

The Media and Terrorism

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Two General Views

- There are two general views on the relationship between Western media and terrorism
- The media is basically responsible when it comes to reporting the news and terrorism
- Or not
- Some argue that the media is both consciously and/or inadvertently complicit in promoting terrorist causes

If it Bleeds, it Leads

- Mass media and terrorism have become ever more intertwined in a mutually beneficial relationship often described as 'symbiotic.'
- News organizations need to balance the public's right to know against the ability of militants to exploit news coverage to promote their beliefs.
- The mass media capitalizes from the confusion and alarm caused by terrorist attacks to produce the kind of dramatic news that draws the attention of its viewers and readers.

Basis for the Conflict

- **Terrorists thrive on publicity** - The media is critical to terrorists both to get out their message and to publicize their attacks
- In fact, some terrorist attacks have been expressly designed to exploit the media and maximize public exposure
- During the Iranian hostage crisis, local Iranians would hang around until the cameras started rolling, and then they would carry on

Basis for the Conflict

- The media is not detached and objective
 - Political favoritism
 - Financial interests
- The media is politically influenced and financially motivated, and they may pursue high ratings regardless of what the government wants or the danger to victims that their reporting brings
- It would be Naïve to consider the coverage of terrorist incidents to be agenda free.

CNN/Iraq in 2003

- CNN had information regarding killing and torture by the Iraqi regime
- This illustrates CNN's financial interest in remaining in Iraq
- In 2003 it was revealed that CNN had information about killing and torture by Saddam. CNN, however, did not divulge the information so as to remain in Saddam's good graces and not be forced to leave the country.

CNN/Iraq in 2003

- In short, CNN chose not to reveal the information so that they would make more money
- CNN executives eventually admitted to this conduct
- Rather than report the information, CNN hid it in order to avoid being removed from Iraq

CNN/Iraq in 2003

- There are numerous reports of news agencies catering to the PLO - [Palestine Liberation Organization](#).
- Most recently many news sources covered the murder of a family of five Israeli's as a problem related to settlements in Jerusalem instead of the simple terror attack that it was

4 Basic Types of Reporting

- News is generally reported within the structure of four basic categories
- **Information tradition** - Information tradition presents information factually and reliably
- **Sensationalist tradition** - Sensationalist tradition presents information in a style that provokes emotions such as fear, anger and alarm

4 Basic Types of Reporting

- **Feature story tradition** - Feature story tradition presents information by focusing on one individual's story and portraying this individual as a hero, victim or villain.
- This focus tends to be at the expense of deeper coverage of the issues. In other words, it distracts viewers from what is really going on
- **Didactic tradition** - Didactic tradition presents information with the goal of educating the public.
- This is potentially biased or helpful, depending on how it is handled
- **There can be overlap of each type**

Irresponsible Perspective

- The media's conduct is irresponsible or perhaps even **supportive of terrorism** - This point of view asserts that the media is at best irresponsible and at worst, supportive of terrorism
- **Media benefits** - the media benefits from terrorist incidents by gaining viewers and money, they indirectly promote terrorism
- **Interesting point**, No positive impact on public opinion - Research shows that media coverage does not influence public opinion in favor of terrorists

Growth in Sensationalism

- Since the 1970's there has been a considerable increase in media sensationalism
- This is attributed by technical developments such as:
 - Portable mini-video cameras
 - Battery powered video recorder
 - Satellite technology enables instant transmission of images
- **Cell phone cameras might make things even worse. Now everyone is carrying a camera**

Media Motivators

- **What motivates the media to be irresponsible?**
 - News is a limited resource - There is only so much new news to keep viewers engaged
 - So the media creates new news - The media needs to keep the viewing audience, and given the limited supply of new news, they go to extra effort to create more news

Media Motivators

- **Uses human interest stories** - This results in human interest stories that tend to have an inflammatory effect and focus on secondary aspects of the story
- **Often more inflammatory than newsworthy** - The media concentrates on the trivial, marginal and the irrelevant in the search for excitement
- **In an example of this, during the first Palestinian Intifadah from 87-91, foreign correspondents would instigate Palestinian violence against Israelis by paying Palestinians to attack Israeli's**

TWA Flight 847

- Several examples illustrate the media in run amok mode
- Hijacked to Beirut by Shi'i terrorists - In 1985, flight 847 was hijacked by Shi'i terrorists and redirected to Beirut Lebanon
- Once it landed, 39 hostages were relocated to safe houses throughout the city to prevent a rescue attempt
- The terrorists wanted 756 imprisoned Shi'i fighters released in exchange for the hostages
- The media ran sympathetic stories, For 17 days the American media turned the situation into a circus

Revealed a rescue attempt

Hanafi Attack in DC

- Flattering live coverage
- Phoned terrorists
- Revealed hiding civilians
- Revealed information about demands
- Antagonized the terrorists
 - Mistook food for ammunition
 - Made unhelpful suggestions
 - Aired a clip of the movie in question

Koran Burning

- A Florida church recently planned to burn a copy of the Koran
- The church called it off

A Responsible Media

- Audience influence minimal
- Government pressure, terrorist threats
- Little wrongdoing
- Mostly fair and responsible

Iranian Embassy in London

- 6 Arab-Iranians took 26 hostages
- Commandos prepared to move in
- Media well informed
- Did not broadcast the story until it was over

Unabomber

- Theodore John Kaczynski
- Genius
- Lived in Montana as a hermit
- Sent letter bombs
- Volunteered to end attacks if his manifesto was published
- Washington Post and NY Times agreed
- Content recognized by younger brother who turned him in

A Dangerous Business

- Reporters Without Borders keeps track of killed and imprisoned reporters
- Many reporters operate in dangerous countries
 - Hostile governments
 - Warlords
 - Drugs
 - Terrorists

Media and Terrorism

- Look at the relationship from three perspectives
 - What the terrorists want from the media
 - What the governments want from the media
 - What the media itself wants

What Terrorists Want

- **Terrorists try to manipulate the media to obtain these benefits**
 - Free publicity and sympathetic coverage
 - Legitimacy for their front organizations such as charities
 - Information about hostages and government plans
 - Hurt the government by exposing ineptitude and causing panic

What Governments Want

- Promote the government's perspective
- Portray terrorists negatively
- Provide the government with information
- Reduce tensions in a crisis
- Avoid human interest stories
- Keep things confidential
- Avoid being manipulated
- Assist the government with information or mis-information

What the Media Wants

- Remain professional
- Provide accurate information
- Be first with a story
- Maximize the drama
- Avoid legal liability
- Protect the public's right to information
- Help without compromising professional and ethical responsibilities

The Media and State Terrorism

- **Undemocratic governments use the media as a tool**
 - Propaganda – we are good and our enemies are bad
 - Control of information
 - Perpetuate the regime – we are so good to the people

The Problem

- Looking at multiple incidents is not terribly helpful.
- There are examples of both the media behaving badly and responsibly
- So it is difficult to find conclusive answers to the question
- Everyone finds bias in the media

The First Amendment

- “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

The First Amendment

- This is the freedom of religion, the press and expression
- It is critical to democracy
- This is why, one hopes, that the media will take their responsibilities seriously
- But, the American public has much less confidence in the media than they used to.
- There used to be the perception that news reporting was fair and unbiased, and that is no longer the case

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