

KAL: The media exploited story

by Robert A. Hackett

An airliner strays into hostile territory, over sensitive military installations. Fighter planes scramble to intercept it. After establishing visual contact, a fighter-pilot fires two rockets into the intruder. Scores of civilians are killed in the resulting crash. Afterwards, bitter recriminations. The state which downed the aircraft tries to justify itself. The plane ignored instructions to land, officials say, and tried to escape. They had suspected it of being on a spy mission. The airliner's flag-state and its allies condemn the action as "heinous", "terrorism of a new type", "a terrible massacre", "committed in cold blood", "deplored by the civilized world". They charge that the airliners had been given no warning, and the fighter pilot had "definite instructions" to destroy it. One superpower accuses the other of responsibility for "new crimes and new acts of aggression". The U.N.'s International Civil Aviation Organization denounces the action and calls for an investigation.

This story, the Soviet downing of Flight KAL-007, is all too familiar by now, right?

Wrong. The above statements were taken from news summaries of the Israeli downing of a Libyan airliner over the Sinai on February 21, 1973. Both attacks could be considered atrocities. Yet Israel suffered no lasting loss of support in the West, while the KAL disaster has unleashed Cold War hysteria poisoning North America's political climate. We see this at all levels, from Congressional jingoism, to harassment of Toronto anti-Cruise activists, to Edmonton Council's vote to quash a proposed disarmament referendum.

The much greater political fallout from KAL-007

is partly due to mainstream journalism's tendency (in the words of media critic Barrie Zwicker) "to be spear carriers for official Washington's interpretation of the world." My preliminary monitoring of KAL-007 coverage in several periodicals suggests several ways in which they were "spear carriers".

Milking the Story

"If the Soviet media have grossly underplayed the incident, in line with their government's priorities," asked Zwicker in his weekly radio commentary, "have the Western media overplayed (it), in line with Washington's priorities? I think the answer clearly is 'yes'."

Time and *Newsweek* magazines gave the Sinai tragedy barely one page each in the middle of their issues of March 5, 1973, and then (apart from a handful of readers' letters) dropped it. By contrast, each newsmagazine gave KAL-007 two consecutive cover stories, totalling 45 pages. In the ten issues following each incident, the *Globe* and *Mail* devoted only 11 articles to Sinai, and 103 to KAL-007 (including front-page coverage daily from Sept. 1 to Sept. 14).

What made KAL-007 so vastly more newsworthy than Sinai? In part, the Israelis defused the situation by displaying more contrition than the Soviets, and offering compensation. Media speculation about how KAL-007 "really happened", and why the Soviets did it, has been fuelled by their self-defeating stonewalling, apparently motivated by internal bureaucratic politics, aversion to public self-criticism, and reluctance to reveal the shortcomings of their air-defenses. The direct involvement of one of the superpowers, with its implications for world peace, is another factor. So too is

ethnocentrism: the Israelis killed only one North American passenger, the Soviets, dozens.

But there is more to it than that. In their study of foreign news coverage, J. Galtung and M. Ruge argued that one factor making an event newsworthy is its consonance with pre-existing expectations. Sinai contradicted the media-nurtured pre-Lebanon image of the Israeli David fending off the Arab Goliath. But KAL-007 fitted spectacularly well the media's stereotype of the U.S.S.R. as a brutal, totalitarian threat to world peace. In his survey of Toronto press coverage of the U.S.S.R. over six months, Zwicker found a preoccupation with spies, dissidents, and weapons, and very little on daily life, culture, sports, etc. There is "virtually no human face, but a dehumanized ideological abstraction." Out of 190 opinion columns, editorials and cartoons, only four could be considered at all favorable to the U.S.S.R. A similar study by William Dorman found that the U.S. media painted Soviet intentions and behaviour "in the darkest possible shades", echoed the views of official Washington, failed to challenge Americans' worst fears, and substituted labels for analysis. (*Sources*, Summer 1983).

All of this accords with the Western media's selective pattern of attention to human rights violations, extensively documented by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman. As one of hundreds of examples, two Soviet dissidents on trial gathered more press attention in 1978 than 20,000 Latin Americans tortured or killed by U.S. client states. (*The Political Economy of Human Rights*, vol. 1, p. 24).

Media Frames: the "Evil Empire"

Three broad political interpretive frames informed media coverage and public response to KAL-007. Each frame emphasizes different "facts", raises different questions. The first frame we might label "the evil empire". According to it, the destruction of KAL-007 was "a terrorist act to sacrifice the lives of innocent human beings" (Reagan) which exemplifies the U.S.S.R.'s willingness "to use every available means to assert its power, spread its influence, export its despotism, subjugate people, and threaten world peace" (M. Hamm, Heritage Foundation). The appropriate responses are sanctions, harsh reprimands, the quarantine of the U.S.S.R. from the "civilized" world, and above all, a huge military (especially nuclear) build-up to "defend" ourselves.

The second frame is the Soviet Justification: KAL-007 was on a spy mission provoked by the U.S. to justify a hard line in arms talks, and its

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"termination" was a legitimate act of national self-defence.

A third frame is the Reasoned Response. Without seeking to excuse the Soviet action, its intention is to reduce the hysteria and self-righteousness of the West's reaction. Themes appropriate to this frame include the rather stained human rights record of the U.S. and its own client states; the need to reduce international tensions to avoid further such tragedies; and a picture of the U.S.S.R. as "an ultra-cautious, primarily defensive power which certainly needs to be kept in check when it shows signs of expansionist opportunism, but which it is expedient to involve as much as possible in the intercourse of civilized states." (David Watt, *London Times*, Sept. 9).

The "free press" would not be credible (or ideologically effective) without at least the appearance of balance between contending viewpoints. So out of the *Globe's* 129 articles in the three weeks after KAL-007, 18 seemed directly to support the "evil empire" frame, and 21 the "reasoned response". Twenty-nine articles advanced the "Soviet justification" (mainly in the Soviets' own statements, which were the main topic of 12 articles), and 23 contained explicit refutations of the Soviet spy/provocation line.

Yet the "evil empire" frame was often privileged in the media, especially the American newsmagazines, which spurn conventional "objectivity" in favour of colourful, interpretive reporting. Some examples:

- Said *Time* (which still has a Canadian circulation of 330,000): "For Americans, the loss of 61 U.S. civilians in a military attack may have been the greatest since the Japanese assault on Pearl Harbor" (Sept. 12). It may have been. It may not. Lack of historical research was not about to deter the use of such an explosive comparison. Nor did *Time* point out that Pearl Harbor was not flying over Japanese airspace on Dec. 7, 1941.
- "Last week, the world witnessed the Soviet Union that Ronald Reagan had always warned against," concluded *Newsweek* (Sept. 12).

THE SPORTS QUIZ

1. THE "OFFENSIVE LINE":

- comprises the front five players on a football team
- is a remark that grosses everyone out
- is the queue for people waiting to get into the showers following a grueling workout

2. A DRAFT CHOICE:

- is a graduating college player chosen by a pro team
- means opening the window because you want to
- means cold OV on tap

3. A POP FLY IS:

- a ball hit high into the outfield
- a fatherly insect
- a zipper that opens by surprise



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