

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

This PDF is auto-generated for reference only. As such, it may contain some conversion errors and/or missing information. For all formal use please refer to the official version on the website, as linked below.

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

<https://www.e-ir.info/2012/07/22/terrorism-and-the-media-a-dangerous-symbiosis/>

ARDA BILGEN, JUL 22 2012

Recent history, specifically the past decade, has provided plenty of examples of the mutually beneficial relationship between terrorist organizations and the media (Rohner and Frey 2007). As some remarkable terrorist attacks in history indicate, whether it is in the United States (US), Europe, or the Middle East, it is by and large the case that the architects of terrorism exploit the media for the benefit of their operational efficiency, information gathering, recruitment, fund raising, and propaganda schemes (Nacos 2006). In the words of Nacos (2002), whether it is the relatively inconsequential arson by an amateurish environmental group or mass destruction by a network of terrorists, the perpetrators' media-related goals are the same: attention, recognition, and perhaps even a degree of respectability and legitimacy in their various publics (Nacos 2002a). Media, in return, receives the attention of the public that is vital for its existence and benefits from record sales and huge audiences. To put it briefly, just as terrorism has to be communicated to have effect (Seib and Janbek 2011), the media has to cover the incidents in such a way to benefit from the public's eagerness to obtain information about terrorist attacks. It is, therefore, fair to argue that there is a mutually beneficial relationship between terrorism and today's media.

This symbiosis is indeed worth examining in greater detail, as it is as vicious and dangerous as it is largely overlooked. In this study, how and why terrorists utilize media tools, how and why the media covers acts of terrorism, and the coverage in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks in 2001 in the US will be examined. To conclude, a way forward to counter the damaging effects of the symbiosis will be provided.

The Media-Related Goals and Means of Terrorists

As Hoffman (2008) argues to explain the above-mentioned symbiosis, "without the media's coverage, the act's impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, rather than reaching the wider 'target audience' at whom the terrorists' violence is actually aimed." In a similar vein, Stohl (in Staci, Bennett, and Flickinger 2002) argues that terrorists are primarily interested in audience, not the victims, and emphasizes that how the audience reacts is as important as the act itself. Accordingly, winning the attention of the media, national and foreign publics, and decision-makers in a government is one of the primary goals of terrorists. To this end, terrorists carefully select the places in which they carry out their attacks in order to provide the best media coverage. As will be addressed later in greater detail, the obvious example of this is the 9/11 attacks in the US, where a wide variety of media covered the story immediately. Not only was the media able to capture this incredibly visual attack, but the people who were in New York City, residents and tourists alike, were also able to document this event with pictures, videos and personal stories (Baran 2008).

Indeed, the goals of terrorists are not solely confined to winning the attention of the masses. In addition to that, through the media, they aim to publicize their political causes, inform both friends and foes about the motives for terrorist deeds, and explain their rationale for resorting to violence (Nacos 2006). They further aim to be treated like regular, accepted, legitimate world leaders, as the media gives them a similar status. That is to say, for terrorists, the media functions as a tool to shrink the power asymmetry between them and the entity they fight against in an actual and ideological warfare, create an atmosphere of fear and suspicion, legitimize their acts, and reach greater audiences. Given these motives, terrorists arguably carry out their attacks rationally and strategically with full awareness of the influence of the media coverage on almost every segment of a society and government officials of almost all levels. To illustrate this, Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of al-Qaeda, argues that "[al-Qaeda is] in a

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place in the battlefield of the media. [Al-Qaeda is] in a media battle for the hearts and minds of the *ummah*" (Seib and Janbek 2011).

Terrorists' means of communication greatly vary. Indeed, technological advancements and changing audience behavior in the past decade enabled terrorist groups to utilize media tools with greater convenience. Specifically in the years since the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union crumbled, the mass media of communication have changed in dramatic ways, mostly because of the global reach of the Internet and cellular phones (Nacos 2002a). The new and emerging media has made it easier for terrorists to publicize their messages to the world via websites at their own discretion and "new technologies have simply allowed the dissemination of terrorist messages to reach a broader audience with a more concise message" (Baran 2008). In the words of Moutot, "terrorists do not really need [printed media] anymore to convey their message. The 'official' media have been replaced by the Internet which, in the end, is much easier to use, much quicker and much more effective" (Nacos 2006). In other words, the Internet has arguably replaced the role of the printed media in the field of terrorism, as, for the first time in history, terrorists can take whatever message and images they decide to straight to the online world, which is global in reach (Klopfenstein in Kavoori 2006). As their stories and messages reach the general public either through the "old" media or the "new" media, terrorists use this publicity specifically in their recruitment efforts. In brief, the Internet clearly increased the scope of terrorist propaganda and activities, and became a perfect tool for terrorists in terms of advancing their operational goals with little expense and risk.

Despite this, the power of other media forms and technologies such as video and audiocassettes, DVDs, video games, popular music, and novels should not be underestimated (Nacos 2002b). Terrorists generally embrace the newest information, follow the latest technological developments to be innovative, and utilize the most up-to-date communication technologies; however, it does not necessarily indicate an absolute shift from old technologies and trends, as, for instance, some terrorist organizations even today rely on *hawala*, the informal network of money exchanges that dates back to 8th century (Feldman 2006).

The picture above suggests that terrorists need the media to receive free publicity for their cause, transmit their messages, and garner support, recognition, and legitimacy. Given the emerging trends in the media and communications technology, it is likely that terrorists will employ more innovative tactics to achieve their goals. The following section will discuss how the other side of the equation—the media—portrays terrorism and benefits from it.

How and Why the Media Covers Terrorism-Related Stories

Needless to say, terrorism is an attractive boon for media coverage, mainly because terrorist attacks make viewer ratings surge and profits increase. To be more specific, terrorism has many aspects that make it a very attractive subject for the media, as it has the elements of drama, danger, blood, human tragedy, miracle stories, heroes, shocking footage, and action (Terrorism and the Media 2008). Another reason is that violence is a central and defining quality in contemporary television culture and is critical to the semiotic and financial momentum of contemporary media organizations (Lewis 2005). Indeed, the media has always been interested in reporting terrorism; however, the recent proliferation of television and radio channels, and the emergence of mega-media organizations have resulted in greater competition and insatiable appetites for shocking, sensational "infotainment" that is believed to keep audiences captivated, boost ratings and circulation, and increase profits (Nacos 2006). Also, the part of the reason why the media is that irresponsible and excessively profit-oriented in the context of terrorism is that a considerable number of top media executives today come from the corporate world, but not from the ranks of journalists (Biernatzki 2002).

The problem does not lie in *why* the media covers terrorism, but lies in *how* the media covers terrorism. It is by and large the case that the media covers terrorist acts by writing sensation-seeking, enlarging anecdotic stories, especially on who is to blame, repeating the same images over and over again, separating physical and mental health consequences of disasters, and creating new syndromes (Vasterman, Yzermans, and Dirkzwager 2005). In addition, the media traumatizes the audience by exaggerating the threats, or, as it was in the case in the US after 9/11, showing nonstop footage of combat scenes (Long 2002). In other words, as Altheide underlines, the politics of fear is a dominant motif for news and popular culture today. Moreover, within this framework, news reporting about

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

terrorism is linked with “victimization” narratives that make crime, danger, and fear very relevant to everyday experiences (Altheide 2009).

To understand how the media portrays terrorists and covers related stories and news, one should take a closer look at the mediums the media employs. The media generally uses *agenda setting* and *framing* to highlight and make certain issues more prominent than others. Agenda setting is the theory that the more attention a media outlet pays to a certain phenomenon, the more importance the public attributes to such an issue (Terrorism and the Media 2008). Framing, on the other hand, is “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Papacharissi and Oliveira 2008). Thus, the words and images that make up the frame can be distinguished from the rest of the news by their capacity to stimulate support of or opposition to the sides in a political conflict (Entman 2003).

To illustrate this, Muslims and Arabs were discussed and apprehended either as suppliers of oil or as potential terrorists after 9/11. Very little of the detail, the human density, the passion of Arab-Muslim life has entered the awareness of even those people whose profession it is to report the Islamic world (Nacos and Torres-Reina 2002). In a similar vein, the media covered the 9/11 attacks in such an immediate way that, through its lens, the problematic effect was the death of thousands of civilians in an act of war against America, the cause was terrorists, and the remedy quickly became war against the perpetrators (Entman 2003). As both examples point out, public perception may be negatively affected by the media’s rhetoric, its bias toward certain groups, and framing of certain ethnic and/or religious groups as terrorists, and of events as acts of terrorism.

The media indeed profits from the drama terrorism creates, and covers the terrorism-related news in a sensational way. Through employing the above-mentioned mediums, however, the media may directly or indirectly serve the interests of terrorists by simplifying stories for the viewer to the point that it has little to do with the actual events. Repeating the traumatizing scenes and stories may also serve them, as the goal of the terrorists is to be in the media as often and long as possible. In addition, the media’s bias and obsession of sensationalism may help them get the upper hand in using media as a tool, create an atmosphere and politics of fear, and create ripe conditions for propaganda and recruitment following any terrorist attack. Given these, it can be argued that the goals and objectives of terrorists are highly related to agenda setting and framing, and that the way media covers news and stories has a crucial impact on the way terrorists communicate, carry out attacks, and gain a foothold in the audiences’ daily lives. The better terrorists understand this mechanism behind the media, the more coverage they may receive and take further steps for massive publicity and the opportunity to showcase their ability to strike. One of the most remarkable examples of this, the 9/11 attacks, will be examined in the following section.

The 9/11 Attacks and the Media

Without a doubt, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and on the Pentagon near Washington, DC were shocking global media events that dominated public attention and provoked reams of discourse (Kellner 2004). Obviously, terrorists were aware of the fact that attacking the symbolic targets in the US, killing thousands of citizens, and causing a tremendous amount of damage to the American and international economy, as well as the image of the US would be sensational news around the globe.

The response of the media in the US was often far from being objective, calm, and prudent. Instead, media organs oozed hatred and hysteria, calling for action against mainly Arabs and Muslims and crying for revenge, as terrorists would have planned. The major corporate media tended to support the patriotic discourse and the policies of the then president George W. Bush, who was leading the nation against the forces of “political and cosmological evil” (Lewis 2005). This way of media coverage after a traumatic event dramatically changed the public perceptions, discourse at government and public levels, and the way people perceive events and “other” people, specifically ethnic and religious minorities who can be perceived as a “threat”. As a result, as Altheide (2009) argues, the discourse of fear has been constructed through news and popular culture accounts and the main discourse of fear has clearly become terrorism in the post 9/11 era. In other words, “9/11 was used by the media and politicians to promote fear related agendas and ideologies. Citizens became accustomed to ‘safety rhetoric’ by police officials, which often required

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

them to permit police searches, condone 'overaggressive' police action, as well as join in a myriad of crime-prevention efforts, many of which involved more human as well as electronic surveillance of work places, neighborhoods, stores, and even 'bodies'" (Altheide 2009).

The picture above suggests that the architects of the 9/11 attacks achieved their media-centered objectives, as the media conveyed the message that even the US was vulnerable to terror attack, that terrorists could create great harm, and that anyone at any time could be subject to a deadly terror attack. They also succeeded in immersing the US government in "a global information war to promote the interests, values, and the image of the US" (Kavoori and Fraley 2006). Terrorists were obviously aware of the magnitude of sensation their attacks would create; however, the way media covered news and stories rendered it possible for the terrorists to conceive an unimaginable victory in terms of penetrating into the daily lives of a huge audience. They attracted global attention, obtained global recognition, received a degree of respect among sympathizers, and gained legitimacy in the eyes of supporters and potential recruits, through the fear narrative the media employed.

Recommendations

The media plays a central role in the calculus of political violence and are put into positions where they can magnify or minimize these kinds of acts and their perpetrators, or, of course, they can provide coverage that avoids either one of those extremes (Nacos 2002a). Under this light, the recommendations below can be implemented to minimize the media-related effects of terrorism:

1. *Desecuritization* – There is no doubt that terrorism must be reported. However, the way the events are framed and the extent to which it is covered is also important. Accordingly, in order to alter the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media, it is of high importance for the media to reevaluate and change its rhetoric when covering the terrorism-related news and stories. Just as the security elite can desecuritize issues in international affairs through speech-acts, media can adopt the same approach and desecuritize terrorism-related acts and stories through covering those incidents just as any other story in a more responsible and less "sensational" manner. Achieving this may not only prevent terrorists from using media coverage as an important publicity and recruitment tool, but may also prevent the emergence of an atmosphere of fear at the public level. It may also force government and security elite to make more rational decisions regarding countering terrorism and dealing with public outrage. Hence, news coverage with less repetition of horrific scenes, less traumatization, less sensation and more information and prudence are essential in the first place to break the symbiosis.
2. *Objectivity* – The media should have a conscious sense of its responsibilities to the public, as one of the goals of terrorists it to shake public confidence in their own security. Thus, objectivity and bipartisanship should be key when reporting a story. The media should present both sides of the story to the audience fairly and accurately without bias, so that the audience can make their own opinion of the news and/or story independent of the media's negative influence. The media coverage of success stories should be balanced with the coverage of failure stories without speculation and dramatization in order to add to the credibility of the source and public order in the aftermath of an attack.
3. *Clarity* – Since a critical part of counterterrorism is information warfare, it is among the goals of terrorists to misinform the public and exploit the uncertainty and suspicion emerged afterwards. Given these, the media should provide the clearest, most factual, and most balanced information to the extent it is possible to prevent the misinterpretation of terrorism-related incidents by the public and government officials who can possibly make suboptimal decisions regarding the countering moves. The media should especially avoid presenting extreme and blindly partisan viewpoints to raise ratings and use a plain language that everybody can understand in order not to invite panic.
4. *Selective use of soft power* – Even though some advocate the use of media tools for propaganda against terrorists, specifically in the narrative warfare in radical extremism, this is generally fruitless, given that the media has certain limits and legal and moral obligations, while terrorists do not. It is also counterproductive, as media propoganda amplifies the perceived power of a terrorist organization. Instead, media can be employed as a public affairs and public diplomacy tool instead of a propaganda tool to influence foreign publics and potential recruits. To this end, without propoganda, through the "new" and "traditional" media

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

- tools, the extremist narrative can be countered with an equally clear and appealing narrative to deny access to the public terrorists draw their support from.
5. *Differentiation* – Since no terrorist group is alike, the media should differentiate between different types of terrorism and terrorist groups in order not to provoke and mobilize public against certain ethnic and/or religious minorities. In other words, it is of high importance not to cover news and stories in such a way to contribute to the “otherization” of the group in question and create an “us vs. them” scenario. Such dichotomy can give way to social unrest in multicultural societies that fail to integrate certain groups and trigger further attacks, as the anger and hopelessness become pushing forces for potential recruiters, sympathizers, and even moderates to uprising.
 6. *Counter cyber-terrorism* – The Internet has become a central forum in a global scale for debate among numerous communities that are being directly affected by the global political violence. The communication of violent and oppressive groups has also heavily relied on the Internet. In other words, the age of the Internet has brought an age of online terrorism and enabled terrorists to use the web to recruit, raise money, and spread their messages. Even though the regulation of the media, specifically the Internet, presents a fundamental dilemma due to the inherent tension between censorship and the democratic tradition of free speech, privacy, and press freedom, it is crucial to take countering measures against the cyber activities of terrorists. These measures can include tracking their activities on online forums, following their conversations and activities on social media, and prevent the spread of radicalizing materials from specific websites. In addition to that, enacting laws at national level to punish the ones using the Internet to provoke the public, recruit and train, and propagandize can identify terrorists and prevent a potential attack.
 7. *Government assistance* – Governments can give assistance to media organs by giving the political context and background of any terrorism-related act or story, as it is ideally the ultimate goal of the media to correctly inform the audience. To this end, a government-media partnership that is better informing the public, refuting the arguments of terrorists, and depriving them of the publicity they need can be formed.

Concluding Remarks

Terrorism is a category of political violence, which is intended to influence foreign and domestic governments, as well as communities. Terrorism uses its immediate victims and material targets for semiotic and symbolic purposes (Lewis 2005). Attacks are designed to create an atmosphere of fear or a sense of threat. In the same vein, terrorism can also refer to politically motivated deeds perpetrated by groups or individuals for the sake of communicating messages to a larger audience (Nacos 2002a). In any case, the terrorists’ need for media publicity and media’s need for a greater audience and profits form a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media.

This symbiosis is not inevitable. Implementing certain policies that are different than the previous failed policies can facilitate the breaking of that cycle by forcing at least one side of the equation—the media—to act in a more responsible, more conscious, and more cooperative manner. Only then starving the terrorists of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend can become possible and more robust steps can be taken to win the ideological and actual battle against terrorism.

Bibliography

Altheide, David L. 2009. *Terror Post 9/11 and the Media*. New York: Peter Lang.

Baran, Jessica. 2008. “Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al Qaeda: A Change of Course?” *The Peace and Conflict Review* 3. Available at: <http://www.review.upeace.org/index.cfm?opcion=0&ejemplar=7&entrada=63>

Biernatzki, William E. 2002. “Terrorism and Mass Media.” *Communication Research Trends* 21.

Entman, Robert M. 2003. “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11.” *Political Communication* 20.

Feldman, Robert. 2006. “Fund Transfers – African Terrorists Blend Old and New: Hawala and Satellite

Terrorism and the Media: A Dangerous Symbiosis

Written by Arda Bilgen

Telecommunications." *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 17.

Hess, Stephen and Marvin Kalb, eds. 2003. *The Media and the War on Terrorism*. Washington, DC: Brookings.

Kavoori, Anandam P. and Todd Fraley, eds. 2006. *Media, Terrorism, and Theory*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield.

Kellner, Douglas. 2004. "9/11, Spectacles of Terror, and Media Manipulation: A Critique of Jihadist and Bush Media Politics." *Critical Discourse Studies* 1 (April).

Lewis, Jeff. 2005. *Language Wars: The Role of Media and Culture in Global Terror and Political Violence*. London: Pluto Press.

Long, David E. 2002. "Coming to Grips With Terrorism After 11 September." *Brown Journal of International Affairs* 8 (Winter).

Nacos, Brigitte L. 2002a. *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*. USA: Rowman and Littlefield.

Nacos, Brigitte L. 2002b. "Terrorism, the Mass Media and the Events of 9-11." *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 82.

Nacos, Brigitte L. 2006. *Terrorism/Counterterrorism and Media in the Age of Global Communication. United Nations University Global Seminar Second Shimane-Yamaguchi Session, Terrorism—A Global Challenge*.

Nacos, Brigitte L. and Oscar Torres-Reyna. 2002. "Muslim Americans in the News before and after 9-11." *Prepared for presentation at the Symposium "Restless Searchlight: Terrorism, the Media & Public Life," co-sponsored by the APSA Communication Section and the Shorenstein Center at the John F. Kennedy School, Harvard University*.

Palmer, Nancy, ed. 2003. *Terrorism, War, and the Press*. USA: Hollis.

Papacharissi, Zizi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira. 2008. "News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers." *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13.

Rhine, Staci, Stephen Bennett, and Richard Flickinger. 2002. "After 9/11: Television Viewers, Newspaper Readers and Public Opinion About Terrorism's Consequences." *Presentation at the Annual APSA Meeting*.

Rohner, Dominic and Bruno S. Frey. 2007. "Blood and ink! The common-interest-game between terrorists and the media." *Public Choice* 133.

Seib, Philip and Dana M. Janbek. 2011. *Global Terrorism and New Media*. GB: Routledge.

"Terrorism and Media." 2008. *Transnational Terrorism, Security, and the Rule of Law*.

Vasterman, Peter, C. Joris Yzermans, and Anja J. E. Dirkzwager. 2005. "The Role of the Media and Media Hypes in the Aftermath of Disasters." *Epidemiologic Reviews* 27.

—

Written by: Arda Bilgen

Written at: The George Washington University

Written for: Peter Faber

Date written: April 2011