

## Part II

# Downgrading Traditional Actors

We now move to actors who played a central role in the traditional coverage of violent conflicts in the not-so-distant past: editors (Chapter 5), politicians (Chapter 6) and army generals (Chapter 7). The best example for demonstrating the dramatic change in the status of these elite actors may be found, first, in the development of major sub-genres of news in the television era – the daily evening news, media events and disaster marathons – and, second, in the emergence of a new media regime, based on new technological affordances (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011).

The traditional primetime news edition is still the site in which the editor has the overall authority for deciding what is news, that is, what goes into the program and what is left out. However, in the television age, we also witnessed the emergence of two new subgenres, one perceived as central for its integrative function for the nation state; the second for its disruptive nature: media events and disaster marathons (Katz and Liebes, 2009). In both subgenres, the editor relinquishes control to a stronger power. The identity of the personae that take over the broadcasting demonstrates our claim, according to which traditional, elite actors, both on stage and behind the scenes, are replaced by new actors who in past wars were perceived as illegitimate or redundant.

The earlier genre is that of *media events* (Dayan and Katz, 1992), defined as public ceremonies, deemed historic and broadcast live to viewers as citizens on television. When they first appeared on the screen, media events presented elite public figures in an integrating spectacle for the public at large. Indeed, in this type of broadcast, the editor hands over the control, voluntarily, to the traditional actors, seen as members of the political establishment. Media events are pre-planned according to the schedule determined by the planners of the event. Dayan and Katz distinguish among three types of media events, all of which confer status upon elite actors and are produced by them. One is *coronations*, such as weddings, funerals, commemorations, and so on,

that mark the role changes of the mighty. Here the editor follows the schedule as planned by the initiators, as in the case of the staged royal wedding of Prince William and Kate Middleton in 2011. Second is *conquests*, defined as great steps for humankind. Here we find not only the nation's top leaders, but also major players from without. The most prominent example is that of the visit of Egypt's president, Anwar Sadat, in Israel in 1977. However, in contrast to the genres which give the stage to the enemy (discussed in Chapters 2 and 3), here an outsider is given the stage in the context of reconciliation following a bloody war. Here again, the editors follow the script given in advance by the elite (Liebes, 1984). The third type is *contests* – referring, for example, to political events such as presidential debates which give the stage to the leading political candidates from within. In this case, at least in the earlier period of television, the editor followed the schedule dictated from above.

As aforementioned, one of the most important characteristics of the genre is the cooperation between the traditional actors – TV editors and politicians – with audiences tuned in to the screens for as long as the broadcast continues. In the case of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, it was for three days of constant viewing by the Israeli public. It is important to note that although the routine role of editors is to point out the faults of the political establishment, in these special moments, they facilitate the construction of unity and consent. Although this sounds like a practice taken from authoritarian regimes, the editors' alignment with the political establishment is voluntary and rare. When the event is over, editors and journalists usually return to their routine critical role vis-a-vis the government.

Whereas the broadcasting of a media event confers status on one or more of the traditional players, a later invention, that of *disaster marathon* following terror attacks (Liebes, 1998), passed on this status to a new cast of characters: Terrorists as initiators of dramatic events, and ordinary people. The latter enact a range of roles such as victims, witnesses and (the most extreme) ad hoc populist commentators, mobilized by journalists at the scene of terror to express their perspectives on government policy (Liebes, 1998; Liebes and Kampf, 2007a). This genre is much more prevalent than are media events in the contemporary broadcast ecology (Katz and Liebes, 2009). In contrast to its optimistic predecessor, the disaster marathon rallies the public around a shared anxiety stemming from the live broadcast of natural or manmade disasters. In the long run, however, when the public starts pointing

a blaming finger at the establishment, disaster marathon's disruptive function materializes.

In the case of *disaster marathons of terror*, again, the editor sees no choice but to relinquish control; however, this time not to the representatives of the nation state, but to a subversive player: the terrorist as the producer and actor of the terror attack (Blondheim and Liebes, 2002; Blondheim and Liebes, 2003).

Disaster marathons render the function of the editor redundant, leaving the anchor in the studio and the reporter on site to invent a story on the spot by recycling sound-bites and image-bites from the scene of action, quoting possibly available (often unavailable) sources from various emergency services, chasing possible interviewees who happened to be there, and speculating on what happened, who did it and why (Witzthum, 2006). Politicians and military generals are pushed to the margins and all they can do is respond to the horror, the hysteria and extreme policy suggestions for 'annihilating terror'. Following the loss of control, they now need to restore their image vis-a-vis the public, and to threaten the terrorists with 'a long arm' that can eliminate any villain on the globe with a vengeance.

During the last two decades, we were witnesses to another development, identified by media scholars as the 'end of the television age' (Katz and Scannell, 2009), and with it the 'fall of the age of broadcast news' (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011). Accordingly, the media environment is changing once again. If in the past, news was reaching homes mainly via TV, either national or global, today any actor (whether elite or non-elite) can disintermediate TV and the printed press monopoly on news via the simple-to-handle advanced communication technologies. This new media regime further challenges the traditional relationship within the nation state between media professionals, citizens and political elites.

As we demonstrated in the first part of the book, the new media regime also allows new players to join the game, thus forcing each one of the traditional actors to adjust to the new rules governing the contemporary, complex media environment. At present we witness, as we never did in the past, human rights violations, often in real time, forcing governments to adjust their modes of fighting. Moreover, the present media environment successfully allows for criticizing and challenging state mobilization. Nevertheless, the new technological affordances have their own dysfunctions. Today it is much easier to diffuse conspiracy theories, (Williams and Delli Carpini, 2011) and social networks are

also used by terrorist groups around the globe (Weimann, 2006). In the Conclusion we will return to the question of costs and benefits arising from the new media regime. In what follows, we ask what happens to the major national actors in the coverage of war and terror when the processes on which we elaborated at the outset challenge the 'old order', that is, the very idea of the nation state.