

**THE MEDIA EFFECT:  
AN EVOLUTION IN FORM AND FUNCTION  
ACROSS THREE PIVOTAL PERIODS**

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper details the nature and role of media in the context of the following three periods in history. During post-WWI Germany, Hitler successfully manipulated media outlets to gain and secure power, which he then used to persecute an entire subculture. In the 1960s, African Americans took advantage of the more widely spread technology to aid them in a long-existing battle for equality. The coverage following the September 11 terrorist attacks focused unwanted attention on Middle-Eastern and Islamic people in the U.S., making them targets for abuse. An observation and analysis of the relationship between media and these events leads to the conclusion that the former uniquely presents itself in each period, while becoming more widespread, complex, and powerful through the decades.

**INTRODUCTION**

One of the basic abilities of humans is the power to communicate. Over the centuries, people have expanded the methods in which they share their thoughts and feelings. Ideas that were once capable of reaching only small, local groups spread quickly across towns, countries, and oceans. People began to identify with each other in new ways, allowing cultures to grow in size. However, this ability to reach a massive audience introduced a new kind of power, large-scale influence. By taking advantage of media, one's message could permeate throughout society in ways that could not be ignored. Although humans have the power to voice themselves, it is the massive and deeply-rooted media system that validates their views and empowers an individual or group to make a striking societal impact, be it positive or negative.

**GERMANY: A BEATEN NATION**

The outcome of World War I was dire for countries on both sides. This was especially true for Germany, who was stripped of land, money, and dignity. The 1919 Treaty of Versailles required Germany to give up its lands to Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and France, and its overseas colonies were seized by the League of Nations. Along with other axis nations, Germany was forced to pay considerable war reparations. To prevent future threats from the country, its military was reduced to 100,000 men, vessel numbers were restricted, and both the air force and submarine fleet were dissolved. The most embarrassing part of its punishment, arguably, was the War Guilt Clause, which made Germany claim responsibility for causing the war (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum [USHMM], 2013a). The "November Criminals", politicians who had agreed to the armistice in 1918, were further criticized by the right wing for the unfavorable terms of the treaty (USHMM, 2013b). In addition to political tension, there were serious economic issues which stemmed from the hyperinflation of the German mark. In July 1914, 4 marks equaled 1 U.S. dollar. By January 1923 this increased to 353,000 marks, and by November of the same year it grew astronomically to 200 billion marks (Constitutional Rights Foundation [CRF], 2005). This was just enough to buy a loaf of bread ("Weimar - crisis of 1923", n.d.). The middle class suffered the most from inflation, for their pensions and savings became worthless. To exacerbate Germany's already poor economic situation, the effects of the Great Depression began spreading worldwide and increased unemployment to 6 million by 1933 (CRF, 2005). The nation's unstable socioeconomic and political position made Germans fearful and desperate for positive change.

### **HITLER'S RISE TO POWER**

Hitler's charisma, combined with a quick media takeover, allowed him to easily sway the German people and seize power. Hitler joined the German Workers' Party (later renamed the Nazi Party) in 1919. He spent his time absorbing the group's nationalistic and anti-Semitic beliefs and developing his oratory skills. Two years later, he became the party's leader. In November 1923, Hitler attempted to overthrow the Weimar government, but he failed and was arrested for treason ("Beer Hall Putsch", 2009). However, his highly-publicized trial gained him national attention and popularity. Hitler took advantage of this and published the first part of his autobiography, *Mein Kampf*, in which he detailed his social beliefs and political agenda. Throughout the work, he blames Jewish people for ruining all aspects of German life:

Culturally, he contaminates art, literature, the theater, makes a mockery of natural feeling, overthrows all concepts of beauty and sublimity, of the noble and the good [...] Religion is ridiculed, ethics and morality represented as outmoded, until the last props of a nation in its struggle for existence in this world have fallen. (Shoah Resource Center, 1981, p. 4)

It was not until Hitler became Chancellor in 1933 that the entire work gained tremendous popularity. By that year, sales had risen to 250,000 copies (from 10,000 copies in 1925). Six years later, 5.2 million copies had been sold. The German government increased its circulation by ensuring every newlywed and soldier received the book as a gift. Although a large number of Germans later confessed to never reading or finishing *Mein Kampf*, its pervasiveness helped keep the chancellor relevant in German society (Goss, n.d.).

After achieving political significance, Hitler appointed Joseph Goebbels to head the Reich Ministry of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda. His job was to ensure that the Nazi Party was always displayed in a positive light. To achieve this, Goebbels used two tactics. Firstly, he filtered the media channels. For example, the SS and Gestapo were used to silence those producing works that contradicted the Nazi ideology. This was achieved through violence and destruction, such as beatings and public book burnings. Those who wanted to disseminate a work through a media outlet had to gain membership to the Reich Chamber of Commerce, which Goebbels created and controlled (Trueman, 2005). Secondly, Goebbels supplied Germany with a steady stream of propaganda through many literary, visual, and auditory channels. Newspapers and films contained messages that associated Hitler's regime with strength and prosperity, while his enemies, especially Jewish people, were coupled with the nation's ills. Posters displayed throughout Germany were effective in quickly conveying this same meaning. In schools, textbooks were rewritten with the goal of instilling pro-Nazi attitudes in students, who were more compliant and impressionable than adults (London Jewish Cultural Centre, n.d.). Goebbels' most well-known propaganda tactic was broadcasting Hitler's voice. His ministry sold cheap radio sets (known as the "people's receivers") to the public, installed loudspeakers on streets, and forced business owners to play the broadcasts. This ensured that Hitler's infamous speeches would be heard by the masses (Trueman, 2005). While Goebbels' tactics created the pretense of informing and empowering the German people, the exact opposite was occurring.

### **HITLER'S GERMANY**

At the height of his power, Hitler controlled virtually all media outlets in Germany. The 1933 Enabling Act was pivotal in bringing about this control. It allowed the new chancellor to create laws without consulting the Reichstag (parliament). Using intimidation, violence, and deceit, Hitler persuaded the Reichstag to pass the law, effectively creating a dictatorship (German Bundestag, 2006). His acquisition of these channels allowed him to detach the German public from opposition in the country and the rest of the world (especially the Allied forces) (Aylett, 2008). His regime's messages became the main source of information available through the nation's media channels. The perceived legitimacy of these messages stemmed from this censorship, for there were no other publicized views for Germans to compare against Hitler's theories.

Furthermore, the control of a clearly aggressive government meant that media was a one-way channel. The goal was for the German people to absorb Hitler's messages; public responses were not

considered or tolerated unless they promoted Nazi ideology. It was this wall in communication that helped suppress contrasting opinions concerning the treatment of Jews. Germans presumably exhibited different reactions to this treatment, including the following. There were those who believed in Hitler's ideology and developed resentment towards Jewish people. Then there were others who disagreed with the dictator's policies, but never expressed it. This was not necessarily an act of ill will, but one of self-preservation; it was understood by those under the Nazi regime that obedience equaled safety. Many people also likely exhibited a combination of both reactions; in order to counter-balance their fear, they turned to victim blaming. The result of all three attitudes was an emotional and physical distancing from the Jewish community.

Hitler's "Aryanization" of Germany led millions of Jewish people to lose their individual freedoms. Direct discrimination began with manipulation of the law. The first law enacted against the Jews was the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service, which banned Jewish people from being employees of the state. Similar laws followed that limited education, restricted the practice of law and medicine, and revoked professional licenses. The 1935 Nuremberg Laws further increased segregation. Jewish people lost voting rights, marriage rights (to non-Jewish Germans), healthcare options, and more job opportunities (USHMM, 2013c). This aggression soon turned violent. During Kristallnacht in 1938, Jewish businesses, residences, and synagogues were broken into and ransacked. With seemingly absolute power, Hitler escalated to extermination (USHMM, 2013d). Each phase of persecution took from the Jews economic independence, social belonging, a sense of physical safety, and their overall identity. Hitler's successes proved that it is not the truth in one's message that is important; it is whether the audience is influenced to change because of it.

### **THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN BATTLE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS**

Despite the abolition of slavery a century earlier, the divide between African Americans and the white population in the 1960s remained. However, significant movements towards equality had been made up to that point. The *Brown v. Board* case of 1954 succeeded in partially overturning the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling of 1896. It was decided that segregated public schools were unequal and violated equal protection under the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment ("Brown v. Board", n.d.). This set in motion a desegregation movement. A year later, Rosa Parks expanded the inequality issue to seating on public transportation, which resulted in the highly publicized Montgomery Bus Boycott. After Parks' arrest and release, the city's black community organized a one-day boycott, word of which spread quickly through local radio, newspapers, and television stations. This was regarded as the first mass protest of the desegregation movement (Sigmond, 2011).

However, boycotting efforts surpassed the one day. For over a year, African Americans in Montgomery, Alabama (who represented 75% of the city's riders) refused to use its segregated buses. During this time, "more than 100 reporters visited Montgomery [...] to profile the effort and its leaders" ("Montgomery Bus Boycott", 2010, para. 8). One of these leaders was Martin Luther King Jr., who gained popularity as a result of this event. Consequently, he was arrested in February of 1956 on conspiracy charges. However the national media coverage of King's trial increased support for the boycott. At the end of the year, the Supreme Court ruled in favor of the NAACP's case, stating that bus segregation was unconstitutional. The media had helped the movement gain momentum and it was there to cover the celebration as well. The day after the ruling, reporters rushed to record Richard Nixon, Ralph Abernathy, Glenn Smiley, and Martin Luther King Jr. riding the first integrated bus together (Sigmond, 2011). This was a significant victory for the black community; however, there were more issues to redress.

### **A GROWING MOVEMENT**

The accomplishments of the Montgomery Bus Boycott encouraged African Americans to intensify their efforts, and media took on a larger role in this mission. By 1960, 90% of American households had televisions, making them one of the dominant sources of news and information (The Paley Center for Media, n.d.). Therefore, viewers nationwide could witness the events unfolding in the South, where racial inequality and violence were most prevalent. In 1961, the multiracial Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) decided to organize bus rides into the Deep South. The Freedom Riders, as they were called, wanted to assess whether state governments would uphold the Supreme Court's bus desegregation ruling. They

encountered the worst of the violence in Alabama, where one of the buses was set on fire and the Riders were beaten. The police did very little to interfere in the attacks. Images depicting the scenes spread not only nationally, but also worldwide ("Freedom Rides", 2013). CBC-TV, a station in Canada, broadcasted coverage of the event and a statement from James Zwerg, a hospitalized Freedom Rider ("Freedom Riders stand...", 2013). Not only were people able to read about the atrocities occurring in the South, they could see picture proof of the actual damage to activists and their property. The real-life images of the destruction made it easier for people to understand the extent of the violence that the Riders and other advocates experienced firsthand.

As the Civil Rights Movement quickly gained momentum, Martin Luther King Jr. moved to its forefront and became the new face of the cause. In 1963, while jailed for staging a protest in Birmingham, Alabama, King read a public letter addressed to him in a newspaper from religious leaders. They criticized him for heading a cause that created what they saw as unnecessary and unlawful disturbances. King then penned a response, famously known as the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" (Maranzani, 2013). In it, King chastised the leaders for their passiveness during a time of oppression, stating, "I am sure if I had lived in Germany during that time, I would have aided [...] my Jewish brothers even it was illegal" (The Editors, 2013, para. 8). His work was published in a number of prints countrywide, including *The Atlantic* newspaper in Massachusetts and *The Christian Century*, a popular Protestant magazine. This exposure, coupled with King's message, made the letter one of the most well-known texts of the civil rights movement (Maranzani, 2013).

The Birmingham campaign continued as both adults and students alike marched the city's streets calling for equal rights. The aftermath of these protests once again made international headlines. Photos were captured of police and firefighters blasting crowds with power hoses, beating them with clubs, and setting dogs on the nonviolent protestors. The apparent inhumane treatment shocked people around the world and placed the United States under heavy criticism. This high level of international attention put pressure on the government, specifically President Kennedy. The pressure came to a climax during the 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom, in which 200,000 people of both races participated. Broadcasts of crowds stretching from the Lincoln Memorial to the Washington Monument provided striking images that were virtually impossible to disregard ("American Civil Rights Movement", 2013). It would have been evident to the viewers that the message behind a crowd of such size was one of significance. King conveyed this message in the speech "I Have a Dream", stating, "I have a dream that one day the nation will rise up, live out the true meaning of its creed: 'we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal'" (King Jr., 1963, p. 4).

## **A STEP FORWARD**

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In 1964, President Lyndon B. Johnson signed into law the Civil Rights Act, which stated that discrimination in terms of "race, color, religion, sex, or national origin" was unlawful (U.S. NARA, n.d., para. 3). It also created the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (U.S. NARA, n.d.) and officially put an end to the Jim Crow laws (U.S. Senate, n.d.). The 1965 Voting Rights Acts followed, removing the last barriers employed by some local and state governments to prevent black people from voting ("Voting Rights Act", 2013). Eventually, African Americans were able to play larger political roles. Well-known figures, like Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall and Congresswoman Shirley Chisholm, were able to more fairly represent the interests of the black community (PBS, 2002). They also helped show other African Americans that it was possible for them to reach influential positions. New laws continued to be enacted, including the Civil Rights Act of 1968, which prohibited housing discrimination on the same grounds as those in the Act of 1964 (HUD, 2007). Without the continuous efforts of activists and their supporters, these achievements would have been more difficult to bring about.

These activists employed the means that they had available to them to further their cause. Television stations, newspapers, and magazines were businesses that acted in their own, mainly profit-driven, interests. Each channel was made up of numerous competitors, demanding stories that would capture attention and increase viewership and sales. Most of these businesses were not controlled by the government, so they were free to report any news story. Additionally, there was a relatively porous border between media channels and the public. In other words, not only did these institutions disseminate their own information, individuals and groups used them as a means of sharing their views

as well. Therefore, African Americans were able to access a newspaper or television station to communicate their struggle and efforts across the U.S. They could also reach global audiences, for the government did not have the power to filter outgoing news or incoming responses. Furthermore, the striking images printed in newspapers and shown on TV conveyed more than that of words. People could no longer distance themselves from events in the same way that they could when reading a news story. The advantages gained through media by no means eliminated all negative perceptions of African Americans, but they helped to quicken the process towards respect, understanding, and acceptance.

### **SEPTEMBER 11: ATTACK ON THE HOME FRONT**

On the day of September 11, 2001, the United States experienced an event so unprecedented that it brought the strong, forward-moving nation to a standstill. Members of the terrorist group Al Qaeda hijacked and crashed commercial planes into the Twin Towers and the Pentagon, two main pillars of the country's economic and political systems. Thousands lost their lives (Schmemmann, 2001). Within minutes of the events, news centers nationwide were covering the breaking news; this coverage quickly spread worldwide. In the following days, the attacks dominated the focus of the nation, and the media endeavored to relay every moment of the event. Footage was shown of eyewitnesses giving their accounts of the attacks. These retellings came from a wide range of people, including shocked spectators, bloodied fireman, and hospitalized victims. In addition, many of these people sent their own photos and recordings to news companies. Vivid, color images of the burning and falling Twin Towers were replayed and reprinted globally (Franklin, 2011). Soon these pictures were accompanied by those of distraught families of the victims. Some of the images became controversial, showing people jumping from the towers to escape flames and smoke. The Falling Man is an infamous photo taken by news photographer Richard Drew that depicts this scene (Junod, 2009). As a result, "papers all over the country were forced to defend themselves against charges that they had exploited a man's death, stripped him of his dignity, [and] invaded his privacy" (Junod, 2009, para. 8). This intimate, candid, and inescapable news coverage played a large role in intensifying Americans' collective anger and sadness.

Furthermore, the media's use of typecasting placed a stigma on Islamic and Middle-Eastern people, and anyone who physically resembled people of these groups. Key adjectives such as "Islamist" and "Muslim" were placed right next to trigger words such as "terrorists" and "militants". A New York Times article stated, "the history of major attacks on American targets in recent years led many officials and experts to point to Osama bin Laden, the Islamic militant believed to operate out of Afghanistan" (Schmemmann, 2001, para. 11). Whether or not this was intentional, news outlets had created an association between Islam and terrorism. Media channels were focused on covering the events and did not take enough time to highlight the great difference between regular worshippers and fanatics. As a result, this association persisted years after the attacks. In 2010, conservative news commentator Bill O'Reilly proclaimed on *The View* that "'Muslims killed us on 9/11'", and later stated that "'there's no question there is a Muslim problem in the world'" (Armbruster, 2010, para. 2). His statements were supported by Fox News contributor Juan Williams, who replied on-air with the following:

I mean, look, Bill, I'm not a bigot. You know the kind of books I've written about the civil rights movement in this country. But when I get on the plane, I got to tell you, if I see people who are in Muslim garb and I think, you know, they are identifying themselves first and foremost as Muslims, I get worried. I get nervous. (Armbruster, 2010, para. 4)

Amid the widespread fear and following uncertainty, it was easy for Americans to absorb these comments and develop negative attitudes towards Muslims and Middle-Eastern people. The resulting consequences would prove to be scarring for many in these communities.

### **THE AFTERMATH**

In response to the deadly attacks on their nation, Americans began to focus their hostility on select groups. Although they were not to blame, Muslims and those of Middle-Eastern descent living in the U.S. were made to feel responsible for the actions of the 9/11 terrorists. It was not long until verbal and physical attacks began. On September 15, Sikh-American Balbir Singh Sohdi was murdered as an act of

revenge, despite the fact that he was not of the same religion or nationality as the attackers. This was the first hate crime casualty following September 11 (Singh, 2012). Like other Americans, many American Muslims lost family in the attacks. Talat Hamdani recalls feeling “twice victimized: first by fellow Muslims who killed her son, then by fellow Americans who doubted that a Muslim like her Salman died a hero at the World Trade Center” (Hampson, 2010, para. 1). Within the first year of the attacks, hate crimes against Muslims increased from 28 in 2000 to 481 in 2001, ten of which were murders (Schevitz, 2002). Many of these occurrences were underexposed.

Despite the difficulty, some individuals managed to publicly reveal the discrimination they encountered, mainly from government institutions. In 2008, *New York Magazine* published a story of a young Arab American named Rasha. Several months after the terrorist attacks, Rasha and her family were forcefully removed from their home and detained in a government holding facility for three months. They were not told why they had been investigated, interrogated, or imprisoned. Upon release, the family faced more issues; they were forced to sell their home as a result of late payments, and the children had missed months of school. They had little proof to provide of their ordeal and were left to assimilate back into society by themselves (Bayoumi, 2008). In 2005, PhD student Rahinah Ibrahim was prevented from reentering the U.S. after being placed on the no-fly list. Ibrahim believes she had been targeted based on her nationality and faith (Associated Press, 2013). Nine years passed (during which she sued the government) before she was given a full explanation and removed from the list (The Editorial Board, 2014). Recently revealed FBI actions have resulted in further concern about the treatment of Muslims. In 2013, *The Guardian* reported on the FBI’s ability to indefinitely stop Muslim people from receiving citizenship (McVeigh, 2013). Additionally, the bureau has been exposed for “designating mosques as terrorist organizations”, a power which has allowed it to use spies to record the services (Goldman & Apuzzo, 2013, para 1).

The mistreatment that these groups have encountered has left them not only with feelings of frustration, but also psychological trauma. In the 2008 *Journal of Muslim Mental Health*, professor Wahiba Abu-Ras published a study she conducted on a sample of Arab-American New Yorkers (mostly Muslim) to assess the effects of September 11. “Participants [...] revealed fear of hate crimes and threats to their safety, anxiety about the future, isolation and loss of community and stigmatization” (Clay, 2011, para. 12). The following year, she carried out a study investigating the prevalence of hate crimes, which was published in *Traumatology*. The tests concluded that, “twenty-five percent of participants reported verbal assaults, 22 percent reported workplace discrimination, 19 percent reported unprovoked interrogation by government agents and 19 percent reported physical assaults” (Clay, 2011, para. 12). Although the test groups were not large enough to fully represent the Muslim and Arab-American populations, the studies give insight into the actual mental trauma sustained by individuals in these groups. Psychologists Mona Amer and Joseph Hovey note that it is not in the cultural nature of Arab Americans to talk openly of mental issues, therefore making it difficult to measure the extent of the effects in this community (Clay, 2011).

### **THE INTERNET POST-9/11**

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Although over a decade has passed since the September 11 attacks, the emotional links to the events (while less apparent) still remain. This is due to the growth and commercialization of the Internet. In 2001, social media and user-run websites were not very prevalent. However, this changed with the introduction of Facebook and YouTube in the mid-2000s. Within several years, these types of websites overflowed with activity. People were able to share their thoughts and views with others worldwide within minutes and seconds. As print media began to die, newspapers and magazines moved their businesses online, gaining access to a significantly larger audience. The number of computer-literate people increased as well, which encouraged more users to maintain their own blogs and websites. Thus, in addition to absorbing and responding to information spread through news media, people played larger and more individual roles in the production and dissemination processes.

The large volume of information exchange, coupled with the technology to process and preserve it, meant that people could gain immediate access to countless topics (in various forms and great detail). The events of September 11 were no exception. Numerous video broadcasts, editorials, blogs, news articles, and more were within reach of the public. The ease with which one could revisit this information

encouraged new and old emotions to surface. Those who remember the attacks re-experience their anger or fear; those who were too young to remember find themselves feeling very similar emotions. Despite the discrimination Muslims and Middle-Eastern people were subjected to (and still are), this online revolution benefitted them as well. They too gained access to a channel through which they could voice their opinions and detail their experiences. With so many different types of people involved and connected through the Internet, their viewpoints had the potential to be considered on a more equal basis to those of their critics. While the consequences of 9/11 can still be felt, people have a greater voice in determining how the event affects them and others.

## CONCLUSION

Media has proven itself throughout the years to be an unavoidable and effective means to social, economic, and political recognition. Hitler understood its power and consolidated it under his regime to further his own agenda. African Americans viewed it as a crucial tool that would help them to make greater strides towards equality. What at first enabled discrimination against Islamic and Middle-Eastern groups transformed into a platform for reclaiming religious and cultural identities. In each time period, it is evident that media underwent a unique period of development. The channels of communication in Nazi Germany were effective for their time, but there still remained a large amount of growth and potential. The popularity of television during the Civil Rights Movement incited competition and expanded media's national and global reach. Technological improvements and increased Internet use following September 11 led to a multidimensional and established media system. With more people participating than ever before, it is likely these communications will become even more integrated, efficient, and powerful. What remains to be seen is how humankind will take advantage of these changes, and to what ends.

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