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Christian F. Buck: Medien und Geiselnahmen. Fallstudien zum inszenierten Terror

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**Christian F. Buck: Medien und Geiselnahmen.
Fallstudien zum inszenierten Terror**

Wiesbaden: VS 2007, 321 S., ISBN 978-3-531-15514-2, € 39,90

Media coverage of the 'Jolo hostage crisis' of 2000 was as large in quantity as it was sensational in nature. With unprecedented access to the Filipino camp where guerrillas held twenty-one captives, media representations turned the best-known German hostages, the 'Familie Wallert,' into the involuntary stars of a hybrid of rolling news, reality TV and soap opera. Christian F. Buck's accomplished monograph on hostage-taking and the media revisits the events, persuasively arguing for their continued actuality. He uses the case as a starting point for a wider exploration of relations between government and media in hostage crises, focusing on the constraints imposed on state action by mass-medial ubiquity and journalistic recklessness.

The study's theoretical preface emphasizes the inadequacy of classical models which posit news media as neutral transmitters of information about an extra-medial social reality. Turning rather to Luhmann's systems theory, the author stresses the media's reality-constructing role, and the mutual conditioning of separately functioning medial and political systems. Throughout, the news media's increasingly uninhibited pursuit of its systemic interests is contrasted with the more constrained power of the state, epitomized by the impossibility of "securing the crime scene" (S.272), the fact which left the Jolo hostage camp open to the media. While the author analyzes both systems, and their interaction, the book's locus lies within the political arena: Buck is a German foreign ministry official, tangentially involved in the events in question. Besides being his 2007 dissertation, the book aims to systematize crisis-generated expertise into institutional knowledge, to assist, as he puts it, in the "Lernprozesse [der] Bundesregierung." (S.9)

The lengthy reconstruction of the case's minutiae in the book's central section is both gripping and frustrating. Gripping, since the events retain a strangeness and bleak humor worthy of a Don DeLillo novel, not least in reversals where journalists become hostages and hostages take on the functions of journalists. Unfortunately, perhaps due to a wish to avoid the sensationalism of the original coverage, the complex material is presented as a highly detailed, but unvaryingly linear daily digest of events. A more synthetic approach might have done better justice to its encyclopedic research. The book regains its surefootedness and analytic scope in its treatment of twenty "Dilemmata und Lösungen." In this analysis, which will

surely serve as a diplomatic reference work in future crises, Buck crisply assesses the media-political ramifications of issues ranging from the state's responsibility for citizens abroad to the appropriate level of crisis management ("Ist Geiselnahme immer Chefsache?" [S.240]), from airport etiquette at hostage homecomings to the difficult question of ransom payments.

In line with his functionalist approach, Buck's conclusions focus on practical lessons for government, refraining, for the most part, from substantial normative critique of the evolving media culture he documents. The blurring of values, genres and institutions of news and entertainment; the performativity of contemporary political culture; the public's appetite for narrative clichés and "fest gefügte Skripte" (S.298) of an increasingly ubiquitous news media – these factors suffuse Buck's study and their impact on government is the book's ultimate *raison d'être*, but they are only locally the subject of direct analysis or critique, when they hamper executive strategy or endanger innocent life. Buck's intense focus on one example of recent political spectacle indirectly brings these developments into sharp relief, however, lending the book relevance beyond the specialized field of political communications, inside or outside of government.

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