

THE PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF MEDIA-COVERED TERRORISM

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PREFACE

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In the age of mass communications, the role of the news media cannot be separated from the acts of terrorism. To talk about the psychological effects of terrorism is to talk about the psychological effects of terrorism as reported by the news media.

Terrorism is aimed at the people watching. By carrying out inherently dramatic, deliberately shocking acts of violence, terrorists hope to attract attention to their causes and project themselves as forces to be reckoned with. To reach their audience terrorists depend on the news media. This sometimes puts the news media in the uncomfortable role of appearing to be an accomplice to the terrorist and has led to allegations that by their reporting the media exaggerate the problem of terrorism, spread alarm and provoke overreaction, aggrandize and romanticize the terrorists, even bestow a degree of legitimacy upon them, and inspire others to become terrorists. A closer examination of these assertions shows some of them to be at least partially correct. But some surprises also appear.

Do the news media provide too much coverage to terrorism and thereby exaggerate its significance? Obviously, the assassination of a major political figure, the kidnapping and murder of a former premier, the attempted assassination of the Pope, are events of great consequence. They *are* newsworthy. Who is to say how much news coverage is too much?

Because of their inherent drama, terrorist incidents tend to crowd out all other news. The kidnapping of Aldo Moro virtually eliminated other news from the front pages of Italian newspapers. For 444 days, the American news media gave similar prominence to the seizure of our embassy in Teheran.

Yet, measured against the world volume of violence, the amount of terrorist violence is trivial. Ordinary crime claims far more victims. Even in Israel, where 272 persons died in terrorist incidents between

1967 and 1978, nearly a thousand people were murdered during the same period. The contrast is truly striking, however, in the United States where terrorist violence caused fewer than 80 deaths between 1970 and 1978 but nearly 20,000 murders were committed annually. Although the murder rate in most Western European countries is only about one-tenth of that in the United States, even there ordinary homicides still vastly outnumber killings by political extremists. Worldwide, several thousand have died in international terrorist incidents--upwards of ten thousand if the casualties of purely domestic violence in Northern Ireland, Spain, Argentina, and Turkey are included. (This total does not reflect the great numbers killed as a result of state-directed terror campaigns.) During the same period, several millions died in wars. Yet it is the terrorists who often dominate the headlines of our era.

It makes no difference that ordinary homicides vastly exceed murders caused by terrorists. The news media do not allocate space or air time proportionally according to the leading causes of death in the world. News in general is about the unusual, the alarming, the dramatic. It is not a summing up of information. It is anecdotal. Because of their frequency, ordinary homicides are, regrettably, just that--ordinary.

It has been asserted that the news media report only the sensational aspects of terrorism, the blood, the gore, the horror of the victims. As in war, the media, and in particular television, focus on the action and in so doing often present an unbalanced picture of the intensity of the conflict.

Content analysis of coverage of terrorist incidents in *The New York Times* and the *Times of London* shows that the news media provide little context in which the public can judge the events. Reporting is usually coverage of something that happens. There is almost no coverage of the phenomenon of terrorism in between episodes because nothing visible and dramatic is happening.¹ If true of printed news, this is

¹Michael J. Kelly and Thomas H. Mitchell, *Transnational Terrorism and the Western Elite Press*, paper presented to the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Political Science Association, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, May 30, 1979, 45 pp.

truer still of radio and television, with their emphasis on brief snips of sight and sound.

This causes problems for the terrorists too. They obtain much publicity through the news media, but not the propaganda they usually want. The news media focus on the incident, not the grievances nor the objectives of the terrorists' cause. If exposure is power, then the news media provide power. But for the purpose of winning adherents or sympathizers if power depends on the communication of any message beyond the violence, then the news media provide little assistance.¹ This has led, in some cases, to direct demands by the terrorists on the news media to publish their messages in their entirety.

There is an almost cosmic irony here: despite the tremendous amount of publicity they receive, the terrorists' ideological purposes are usually obscured. Nevertheless, that publicity creates alarm far beyond any actual carnage they cause.

An atmosphere of alarm produces exaggerated perceptions of the level of political violence. People may think the terrorist problem is much more pervasive than it is. Most people may think that Italy is constantly convulsed by terrorist battles, but visitors to that country see no trace of it. The media exaggerate the strength of the terrorists, creating the illusion of their omnipresence. Then, as a consequence, alarm produced by terrorism may lead to pessimistic expectations of even higher levels of civil disorder.

For every actual victim of terrorism, there are thousands of vicarious victims. There is no direct measure of public alarm, but a measure of concern and alarm can be inferred from the number of people who view terrorism as a "very serious" problem, and from their willingness to support draconian measures against terrorists.

Ninety percent of Americans responding to a public opinion poll in December 1977 viewed terrorism as a "very serious" world problem; 60 percent considered it a very serious domestic problem--which is somewhat surprising in a country that had not yet experienced major terrorist campaigns or any spectacular hostage incidents equivalent to the Munich incident, the seizure of the OPEC headquarters in Vienna, or the South Moluccan episodes in the Netherlands.² Eighty-five percent of those

¹Kelly and Mitchell, op. cit.

²Louis Harris, "Terrorism," *The Harris Survey*, Press Release, December 5, 1977, 3 pp.

polled in a similar survey in the United Kingdom in June 1978 viewed terrorism as a very serious problem.¹

A further effect of public alarm is that more people expect to be victims than are likely ever to become victims. When coupled with the view that personal security cannot be guaranteed by the government, this perception leads to diversion of resources to private security. People start building walls in the literal and figurative sense.

With the hardening of targets comes a hardening of attitudes. Terrorism provokes backlash and polarization. A series of polls conducted in Western European countries between February 1970 and November 1977, a period of growing terrorism, shows a steady erosion of support for the statement that "Our society must be gradually improved by reform," and growing support for the statement, "Our present society must be valiantly defended against all subversive forces."²

The quality of the terrorist incident determines whether or not it is covered by the news media and the amount of coverage given it. As a result of this uneven news coverage, public perceptions of terrorism are imperfect, driven not by the volume of terrorist activity but rather by a handful of spectacular actions, generally those involving hostages.

A significant number of incidents, although international in character, are overlooked entirely by all but local news media. For example, of 158 incidents of international terrorism between 1968 and 1974, the *Times of London* ignored 43 percent while *The New York Times* ignored 44 percent.³

Bombings, the most frequent terrorist tactic, were the most likely to be overlooked. (Both papers reported only 41 percent of all recorded terrorist bombings of an international character.) When reported, bombings were given only brief coverage. Not surprisingly, incidents with a greater number of deaths received a greater volume of news coverage than incidents with fewer deaths.⁴

¹Connie De Boer, "The Polls: Terrorism and Hijacking," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Fall 1979, pp. 410-418.

²"Revolution, Reform and Subversion in West European Countries," *World Opinion Update*, Vol. II, No. 5, September 1978, pp. 114-117.

³Kelly, op. cit.

⁴Ibid.

Incidents involving hostages--hijackings and kidnappings--were the most likely to receive coverage, and it is easy to understand why. Murder lacks suspense--forgive me, Agatha Christie--at least when the perpetrator is known. But the outcome of a hostage situation may not be known for hours, for days, for months. Human life hangs in the balance. That is genuine drama.

Unfortunately, this focus on hostage situations means that public perceptions of government standing and competence in combatting terrorism are based not on the government's overall performance in combatting terrorism but rather on its performance in a few dramatic hostage incidents in which the government suffers disadvantages from the moment the incident occurs. The public sees the government only in crisis, demonstrably unable to provide security for its citizens, sometimes yielding to the terrorists to save lives, unable to bring its enemies to justice. Such perceptions may corrode the links between the governed and their government and contribute to public support for drastic measures to counter terrorism.

This is perhaps the greatest danger posed by terrorism: that it will provoke reactions that imperil democracy. Fueling such reactions is the widespread impression that governments, especially that handful of nations truly entitled to call themselves democracies, are impotent in combatting terrorism. Many may come to view the very laws which guarantee individual liberties as impediments to eradicating terrorism. Perceptions of government impotence may generate support for totalitarian solutions on the one hand or can lead to vigilantism or counter-terrorism either by members of the law enforcement organizations or by new terrorist groups.

Most people appear to support draconian punishment or military actions against terrorists. By 55 to 31 percent, Americans polled indicated they would favor a law providing that "all those caught committing acts of terror should be convicted and given the death penalty" and by 55 to 29 percent, respondents said they would support the organization of a "special world police force which would operate in any country of the world and which would investigate terrorist groups, arrest them, *and put their members*

and leaders to death." [Italics added]¹ Lest anyone think that this sort of rough frontier justice is uniquely American, it should be pointed out that the margin of support for this same measure was even wider in the United Kingdom.² Ninety-three percent of the Israelis questioned in a 1980 survey support the assassination of terrorist leaders; 75 percent support reprisals even if innocent civilians are hit during the operations.³ Dutch respondents favored by 73 to 21 percent that especially stern and harsh actions should be taken against terrorists as opposed to dealing with them as ordinary criminals.⁴

By giving incidents of terrorism enormous coverage, do the news media encourage acts of terrorism? The public certainly believes so (by a margin of 64 percent to 27 percent in one poll).⁵ Initial research tentatively suggests that heavy media coverage of hijackings, kidnappings and other hostile seizures carried out by terrorists increases the likelihood that similar incidents will occur in the period immediately following. A recent Rand analysis of embassy seizures during the last decade shows them occurring in clusters, clearly suggesting a contagion effect.⁶ The recent spate of airline hijackings implies that they also tend to cluster after a well-publicized terrorist success. Although little is known about the decisionmaking process of most terrorist groups, there is some direct evidence from terrorists

¹Louis Harris, "Terrorism" *The Harris Survey*, Press Release, December 5, 1977, 3 pp.

²Connie De Boer, "The Polls: Terrorism and Hijacking," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Fall 1979, pp. 410-418.

³Hanan Alon, *Countering Palestinian Terrorism in Israel: Toward a Policy Analysis of Countermeasures*, The Rand Corporation, N-1567-FF, August 1980, pp. 89-90.

⁴Connie De Boer, "The Polls: Terrorism and Hijacking," *Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 3, Fall 1979, pp. 410-418.

⁵"Media Reporting of Terrorism Implicated as Accessory to Crimes," *Gallup Opinion Index*, No. 144, July 1977, pp. 13-15.

⁶Brian M. Jenkins, *Embassies Under Siege: A Review of 48 Embassy Takeovers 1971-1980*, The Rand Corporation, R-2651-RC, January 1981.

who have been apprehended that coverage in the press of certain terrorist incidents gave them the idea to carry out similar actions.¹

Beyond encouraging specific types of terrorist incidents, prominent news coverage of terrorist incidents may provide would be extremists with a general model for behavior. Over the last decade we have seen a proliferation of groups adopting terrorist tactics sometimes on behalf of specific issues--nuclear energy, pollution, even housing shortages. Terrorism appears to have become a self-perpetuating phenomenon.

Over the long run, people don't remain terrorized. They may alter their own life style somewhat, staying at home at night, buying another lock for the door, perhaps a gun. Their attitudes may harden. They may become more cynical, seeing politics as an inherently violent business. A few may join extremist groups dedicated to preserving order.

Terrorism ceases to work after a while. The news value of another kidnapping, another assassination diminishes as such things become repetitious. Ironically, while extensive news media coverage tends to magnify individual terrorist episodes, continuing media coverage ultimately deflates their effect by making them commonplace. At the same time, the public may grow indifferent to the barrage of news about terrorist violence and literally tune out. The danger here is that intolerable levels of violence become acceptable in a brutalized society.

How will the terrorists react to diminishing returns in the press? If their repertoire of tactics no longer brings them the publicity and coercive power they once had, terrorists may seek novel tactics or targets to regain the attention of the news media, or they may escalate their violence to a level that cannot be ignored.

While essential to the process of modern terrorism, it would appear that news media coverage of terrorism satisfies no one. For the terrorists, the news media are an imperfect and unwieldy tool that ignores a

¹For example, it appears that South Moluccan extremists in The Netherlands got their idea of hijacking a train from press coverage of a similar plot by Arab terrorists. Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graff, *Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media: An Exploratory Analysis with a Dutch Case Study*, Center for the Study of Social Conflicts (C.O.M.T.), Dutch State University, Leiden, The Netherlands, November 1980, 477 pp.

significant number of terrorist incidents, does publicize the existence of the terrorists when they carry out spectacular actions and helps to create the alarm terrorists want. However, in the terrorists' view, the media coverage fails to convey the terrorists' message, provokes public backlash, and ultimately deflates the effect of terrorist tactics by making them commonplace, forcing the terrorists to make greater investments and take greater risks. To the government, the news media often appear as adversaries of public order by perhaps unintentionally exaggerating the threat posed by the terrorists and by sometimes exposing government weaknesses in moments of crisis, inspiring others to become terrorists, creating alarm and at the same time often galvanizing public opinion against terrorists, but in the process creating pressure for extreme measures. For the public, the news media provide an empty spectacle of violence, perhaps morbidly fascinating for some, alarming for most but in any case, of little meaning, hardening their attitudes, ultimately numbing them to violence.

Finally, terrorism also poses problems for the news media. Terrorist events generally are newsworthy but frequently expose the news media to conflicting demands by terrorists and government as to what they must or must not print. The news media are increasingly the direct target of attacks by terrorists attempting to influence news coverage. Press censorship is a common first step where governments have adopted authoritarian measures to deal with terrorism.

Thus, like anything else that is connected with terrorism, the problems in dealing effectively with the phenomenon are incapable of a simple solution. This, of course, is the strength of the terrorists who would otherwise be insignificant and ineffective, due to their small number and limited power. As far as media coverage of terrorist acts is concerned, there is no question that the actions receive a boost as a result of the coverage; but there is no question either than this does not mean a blackout can or should be enforced. The media will have to experiment with covering terrorist acts in such a fashion as to remain true to their responsibility of reporting the news, while at the same time being extremely sensitive to the consequences of that reporting.

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