

Terrorism and the Mass Media: A symbiotic relationship?

Marjolein Camphuijsen and Esther Vissers

Abstract

Over the last two decades, the influence of the mass media has grown enormously. People from all over the world are now able to collect information about all kinds of issues from a wide variety of sources, including television, the internet and newspapers. Terrorists seek to publicize their cause, influence public opinion and have become aware of the impact of mass media. Terrorist groups have thus discovered the usefulness of the mass media. On the other hand, media outlets seek to meet the needs of their consumers by providing stories that contain a number of specific elements: dramatic incidents, emotional resonance, or some highly disturbing aspect. Stories that directly affect the audience have also been found to have the greatest impact. On the basis of these well-established findings, we posit a symbiotic relationship between mass media and terrorist organizations. This symbiosis has certain implications for our societies. These implications, and the media's proper role in society, will be discussed.

Keywords: terrorism, mass media, symbiotic relationship.

Introduction

"When the press is free, all is safe". About 200 years ago, these famous words were written by Thomas Jefferson. In the twenty-first century, the free press is considered one of the most important cornerstones of a democracy. However, *what happens if the content the media offer the audience is delivered or influenced by an organization that seeks to disturb the public peace?* This is the question posed by the Sixth Framework Program (2008), an organization financed by the European Commission which deals with transnational terrorism, security and the rule of law. This is what seems to be the case with terrorism.

On at least a weekly basis the media reports violent acts committed by terrorist groups. A great deal of research has shown that terrorism induces fear in societies (Sixth Framework Program, 2008). In this connection, it is important to bear in mind that the goal of terrorist groups is not to hurt as many people as

possible, but to influence public opinion regarding the legitimacy of their causes. To do this, they need the media to report both their deeds and their political messages (Sixth Framework Program, 2008).

Margaret Thatcher, British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, paid specific attention to this effect by calling the media the "oxygen" of terrorists (Muller, Spaaij & Ruitenber, 2003). Vieira, 1991). According to her, the solution to this problem is simple. Thatcher suggested the media simply not pay any attention to terrorist acts and refrain from reporting them. By withholding the "oxygen" in this way, she contended, terrorism would die (Sixth Framework Program, 2008)

The media have generally rejected such a course of action. As noted in "Terrorism and the Media" by the Sixth Framework Program (2008) the media seem to benefit in some way from the acts of terrorists. Thus, we need to ask ourselves if there is a symbiotic

relationship between terrorism and the media. What kinds of relationships exist between terrorist groups and the media? In this review, we will study both how publicity benefits terrorists, and how the media benefits from the acts of terrorists. The present paper will attempt to answer these questions.

First, we will discuss how to properly define terrorism, before exploring the elements of the symbiosis between terrorist organizations and the media. We will then propose a more appropriate role for the media before reflecting on the relationship from a psychological standpoint.

Conceptional definitions

When does a certain act of violence meet the definition of terrorism? To provide an answer to this question, we need to draw a clear distinction between a “common” criminal and a terrorist (Nacos, 2002). The simplest way to understand the difference is that common criminals do not engage in illegal activities in order to make a political statement, while this is precisely what terrorists do. In order to assure that their intended “statement” reaches as wide an audience as possible, terrorists often use violence to attract the attention of the media (Nacos, 2002).

Schmid and De Graaf (1982) add to this distinction an observation regarding the different ways that common criminals and insurgent terrorists see their victims. When we consider the former, one would say that in most cases the victim is also the actual target of the criminal behavior. For terrorists, on the other hand, the victim is generally not the target of the action, but functions rather as a means to reach a wider audience. In such a way, we could even say the violence committed by terrorists can be considered as a means of communicating. As Schmid and De Graaf conclude, “*For the terrorist, the message matters, not the victim*” (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, 14).

Because the way terrorism is defined, has far-reaching implications, we must approach such a task with a high degree of caution (Sproat, 1991; Hocking, 1992). “*Once an action has been given that label, it becomes difficult to treat it in a value-neutral manner*” (Hocking, 1992, p 90). This notion also has implications for scientific research into the phenomenon of terrorist activity. Before we can conduct objective and effective research, we need to be sure our definition of terrorism is not prejudiced in a way that undermines this worthy goal.

Sproat (1991) has expanded this issue in his essay and mentioned it could be seen as a challenge for most researchers to treat their research subjects – in this case terrorists – without any preconceived notions regarding their deeds and ideas. He notes that most researchers are in some way hostile toward the terrorists they study, based on their own notions of right and wrong. Prejudiced attitudes toward research subjects obviously have implications for the validity of research. Together with other researchers, Sproat (1991) has called for research methods by which terrorists are observed and studied in their social context and treated as humans (Brannan, Esler, & Strindberg, 2001)

One official definition which is used in scientific research is given by the United Nations General Assembly:

“Terrorism can be seen as criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them” (as quoted by Koh 2002: 148).

There has been some critical response to this definition. As Biernatzki (2002) noted in his essay, the way in which the criminality of an action is determined

is very vague and subjective. As a reaction to this criticism, the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) formulated their own definition, in which they use the word “unlawful” instead of the normative judgment of whether an act is criminal or not.

The FBI formulated the following definition of terrorism:

“Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (as quoted by The Terrorism Research Center 2002).

For many purposes, both definitions seem very useful to include in the present review, which is mostly focused on the actions of insurgent terrorists. Paletz and Vinson (1992) describe insurgent terrorism carried out by non-state entities. They thus draw a distinction between insurgent terrorism and state-terrorism, which includes terrorism used by governments toward their own people or toward citizens of other countries. In this review, we will focus on insurgent terrorism because of its assumed relationship with the (mass) media.

Terrorists’ use of the media

As Nacos (2002) noted in her book “Mass-mediated terrorism” most terrorists calculate the consequences of their actions, the likelihood of attracting the attention of the media, and the probability of gaining entry into what she calls the “*Triangle of Political Communication*” (Nacos, 2002, 11). Gaining such entry is, in her view, the ultimate goal of terrorists. As shown in figure 1, the triangle of political communication consists of communication between the public and the government, where the media seems to provide the lines of communication. The role of the media in the communication process is implicit because, in mass societies, government

officials and the general public are not able to communicate directly with each other.

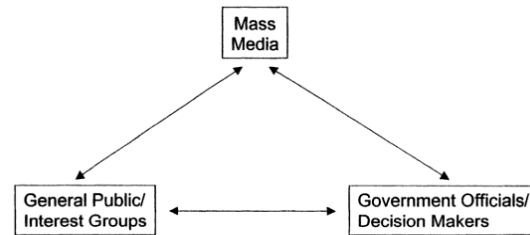


Figure 1: The triangle of political communication (Nacos, 2002, 11).

However, we need to bear in mind that the media can hardly be considered “neutral and passive communication conduits” (Nacos, 2002, 11). This statement made by Nacos will be strongly endorsed by groups or individuals who feel unable to communicate their message through the media, because their views lie outside the mainstream. The strategic importance of the media is thus evident, because they are in a position of being able to decide whether an issue is maximized or minimized, included or excluded (Nacos, 2002).

Terrorists can most certainly be considered as people with political views that “lie outside the mainstream”, and who perceive their concerns as being disregarded by, the mass media, the government and the public. Terrorists thus might have the expectation that their existence and their message will be noticed when they use political violence, and especially when they engage in spectacularly violent acts. They might reasonably expect the media to report not only their violent deeds, but also their political message. (Nacos, 2002).

In their book ‘*Terrorism and the Media*’, Paletz and Schmid (1992) have paid specific attention to the question of what the political message of terrorist groups actually is. What are terrorists trying to tell us, and why are they so

desperate that they are willing to engage in violence? From this perspective we can say that publicity serves as a means, rather than as an end. But if publicity is not the goal, what are the goals of terrorists? Paletz and Schmid (1992) have made of summary of goals that terrorists try to achieve. We will discuss all six of them. All six are shown in figure 2 and discussed below.

The first goal terrorists are trying to achieve relates to the demonstration of a terrorist movement's strength and conveying the corresponding vulnerability of authorities. What is meant by this goal is that insurgent terrorists try to show how powerful they are by making their opponents look less powerful or even vulnerable. They do this by embarrassing their enemies (including the governments they oppose), demonstrating armed resistance, and showing that their opponents are not as powerful as commonly assumed. The success of their attempts is mostly dependent on the publicity they succeed in gaining for their causes (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Secondly, they also try to make use of repression by the government. When the authorities which terrorists are fighting exercise repression, there are ways in which terrorists can benefit from such actions. For instance, repression could motivate others to join the cause. Repressive action on the part of authorities also tend to display governments' darkest side, thus leading to negative perceptions of authorities on the part of the general public. The media can thus be used to portray the supposedly repressive nature of the forces of law and order within any particular context (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Another goal that terrorist groups commonly pursue is the demoralization of their opponents and raising of the morale of the terrorist group and its supporters. Such psychological goals are pursued by every political group, but are magnified in

the case of terrorist groups due to their use of deadly violence. Publicity is the most important means to achieve this goal. It is up to the mass media to decide whether they only publish a particular act of violence, or if they also investigate the underlying motivation of that actions in order to engender understanding (and perhaps even sympathy) among citizens as regards terrorists' intended message (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

This goal of gaining sympathy for the movement is one of the most important goals of terrorist groups. This is because the perception of a terrorist group's legitimacy is directly correlated with public sympathy for, and support of, its cause (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Another goal of terrorist groups is radicalizing a significant portion of the public, as well as polarizing the political situation in order to create chaos and fear. Thus, terrorist groups find it highly useful to create uncertainties and anxieties. This helps them demonstrate that the government is not fully in control, and may in the end lead to social conflict. In order to promote such perceptions, media exposure is of critical importance (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Finally, terrorists try to promote the notion that, because the violence they commit is necessary, it is in fact *heroic*. Terrorism does not exist without the use of violence, which serves as their means of communicating their message. However, terrorist groups typically promote the notion that the violence is a means to an end, rather than an end itself. One way to do this is by use of the mass media (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

We can conclude that media publicity in general can be seen as an important element in terrorist strategy (Paletz & Schmid, 1992). The mass media seems to be of enormous importance for terrorists, because the latter's goals will only be achieved when they have a sufficient amount of media exposure.

There is no agreement among researchers regarding the particular kind of publicity that terrorists desire for their cause. Some argue that terrorists do not really care about how they are portrayed in the media. Such researchers (e.g., Bell, 1979) argue that terrorists only desire to achieve as much exposure as possible, whether negative or positive. Other researchers, such as Alexander (1977), Clutterbuck (1981) and Schmid and De Graaf (1982) emphasize that it is of great importance for terrorists that the media convey their political message as well as report their violent acts.

We agree with the latter researchers and assume that terrorists find it important to disseminate their political *message*. This notion seems to be consistent with the above named goals terrorists are trying to achieve. There are many different ways that terrorists ensure that their message will be conveyed. In their research, Paletz and Schmid (1992), have categorized various tactics that terrorists use in order to assure as much publicity as possible for their causes.

Terrorists only commit the kinds of violent acts that will attract media attention (Paletz & Schmid, 1992). Another way of saying this is that terrorists' actions are often determined by their newsworthiness. Three factors are important in this connection.

One of these factors is the degree of violence, which can be measured in the number or status of the victims. The more people hurt, the more interesting the action will be for journalists. Also contributing to newsworthiness are vulnerable victims (e.g., children) or famous victims (Schmid, 1982). Another way to increase newsworthiness lies in the use of symbolism. This includes, for example, choosing a date or venue for a violent action that has a special meaning. Finally, it is more likely that the media attention will be attracted when terrorists engage in activities of an inherently spectacular

nature. By use of these strategies, terrorist try to not only gain media attention, but also try to force the media to discover and describe the motivation for their actions.

A second tactic to attain publicity involves recruitment and propaganda. Violent actions can serve to recruit new members. However, there are also "legal" ways that terrorists try to gain attention. Examples of this are meetings, speeches, posters, pamphlets, radio broadcasts and political literature. The well-known audio and video messages used by Al-Qaeda are examples of such activities (Nacos, 2006).

A third factor is the choice of optimal time and place for an action. Terrorists will sometimes choose an optimal time and for action in order to achieve as much of a psychological advantage as possible. First of all, one would expect terrorists to choose targets where a lot of the press is concentrated. Thus, a city has a bigger chance of being attacked than a remote small town. Another consideration lies in the opportunity terrorists have when the media is already gathered for some sort of special event. Though location is of great importance, timing also seems to be important in attracting media attention. The hours during which the highest audience views television ("prime time") are considered an especially propitious time to carry out a terrorist action. Next to specifying timing, special events are often utilized as occasions for terrorist violence (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Another way by which terrorists try to attain publicity is by making tactical use of formally issued statements. Terrorists do not only commit violent deeds, but also try to explain why they feel they are forced to resort to violence. Formally, issued statements allow terrorists to construct their own narratives whereby they justify their actions. If they give no explanation, on the other hand, terrorist groups risk that the public will draw the wrong conclusions

about their actions (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

There are several ways that terrorist groups issue statements. One possibility is for terrorists to print and disseminate statements themselves. Another way is to prepare an issued statement which can function as a *de facto* press release. In most cases, the statements are drafted in a way that allows media outlets to reproduce them *verbatim*. Terrorist groups also sometimes use the threat of violence against publishers or journalists in order to assure publication of their drafted statements (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Keeping in contact with journalists and granting interviews seems to be another important tactic. Interviews are seen as a way of decreasing the distance between terrorists and the public. They also provide another way to draw attention to groups' political messages. The media are the most important tool than can be utilized in trying to change or at least influence the attitudes, opinions and values of the public (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Claiming responsibility for terrorist actions is one of the most direct ways of drawing media attention. After a violent terrorist action, terrorists want to let the world know what happened. They do this by use of the mass media (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

Finally, utilizing powerful symbols seems to be a successful strategy for gaining public attention. The choice of a particular person or group as a target, or the choice of the name for the terrorist group, are examples of the utilization of symbols. In other instances, symbolism can be found in date, time, or place of a terrorist action. Furthermore, the particular manner a terrorist action is carried out can have symbolic meaning (Paletz & Schmid, 1992).

In real life, all of the different options for drawing media attention will often be employed. When all the different methods are used, terrorism can become a

strong weapon. Publicity and the mass media can play a big role in its success. In all the above described goals, the media and publicity play an important role as a means to achieve certain goals. In their book "Terrorism and the Mass Media" Paletz and Schmid (1992) note that we should not exaggerate the important influence the media can have on the success of the strategies of terrorist groups. They mention that terrorists do not fully depend on radio, television and the newspapers to achieve their goals. In addition, terrorists spread their messages in other ways. However, it is undeniable that the role of the media in terrorist groups' strategies is critically important.

In the next section we will turn to the possible motivations that lead media outlets to report terrorist activities in particular ways.

The usefulness of terrorists for the media

Barnhurst (1991) proposes two models that try to describe the relationship between terrorism and the media. The first model is the *culpable-media model*. According to this model, the media complete a vicious circle. By reporting on terrorist attacks, the media play a part in conveying terrorist messages to a large audience. This is a key aim for terrorist organizations, and therefore encourages them to carry out more attacks, which will in turn be reported by the media. This creates a vicious circle, in which terrorist carry out attacks, which are reported by the media, and which subsequently lead to more attacks. In a sense, the model identifies the media as a cause for terrorist attacks.

The second model proposed by Barnhurst (1991) is called the *vulnerable media model*, and views the media as a *victim* of terrorism rather than a cause. In this notion, Barnhurst (1991) proposes that, even though the media could theoretically stop covering terrorism, this

would not be enough to bring terrorist activities to an end. Terrorists do not have to rely on any one media outlet for their communication. This is because of the existing competition in the current media system (Barnhurst, 1991). In addition, a “breaking news mentality” is deeply rooted in the media. This means that every newspaper, television network, or radio station constantly tries to be the first to cover a news item, which enables them to draw large audiences to their particular news feed (Glüpker, 2008). This is caused by the increasing competition among media to cover news items as quickly as possible (Kushner, 2000). In some cases, this pressure can cause journalists to underestimate the consequences of reporting on terrorism, or lead to incorrect interpretations of the activities of terrorist organizations.

The pressure on the media to report news involving terrorism does not necessarily imply direct control by terrorist organizations of the media. What it does suggest, however, is a responsibility on the part of the media to be continuously aware of the manipulative actions of terrorist activities (Wilkinson, 1997).

Martin (2010) observed that there is a prevailing opinion in modern society that “information is power.” Terrorist attacks are often committed in order to gain the attention of the media, and thus draw more public attention to the groups that commit the attacks. The media are constantly trying to please their audiences. Television stations are trying to attract as many viewers as possible, newspapers try to attract readers, and websites try to attract visitors. Dramatic incidents, stories with emotional aspects, and “negative” stories are often topics that readers find interesting. Other kinds of stories that tend to draw high levels of interest are those that are exciting and sensational, and those that directly affect the audience (Glüpker, 2008). A news item covering a terrorist action or attack is a typical example of a

topic satisfying all these requirements. This information suggests that the media are dependent on terrorism because of its supposed news value. The main reason why the media covers items concerning terrorism is to increase the number of their viewers. Of course, there are always other factors that play a role in such decisions, such as personal interest or social responsibility. The media surely understands that terrorism has an inherent news value, and that therefore it must be covered, irrespective of audience satisfaction. But it also makes sense for the media to respond to the demand of the audience for news about terrorist organizations (Wilkinson, 1997).

The way in which news is formulated is of great importance. Editors must efficiently use the short amount of time they have to assess which information to publish, and how. With high-impact events or topics that the audience may find highly disturbing, it is important that editors of print or broadcast copy give a sound interpretation of the facts. Terrorist activities have a great influence on the cultural, political and personal bias of the editor (Martin, 2010). There is always a tradeoff between providing a sound interpretation of a subject, and having a “breaking news” headline. “The “rush to publish” (or broadcast) can engender unnecessary fears, while at the same time enabling terrorists to get the media coverage they so desperately want (Martin, 2010). The media need to assume a certain responsibility in covering terrorist activities and/or events. It is our notion of this responsibility that forms the basis for the following critical remarks. It is important to recognize that journalists, instead of covering news information, are actually spreading terrorist propaganda. Secondly, it has been noted by media critics that, in certain cases, the objectivity of the journalists reporting terrorist activities is questionable. High-impact news items and topics are especially

conducive to the expression of sensational and subjective opinions. Finally, media critics claim that the drive of the mass-media to reach huge audiences can cause shifts in the socio-political environment (Gus, 2010).

Media criticism

In his essay "Terrorism and the Mass Media", Biernatzki (2002) questions what a more appropriate role of the media might be. He begins by citing Lu Xun, a Chinese author, artist and intellectual who mentioned that "*the role of the writer is to criticize*" (Biernatzki, 2002, 20), and goes on to suggest that twenty-first century journalists heed these words.

One prominent contemporary media critic is the Dutch journalist Mark Blaisse. He believes that the media have become susceptible to all kinds of outside pressures which tend to suppress objective and accurate reporting. Blaisse (1992) also notes that the main goal of the media consists of entertainment more than objective reporting and seems to be driven by the motive of obtaining maximum profit. As he cynically notes, "*If you have enough money, you can buy all the newspapers and radio and television stations you want*" (Blaisse, 1992, 138).

Blaisse (1992) contends that journalists have responsibility for the way they report their findings. Most of the time, it is not the theme or topic of the article which can be considered as dangerous, but the tone and style in which the article was written (Blaisse, 1992). The way terrorist activities are reported can have far-reaching implications for the future actions of terrorist groups, the reactions and responses of governmental organizations, and public opinion. The way journalists report consists of the description of the violent activities, how prominent these activities are, how they are framed and how they are emphasized. From this we can see that the media forms the vital link

between terrorists, the government, and the public (Paletz & Tawney, 1992).

Conclusion

"Possibly the most accurate description of the relationship between the mass media and terrorists is that the media have come to constitute such a major portion of modern culture that most of today's terrorists have factored them into their tactics in one way or another" (Biernatzki, 2002, 21). In this conclusion, Biernatzki (2002) points out that the impact that mass media has on our everyday life has grown enormously. This impact was not only noticed by researchers and politicians, but also by terrorists (Biernatzki, 2002).

The phenomenon of terrorism arose before the existence of the mass media. We also need to bear in mind that reporters and journalists are not always friends of terrorists; they can also sometimes be their enemies. This is likely to happen when reporters are publishing propaganda of opposing or counterterrorist groups, or when reporters criticize the goals, motives and/or methods of terrorists (Biernatzki, 2002).

Finally, as stated by Paletz and Schmid (1992), it is important to note that publicity is more of a means than an end in itself. We should therefore not exaggerate the influence the media has on the ultimate success of terrorists strategies.

However, media exposure plays an important part in all seven goals that we have discussed in this paper (Schmid & de Graaf, 1992). Terrorists depend on publicity and the (mass) media to achieve their goals. The immediacy and score of media coverage of terrorist activity is something that terrorist groups themselves are incapable of (Biernatzki, 2002)

Furthermore, we can turn the relationship between the mass media and terrorists the other way around and state that the media also to some extent rely on the actions of terrorists. The violent actions of terrorists seem to be attractive to report

and publish because of their sensational nature. The mass media seem to be obsessed with expanding their audience and maximizing their profits. Biernatzki (2002) states that journalists are prepared to do almost anything in order to increase their audience. Because most of the public is highly attracted by the use of sensationalism by the media, reporters and journalists are especially vulnerable to being manipulated by terrorists (Biernatzki, 2002).

From this we can conclude, that there seems to be a symbiotic relationship between terrorists and the media. This relationship has not always existed, but has arisen and intensified as a result of the growth of the mass media. We need to acknowledge that terrorists or the media do not depend fully on one another, but can to a large extent profit from one another.

The existence of a symbiotic relationship provides an answer to the question as to why Margaret Thatcher's suggestion did not work out. It was not in the interest of the media to stop publishing and reporting the violent acts committed by terrorist organizations. Other kinds of solutions are called for to address the problem under discussion.

Reflection

This article was written from a sociological perspective that is inherently limited. Such a perspective pays more attention to groups at the expense of individuals. In order to provide a more complete picture of the importance of the media, it would have been quite interesting to also consider a psychological perspective that focused more closely on individuals' behavior. This would have enabled the authors to individually cover key persons in the news process, such as journalists and editors, in greater depth. For instance, how can reporters and journalists cope with the huge pressure of the "breaking news mentality," and how can they combine this

mentality with other rules journalists are required to adhere to, such as objectivity. If it turns out that journalists and reporters cannot find a good balance in this tradeoff, then maybe we can better explain why subjectivity and speculation sometimes find their way into the reporting of news. It would also have been interesting to use a psychological perspective in relation to terrorists. How do terrorists try to manipulate the media on an individual level? Answering this question could provide insights as to how the media can better protect themselves against these types of manipulation. Elaboration of the micro level may promote a better understanding of the relationship between media and terrorism. In the social sciences, the interest of terrorists in the media has been explored to a greater extent than the interest of the media in terrorism. The psychological approach may, on the other hand, be suitable for exploring the motivation, on an individual level, of those working in the media.

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