Stephen Marmura
November, 2006

[DRAFT]

Security vs. Privacy: Media Messages, State Policies, and American Public Trust in Government

Abstract: The international survey includes questions designed to measure public perceptions regarding the media's attention to terrorism on the one hand vs. violations of citizens' privacy rights by the government and/or corporations on the other. It also addresses public perceptions about the media's coverage of information privacy issues more generally. Other questions attempt to assess the level of public trust in government with respect to its surveillance of citizens. When taken together, and considered in conjunction with credible evidence obtained elsewhere, the relevant survey findings appear to indicate that while Americans have become more worried about the 'intrusive' nature of state surveillance practices, such concerns continue to be overshadowed by fears about terrorism and a desire for greater security. To better appreciate the evolution and character of public opinion on these matters, the survey results are considered in light of the following: other polls and studies dealing with relevant attitudes; America's dual character as both a security state and sole global superpower; relevant media and propaganda issues (theory and precedents). Evidence suggests both that large segments if not a majority of the American public will likely continue to signal acceptance for surveillance measures ostensibly implemented by the state to guard against terrorist threats, and that the mass media will continue to play a significant role in encouraging such acceptance.

Key Words: *privacy; security; terrorism; perceptions; media; surveillance; trust*

Introduction

This paper will examine two interrelated sets of issues addressed by the international survey as they pertain to public attitudes in the United States (US). The first, concerns trust in government[1]; specifically whether state surveillance policies implemented to counter the threat of terrorism are perceived by citizens to impinge unduly upon their individual rights. The second, related area concerns public perceptions about the amount of media attention regularly given to various aspects of surveillance, terrorism, security and privacy. The premise of the paper is that the international survey findings dealing with both sets of issues, along with any potential relationships between the two, may be

[1] Unless otherwise indicated, all references to 'government' and/or '(the) state' should be understood as references to the US federal government.

better appreciated if America's status as both a 'security state' and sole global superpower are kept firmly in view. Popular attitudes towards the role of the state will be considered in light of this dual status, as will the role traditionally played by the media with respect to real or perceived threats to the state and its citizens. The findings of other surveys and studies dealing with these and related issues will be addressed throughout. Attention to these areas will allow for a more comprehensive approach and greater insight when assessing the international survey findings for questions 5, 13-15 and 17.

The Survey Findings: A brief summary of the results for questions 5, 13-15 and 17

a.i) Public Trust in Government: responses to questions 5 and 17

American public trust in government, with respect to the state's implementation of 'appropriate' national security measures, is a primary concern of this paper. Question 5 deals directly with this issue, by pitting the relative importance of protecting individual rights against the need for aggressive national security policies. Specifically, this question asks respondents whether they have a 'very high level of trust', 'reasonably high level of trust', 'fairly low level of trust', or 'very low level of trust' that 'the government is striking the right balance between national security and individual rights'. Respondents may also indicate that they are 'not sure' in this regard. Pubic attitudes towards government security policies are also probed in question 17. This question asks respondents whether they believe that laws aimed at protecting national security are 'intrusive upon personal privacy'. The relevant choices here are 'highly intrusive', 'somewhat intrusive', 'not very intrusive', 'not intrusive at all' and 'not sure'.

The findings for question 5 indicate that a small majority, 52.7%, of US citizens do not trust the government to strike the right balance between maintaining national security and protecting individual rights. Twenty-five percent (24.7%) indicated a *fairly* low level of trust in this regard, while 28% had a *very* low level of trust. By contrast, 28.6% indicated a reasonably high level of trust, and 9.9% a very high level of trust. Eight percent (8.3%) were 'not sure'. The survey results for question 17 indicate that a majority of the public, 57.2 % feel that government laws aimed at protecting national security are intrusive. Fifteen percent (15.1%) of respondents view such laws as highly intrusive, while 42.1 % see them as somewhat intrusive. In contrast, 18.1 % believe government laws are not very intrusive and 8.4% believe that they are not intrusive at all. Sixteen percent of respondents were 'not sure'.

a.ii) Related findings of other surveys

The international survey results for questions 5 and 17 do not indicate whether revealed levels of public mistrust stem primarily from the fear that the state has implemented national security polices which are too invasive, and hence that the government is not committed enough to protecting individual rights, or alternatively, from the belief that the government is not being assertive and/or intrusive enough in terms of safeguarding national security. To address this ambiguity, attention will be given to the results of two public opinion polls conducted for the *Washington Post* and *ABC News* (henceforth, ABC polls) by TNS of Horsham. These surveys, which were conducted in January and May of 2006, deal directly with public attitudes towards government terrorism/security policies vs. privacy rights, focusing particular attention on the issue of warrantless wiretapping by the National Security Agency (NSA). Brief attention will also be given to the results

from four polls undertaken by Pew Research, designed to measure public concerns with respect to the broader category of 'civil liberties'.

According to the ABC poll conducted in January, 3 in 10 Americans feel that the government is making unjustified intrusions into personal privacy as it investigates terrorism. Significantly, however, the same poll indicated that 51% of the public consider the use of warrantless wiretaps by the National Security Agency (NSA) to be acceptable. Forty-seven percent deem them unacceptable. Similar results appeared in the ABC poll conducted in May. This survey indicates that just under half of Americans, 45%, believe the government is not doing enough to protect Americans' rights as it investigates terrorism. This concern is considerably higher than in 2002 and 2003, the two years following the 9/11 attacks, according to earlier ABC polls. Surveys conducted in 2001, 2002, 2003 and 2004 by the commercial polling organization, Harris Interactive reveal a similar pattern with respect to changes in public attitudes on this issue. Both the January and May ABC polls indicate that 65% percent of the public believes it is more important for the government to investigate possible terrorist threats, even when this intrudes on personal privacy, than it is for the government to avoid such intrusions even if they limit its investigative ability.

The ABC poll findings could be interpreted as indicating a higher level of public trust in government and/or tacit support for its surveillance practices than the findings of the international survey. However, other results from the January poll suggest that this is not the case. This poll indicates that while 48-42 % of the public believe that the government is doing enough to protect the rights of citizens while it investigates terrorism, 8% say it's doing too much. Furthermore, as many Americans, 48%, are

worried that Bush will not do enough to investigate terrorism as are worried that he'll go too far (44%). Similar results were obtained for four surveys conducted by Pew research which probed public concerns about civil liberties more broadly construed. These polls, which were conducted in July/04, July/05, Oct/04 and Jan/06, asked respondents whether they had a 'bigger concern that the government had not gone far enough to protect the country' from terrorism, or whether it had 'gone too far in restricting civil liberties'. The results for the polls as stated in terms of responses to the first versus the second option were as follows: 49% vs. 29% (July/04); 52% vs. 31% (July/05); 48% vs. 34% (Oct/05); 46% vs. 33% (Jan/06).

In light of the evidence cited above, it would seem unwise to interpret the comparatively high level of public mistrust indicated in responses to question 5 of the international survey as fully equivalent to a belief that the government is not doing enough to protect privacy. It also seems likely that a portion of the respondents to question 17, namely those who indicated that government security laws are either somewhat intrusive or highly intrusive, might still view such laws as desirable in light of the threat of terrorism. When these points are taken into account, the ABC poll results do not appear to contradict those of the international survey on the matter of public trust. Taken together, they portray a citizenry which is growing increasingly uneasy about intrusive government security practices, but a substantial majority of whom remain willing to tolerate threats to privacy in the name of greater security.

b) Perceptions of Media Messages: responses to questions 13-15

Of those survey questions geared to measure public perceptions regarding media coverage of matters pertaining to national security, privacy and/or terrorism, questions 14

and 15 are deemed the most important for this analysis. Question 14 asks respondents whether they feel that the media pays 'more attention to stories about terrorism', 'more attention to stories about government violation of personal privacy of citizens', or 'equal attention to both'. Question 15 repeats this question, but substitutes 'private sector' for 'government' and 'consumers' for 'citizens'. While only question 14 deals explicitly with messages about government practices, media messages about the private sector may also hold relevance in relation to public attitudes towards state surveillance/security policies. Many of the government initiatives enacted after 9/11entail state access to, or use of corporate data gathering practices. Question 13 is more general than 14 and 15 and does not address the issue of terrorism. It asks respondents whether they feel that the media (TV, radio, newspapers, magazines, online information, advertisements) provides 'a lot of coverage', 'some coverage', 'not much coverage', or 'no coverage at all' with respect to the safety of personal information.

Roughly 36% (35.7%) of respondents for question 14 indicated that the media gives more attention to terrorism than to government violations of personal privacy, while 10.9% felt that more coverage was given to the latter. A small majority, 53.2%, indicated that they did not know or were not sure. In the case of question 15, 44.5% of respondents perceived a media bias towards greater coverage of stories about terrorism, while only 7.1 % believed that more attention was given to stories about private sector violations of the personal privacy of consumers. An additional 23.5% indicated that equal coverage was given to both, while 24.8% were not sure. The results for question 13 indicate that 29.1% of Americans believe that a lot of media coverage was given to concerns about the safety of personal information while 46.6% felt that 'some coverage'

was provided. Thirteen percent indicated ‘not much coverage’, 2.4% selected ‘no coverage at all’, and 8.9% were not sure. Overall, public perceptions appear consistent with what is likely to be the reality in terms of actual levels of news coverage for these topics, a point which will be taken up later in the analysis.

The Larger Context: America as a Global Power and Security State

Public attitudes towards recent US government surveillance initiatives conducted in the name of homeland security have clearly been influenced by the events of 9/11, a fact borne out by numerous polls conducted from 2001onward. However, it should also be kept in mind that America’s drift towards a security state model of governance was already well underway before the 9/11 attacks, dating back to at least the 1980s (?)(Lyon 2003). Similarly, while the US’s propensity for military interventionism abroad has arguably become more pronounced since the Bush administration took office, achieving military, as well as economic and communicative global dominance has been central to US foreign policy since the end of World War II (Johnson 2004; Schiller 1998; Wallerstein 2003). These larger realities should be taken into account when assessing the survey findings summarized above, as they hold potentially significant implications with respect to both citizens’ trust in government, and the media’s role in shaping relevant public attitudes. The latter two issues will be considered in turn with some necessary overlap.

a) 'Trust', in Context: American Attitudes towards the role of the State

Popular distrust of government, and specifically of the federal government, has a long history in the United States (US). However, it should also be recognized that widespread, grassroots skepticism towards the notion of 'big government' has traditionally had less to do with the size of government per se, than with widespread sentiments concerning those areas in which it is considered appropriate for the state to invest financial, technological and human resources. Significantly, the rapid growth of America's military-industrial complex after the Second World War, its ongoing War on Terror, and a related expansion of surveillance and policing powers at home do not *necessarily* conflict with such sentiments. For example, numerous polls indicate broad public support for the Patriot Act, which gave broad new powers to the state in the name of national security (e.g. Pew ; ABC).[2] These points hold importance in relation to the survey findings. They suggest that despite growing public concern about governmental surveillance of citizens, political leaders may still be able to rely on high levels of patriotism and/or nationalist sentiment when attempting to gain support for domestic surveillance practices. As with the case of military actions abroad, it is the ability to link relevant policies to questions of national security which appears critical.

Before proceeding further, it should be noted that the terms 'welfare state' and 'security state' are being employed here for heuristic purposes, to designate a general shift towards a mode of governance less concerned with an equitable distribution of public resources, and more oriented to reducing risks to state and corporate interests - particularly those risks associated with participation in the global economy. The two

[2] However, a recent survey undertaken by the University of Connecticut indicates poor public understanding about the true nature of the Act. Key findings of the study are cited in the next section.

concepts need not be understood as mutually exclusive, and refer primarily to changes in *emphasis* in government policy making.[3] Significantly, this shift in emphasis was given a new impetus by the events of 9/11. As Lyon (2003: 4) makes clear, the 9/11 attacks provided the opportunity for those with an interest in expanding the state's surveillance powers, to integrate and exploit 'existing ideas, policies, and technologies' in the name of the War on Terror. Both the Patriot Act, passed only weeks after the 9/11 attacks, and the Department of Homeland Security created in 2002, now provide the state with unprecedented 'preventive' powers to combat potential threats to the state and its citizens (EPIC 2006; Lyon 2003).

Americans arguably were and remain more culturally predisposed to accommodate the transition from a welfare state to a security state model of governance than the citizens of other Western liberal democracies. A recent study by Epstein (2004) suggests that the American public has long been skeptical of the idea that government should be proactive in the area of social welfare, and that this is the case regardless of whether the concept of welfare is narrowly or broadly construed. He also claims that pronounced differences in outlook amongst various groups in society, particularly blacks vs. whites, have largely vanished over the past few decades. In research designed to gauge relevant public attitudes, Epstein examined numerous polls including the General Social Surveys (1972-1998) (GSS), the National Elections Surveys (1948-1998) (NES), and the CBS/New York Times Polls (since 1976) (CBS/NYT). He concluded that a general consensus, one cutting across categories such as race, class (including the rich and very poor), and union vs. non-union households, has long characterized popular

[3] Clearly, the US may still be understood as a welfare state in important respects. Similarly, the reduction of risks, such as those posed by the threat of terrorism, may benefit the general public as well as powerful interests.

attitudes towards social welfare. This consensus is one 'which has cemented a position quite a bit to the right of center, ideologically centered on voluntary civic participation and good character—"compassionate conservatism:" communitarianism rather than communalism' (Epstein 2004: 7).

While Epstein's views should not be taken as the final word on the matter, the findings of his research may help account, at least in part, for the results of an ABC poll conducted in January 2002. ABC's polling director, Gary Langer, designed this survey to reassess what appeared to be a dramatic upsurge in public trust in government after September 11, 2001. This upsurge was widely interpreted by politicians, as well as by the foreign and domestic press, to be a direct consequence of the 9/11 attacks. The poll took the form of a split survey. Half of the respondents were asked the first of the two questions shown below - the other half, the second:

> **Question:** When it comes to handling national security and the war on terrorism, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?
>
> **Question:** When it comes to handling social issues like the economy, health care, Social Security and education, how much of the time do you trust the government in Washington to do what is right? Would you say just about always, most of the time, or only some of the time?

Significantly, while 68% of respondents indicated that they trusted government to handle national security issues 'just about always' or 'most of the time', only 38% said they trusted it to handle social issues just about always, or most of the time (Langer 2002: 9).

It seems plausible that the low level of public trust indicated in responses to the second split-poll question, may be a reflection not only of the contentious nature of the social welfare issues listed, a possibility noted by Langer (2002), but also of deep-set

populist ideals holding that the role of the state should remain limited, as suggested by Epstein's (2004) research. Traditionally, this 'limited' role has often been understood in libertarian terms, referring to the state's obligation to maintain law and order at home, while protecting its citizens from foreign threats. At the very least, the results for this poll suggest that what changed after the 9/11 attacks was not public trust in government per se, but rather 'the context in which that trust was being evaluated and expressed' (Langer 2002). More specifically, the ABC poll results lend support to the idea that the high levels of public trust widely reported after the events of 9/11, signified American patriotism as expressed by a willingness to rally behind the president in a time of national crisis, and support for the state's military role in the face of foreign (or foreign-inspired) threats. Broader changes to attitudes concerning other functions, institutions or policies of government were likely negligible or non-existent (Chanley 2002; Langer 2002).

As suggested above, poll results dealing with public attitudes towards government may be strongly influenced not only by how such terms as 'trust', 'mistrust' or 'confidence' are operationalized by survey designers, but also by the particular institutions, branches of government, policies, politicians or incidents which respondents are likely to have foremost in mind at the time they are interviewed (Chanley 2002; Cook & Gronke 2004). Langer (2006) notes that this tendency may help account for differences in attitudes towards NSA wiretapping as measured by an ABC poll (the May ABC poll referred to earlier in this paper) and one undertaken by *Newsweek*. Both polls were conducted shortly after the NSA phone-record logging program was disclosed to the public on May 11, 2006. The key questions for each were as follows:

> It's been reported that the National Security Agency has been collecting the phone call records of tens of millions of Americans. It then analyses calling patterns in

> an effort to identify possible terrorism suspects without listening to or recording the conversations. Would you consider this an acceptable or unacceptable way for the federal government to investigate terrorism? Do you feel that way strongly or somewhat? (*Washington Post*/ABC News poll: May 11, 2006)
>
> As you may know, there are reports that the NSA, a governmental intelligence agency, has been collecting the phone call records of Americans. The agency doesn't actually listen to the calls but logs in nearly every phone number to create a database of calls made within the United States. Which of the following comes CLOSER to your own view of this domestic surveillance program? It is necessary to combat terrorism. [Or] It goes too far in invading people's privacy. (*Newsweek* poll: May 11-12, 2006)

In the case of the ABC poll, 63% said the program was 'acceptable' while 35% indicated it was 'unacceptable'. By contrast, only 41% of respondents for the *Newsweek* poll said the program was 'a necessary tool' while 53% said that it 'goes too far'.

Langer (2006) argues that several differences between the two news polls likely had an impact on the responses for each. For example, he notes that the ABC poll asked two general preliminary questions: whether the American government as it stands now, is doing enough to protect Americans' rights; and which is more important right now, investigating terror or preventing intrusions on privacy. He argues that these questions may have inspired respondents think about 'the tradeoffs between these two, highly desirable aims' (Langer 2006). He also suggests that the term 'necessary tool' may represent a higher bar in the minds of respondents than 'acceptable'. Most notably, Langer points out that the ABC poll describes the rationale for the NSA practices, while the *Newsweek* poll does not. He observes that unlike the ABC poll, which states that the NSA analyses calling patterns to identify possible terrorism suspects, the *Newsweek* poll doesn't explain what the NSA is doing with collected phone records. Langer (2006), then argues that 'it may be harder to say something like this is OK without knowing its purpose'.

Interestingly, Langer (2006) appears to find the ABC poll (which he oversaw) as the better measure of public attitudes than the *Newsweek* poll, precisely because it explicitly connects NSA wiretapping to the goal of preventing terrorism. Consequently, he chooses to overlook the fact that the surveillance practices in question could very well be used for other purposes, such as spying on anti-war activists, environmentalists, or others critical of state policies. Significantly, however, the fact that the ABC poll may be 'biased' in this respect may actually make it a more meaningful measure of relevant public attitudes. Not because the ABC poll necessarily describes reality more accurately, as Langer (2006) implies, but rather due to the reflexive nature of public opinion. More specifically, because the context within which American attitudes are being shaped is one in which the mass media regularly and uncritically collapse the issues of terrorism and security/surveillance into a single problematic. This issue will be given further attention in the next section of the discussion.

When viewed against the findings of earlier polls, the international survey results for questions 5 and 17 indicate that there has in fact been growing public concern about government surveillance of citizens, even when such practices are held up against the need for greater security. However, the fact that more citizens continue to defend the government's 'right' to employ special powers to prevent terrorism may be more telling. It should be noted that many or most recent polls measuring public attitudes to state surveillance practices have drawn specific attention to the contentious issue of the NSA's warrantless wiretapping program, news of which was broken by the *New York Times* in October 2005. While the NSA program was not declared unconstitutional until August 2006, debates and questions concerning its legality were already being circulated widely

by the media. This issue was almost certainly on the minds of many respondents for the international survey, which was conducted in the US between June 27 and July 28, 2006 - not long after the NSA monitoring program was disclosed to the public on May 11, 2006. Consequently, widespread public acceptance of such a controversial program may indicate an even greater readiness to tolerate less conspicuous and ostensibly legal forms of state surveillance initiated or expanded after 9/11.

b) Media Messages and Public Opinion

Discussion in this section proceeds from two basic premises. The first, by now well established in mass media research, is that 'in all political and economic systems, news "coincides with" and "reinforces" the definition of the political situation evolved by the political elite' (Murdock 1973: 172). The mechanisms, both direct and indirect, through which this situation is sustained within democratic societies have been well documented in the work of various media researchers including Curran (2000), Bagdikian (2004), Herman & Chomsky (1998), McChesney (2001; 2003), Parenti (1986; 1992) and Philo & Berry (2004) and will not be reviewed here. However, references to specific influences on media content will be made in relation to relevant illustrations and arguments. The second premise informing this discussion is that the media represent one of the most important forces shaping public opinion. While they are by no means the only significant influence on human attitudes, and while the media reflect as well as shape public sentiments and beliefs, it is also clear that the mass media hold a privileged position in information-based societies such as the United States. As Philo & Berry (2004: 94) remark, the media 'are central to the exercise of power in society' and 'can set agendas in

the sense of highlighting some news stories and topics, but they can also severely limit the information with which we understand events in the world'.

To begin, it should be pointed out that the international survey results for questions 13-15, which deal with public perceptions of media messages, do appear relatively consistent with what most of the media studies literature would predict, and what recent evidence suggests, concerning actual media content. That is to say public perceptions concerning the *proportion* of media coverage in the areas of privacy/security vs. terrorism appear to reflect what the media likely are disseminating on a regular basis. For example, the survey results for questions 14 and 15 indicate that the public feels the media are devoting relatively more attention to governmental rather than corporate violations of privacy.[4] This appears likely in light of recent media attention to the NSA wiretapping program. The survey findings for questions 13-15 also indicate that the public believe that much more media attention is being devoted to stories about terrorism than to stories about either governmental or corporate violations of privacy. That the issue of terrorism makes for press at least as sensational as the issue of information privacy should be fairly clear. That terrorism also represents a news topic which can more easily be made commensurate with the agendas of powerful interests is a point which will be addressed shortly.

As numerous media researchers have observed, media criticism of governmental and corporate conduct, as it occurs within democratic societies such as the US, rarely strays outside the range of debate visible within mainstream political circles and/or state

[4] This perception is also consistent with a general trend, identified by numerous researchers, to the effect that the media have become more relatively more reluctant to antagonize corporate than governmental interests as corporate has gown disproportionately under the conditions of economic globalization (Curran 2000; Webster 2001). However, this point holds less direct relevance here.

and corporate sponsored think tanks (McMurtry 1998; Parenti Herman & Chomsky). One consequence, is that the continuous *presence* of criticism and/or attention to controversial issues and policies makes the press appear far more 'free' with respect to both its willingness and its ability to play the role of watchdog, than is indicated by its actual ties to, and dependence upon, state and corporate goodwill. In this light, it is worth noting that when the *New York Times* broke the news of the NSA's warrantless wiretapping program in December 2005, it did so after withholding the story at the request of the White House for at least a year, (NYT). Executive Editor Bill Keller later explained that when the story was released, 'it was the expansion of authority – not the need for a robust anti-terror operation – that prompted debate within the government, and that is the subject of the article'. Subsequent media attention to this necessarily controversial program (in light of its probable illegality) has arguably served to mask the more far-reaching implications of an underlying political consensus. This concerns the broad bipartisan support for expanded state powers (aided by corporate tools and services) in the areas of law enforcement and surveillance after 9/11.

The Patriot Act of 2001 was unprecedented in granting new surveillance and investigative powers to the state (Lyon 2003). Sweeping changes were made to US law, including amendments to the following: Wiretap Statute (Title III); Electronics Communications Privacy Act; Computer Fraud and Abuse Act; Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act; Family Education Rights and Privacy Act; Pen Register and Trap and Trace Statute; Money Laundering Act; Immigration and Nationality Act; Money Laundering Control Act; Bank Secrecy Act; Right to Financial Privacy Act; Fair Credit Reporting Act (EPIC 2006). Yet, despite its tremendous scope and obvious import,

evidence suggests that the media have done a poor job in informing the public about the nature of this Act. A survey conducted by the University of Connecticut in August 2005, found that while 64% of Americans said they support the Patriot Act, and 57% said they are familiar with its contents, only 42% were able to identify its primary intent of 'enhancing surveillance procedures for federal law enforcement agencies'.[5] The study also found that the more citizens knew about the Act, the less likely they were to support it. Fifty-seven percent of those who knew the intent of the legislation indicated support, compared to 70% of those who did not know the intent.

While Americans appear ill-informed about the nature of their government's new powers, linkage between the need for greater surveillance and security at home ('homeland security'), and ongoing military operations abroad (the 'war on terror'), has repeatedly been made by US politicians and government spokespersons, and hence widely circulated in the media. A recent example concerns statements made by President Bush during a Washington news conference in August 2006, in which he defended his administration's policies in Iraq. Criticizing a federal judge's August (16?), 2006 ruling to stop warrantless wiretapping by the NSA, Bush tied both the program and US policies in Iraq directly to the War on Terror:

> Those who heralded the decision not to give law enforcement the tools necessary to protect the American people just simply don't see the world the way we do. They see maybe these kind of incidents. These aren't isolated incidents; they're tied together. There is a global war going on…. A failed Iraq in the heart of the Middle East will provide safe haven for terrorists and extremists.
>
> (CNN.com Aug. 21, 2006)

[5] The other options from which respondents could choose were as follows: supplying body armor and higher combat pay for soldiers in Iraq; the procedures for interrogating suspected terrorists in foreign countries; the security of airliners and other forms of transportation.

More often than not, such statements are circulated endlessly by the media with little in the way of relevant background information, appraisals concerning the accuracy of specific claims, or critique of underlying policies (Philo 2002; McChesney 2002). Ironically, this tendency is due in part to a journalistic tradition which emphasizes the ideal of 'objectivity' in news reporting – the idea that facts and statements should be presented 'just as they are' without interpretation by reporters, and with criticism left to other politicians or establishment 'experts' (McChseney 2002; Schudson 1995; 2003). However, in a context where journalists depend heavily upon government and corporate sources of to meet strict deadlines, such 'objectivity' may readily translate into public ignorance.

According to a poll conducted by Pew Research in November 2001, most Americans look to cable news for reports about terrorism and the war in Iraq. The study states that after mid-September 2001, 53% of the public cited cable as their primary source of news on these issues. This trend is noteworthy in light of audience research conducted by Philo (2002: 185) indicating that 'television audiences have in general very little understanding of events in the world or of major international institutions or relationships.' Philo (2002: 185) states that this is 'in part the result of television coverage that tends to focus on dramatic, violent and tragic images while giving very little context to the events that are being portrayed'. He also note that those explanations which are present tend to be partial and 'informed by what might be termed "neocolonial" beliefs' (Philo 2002: 173). While Philo's (2002) study took place in Britain, evidence suggests that the regular identification and exaggeration of foreign threats by politicians, and an accompanying lack of critical media commentary have also

had a measurable impact on American audiences. For example, a Harris poll released July 21, 2006, indicated that 50% of Americans continue to believe that weapons of mass destruction were uncovered in Iraq after US troops invaded that country in March 2003.[6]

The fact that media will pay extensive attention to an issue as sensational and emotionally charged as terrorism is hardly surprising. However, it is should be mentioned that reporting on this issue after 9/11 appears to have reinforced a trend identified long ago by Herman (1982). This concerns the media's highly selective use of the term terrorism, a concept which tends to be invoked only when the US or a close ally is the recipient of a violent attack. An alternative would be for the media to follow the lead of the UN, and employ more objective criteria concerning the nature of the intended target(s); namely military versus non-combatant. It is worth noting that attack on the Pentagon in 2001, the bombing of the USS Cole in Yemen in 2000, the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, and the suicide attack on US Marine barracks in Beirut in 1982, are all regularly referred to by the media as acts of terrorism despite the fact the main targets in each incident were military. Conversely, the US bombing of a pharmaceutical plant in Sudan in , the shelling of villages by the Northern Alliance in Afghanistan, 'Operation Shock and Awe' in Iraq in 2003, and Israel's recent (US-backed) bombing of homes, infrastructure and UN personnel in Lebanon, are rarely (if ever) referred to in such terms despite the fact that they involved direct attacks on non-military or civilian targets.[7]

---

[6] This was after United Nations (UN) inspectors (2002-2003) and an independent American survey (2004) concluded that any previous biological, chemical and nuclear arms programs had been dismantled in 1991 under UN supervision.

[7] Information concerning most of these incidents, including atrocities committed by the US-backed Northern Alliance, is available in the Web sites of Human Rights watch and/or Amnesty international.

One notable effect of the media's selective use of the term, terrorism, is that this form of violence has become associated almost exclusively with Arab and/or Islamist organizations or 'rogue states'[8]. While some might argue that the events of 9/11 made this inevitable, the trend of vilifying Muslims and particularly Arabs, was already well-established in both the news media and in popular film long before 2001 (Karim McAllister Said Shaheen). That this trend is related to the 'imperial context' of long-standing US strategic interests and military interventions in the Middle East is clear (Said 1994; 1997). As Eqbal Ahmad observed after the US first attacked Iraq in 1991:

> There is more continuity than change in American objectives in the Middle East, and that is why, since the end of World War II, America has discovered more Hitlers there than any other region. Mohammed Mossadegh, Iran's nationalist prime minister, was the first to be portrayed as Hitler. Then it was Gamal Abdel Nasser's turn. His book, Philosophy of the Revolution, was described by the U.S. media, including the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, as an Arab equivalent of *Mein Kampf* . Then Yasir Arafat was portrayed as Hitler. Most people do no recall that until he made his dramatic visit to Israel, concluded separate peace with Israel, and became the darling of the American officials and the media, even Anwar Sadat was routinely portrayed as a fascist; allegations were dredged up of his links with the Nazis. And for the purposes of the Gulf War, of course, Saddam Hussein served as the new Hitler. (Ahmad 1991: 10)

It is worth noting both that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad has recently joined the ranks of 'Hitler's' identified by the Western media, and that many in the Bush administration have been calling for a military campaign against that country.

Numerous surveys, including polls conducted by Pew research (March 2002; July 2003) and ABC news (2002; 2006), indicate that negative public attitudes towards Arabs and Muslims have increased in the years following 9/11. These attitudes are not restricted to views about specific leaders, organizations, or terror suspects, and include

[8] In this light it is worth noting that the US is the only state ever condemned by the old World Court for terrorism; a result of covert US attempts to overthrow the Sandinista government in Nicaragua in 1984 (Johnson 2004: 75).

widespread perceptions about the nature of the Islamic faith. According to Pew research, a growing number of Americans, 25% in 2002 versus 44% in 2003, believe that Islam is more likely than other faiths 'to encourage violence among its believers'. Similarly, a poll conducted by ABC in March 2006 found that 58% of the public believe that there are 'more violent extremists in Islam' than among the followers of other faiths compared to 38% in 2002. The same poll also found that 46% of the public hold a generally unfavorable opinion of Islam.

The results of a survey commissioned by Cornell's Department of Communication, released December 17 2004, are even more noteworthy, since they tie public views about both Islam and Muslim Americans to the issue of restrictions on civil liberties. A brief summary its key findings is presented in *Cornell News* ( ):

> About 27 percent of respondents said that all Muslim Americans should be required to register their location with the federal government, and 26 percent said they think that mosques should be closely monitored by U.S. law enforcement agencies. Twenty-nine percent agreed that undercover law enforcement agents should infiltrate Muslim civic and volunteer organizations, in order to keep tabs on their activities and fund raising. About 22 percent said the federal government should profile citizens as potential threats based on the fact that they are Muslim or have Middle Eastern heritage. In all, about 44 percent said they believe that some curtailment of liberties is necessary for Muslim Americans.
>
> (Cornell News)

Of particular significance in light of present concerns, this study revealed a direct correlation between television news-watching habits, a respondent's fear level, and attitudes toward restrictions on civil liberties for *all* Americans. Those who paid more attention to the news were most likely to favour government restrictions on civil liberties such as greater authority to monitor the Internet. Those who watched less news were less likely to support such measures ( ). Interestingly, these findings fit well with a large body of survey research conducted by George Gerbner ( ) suggesting a positive

correlation between time spent watching television and fear of violent crime. Gerbner ( ) has become well-known for his use of the phrases 'fortress mentality' and 'mean world syndrome' to describe the mind-set of heavy television viewers.

It is doubtful that either the quality or quantity of news coverage given to the issues of terrorism, state surveillance or homeland security will change significantly in the foreseeable future. And the US government continues to devise means for influencing public attitudes. For example, in late 2002, Donald Rumsfeld created the new position of deputy undersecretary of defense for special plans. The 'special plans' in question include managing and restricting public information, controlling news sources, and manipulating public opinion (Johnson 2004: 299). In January 2003, the White House created a new propaganda agency, the Office for Global Communications for similar purposes; particularly to ensure greater access for government and military spokespersons on foreign and domestic news shows (Ibid). There has also been mounting pressure on universities to restrict the use of curriculum deemed 'unpatriotic'. On October 31, 2003, the House of Representatives passed a bill (H.R. 3077) that could require international studies departments to show greater support for American foreign policy, or risk losing their federal funding. Of particular concern to those behind the bill was the body of post-colonial theory developed by the noted scholar Edward Said (Goldberg 2003; Roy 2004). Much of Said's work deals with the relationships between popular media and news representations of Islam and the Middle East, and US foreign policy.

Concluding Remarks

The international survey results for questions 5 and 17 suggest that American attitudes concerning state surveillance have not remained static in the years following the attacks of 9/11. When held against the results of earlier polls, they appear to indicate that the public has become more worried about the intrusive nature of government surveillance practices initiated during or after 2001. However, when the survey results are considered in conjunction with credible evidence obtained elsewhere, it also appears likely that a majority of the public will continue to demonstrate tolerance for such practices, even when faith that the government will safeguard individual privacy rights remains low. This tolerance cannot be adequately appreciated without attention to the role played by the mass media in influencing public attitudes.

The international survey results for questions 13-15 only measure public *perceptions* about *levels* of media attention to the issues of state and corporate privacy violations, security, and terrorism. However there is a large body of research from which to draw concerning the *nature* of relevant media content. Significantly, both the quality and quantity of media messages appear to be affecting public opinion. Considerable evidence suggests that widespread support for expanded state surveillance practices is most pronounced when the threat of terrorism and the need for national security are conjoined in the minds of citizens. A general lack of public knowledge concerning the nature of government motives and policies in these areas also appears critical. That the news media will continue to encourage prevailing attitudes appears likely, particularly when its close ties to powerful interests are taken into account.

References [incomplete]

Bagdikian, B. (2004) *The New Media Monopoly*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Chanley, V. (2002) 'Trust in Government in the Aftermath of 9/11: Determinants and Consequences', *Political Psychology* 23(3): 469-483.

Cook, T. and Gronke, P. (2005) 'The Skeptical American: Revisiting the Meanings of Trust in Government and Confidence in Institutions', *The Journal of Politics* Aug. 2004. 67(3).

Curran, J. (2000) 'Rethinking media and Democracy' In *Mass Media and Society*. James Curran, and Michael Gurevitch (Eds.). 3rd ed. London: Arnold. (120-154).

Epstein, W. (2004) 'Cleavage in American attitudes towards social welfare', *Journal of Sociology and Social Welfare* Dec., 2004 pp. 469-483.

Goldberg, M. (2003) 'Osama University?', *Salon.com*. 6 Nov. <http://www.geocities.com/ivorytowersorg/OsamaUniversity.htm>.

International Survey on Privacy and Surveillance, funded by a SSHRC grant in conjunction with the Globalization of Personal Data Project, Queen's University, 2006.

Harris Interactive (2001) 'Overwhelming Public Support for Increasing Surveillance Powers and, In Spite of Many Concerns about Potential Abuses, Confidence that these Powers Would be Used Properly', Sept. 19, 24, 2001. The Harris Poll # 49

Harris Interactive (2002) 'Homeland Security: Public Continues to Endorse a Broad Range of Surveillance Powers But Support Has Declined Somewhat Since Last September', March 13, 19, 2002. The Harris Poll # 16

Harris Interactive (2003)

Harris Interactive (2004)

Harris Interactive (2004)

Herman, E. (1982) *The Real Terror Network: Terrorism in Fact and Propaganda*. Boston: South End Press.

Johnson, C. (2005) *The Sorrows of Empire: Militarism, Secrecy, and the end of the Republic*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.

Karim, K. (2003) *Islamic Peril: Media and Global Violence*. New York: Black Rose.

Langer, G. May 14, 2006. 'NSA polls: Do they contradict each other?', *The World Newser*, Retrieved Oct. 20, 2006.

Langer, G. (2002) 'Trust in Government… to do what?', *Public Perspective* July/August, 2002.

Lyon, D. (2003) *Surveillance after September 11*. Oxford: Blackwell.

McChesney, R. 'Global Media, Neoliberalism, and Imperialism', *Monthly Review* 52(10).

McMurtry, J. (1998) *Unequal Freedoms: The Global Market as an Ethical System*. Toronto: Kumarian Press.

Mueller, J. (2006) 'Is There a Terrorist Threat?: The Myth of the Omnipresent Enemy', *Foreign Affairs* 85(5): 2-8.

Murdock, G. (1973) 'Political Deviance: The Press Presentation of a Militant Mass Demonstration' in S. Cohen and J. Young (eds) *The Manufacture of News: A Reader*. Beverly Hills: Sage, 157-75.

The Pew Charitable Trusts. (2001) 'But Military Censorship Backed; Terror Coverage Boosts News Media's Image',

Parenti (1992)

Parenti (1986)

Pew Research Center for the People & the Press. 'Diminished Public Appetite for Military Force and

Philo, G. (2002) 'Television News and Audience Understanding of War, Conflict and Disaster', *Journalism Studies* 3(2): 173-186.

Philo, G. and Berry, M. (2004) *Bad News From Israel*. London: Pluto Press.

Risen, J. and Lichtblau E. 'Bush Lets U.S. Spy on Callers Without Courts', *New York Times*. Retrieved Nov. 1, 2006 <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/12/16/politics/16program.html>.

Roy, S. (2005) 'Strategizing Control of the Academy', *Thought and Action* Fall: 147-162.

Said, E. (1997) *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts determine how we see the rest of the World*. New York: Vintage Books.

Said, E. (1994) *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books.

Shaheen, J. (2003) *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People*. Moreton-in-Marsh: Arris.

Shaheen, J. (1984) *The TV Arab*. Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press.

Schudson, M. (2003) *The Sociology of News*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

Schudson, M. (1995) *The Power of News*. Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press.

Washington Post/ABC News ( )

Washington Post/ABC News ( )

Washington Post/ABC News ( )

Washington Post/ABC News ( )

CNN.com (2006) 'Bush: Leaving Iraq now would be a 'disaster', Retrieved Aug. 21 2006. <http://www.cnn.com/2006/POLITICS/08/21/Iraq.poll/index.html>.