



Deconstructing the terrorism–news media relationship

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The news media are an extremely powerful actor in the dynamics of oppositional political terrorism.¹ Just how important newspapers, radio, and television are during ongoing campaigns and in the context of terrorist incidents is a subject of constant debate (Atwater, 1987; Jenkins, 2003). Any understanding of the connections between this type of violence and the media must be embedded in broader discussions of: the power of the media (e.g. Shaw and McCombs, 1972), especially in conflict situations (e.g. Arno, 1984); the relationship among journalists, editors, authorities, and terrorists; empirical analyses of the media; and the connection between terrorism and public opinion.

Nevertheless, since the early 1970s, researchers have examined the role of the news media in connection with terrorism. In many respects, this body of work is a sub-specialty in the field of terrorism studies. It is typically anchored in a limited number of academic disciplines including communications studies, law, political science, and sociology. In short, this Research Note looks at the venues in which research on this connection is typically found, the topics that academics generally research and the methods they use, their findings, and where these scholars might devote their future energy.

WHERE HAS IT APPEARED?

The majority of scholarly research on the connection between terrorism and the news media has appeared in the form of articles in peer-reviewed journals or chapters in scholarly books. Less frequent are stand-alone monographs. A considerable amount of the books on the terrorism–news media relationship are edited collections (e.g. Midgley and Rice, 1984; Alali and Eke, 1991; Alexander and Picard, 1991; Paletz and Schmid, 1992; Chitty et al., 2003; Hess and Kalb, 2003; Norris et al., 2003), typically consisting of papers originally presented at a conference sponsored by an academic organization or think-tank. Other pieces are part of edited books that examine the news media's role regarding violent political conflict (e.g. Alexander, 1973; Arno, 1984). There is a striking similarity among these monographs;

they cover many of the same topics and often reprint well-cited journal articles, therefore adding little new information.

WHAT TOPICS ARE GENERALLY RESEARCHED?

The greatest concentration of research has been done at a general descriptive level, supported by copious examples of incidents in which the media have had some role in selected terrorist incidents or campaigns (e.g. Alexander, 1977; Rabe, 1977; Berger, 1979; Friedlander, 1981; Wilkinson, 1981; Martin, 1985; Nacos, 1994, 2002). Other work has focused, in whole or in part, on criticizing this subfield of study (e.g. Schlesinger, 1981; Jenkins, 2003). Still some research has commented on the difficulties with the media's coverage of terrorism (e.g. Bassiouni, 1983; Jenkins, 2003).

Other aspects of this relationship that have been studied include censorship of the press, First Amendment issues (Jones and Miller, 1979; Miller, 1982), ethical problems (Picard, 1981; Kehler et al., 1982; O'Neil, 1986; Schmid, 1989), the news media-law enforcement relationship (e.g. Scanlon, 1981), and the possibility that acts of terrorism cause others to engage in terrorism. Although there has been some mildly supportive evidence (e.g. Midlarsky et al., 1980), some researchers (Picard, 1986) doubt this effect actually occurs.

Terrorists' use of the media

Terrorists' understanding of media dynamics Many terrorist groups are very sensitive to the timing of news stories and audience dynamics, and structure their actions accordingly (Weimann and Winn, 1994). Several examples include: the 1974 kidnapping of Patricia Hearst by members of the Symbionese Liberation Army; the 1977 Baader-Meinhof gang suicide in Stammheim prison; the 1977 kidnapping of the Italian Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, by the Red Brigades; the 1983 Armenian Revolutionary Army attack against the Turkish ambassador in Lisbon; and the 1984 bombing of the Grand Hotel in Brighton by the Provisional Irish Republican Army (Poland, 1988).

But perhaps one of the most salient terrorist events covered by the media was the kidnapping of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Olympics, held in Munich. Members of Black September realized that the world's major media organizations would be at the event and decided to use the incident to stage their incident. Similarly, Iranian activists' takeover of the American embassy in Teheran in November 1979 helped focus the world's attention on the power of Islamic fundamentalism, especially by stretching the event over 444 days (Sick, 1985). Finally, the 9/11 terrorist attacks appeared to be timed so that television cameras would capture the second plane hitting the World Trade Center towers.

Terrorist organizations taking over or 'owning' the media Some terrorist groups have taken over broadcast outlets. This is perhaps why, in the wake of 9/11, we saw increased security at large television stations in big American cities. Authorities and communication industry executives recognized that terrorists might try to commandeer one of these radio or television outlets.

Alternatively, if resources and minimal threats to security permit, terrorist groups have formed their own radio and television stations and newspapers (Weinberg and Davis, 1989). Alternatively, some established media outlets are sympathetic or appear overly accommodating to certain terrorist organizations. For example, in the aftermath of 9/11, al Jazeera has broadcast videotapes of Osama bin Laden warning the West of impending terrorist attacks. Needless to say, over the past decade, the resource-intensive nature of owning and operating newspapers or radio or television stations has been mitigated because many terrorist groups now have their own websites, which are cost effective and portable (Weimann, 2004).

Problems with media coverage

There are six basic difficulties with the coverage of terrorism by the media.

Selective reporting and self-censorship Journalists sometimes face blackmail and intimidation as they attempt to gain access to terrorists (Weinberg and Davis, 1989). Once contact has been established, terrorists typically establish certain conditions under which they will speak; this may lead to ‘selective’ reporting if reporters want to ensure continued access or their own safety, as some reporters have been kidnapped and killed in their efforts to talk with terrorists (Grieset and Mahan, 2003). For example, the *Wall Street Journal's* Daniel Pearl, while working in Lahore, Pakistan, in 2002, received a tip that a high-ranking member of al Qaeda was willing to talk with him. Unfortunately, this was simply a ruse with the express purpose of killing him.

Editorial discretion Just because a newsworthy story exists, does not mean that it will be assigned by an editor or producer (Boyd-Barrett, 2003), nor if a story is written or shot does it mean that it will be published or broadcast (Fishman, 1980). In addition to the relationship between reporters and sources, a complex understanding exists between journalists and their various editors or producers. This interaction naturally affects the outcome of articles or stories on terrorism. In deciding if, how, and when a story will be run, most editors or producers make decisions about the reliability and newsworthiness of the piece, its sources, competing articles, and other stories that are on schedule, or were written or shot for that day’s news (Ross, 2000).

Lack of specialists focusing on terrorism Most big news organizations are divided into different beats, or journalists who have an expertise in a particular area. These working conditions determine a reporter’s access to sources, the type of relationship the reporter has with his or her editors, competition among news outlets, and decisions concerning the investigation, writing, and timing of articles or segments on terrorism (e.g., Fishman, 1980). Few news organizations, however, have reporters who specialize solely in covering terrorism. On occasion, reporters – like Josh Myers of the *Los Angeles Times* – specialize in covering stories on terrorism. Alternatively, news organizations may periodically rely on experts like Peter Bergen, who regularly appears on CNN.

Misinformation given to reporters by national security agencies Many stories published or broadcast in the press originated with official government sources. According to Jenkins (2003),

Most materials that appear in the media can be traced to a small number of official agencies, and indeed, subunits of those agencies, which enjoy a very high degree of credibility . . . Media reliance on law enforcement sources is not difficult to understand because, for all their flaws, agencies like the FBI should in fact be the best-informed group in the country, with access to abundant evidence from moles, infiltrators, and surveillance materials. (p. 140)

But these agencies can also use reporters to serve selfish purposes, particularly through so-called strategic leaks (Jenkins, 2003). This was especially true after 9/11, when federal agencies scrambled to do 'damage control', hoping to prove to the American public that they were not sleeping on the job.

News media obstructing counter-terrorist efforts Occasionally, the news media have inadvertently hindered anti-terrorist efforts to successfully resolve hostage-type incidents. Press corps members 'have entered lines of fire and secured zones, and hostage and rescue forces have been pictured on live television as they moved in for an assault' (White, 2003: 263). In these situations, terrorists need only to turn on a television or radio newscast to gain the upper hand. There are countless examples of this, including the 1977 Hanafi Muslim takeover of the B'nai B'rith building in Washington, DC.

The fear of terrorists' influence on the media has resulted in a number of controls established by law enforcement, national security, and media organizations (e.g. Jones and Miller, 1979; Scanlon, 1981, 1982; Kehler et al., 1982). There are essentially two positions: first, that the government needs to intervene in this sort of media coverage, and second, that the media should regulate themselves. The public and the media are appropriately quick to cry censorship whenever the government proposes some kind of intervention (e.g. Schlesinger, 1981). This is largely motivated by the fact that in the United States and in many other advanced industrialized democracies, free speech is a valued cornerstone of democracy.²

Sensationalization There is considerable competition among news organizations to be the first to report any news (Tuckman, 1978), which affects the way news is obtained and portrayed (O'Neil, 1986; Chermack et al., 2003). 'This could be accomplished basically in one of two ways, by being the first on the scene or by being the first to report some hitherto undisclosed information' (Hoffman, 1998: 138).

WHAT KINDS OF RESEARCH METHODS HAVE BEEN UTILIZED?

Three principle research methods have been used by investigators to examine the media-terrorism relationship.

Rhetorical studies/discourse analysis

The rhetorical and discourse analyses approach, which borrows heavily from communications theory, recognizes that terrorism is socially constructed and attempts to demonstrate how understanding this form of political violence and crime relies on the complexity of words, symbols, and meanings (Gutmann, 1979; Elliot et al., 1983; Dowling, 1986; Tuman, 2003). Altheide (1987), in his investigation of television news coverage of the 1985 Irish Republican Army bombing in Hyde Park, compares British and American broadcasts of the incident to see how they both presented the event. Others, like Norris et al. (2003) recognize that the news media ‘frame’ terrorism (i.e. manage and manipulate our perceptions) and have the contributors to their volume respond to this perspective.

Case study investigations

Few case studies of media coverage of terrorist incidents exist, but exceptions do occur. Atwater (1987) examines news reporting of the 1985 TWA hostage incident. Others (e.g. Debatin, 2002; Chermack et al., 2003; Fox, 2003) review media attention or representations of 9/11. Some writers have provided descriptions of dramatic terrorist events in which the media was an actor. Schmid and de Graff (1980), for example, have looked at the news media in the context of a well-known incident of terrorism in The Netherlands.

Content analyses of terrorism

The most frequent type of news media–terrorism research uses content analysis (e.g. Kelly and Mitchell, 1981; Weimann, 1985; Fuller, 1988; Delli Carpini and Williams, 1987; Picard and Adams, 1991). This usually entails counting and statistically analyzing how terrorism is mentioned in the context of a particular form of communication (Holsti, 1969; Krippendorf, 1981), or examining the sources interviewed or quoted (Herman and O’Sullivan, 1989). In the field of terrorism studies, content analyses have primarily focused on newspapers. Typically, this technique entails counting the number of articles on terrorism that appear in newspapers per issue, month, and year, and then determining the relationship between the numbers of stories on terrorism and acts of this form of political violence.

The majority of papers analyzed for coverage of terrorist events originate in western countries. For instance, Kelly and Mitchell (1981) reviewed *The New York Times* and *The Times of London*. Fuller (1988) examined the *Christian Science Monitor*, and Picard and Adams (1991) studied the terrorist coverage in *The Los Angeles Times*, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. Alternatively, papers restricted to a particular geographic area are used (e.g. Weimann, 1985). With rare exceptions (e.g. Atton, 2003), generally neglected are monthly, bimonthly, quarterly, or semi-annual ethnic, racial, and/or religious-based communication vehicles run by religious groups, non-sectarian associations, and individual citizens directed toward members of a particular community.

Additionally, few content analyses of radio and television broadcasts of terrorist incidents have been conducted. For example, Delli Carpini and Williams (1987) examined ‘all weekday network news broadcasts for’ ABC, CBS, and NBC ‘from January 1969 to

December 1980' (p. 50). Rarely have researchers performed content analyses of radio programs that cover terrorist incidents. Nor have they performed ethnographic studies of either terrorists' use of the media or journalists' coverage of terrorism.

THE MEDIA AS A CAUSAL VARIABLE

Just because terrorists are successful in using the media to communicate their messages does not mean that the public accepts their arguments, and/or will turn around and either support the terrorists' efforts and/or engage in violence themselves (Snyder, 1978; Weimann, 1983; Hewitt, 1990). Countless events and processes can intervene (Hoffman, 1998). Despite numerous polls about how people feel about terrorism, we are not sure exactly how, or if, the media have an effect (Weinberg and Davis, 1989; Yang and Ostman, 2003). Additionally, although people may think that terrorism is a problem, often it is not seen as the most pressing, compared with other social problems. Moreover, many public opinion polls have a hard time comparing the fear of terrorism between, among, and within different countries. After reviewing a handful of studies, Weinberg and Davis (1989) concluded that

the problem with these responses, though, is that they were based on snap shots taken at single points in time. The questions were usually asked during or just after a particularly dramatic terrorist event or events, that is, at a time when the public was most likely to be aroused by the violence and where media coverage was likely to have been of the crisis variety. (p. 135)

Finally, attitudes towards press coverage of terrorism are rarely studied. In one unusual study, Den Boer (1979) examined how citizens in different countries viewed the press's treatment of terrorism.

WHAT IS MISSING?

Few researchers have examined the effects of media coverage on public opinion. When this is attempted, it is typically done in general terms (e.g. Snyder, 1978; Jenkins, 1981; Weimann, 1983).

Although the study of terrorism is clearly inter-disciplinary, and despite the fact that the field has examined the role of the media and crime for at least four decades (e.g. Fishman, 1980), few criminologists and criminal justice experts have looked at the role of the news media in terrorism. Indeed, in the wake of 9/11, it appears that a handful of criminologists are studying terrorism in the hope that these efforts will provide greater access to grant money (Hamm, 2005).

More sophisticated methodologies could be used to understand the media's influence. These might include improved processes for electronically downloading entire periodicals onto a computer to allow for better textual analysis, surveys of journalists covering terrorism, or other empirical analyses of terrorists' behavior to track their media consumption patterns prior to and during their terrorist activity.

Although difficult to perform, no ethnographic studies have been conducted to determine terrorists' decision-making concerning their use of the media. Likewise, despite the fact that journalists have written books on terrorism, with rare exception are reporters, editors, producers, and publishers interviewed by researchers to understand their approach to covering terrorists and their behavior (Picard, 1981).

CONCLUSION

This article has reviewed the power and nuances of the media's interaction with terrorists, their organizations, and their sources. Terrorists use the media as a tool to gain increased coverage and communicate their message. Although the media may facilitate terrorism, most research indicates that it does not cause terrorism. We are also entering an age in which electronic communications (particularly the Internet) are of increasing importance. Terrorists and their organizations have a better ability to harness the numerous tools of mass communication for their purposes. The relationship between terrorists and the news media will not subside, and in many respects, that interconnectivity will increase in years to come.

Notes

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- 1 The author uses Schmid's (1983) consensus definition of terrorism with some modification (Ross, 2006) as his point of departure. All future references to terrorism in this article will subsume both oppositional and political dimensions. Additionally, the reader should be reminded that the Research Note's focus is news and not mass media, thus a discussion of books, films, theatrical productions and so on is beyond the scope of this article.
- 2 For a further discussion of this problem in connection with terrorism, see, for example, Schmid (1983).

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