The Media's Role in

International Terrorism

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Abstract   Terrorism, like Propaganda, is a form of persuasive communication. Like propaganda, it is a pejorative term. Some have referred to it as propaganda of the deed. It is hard to define because its definition depends on whether one agrees with the message. If one does, neither propaganda nor terrorism is the term that is normally used to describe such activity.

After considering various definitions and examples of what is and is not terrorism, this paper looks at the symbiotic relationship that exists between terrorism and mass media. Each exploits the other and terrorism has no meaning without media coverage in this age of mass communication. Terrorists use mass media for both tactical and strategic purposes.

While the mass media do, generally, cover terrorism at a rate of at least nine incidents per day worldwide, according to a pilot study undertaken for this paper, the press uses the term " terrorist" sparingly, preferring such neutral terms as guerrilla, rebel, and paramilitary, or using no value-laden adjectives at all. (Each country in the study, except Egypt, did, however, have its pet terrorists.) This raises the question of the effectiveness of terrorism. The press gives terrorists publicity but often omits the propaganda message that terrorists would like to see accompanying reports of their exploits, thus reducing terrorism to mere crime or sabotage.

"When I use a word," Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, "it means just what I choose it to mean-neither more nor less."

Lewis Carroll,

Through the Looking Glass

Terrorism has much in common with propaganda. Both are forms or vehicles of communication. Both are persuasive in intent, rather than, say, informative. Both are expressed in verbal as well as nonverbal terms. And both are pejorative in connotation. One does not refer to friends as terrorists or propagandists. These are terms reserved for one's enemies. The mass media, we found in this preliminary study, may quote someone verbatim using "terror" or "terrorism" in reference to an act performed by a group toward which the medium is either neutral or opposed, but the press will never use these terms in a headline unless it not only disapproves of the act but has no sympathy for its perpetrators.

Definitions

In an examination of the U.S. government's response to terrorism, a senior official in the office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff found that "it is not always clear just what one has in mind. The term has no precise and completely accepted definition."' He concluded, quoting the much cited Brian Jenkins, the Rand Corporation's expert on terrorism, that "the definition of terrorism seems to depend on one's point of view-it is what the 'bad guys' do."

Obviously, if one is unable to define a term, it is difficult if not impossible to do a scientific study of it. Since dozens of books and hundreds of articles and papers have been written on the subject of terrorism, most authors must be satisfied that they are focusing on something specific. Thus, Schmid and de Graaf, in an excellent study of the relationship of terrorism to communication, define terrorism as "the deliberate and systematic use or threat of violence against instrumental (human) targets (C) in a conflict between two (A, B) or more parties, whereby the immediate victims C-who might not even be part of the conflicting parties-cannot, through a change of attitude

or behavior, dissociate themselves from the conflict." They then point out that the Kennedy murder was not a terroristic act since the victim and target were identical.

Wardlaw says that the use of terror does not in itself constitute terrorism. Terror must be used as "a symbolic act designed to influence political behaviour by extranormal means, entailing the use or threat of violence." Wardlaw adds his own definition: "Political terrorism is the use, or threat of use, of violence by an individual or a group, whether acting for or in opposition to established authority, when such action is designed to create extreme anxiety and/or fear-inducing effects in a target group larger than the immediate victims with the purpose of coercing that group into acceding to the political demands of the perpetrators.

Wardlaw uses as one of his criteria of analysis Kenneth Burke's concept of identification. Identification, according to Burke, is the key to rhetorical success. If people identify with the victim, the terrorist has failed. While if they identify with the perpetrator, or at least are neutral or ambivalent about the act, the terrorist has succeeded. Although this definition permits an act to be terrorism for some yet not for others, it is amenable to testing for research purposes. It does not conflict with the often cited aphorism that "one man's terrorist is another's freedom fighter."

Terrorism, therefore, uses violence, or the threat of it; it is a Political act*, its victims are third parties, rather than principals; and its success depends on the identification of the audience with the terrorist rather than with the victim.

This definition is still not quite satisfactory, however. If a terrorist tried to keep his act secret, as criminals generally would be happy to do, we would term it not terrorism but a crime. In other words, terrorism must be a public act. However, publicity seeking, while an essential element, is not in itself sufficient to characterize an act as terrorism. Some criminals seek publicity. The act must not be an end but a means to an end-the terrorist's "cause"-and the cause must include beneficiaries other than the immediate perpetrators of the act. Thus, for an act to be terrorism, we must answer "yes" to the following three questions:

1. Is the violence or threat of political violence an intentionally public act?

2. Is it a means to a known or implied end beyond the act itself?

3. Are there announced or implied beneficiaries other than the perpetrators of the act? (In other words, it cannot just be a kidnap for ransom, for example, with the money going to the kidnapers for their personal use.)

This definition does not, however, take what I call the "legitimacy contingency" into account. The United States, fighting a war, would be engaged in a publicly violent activity as a means to the known or implied political end of "making the world safe for democracy." The announced or implied beneficiaries are the wives, husbands, parents, and children of the soldiers doing the fighting-clearly fitting all the criteria of terrorism. The "legitimacy contingency" hinges on whether the perpetrator is recognized as the representative of a political entity, nation, or state. If the group is recognized, those who recognize it will refer to its violent acts as war, guerrilla warfare, insurgency, rebellion, revolution, a military or paramilitary undertaking, a police action, or they will call it by one of a dozen or more possible names. Those who do not recognize it may well call it terrorism.

Thus, there is no doubt who were considered the terrorists by the Voice of the Arabs, broadcasting for the Egyptian govern ment in 1972. The broadcast followed the taking of Israeli hostages by an Arab group at the Munich Olympics and a shootout with the German police. The Egyptian broadcast said:

   The Federal German Government rejects terror sm. We also reject it. The difference between us is that terrorism, in its view, is what the fedayeen carry out to draw the attention of the world to a cause that has not enjoyed any practical support so far. We, on the other hand, consider that the situation cannot be dealt with except at the source, that is, by putting an end to the Israeli Nazi terrorism.

In spite of this "definitive" definition, certain acts that fail one or another of the tests still qualify as terrorism by most standards. Thus, a Washington Post headline on July 26, 1983, read: "Terrorist Groups Baffle Experts in Armenian Tactics." The article

described two Armenian groups-the Armenian Secret Army for the Liberation of Armenia (ASALA) and the Justice Commandos for the Armenian Genocide (JCAG). The former is "Marxist and thus theoretically internationalist, but it appears to have no real interest beyond attacking the Turks." The latter's "politics are rightist and nationalist, and.... concerned more with settling old scores than carving a utopian future Armenia out of eastern Turkey and the Soviet Republic of Armenia." The question is, can one call vengeance a "political act beyond the act itself"? However, killing of individuals whose guilt is limited to association by ethnic background, to avenge the death of hundreds of fellow nationals, does intuitively suggest terrorism. Another form of political violence or threat of violence that has occasionally been referred to as terrorism, although it violates both the legitimacy contingency and the requirement that the act must be intentionally public, is state terrorism. Schmid and de Great say that what distinguishes "insurgent" from 11 state" terrorism is that the latter does not actively seek publicity-" The term, in fact, originated with the French government's reign of terror under the Jacobins, according to Friedlander. And, according to another author, state terrorism may be directed by one state against another, as in the early days of the present Iran-Iraq war.

The obvious purpose of state terrorism, if the term is appropriate, is not publicity but control of the population through intimidation. The term is occasionally applied to revolutionary governments, which are not far removed from the revolutions that gave them birth, and many that later acquired respectability were offsprings of small, disaffected, later insurgent groups. Terrorism was the major instrumentality of Russian revolutionaries the protection of the group; creating diversions, e.g., drawing attention away from or to some incident, such as the martyrdom of a member as a means of recruiting new members.

Terrorism has generally been more successful in achieving strategic, or long-range goals. These are mainly publicity for the group and the cause as an intermediate step in realizing the cause itself Many tactical terrorist incidents, while they fail in achieving their immediate objectives such as release of prisoners, are highly successful in getting full publicity for the group, including extensive media explanation of their cause. Tactical terrorism includes kidnapings, hijacks, bomb and nuclear threats. Strategic terrorism includes assassinations and murder, arson, and bombings.

In general, one would suspect that terrorists prefer publicity to casualties. Schmid and de Graaf quote a member of the Palestine Liberation Organization as saying, "we would throw roses, if it would work" instead of bombs. "Publicity," say Amos and Stole,

"can be seen generally to rank above the goal of forcing a target government to carry out some immediate action, for example, the release of prisoners, distribution of food, or payment of tribute." In fact, terrorist groups are often known to claim responsibility for bombings they did not commit.

Terrorism, in effect, is a form of nonverbal communication that the terrorist resorts to when verbal communication fails. The terrorist feels a strong need to discredit a government in power, to right or to avenge a wrong. Since trying to do this singlehandedly would brand him or her as a criminal, the terrorist organizes a group of likeminded individuals and declares a "cause.'' Once the group has been formed, it needs to be maintained, and it turns to tactical terrorism to keep itself in arms, money, and fresh recruits. The visibility thus achieved also has longrange or strategic value. The PLO, for example, soon became a group to be reckoned with after a few terrorist incidents. Saudi Arabia and other Arab, as well as non-Arab, countries began to provide the group with lavish support so that it was able to use more traditional, less violent methods of propaganda, such as advertising, participation in international discussion, and attendance at world forums, as well as broadcasting, newspapers, magazines, motion pictures, and a wire service.

Tactical terrorism does not have to succeed to have strategic value. And even negative publicity is better than no publicity at all. PLO intelligence chief, Abu Ayyad, gave three goals for the 1972 Munich Olympic games incident: "Strengthening of the existence of the Palestinian people; echo with the international press assembled there; and liberation of fedayeen imprisoned in Israel." Schmid and de Graaf comment that the placement of the military objective as the last item implicitly admits the propagandistic nature of the action." The 200 detained Palestinians were not released by Israel, nor did the PLO ever expect them to be. In fact, had their demands been met, it is highly probable that they would have been escalated. "The demands that terrorists present are usually so outrageous," according to Devine and Rafalko, "that they are rarely met. When officials can and do meet the demands of a terrorist group, they usually respond with demands that are even more unlikely to be accommodated.

All that terrorists want is a large audience, and they have learned to exploit the media's own modus operandi to maximize their reach. The Red Brigades, according to Schmid and de Graaf, pick Wednesdays and Saturdays as "their preferred communication days" to get into the thicker Thursday and Sunday newspapers. "We recognize," said a PLO member, "that sport is the modern religion of the Western World. We knew that the people of England and America would switch their television

sets from any program about the plight of the Palestinians if there Was a sporting event on another channel. So we decided to use their Olympics . . . to make the world pay attention to us. We offered up human sacrifices to your gods of sport and television." Terrorists prefer to operate in Western Europe because the publicity they can receive there is greater than anywhere else except in the United States.

International Terrorism

Sandier et al. define "transnational' terrorism as "incidents originating in one country and terminating in another" as well as "incidents involving demands made of a nation other than the one where the incident occurs." Farrell distinguishes between international and transnational terrorism, using the CIA definitions: "International terrorism should be applied to groups or individuals controlled by a sovereign state," while "transna- tional terrorism is carried out by basically autonomous nonstate actors," although these may "enjoy some degree of support from sympathetic states." But the CIA admits that, "given the element of governmental patronage that is common to both, the boundary between transnational and international terrorism is often difficult to draw." Others do not attempt to make the distinction.

While terrorism in the early part of this century tended to be national rather than international, and was largely limited to the Ottoman Empire and to Czarist Russia, today it is often international in scope and occurs mostly in Western democracies. A CIA report in 1981 stated that 40 percent of all transnational terrorism occurred in Western Europe or North America and that 44 percent involved the United States. Before the 1970s, few terrorist incidents were even mentioned in the press. Robert H. Kupperman, of the U.S. Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, estimates that there are around 3,000 terrorists grouped into 50 organizations. Of these, some 200 are members of the four or five major international terrorist groups led by Germans, Palestinians, and Japanese. The terrorists have been trained in Lebanon, Cuba, Libya, and North Korea, and their weapons come mostly from Czechoslovakia and other Communist-bloc countries.

As mentioned earlier, international terrorism is treated as important news by all media in the Western world. In the Communist world and much of the third world, which place less emphasis on objective, "hard news" reporting and more on advocacy

journalism, terrorist incidents are mentioned only when they have some didactic value or when they serve the country's current policies or ideology. Thus, although it was determined by an American and a separate U.N. investigation that illness of a large number of Arab girls on the West Bank was not due to mass poisoning, as at first alleged, but more probably to mass hysteria, the Czech-based IOJ News Letter (of the International Organization of Journalists) wrote in its May 1, 1983, issue: "Our member union, the General Union of Palestinian Writers and Journalists (GUPWJ), has sent an urgent appeal condemning this terrorist act reflecting the real interests of the Israeli government." Evidently, it served Communist policy to run the story long after it had been discredited.

"Terrorism" as a pejorative flows trippingly on the tongue, as Shakespeare might have put it, in all cultures. "Powers Condemn Island's 'Diplomatic Terrorism' in Dragging Out Conference," the Washington Post headlined a story (July 27, 1983, p. AD accusing Matta of blocking EastWest detente in Europe at a conference in Madrid. But, on the whole, the term is used sparingly by all countries. Hester, who monitored the English-language international broadcasts of ten countries in late 1981, found that the Communist world was most sparing in its coverage of crime and terrorism (5.4 percent of all broadcasts), while the third world was almost equally disinterested in the topic, using "considerably less news about crime and terrorism than did the developed countries" (7.1 percent vs. 17.8 percent). Although the Soviet Union is gradually expanding its hard news coverage, "bad" news on crime 'and terrorism is still rarely reported. "Hijackings within Russia receive minimal news treatment and even foreign hijackings get hardly any coverage.... Other acts of violence with political connotations also get only short backpage treatment," according to Schmid and de Graaf.

The British press and British politicians try to remain objective about certain terrorist groups-but not about others. Lord Chelwood in the House of Lords in May 1982, speaking about America's "blinkered" approach to the Middle East and its refusal to talk to the PLO, noted that if Britain had refused to talk to Jewish organizations in Palestine before 1948 because of their terrorist activities, "Israel would not exist today." The Japanese press tends to lean toward support for the Palestinians, while the French press is divided. "The right-wing press is not in favor of recognition of the PLO," says Eric Rouleau, Le Monde's chief Middle East correspondent. "They speak of the PLO like the American administration does-, it's a terrorist organization." However, "the more you go to the left, the more you find the papers critical," he adds. As for French public opinion, Rouleau feels, it does not accept Israel's "allegation that the PLO was just a terrorist organization. The French public, from its own experience, knows that every nationalist movement of that kind does permit terrorist acts but is

not necessarily just a terrorist organization." He then points to Algeria's FLN, which threw bombs at women and children in Algiers. Yet the French negotiated with them because General De Gaulle believed one should negotiate with those holding the gun.

Foreign Press Study

A pilot study was conducted of how terrorism is handled by four foreign and one American newspaper. The newspapers in the sample were the Washington Post, The Times of London, the Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, the Jerusalem Post, and the Egyptian Gazette. The sample, as shown in Table 1, comprised five alternate days in late June and early July 1983-admittedly small, but large enough to give a full flavor of the handling of terrorism by these newspapers. All items involving violence or the threat of violence by a politically oriented group were read, as were items dealing with bombings, kidnapings, gunfire, etc., in which the individual or group responsible was unknown. Kidnapings and hijackings for personal reasons or gain or involving an isolated, non-recurring incident were not included.

Overall, 45 different news stories involving terrorists, or incidents that by our definition were probably attributable to terrorism, were reported during the five days- an average of nine per day. Altogether there were 70 reports by the five newspapers, meaning that 25 items covered the same incidents-a relatively small number when one considers that if all 45 stories had been carried by all five newspapers, there would have been 225 rather than 70 items.

Of the 70 items, only 16 actually used the term "terrorism," "terrorist," or "terror." The remaining 54 items referred to guerrillas, rebels, violence, or some other term that Suggested terrorist action.

The Jerusalem Post had the most news stories describing terrorist activities (25) and also by far the greatest use of the term

<TABLE 1>

'terrorism' (9). The Egyptian Gazette reported the fewest terrorist incidents (8), and never called them 'terrorism' (see table).

While 14 news events received multiple coverage, only two of these were reported by more than one newspaper using the word

'terrorism.' In the case of one of the stories, two newspapers used 'terrorism,' and three did in the case of the other story. On June 29, both the Jerusalem Post and the London Times reported the imprisonment of an ailing South African labor union member who had been sentenced on charges of terrorism. In the case of the Jerusalem Post, an AP wire story was used, whereas the London Times used its own correspondent's report. The other item was carried by all five newspapers on July 5, but only the Jerusalem Post, the London Times and the Washington Post referred to terrorism in it. The story involved the firing of rockets into the West Bank town of Beit She'an from the Jordanian side of the River Jordan. The Washington Post used a UPI version, the Egyptian Gazette used AP and Reuter, the Frankfurter AllgeMeine Zeitung used a German wire service (dpa) story, while the London Times and the Jerusalem Post used their own correspondents' stories.

Each country has its own national nemeses to whom it refers as terrorists. Thus five of the nine terrorist mentions in the Jerusalem Post involved Arab actions. One of the three London Times ment ions involved the Irish Republican Army, and one of the three incidents in the Washington Post in which the word 'terrorism' was used was in reference to a Puerto Rican terrorist incident in Chicago. Although the sole Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung story that mentioned terrorism quoted Israeli Foreign Minister Shamir's call for the closing of all PLO foreign bureaus because they were "instruments of terrorism," one of the Washinton Post terrorist mentions cited West German Chancellor Helmut Kohl, who said he wouldn't bow to terror in connection with violent anti-Bush clashes during the U.S. vice president's visit to Germany.

Discussion

While terrorist incidents are fairly frequent-the reported ones averaging at least nine a day-they are not always covered by the world's press, in spite of their "made for the news media" production. If, therefore, it is true, as Devine and Rafalko say, that "it

would be utterly pointless to commit an act of terrorism in a society having rigid control over its press." because without publicity, terrorism is meaningless; if, as Schmid and de Graaf state, "the main sense, if not the only one ... a massacre has is that sense it gains from being reported and explained by the media"; and if "the terror event enjoys an unparalleled power simply because of its media value," as Kupperman puts it, then terrorism is not being too successful, unless it is a truly spectacular event. Very few terrorist incidents were reported crossnationally-at least in the leading newspapers in this admittedly limited study. Kupperman is right, in that case, when he says that "to maintain the media spotlight, terrorist organizations must heighten the threshold for the spectacular assault."

Also under press control, terrorists may have to escalate their activities in order to get into the media, John Grace fears, since there must presumably be a critical mass of terrorism that would force itself through the barrier of media secrecy. However, Brian Jenkins does not believe terrorists want a lot of casualties. They want publicity and are not, therefore, likely to go nuclear., for example. This is a reasonable assumption, since there also is a critical mass of public tolerance of violence. "Acts of extraordinary violence would be counterproductive," says Kupperman. "Were they to occur. nations would unite to rout out the terrorists." A possible consequence of the muzzling of the press, as has been true in Latin America and also in several African countries, is that terrorists are forced to seize broadcasting stations to get their message across. "Radio stations in many African states," according to Martin, "are as closely guarded as the presidential residence because they are among the first targets of insurgents."

How effective, then, can terrorism be? "There is no known case in modern history," says Gross, "of a terrorist movement seizing political power." On the other hand, Gross also cites a 1965-1975 study that says: "The record shows that transnational terrorists have generally been rather successful in avoiding capture (or, if caught, in escaping punishment). " And, "while it is extremely doubtful that [terrorist] attacks could force the Yugoslav government to give Croatia its independence," to cite one example in Europe, Jenkins has pointed out that "insurgents fought in Angola, Mozambique and Portuguese Guinea for over 14 years using the, standard tactics of rural guerrilla warfare. The world hardly noticed their struggle, while an approximately equal number of Palestinian commandos employing terrorist tactics have in a few years become a primary concern to the world."

Of course, others have suggested that the last thing terrorists want is to achieve their goals. One of the hostages in the Hanafi incident in Washington recalls, according to

Schmid and de Graaf, "Khaalis coming in and telling us: 'The whole world is watching me; the whole world is calling me.' It was his moment of glory. " Martin says terrorists seldom demand the full realization of their cause, possibly because they don't expect it, but equally probably, as Watson suggests, because achieving their goals would force them to relinquish their accumulated power. If terrorists want political power above everything else, they will not trade it away by negotiating to achieve their ultimate goal Frequently, therefore, when a cause is realized or becomes moot terrorists continue student terrorists, to operate but change their causes. German for example, began as an anti-Vietnam War movement. After the war, they took up other causes."

What should be the role of the media'? There is no doubt that people have the right to know not only about the "crazies" in their midst and the threats to life, limb, and property, but also about the causes people espouse and are willing to lay down their lives for. For all one knows, people may wish to support such causes, if not physically then with money and through moral suasion. "It is possible to imagine governmental officials doing more to destroy democracy in the name of counter-terrorism than is presently likely to be achieved by terrorists themselves," Wardlaw warns.

On the other hand, one must distinguish between the need to know and the desire to be entertained. Entertainment should not be at the expense of law and order, life, limb, and property Yet terrorism has become a form of mass entertainment, according to psychiatrist Frederick J. Hacker. Richard Salant, president of CBS News, argues that, "We present facts from which people draw their own conclusions . . . , whether it's politics or terrorists or anything else . . . . If we start playing God and say that fact or this viewpoint ... might give people ideas, we would have to stop covering politics." But is he being completely objective? Isn't there a conflict of interest in his argument? Does CBS present all the news, or does it play God, selecting what it thinks will keep its ratings above those of other networks? And is such selection made on the basis of the need to know or in terms of the maximum entertainment value-the drawing power of the story?