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The link between the media and terrorism : why are the two inseparable?

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THE LINK BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND TERRORISM – WHY ARE THE TWO INSEPARABLE?

When one says “terrorism” in a democratic society, one also says “media”¹

Abstract

This report examines the link between the media and terrorism. Firstly, the media constructions of terrorism and terrorists were investigated. Previous research had revealed that the way in which the media present certain events influences the public's perception and memory. Therefore, it was established that terrorism is to a great extent a media creation. Moreover, the paper inquired into the reasons for which the media extensively cover terrorist acts. It was argued that people are craving for horrific images and descriptions because they give them the experience of negative pleasure.

Introduction

The word 'terror' originates from the Latin word 'terrere' and means 'to frighten'.² Terrorism, therefore, is aimed at introducing fear and hysteria. A universal definition of terrorism, however, still remains to be coined.³ During the French Revolution in 1793, 17,000 people were publicly executed for the purpose of spreading panic and horror among audiences. Indeed, to put it in Jenkins'⁴ words: *terrorism is aimed at people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater*. Similarly, the modern incarnation of terrorism also seeks to disseminate certain meanings as well as incite public consternation. The political as well as psychological strength of the terrorist message, however, has been recently magnified as a result of technological progress.⁵

As Wilkinson⁶ suggests, the relationship between terrorism and the media seems dangerously symbiotic. What is more, from historical perspective, the two phenomena became a part of social life almost simultaneously: terrorism in 1866 when dynamite was first created and the media in 1848 thanks to the development to the rotary press.⁷ Further, one could argue that terrorism is an act of communication which needs publicity in order to reach the target audience. In fact, *when terrorists hurl a rocket into Great Britain's foreign spy headquarters,*

¹ P. Wilkinson, *Terrorism versus Democracy: The liberal state response*. Frank Cass, London 2001, p. 177

² G. Weimann, *The psychology of mass-mediated terrorism*. "American Behavioral Scientist". 2008, 52(1), pp. 69-86

³ M.J. Stevens, *What is terrorism and can psychology do anything to prevent it?* "Behavioral Sciences and the Law". 2005, 23, pp. 507-526

⁴ B. Jenkins, *International Terrorism*. Crescent, Los Angeles 1975, p. 4

⁵ G. Weimann, op. cit.

⁶ P. Wilkinson, op. cit.

⁷ A.P. Schmid, J. de Graff, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent terrorism and the Western news media*. Sage Publications, London, Beverly Hills 1982

*bomb the hall of the USS Cole, hold hostages in a remote part of the Philippines, or hijack an Indian airliner, they do not simply commit violence – they execute premediated terrorism that virtually assures a great deal of news coverage.*⁸ Even more, Weimann⁹ explicates, terrorists manipulate the media coverage of their acts and intend to make them as newsworthy as possible. Nevertheless, the relationship between the media and terrorism seems to be mutually advantageous.¹⁰ Namely, in order to sell itself, the press needs to shock and the publication of catastrophic images certainly does the trick.¹¹ Furthermore, Freud's¹² theory of the uncanny holds that people yearn for drama and destruction as long as it does not pose a personal threat. Terrorism appears perfect for this role as it is real enough to be feared, yet fictional enough to keep the fear pleasurable. Finally, the media, often influenced by the government, choose what is to be classed as terrorism. Their choice of labels, in turn, impacts people's perception as well as memory of particular events. Acts of terrorism, it can be claimed, are socially constructed.¹³

As exemplified, the correlation between the media and terrorism is extremely complex and surprisingly strong. Therefore, the focus of this paper will be on how terrorism is constructed by the media. Further, the reasons why the media choose to report terrorist acts and why those accounts attract world-wide audience will be investigated.

Media-framed terrorism

*Reality in our century is not something to be faced*¹⁴

As mentioned in the introduction, a comprehensive and universal definition of terrorism does not exist. It can be suggested that objectivity cannot be achieved due to conflicting ideological frameworks and worldviews.¹⁵ Therefore, it appears that the shape of the concept is culturally-specific and the public's understanding of it is largely framed by the media.¹⁶ Schechter¹⁷ asserts that audiences trust the media and treat media-generated stories as well as images as the reflection

⁸ B.L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The central role of the media in terrorism and counterterrorism*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Oxford 2007, p. 14

⁹ Weimann, op. cit.

¹⁰ M. Slone, *Responses to media coverage of terrorism*. "Journal of Conflict Resolution". 2000, 44, pp. 508-522

¹¹ A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit.

¹² S. Freud, *The Uncanny*. Penguin Books, London 2003

¹³ E.W. Dunn, M. Moore, B.A. Nosek, *The war of the words: How linguistic differences in reporting shape perception of terrorism*. "Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy". 2005, 5(1), pp. 67-86; A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit.

¹⁴ G. Greene, *Our Man in Havana*. Heinemann, London 1970, p. 10

¹⁵ B. McNair, *UK media coverage of September 11*. (in:) T. Pludowski (ed.), *How the World's News Media Reacted to 9/11: Essays from around the globe*. Marquette Books Llc, Spokane, Washington 2007, pp. 29-37; M.J. Stevens, op. cit.

¹⁶ C. Erjavec, Z. Volcic, *Mapping the notion of "terrorism" in Serbian and Croatian newspapers*. "Journal of Communication Inquiry". 2006, 30, pp. 298-319

¹⁷ D. Schechter, *Media Wars: News at a time of terror*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Lanham, Oxford 2003

of reality. Moreover, people are ready to accept the mediated world without questioning the source and nature of the vision. The public's thoughts are hence directed, and public opinion is not moulded by the people but delivered to the people in a ready-made form.¹⁸ Even more, the media are far from being *neutral and passive communication conduits*.¹⁹ Also, the term 'terrorism' is applied inconsistently. *Star Tribune* (in the US), for example, uses the term only to refer to attacks carried out on civilians by non-governmental groups.²⁰ Consequently, Hülse and Spencer²¹ as well as Schmid and de Graff²² suggest that any attempts at grasping the 'nature' of terrorism are doomed to failure as the conception is a social and political epithet. Therefore, terrorism and terrorists should not be studied with the use of traditional anthropological approaches, but in relation to discourse in which those terms function.

Dunn et al.²³ argue that *perception, categorization, and memory are not direct reflections of life outside the mind, but are actively shaped by expectancies and prior experience*. Similarly, Loftus and Ketcham²⁴ as well as Loftus and Palmer²⁵ maintain that memories are not a faithful reflection of reality. Rather, what and how people remember is contingent on social aspects and embedded in discourse.²⁶ To elaborate, Dunn et al.²⁷ conducted a four-phase study in order to demonstrate how linguistic differences in news reporting may influence people's perception and memories of events. Firstly, content analysis of American newspaper articles published in 2003 (i.e. during American invasion on Iraq) revealed that the words used with reference to non-U.S. allies strongly implied demolition, devastation as well as hateful motivation. What is more, this biased accounting activated experiment participants' stereotypes as well as schemas for remembering, which *may powerfully shape whether people perceive the acts as reflecting terrorism or patriotism* (p. 72). In the final stage of the study, participants were given a short article depicting the bombing of a building. One version of the narrative contained words implying that the United States were the perpetrator of the act ("us" version), whereas the other version hinted at Iraq ("them" version). As expected, participants

¹⁸ P. Norris, M. Kern, M. Just (ed.), *Framing terrorism: The news media, the government, and the public*. Routledge, New York 2003

¹⁹ B.L. Nacos, op. cit., p. 16

²⁰ D. Schechter, op. cit.

²¹ R. Hülse, A. Spencer, *The metaphor of terror: Terrorism studies and the constructivism turn*. "Security Dialogue". 2008, 39, pp. 571-592

²² A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit.

²³ E.W. Dunn, M. Moore, B.A. Nosek, op. cit., p. 67

²⁴ E.F. Loftus, K.E. Ketcham, *The malleability of eyewitness accounts*. (in:) S. Lloyd-Bostock, B.R. Clifford (eds.), *Evaluating Witness Evidence: Recent psychological research and new perspectives*. John Wiley & Sons, Chichester 1983, pp. 159-171

²⁵ E.F. Loftus, J.C. Palmer, *Reconstruction of automobile destruction: An example of the interaction between language and memory*. "Journal of Verbal Learning and Verbal Behavior". 1974, 13, pp. 585-589

²⁶ M.B. Marron, *Elite British and Irish newspapers reflect ideology in framing the 9/11 catastrophe*. (in:) T. Pludowski (ed.), *How the World's News Media Reacted to 9/11: Essays from around the globe*. Marquette Books Llc, Spokane, Washington 2007, pp. 38-50; J. Shotter: *The social construction of remembering and forgetting*. (in:) D. Middleton, D. Edwards (eds.), *Collective Remembering*. Sage Publications, London, Thousand Oaks 1997, pp. 120-138

²⁷ E.W. Dunn, M. Moore, B.A. Nosek, op. cit., p. 72

who read the “us” version of the article were more likely to view the bombing as a justified, legitimate act (patriotism schema activated). In contrast, participants exposed to the “them” version interpreted the situation as a terrorist action (terrorism schema activated). The way people view terrorism, therefore, heavily relies on the language used by the media.

Moreover, in order to facilitate the understanding of novel phenomena, familiar connotations are being applied to their description. Interestingly, the rule is readily embraced by the mass media when it comes to presenting terrorism and terrorists.²⁸ Accordingly, the terrorist is dehumanized with the use of recognisable terminology. Indeed, he became the Other: an Arab monster or a madman, a freak of nature (to confirm, bin Laden is described as unnaturally tall), hiding in a cave.²⁹ In fact, after 9/11, the media tended to describe bin Laden as *evil, barbaric, and fanatic*. George Bush, on the other hand, was presented as *patriotic, freedom-loving, and determined*.³⁰ Further, Hülse and Spencer³¹ examined how Al-Qaeda was metaphorically constructed in the German popular press between the years 2001-2005. After 9/11, the researchers found, the metaphors were mainly of military nature (e.g. suicide commandos, private army or kamikaze pilots and hence the War on Terror was created as a response to the threat). After the Madrid bombings in 2004, however, the paradigm has shifted towards criminal denotations (e.g. murderer, criminal assault). Finally, after London Underground bombings of 2005, military metaphors sank into oblivion altogether and the terrorist, as a newly-formed criminal, became an internal enemy. *Rather than being an exceptional state, as indicated by the war metaphor, terrorism has now been turned into an everyday phenomenon*. On the contrary, bin Laden’s messages transmitted by Al-Jazeera satellite television clearly construct the West as the terrorist side. He also *denounced the American campaign against the Taliban as a ‘terrorist Christian crusade’*.³² It could be argued, therefore, that terrorism is in the eye of the beholder. Even more, to put it in Kearney’s³³ words: *the eye is never innocent: even less so the eye of the media*.

The horrific pleasure

*One can be a virgin with respect to Horror as one is virgin toward Voluptuousness*³⁴

Nacos³⁵ asserts that terrorists use the Internet, television and the press as the medium for their communication. Indeed, terrorism is about delivering a message to the chosen audience and terrorists consciously and effectively manipulate how

²⁸ J.S. Tuman, *Communicating Terror: The rhetorical dimensions of terrorism*. Sage Publications, Thousand Oaks, London 2003

²⁹ C. Erjavec, Z. Volcic, op. cit.; R. Kearney, *Terror, philosophy and the sublime: Some philosophical reflections on 11 September*. “Philosophy and Social Criticism”. 2003, 29, pp. 23-51; M.B. Marron, op. cit.; J. Saunders, *The uncanny suburbs: Arlington Road and the politics of terrorism*. “Text, Practice, Performance”. 2000, II, pp. 33-52

³⁰ D. Schechter, op. cit., p. 113

³¹ R. Hülse, A. Spencer, op. cit., p. 585

³² R. Kearney, op. cit., p. 25

³³ Ibidem, p. 43

³⁴ L.F. Céline, *Journey to the End of the Night*. Calder, London 1932, as cited in J. Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An essay on abjection*. Columbia University Press, New York 1982, p. 140

³⁵ B.L. Nacos, op. cit.

and when the purport of their acts is to be transmitted. Consequently, Weimann³⁶ reports, there have been attempts to limit terrorists' access to the media. Nevertheless, one could claim that this policy could never be fully realised as the relationship between the media and terrorism is reciprocally beneficial. TV stations and newspapers constantly compete with each other for audiences. *Hence, they are almost bound to respond to terrorist propaganda of the deed because it is dramatic bad news.*³⁷ In fact, crime and terrorism sell extremely well. To confirm, the kidnapping of Aldo Moro, an Italian politician, had increased the circulation figures of daily *Il Corriere* by 38.8 percent. What is more, the figures exceeded 50 percent increase when Moro was found dead.³⁸ Ironically, Nacos³⁹ suggests, 9/11 terrorists who hate everything about American pop culture composed a story far greater and more realistic than the ones created in Hollywood – full of horror, blood, and unimaginable suffering. Accordingly, Nacos⁴⁰ introduces the idea of infotainment, i.e. a blend of information and entertainment. Infotainment *thrives on the very images and themes that terrorist incidents offer – drama, tragedy, shock, anger, grief, fear, panic – the ideal ingredients for transforming real-life terror into breathtaking thrillers or heartbreaking soap operas designed to captivate and stir up audiences.* Indeed, terrorist attacks have served as a basis of many films, such as *Lady in the Water*, *The Day After Tomorrow*, *I am Legend*, or *The Bourne Identity*, all of which became very popular.⁴¹ Gómez⁴² as well as Jancovich⁴³ explicate that such films with a clear nexus with reality and where the monstrous and horrifying is contained gives the sense of closure and fulfillment. *Fascination with media violence, in this view, is an expression of suppressed aggressive impulses of frustrated people, who, unable to admit to themselves that these impulses exist, demand and expect that the crimes they enjoy will be punished.*⁴⁴

As demonstrated, terrorism occupies a notable position on both the news as well as entertainment media's agenda. This is due to the great public demand for such images. This fact, however, seems bewildering, even more so in the light of Keinan, Sadeh and Rosen's⁴⁵ study results. Namely, it has been established that a considerable and prolonged exposure to terrorist news clips may lead to heightened anxiety levels or even to the development of symptoms akin to those

³⁶ G. Weimann, op. cit.

³⁷ P. Wilkinson, op. cit., p. 177

³⁸ A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit.

³⁹ B.L. Nacos, op. cit.

⁴⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 37

⁴¹ G. Garcia Mingorance, *Monsters, aliens, threaten global and the uncanny in the cinema of M. Night Shyamalan*. (in:) L. Franklin, R. Richardson (eds.), *The Many Forms of Fear, Horror and Terror*. Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 23-34

⁴² R. Á. Gómez, *Terrorism and social panic in British fantastic cinema*. (in:) L. Franklin, R. Richardson (eds.), *The Many Forms of Fear, Horror and Terror*. Inter-Disciplinary Press, Oxford 2009, pp. 3-12

⁴³ M. Jancovich, M: *Horror*. B.T. Batsford Ltd, London 1992

⁴⁴ A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit., p. 71

⁴⁵ G. Keinan, A. Sadeh, S. Rosen, *Attitudes and reactions to media coverage of terrorists acts*. "Journal of Community Psychology". 2003, 31(2), pp. 149-165

of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Given the possibility of such dramatic repercussions, therefore, one could wonder why people choose to watch and read about terrorist acts. According to Garcia Mingorance, Saunders and Tudor⁴⁶ terrorism is so alluring because it is the ultimate horror genre which gives people the experience of the uncanny. Freud⁴⁷ explains that “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar”. What is more, it brings the feeling of negative pleasure. Further, one of the most powerful effects of the uncanny can be achieved through presenting terrorists as zombies or automatons, i.e. creatures who are driven by mindless compulsion and whose behaviour is unthinking and meaningless.⁴⁸ Also, as mentioned in the previous section, terrorists have become the new monsters – even more scary because they are painfully real.⁴⁹ Interestingly, Freedland⁵⁰ suggests that the human ghouls are already so deeply ingrained in the current discourse that they have managed to supplant the old, imaginary ones in children’s nightmares. The discourse, in turn, is permeated by those beast and monster metaphors because the dominant media instill them in people’s imagination.⁵¹ Moreover, Kearney⁵² asserts that people feel threatened by the vision of monsters because they *remind us that we don’t know who we are (...)* In that sense we may say that monsters are our Others, *par excellence*. Lacan and Saunders⁵³ propound that people define themselves by their Others and thus without them knowing oneself becomes impossible. Further, the monstrous Other becomes an object of terror, but at the same time the source of negative pleasure.⁵⁴ Finally, Kant⁵⁵ propounds that people delight in watching terror, however, real terror could be unbearable. The framing of images allows the viewer to adopt a safe position and consequently introduces the opportunity to experience horror in the mode of the imaginary.

Summary

To conclude, it can be argued that terrorism is to a large extent a media creation.⁵⁶ This is not to say, however, that terrorism is wrong and contemptible only because it is presented in this way. Undoubtedly, terrorists kill, maim and threaten. Nevertheless, the same could be said about many criminals.

⁴⁶ G. Garcia Mingorance, op. cit.; J. Saunders, op. cit.; A. Tudor, *Why horror? The peculiar pleasures of a popular genre*. “Cultural Studies”. 1997, 11, pp. 443-463

⁴⁷ S. Freud, op. cit., p. 124

⁴⁸ S. Freud, op. cit.; M. Jancovich, op. cit.

⁴⁹ M.B. Marron, op. cit.

⁵⁰ J. Freedland, *War on terror: Osama’s return: Terrorist threats are working as new brand of fear creeps into everyday life*. “The Mirror”. 2002, November 14

⁵¹ J.K. Puar, A.S. Rai, *Monster, terrorist, fag: The war on terrorism and the production of docile patriots*. “Social Text 72”. 2002, 20(3), pp. 117-148

⁵² R. Kearney, op. cit., p. 28

⁵³ J. Lacan, *Écrits: A selection*. Routledge, London 1977; J. Saunders, op. cit.

⁵⁴ S. Freud, op. cit.

⁵⁵ I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*. Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969

⁵⁶ R. Hülse, A. Spencer, op. cit.; B.L. Nacos, op. cit.

Consequently, it is largely the media, often influenced by governments, who decide what labels are applied to certain events and actions.⁵⁷ What is more, those labels, specially chosen as to stir emotions, impact the public's perception and memory.⁵⁸ Also, it can be suggested that the "striking power" of the media is best exemplified by the symbolic emergence of a new category of monstrous creatures – the terrorists.⁵⁹ Furthermore, not only do the media create terrorism, they also thrive on it. Media-framed crimes, and especially terrorist acts which are now seen by many as the ultimate offence against humanity, are a constant source of negative pleasure.⁶⁰ As long as supply, therefore, is driven by this peculiar demand, the current state of affairs is unlikely to change and the media and terrorism are bound to remain inseparable.

⁵⁷ A.P. Schmid, J. de Graaf, op. cit.

⁵⁸ E.W. Dunn, M. Moore, B.A. Nosek, op. cit.

⁵⁹ R. Kearney, op. cit., M.B. Marron, op. cit.

⁶⁰ S. Freud, op. cit., J. Saunders, op. cit.