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## Transnational Advertising and International Relations: US Press Discourses on the Benetton "We on Death Row" Campaign

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### Abstract

Over the years, the Benetton Company has repeatedly created controversy with flamboyant advertising campaigns, provocative statements and graphic pictures – what Giroux (1994: 21) described as 'hyperventilating realism' – on global social issues such as AIDS, war, politics, race, religion (Tinic, 1997) and, most recently, capital punishment. In effect, Benetton advertising campaigns have become a unique '[form] of global communication and a significant site of cultural production' (Tinic, 1997: 4). In this paper we analyze Benetton's 2000 'We on Death Row' campaign as a site of cultural production where ideological differences between the United States and Europe are played out. More specifically, we examine the mass-mediated public discourse framing the campaign in the so-called prestige press in the United States. We examine on the discursive boundaries surrounding imported cultural forms like the Benetton advertisements, and, using the Gramscian concept of hegemony, focus on how these boundaries are established through the use of media frames. Our analysis will also demonstrate that transnational advertising is a discursive space where international relations are played out.

### Disciplines

International and Intercultural Communication

### Comments

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# Transnational advertising and international relations: US press discourses on the Benetton 'We on Death Row' campaign

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Over the years, the Benetton Company has repeatedly created controversy with flamboyant advertising campaigns, provocative statements and graphic pictures – what Giroux (1994: 21) described as 'hyperventilating realism' – on global social issues such as AIDS, war, politics, race, religion (Tinic, 1997) and, most recently, capital punishment. In effect, Benetton advertising campaigns have become a unique '[form] of global communication and a significant site of cultural production' (Tinic, 1997: 4). In this paper we analyze Benetton's 2000 'We on Death Row' campaign as a site of cultural production where ideological differences between the United States and Europe are played out. More specifically, we examine the mass-mediated public discourse framing the campaign in the so-called prestige press in the United States. We examine on the discursive boundaries surrounding imported cultural forms like the Benetton advertisements, and, using the Gramscian concept of hegemony, focus on how these boundaries are established through the use of media frames. Our analysis will also demonstrate that transnational advertising is a discursive space where international relations are played out.

This article should not be misconstrued as a defense of Benetton's brand of transnational advertising. With other scholars who have analyzed Benetton's campaigns (Giroux, 1994; Hoeschmann, 1997; Tinic, 1997) we believe that 'the bottom line for the company is profit and not social justice' (Giroux, 1994: 12). The social messages expressed in its advertising campaign should not obfuscate the fact that the Benetton Company is a highly successful post-Fordist corporation probably engaged in business practices that undermine social justice. Besides, Luciano Benetton, senator in the Italian parliament, is a leading proponent of business interests in Italy, known more for his neo-liberal political beliefs than for his social activism (Giroux, 1994; Hoeschmann, 1997). Recognizing that Benetton's *primary* goal is to sell sweaters rather than raise consciousness, we nevertheless believe, with other researchers (Costera Meijer, 1998; García- Canclini, 1995), that advertising *can*, in some situations, raise important political issues. This article's objective is to examine the reception of the 'We on Death Row' campaign in the US prestige press to understand how the political message carried in the campaign is received and 'domesticated' for consumption in the United States.

The first section of this article reviews the concept of hegemony as it developed from its Gramscian origins to more contemporary applications. In the second section we examine how the hegemonic process permeates mass mediated public discourse, focusing on the 'We on Death Row' Benetton campaign in the context of the 2000 presidential election in the United States, and the issue of capital punishment. Third, we conduct a textual analysis of the coverage of the advertisements by the US prestige press. In the discussion, we articulate the public discourse generated by the Benetton 'We on Death Row' campaign with international relations between incorporated into the ideological fabric(s) of the United States.

## **Textual analysis and mass-mediated public discourse**

The complex process of domestication of transnational images and ideologies has not received full attention in the study of international relations or in the interdisciplinary debate on globalization. In this article we examine the transnational cultural-ideological flow from a specific point of entry: the importation of a hybrid cultural form, an advertising campaign with a social message, blending issues of consumption and citizenship. This fills an important gap in the literature, since most research on cultural globalization and transnational communication has focused on the consequences and implications of cultural flows stemming from the United States and entering other national and cultural spheres. In contrast, this paper focuses on 'foreign' mediated messages coming into the United States.

Textual analyses have uncovered the underlying framing tactics used by the print media (Lester, 1994; Lule, 1993, 1995; Tucker, 1998). In this study, textual analysis is useful for looking at the re-embedding of the global, originally Italian, advertisements by the American so-called 'elite press', into the national ideological fabric. Textual analysis allows us to reveal 'a fundamental assumption: that meaning is a social production' (Acosta-Alzuru and Lester-Roushanzamir, 2000: 315). The articulation of ideas is key to understanding them, as 'language plus other practices constitutes our evidence within a text' (Acosta-Alzuru and Lester-Roushanzamir, 2000: 315). In this study, the Benetton Company presents a discourse opposed to capital punishment. In turn, the elite press frames the campaign as negative, drawing on Benetton's controversial history, often overlooking the issue of capital punishment. To understand those framing devices, we conducted a textual analysis of articles in the US elite press to uncover the boundaries drawn around on the reception parameters of the 'We on Death Row' campaign.

### **The campaign and the study**

The Benetton Company officially launched the 'We on Death Row' campaign on 31 January 2000. A pre-campaign promotion appeared in the February issue of *Talk* magazine, which was available on US news-stands in January, consisting of a 96-page insert of the 'We on Death Row' campaign (Muwakkil, 2000; Stuever, 2000). The campaign was also featured in *Rolling Stone*, *Vanity Fair*, and the *New Yorker*, as well as on billboards in major US metropolitan areas. As such, the campaign had a wide reach throughout the United States.

We performed a textual analysis on a total of 16 articles published in the US prestige press in the three months of the study. Six were from the *New York Times*, including two Reuters stories, five were published in the *Chicago Tribune*, three in the *Los Angeles Times*, and two in the *Washington Post*. These articles, including news stories and opinion pieces, are from four major US newspapers, representing the so-called prestige press in different US regions: the *Washington Post*, the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times* and the *Chicago Tribune*. These four newspapers, leading opinion makers in their respective regions and the entire United States, offer a comprehensive view of how the Benetton campaign has been taken up in mainstream public discourse throughout the country. We also used four articles from *Advertising Age*, a trade magazine, to provide some perspective on how the advertising industry has perceived this campaign.

We focused on the three months of January, February and March 2000. Our analysis began one month prior to the official premiere of the 'We on Death Row' campaign, followed through the first month of the campaign, and ended one month after the campaign. These three months capture the anticipation of the campaign, the immediate press reactions and commentary after the end of the campaign, therefore providing a comprehensive picture of US prestige press coverage.

## **Media frames and the construction of hegemony**

The concept of hegemony has evolved substantially since Antonio Gramsci first coined it, and has been increasingly used and adapted in critical analyses of the news media (Anderson, 1988; Condit, 1994; Gitlin, 1980; Hallin, 1987; Press, 1989; Wren-Lewis, 1983; see Carragee, 1993, for a detailed discussion of the application of hegemony to mass media discourse). The process of constructing consent into what Gramsci refers to as 'common sense' is complex, and goes mostly unrecognized by the public. Language plays a key role in this process as it is rhetorically enlisted in order to promote a specific understanding of a given issue. Thus, language becomes a primary instrument in the hegemonic construction of 'common sense'. The construction and use of a language system aids in the production of ideology for public consumption, as 'language [is] seen to be a social given which structure[s] consciousness' (Brandist, 1996: 95). Articulating Gramsci's hegemony with a Bakhtinian focus on the semiotic role of language allows a comprehension of the narration of power as hegemonic frames are deployed in mass-mediated public discourse.

The theory of hegemony must be revised to account for the intensification and increased complexity of transnational flows of culture, images and ideologies. This is important because the mass media are an important site of analysis in the hegemonic process due to high cost of advertising in transnational media space (Condit, 1994: 209). This high cost reinforces the hegemonic idea of a powerful alliance of the economic and political elite forging common sense by framing information in public discourse. Condit (1994) uses a model of concordance to describe the hegemonic process in the contemporary United States, defining *concordance* as 'the active or passive acceptance of a given social policy or political framework as the best that can be negotiated under the given conditions' (Condit, 1994: 210).

In the American commercial media system where politicians are dependent on corporate donations to publicize their views, the economic elite contributes to drawing the boundaries of public discourse. Hegemony offers the pretense of equal participation in public discourse 'based on an accommodationist model of discourse that assumes that all parties have the right to articulate their own interests, and that each party's interest deserves a claim on the whole' (Condit, 1994: 210). Consequently, in the transnational flow of ideas and ideologies, global, controversial notions are disembedded from their original context and then re-embedded in the space of reception according to the interests of the political and economic elite.

A host of scholars (Gitlin, 1980; Lewis, 1999; Tuchman, 1978; Tucker, 1998; Watkins, 2001) have underscored the importance of media framing in the construction of social reality. In liberal democracies, the media's allegedly objective reputation is in fact instrumental in the circulation of hegemonic views. In his analysis of 'political hegemony in the United States', Lewis argues that 'the evidence for a simple confluence between the American people and those who govern them is, at best, highly contradictory' (1999: 253). Lewis posits three discursive

elements necessary to sustain public support: (1) a left versus right framework of political reporting; (2) the mystification of economic issues in defining political difference; and (3) the notion that the US is *the* model of a free and democratic society (1999: 255–8).

The left versus right framework of reporting offers the public a superficial choice between ‘liberal’ and ‘conservative’ views (Lewis, 1999), projecting the false impression that the entire political spectrum is represented. Meanwhile, politicians from either camp continuously appropriate the other party’s positions. As a result ‘political differences are stressed, while areas of agreement are assumed to take place somewhere in the political center’ (Lewis, 1999: 256). A leader like President Clinton can emerge as representing the Democratic right, while holding views which differentiate him little from a moderate Republican, all the while being placed on the political left (Lewis, 1999). Public discourse thus operates to maintain political consent by re-aligning such labels as ‘left’ and ‘right’.

Corporate interests affect this ambiguous representation of the political spectrum. Lewis argues that economic issues are avoided in favor of ‘social issues’, restricting interrogation into the ‘nature of broadly economic questions’ (1999: 256). Running effective electoral campaigns requires the financial backing of wealthy elite groups, nudging the candidates to adopt the views of political supporters. Thus ‘hegemony is achieved before a single ballot is cast’ (Lewis, 1999: 255) through the mystification of economic factors in the political process, a recurring finding in critical analyses of news (Tuchman, 1978).

The third assumption governing US public discourse is that the United States is the worldwide epitome of freedom and democracy (Lewis, 1999). This mythical portrayal of America pre-empts fair consideration of ideas and ideologies from other nations in American public discourse, because they are ‘less democratic’. The hegemonic system thus works against the acceptance of foreign ideas, since ‘the process of hegemony generally involves the struggle to create consent for a system that favors certain dominant interests’ (Lewis, 1999: 263).

### **Public discourse and the Benetton Company**

Tinic advocated an understanding of Benetton campaigns as a ‘site of ideological struggle’ between Europe and America (1997: 3). In its transnational advertising campaigns, Benetton has ostentatiously blended commerce with advocacy, triggering controversy. The AIDS campaign, for instance, was banned in both Germany and France due to its graphic depiction of a patient dying of AIDS, while being praised for raising social awareness of AIDS by a German AIDS foundation (Tinic, 1997). As already mentioned, there is no doubt that mass-mediated controversy is beneficial for the company’s bottom line, but ‘whether the public is discussing the issues or just the ads remains uncertain’ (Tinic, 1997: 10). Public discourse is appropriated as gratuitous advertising, in which case social issues are commodified.

Leiss et al. have argued that ‘mass culture analysis aims its critiques at advertising when its larger complaint appears to be with the existing social structure that depends on this means of communication’ (1990, cited in Tinic, 1997: 23). Benetton works its advertising campaigns as a ‘public service with a sales pitch’ (Tinic, 1997: 11), but the announcements within these advertisements have been framed by the US prestige press to be *nothing more* than capitalistic propaganda. Anti-Benetton accusations claim that the advertisements serve the ‘ideological and economic interests of the company’ (Tinic, 1997: 10). Yet, the debate does not even hint at the real social issues highlighted in Benetton advertisements. The following section of this article

attempts to answer the question: how is the Death Row campaign framed in mass-mediated public discourse? Does it elicit a meaningful discussion of the death penalty and its implications? Or does the framing merely focus on the controversy triggered by the advertisements, glossing over the social and moral implications of capital punishment?

The attention given to Benetton's 'We on Death Row' campaign was to a large extent in connection with the Sears Roebuck Company. The two companies clinched an agreement for the manufacture of a Benetton USA clothing line to be sold exclusively in Sears retail stores prior to the release of the Death Row campaign (*Advertising Age*, 2000; Chandler, 2000; Cuneo, 2000; Greising, 2000; Hughes, 2000; Reuters, 2000; Webber, 2000). While Sears objected to the campaign strategy, official company statements insisted that 'we are not taking a stand on capital punishment' (Chandler, 2000: 1). Sears instead focused on complaints from its consumers, including demonstrations against the campaign at the Houston Sears location and the Benetton office in New York (Webber, 2000). This led to a public disavowal of Benetton by the Sears Roebuck Company, which was received favorably in the US prestige press:

Benetton was asking for it. Begging for it, even. How nice to see someone finally give it to them. Sears, Roebuck, and Co. on Wednesday dumped Benetton from Sears stores. It's a long-overdue payback for Benetton's tasteless and cynically manipulative advertising campaigns. (Greising, 2000: 1)

The articles attack Benetton's use of death row inmates, claiming it demonstrates blatant disregard for the victims and their families (Chandler, 2000; Chiem, 2000; Hughes, 2000; Stuever, 2000; Webber, 2000). 'It's reopened wounds and brought back a lot of painful memories and people are hurt by it', Sears spokesman Tom Nicholson said (Hughes, 2000: 1), adding that '[R]elatives of the victims have written to us [the Sears Company] and returned their charge cards' (Chandler, 2000: 1). Rather than taking a stand on the issue of capital punishment, Sears re-articulates the issue in terms of the victims' families, escaping the larger, political controversy.

Instead of withdrawing the advertisements, Benetton engaged the political controversy. As a result, the Company is framed as sympathizing with murderers: '[to] many outraged victims' rights groups . . . the Benetton project exploits the fates of murderers and ignores the suffering of victims – all in the name of selling sweaters' (Chandler, 2000: 1). The press frames Benetton as impervious to human suffering:

The entire campaign is founded in blood money, pure and simple.... No one doubts the humanity of a death row inmate. But the reality is that they are awaiting execution because of the cold-blooded crimes they committed. (Chiem, 2000: 1)

Permission to publish the interviews was gained with the condition that Benetton would not ask the inmates to give details of their crimes, but rather offer a brief explanation of the charges (Garfield, 2000; Stuever, 2000). This lack of background information is used against the Benetton Company with the claim that 'Benetton struck sweetheart deals with the lawyers and the prisons' (Garfield, 2000: 45). Several newspaper articles, however, include specific information about the inmates' crimes, justifying their execution. Other news texts make the connection directly. Bob Garfield (2000) of *Advertising Age*, for example, makes a point of notifying readers that the inmate Leroy Orange was 'condemned in Illinois for the 1984 murder of four'. Also, the Associated Press disclosed the details of a crime committed by Jeremy Sheets, describing him as 'a white man awaiting execution for the racially motivated rape and murder of

a black teen-ager in 1992' (2000). However, the impact these disclosures had on the victims' families is not discussed.

While Benetton is criticized for withholding details, the prestige press glosses over the issue of capital punishment, focusing instead on the controversy surrounding Benetton's commodification of the inmates. 'The Death Row ads say nothing about victims. They are simple, stark portraits of condemned American inmates looking right into the lens, serious and often sad' (Hughes, 2000: 1). In its interviews with inmates, Benetton asked questions such as 'Were you ever in love?', 'Did you ever love an animal?'; 'Who are your favorite boxers?'; and 'How's your appetite in here?' ('Benetton Says', 2000: 2). The answers depict human experience: 'One inmate is shown reading a Bible. Many speak of long-lost pleasures' (Chiem, 2000: 1). In contrast, the US prestige press portrayed the inmates as undeserving of the human right to life. Benetton's apparently compassionate message is thus overridden by the media's negative framing of the inmates.

Benetton's two-year process of interviewing and photographing the inmates is also under fire. Claims that Benetton presented the research as work for a *Newsweek* article frames the campaign as fraudulent. The charge is based on the fact that 'Missouri's attorney general has accused the Italian clothing maker Benetton of fraudulent misrepresentation in a lawsuit over the use of four death row inmates in an advertising campaign' ('Missouri Sues', 2000). Benetton was also prohibited from paying the inmates, which is used to emphasize the Company's exploitative tactics. The *Washington Post* carried an Associated Press (2000) story about an attempted payment of \$1000 to a Nebraska inmate, implying inmate profit from the ads. However, Nebraska's attorney general's office promptly set the record straight, stating that the 'death row inmate cannot profit from appearing in the Benetton fashion company's international ad campaign' and any money obtained through the participation in the campaign is channeled into a victim's compensation fund (Associated Press, 2000). Therefore the elite press falsely accuses Benetton of exploiting death row prisoners.

Benetton is also discredited by frequent references to its controversial track record (Chandler, 2000; Chiem, 2000; Greising, 2000; Webber, 2000). A *New York Times* story establishes this frame, explaining that 'During the 1990's, the Benetton Group . . . became notorious for politically provocative advertising' (Elliott, 1999: C8L). Prior to mentioning the Death Row advertisements, the article traces the genealogy of 'shockvertising to describe the Italian company's use of contentious images to sell its United Colors of Benetton apparel around the world' (Elliott, 1999: C8L). The campaign is disparaged as just one of Benetton's misplaced political statements.

The US prestige press framing of the 'We on Death Row' campaign was not monolithic. Statements supporting the campaign are, however, scarce and presented as either foreign reactions or editorial comment, both assumed to lack objectivity. Oliver Toscani, the photographer of the campaign, is allowed to voice his support only within a frame of *foreignness*, only to the extent that he represents the European perception of the death penalty. For example, Toscani is quoted saying, 'in Europe, we hate the death penalty' (Elliot, 2000: C8), thus framing his opinion as foreign. Other explanations and objections to the death penalty are headlined in a way that prevents interpretations other than a foreign/outside perspective. For example, the headline 'Europeans Deplore Executions in the US' (Daley, 2000: A8) projects opposition to the death penalty as a foreign affair. The articles make limited mention of opposition to the death penalty in the United States, while emphasizing US support by noting that 38 states in America employ the death penalty in the penal system (Daley, 2000). The



European objection is made obvious through the claim that ‘many Europeans find it a contradiction that the United States claims to be a leader in protecting human rights when it executed more than 75 people last year’ (Daley, 2000: A8L). However, the article cites French statistics showing that 46 percent of the French population support the death penalty, puncturing any impression that European objections to capital punishment were unanimous (Daley, 2000). Again, the arguments against capital punishment are not discussed in any length.

In the *Chicago Tribune*, Muwakkil gave ‘three cheers for the United Colors of Benetton’ (2000: 15) and continued to praise the company for its efforts against capital punishment. He argued that ‘the U.S. is way out of step on this global issue and if it takes a colorful clothing company to remind Americans of their capacity for compassion, so be it’ (2000: 15). Toscani was permitted to explain that ‘it’s the other way around... I exploit clothing to raise social issues’ (Muwakkil, 2000: 15). Toscani’s unstated profit motivation notwithstanding, this is the only article that allows Toscani to speak without an explicit statement situating him as a foreigner. The editorial genre also allowed issues associated with the death penalty, such as human rights, revenge and the contradiction of murdering a murderer, to emerge in public discourse. For example, in a *Los Angeles Times* editorial, Martinez argues that ‘there has to be a better way’, accusing ‘humanity [of] attempt[ing] to deal with people who kill other people or who otherwise offend the body politic’ by execution in order to ‘satisf[y] the notion that the condemned person has suffered at least as much as his victim’ (2000, page unavailable).

The placement of a story identifies its importance as a newsworthy topic. The front page often displays the topics of the utmost importance, and the first section involving the most significant topics. The following sections are usually categorized by topic, with commentary and newsworthy stories placed within the appropriate segments. The scarce commentary favorable to the Benetton campaign is placed in inner or latter section pages. Muwakkil (2000)’s piece, for instance, is in the commentary section of the *Chicago Tribune*, on page 15, far from the instant exposure of the front page. However, the articles about the breaking of the deal between Sears and Benetton appear in the more visible business section on page 1 or 2. The more visible articles cast Benetton as a foreign company, objectifying its influence as nothing more than European interference reaching into the United States via transnational capitalism, and framing the campaign as an exploitative commodification of social issues. Also, the few dissenting voices in the US prestige press cement the hegemonic process, by safeguarding the appearance of a pluralistic spectrum of opinion.

However, the issue at the heart of the matter is raised by Muwakkil, who writes that ‘one major question for discussion concerns why this country is the lone Western democracy that still permits state-sanctioned murder’ (2000: 15). The answer is the presentation of Benetton as a foreign entity, exporting unpopular European opinions into the United States to sell its sweaters. A *Chicago Tribune* article crystallizes the dominant frame of objection to the Benetton Company itself, instead of an objection to capital punishment, declaring ‘it’s a long-overdue payback for Benetton’s tasteless and cynically manipulative advertising campaigns’ (Greising, 2000: 1)

Constructed as a foreign ‘other’, the Benetton Company is ‘compared’ to the United States, using democracy as a yardstick. The result is an invocation of the icon-status of US democracy overshadowing a foreign challenge (Lewis, 1999): ‘Benetton should recall that people don’t die on the gallows just in the United States and that it is unjust to make the United States a symbol of death in a world of massacres’ (Hughes, 2000: 1). This nationalistic attempt to justify the death penalty in America is however shattered in a *Los Angeles Times* piece:

If character can be judged by the company one keeps, Americans are running with what Europeans see as a dangerously rough crowd that still practices capital punishment. Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran, Iraq and China are among the few countries that still invoke the death penalty to punish those deemed of no further social value. (Williams, 2000)

In all 16 articles we analyzed, never is the issue of the death penalty meaningfully raised, nor is the debate over its humanity noted, except from a ‘foreign’ perspective.

### **Three discourses framing the Benetton Company**

Three overarching discourses emerge from our analysis of elite press coverage of the ‘We on Death Row’ campaign. *Denigration* is the first theme, emphasizing Benetton’s controversial past, while alleging fraudulent activity by the company to harm its reputation. The second theme is the *commodification* of social issues by Benetton in order to sell a product (Tinic, 1997). *Othering* is the third theme of the articles, framing Benetton as a foreign ‘other’. In the last section of this article we explicate these three themes where Benetton’s message against capital punishment is subjected to hostile media frames and pushed to the margins of public discourse.

#### *Benetton and the discourse of denigration*

Its controversial past is used to denigrate the Benetton Company among American readers, in quotes such as ‘[F]or Benetton, the outrage is not new. Hired in 1982, Toscani recreated a corporate image for the company based solely on its edgy, often outrageous, advertising’ (Chiem, 2000: 1). Detailed descriptions of past controversial techniques used by the Company are provided:

To highlight global issues of racism and intolerance, for example, the company has used splashy photographs of a black woman breastfeeding a white baby, a priest and a nun kissing, a newborn trailing her uncut umbilical cord, and a man dying of AIDS. (Chiem, 2000: 1)

The US prestige press focuses on the suffering of the inmates’ victims, presenting Benetton as insensitive to the victims’ families because it is too busy glamorizing the murderers for commercial reasons:

It is a screed. . . . There is no brand – not a single one – that has the right to increase its sales on the backs, on the misery, on the fates of condemned men and women, much less their slaughtered victims, says Bob Garfield of *Advertising Age*. (Stuever, 2000: CO1)

The articles also cite other sources of objection to the campaign. Nancy Ruhe-Munch, executive director of the US-based National Organization of Parents of Murdered Children is quoted referring to the campaign as ‘a slap in the face to survivors, to the police who investigated these crimes, to prosecutors who prosecuted these crimes, and to the jurors . . .’ (‘Benetton Says’, 2000: 2).

The news stories we analyzed refer substantially to a lawsuit pending against Benetton by the State of Missouri for gaining inmate access under fraudulent conditions, pretending to be writing a story for *Newsweek* magazine (Garfield, 2000; Hughes, 2000; Reuters, 2000). A *Los Angeles Times* story reports that ‘Victims’ advocate Nancy Munch urged other states that let

Benetton's representatives on to death row – including Illinois, Nebraska and North Carolina – to consider joining Missouri in court' ('Benetton Says', 2000: 2). By publicizing this lawsuit, the press undermines Benetton's credibility. Past legal controversies are also dwelled upon, noting 'the time a court ordered Benetton to pay damages to French citizens infected with the HIV virus, saying the company exploited human suffering' ('Benetton Says', 2000: 2).

### *Benetton and the discourse of commodification of social issues*

The framing of Benetton in the US press invokes the assumption that raising social issues in the commercial context of advertising is highly inappropriate. Hence the articles ask the question 'What standing does Benetton have in exploring [the death penalty]?' (Garfield, 2000: 45). The answer has come back, overwhelmingly, as expressed by Garfield in *Advertising Age*, 'none. None at all' (2000: 45). The press thus argues that social issues belong to 'the terrain of news discourse and public service announcements' (Tinic, 1997: 4–5), not a clothing company promoting a fashion label in magazines and billboards. This frame denies Benetton's social message any credibility, reminding readers that '[F]or every few pages in the magazine, standing out splashy against the pallor of death row, is a bright green logo with white lettering that reads: United Colors of Benetton' (Simon, 2000: A5). According to its detractors, 'the Benetton project exploits the fates of murderers and ignores the suffering of victims – all in the name of selling clothes' (Chiem, 2000: 1).

Benetton, on the other hand, expressed a different point of view. A *Chicago Tribune* story reports that 'Sator and Toscani shrugged off suggestions that swaddling a commercial campaign in a moral message might be seen as cynical. Advertising offers a "modern way" to raise moral issues, according to Toscani' (Hughes, 2000: 1). On its official web site, Benetton goes beyond the Death Row campaign, stating unequivocally:

The campaign is *about* the death penalty. Leaving aside any social, political, judicial or moral consideration, this project aims at showing to the public the reality of capital punishment, so that no one around the world will consider the death penalty neither as a distant problem nor as news that occasionally appear on TV. ('Looking Death', 2000)

Its ultimate profit objective notwithstanding, Benetton not only violates the modernist separation of the private and public spheres; it directly challenges accepted US beliefs about capital punishment.

However, the press uses Toscani's 1995 quote, 'We're not the only ones using emotion for commercial gain' ('Benetton Says', 2000: 2) against him. It thus performs the task of ideological containment, deploying a disparaging rhetoric to minimize Benetton's anti-capital punishment message.

### *Benetton as the foreign other in national public discourse*

The Death Row campaign deviates from previous Benetton campaigns in that the Company takes a firm stand on a social issue where the United States and Europe differ sharply. The advertisements present a clear opposition to capital punishment by picturing the prisoner with 'sentenced to death' stamped across the page. Both Toscani and Benetton readily speak out about

the campaign, in efforts to provoke discussion against the death penalty. On its official website, the Benetton Company notes:

Toscani's images aim at giving back a human face to the prisoners on death row, to remind those *respectable people [who] are always so sure they are right* ...that the debate concerns men and women in flesh and blood, not virtual characters eliminated or spared with a simple click as with a videogame. ('Looking Death', 2000)

Thus Benetton directly articulates a counter-ideology to the public, challenging the US press to justify the US position. In the reaction of the press, Benetton is framed as a foreign, therefore questionable 'other'.

The issues surrounding the death penalty are obscured in the US prestige press, framing Benetton as a European entity, having virtually no business in American public discourse. The construction of Benetton as 'other' is bolstered through constant reminders of the Company's Italian origin. Quotations taken from Toscani are consistently followed by the words 'the Italian photographer' (Stuever, 2000: CO1), while Benetton is constantly described as an Italian-based company. The message of the advertisements is categorized as a foreign perspective, reminding the American public to be suspicious of moral internationalism:

There's a direct message here (death penalty: bad), but also there is a more subtle, off-color Italian hand gesture flung in our direction: You and your death penalty are in danger of being disowned by the Family of Man. (Stuever, 2000: CO1)

Opposition to the death penalty as a foreign opinion leaves discursive space to strategically contrast American standards with foreign practices. If opposition is framed as a 'foreign', then support of the death penalty is American. Press statements with nationalistic undertones come in support of the death penalty as a means of justice in the United States:

It's unfashionable to kill our killers, as far as the rest of the world is concerned. But for now, it's the way we're cut. Even as Toscani wants us to understand killers have feelings too, we go on not quite getting why he even cares. Toscani counts on that susceptible ignorance most of all. Banks on it, even. (Stuever, 2000: CO1)

### **The Benetton Death Row campaign and hegemony in public discourse**

It is understandable that the 'Americanization' of the Benetton campaign is oppositional, because the campaign attacks a legal practice and ideological stand widely accepted by the American public. Figures show that, in absence of an alternative, 77 percent of Americans support capital punishment. However, with the alternative of life in prison without parole plus restitution, support for the death penalty drops to 41 percent, with 15 percent unsure and 44 percent in opposition (Death Penalty Information Centre, 2000). Despite these statistics, the framing of the Benetton Death Row campaign by the US prestige press, with rare exceptions discussed earlier in this article, has projected only one alternative to the American public – support of capital punishment.

The rhetoric surrounding the practice of capital punishment justifies it in terms of retribution for victims and their families (Muwakkil, 2000: 15). An eye-for-an-eye attitude, implying an image of convicted killers as inhuman, a burden on American society and a blow to American civility, is entrenched as a hegemonic 'common sense'. The consensus is such that these killers cannot contribute any good to society, and therefore have no place within it. It then becomes logical to rid society of such useless life, 'for it is easier to kill a beast than a man'

(Garfield, 2000). In this way, the hegemonic process circulates a commonsensical social consciousness in support of the death penalty.

The timing of the campaign, during the 2000 presidential election in the United States also bears on our analysis. Since both major party candidates, Democrat Al Gore and Republican George W. Bush, supported the death penalty, it was not a central issue in the campaign. According to the US press, presidential candidate George W. Bush, then governor of Texas, who eventually won the US presidency, is a leading supporter of capital punishment. Having put more prisoners to death than any other governor in the nation (Oppel and Bruni, 2000; Rimer and Bonner, 2000), Bush's track record includes the execution of 131 (Oppel and Bruni, 2000). Bush supports capital punishment while defining himself as pro-life in the abortion debate. For some voters, this contradiction may suggest a conflict of ideals in the candidate's platform. Capital punishment was thus avoided in favor of less controversial issues, illustrating Gramsci's connection between party politics and common sense (Brandist, 1996). In their campaigns, the presidential candidates glossed over capital punishment and avoided meaningful media scrutiny. That helps explain why Benetton's message is so irksome to American public discourse:

Especially in this U.S. election year, when the pace of executions has accelerated and even liberal candidates fear to criticize what Europeans see as a policy of 'kill to win,' disgust with the Americans' eye-for-an-eye approach is not only growing, but moving from ethical upbraids to economic interventions. (Williams, 2000)

European opposition is not enough to sway American support for capital punishment. The oppositional media frames of Benetton avoid the issue of capital punishment altogether. Their focus is on orange prison suits, the controversial advertising techniques, and details of the inmates' crimes that Benetton had left out of the interviews.

Benetton's campaign is dismissed as a foreign intervention. Since America is framed as the epitome of democracy, a model of equality and justice for the world, Benetton's anti-death penalty message must be wrong. Since the United States condones capital punishment, its condemnation in US public discourse remains relatively unheard. This view of American democracy helps make a comparison between America and the rest of the world which is skewed in favor of the United States, as '[T]his discourse has been undeniably powerful in discouraging comparisons with other systems' (Lewis, 1999: 258). Therefore it is unlikely that a comparison of the legal systems between the United States and the rest of the world will uncover the opposition to capital punishment in the global environment. The fact that most of Europe, excluding Russia and Turkey, and numerous countries in the world have abolished the death penalty is never mentioned (Williams, 2000).

The media framing of the Benetton Death Row campaign is a clear example of a national hegemonic process 'domesticating' an international issue, when this issue threatens a nation's status quo. The US prestige press's frames of Benetton obscure the central issue of capital punishment. What should ideally have been seized as an opportunity to discuss a poignant and controversial global issue is reduced to a heavily polarized argument. More importantly, in a global era, leading nations like the United States have powerful hegemonic frames of Othering that can delegitimize competing social ideals, even those coming from other Western, liberal democratic spheres, as foreign, while ostentatiously celebrating globalization as diversity (Kraidy, 2002). Beyond the frames, the intense coverage in the US elite press indicates that Benetton was somewhat influential in international affairs. Capital punishment is an internationally important issue and is used as a factor in determining membership to the Council of Europe (Muwakkil, 2000: 15); moreover, it has been one of the reasons why Turkey has been

denied membership in that body. As we enter the 21st century, the conversation about the death penalty is leaning towards unanimous opposition to what is increasingly regarded as cruel and excessive punishment.

Perhaps more importantly, the controversy surrounding Benetton stems from the fact that, in its advertising campaigns, the company has repeatedly challenged the modernist separation between the private and public sphere, thrusting consumer society and civil society into collision. In several campaigns the Benetton Company has challenged this artificial dichotomy with provocative advertising tactics. At a time when the public sphere is suffering from constant encroachment from private interests, Benetton's 'We on Death Row' campaign makes a strong point about 'advertising's potential as a form of public communication and a setting for the actualization of notions of contemporary citizenship' (Costera Meijer, 1998: 235).

Ultimately, US prestige press discourses on the Benetton campaign represent a lost opportunity to engage in a meaningful global dialogue about capital punishment. In this sense, advertising's civic potential as seen by Costera Meijer (1998) and others has remained unfulfilled because of the hostile coverage it triggered in major US newspapers. Dahlgren is useful in this regard, when he wrote that:

... the chief ideological tension today is... what is at stake is whether people's identities as citizens can largely be reduced to and framed in consumer terms or whether some sense of the political – beyond market logics – can be retained in people's conceptions of citizenship. (1995: 23)

Our analysis suggests that some sense of the political was in fact highlighted by the strong reaction of the US prestige press, but that this sense was lost in the way US newspapers framed the campaign. The Benetton Company having 'redefined corporate benevolence as a didactic flourish piggybacked onto its own advertising needs' (Hoeschmann, 1997: 199) notwithstanding, the 'We on Death Row' campaign touched a raw nerve in US media circles. In doing so, the campaign exposed the instability of hegemonic ideologies – in this case, support for capital punishment – in mass-mediated public discourse, even in the world's sole remaining superpower, at a time when some see advertising as 'leading the way in creating the cultural conditions for the so-called global village' (Hoeschmann, 1997: 183).

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