The Taliban Touch: Is Smashing TV Sets a Smashing Idea?

Editor

Follow this and additional works at: https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp

Part of the Mass Communication Commons, Other Political Science Commons, Other Psychology Commons, and the Terrorism Studies Commons

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol5/iss3/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.
Abstract. This article contains a commentary on a new public policy announced by the Taliban movement in Afghanistan that will proscribe televisions, videocassette recorders, videotapes, and satellite dishes among the people under its control. The commentary focuses on the potential political consequences of this policy based on psychological research on the effects of television.

According to The New York Times (July 9, 1998), the Islamic Taliban movement--specifically its Minister for the Prevention of Vice and the Promotion of Virtue--has decreed that people under its control have 15 days to get rid of their television sets. (In addition, videocassette recorders, videotapes, and satellite dishes will be proscribed.) After the 15 days, television sets will be "smashed" by the religious police.

The rationale for the proscription seems to be that the governmental authorities believe that television and related media are the source of corruption. Allegedly, the media induce (1) behavior violating Taliban interpretations of the Koran and conceptions of government by Islamic precepts, Sharia, and (2) beliefs, opinions, emotions, and attitudes that not only generate behavioral violations but are themselves violations.

More jaundiced observers and analysts of the Taliban policy might posit that what's really at Issue is not religious purity but government control--the former merely a vehicle to the latter. If this were the case, the Taliban policy immediately could be analyzed in the context of political control strategies comprising communication media--e.g., the media warfare of the Cold War waged successfully by the United States and its allies, less successfully by the Soviet Union and its allies; more recently, China's banning of satellite dishes and even various international attempts to ban the Internet. In the latter cases, instead of merely censoring, modifying, or outright jamming of incoming information, government leaders seeks to ban the very communication medium from which information is imparted.

Back to the Taliban: do such constraining policies make sense? In other words--irrespective of ethical, moral, and even legal Issues--can information from such media sources predictively influence people in a manner deleterious to political control or even to internalization of or compliance or identification with religious precept?

Research on the psychological effects of television only indirectly address these questions. (As anatomy is not destiny, neither is psychology politics.) Sticking with research on real or simulated commercial television shows, one can safely stipulate that televised information can induce various psychological consequences--e.g., inducing (1) antisocial behavior, including violent behavior, in some people in some situations (Palermo, 1995); (2) exacerbation of personal anxieties in some people (Johnston & Graham, 1997); (3) incidental learning of words in some people (Chen & Peng, 1995); and (4) decreased interest in hobbies, reading books, and schoolwork of still other people (Myrtek et al, 1996).

The crucial problem from a government control perspective is that each of the above psychological effects can in turn support or detract from political control. So-called antisocial and violent behaviors can be employed against a government's supporters and adversaries alike. Personal anxieties can lead to
political destabilization or render destabilization less likely through the preoccupations of everyday life. Learning also can increase or weaken support for an existing government depending on what is learned.


(Keywords: Information Warfare, Mass Media, Perception Management, Propaganda.)