

Chapter 18

Prevention of (Ab-) Use of Mass Media by Terrorists (and vice versa)

Alex P. Schmid

Modern terrorism is media terrorism.
The media are attracted by extreme terrorist acts not only
because it is their duty to report
on any major event but also because the dramatic
and spectacular aspect of terrorism fascinates the general public.
Today's terrorists exploit this and act in a way
which will attract maximum attention around the world.

- *European Parliamentary Assembly Report (2005)*¹

The terrorists need the media,
and the media find in terrorism
all the ingredients of an exciting story –

- *Walter Laqueur (1999)*²

This chapter explores both the use of mass media by terrorists and the use of terrorism-generated news by mass media. Ever since the attention-raising effectiveness of “propaganda of the deed” was discovered in the second half of the 19th century, terrorists have exploited the mass media’s propensity to cover “bad news” extensively, first with the help of the rotary press, then followed by radio and television. Mass media, in turn, have often given broad coverage to terrorist attacks since the “human interest” generated by acts of demonstrative public violence attracts large audiences and generates extra revenue. There is a fine line between the media adhering to the public’s right to know, and broad media coverage creating exaggerated anxiety and thereby intimidating the public. Some existing media guidelines for covering terrorist news are discussed and evaluated with an eye on harm prevention resulting from the coverage of terrorist incidents.

Keywords: 9/11, Al Qaeda, audience, censorship, communication, contagion, guidelines, ISIS, jihad, mass media, media jihad, news, news values, propaganda of the deed, radicalisation, television, terrorism

¹ European Parliamentary Assembly, ‘Media and Terrorism. Report,’ Council of Europe, Committee on Culture, Science and Education. Doc. 10557. 20 May 2005. Available at: [http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17343&lang=en](http://assembly.coe.int/nw/xml/XRef/Xref-XML2HTML-en.asp?fileid=17343&lang=en;).; URL: assembly.coe.int

² Laqueur, Walter, ‘*The New Terrorism: Fanaticism and the Arms of Mass Destruction.*’ New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, p. 44.

It has been said that terrorism is a combination of violence and communication.³ If one accepts this premise, the prevention of terrorism will have to focus on both violence and communication. The first question that arises is: how important is each of these two elements? Ayman al-Zawahiri, the current leader of Al-Qaeda wrote in 2005 in a letter to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi: “More than half of the battle is taking place on the battlefield of the media. We are in a media race for hearts and minds.”⁴ In the same vein, Osama Bin Laden wrote in a letter to Emir Al-Mominee: “It is obvious that the media war in this century is one of the strongest methods; in fact, its ratio may reach 90% of the total preparation for the battles.”⁵ Shortly after 9/11, when Bin Laden was still publicly denying responsibility for the attack, placed much of the blame on the Western mass media, but actually raised a valid point:

“The Western media is unleashing such a baseless propaganda, which makes us surprise[d] but it reflects on what is in their hearts and gradually they themselves become captive[s] of this propaganda. They become afraid of it and begin to cause harm to themselves. Terror is the most dreaded weapon in [the] modern age and the Western media is mercilessly using it against its own people. It can add fear and helplessness in the psyche of the people of Europe and the United States. It means that what the enemies of the United States cannot do, its media is doing that.”⁶

The media in today’s world act very much like the nervous system of our societies.⁷ Yet, that alert system can be turned against the very social system it is meant to serve if it falls prey to misleading violent stimuli from terrorists (like those applied with the attacks of 9/11) and, through saturation coverage, magnifies single acts of terrorism to enormous proportions. Terrorist-made “bad news,” such as the attacks of 9/11, amplified by television and repeated again and again in the weeks, months and even years thereafter around the world seems to act like an auto-immune disease that infects many viewers again and again, frightening some while stimulating others.

This chapter explores first how militants have learned to use mass media for their purposes, how mass media, in turn, have made use of terrorist events, and how governments and some of the mass media are trying to prevent, or at least minimize, such exploitation through introducing guidelines and advocating selective censorship. While the main sources of concern today are the internet and social media, the traditional mass media – mainly printed press and television – still play a large role in the terrorist calculus to influence public opinion and humiliate and/or blackmail governments. While other chapters in this Handbook focus on social media, this one looks at the traditional mass media, i.e. press, radio, and television.

³ Schmid, Alex P. and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage, 1982.

⁴ Hughes, John, ‘Winning the war of words in the campaign against terrorism,’ *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 May 2006.

⁵ Corman, S.R., and Jill S. Schiefelbein, ‘Communication and Media Strategy in the Jihadi War of Ideas,’ Report # 0601; Consortium for Strategic Communication, Arizona State University, 20 April 2006, p. 2. Available at: <http://csc.asu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/119.pdf>.

⁶ Ummat, ‘Usama bin Laden says Al-Qaidah group had nothing to do with the 11 September attacks’, *Ummat Karachi*, 28 September 2001, p. 2; Devji, Faisal, *Landscapes of the Jihad. Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. London: Hurst, 2005, p. 160.

⁷ The communication researcher Ben Bagdikian noted in the early 1970s when satellite-supported TV started to spread worldwide: “For most of the people of the world, for most of the events in the world, what the news system does not transmit did not happen. To that extent, the world and its inhabitants are what the news media say they are.” See Bagdikian, Ben H., *The Information Machines: Their Impact on Men and the Media*. New York: Harper & Row, 1971, pp. xii-xiii.

Propaganda of the Deed - How Terrorists seek to use Mass Media

While in France during the “Reign of Terror” (1793-1794), serial public executions of “enemies of the revolution” by the guillotine were used to create and spread terror, by the late 19th century, an emerging sensationalist press amplified the impact of individual terrorist bombings. Anarchist and social-revolutionary theorists and practitioners discovered that one could use demonstrative acts of public violence as a way to enter the news system. They called it “propaganda of [or: by] the deed.”⁸

The convergence of violence and the media began in the second half of the 19th century when two inventions began to interact – dynamite (discovered in the 1862) and the rotary press (perfected in 1881). Anarchists, social-revolutionaries, as well as ethno-nationalists, soon discovered the potential of this confluence. Here is what an anarchist wrote in 1881 in the San Francisco paper “Truth,” “*Truth* is two cents a copy, dynamite is forty cents a pound. Buy them both, read one, use the other.”⁹ A German anarchist named Johannes Most who had emigrated to the US and also worked as a journalist wrote in 1885, “What is important is not solely these actions themselves but also the propagandistic effect they are able to achieve. Hence, we preach not only action in and for itself, but also action as propaganda.”¹⁰ This combination had been given the name “propaganda of the deed” (*la propagande par le fait*) by its inventors and practitioners.¹¹ They explained the underlying logic in these terms:

- Mikhail Bakunin (1870): “we must spread our principles, not with words but with deeds, for this is the most popular, the most potent, and the most irresistible form of propaganda”;
- Errico Malatesta (1876): “the insurrectional deed destined to affirm socialist principles by acts, is the most efficacious means of propaganda”;
- Peter Kropotkin (1870s): “By actions which compel general attention, the new idea seeps into people’s minds and wins converts. One such act may, in a few days, make more propaganda than a thousand pamphlets. Above all, it awakens the spirit of revolt...”
- Johannes Most (1884): “Everyone knows...that the more highly placed the one shot or blown up, and the more perfectly executed the attempt, the greater the propagandistic effect.”¹²

The “exemplary deed”, as “propaganda of the deed” (or ‘propaganda by the deed’) was also called, was meant to act as a spark to awaken the spirit of revolt, show the masses that resistance to state repression was possible and make those in power fear that they might be next. By killing heads of state and government, ranging from the Russian Czar Alexander II 1881 to the Italian King Umberto I in 1900, terrorists made headlines without paying a penny in advertising

⁸ Bolt, Neville, David Betz, and Jaz Azari, *Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon*. Whitehall Report Series, 3-08, London: RUSI, 2008.

⁹ Johnpoll, Bernard, ‘Terrorism and the Mass Media in the United States’; in: Alexander, Yonah, and Seymour Maxwell Finger (eds.), *Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*. New York, John Jay Press, 1977, p. 160.

¹⁰ Johannes Most, as quoted in: Laqueur, Walter and Yonah Alexander (eds.), *The Terrorism Reader: A Historical Anthology*. New York, New American Library, 1987, p. 105.

¹¹ Brusse, Paul and Peter Kropotkin, ‘La propagande par le fait’ [Propaganda of the deed]. *Bulletin de la Fédération Jurassienne de l’Association internationale des travailleurs*, 5 August 1877; Schmid, Alex P., ‘Terrorism and the Media: The Ethics of Publicity,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 1(4), December 1989, p. 540; see also: Bolt, Betz, and Azari 2008.

¹² Schmid and de Graaf 1982, pp. 13-14.; and Wikipedia, ‘Propaganda of the Deed,’ Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Propaganda_of_the_deed accessed 2 November 2006.

costs.¹³ With their assassinations, they found a way of accessing the world's news system by deliberately creating "bad news." The historian Daniel Boorstin notes in one of his works the transition from news gathering to news making in the years between the World Wars. However, it can be argued that terrorists already discovered "news making" in the late 1870s. Boorstin coined the term "pseudo-events" to describe "the new kind of synthetic novelty which has flooded our experience." In his view, a pseudo-event possesses the following characteristics:

1. "It is not spontaneous, but comes about because someone has planned or incited it;
2. It is planned primarily (not always exclusively) for the immediate purpose of being reported or reproduced. Therefore, its occurrence is arranged for the convenience of the reporting or reproducing media. Its success is measured by how widely it is reported."¹⁴

The Greek word *pseudo* means "false, meant to deceive." Terrorists create "pseudo-events" which are real in their consequences for the direct victims, but which mainly serve to deceive many others, manipulating them, for instance, into believing that the terrorists are much stronger than they really are. The earliest definition of terrorism, coming from ancient China, is "Kill one, frighten ten thousand."¹⁵ With the advent of mass media, the force multiplication of terrorism became much larger and a single demonstrative public murder can scare or impress millions of people.

In a study with the title *Violence as Communication* in 1982, I had argued that violence and propaganda have much in common.¹⁶ Violence aims at behaviour modification by coercion. Propaganda aims at the same by persuasion. Terrorism can be seen as a combination of the two. Eugen Hadamovsky, a Nazi radio director serving under Germany's propaganda minister Joseph Goebbels, already noted in 1933 in his book on *Propaganda and National Power* that "Propaganda and violence are never contradictions. Use of violence can be part of propaganda."¹⁷ Terrorism, by using violence against one victim, seeks to coerce or persuade others. The immediate victim is merely instrumental - to use a crude but telling metaphor - the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience.¹⁸ Violence always

¹³ In his study of the origins of the "propaganda of the deed," Fabian Lemmes noted, "...above all, a broad resonance space opened up for assassinations and those who committed these. The hitherto unparalleled transnational wave of assassinations in the 'long' 1890s cannot be explained without the massive, even abundant, reporting by the media of the late 19th century. By means of the enormous mediatisation, demonstrative violence as a political instrument relying on public attention generation gained its attraction. In addition, the constant presence of the topic in the public discourse across national boundaries inspired more perpetrators to engage in acts of imitation and revenge." See Fabian Lemmes, 'Propaganda der Tat. Zur Geschichte einer besonderen Gewaltpraxis,' [Propaganda indeed. On the history of a particular violence practice] *Mittelweg 36, Zeitschrift des Hamburger Instituts für Sozialforschung*, 29(4-5) October 2020, p. 44 [translated by Alex P. Schmid].

¹⁴ Boorstin, Daniel J., 'From News Gathering to News Making: A Flood of Pseudo-Events'; in: Combs, James et al. (eds.) *Drama in Life. The Uses of Communication in Society*. New York: Hastings House, 1976, pp. 182-183.

¹⁵ Cf. Henry Prunckun, 'The First Pillar of Terror – Kill One, Frighten Ten Thousand: A Critical Discussion of the Doctrinal Shift Associated with the "New Terrorism",' *Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* 87(3), 2014, pp. 178–185.

¹⁶ Schmid, Alex P. and J. de Graaf, *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage, 1982.

¹⁷ Arendt, Hannah, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1971, p. 341. Joseph Goebbels noted in 1936, "Violence arrests the attention of all who are within sight and hearing of the action....it focuses the attention of everybody in the audience on the terrorists' propaganda message." Cit. Schmid 1989, p. 539.

¹⁸ Kropotkin, Peter, *The Spirit of Revolt, 1880*, as cited in Iviansky, Ze'ev, 'Individual Terror: Concept and Typology,' *Journal of Contemporary History*, 12, 1977, p. 45. Available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/002200947701200102>.

calls for attention as it is potentially life-threatening and we cannot ignore it, even if it is not taking place in our street but “only” in an audio news broadcast on the television screen.

Not only the National Socialists in the 1930s, but also Communist theorists like Carlos Marighella in the 1960s, recognized the utility of using a mix of violence and propaganda. In his *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969) the Brazilian terrorist detailed how “propaganda of the deed” works:

1. Terrorist acts should be aimed at the audience, the general public;
2. Victims should be chosen for their symbolic meaning;
3. The media are eager to cover terrorist violence;
4. The media can be activated, directed, and manipulated for propagandistic effect; and
5. Governments are at a disadvantage because their only choice is between censorship and letting terrorists make use of their media.¹⁹

As a public display of power over life and death, many acts of terrorism are highly dramatic, almost irresistible for the media not to report. A German terrorist, Hans-Joachim Klein said: “If they do not listen to us, then we throw a couple of bombs.”²⁰ On another occasion, he said: “We give the media what they need: newsworthy events. They cover us, explain our causes and this, unknowingly, legitimates us....”²¹ Ted Kaczynski, the Harvard-educated Unabomber, put it this way: “In order to get our message before the public with some chance of making a lasting impression, we’ve had to kill people.”²²

In other words, terrorists know what the news media consider “news value” and tailor (some of) their attacks to fit the criteria of the news system in order to get free publicity on a scale that very few could afford if the same prominent space and time in the media had to be bought in the form of advertisements. The media’s news value system puts a premium on things that are new, surprising, unexpected, dramatic, disruptive and have what is termed “human interest.” Many acts of terrorism fulfil half or more of the elements that commonly determine “news value” and therefore lead to publication:

1. Immediacy and event-orientation;
2. Drama and conflict;
3. Negativity (bad news has drama and conflict);
4. Human interest;
5. Photographability;
6. Simple story lines;
7. Topicality (current news frames);

¹⁹ Marighella, Carlos, *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969), as cited in Weiman, Gabriel and Conrad Winn, *The Theatre of Terror. Mass Media and International Terrorism*. New York, Longman, 1994, p. 57.

²⁰ Schmid, Alex P. and Janny de Graaf, *Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media. An Exploratory Analysis with a Dutch Case Study*. Leiden, COMT, 1980, p. 44.

²¹ Former terrorist active in German RAF and Italian BR. See Weimann, Gabriel and Conrad Winn, *The Theater of Terror. Mass Media and International Terrorism*. White Plains: Longman Publishing Group, 1994, p. 61.

²² *The New York Times*, June 1995, as cited in: Badley, Thomas, ‘Defining International Terrorism: A Pragmatic Approach,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence*, 10(2), Spring 1998, p. 98. Ted Kaczynski was held responsible for sixteen bombings of universities and airports conducted between 1978 and 1995, killing three persons and injuring 23 others in the US. He promised he would “desist from terrorism” and end his bombing campaign if a major national newspaper would publish his 35,000 words long essay *Industrial Society and Its Future* (the “Unabomber Manifesto”). *The Washington Post* published the “Unabomber Manifesto” on 19 September 1995. Wikipedia (English.), Lemma ‘Ted Kaczynski,’ Wikipedia.

8. Exclusivity;
9. Status and reliability of information source
10. Local interest²³

By tailoring their violence to the news values of the media (e.g. “if it bleeds, it leads”),²⁴ terrorists could - and still can - gain access to mass audiences. The media not only transmit their message – a deed that speaks for itself and/or a communiqué to go with it – almost in real time. They also publicize the terrorists’ grievances and accusations free of charge, which makes their strategy very cost-effective. Empirical research has shown that a number of goals are pursued in this way.

1. Winning or enlarging sympathy among “their” public;
2. Winning new recruits for the terrorist organization;
3. Demoralizing targeted sectors of the public;
4. Demonstrating the vulnerability of authorities;
5. Polarizing the political situation.²⁵

The media have become a weapon of mass communication in political conflicts and even more so in armed conflicts. This is nothing new. The Nazi propaganda minister, Josef Goebbels, had already known that “News is a weapon of war. Its purpose is to wage war and not to give out information.”²⁶

Each side in a conflict wishes to give a certain media “spin” to what is happening, so that pertinent events are interpreted favourably by one side or the other. Terrorists are primarily interested in the psychological rather than the physical effects of their violence, based on “.... their conviction that the actual effect of terror is its representation in the media, without which its value and effect as a weapon is meaningless and limited” - to quote the Director of Israeli Television, David Witzhum.²⁷ Satellite-linked live television has increased audiences to hundreds of millions and – today – even more. An attack on Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games of 1972 reached an audience of up to 800 million television spectators.²⁸ The Palestinian Liberation Organization leader Abu Iyad, Yassir Arafat’s deputy, explained one of the rationales behind this attack: “To exploit the unusual concentration of media coverage in Munich to give our struggle an international resonance – positive or negative, it didn’t

²³ Based on Peltu, M., ‘The role of communication media’; in: Otway, H. and M. Peltu (eds.), *Regulating Industrial Risks: Science, Hazards and Public Protection*. London: Butterworths, 1985, pp. 128-148; Debatin, Bernhard, ‘Plane Wreck with Spectators: Terrorism and Media Attention’; in: Greenberg, Bradley S. (ed.), *Communication and Terrorism. Public and Media Responses to 9/11*. Cresskill, N.J.: Hamilton Press, 2002, p. 168. Cf. see also Galtung, Johan and Marie Holmboe Ruge, ‘The Structure of Foreign News,’ *Journal of Peace Research*, 2(1), 1965, pp. 64-91.

²⁴ “Leads” refers here to be placed on page one of a newspaper. Already in the 1950s, FLN leader Ramdane Abane instructed his followers in the struggle for the liberation of Algeria from France, “We must have blood in the headlines of all the newspapers.” See Crenshaw Hutchinson, Martha, *Revolutionary Terrorism: The FLN in Algeria, 1954-1962*. Stanford, Hoover Institution Press, 1978, p. 94.

²⁵ Gerrits, Robin P.J.M., ‘Terrorists Perspectives: Memoirs’; in: Paletz David L. and Alex P. Schmid, *Terrorism and the Media. How Researcher, Terrorists, Government, Press, Public, Victims View and Use the Media*. Newbury Park: Sage Publications, 1992, p. 33.

²⁶ Schmid and de Graaf 1982 p. 14.

²⁷ Witzhum, David, op. cit., p. 33. – This is echoed in the statement, “Yet as a weapon, terror is sophisticated. It is “1% bang and 99% publicity.” See Simon Jenkins, ‘Reviewing Matthew Carr’s Unknown Soldiers: How Terrorism Transformed the Modern World’; in: *The Sunday Times* (books), p. 38. Available at: <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/topic/books?page=1>.

²⁸ Schmid and de Graaf 1982 p. 30.

matter....”²⁹ Brian Jenkins, an American researcher, wrote in the mid-1970s: “Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not the actual victims. Terrorism is theatre.”³⁰

Once reported, such violent communications tend to terrorize segments of society which belong to the same category of people as the direct victims. The perpetrators of violence can at the same time also impress actual and potential constituencies of the terrorists and they can pressure governments to respond to the political demands of the terrorists. In other words, one act of violence, and even more so a series of acts of violence against non-combatant civilians, can alternatively impress, intimidate, or coerce different (but sometimes partly overlapping) target audiences.³¹

The 9/11 attacks served several purposes. In the words of Bin Laden (who had already announced in 1997 when asked about his future plans: “You’ll see them and hear about them in the media, God willing”³²): “The effect of his deed [of one of the 9/11 hijacker-pilots] was significantly more efficient than many million books, which have been “written for the strengthening of Islam. ... They [Al-Qaeda’s 9/11 hijackers] have not only destroyed the towers of the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. That would have been too easy. No, they have destroyed the symbol of the tyrants of our times and their values.”³³

The main targets of these attacks were, however, not the near 3,000 people from more than 60 countries who died in the 9/11 attacks, or even the American people as a whole. In the words of one of the top commanders of Al-Qaeda, Saif al-Adel:

“...al Qaeda has, and always had, a specific aim: to arouse the sleeping body of the Islamic Nation – a billion Muslims worldwide – to fight against Western power and the contaminations of Western culture. In support of this aim, the 9/11 attacks were designed to force the Western snake to bite the sleeping body, and wake it up.”³⁴

The media were crucial in the calculus of Al-Qaeda and other jihadist groups.

Faisal Devji, who analysed the speeches of Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri in his book *Landscapes of the Jihad*, argues:

²⁹ Iyad, Abu, *Without a Homeland: Conversations with Arik Rouleau*. Tel Aviv: Mifras Publications, 1983, p. 158, p. 165; Ganor, Boaz, *The Counter-Terrorism Puzzle. A Guide for Decision Makers*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction Publishers, 2005, p. 234.

³⁰ Jenkins, Brian, ‘International Terrorism: A Balance Sheet,’ *Survival*, 17(4), 1975, pp. 158–164. Six years later, in 1981, he elaborated”

³¹ Terrorism does not “terrorise” everybody, but only the direct victims and those who strongly identify with them. There is a whole spectrum of different reactions to acts of terrorism from very negative to very positive, depending with whom a witness or indirect observer identifies: the victims, the terrorists, the government, or someone else. The individual scale of reactions to acts of terrorism includes those who are: 1) terrorised and intimidated; 2) panicking and confused; 3) frightened and showing loss of confidence; 4) worrying and distressed; 5) angered, with hardened opposition to the terrorist cause; 6) indifferent or wavering; 7) positively impressed by short-term impact of terrorist act; 8) sympathetic to terrorist cause; 9) supportive of terrorist tactics; 10) seeking to join terrorist organization. One only has to recall that after 9/11, some of the reactions listed under points 7 to 10 were not unusual in the Arab world. Cf. Schmid, Alex P., ‘Public Opinion Survey Data to Measure Sympathy and Support for Islamist Terrorism: A Look at Muslim Opinions on Al Qaeda and IS,’ *The International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) Research Paper*, February 2017. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.19165/2017.1.02>.

³² In an interview with Peter Arnett, ‘CNN March 1997 interview with Osama bin Laden.’ Available at: <http://www.crono911.net/docs/Arnett1997.pdf>.

³³ Quoted from a 62-minute video produced by Al-Qaeda’s propaganda committee, as quoted in *Der Spiegel* (Hamburg), 44, 27 October 2003, pp. 122-123.

³⁴ Saif al-Adel, 2005; cf. McCauley and Moskalenko, 2011, p. 157.

“Perhaps the most important way in which the jihad assumes its universality, however, is through the mass media. As a series of global effects the jihad is more a product of the media than it is of any local tradition or situation and school or lineage of Muslim authority. ... the jihad itself can be seen as an offspring of the media, composed as it is almost completely of pre-existing media themes, images and stereotypes. ... It is no exaggeration to say that only in this globally mediated landscape does Islam become universal, uniting Muslims and non-Muslims alike in a common visual practice.... The jihad battlefields become sites of a global Islam only when they are in the news, which is why combatants, funds, and supplies, not to mention the world’s attention, move from one battlefield to another, because the content of the jihad is the news itself as something new. ... Only in the mass media does the collective witnessing that defines martyrdom achieve its full effect, as the various attempts by would-be martyrs to film their deaths or at least to leave behind videotaped testaments, illustrates so clearly.”³⁵

The basic idea of “propaganda of the deed,” namely to openly perform acts of extraordinary violence to attract media attention and instrumentalize the publicity generated in an effort to gain leverage, has not changed much since the late 19th century.³⁶ Key is the triangular relationship between perpetrator(s), victim(s) and ultimate target(s)³⁷ (see diagram ‘The Triangle of Terrorism’ in chapter 2).

With the help of mass media, terrorists can reach more than one “ultimate target.” One can distinguish ten different audiences:

1. Adversary (-ies) – usually government(s);
2. Society of the adversary;
3. Direct victims and their families and friends;
4. Others who have reason to fear that they might become next targets;
5. Members of the terrorist organization;
6. Members of other rival terrorist or political party organizations;
7. Constituency terrorists who claim to represent/act for the terrorist organization;
8. Potentially sympathetic sectors of domestic and foreign (diaspora) publics;
9. “Neutral,” distant publics;
10. Last, but not least: the mass and social media themselves.³⁸

³⁵ Devji, Faisal, *Landscapes of the Jihad. Militancy, Morality, Modernity*. London: Hurst, 2005, pp. 87-95.

³⁶ In an analysis from 2008, Neville Bolt wrote about Propaganda of the Deed (POTD), “POTD is more than an operational technique intended to produce ‘shock and awe’ through the force multiplying effect of fear. (...) POTD is a symbolic and rhetorical tool for insurgents in a repertoire of ‘political marketing’ – it encourages the formation of sympathetic support-communities. (...) POTD has shifted from territorial to ‘virtual’ theatres of operation.” See Bolt, Betz, and Azari, 2008.

³⁷ Schmid, Alex P., *Political Terrorism*. Amsterdam: North-Holland Publ., 1984, p. 91.

³⁸ This list is not exhaustive. Some terrorists might, unconsciously perhaps, aim for a boomerang effect. As I wrote elsewhere, “In fact, I suspect that in many cases the terrorists and their immediate supporters are the only ones who appreciate the results of their violence. Auto-propaganda, whereby the terrorists are both perpetrators and chief audience, is a very important element. A bomb set off, an opponent killed, and the media coverage that goes with it boost their morale much more than it lowers that of their opponent. The terrorist message to the ‘true believers’ - the community of insiders – might be more important than the message to the outsiders.” See Schmid, Alex P. ‘Terrorism and the Media: Freedom of Information vs. Freedom from Intimidation’; in: Howard, Lawrence (ed.) *Terrorism. Roots, Impact, Responses*. New York: Praeger, 1992, p. 106.

Depending on what the intended purposes of a given act of terrorism are, an attack can be directed at one or several specific audiences.³⁹ To create the connection between the direct victim and the ultimate target(s), however, the terrorist perpetrator needs mass media as amplifiers. Without them, the act of terrorism would not get much attention and the deed would be almost as unrecorded as the proverbial tree falling in the forest with nobody watching.⁴⁰ A German terrorist, Bommi Baumann, member of the German left-wing guerrilla group 2 June Movement admitted, “Without journalistic reporting we would find ourselves facing a certain vacuum. It is through the press that our cause is maintained in the just manner....”⁴¹ Satellite-linked television, in particular, has given terrorism a new platform. In the words of Brigitte Nacos: “No other medium has provided more oxygen to terrorism than television because of its ability to report the news instantly, nonstop, and in visuals and words from any place to all parts of the globe, a facility that has affected the reporting patterns of other media as well.”⁴²

How the Media Portray and (Ab-)Use Terrorism

Since modern mass media came into existence in the second half of the 19th century, they have served several functions:

1. The *informational function* (updating the public about current events which might affect people);
2. The *interactional function* (providing an open forum for the free exchange of ideas and opinions); and
3. The *educational function* (transmitting useful knowledge to help define and clarify public issues).

However, pressured by the commercial character of many mass media and/or by their role in mobilizing public support for political parties in and out of government, two other functions have become stronger, often pushing the first three positive functions into the background:

4. The *political party function* (providing the public with preferred political judgments and ideological interpretations); and
5. The *commercial function* (obtaining more advertisements and increases sales and market shares for profit reasons to the media owners themselves).⁴³

³⁹ Schmid, Alex P., ‘Revisiting the Wicked Problem of Defining Terrorism,’ *Contemporary Voices: St Andrews Journal of International Relations (CVIR)*, October 2020.

⁴⁰ Ted Koppel, an anchor man of the ABC TEV network in the United States has been quoted as saying, “Without television, terrorism becomes rather like the philosopher’s hypothetical tree falling in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it has no reason for being. And television, without terrorism, while not deprived of all interesting things in the world, is nonetheless deprived of one of the most interesting.” Anzovin, Steven, *Terrorism*. New York, NY: H W Wilson, 1986, p. 97.

⁴¹ Schmid and de Graaf 1982 p. 48.

⁴² Nacos, Brigitte L., *Mass-Mediated Terrorism. The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 39.

⁴³ This list (which is not the author’s own creation but taken from communication studies) is not exhaustive. There is at least one more function: 6) recreational function (providing entertainment and amusement about the ways of society). There are also combinations of functions. In this context, Brigitte Nacos noted: “As serious news organizations move increasingly away from reporting what journalists/gatekeepers deem *important* for the enlightenment of fellow citizens to what profit-oriented corporate managers consider *interesting* for the entertainment of news consumers, “hard” news is increasingly crowded out by “soft” news. ...As a result, most news offered in the twenty-first century is essentially a blend between “hard” information and “soft” entertainment – infotainment in the guise of news reporting. ... Infotainment, far more than informative hard news, strives on

Capturing a broad public and gaining and holding its attention is what most mass media in open societies have increasingly been looking for, driven by competitive market forces (“if we do not cover a terrorist incident to the fullest, the competition will, and audiences will switch TV channels”). The way to hold the attention of audiences is to provide the public with news, preferably with moving pictures, that has great “human interest.” The strongest human interest is the interest to survive. Any news that signals danger to survival is eagerly absorbed.⁴⁴ Therefore “bad news” is more newsworthy than other news which signals no danger. This is sometimes described as “the basic news value.”⁴⁵

A closer look at news values and the place of bad news has been provided by Richard Hoggart. He had, in the mid-1970s, this to say about the journalism trade when television became the main source of news:

“Of course, what they call ‘the news’ is biased; or, if that seems too loaded a word, artificially shaped. It is the result each day of a process of selection so speedy and habitual as to seem almost instinctive. ... ‘The news’ selects itself by four main filtering processes. First, by simple constraints germane to the medium or fortuitously of the moment: constraints of available time or available resources, or of geography and so on. Second, ‘the news’ is decided by a tradition of ‘news values’ which television has largely taken over from the more popular end of the press and holds on to with little apparent will to think through their relevance, or irrelevance, to television’s own situation.... Third, there are what are known as specifically ‘television values’ or ‘television material.’ This item is recognized as good visually, so it rates a place before that; or this subject will be approached thus because that’s the angle which makes ‘good television.’ The fourth and most important filter – since it partly contains the others – is the cultural air we breathe, the whole ideological atmosphere of our society, which tells us that some things can be said and others had best not be said. ... By the concurrent and almost instant application of these four types of filter, television gives us what its practitioners call ‘the objective news’ but what is in reality a heavily-selected interpretation of events, one which structures reality for us, which shapes and frames a world for us to inhabit and accept as real and legitimated, one which sets the agenda within which – except by a positive effort at remaking – we are led to discuss the terms of our lives.”⁴⁶

In one sense “bad news” (e.g. about a killer on the loose in the neighbourhood) is “good news” since there is great local “human interest” in it and many people will switch on radio or TV to update themselves about the event. For most mass media, such “bad news” is, commercially

the very images and themes that terrorist incidents offer – drama, tragedy, shock, anger, grief, fear, panic – the ideal ingredients for transforming real life terror into breath-taking thrillers or heart-breaking soap operas designed to captivate and stir up audiences.” – Nacos 2002 pp. 28-29.

⁴⁴ The former president of ABC News in the United States, Av Westin, discussing the network’s evening programming, held that the audience wants to know one thing more than others, “Is the world safe and am I secure?” Sperry, Sharon L., ‘Television News as Narrative’; in: Adler, Richard E. and Douglass Cater (eds.) *Television as a Cultural Force*. New York: Praeger, 1976, p. 135.

⁴⁵ Wikipedia (English), ‘News Values,’ Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/News_values#:~:text=The%20news%20value%20of%20a,for%20the%20individual%20or%20group

⁴⁶ Richard Hoggart in Foreword to a study by the Glasgow University Media Group, titled ‘Bad News’ (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul 1981 (1976)], pp. ix-x.

speaking, “good news” as it allows them to attract larger audiences which, in turn, generates larger revenues from advertisements. Hence the old journalistic adage: “Bad news is good news, good news is bad news, and no news is bad news.” Terrorists have discovered and continue to exploit this propensity of the news system and deliberately create “bad news.” This common interest of mass media and terrorists in “bad news” has been viewed by some observers as a form of “symbiosis.”⁴⁷ The historian Walter Laqueur once said that “the media are the terrorists best friend.”⁴⁸ A German journalist turned academic, Brigitte Nacos, looking at the alleged symbiosis from the other side, described this relationship in these words, “[T]he news media and terrorists are not involved in a love story; they are strange bedfellows in a marriage of convenience.”⁴⁹ On another occasion, she reformulated her statement: “All told, the mainstream media and terrorists are not bedfellows, they are more like partners in a marriage of convenience.”⁵⁰ More recently, Jessica White also noted that: “... there is a clear synergy between the media’s desire for a sensational story and terrorists’ desire for publicity.”⁵¹

Both mass media and non-state terrorists want to obtain the attention of large publics, the terrorists to sell shock and awe to target audiences, the commercial mass media to sell large fearful publics to advertisers and reap the profits.⁵² Morality and profitability are sometimes at odds with each other when “news” is no longer primarily considered as a social and public good but treated as a commercial commodity like any other and packaged and marketed primarily to make money.

In an analysis of 21st century “propaganda of the deed” (POTD) Neville Bolt concluded in 2008 that:

“News organisations are trapped in a competition to deliver audiences; at the same time, they are caught in shrinking time and space. Reporting stories in real-time through twenty-four hour television news stations places them on an ever-shrinking timeline between event and broadcast. This timeline is governed by a number of factors. 1) The commoditisation of news and factual programming into a form of quasi entertainment creates viewer appetite. 2) The ‘tabloidisation’ of information means the most dramatic content rises to the top of the news running order, while the medium continues its ‘race to the bottom’. 3) The ubiquity and standardisation of formatised programming across television around the world means the underlying, tabloid visual grammar is shorthanded and homogenised, thus readily understood by any viewer. 4) The proliferation of state and commercial TV stations increases competition for the dramatic image and increases market-access for groups engaged in POTD. 5)

⁴⁷ E.g. by terrorism analyst Cindy C. Combs or Jessica White. See Forest, James, *The Terrorism Lectures*. Orange County: Nortia Press, 2012, p. 100; White, Jessica, ‘Terrorism and the Media,’ London: RUSI, 2020, p. 35.

⁴⁸ Laqueur, Walter, ‘The Futility of Terrorism,’ *Harper’s* 252, 1976, p. 106.

⁴⁹ Nacos, Brigitte L., *Terrorism and Counterterrorism: Understanding Threats and Responses in the Post-9/11 World*. 3rd ed. Boston: Longman, 2010, p. 263.

⁵⁰ Nacos, Brigitte L., *Mass-Mediated Terrorism. The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, p. 99. Other researcher came to similar, but less one-sided conclusions. Cynthis Irwin, basing herself on interviews with terrorists from the IRA, ETA and the PLO, concluded that “... insurgent ‘terrorists’ are more likely to view the media as, at best, reluctant allies and, at worst, hostile and powerful enemies.” See ‘Terrorists’ Perspectives: Interviews’; in: Paletz and Schmid, 1992, p. 84.

⁵¹ White, 2020, p. vii.

⁵² Nacos, Brigitte L., Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro, *Selling Fear. Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

The availability of low-cost technology means POTD group activity can be relayed through ‘in house’ units of insurgents who record and edit attacks before making them available either on internet insurgency sites or via the web to global TV stations”.⁵³

In my earlier work, I had identified no fewer than thirty active and passive uses of the mass media by terrorists (see Appendix I). Three consequences of mass media reporting of acts of terrorism that stand out are briefly highlighted here.

Intimidation

Violence always demands our attention since it can be life-threatening. However, our instinctual reaction to pay attention to violence also works when the violence is not close to our immediate surroundings but “only” on television. Media-reported violence, especially when accompanied by graphic images, triggers our instinctive attention. Terrorists know that and so do mass media. The more media violence we are exposed to, the more people tend to become anxious, fearful or even terrorized, despite a certain numbing that can also be observed among parts of the public.⁵⁴ Mass media, while informing us about violence, thereby can also intimidate us. That is perhaps the main effect of media portrayals of acts of terrorism. If mass media have a propensity to favour bad news over good news, the result is not just information but also intimidation.

Agenda Setting

By extensively covering certain news stories more than others, the mass media have the ability to determine the importance of issues in the public domain. What the public perceive as important becomes, in democratic societies, politically important, and sets the government’s agenda. A social issue becomes a political issue by receiving widespread media coverage. Such agenda-setting coverage, in turn, can be achieved by attacking people whose death is newsworthy. One tactical victory of non-state terrorists is that they can place issues on the political agenda and force governments to react – and often overreact. Acts of terrorism can set in motion a chain of events in a fertile surrounding, e.g., the nationalist revolt against empires in the early 20th century. The worst example is the assassination of the Austrian heir to the throne, Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo on 28 June 1914 by the 19-year-old Bosnian Serb student Gavrilo Princip, who was linked to the nationalist Serbian Black Hand Organization. His assassination started a chain reaction of ill-considered governmental policy decisions in Germany, Austria, Russia, and France, leading to the outbreak of the First World War on 1 August 1914. When the war ended, the Austrian-Hungarian empire, the German empire, the Russian empire, and the Ottoman empire had crumbled. While this was an exceptional outcome, terrorists often can, with calculated assassinations and massacres, determine a government’s political agenda for months and years.

Acts of terrorism are often acts of provocation and in political party systems politicians often feel tempted to “play politics” with terrorism, calling for stronger counter-measures than the

⁵³ Bolt, Betz, and Azari, 2008.

⁵⁴ Cf. Shoshani, Anat and Michelle Slone, ‘The Drama of Media Coverage of Terrorism: Emotional and Attitudinal Impact on the Audience,’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 31(7), 2008, pp. 627-640.

opposition. This process of outbidding between government and opposition following a terrorist attack can keep terrorism on the political agenda for weeks and months. Countermeasures targeting the constituency terrorists come from, tend to drive other members of the constituency into the arms of the terrorist organisation, making the constituency a “suspect community” in the eyes of other members of society, thereby leading to polarization and radicalization on both sides. A climate of suspicion and fear can be the result, leading to an escalation of violence. The way mass media reports on acts of terrorism often increase the risk of escalation.

Contagion

One probable effect of massive media reporting is contagion – a chain reaction of imitative acts by persons influenced by a reported successful initial act. While the majority of people reject violence and sympathize with the victims of terrorism, there are others who identify with the terrorists, approving their goals if not their methods. There is also a tiny minority who feel inspired and join a terrorist group or seek to copy acts of terrorism without direct links to the original perpetrators. Human beings have a tendency to imitate other human beings, and while such imitation is usually harmless – as in fashion trends that become popular – there are also harmful ones, as in copycat crimes and lone actor attacks. People learn from each other but also from the mass media; especially visual media like television can create captivating images that appeal to some to go out and do likewise. When mass media reach hundreds of millions of people, even the most atrocious acts of violence portrayed by mass media can find some eager learners and impressed imitators.

It is widely accepted by the mass media that detailed and graphic reports on suicides lead to more suicides of the same type. Most mass media have learned to be restrained in their coverage of suicides or do not cover them at all.⁵⁵ However, this has not been true for suicide terrorism nor for other forms of terrorism like hijackings or ramming heavy vehicles into crowds of people.⁵⁶ There have been various statistical studies that have shown a causal link between reporting on acts of terrorism and further similar acts of terrorism. One statistical study by Michael Jetter found that enhanced media attention to terrorism tends to lead to more terrorism.⁵⁷ Other studies using different methodologies have noted similar contagion effects.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Cf. Samaritans, ‘Best Practice Suicide Reporting Tips’ Samaritans. Available at: <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/best-practice-suicide-reporting-tips/>; White, 2020, p. 11.

⁵⁶ Miller, Vincent, and Keith J Hayward, “‘I Did My Bit’: Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event,” *British Journal of Criminology*, 59(1), 2018, p. 1.

⁵⁷ Jetter, Michael, ‘The Effect of Media Attention on Terrorism,’ *Journal of Public Economics*, 153, September 2017, pp. 32-48. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpubeco.2017.07.008>; Jetter, Michael, ‘Terrorism and the Media: The Effect of US Television Coverage on Al-Qaeda Attacks,’ IZA Discussion Paper Series, No. 10708, April 2017. Available at: http://legacy.iza.org/de/webcontent/publications/papers/viewAbstract?dp_id=10708; see also: Brosius, Hans-Bernd and Gabriel Weimann, ‘The Contagiousness of Mass-Mediated Terrorism,’ *European Journal of Communication*, 6(1), 1991, pp. 63-75. Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0267323191006001004>; Nacos, Brigitte L., ‘Revisiting the Contagion Hypothesis: Terrorism, News Coverage, and Copycat Attacks,’ *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 3(3), September 2009, pp. 3-13. Available at:

<http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/73>.

⁵⁸ Jessica White found in her literature review on terrorism and the media that: “Mass media reporting can contribute to imitation of terrorism.” See J. White, (2020) op. cit., p. vii. Judith Begeer in her thesis ‘How Media-Reported Violence Spreads: The Contagion of Suicide Terrorism’ (The Hague: Leiden University M.A. Thesis, 2017), found that statistically ‘.... suicide terrorism spreads via a non-random distribution.’ She also concluded

This is exactly in line with what the inventors of “propaganda of the deed” in the late 19th century expected. Terrorists learn from each other and imitate each other but much of that learning is by means of mass media and, more recently, also from social media. In a chapter on *Media-Induced Contagion of Terrorist Violence* in the volume *Violence as Communication*, I described ten cases of serial contagion, and concluded that:

“The media can provide the potential terrorist with all the ingredients that are necessary to engage in this type of [imitative] violence. They can reduce inhibitions against the use of violence, they can offer models and know-how to potential terrorists and they can motivate them in various ways”.⁵⁹

In the 1970s, one of the tactics frequently used by terrorists was the occupation of foreign embassies. In one case – the occupation of the US embassy in Tehran on 4 November 1979, 52 hostages were held for 444 days, with some major mass media in North America covering the story on an almost daily basis. In an earlier study ten years after the events, I wrote:

“Terrorists use the media and the media use terrorism. At the time of the Tehran embassy incident this was particularly evident when the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation filmed a mob demonstration. As soon as the cameras were on, the demonstrators began shouting ‘Death to Carter’, raised their fists, looked angry and burned American flags. After two minutes, the cameraman signalled the end of the ‘take’. Then the same scene was done once more for the French-speaking Canadians, with the crowd shouting ‘Mort a Carter’”.⁶⁰

Here the line between the television media’s news gathering and news making had clearly been crossed. The excessive media coverage of the hostage drama in the US embassy arguably cost President Jimmy Carter the re-election and brought Ronald Reagan into the White House. In a globalizing world interlinked by satellite television, local terrorist acts can, and often do, assume global relevance. In study I did in 1992 I concluded:

“The rise of the newsworthy violent pseudo-event has, in my opinion, begun to poison journalism. It has started a feedback process in which the media, and television in particular, reflect reality less than reality has begun to reflect television’s news values. The implications of this shift from neutral news gathering to calculated news making by actors in and recorders of events are profound for the global electronic village.”⁶¹

Some quality media have in recent decades developed guidelines on how to cover terrorist events, partly driven by apprehension that if the media would not police themselves, the government might do so with a heavier hand. It is to the issue of media guidelines we turn next.

that “...clusters and frequencies in the spread of this type of violence [were] pointing towards contagion.” (Quote from the Abstract).

⁵⁹ Schmid, Alex P. & Janny de Graaf (1982), op. cit., p. 142.

⁶⁰ Schmid, 1989, p. 559.

⁶¹ Schmid, Alex P., ‘Terrorism and the Media: Freedom of Information vs. Freedom from Intimidation,’ pp. 95-118; in: Howard, Lawrence (ed.), *Terrorism. Roots, Impact, Responses*. New York: Praeger 1992, p. 100.

Media Guidelines to Prevent Terrorist (Ab-) Use of Mass Media

The evidence that mass media reporting can facilitate terrorism is no longer seriously contested. Jessica White, a former intelligence analyst, for instance, concluded in a RUSI review of literature on media and terrorism in 2020 that:

“... there is significant empirical evidence in the literature to suggest that the media can and sometimes does contribute to radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation to violence and imitation of terrorist attack methods. ...Media coverage of terrorism in any form amplifies the effects of terrorism, because it broadcasts attacks to a larger audience than would be immediately affected. ... Analysis also indicates that inadvertent advancement does occur, due to the communication of terrorism through reporting.”⁶²

What then should – and can – be done to ban or at least minimize terrorist news making? One answer is governmental censorship (which we will not explore here), another answer is self-control by the mass media in the form of internal or inter-media guidelines advocating restraint in the coverage of terrorism. Relying on principles of news coverage antedates the current wave of terrorist exploitation of news values.

Over the last century a set of journalistic ethical principles have emerged in Western democracies among quality papers and some visual media, which includes the following basic elements:

1. “to report truthfully, that is, honestly, accurately, objectively, and reliably;
2. to report comprehensively so that the public gets the best information available in order to develop an understanding of conflicting viewpoints and to reduce ignorance of significant issues;
3. to report impartially, that is, with fairness to all sides who have a point;
4. to maintain editorial independence against all interest groups;
5. to separate news from commentary so that a journalist’s bias towards a person or institution does not influence a news report”.⁶³

However, such principles – even when observed - are not a sufficient defence against abuse by terrorists, since these principles are largely based on journalistic news gathering rather than malicious news making by terrorists eager to get public attention.

Individual media, media organizations as well as inter-governmental committees have tried to regulate media reporting in situations of terrorist campaigns since the 1970s. One of the first was the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) when facing terrorist attacks in Northern Ireland and in Brighton, Birmingham, and London.⁶⁴ Several news organizations and news agencies (e.g. Reuters) and individual editors have developed guidelines referring to issues such as:

⁶² White 2020 p. 35.

⁶³ This short list of ethical principles was derived on the basis of responses from editors to author, as quoted in Schmid 1989, p. 546.

⁶⁴ Peresin, Anita, ‘Mass Media and Terrorism,’ *Medij. istraž.* 13(1), 2007, p. 14.

- Coverage should be restricted to “facts” but must not imply encouragement, glorification, or condoning of acts of terrorism;
- News should not be presented in a way as to cause unnecessary panic, alarm, or stress;
- Increased attention to should be given to humanizing the victims;
- Reduction in the prominence of imagery of the perpetrators;
- Promotion of narratives of community and cross-community solidarity.⁶⁵

Guidelines have also been proposed by independent observers. A good set comes from Raphael Cohen-Almagor from University of Haifa, Israel. In 2005 he proposed, inter alia, the following ten guidelines:⁶⁶

1. The media should refrain from sensational and panicky headlines, from inflammatory catchwords, and from needless repetition of photos from bloody scenes. ...
2. The media should not broadcast live terrorist incidents that include hostage taking. ...
3. The media are advised not to interview terrorists while the terrorist incident is still in motion. ...
4. The media are required to show sensitivity to the victims and to their loved ones. ...
5. The media are advised to co-operate with the government when human lives are at stake in order to bring a peaceful end to the terrorist episode. ...
6. Terrorism should be explicitly condemned for its brutality and violent, indiscriminate nature....
7. The media should not jeopardize human life.
8. The media must not pay or be paid for covering terrorist incidents.
9. The media need to be accountable for the consequences of their coverage.
10. The media should not co-operate with terrorists who stage events.

These are valid points but one problem with such policy guidelines is that they are voluntary. When a major terrorist event becomes “breaking news,” and television networks compete with each other for scoops, the responsibility alluded to in such guidelines tends to be forgotten.⁶⁷ Furthermore, points 8, 9, and 10 of this list are linked to the very structure and functioning of many commercial as well as public mass media in open societies.

As to point 8 (“The media must not pay or be paid for covering terrorist incidents”): If the coverage of terrorist incidents leads to a greater audience and as a consequence for commercial mass media, to greater revenues from advertisements, the payment to the media is invisible because it is indirect – coming not from the terrorists themselves but those who place advertisements next to terrorist news.

⁶⁵ Various source as quoted in: White 2020, p. 26; Paletz, David L. and Laura L. Tawney, ‘Broadcasting Organizations’ Perspectives,’ in: Paletz and Schmid 1992, p. 109; Schmid, Alex P., ‘Editors’ Perspectives’; in: Paletz and Schmid 1992p. 126.

⁶⁶ Cohen-Almagor, Raphael, ‘Media Coverage of Acts of Terrorism: Troubling Episodes and Suggested Guidelines,’ *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 30, 2005, pp. 383-409, pp. 401- 402. The original set he proposed is larger than the one reproduced here and the sequence of the points he listed has been changed here.

⁶⁷ To cite a journalist turned academic, Brigitte Nacos (Columbia University, New York): “Encouraging media guidelines for reporting terrorist incidents may be prudent; however, trusting that news organizations will follow their guidelines is not”, See Nacos 2002, p. 186.

As to point 9 (“The media need to be accountable for the consequences of their coverage”): While careless terrorist news coverage has cost the lives of hostages,⁶⁸ I can remember no instance where mass media or individual journalists have been held accountable for the loss of lives and had to pay indemnities to the families of victims or where editors or journalists went to prison as a consequence of irresponsible reporting. One reason for this is that it is often difficult to establish a direct chain of causation between careless media coverage and loss of human lives, at least in a form that would stand up in court.

The crux of the matter, however, is point 10 (“The media should not co-operate with terrorists who stage events”): Since acts of terrorism are almost by definition “staged” propaganda performances with the goal of catching the attention of the mass media, the very act of reporting acts of terrorism amounts, de facto, to sometimes unwitting, and sometimes unwilling “co-operation.” In the words of Paul Wilkinson, “... the free media in an open society are particularly vulnerable to exploitation and manipulation by ruthless terrorist organisations.”⁶⁹

Paradoxically, while terrorists use the mass media, they do not treat journalists with any regard. In fact, journalists have been kidnapped and killed by terrorists. One example is Daniel Pearl, an Israeli-American journalist for the *Wall Street Journal* was kidnapped in Karachi and beheaded in January 2002 by Khalid Sheik Mohammed, who was also the original planner of the 9/11 attacks.⁷⁰ A British journalist, John H. Cantlie, was forced to become a “news” presenter for ISIS after being kidnapped in 2014, while the American journalist James Foley, who had been abducted with Cantlie in Syria, was beheaded by ISIS in August 2014, when a ransom demand of €100 million euros for his release was not met, with ISIS distributing a video about his killing.⁷¹

In reaction to such events, a number of journalists and editors of mass media outlets have sought ways of denying individual terrorists publicity, for instance, by not mentioning their names or not showing their photographs or video clips, something called a “partial blackout” of news (as partly occurred in the case of the Christchurch attacker in New Zealand).⁷² However, given the competitiveness of the media business, such information often reaches the public, or parts of it, though on a smaller scale. Between self-censorship by the media and saturation coverage, there are many degrees of using or not using “bad news” created by terrorists. In this context, it should also not be forgotten that governments and politicians in and out of government also use terrorist events to push certain policy preferences (and sometimes their own careers).⁷³ The media are not neutral but parties in the fight between terrorists, government, and society. They are the battleground in which terrorists and counter-terrorists fight to shape public and special audiences’ perceptions with words and images about manufactured and real deeds and misdeeds.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 388.

⁶⁹ Wilkinson, Paul, ‘The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment,’ *Terrorism and Political Violence*, (92, Summer 1997, pp. 51-64, p. 56.

⁷⁰ Wikipedia (German), ‘Daniel Perl,’ Wikipedia. Available at: https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Pearl, accessed 23 October 2020.

⁷¹ Wikipedia (English), ‘John Cantlie,’ Wikipedia. Available at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Cantlie; Wikipedia (English), ‘James Foley,’ Wikipedia. Available at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Foley_\(journalist\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Foley_(journalist)).

⁷² Cf. Matthew Dalton., ‘French Media Rethink Publication of Images of Terror Suspects,’ *Wall Street Journal*, 28 July 2015.

⁷³ Cf. Kassimiris, George (ed.), *Playing Politics with Terrorism; A User’s Guide*. London: Hurst, 2007.

Conclusion

How can such use and abuse of mass media by terrorists be prevented? This brings us back to the statement by the current leader of Al-Qaeda, quoted at the beginning of this chapter: “More than half of the battle is taking place on the battlefield of the media. We are in a media race for hearts and minds.”⁷⁴

The simple answer to the question of how abuse of mass media can be prevented is overt or covert mass media censorship by the government (for arguments for and against censoring terrorist news, see Appendix 2). Used with a heavy hand, censorship can close open societies. Katherine Graham, the former owner of the *Washington Post*, rightly noted in 1994:

“Publicity may be the oxygen of terrorists. But I say this: News is the lifeblood of liberty. If the terrorists succeed in depriving us of freedom, their victory will be far greater than they ever hoped and far worse than we ever feared. Let it never come to pass.”⁷⁵

Unfortunately, many governments have gone down the path of censorship, especially since 9/11. If the public debate in and through the media is repressed, democracy suffocates. The number of true democracies has gone down since 2006. According to *The Economist’s* Annual Democracy Index, there were in 2019 only 22 “full democracies” left, with only 5.7 percent of the world population enjoying full freedom, while more than one third of all human beings have to live under authoritarian regimes and the rest in only partly free countries.⁷⁶

Many governments have used the argument that censorship is necessary to prevent and control terrorism, but this argument has often been used to curb freedom of the press for other reasons as well. In many countries, especially in the Middle East and North Africa, free democratic public space has come under great pressure, with terrorists on the one side and repressive governments on the other. The control of the mass media through censorship or other measures, which also muzzles free expression in non-democratic regimes, has partly been circumvented by the terrorists through their shift to social media and other channels on the internet, which are harder to control than local television stations and print publishing houses. Yet, the traditional media remain important when it comes to terrorist propaganda as they often pick up information from the internet, turning it into “bad news.”

This brings us back to the question on how to deal with terrorist-made “bad news.” The rise of the newsworthy violent “pseudo-event” has poisoned journalism. It has started a feedback process in which the media, television in particular, are less reflective of reality than reality has begun to adapt to certain visual news values. The implications of this shift from neutral news

⁷⁴ Hughes, John, ‘Winning the war of words in the campaign against terrorism,’ *The Christian Science Monitor*, 17 May 2006.

⁷⁵ K. Graham, ‘The Media Must Report Terrorism,’ in Nacos 1994, p. 159.

⁷⁶ Hoey, Joan (Editor), ‘The Democracy Index 2019,’ The Economist Intelligence Unit, *The Economist*, 22 January 2020

gathering to calculated news-making by violent actors (as well as others) are profound for global society, for which the media function as its nervous system.⁷⁷

Mass media should not be prevented from reporting naturally occurring bad news, whether lethal or not. Yet in order to prevent, or at least reduce, terrorism, ways have to be found to minimize the intrusion of artificially created violent events that are crafted for appealing to the existing news value system and meant, on the one hand, to shock and intimidate the majority of the public and, on the other hand, among those who identify with the cause of the terrorists, attract and radicalize a small but not insignificant sector of violence-prone individuals in our societies.

Mass media are not neutral in the fight between terrorists and societies: they are, as we found earlier, the battleground, and as such, part of the problem. Yet they could also be part of the solution, a solution not based on censorship but on the understanding that if civilians get brazenly killed by terrorist groups to obtain publicity, to intimidate the public, or to coerce the government, the usual news values (“bad news is good news” and “if it bleeds, it leads”) should no longer be automatically applied. A temporary blackout or at least minimizing such news could save lives, prevent copycat crimes, and help denying terrorists the attention and recognition they crave. Yet to achieve that, a reconsideration of what mass media consider to be “news” and what should constitute legitimate “news value” is necessary. When the public’s freedom of information becomes a freedom for terrorists to intimidate the public through predesigned shocking acts of violence, something has clearly gone wrong and needs to be set right. Editors in the mass media should clearly distinguish between “genuine violence” that would have been inevitable and “histrionic violence” for audience manipulation via mass media. Whenever the latter is suspected, coverage - at least visual coverage - should be minimal, if not entirely absent. While the public has, in democratic societies, a right to know, it should also realise that there are aggressive terrorists out there who seek to have our minds captivated by messages of intimidation administered to us by mass media under the guise of freedom of information.⁷⁸ Responsible journalism should be responsible not to the terrorist desire for propaganda and the media corporations desire for profit first and foremost, but to public concerns, government concerns, and last but not least, victims’ concerns. The mass media do more than inform us when reporting on terrorism. They give tiny numbers of violent individuals access to millions of homes and allow the terrorist newsmakers to horrify us by sudden unprovoked killings of innocent people. In fact, we become secondary victims, some of us more than others, depending on the degree of identification with the primary victims.

Charlie Beckett from New York Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism has correctly noted that,

“The fact news media gives publicity to the terrorist is a problem that cannot be completely resolved. But journalism can be created in ways that reduce the propaganda effect for either the terrorist or the panicked politician. ... The social impact of news coverage should be considered, not just audience numbers and the drama of the event”.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ Schmid Alex P., ‘Terrorism and the Media: Freedom of Information vs. Freedom from Intimidation’; in: Howard, Lawrence (ed.), *Terrorism. Roots, Impact, Responses*. New York: Praeger 1992, p. 100.

⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 101 and p. 114.

⁷⁹ Beckett, Charlie, ‘Fanning the Flames: Reporting on Terror in a Networked World,’ New York: The Tow Center for Digital Journalism, Columbia University, 22 September 2016. Available at: https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/coverage_terrorism_social_media.php.

Research on mass media and violence in general and terrorism in particular has demonstrated that many people learn from the media and some imitate what they see in the media. The number of those who learn violence and imitate acts of violence seen in the media is small but not insignificant. Violence that is predictable is violence that is preventable. When it comes to terrorist violence, this places an obligation on those who work for mass media to carry their share of social responsibility in a whole-of-society effort to prevent terrorism by rethinking how to deal with terrorist-made “bad news.”

Alex P. Schmid is a Research Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague. He is Editor-in-Chief of ‘Perspectives on Terrorism’ and former Co-Editor of ‘Terrorism and Political Violence’ – both leading journals in the field of Terrorism Studies. Until 2009, Dr. Schmid held a chair in International Relations at the University of St. Andrews where he was also Director of the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence (CSTPV). Previous positions include Officer-in-Charge of the Terrorism Prevention Branch of the UN Office on Drugs and Crime in Vienna (1999-2005) and Extraordinary Professor of Conflict Resolution at Erasmus University, Rotterdam (1991-1999). Between 1978 and 2018 he also held various positions at Leiden University and at its campus in The Hague. Currently, he is Director of the Vienna-based Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI), a consortium of institutes and individual scholars seeking to enhance human security through collaborative research. Prof. em. Schmid has more than 200 publications and reports in ten languages to his name, including the award-winning volume ‘Political Terrorism’ (1984, 1988, 2006) and the Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research (2011, 2013).

Appendix 1: Active and Passive Uses of Media by Non-State Terrorists

1. Communication of (fear-)messages to mass audiences.
2. Polarizing public opinion.
3. Making converts, attracting new members to terrorist movements.
4. Demanding publication of manifestos under threat of harm to victims.
5. Using media as a conduit for threats, demands, and bargaining messages.
6. Verifying demand compliance by the enemy.
7. Winning favourable publicity via released hostages.
8. Linking message to victim.
9. Misleading enemies by spreading false information.
10. Winning publicity by granting underground interviews.
11. Intimidating media by killing or wounding journalists.
12. Advertising terrorist movements and representing their cause.
13. Arousing public concern for victims to pressure governments to make concessions.
14. Discrediting victims by making their “confessions” public.
15. Discrediting enemies by making victims’ “confessions” public.
16. Deflecting public attention from disliked issues by bombing it from front pages.
17. Announcing further actions.
18. Using journalists as negotiators in bargaining situations.
19. Inciting the public against the government.
20. Occupying broadcasting stations to issue messages.
21. Boosting one’s own morale.
22. Gaining “Robin Hood” image.
23. Using media as an external communication network between terrorists.
24. Learning new coercive techniques from media reports on terrorism.
25. Obtaining information about identity and status of hostages.
26. Obtaining information on countermeasures by security forces.
27. Using media at the site of siege as insurance against “dirty tricks” by security forces.
28. Creating fear among the enemies by media’s exaggeration of own strength, thereby reducing likelihood that individual policemen dare to apprehend terrorists.
29. Identifying future targets for terroristic violence.
30. Obtaining information about public reaction to terroristic acts.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Schmid, Alex P. and Janny de Graaf. *Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media. An Explanatory Analysis with a Dutch Case Study*. Leiden: C.O.M.T., 1980, p.55.

Appendix 2: Arguments for and against Censorship

Arguments for Censorship

1. Non-state terrorists use the mass media as a platform for political propaganda, which also helps them to recruit new members to their movement.
2. Since publicity is a major, and in some cases, the sole reward sought by terrorists, censorship would make terrorism a less desirable strategy.
3. Detailed coverage of incidents by the media provides potential terrorists with a model that increases their chance of success in their own acts.
4. Reporting on acts of terrorism can produce imitative acts.
5. People who have so little respect for other people's lives as terrorists do, should not be enabled to command public attention only because they use violence.
6. Media reports on terrorist outrages might lead to vigilantism and uncontrolled revenge acts against the group the terrorists claim to speak for.
7. Negative news demoralizes the public while "good news makes us good."

Arguments against Censorship

1. If the media would keep quiet on terrorist atrocities, the violent terrorists might be judged less negatively by sections of the public.
2. Political terrorists boycotted by the media might step up their level of violence until the media have to cover their deeds.
3. If the media did not report on terrorism, rumours would spread, which might be worse than the worst media reporting.
4. Suppression of news on terrorism might leave the public with a false sense of security.
5. People would be unprepared to deal with terrorism, when directly faced with it.
6. If the media would censor terrorism, the public would suspect that other things are censored as well and the credibility of the media would decline.
7. The lack of public awareness of certain terroristic activities would keep the public from fully understanding the political situation.
8. The assertion of insurgent terrorists that democratic states are not really free would gain added credibility if the freedom of the press were suspended.⁸¹

⁸¹ Adapted from Schmid, Alex P. and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media*. London: Sage, 1982, p. 172.

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