

Terrorism and the Media: The effect of the media in the growth of the phenomenon of terrorism in the environment of contemporary societies (Article Review)

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Received: February 5, 2021

Accepted: March 17, 2021

ABSTRACT

This research aims to reveal whether some of the traditional or contemporary media, such as social media, television, radio, newspapers, etc have a greater role in the development and growth of terrorism phenomenon, terrorist acts, and terrorist groups, in the light of the fact that terrorism has different definitions, exploitation to the media and the ways to cover the terrorist event and what has been forgotten or even focusing on it.

Keywords: Terrorism, Media, Environment

INRODUCTION

Despite constant debates about how to define terrorism, there is a definition under U.S. law; terrorism is a premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents ⁽¹⁾. Terrorism relied on the media for achieving political aims, exerting public pressure on decision-makers to negotiate an ad-hoc case, or spreading shock and fear ^(2,3). Therefore, it is important to know the role of different media in enhancing the terrorism phenomena in the era of globalization.

One of the difficulties in the attempt to analyze the relationship between the media and terrorists is that there is no clear consensus on the premium terrorist organizations place on getting the exact sort of publicity they want, also to keep them in the field of vision. Terrorists attempt to achieve sympathy for their cause by getting the press to not only report what they do but also to explain their purported reasons for doing it in as favorable terms as possible. Kampf⁽⁴⁾ discussed the changing representation of terrorists and their attacks in the media, beside the changing definition of terrorism. Therefore, this review aims to discuss the relation of media with terrorism and how media must be aware of terrorists' intent to manipulate and give the impression of having greater strength than they actually possess, and strive to remain neutral and accurate in their treatment of both the terrorists' actions and their motives.

1- The role of the media in the growth of the phenomenon of terrorism:

Media in its various forms can play a pivotal role in political conflict situations. Radio, television, and newspaper coverage can spur or deter political violence; it can be used as a propaganda tool or simply as a megaphone to spread information across a large audience ⁽⁵⁾. An important distinction between the media's role in terrorism and the conflict settings discussed above relates to the implied mechanism. In the respective conflict settings, the media can facilitate the spread of propaganda and information to influence people's political attitudes and beliefs. Terrorist organizations, however, choose "their timing in order to maximize media

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attention” and may strike more when media attention is already on them ⁽⁶⁾. Thus, media coverage is not necessarily used explicitly to advance specific goals (which may also be possible, however but terrorist groups may aim to exploit the media platform they currently have. Interestingly, this goal of maximizing media coverage may stand in contrast governments’ desire to attack ‘when the world is not watching’, as suggested by Durante and Zhuravskaya ⁽⁷⁾ in their study on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The starting point for an empirical analysis on terrorism and the media is to note that the media actually cover very few terrorist incidents. Weimann and Winn⁽⁸⁾ estimated that newspapers cover only one-third of all transnational attacks. For TV news, the proportion falls to approximately one-sixth. This raises the question which characteristics of a terrorist attack attract media attention. There is consensus that those attacks tend to receive more attention that are successful, involve suicide, have a high number of victims, are aimed at Western countries, and include hostage taking or ransom demands. Nacos⁽¹⁾ argued that terrorist organizations have four media-centered goals: (i) to create awareness of their organization, (ii) to spread recognition of the organization’s motives, (iii) to gain sympathy of those in whose interest they claim to act, (iv) and to achieve a quasilegitimate status. Further, Schbley⁽⁹⁾ found that US and European media entities were important transmitters of attack ideas to potential terrorists. Slone ⁽¹⁰⁾ demonstrated that the consumption of news on terrorism (in this case, TV news) induces more anxiety than news that is unrelated to situations of national danger. Similarly, Pfeiffer *et al.*⁽¹¹⁾ (2004) showed that media consumption tends to increase the perceived crime rate. Although, empirical evidence is lacking, it seems likely that a similar relationship applies to terrorism ⁽¹²⁾. On the other hand, less than half a dozen of online forums are by terrorists as sources of data ⁽¹³⁾.

2- Terrorists’ use of the media:

Terrorists’ means of communication greatly vary. Indeed, technological advancements and changing audience behavior in the past decade enabled terrorist groups to utilize media tools with greater convenience. Specifically in the years since the Berlin Wall came down and the Soviet Union crumbled, the mass media of communication have changed in dramatic ways, mostly because of the global reach of the Internet and cellular phones ⁽¹⁴⁾. The new and emerging media has made it easier for terrorists to publicize their messages to the world via websites at their own discretion and “new technologies have simply allowed the dissemination of terrorist messages to reach a broader audience with a more concise message”. In the words of Moutot, “terrorists do not really need [printed media] anymore to convey their message ⁽¹⁵⁾. The ‘official’ media have been replaced by the Internet which, in the end, is much easier to use, much quicker and much more effective. In other words, the Internet has arguably replaced the role of the printed media in the field of terrorism, as, for the first time in history, terrorists can take whatever message and images they decide to straight to the online world, which is global in reach. As their stories and messages reach the general public either through the “old” media or the “new” media, terrorists use this publicity specifically in their recruitment efforts. In brief, the Internet clearly increased the scope of terrorist propaganda and activities, and became a perfect tool for terrorists in terms of advancing their operational goals with little expense and risk ⁽¹⁶⁾. Despite this, the power of other media forms and technologies such as video and audiocassettes, DVDs, video games, popular music, and novels should not be underestimated. Terrorists generally embrace the newest information, follow the latest technological developments to be innovative, and utilize the most up-to-date communication technologies; however, it does not necessarily indicate an absolute shift from old technologies and trends, as, for instance, some

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terrorist organizations even today rely on hawala, the informal network of money exchanges that dates back to 8th century⁽¹⁷⁾. The picture above suggests that terrorists need the media to receive free publicity for their cause, transmit their messages, and garner support, recognition, and legitimacy. Given the emerging trends in the media and communications technology, it is likely that terrorists will employ more innovative tactics to achieve their goals.

The following section will discuss how the other side of the equation—the media—portrays terrorism and benefits from it.

3- Problems with media coverage:

Terrorism is an attractive matter for media coverage, mainly because terrorist attacks make viewer rating surge and profits increase. This is because terrorism has many aspects that make it a very attractive subject for the media, as it has the elements of drama, danger, blood, human tragedy, miracle stories, heroes, shocking footage, and action⁽¹⁸⁾. Also, violence is critical to the semiotic and financial momentum of contemporary media organizations.

Indeed, the media has always been interested in reporting terrorism; however, the recent proliferation of television and radio channels and the emergence of mega-media organizations have resulted in greater competition and insatiable appetites for shocking, sensational “infotainment” that is believed to keep audiences captivated, boost ratings and circulation, and increase profits. Also, the part of the reason why the media is that irresponsible and excessively profit-oriented in the context of terrorism is that a considerable number of top media executives today come from the corporate world, but not from the ranks of journalists.

Basic difficulties for the coverage of terrorism by the media:

a- Selective reporting and self-censorship Journalists:

Sometimes Journalists face blackmail and intimidation as they attempt to gain access to terrorists. Once contact has been made, terrorists typically establish certain conditions under which they will speak; this may lead to ‘selective’ reporting if journalists want to ensure continued access or their own safety, as some reporters have been kidnapped and killed in their efforts to talk with terrorists⁽¹⁹⁾.

b- Editorial discretion

The existence of a newsworthy story does not necessarily mean that it will not be assigned by an editor or producer, nor if a story is written or shot does it mean that it will be published or broadcast. In addition to the relationship between reporters and sources, a complex understanding exists between journalists and their various editors or producers.

c- Lack of specialists working 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.

d- Misinformation given to reporters by national security agencies:

Many stories published or broadcast in the press originated with official government sources. Therefore, Kampf⁽⁴⁾ (2018) argued that advanced communication technologies since the 1990s has made terrorism more visible in national and international media landscapes. He

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addressed the new journalistic practices and their consequences on media reporting of terrorism in UK, US and Israel.

e-News media obstructing counter-terrorist efforts

Occasionally, the news media have inadvertently hindered anti-terrorist efforts to successfully resolve hostage-type incidents.

4- What is missing?

The media plays a central role in the calculus of political violence and are put into positions where they can magnify or minimize these kinds of acts and their perpetrators. Under this light, the recommendations below can be implemented to minimize the media-related effects of terrorism:

a- Desecuritization:

There is no doubt that terrorism must be reported. However, the way the events are framed and the extent to which it is covered is also important. Accordingly, in order to alter the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media, it is of high importance for the media to reevaluate and change its rhetoric when covering terrorism-related news and stories. Just as the security elite can desecuritize issues in international affairs through speech acts, media can adopt the same approach and desecuritize terrorism-related acts and stories through covering those incidents just as any other story in a more responsible and less “sensational” manner. Achieving this may not only prevent terrorists from using media coverage as an important publicity and recruitment tool but may also prevent the emergence of an atmosphere of fear at the public level. It may also force the government and security elite to make more rational decisions regarding countering terrorism and dealing with public outrage. Hence, news coverage with less repetition of horrific scenes, less traumatization, less sensation, and more information and prudence are essential in the first place to break the effect of terrorism.

b- Objectivity:

The media should have a responsible sense towards the public, as one of the goals of terrorists is to shake public confidence in their own security. Thus, objectivity should be the key when reporting a story. The media should present both sides of the story to the audience fairly and accurately without bias so that the audience can make their own opinion about the news and/or story independent of the negative influence of media. The media coverage of success stories should be balanced with the coverage of failure stories without speculation and dramatization in order to add to the credibility of the source and public order in the aftermath of an attack.

c- Clarity :

Since a critical part of counterterrorism is information warfare, it is among the goals of terrorists to misinform the public and exploit the uncertainty and suspicion that emerged afterward. Therefore, the media should provide clear factual and balanced information to the extent that it becomes possible to prevent the misinterpretation of terrorism-related incidents by the public and government who can possibly make suboptimal decisions regarding its countering actions against terrorism. The media should especially avoid presenting extreme and blindly partisan viewpoints to raise ratings and use plain language that everybody can understand in order to prevent panic.

e- Selective use of soft power:

Even though some advocate the use of media tools for propaganda against terrorists, specifically in the narrative warfare in radical extremism, this is generally fruitless, given that the

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media has certain limits and legal and moral obligations, while terrorists do not. It is also counterproductive, as media propaganda amplifies the perceived power of a terrorist organization. Instead, media can be employed as a public affairs and public diplomacy tool instead of a propaganda tool to influence foreign publics and potential recruits. It is important to analyze role of the “new” and “traditional” media in rewarding terrorists and how should ‘news values’ be adapted so as not to do provide terrorists with free access to a large public.

f-Differentiation:

Since no terrorist group is alike, the media should differentiate between different types of terrorism and terrorist groups in order not to provoke and mobilize the public against certain ethnic and/or religious minorities. Therefore, it is important not to cover news and stories in such a way as to contribute to “theorization” of the group in question and create an “us vs. them” scenario. Such dichotomy can give way to social unrest in multicultural societies that fail to integrate certain groups and trigger further attacks, as the anger and hopelessness become pushing forces for potential recruiters, sympathizers, and even moderates to upraise.

g-Counter cyber-terrorism:

The Internet has become a central forum on a global scale for debate among numerous communities that are being directly affected by global political violence. The communication of violent and oppressive groups has also heavily relied on the Internet. In other words, the age of the Internet has brought an age of online terrorism and enabled terrorists to use the web to recruit, raise money, and spread their messages. However, Benson⁽²⁰⁾ (2014) declared that although access to the Internet has increased all over the world, yet there was no corresponding increase in completed transnational terrorist attacks. He demonstrated both theoretically and empirically that the Internet is not a force multiplier for transnational terrorist organizations. Even though the regulation of the media, specifically the Internet, presents a fundamental dilemma due to the inherent tension between censorship and the democratic tradition of free speech, privacy, and press freedom, it is crucial to take countermeasures against the cyber activities of terrorists. These measures can include tracking their activities on online forums, following their conversations and activities on social media, and preventing the spread of radicalizing materials from specific websites. In addition to that, enacting laws at the national level to punish the ones using the Internet to provoke the public, recruit and train, and propagandize can identify terrorists and prevent a potential attack. Moreover, it is important to establish smart social media algorithms to address vulnerable people exposed to terrorist propaganda. This could analyze interactions rather than mere connections. Also, it is necessary to study and analyze; the role of ‘old’ and ‘new’ social media in strengthening terrorism and also in countering terrorism, the role of the internet in stimulating and facilitating recruitment into terrorist networks, causes of Internet-enabled terrorism, its many modalities, and possible mitigating strategies, the need to counter the utilization by terrorists of the Internet’s social media sites.

h-Government assistance:

Governments can give assistance to media organs by giving the political context and background of any terrorism-related act or story, as it is ideally the ultimate goal of the media to correctly inform the audience. To this end, a government-media partnership that is better informing the public, refuting the arguments of terrorists, and depriving them of the publicity they need can be formed.

i-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.

5- Guiding for journalists and media:

According to Guidelines for journalists⁽²¹⁾ published by OSCE Mission to BiH reporting on violent extremism cases and terrorism the following points must be taken in consideration:

- a) Reporting must be balanced and avoid any generalization.
- b) In field reports journalists must report verified facts, while their opinions, perspectives and analysis of the events were given at later stage. Therefore field reports must be kept separate from the analysis of experts.
- c) Journalists should use the, credible, official and trusted sources of information, and check them besides, protecting their identity if necessary.
- d) The information must be transferred accurately as possible to minimize interpretation.
- e) For crime qualifying, official information of the institutions involved in the investigation must be used.
- f) In order to show the impact of the attack, the published photographs and videos should take in consideration the balance between the protection of dignity of the victims and their families and the interest of the public.
- g) Victims and survivors should be in the focus of media coverage and names, number of the killed and injured must taken from official sources.
- h) Journalists have not allow eyewitness to interpret and analyze motives of an attack.
- i) The media should use the available tools on social media and communication channels to suppress spreading of hate speech, panic and fear.

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الإرهاب والإعلام: أثر الإعلام في تنامي ظاهرة الإرهاب في بيئة المجتمعات المعاصرة

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المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى الكشف عما إذا كان لبعض وسائل الإعلام التقليدية أو المعاصرة ، مثل وسائل التواصل الاجتماعي ، والتلفزيون ، والإذاعة ، والصحف ، إلخ ، دور أكبر في تطور وتنامي ظاهرة الإرهاب ، والأعمال الإرهابية ، والجماعات الإرهابية ، في ضوء حقيقة أن الإرهاب له تعريفات مختلفة ، واستغلال وسائل الإعلام وطرق تغطية الحدث الإرهابي وما تم نسيانه أو حتى التركيز عليه.