification of how this 'good versus evil' construct prepared and almost rallied the American public for war. It certainly prevented the chance of dealing with these attacks through diplomacy, as the overarching discourse stated that these terrorists merely wanted to destroy the world before them. While some may support the wars in Afghanistan (2001) and Iraq (2003) that followed these attacks, the poststructuralist contribution deconstructs how this militaristic and aggressive response to 9/11 was legitimised by the discursive construction of the terrorists, the emotions that were manipulated and the divide between 'us' and 'them' that was fashioned.

The pervasion of this discourse also served to conflate the motivations and acts of these terrorists with the construction of a wider Muslim and Arab society. With the simplistic interpretation of the historical relations between the 'West' and 'East' that was encouraged in this discursive construction, the regime of truth played upon and amplified the notion of the Muslim or Arab world as backward and primordial. Within the regime of truth of the War on Terror, then, this emotive discourse was extended to every Muslim, every Arab, and, eventually, every non-Westerner.

With the passage of time, we are also able to trace the gradual disruption to and destabilising of this regime of truth. As the United States was drawn further into destructive and protracted conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq, the public opinion that had supported intervention began to wane. Over time, the discursive construction of terrorists by the media was not strong enough to override the concurrent media accounts of large numbers of casualties resulting from the intervention. Along with these fatalities, as the media began to report on the abuses that were carried out, the regime of truth that had been centred on the foreign policy directives of the Bush presidency started to falter. Thus, the official discourse regarding terrorism and intervention was changing and this shift can be identified by a shift to more clandestine forms of intervention in the Middle East from 2009 onwards – watermarked by the presidency of Barack Obama. The increased use of special forces and drone strikes allowed Obama to continue to exert influence over the region without overtly declaring war – while also distancing his administration from the military intervention that defined that of his predecessor.

"Faking It: How the Media Manipulates the World into War" by James Corbett

*Discursive Tactics of Resistance against the 'War on Terror' Narrative, by Adam Hodges*

The official discourse across an event, although powerful, never fully accounts for the reading of the entire situation. While the presentation of terrorists as irrational and evil has found solid ground and the dominant perceptions of terrorism and terrorists are of an illogical and apolitical act and actor, there always will be deviation from this conceptualisation. As such, the official discourse as crafted by elites never fully accounts for or subsumes the whole of a society. For example, despite the warmongering in the wake of 9/11, there were large-scale anti-war protests by members of the public across many nations. This messy entanglement of the everyday and the elite shows that a plethora of discourses can coexist and craft the view of international relations that we are offered. From this we must recognise that elite and everyday discourses co-exist and, although one assumes a dominant position, there are still many other competing discourses at play that shape international relations and have the potential to contribute to understandings commonly seen as 'knowledge' and 'truth'.

---

## About the author:

**Aishling Mc Morrow** is a Lecturer in International Relations at Queen's University Belfast, UK.

## **Student Feature – Theory in Action: Poststructuralism and Media Representations of Terrorists**

Written by Aishling Mc Morrow