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# The veil as a means of legitimization

An analysis of the interconnectedness of gender, media and war

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## ABSTRACT

The article raises the question of how the news narrative of the liberation of Afghan women from the Taliban regime is linked to the legitimization of military involvement in general and of German foreign policy in particular. We extend the concept of media logic put forth by Altheide and Snow (1979) by those of gender logic (the symbolic construction of male–female dichotomy) and the logic of war (the legitimization of war through the construction of self and other). The interconnectedness of these three logics leads to a specific presentation of women, which in turn serves as proof for the allegedly altered circumstances after the defeat of the Taliban. The discourse analysis of Germany's leading news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* shows that the veiling and unveiling of women is the most prominent feature in their reports on Afghanistan. 'The veiled woman' becomes a highly symbolic representation that marks the other culture as both foreign and irrational.

KEY WORDS ■ Afghanistan war ■ critical discourse analysis ■ gender logic  
■ German news magazines ■ Islam ■ media logic ■ orientalism ■ veil  
■ war logic

## Introduction

Women smiling happily into the camera, their faces no longer hidden by the blue veil – in Germany this image came to signify the defeat of the Taliban. But what do these pictures really tell us about the situation in Afghanistan and about women's rights? We will argue that the veil was predominantly a means to legitimize the military intervention in Afghanistan. It became a symbol that was largely stripped of its references to the plight of women. Focusing almost exclusively on the veil oversimplified the situation in Afghanistan and only

superficially addressed the violation of the rights of women in the country. We suggest that this is a systematic outcome when the three discourses of war, media and gender with their specific preconditions and rules are intertwined. War needs the dichotomy of friends and foes, of perpetrators and victims, of those who act and those who suffer. This is exactly how the media present hierarchical gender relations. We base our discussion of the interconnectedness of war, gender and media around the concept of media logic (Altheide and Snow, 1979, 1991). Altheide and Snow focused solely on the form of media texts and did not take into account the cultural and political factors shaping their content, thus overemphasizing the power of the media. We adopt a somewhat broader approach which emphasizes how war logic and gender logic interact with media logic. This conceptual approach proves useful in analysing the empirical data of an exploratory study examining how women in Afghanistan were represented in Germany's two leading news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* before and after the war in 2001.

### **Media logic – war logic – gender logic**

While gender research has emphasized that stereotypes are intensified in times of war and conflict, very few studies have looked at the interlinkage of media, gender and war. Yet, in order to assess the question of the violation or realization of women's rights, the three social regimes have to be looked at together. The specific conditions of war, the rules and routines of media coverage and, finally, the gender relations prevalent in a specific society interconnect in ways that articulate the specificities of women's rights and the solutions offered to existing gender problems. So, when we talk about media logic, war logic and gender logic, we refer to the conditions that are constituted at the same time by the media reporting of war, the existing gender relations and the specific war situation.

By 1979, Altheide and Snow had already introduced the term *media logic* and attributed so much significance to it that they even chose it as the title of their book. In the book, they argued that:

mass media have risen to a dominant position in the institutional network of society primarily because various institutions follow a media logic in the definition and solution of problems . . . [E]xisting media logic is so incorporated into contemporary urban society that media professionals and the public take for granted that 'seeing' social phenomena through media logic is 'normal'. (Altheide and Snow, 1979: 236)

The authors thus insist on the overwhelming importance of the media for the construction of our reality. They single out media logic as the decisive term in

understanding how the media's construction of reality works. Distinguishing between content and form of media, media logic addresses the latter. It pertains to 'a processual framework *through which* social action occurs' (Altheide and Snow, 1991: 12; emphasis in original). Media logic then includes all the routines, organizational forms and structural factors that govern the handling of different pieces of information and their transformation into news and other media content:

In general terms, *media logic* consists of a form of communication, the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the various media and the formats used by these media . . . Format becomes a framework or perspective that is used to present as well as to interpret phenomena. (Altheide and Snow, 1991: 9)

As in genre theory, for Altheide and Snow, format shapes the content and rhetoric of media, and media logic becomes an influential way of interpreting events. However, contrary to genre theory, in their work it is largely a one-way road. Media logic frames the representation of social life and governs our political and cultural discourses, with other social institutions adapting to it. They write: '[I]t cannot be overemphasized that media serve as major sources of legitimation in how reality is defined and acted upon. Indeed, the legitimizing function of media is the essence of media influence and the consequent media consciousness' (Altheide and Snow, 1991: 237). The media, thus, are extremely powerful social institutions (cf. Altheide, 1985).

For Altheide and Snow, media logic is very influential and it has altered social life by determining the articulations of other social institutions. It is the 'general form' by which cultural content is organized (p. 11). McQuail (2000: 109) regards the concept of media logic as being rooted in a type of technological determinism. This is exactly where we disagree with Altheide and Snow and divert from the original formulation of the concept of media logic, which, in our view, over-stresses the power of the media. Even if we do not take into account the activity of the audiences or the influence of the political sphere, by focusing on the veil it becomes very clear that cultural discourses draw from experiences and events that far precede what Altheide and Snow (1991) call the 'postjournalism era'. Technological factors always interact with a variety of other cultural and political factors. The social, political and cultural environments are as much driving forces leading to the acceptance of particular formats and the demise of others, as they are, in turn, shaped by media logic. Following this line of argument, the different social spheres are not simply determined by the media and their way of organizing information but have their own inherent logic, their own frameworks for the construction of reality and their specific discursive traditions. This is why we

distinguish between media logic, gender logic and war logic and, furthermore, see the logic of those social spheres comprised of both form and content.

### **Media logic – the militarization of the media and journalism**

Studying the media's performance in war and conflict has emerged as a subfield in German communication science following the Gulf War in 1991 (see Löffelholz, 1993; Imhof and Schulz, 1995; Calließ, 1997). Written under the influence of the Second World War, the German Constitution requires that the news media advocate peaceful solutions to conflict. One of the most consistent results, shared by studies from other countries (cf. *European Journal of Communication*, 2000), is that the mainstream media in times of war regularly neglect their function of presenting a diversity of opinions and of criticizing and controlling the political and economic elite. The Austrian researcher Dominikowski (1993) thus suggests that the conditions under which the media operate lend themselves to problems in war reporting and prevent them from successfully fulfilling their function in a democratic society. Media logic leads to the 'structural militarization' of media production in times of war. The concept of 'structural militarization' refers to a symbiotic relationship between the discourses of media and war on a technological, political, economic, individual and professional level (Dominikowski, 1993: 47–8).

Media logic in the sense of Altheide and Snow is especially looked at in studies that examine the organization and routines of news production. Research on news values has isolated a number of factors that have to be ascribed in order for an event to become a news item. Galtung and Ruge (1973) have counted among these negativity, relevance, consonance, personification, cultural closeness, clarity and surprise.<sup>1</sup> The rules of news selection place a focus on the sensational and new and lead to a specific form of presenting events and topics. In a study of Austrian television news, Prenner (1995) has shown that structural problems such as race or gender relations are low on the agenda of the media since they incorporate few news values. Furthermore, if the violation of women's rights hit the news at all, then the political elite had the right to voice their interpretation of the problems while women's organizations were rarely given the opportunity to speak up. Media logic then serves to reduce the complexity of the issues and to narrow down the number of possible solutions drastically.

### **Gender logic – the construction of the male–female dichotomy**

Gender logic is tied to a dualistic and hierarchical symbolic construction of male and female, of femininity and masculinity. In her analysis of the

presentation of female soldiers in publications of the German army, the Bundeswehr, Schießler (2002) has shown that war and the military are very closely connected to traditional constructs of masculinity and this leaves little room for more progressive gender associations. Attributes such as bravery, aggressiveness, power, rationality, physical prowess and discipline are not only associated with maleness but are, at the same time, seen as essential qualities of the military forces. Schießler (2002: 48–9) claims that there is an interdependent and institutional link between military and masculinity. Stables (2003: 110) looked at the role of gendered violence as a justification for the Kosovo war and reached a similar conclusion: ‘The scene of international, particularly military, affairs, provides a narrative structure rich in masculine norms.’ Gender studies researchers have further shown that women are most often shown as victims of war and suffering from its consequences, while men have a much more active role in the media’s narratives either as defenders of the family and guardian of the ‘Heimat’ or as perpetrators (e.g. Pater, 1993; Krenn, 2003: 33–58).

The dichotomy of gender roles that is visible in times of peace is reproduced during times of war and more forcefully enacted. This is not necessarily contradictory to the fact that the existing social order often is overthrown in and after a war and the destruction of a country. The disruption of the traditional gender arrangements is one of the consequences of war with families being torn apart and with women fulfilling tasks extending the narrow confines of ‘proper’ female behaviour. The Second World War ‘Trümmerfrauen’ (women digging in the rubble) in Berlin provide a well-known example for this process. In other words, war leads to a situation of destruction and chaos that sometimes gives way to new definitions of gender roles and opportunities to rework traditional gender arrangements.

### **War logic – legitimizing war through the construction of self and other, friend and foe**

In democratic countries, it is absolutely necessary to convince the public of its inevitability before entering into a war. An armed operation is only legitimate for defence purposes: otherwise non-violence is the norm in dealing with a conflict. If there is no immediate threat, no direct attack from an enemy, then there has to be a strong moral reason to justify the participation in a war. In Germany, as in many other countries, a decision to enter into a military conflict has to be condoned by parliament and requires a three-quarter majority, so that a national consensus across party lines is needed. Such overwhelming support for participation in an armed conflict can only be achieved by drawing a sharp line between one’s own country and the allied

forces on one side and the enemy forces on the other. The very complex reasons for armed conflicts are reduced to a simple black-and-white scheme; otherwise war could not be legitimized and fought. Any solution other than a violent one is, at best, portrayed as being useless and naïve; at worst, it is discredited as cooperation with the enemy and a vindication of inhuman behaviour (see Kempf, 1997).

Thus, the logic of war supports a dualistic construction of good and evil, friend and foe, and prevents a detailed analysis of the history of a conflict, the interests involved in it and its possible solutions.

The attacks on September 11, 2001 were immediately labelled by most news reports as a 'war' waged against the USA. Almost from the beginning of that endless stream of pictures showing the demise of the World Trade Center the media framed the attacks in a way suggested by the politicians (Brensell and Schwab, 2001). If 9/11 included a declaration of war against America, and beyond that against the whole western world, then an armed response was not only a perfectly legitimate defensive measure but absolutely necessary to save civilization from the destructive forces of its enemy. The central means to justify the armed intervention was the construction of an opposition between civilization, represented by the USA and its allies, and barbarism, represented by the Taliban and Al Qaeda. This binary construction evolved around Islamism as the other, as Hafez has shown in his impressive analysis (Hafez, 2002a). Within this context, the media placed paramount importance on the violation of the rights of women in Afghanistan that had been very low on the agenda of mainstream media before 9/11. Thus, war logic, media logic and gender logic are closely interwoven. We hold that this interconnectedness does not allow for a comprehensive and differentiated discussion of the issues involved and this is precisely the reason why women's rights can be exploited for the legitimization of a military intervention (see Klaus et al., 2002).

### **The veil as representation of Islam**

In his influential book *Orientalism*, Edward Said (1991[1978]) has shown that the Orient is 'the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of the Other' (p. 1). The imaginings associated with Orientalism served to construct a European identity based on opposition to the Orient and its presumably colourful, sexually abundant and exotic way of life but, at the same time, barbarian and uncivilized culture. Thus, attached to the Orient, are racist, imperialist and ideological stereotypes marking 'us' Europeans as somehow better – more democratic, more civilized,

more industrious, more Christian – than ‘them’. Said does not dwell on the veil but it certainly is an integral part of this construction. It is a powerful symbol of strangeness and otherness. In Germany, the veil overwhelmingly signifies cultural distance, religious fanaticism and a fundamental violation of women’s rights. In his analysis of the Iranian Revolution of 1978/79, Hafez found that the representation of Islam as a backwardly oriented, traditional religion is paralleled by images of the oppression of women (Hafez, 2002b: 230–2). In the prevalent notions about Islam being an irrational antagonist of the politically modern West, politics, religion and violence form a close union (Hafez, 2002b: 224ff; see also Link, 1993).

The veil has a long tradition in the European history of portraying the East – to the point where the veiled woman becomes a symbol for Islam in general. By the veiling and the unveiling of women, the Islamic world is illustrated and interpreted and marked as a completely different culture:

More than a border between men and women the veil signifies . . . the border between Europe and the Muslim world. The veil serves as a symbol for the oppression of women against which the West wants to prove itself as being emancipatory . . . ‘The veiled woman’ marks the point where Colonialism claims justice and humanity for itself, where a claim for universal human rights is enforced, in short: where the colonial West can pose as liberator (of women).<sup>2</sup> (Volkening, 2001: 239–40, 248; cf. Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2000)

In this context, the symbol of the unveiled woman becomes meaningful as both a sign of victory and as evidence for doing a ‘just’ thing. The ‘unveiling’ itself dates back to colonial times, when, on the one hand, an unveiled woman counted as a ‘converted soul’ and, on the other, pornographic pictures of bare-breasted women with their veils drawn back signified their public availability to the colonizer (Volkening, 2001: 253ff.).

The tight link between the veil and the lack of freedom and its counter-image – the unveiling of women and gender equality – is a western construction that oversimplifies a complex relationship dating back to imperialist times. In some Arab countries, women began to wear the veil covering the whole body in order to be better protected from sexual abuses by colonial soldiers. In Iran under Reza Shah, women were forbidden to wear the veil in public as a symbol of modernity and the secularization of the country but this rule was imposed on women independent of their consent (Abid, 2001). In contrast, wearing the veil in public was violently enforced again under religious rule. Abid points out that today some Iranian women even in prestigious jobs wear the veil as a protest against globalization and the infiltration by western culture. When – depending on context – the veil serves as a means of oppression, a sign of resistance, a political or religious symbol, every effort at an all-encompassing interpretation becomes entangled in the various, multi-

faceted layers of the symbolic veil. Accordingly, in feminist debates, the veil is a similarly contested domain (Moorti and Ross, 2002; Shirvani, 2002; Sreberny, 2002). Alice Schwarzer, one of the best-known German feminists, opposes vehemently the public wearing of the veil and sees it without any doubt as a symbol of women's oppression in Islam, as 'a flag of the fighters for god' (Schwarzer, 2002: 16). Other feminists oppose this view and argue from an anti-colonial and anti-racist perspective drawing on Spivak's work (1990). Their critique centres on the victimization of the veiled woman. By erasing the multiplicity and variety of their lives' experiences, migrant women wearing the veil in Germany are constructed as the 'other' compared to the emancipated Western European woman (see Stötzer, 2004, for a comprehensive discussion). Because the veil had already been introduced in the public debate in Germany and for many served as a symbol of women's oppression it could play an important role in legitimizing the war in Afghanistan. It was used as a moral argument for entering the war and provided a means for creating a unified western identity necessary for the military operation.

### **Between high heels and the veil: the representation of Afghan women and the war in German news magazines**

#### **The war in Afghanistan and the German debate on security policy**

When NATO invoked Article 5 of the Washington Treaty, lending support to military action in Afghanistan, it was not only the first implementation of this article ever but also only the second time since the Second World War that the Bundeswehr had become involved in a military operation. About three weeks earlier, the German Parliament had already agreed to provide armed support and it finally gave formal consent on 16 November. This parliamentary debate, which was central for German involvement in Afghanistan, is interesting for a number of reasons and we shall return to it later. The first soldiers arrived during the last week of November 2001 and, by February 2002, the German military contingent was complete. Today, 1925 German soldiers are stationed in Afghanistan (Bundeswehr, 2004). The military operation in Afghanistan is part of an ongoing debate in Germany about the country's role within the European Union, in general, and the altered circumstances of foreign and security policy, in particular. Following the Second World War, large parts of the German public were highly suspicious of any form of military engagement. The founding of the Bundeswehr in 1956 was accompanied by a national debate and it was installed for defence purposes only. During the Cold War, Germany's military support within NATO or UN missions was restricted to

logistic or medical support (Von Bredow, 2000: 94–5, 198). Thus, the public had to be convinced if it was to accept the newly defined role of the Bundeswehr as a mobile troop, ‘defending’ Germany in far away countries (Struck, 2004) and becoming involved in military combat.

This was done in part by using a moral justification. The ‘humanitarian argument’ first played a major role in the war in Bosnia when it helped to justify an air force mission in the Adriatic Sea. Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel argued in autumn 1994:

Germany pursues a value-oriented foreign policy at the core of which is human rights . . . Precisely because Germany brought war upon the world 55 years ago, it seeks to serve peace all the more consistently . . . Those who claim to oppose war, but who are not prepared to resist warmongers by force of arms if necessary, can in truth neither create peace nor protect human rights. (Kinkel, 1994: 4)

The argument that the historical experience of the Second World War calls for a particular ‘German responsibility’ to prevent war and humanitarian catastrophe even at the cost of military action became very popular across party lines during the 1990s (Schwab-Trapp, 2002). When German troops entered into Kosovo in June 1999, they did so with consent from all political parties but the PDS, a socialist party based in East Germany. The situation of Albanian refugees in and outside Kosovo became the central legitimization for Germany’s support of the NATO strategy. The Balkan wars, then, played a central role in the process that gradually turned an anti-militaristic position into a military involvement in various places of the world.

After the German government had declared its unrestricted solidarity with the USA following 9/11, the issue of a ‘humanitarian catastrophe’ – this time under the Taliban regime – was addressed once again (Schröder, 2001). Contrary to Kosovo, this war was not labelled a ‘humanitarian intervention’ but a ‘fight against terrorism’. Yet the moral argument pervades a large part of the discussion since the human rights situation in Afghanistan was seen by many as a justification for fighting the ‘war on terrorism’ in that country (cf. Deutscher Bundestag, 2001). The violation of the rights of women became an important issue in building the case for this form of military involvement.

### **Analysis of the news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus***

In the process of shifting from an anti-militaristic position to an active military engagement, the violation of human rights was often cited by German politicians as a means of justification. This humanitarian argument played a key role in building a cross-party political and public consent. With reference to media logic, gender logic and war logic, we will analyse how in the context of a new direction in foreign policy the reporting on women’s rights

became part of war reporting, and how it served to legitimate the war in public discourse. In an explorative study, we analysed the press coverage of Afghanistan in Germany's two leading news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* within one year after 9/11.

In times of severe crisis the news magazines not only reach broader audiences but they also tend to feature more commentaries, in-depth articles and background information than television and the daily newspapers. Among their readers are a notable number of decision-makers and opinion leaders (Stockmann, 1999; Winter, 2001: 44ff.). While *Der Spiegel* stands for investigative journalism and a liberal political position influenced by the Social Democrats, *Focus* is more politically conservative. In our analysis, we singled out all articles on the subject of Afghanistan between 9/11 and the constitution of the first Loya Jirga (the council assembly that elected the new head of state) in June 2002 in both magazines. In a first step, we looked at all phrases in the articles mentioning women and analysed their content and their role within the larger structure and rhetoric of the article. In a second step, we compared the photographs that accompanied the articles for both content and style.

As the method of analysis we chose critical discourse analysis (Jäger, 1999), because it proves valuable for the analysis of media discourse in times of war in two ways: the first concerns the media logic and its specific construction of reality; the second the logic of war and gender with its many symbolic references. The power of the media is, to a large extent, based on its linguistic and discursive nature. Media texts represent the meanings and stereotypes projected through language as well as the complex processes of social change involved (Fairclough, 1995; Bell and Garrett, 1998).

### **Reporting on women – burkas, beards and pop music**

The textual analysis of the articles published in *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* that focused on women and women's concerns revealed that the burka was by far the most prominent subject. The study clearly shows that the presentation of women by the media does not necessarily mean reporting *about* women. In fact, women's issues (interests, needs, rights, opinions, etc.) were rarely discussed. While overall coverage of Afghanistan rose significantly after September 11, only a relatively small number of altogether 45 articles mentioned women in Afghanistan at all. Out of a total of 45 articles in the sample, only one article in each magazine focused on the situation of women as the main topic (Emcke, 2001; Jung, 2001). Although in all other articles women were not the centre of attention, there was a passing reference to their plight. Interestingly enough, they were most frequently featured in articles published

in the second half of November 2001, shortly after the fall of Kabul and the German Parliament's decision to send troops. In *Der Spiegel*, 92 articles of a total of 110 were published in the last third of the year and 26 of them mentioned women to a varying degree. In *Focus*, the numbers are similar. After the Bundeswehr came to Afghanistan in February 2002, news coverage almost ceased. Only the constitution of the Loya Jirga in June renewed some interest in the country.

From the 45 articles analysed, those passages that in some way dealt with women's concerns were extracted and a thematic coding was conducted. The content analysis reveals that women are most frequently mentioned with regards to the veil. A smaller number dealt with the plight of the refugees, politically active women, schooling, new jobs, the lack of legal rights or humanitarian help. Other subjects such as accommodation to western life style, participation in the Loya Jirga, abuses etc. played a minor role in the articles. We will briefly discuss the three most prominent subjects: the veiled woman, the politically active woman and the refugees. While *Der Spiegel* saw the *veil* solely as a means of oppression under the Taliban regime, the *Focus* in two articles interpreted it as a traditional piece of clothing that is worn voluntarily in post-Taliban Afghanistan (*Focus* 45/2001: 8; <sup>3</sup> Jung, 2001: 278; Malzahn, 2002a: 137). In one case, the burka was described as potentially dangerous, because the woman might be hiding weapons underneath it (Liebig and Taheri, 2001: 308). But far more often the veil is mentioned together with other 'signs' of the newly gained freedom such as the shaving of beards or the listening to pop music, that were prohibited under Taliban rule.

Theoretically the highly symbolic veil entails a chance to discuss a number of subjects from the legal standing of women to their everyday problems and to present *women as politically active* citizens. However, neither *Focus* nor *Der Spiegel* seized this opportunity due to the interweaving of war logic, gender logic and media logic in war reporting. Women are seen as mute victims of the Taliban; their interests and viewpoints remain largely hidden. Moreover, their muteness carries on in post-Taliban times and they were not generally granted voices as citizens after the liberation of Kabul. Women are seldom portrayed as actively shaping their own lives and futures. The article 'Birth of a new Nation' (Malzahn, 2002b) published in *Der Spiegel* provides a striking example of this. The article deals with the constitution of the first Loya Jirga and starts out by accompanying one of the female participants on her journey to Kabul. But apart from the fact that she voted for Hamid Karzai in the election, we learn nothing about her political opinions, her appraisal of the situation or her ideas for the future. Remaining within the prescription of a rigid gender logic, we are informed instead that she regrets how the waiters

in the hotel 'do not feel responsible for anything' (Malzahn, 2002b: 140), that she cried at night and that the mud-brown Kabul causes a headache. We are told that she recalls the introductory words another woman used in addressing the assembly: 'I first want to express my feelings' and that the speaker was interrupted after only five minutes because her family had collaborated in the past with the Communists (Malzahn, 2002b: 140). Although a woman is allowed to speak up, her voice is confined to the narrow realm of a binary gender construction. Even after the war, the report reconfirms a very traditional view on 'proper' femininity. Although this article may stand out as particularly outspoken, it clearly demonstrates a tendency found in other articles, too: whenever politically active women are represented at all, we learn more about their personal backgrounds and their present circumstances than about their political opinions. Frequently their life's experiences are even more radically reduced to the issue of having to wear the burka or not (Klußmann, 2001; Reitschuster et al., 2001).

Being a *refugee* was another important context in which women appeared in the articles. The portrayal of refugee women is often highly traditional: here they are constructed as passive victims subjected to the hands of active men who decide on their fate (Kurbjuweit, 2001; Klußmann et al., 2001; for an exception, see Emcke, 2001). Gender logic and logic of war are closely entangled in the refugee issue: the connotation of women as being weak, passive and in need of protection mingles with a demand to help the needy refugees and a condemnation of the evil 'other' who forced the women to leave their homes. Accordingly, female refugees are often presented as mothers. Schießler (2002) points out that the notion of motherhood explicitly refers to the stereotype of the woman that has to be protected by a husband and brave fighter. When the portrayal of a woman and her child appears within the context of an article on a refugee camp, this begs for our pity and for our help (Kirchner et al., 2002: 37, 63). Of course, this is not objectionable per se but the call for protection of the refugee women and their children becomes questionable when it is used to justify military intervention and to present it as the only possible solution.

### **Picturing women – veiled and unveiled**

Because the information contained in pictures is usually absorbed much faster than that in texts (Behrens and Hinrichs, 1986), pictures have a strong influence in shaping public opinion. But they do not only carry information, they evoke emotions and suggest authenticity to a much higher degree than texts. As culturally and historically shaped sign systems, they also help us to evaluate new events by comparing them to former experiences. But when the

suggestive power of a picture collides with doubts about its authenticity, another option is taken: the picture is credited for its symbolic value: 'No matter of what it "really" shows, its message and relevance arise from the context of what a person might think is possible. The picture becomes an illustration' (Naumann, 2001: 37). The picture gains another quality of 'truth': it is no longer perceived as an effigy of reality but as a symbol of it. In her content analysis of the news magazines *Focus* and *Der Spiegel*, Winter (2001: 167) has shown that the gender logic influences the choice of the news photographs. Most pictures of women are used as symbols and for the purpose of illustration and demonstration respectively, whereas pictures of men are more often used for documentation and visualization.

Our analysis of the coverage of the Afghanistan war on one level clearly demonstrates the same point, as the burka was used as a symbol. However, on another level, this was not contextualized by gender but by religion and/or ethnicity since the portrayal of the burka was firmly placed within the larger frame of the 'radical Islam'. The burka came to represent the inhumanity of the Taliban regime as well as the unpredictability, irrationality and strangeness usually attributed to Islam (cf. Marx, 2001). The German media did not offer a nuanced discussion of the meaning of the veil or the situation of women in Afghanistan. In a sense, then, war logic modified gender logic in the media coverage.

Following the defeat of the Taliban, the media went in search of pictures of unveiled women that would 'prove' their liberation to the western public and at the same time provide 'proof' for the success of the war effort. Shortly after the Taliban regime was defeated, a number of photographs appeared in German newspapers and magazines that bore a striking resemblance: each pictured a young and beautiful woman smiling happily into the camera, surrounded by others still wearing the blue burka. As one commentator in the leftist magazine *Konkret* noted: 'One doesn't need any training to see how artificial and staged these pictures are' (Uschtrin, 2002: 16). Grittmann (2003) shows how the same photograph of an unveiled face peering out from a crowd of women clad in the burka can symbolize both the restrictions imposed on women under Taliban rule in 1996 and their newly gained freedom in 2001 – depending on the context in which it is published. According to one report, the unveiling was often done to suit the western media and women hid under the burka again whenever Afghan men approached (Fueß, 2001). Yet the almost identical pictures appeared widely and some of them – we found at least four – were printed by more than one paper. Both *Focus* and *Der Spiegel* published them shortly after the Taliban abandoned Kabul in November (*Der Spiegel* 47/2001; Klußmann, 2001; *Focus* 47/2001; Jung, 2001). One characteristic of these photographs is that one woman or girl looks into the camera out

of a group of women that otherwise are veiled. The veil with its rich connotations marks the foe, while the goal of the unveiling signifies the rightness of the military action. It portrays the military alliance as good, because it confronts the detestable deeds of the Taliban. The veil stays in the pictures as a prominent point of reference showing the unveiling, because this way the problems of waging a war and the negative consequences on the people in Afghanistan and the region do not have to be confronted. The justification for the war is given by the rich portrayal of the 'other' against which military action is directed. The western world in contrast is only vaguely sketched by referring to symbols of a capitalist life style.

The articles in *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* accompanying the photographs of the unveiling of women only briefly mention the fact that the women in Afghanistan are now allowed to wear western clothes, buy lipsticks or visit beauty parlours. But again journalists do not delve any deeper into women's current situation. However, the availability of the emblems of western life style turned out to be an important subject in the following months. Sometimes the news magazines exemplified this by pictures of fashion boutiques and beauty parlours (*Der Spiegel* 47/2001: 150). This type of photograph as well as others often worked with contrasts: a woman clad in the burka but wearing high heels (*Focus* 50/2001: 280) or a deeply veiled woman next to others wearing trousers and saluting laughingly into the camera (*Focus* 43/2001: 150). Most strikingly, these images have no relation to the written texts which they accompany, which describe the need for politicians to understand the geographical, historical and ethnological landscape of Afghanistan in order to stabilize the country politically. The thematic frame of women's 'liberation' is given solely by the captions, e.g. 'Liberated Afghan women: Tormented for years' (Klußmann, 2001: 8). The gender logic is very clearly visible in these pictures: the unveiled face bears 'evidence' of the liberation from Taliban oppression and, at the same time, serves to demonstrate the success of the military operation. If veiled women do appear, the magazines – and especially *Focus* – point out that this is due to their own free decision: 'A glance, a smile: Her sky-blue burka pulled back, this young woman looks . . . into the camera. Others remain veiled – but since the retreat of the Taliban troops they do it voluntarily' (*Focus* 50/2001: 278); 'If the refugee wanted she could exchange the burka for a scarf. But for many Afghan women the blue, yellow or white cloth is part of their tradition' (*Focus* 25/2001: 8–9). This way the logic of the 'evidence' is not put at risk.

The photographs of women that accompany the press coverage are almost exclusively used for their symbolic value and are seldom linked to the content of the text at all. Within the logic of these images, the unveiled woman stands as a symbol for the bettering of the situation of all women and beyond that for

the liberation of Afghanistan in general. Thus, it serves to comprehensively justify Germany's involvement in the war. Given the context, the veil is completely separated from the real women wearing it. Instead, the veil becomes an ideological means by which a military fight with predominantly male actors is justified.

### Summary

Taken together, our findings show that in the influential German news magazines, *Der Spiegel* and *Focus*, women in Afghanistan are most often presented in the context of the veil. This highly symbolic garment pervades not only the photographs but the texts as well. Women serve as a foil on which the presumed brutality and inhumanity of a dangerous enemy – the Taliban – can be attached. In texts and photographs alike, the burka symbolized the oppression of women and was used as a means to raise emotions and replace arguments. Since these references were almost always placed in the context of articles on the Taliban regime, they become part of the frame 'radical Islam', which – in the dualistic logic of war – functions as an alien and uncivilized opponent to the 'West'. The 'veiled woman' can illustrate this dualism because they stand in stark contrast to the image of modern Western European femininity (Schmidt-Linsenhoff, 2000: 25).

The technical, organizational and narrative logic of the news media leads to a specific presentation of women in which the lifting of the (already highly symbolic) veil becomes a sign for the allegedly altered circumstances of everyday life after the defeat of the Taliban. This narrative and the media logic that helps to produce it have in turn been adopted by political leaders in Germany and shaped public opinion about the war. In a prominent speech, Chancellor Schroeder argued that the pictures of women shown on TV were proof of the success of the military operation:

If you have seen the TV images of people celebrating in the streets of Kabul after the Taliban had pulled out – and I have in mind particularly the images of women, who are finally allowed to meet freely in the streets – then it should not be too difficult to judge the outcome of the military operation in the people's interest. (Deutscher Bundestag, 2001)

Similar statements were heard from members of all other parties except the PDS. Gregor Gysi, one of their leading figures, argued:

In this context there is a lot of talk about women's rights . . . But the bombs are not dropped because of women's rights, they are dropped in response to the attacks in New York and Washington. Because if this were about women's rights, I'd ask: how many more countries are you going to bomb in order to enforce them? (Deutscher Bundestag, 2001)

In the case of legitimizing the war in Afghanistan, the media coverage became closely entwined with the process of political decision-making.

The veil does not vanish from the news reports after the defeat of the Taliban as one could have suspected. It is only lifted and stays as a point of reference to the frame of 'radical Islam', reiterating old stereotypes (see Maier and Stegmann, 2003). Although the question of if and to what degree anti-Islamic stereotypes influenced news coverage of the war in Afghanistan remains controversial (see Bünger, 2002; Hafez, 2002a), the media never tired of talking about the 'Islamistic fundamentalism' and rigorous anti-modernism of the Taliban regime.

## **Conclusions**

In this article we have tried to show how the news media may use the issue of the violation of women's rights as legitimization of a military intervention. Based on the thesis that such an exploitation of women's rights follows from the interconnectedness of the logic of war, media and gender, we analysed how the influential German news magazines *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* wrote about women in Afghanistan. Gender logic led to a perspective in reporting that perceived women predominantly as victims. Even politically active women were placed firmly in the context of traditional femininity. Thus, the portrayal of women was used to demonstrate the enemy's disregard for human rights. The image of the Orient as the 'other' of Europe was transferred to Afghanistan and produced a dichotomous worldview, in which the European self appeared as more civilized and moral. The logic of war constructed an 'other' against whom a war then seemed justified. Due to media logic, the news reports and photographs analysed supported this hegemonic interpretation of the situation.

In our opinion, it was long overdue that the international media brought the human rights situation in Afghanistan, in general, and the violation of women's rights, in particular (which had been known since 1995/96) to the attention of the international public. However, the timing and the content of reporting, when it was done, served a strategy of legitimating war and presented the armed intervention as the only possible answer to international terrorism and the Taliban regime. The media reported about abuses almost exclusively in the context of the war. In particular, they did not question why politicians suddenly seemed so interested in women's rights in Afghanistan and did not question their motives. When the Taliban were defeated, the

unveiling served as justification of the military involvement. Very few media and politicians in Germany questioned the military strategy and the shift in German foreign policy that had led to it.

The interest in the situation of Afghan women did not reach beyond the immediate military operation. Often unnoticed by the media, women's rights in Afghanistan are, to this day, seldom acknowledged and enforced and many women are still suffering from violence (Amnesty International, 2004). Since the war, background information, self-critique and a reflective stance on war reporting have been rare. Also, the legitimacy of the 'humanitarian argument' that was used as a means for gaining public support and that marks a shift in German foreign policy has not been debated by the news media. Yet these are precisely the questions that need to be raised whenever the 'humanitarian argument' is used in support of participating in a war. The debate in the German parliament on military operations in Afghanistan exemplifies that women's rights – and the reference to the according news coverage – can play a decisive role in the political legitimization of war. The media are entangled in this process; they follow war logic since they serve as mediators between the political decision-makers and the broader public.

By no means do we want to argue that it is not important to address the issue of women's rights in the media. But whenever women's rights suddenly appear on the agenda of foreign or domestic news, we should ask where this interest is rooted and whether it serves women or some other purpose. With regard to the media reporting on war and conflict, it has to be asked whether the subject is used to promote war as the only possible means for solving problems and preventing further abuses. What are the gender discourses into which the news coverage ties? Do women routinely have their voices heard in the news? Are there more than symbolic and fleeting references to the way they live their lives? When gender logic, war logic and media logic are entangled, as was the case in the media coverage of the Afghanistan war, there is little hope for finding clear answers to these questions.

## Notes

- 1 Theoretically, wars comply with most of the factors that lead to the publication of an event but, in practice, most wars go unreported due to intervening news factors such as a bias towards elite nations, elite people, etc.
- 2 All translations from German publications are our own.
- 3 Citations of *Der Spiegel* and *Focus* with no given authors refer to photographs and their captions.

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