

Chapter 6

“If it Bleeds it Leads”: How Mainstream Media Shapes Public Opinion on Terrorism

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Abstract

The purpose of my research is to discover and understand how ‘mass media’ can shape public opinion on terrorism. When the information is represented through media mechanisms such as television, radio, newspapers and social media, the majority of the public considers it to be true. Manipulation is something the public is unaware of. This paper will start by discussing how the media has changed over time with the advances of technology and with the emergence of social media, the number one source for many people in this new informational age, and how this has advanced terrorism. When utilizing the term ‘informational age’, it is referring to the digital, computer age or the new media age. The paper will also talk about how the concept of terrorism emerged after the progression of the mass media, how media tends to incite panic within the public for views and how it’s linked to terrorism by giving examples from several studies and research that shows that terrorism cannot exist without the media due to its need to spread messages of propaganda by using new-media (known as social media) tools such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. The paper will conclude by arguing how we can prevent third parties, that are often not trustworthy, to change our perspectives and views on happenings in the world.

Introduction

One of the most powerful communication tools in today’s world is media. It is considered the best source to know about the happenings of the world. In fact, the public’s interest in terrorism surfaced after the evolution of the mass

media. As technological advances started to increase rapidly, public awareness started to increase rapidly and resulted in a global change in news coverage. As a larger market emerged for media, the competition grew among rival news organizations for larger market shares and audience views. This leads us to the new media age where a technique referred to as “yellow journalism” is used. When employing the term yellow journalism, it refers to ‘the use of cheaply sensational or unscrupulous methods in newspapers, etc. to attract or influence readers’ (HarperCollins Dictionary, 2018). We all know that media satisfies our essential need to stay connected and relevant, but what we do not realize is the effect it has on our lives and how it has the power to influence our thoughts and our perspectives. Trusting a source, especially nowadays, without considering its accuracy can be dangerous. Mass media is a very powerful weapon that can and will change one’s perspective in a split second.

The change in media not only affected the happenings in the world, but also the public and their thoughts. We simply think that we are being offered a simple access to a global stage, but it is much more. The biggest terrorist organizations evolved after the change in the media. They started utilizing every social media platform¹¹ for their propaganda (Weimann, 2004, p. 6). Many terrorist groups use these resources every day because the Internet is the cheapest, quickest and the most anonymous way to spread propaganda among many other materials. What is more important than any of the other listed factors is that the internet is an interactive platform. They can recruit, inform and train new members for their organizations (Weimann, 2003, p. 8). Each video is prepared carefully with the aim of reaching many individuals. They can reach specific groups when needed by using a direct, young language and images or videos with a high emotional impact. The propaganda is multi-lingual with easy access. It is basically a safe environment to advertise themselves. The Internet can be considered a stage for the terrorist and the world is watching them.

The Evolution of Terrorism and Mass Media Technology

A prevalent question asked throughout history is, what are the drives of terrorism, the government, public, individuals, military and businesses. From the beginning, most terrorists’ and terrorist organizations’ end goal is not the killing itself but to send a message. Ideology always plays a part when selecting targets for attacks. What would I get out of this attack? What kind of a message would

¹¹ Facebook, Twitter, Youtube, Instagram

be sent to the world? How can this attack be worldwide? In today's world with the advances of technology, training and level of education observes can place attacks in context, anticipate the next attempt if examined closely. Technology has become a weapon for terrorist groups. Powerful terrorist organizations like ISIS, PKK (Kurdish Workers Party), Hamas and many more have a deep knowledge about the communication techniques used by the internet. They can now shorten their terrorist attack cycle¹² by selecting their targets using the internet. Experts stated that the number of websites containing terrorist material increased drastically since 1998 (Weimann, 2004). Terrorist groups are now exploiting darknets, computer networks with restricted access that is used mainly for illegal peer-to-peer file sharing, which are increasing the number of terrorist operated websites. Propaganda is not the only purpose, they use it for secure communication, fundraising, buying false documents, gathering information, software distribution, purchasing weapons and stolen card data, doxing and psychological warfare (The use of the Internet, UNODC, 2012).

Technology is the foundation of modern society, therefore, it is natural for terrorists to benefit from it. Cyberspace is a platform without boundaries. Terrorists and terrorist organizations can launch attacks everywhere in the world. Many technological advances, such as smartphones, have made it easier to conduct surveillance operations, to use remote cameras to monitor potential targets, and utilize internet-based platforms for training new recruits and teaching techniques on how they use and produce their weapons. Ghost Security Group chief operating officer Michael Smith II told the Christian Science Monitor (Detsch, 2015):

'They want to create a broadcast capability that is more secure than just leveraging Twitter and Facebook. Increasingly what you will see is the focus on developing means to control the distribution of their materials on a global scale.'

There are many examples of distributing terrorism through the internet, like al Qaeda producing detailed videos on how to use and make homemade explosives and Jihadists having an online university where they have an interactive learning environment with encrypted video conferences. All these implements create a habitat where planning attacks are much easier. Social media serves the modern

¹² As listed in STRATFOR Analysis "The Terrorist Attack Cycle: Deployment and Attack" available at <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/terrorist-attack-cycle-deployment-and-attack#:tar-get-planning-deployment-attack-escape-exploitation>

terrorism and these past couple of years it has reached a global dimension because of the emergence of new media and technology.

How do Terrorists and Terrorism Organizations Manipulate the Media?

There is an ongoing change in the media right now as technology and social media become rapidly more important than printed newspapers. Agencies have less control over the news, which makes it easier for terrorist organizations to utilize social media and address the public directly through social media tools and web-based magazines. The unfiltered media exposed a high amount of terrorist propaganda. They were using the ‘oxygen of publicity’ (Thatcher, 1985)¹³. Before social media platforms it was hard for people to encounter terrorist propaganda, videotapes, and audio messages, but with today’s advanced technological tools, terrorists and terrorist organizations can easily record and upload their attacks on the internet. Everyone who has access to the internet have access to these videos. Terrorists have always altered their behavior to best use the media and they know from the start what would attract the media the most for them to use it on the news. It is becoming harder and harder to control the platforms and what we do not realize is that terrorists and their organizations are becoming their own media. Brian Jenkins, an International Terrorism expert, said (Jenkins, cited in Marthoz 2017, p. 10):

‘Terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater.’

After the drastic changes in how the media operates there is a clear link to changes in terrorist attacks including frequencies and types. The idea that the attacks are acts of propaganda is becoming more vivid. Terrorists and terrorist organizations utilize attacks to manipulate the media into spreading their messages and panic. Terrorists becoming more active in the 1960s and 1970s quickly adjusted to the idea of television. Video footage is more powerful than printed sources. There are several examples of such acts like the kidnapping and

¹³ Term used by former British PM, Margaret Thatcher to describe the terrorists’ dependence on the media.

killing of Israeli athletes in 1972 at the Olympics in Munich, which was the first Olympics to be televised live. The terrorist group called "Black September" kidnapped and killed 11 Israeli athletes. Then followed the 1975 hostage crisis at OPEC (The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) in Vienna where attackers took more than 60 hostages. Several were injured, and the attack ended after two days, when the attackers walked away after sending their threat message. The target was not only televised events or big headquarters that would be on the news. For example, in 1985, it was the hijacking of TWA 847 (Trans World Airlines) and in 1988, the target was the Kuwaiti Airlines 422 flight, then of course the most viewed hijacking was the United Airlines Flight 93 on September 11, 2001. These events, particularly 9/11, created a global sense of terror and that is when the wait started for many similar world events to come. American hostages who were taken to Beirut in 1985 is one of the best examples of terrorism's capability to draw attention and manipulate the media. This is the point where television changed, and news channels expanded to become available 24/7/365. Many experts agree that the most destructive effect of this crisis is the confirmation of terrorism as a tactic.

Attacks like these happen in different stages. "*Minimanual of the Urban Guerilla*," a book written by Carlos Marighella, a Brazilian terrorist, discusses different ways of taking advantage of the mass media for terrorism purposes, attracting attention through violence, and spreading a message.

A study from Gabriel Weimann from Haifa University in Israel explored how one terrorism act affects the media and shows that terrorist organizations manipulate the media in a way that makes them 'rationalize' the act (Nelson & Scott, 1992, pp. 329–339). If terrorists have social or political motives, the reasons behind them are represented in a way that the public feels sympathy for the terrorists. They now use the media to ensure promotion, publication and distribution. As a result, terrorist acts have improved over the time and nobody stopped the news channels, newspapers, social media tools or radios.

How does the Mass-Media Change the Public Opinion for Views and Ratings?

There is a well-known motto in the journalist community, "If it bleeds, it leads" which means the more immediate, negative, and panic-leading the event is, the more it will get attention. The coverage of terrorism has increased rapidly since the 1960s and 1970s. Television channels tried to take a step back from covering minimum 30-minute terrorism news, but they would still use a 3-minute video

to advertise it for their viewers, which meant ratings. It got to a point where the smallest terrorist attacks, that meant no danger to the public for the media to warn or inform, had a great news coverage amount. According to the Gallup Poll, 51% of Americans feared for their lives and families more and more every day. This data shows us that the 'media' does more damage to the public than the attacks itself.

Informing about dramatic terrorism events such as kidnapping, hostages, international terror, events that involve kids, means more public attention, which means more views, and ratings that will benefit media companies' profit. Every percentage of rating increase raises the annual income by millions of dollars. Editors seem to only care about their profits and are not aware of the political implications and public trauma they cause. There are many examples of how the media interrupted counterterrorist operations due to irresponsible behaviors. Television crews approached too closely to the hostage area complicating rescue team's actions and newscasters released too much information. By giving major publicity to terrorist actions, the media is increasing public pressure on government representatives to give in to their requests. There are many cases when journalists took the responsibility of negotiating with terrorists. CBS White House correspondent Lesley Stahl once stated (Diamond, 1991, p. 133):

"We are an instrument for the hostages... We force the Administration to put their lives above policy."

As much as terrorism organizations and terrorists manipulate the media and how the media seems unaware of what is going on, nothing is pursued to stop this cycle. Ratings, profits and views are more important than the sanity of the public. The propaganda by terrorist groups that is open to the public is a very strong psychological weapon. It greatly increases the outcome acts from the public that leads to panic. It is a 'show business' that the media is putting on and the public is getting fed by it.

Concluding Ideas and Thoughts

As much as it is important for the media to be the first to release information on happenings it also very important to collect as much detail and data as possible. This is another example which media and terrorists have in common; after the story is created, they both want to keep it alive for as long as possible. The greater the drama, the longer reporting about it holds the audience attention that is in the interest of both media and terrorists.

Terrorism and media are bound together and complement each other. What we, as a public, need to do is very simple. Awareness is the number one key point. What needs to be kept in mind is that the news we hear, or watch might not always represent the facts. Being biased should not be an option. News agencies need to check and make sure of the news before spreading, leave general stuff to the agencies and leave non-official sources. If we want to make this world a peaceful place, we need to work on it together as a whole.