

MEDIA COVERAGE OF URBAN TERRORISM: NEW CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract: This article analyzes and highlights the terrorist organizations which receive an overwhelming amount of media coverage, bordering on sensationalism. Unfortunately, terrorism is one topic where media coverage likely carries dire consequences: our recent research suggests that covering terrorist groups actively encourages them to attack more, makes the groups more popular, and fosters radicalisation, thereby facilitating the recruitment process. The evolution of mass communication dramatically changed the scene of terrorism and the way terrorists conduct their affairs. Precisely, we draw attention to the media coverage on urban terrorism - What are the consequences of that coverage? The results are quite consistent in suggesting that more coverage causes more attacks.

Key words: media, urban terrorism, coverage, terrorist attacks, violence.

1. Introduction

The notion that “the majority of the world’s population is living in cities” has become one of the most recurrent catchphrases in contemporary scholarship pertaining to cities and urban issues, and is raised throughout diverse bodies of literature (While and Whitehead, 2013). While more than half of the population of developed countries has resided in urban areas since the 1950s, only in 2008-09 is the global urbanisation rate said to have surpassed 50 percent. It is estimated that by 2020 more than half of the developing countries’ populations will be living in urban areas –and that by 2037 half of the world’s population will be living in cities and towns located in developing countries (Andrea Florence de Mello Aguiar at all, 2018).

Today’s terrorists are well aware of the power of the media and manipulate them to their own advantage and need. The van attack that killed one and left several injured near Finsbury Park mosque in north London in 2017 is the latest in a sequence of high-profile, low-tech terrorist attacks in major urban areas. Before this latest incident, a van and knife assault on London

Bridge and in nearby Borough Market on June 3 shocked leaders and citizens, a similar attack in Westminster killed five, and on July 14, 2016, a terrorist slaughtered 86 in Nice, France, by plowing through a pedestrian walkway in a large cargo truck. Across the Atlantic, a driver killed one and injured several by attempting to run down pedestrians in New York City's Times Square last year, after which an Islamic State-affiliated media channel warned that there will be more vehicular attacks to come. To date, the Islamic State has produced guidance materials showing would-be terrorists how to kill with cars, trucks and knives.

Terrorist attacks in the US and in Europe have tended to target cities as symbolic and critical centres of power, as seen in New York City (2001), Madrid (2004), London (2005), Minsk (2011), Oslo and Utøya (Norway, 2011), Paris (2015), Brussels (2016), Nice (2016), Berlin (2016), Manchester (2017), London (2017), Barcelona (2017).

But many cities aren't ready for a new onslaught of urban terrorism. State security services have long been occupied with defending vulnerable urban spaces against attack, but until recently, the style of terrorist attack – the targeting of high-profile commercial or government buildings – seldom affected everyday city life. As we have seen from recent attacks, the modus operandi of terrorists has changed significantly in recent years and counter-responses, including urban planning, must adapt to this new reality.

2. Term “media” in the terrorism literature

The term “media” in the terrorism literature is used as self-evident. This, in practice, means that it ends up referring to completely different sets of phenomena and processes. In fact, there are at least three meanings of “media” that need to be distinguished.

First, “media” refers to communication technologies. In this sense “media” is simply the plural of communication medium: beyond the already mentioned Internet, telephone, telegraph, communication platforms like Facebook or Twitter, a communication medium is also a sheet of paper or a clay tablet on which something is written. This is literally the medium that allows a message to be conveyed, transmitted, and shared.

Second, “media” can refer to the content of a communication process or the “message.” When in everyday language we say that “the media” are “saying” something, what we are referring to is actually their content. We are referring to the media coverage – what is written in an article or said in a news report.

The term, media, however, has a third meaning: that of an organisation. There are, for example, news organisations like newspapers, TV broadcast companies, and news agencies (Archetti, 2013).

The problem, as this paper points out, is that the inability to approach the communication components of the terrorism phenomenon is an obstacle to understanding the real nature of the phenomenon. In fact, although the exchange of information and mediation – both in terms of how we communicate with other people, but also in the way we make sense of the information we receive about what happens around us – have always been part of the way social reality

works, they are absolutely crucial to anything we do in an interconnected world in which information is potentially available in all places at all times.

3. Terrorism as a communicative act

This chapter addresses terrorism as a communicative act and explains how tightly woven are terrorists' violent acts and their communication strategies. The most visible (which perhaps means most successful) terrorist groups are those that operate with a communication model that has advanced beyond simple delivery of a message to a passive audience. Rather, the modern communication model used by terrorist organizations is audience-based, meaning centered, culture-dependent, and always tied into an ongoing narrative stream that is part of the socio-political context in which these organizations operate (Corman et al 2008).

According to Alexander Spencer (2012) 'the central aim of terrorism is not so much the act of violence or the killing of a target, but rather the dissemination of terror and uncertainty among a population as well as the spread of the group's message through the newsworthiness of the violent act'.

All but the centremost of these rings are linked to the event by mass media, primarily widely accessible news media, but also self-generated media that terrorist organizations use with increasing skill. Most mainstream news organizations impose standards that rule out graphic images from terror attacks, but the perpetrators of such attacks might disseminate those images through the Internet and other new media sources to audiences that are smaller but are considered high-value, such as potential recruits. The terrorist groups also know that videos on YouTube or other online venues can reach substantial audiences regardless of how much attention is paid to these items by traditional media outlets. Videos showing the execution by terrorists of kidnap victims have sometimes been viewed online millions of times. Overall, getting words and images to various publics is far easier in this era of fewer determinative information gatekeepers (Seib & Janbek 2011).

Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf (1982) famously argued that terrorism is communication: "For the terrorist the message matters, not the victim." In their words the casualties of a terrorist attacks are "message generators".

For John Martin (1985) terrorism is "a form of nonverbal communication that the terrorist resorts to when verbal communication fails." The aspects that are most emphasised in the literature are: the way in which violence is used as tool for engaging in political communication with other social actors; the planning behind terrorist attacks, particularly the orchestration of spectacular violent acts that meet newsworthiness criteria, thereby granting terrorists access to the mainstream media.

For Ronald Crelinsten (1987) terrorism's violence is a form of communication that interacts with other forms of social and political communication. More specifically, he interprets terrorism as a struggle over access to, and definition of, meaning within a society's "communication structure" – the communication channels and institutions where political activity is normally conducted.

Further emphasising the centrality of communication, other authors examine the relationship between terrorism and the media. In this respect, Brigitte Nacos (2002) approaches terrorism as a "massmediated" phenomenon. The mass media plays a central role in what she calls the "calculus" of perpetrators: terrorists anticipate the consequences of their actions, "the likelihood of gaining media attention" and the possibility of entering, through the media, the "Triangle of Political Communication" (Nacos 2003). In a triangle whose points are constituted by the media, policymakers, and the public, as she explains, the media are not neutral.

Cherif Bassiouni (1981) argues that terrorists "stage" events for obtaining coverage in order "to produce a social impact which would not otherwise exist." "Media-conscious" perpetrators, therefore, "manipulate the instruments of mass communications."

What they aim to achieve through their communication strategy is, in his view, to:

- (a) demonstrate the vulnerability and impotence of the government;
- (b) attract broader public sympathy by the choice of a carefully selected target that may be publicly rationalized;
- (c) cause a polarization and radicalisation among the public;
- (d) goad the government into repressive action likely to discredit it; or
- (e) present the violent acts in a manner that makes them appear heroic.

With the goal of shutting cities down, terrorist groups frequently target "soft" targets where people are most likely to gather, like the recent Istanbul bombing, which took place in the Sultanahmet district, near the famous Blue Mosque, or the Jakarta attacks, which took place in a busy commercial area.

Recognising that terrorism is an act of communication – that it is about sending a message, that communication technologies can support terrorist groups in spreading their ideology or organising terrorist plots, or that wide coverage of terrorism might contribute to giving extremists an aura of legitimacy – is, in fact, not sufficient to explain the role of communication and the media.

4. Terrorism and the media: a delicate relationship

There is a delicate relationship between terrorists and the media. Free speech and free media - the basic instruments (many would say values) of every democracy - provide terrorists the publicity they need to inform the public about their operations and goals. Indeed, democracy is the best arena for those who wish to reach their ends by violent means. Violent movements and individuals recognize the "democratic catch" - that the principles that underlie and characterize it may, through their application, bring about its destruction, and exploit the available liberal instruments to find "golden paths" (from their point of view) to further their ends without holding themselves to the rules of law and order. Those movements and individuals would be crushed immediately were they to employ similar tactics in autocratic systems.

The media selects events that are news worthy (based on its own set of values that give priority to violence and conflict in any form). The broadcasting of a news program involves

uncountable preparatory actions that involve the selection and discrimination of content that daily is placed on the desk of any entity that works and writes stories that will be come out in the mass media. There is competition among the different stories that will finally be emitted; those that are victorious are more dramatic, are more spectacular in a visual sense, are more emotional, and contain other elements that can be assimilated by an image-oriented culture.

The 24-hour news channels are involved in a rat race of trying to keep their audiences informed. The competition between these channels to scoop each other in breaking news provides added pressure. Breaking news is often followed by a rolling continual coverage of events as the story develops. However, this only happens in certain places, and breaking stories in other parts of the world irrespective of their importance go days without attention. What types of news qualify for rolling coverage by the media and what criteria do newsrooms use to determine that criteria? Media operational guidelines in this regard vary from organisation to organisation, and most guiding principles are born from a number of rules of thumb and "editorial gut feel". Also, most big news media are located in Europe, which makes it easier for them to cover breaking news. Furthermore, there is an enabling working environment in most European countries for journalists to operate. Ordinarily, the rarity, severity and frequency of events play a critical role in the prioritisation of news stories. Frequent events lack traction and most news organisations tend to give less attention to such news. What attracts attention is rare news and those that contain severe impacts such as high number of casualties and injuries. This is the justification used to explain why certain stories make it to the news and receive a rolling live coverage whilst others don't (Fakude, 2017). Acts of terrorism have been – until recently – rare in most European metropolises compared to the Middle East, making terrorism incidences in Europe more attractive.

The result is not only the shadowing of those events that, despite their interest, lack a conflicting nature, but the establishing of a dangerous pattern for those that want to be "made public" at any price (Ignatieff 1998).

In fact, televised coverage of a terrorist attack's effects (especially if it is live) creates a paradoxical situation in which the spectators imagine more horrendous scenes than the very witnesses situated in the area (Ganor 2005).

Therefore, what the media do in their narratives of reporting on terrorism, apart from their emphasis on the dramatic part of terrorist acts, is that they represent them by constructing a reality about terrorism or terrorists for us, and this representation or construction involves selection, exclusion and inclusion. Meaning therefore does not depend upon how things are but how they are signified, and terrorists, in the way they are reported, are made to signify what official perspective wants them to signify, which, in the end, frame and prime public perceptions of terrorists and their acts without recourse to their historical background and the motivational causes. In other words, the narrative in which terrorism are reported does not give it any legitimacy, and terrorists are denied a framing which takes into account the historical background and justness of their cause. "The terrorists are identified with criminal violence and seen simply as bent on terror" (Schlesinger, et al, 1983).

The result of the aforementioned situation is the existence of several corners of the planet that are never discussed in the news, despite the emergence of problematic situations that could affect the world as a whole. This asymmetric quality of the news causes terrorists to concentrate their efforts in those places where they can receive the media's attention, setting aside other places where their actions receive no interest aside from the violence itself (Soriano 2008).

A natural question then becomes whether the amount of media coverage dedicated to groups like Al-Qaeda or ISIS could encourage them to conduct further attacks. If terrorist groups indeed aim to maximize their media exposure, then a necessary condition of this hypothesis states that a group is covered more when immediately preceding coverage has been high, everything else equal. Thus, once the spotlight is on Al-Qaeda or ISIS, for example, the groups may be encouraged to conduct further attacks in the expectation that the corresponding media attention would also be higher. Why would this be the case? In practical terms, journalists and reporters, as well as news consumers, may already be familiar with the group's agenda and recent operations which may make it easier to cover a new attack. More generally, media outlets may follow a certain path dependency or agenda setting, where once a topic is in the media spotlight the likelihood of additional coverage is raised.

5. Understanding the factors influencing media to devote attention to terrorist attacks

This chapter summarizes the current understanding of factors influencing the decisions of media outlets to devote attention to terrorist attack and discusses how such coverage influences potential sympathizers and supporters.

It is easy for Westerners to forget that the vast majority of terrorist actions occur in less well known cities far from the media headlines. A recent study of more than 1,300 cities ranked Baghdad, Mosul and Ramadi as the most terrorism-prone settlements on the planet. It also showed that Afghan, Egyptian, Libyan, Nigerian, Pakistani, and Somali cities are far more vulnerable to devastating violence than their counterparts in the United Kingdom, France or the U.S.

First, the fact that most terrorist attacks receive no or little media attention suggests that terrorist groups vary substantially in their ability to design attacks to garner media attention. It is not easy for terrorists to manipulate the media coverage they receive. Knowledge of why some terrorist attacks succeed and others fail to attract media attention could provide important insights into the political goals, media perceptiveness, and organizational capacity of the perpetrators. However, terrorist attacks vary widely for attention they receive. Most terrorist attacks receive no attention from major media outlets. Others, such as those in New York and Washington, DC, in 2001, London in 2005, and Mumbai in 2008, received heavy coverage (Kern, Just, & Norris 2003).

Second, a better understanding of the motivations of and constraints facing media outlets could inform the design of media relations and public diplomacy strategies of agencies responsible for counterterrorism. This coverage can provide terrorists with a vehicle for conveying their political messages to mass audiences, and it can distract from public understanding of the

difficulty of preventing terrorist attacks and the steps that the authorities take to achieve this objective. Research in this area has begun to explore, in a systematic manner, the conditions under which the media are more or less likely to devote considerable coverage to terrorist attacks rather than other topics or other aspects of counterterrorism.

Third, the structure and competitiveness of the news industry appear to influence media attention to terrorism. As the media environment becomes more decentralized and competitive, news outlets may try to maintain market share by devoting more attention to terrorist attacks that employ novel tactics or that are particularly violent. Such a development could pose new challenges for the media relations of homeland security agencies by giving the public a distorted picture of the threat from terrorism and reducing the ability of the authorities to explain their policies and to put the problem of terrorism in an appropriate context.

Fourth, existing research is beginning to explore how the tone with which the media covers terrorism influences the attitudes and behaviours of mass publics, including voters, as well as potential sympathizers with terrorist movements. There is considerable evidence that coverage of terrorism increases fear and anxiety and that these emotional changes influence the preference of some members of the public for counterterrorism policies that rely on force. This may make it more difficult for authorities to respond to terrorist attacks with other types of policies, even if these policies might produce superior results. It is sometimes claimed that terrorists are effective in manipulating media coverage to convey their message to a mass audience and to gain sympathizers and supporters (Walsh 2010).

There is a clear trend of terrorist “migration” to online social media, including YouTube, Twitter and Facebook. Moreover, this trend is expanding to the newest online platforms such as Instagram, Flickr, and others. Rephrasing von Clausewitz, the new media should be regarded as “an increasing continuation of war by other means.” This new arena of open and social systems presents new challenges and requires dramatic shifts in strategic thinking regarding national security and countering terrorism.

If live broadcasting during hostage crisis situations undeniably pose a threat to those involved, delayed reporting can also, if executed primarily under the objective of generating profit from public shock, have drastic consequences. The coverage of the Paris attacks of January 7th 2015 showed gruesome images of panic and horror responsible for increasing public intimidation and paralysis. Le Point for example, published a non-blurred picture of Ahmed Merabet lying on the floor, just seconds prior to his execution, as its first page illustration of its January 8th edition; a clear infringement to the public’s right not to know and to the victims’ right to decency. The channel France 24 took this offence farther by broadcasting sequences of a video that depicts the Ahmed Merabet’s assassination by the terrorists, letting viewers both see the panicked face of the public agent and hear its trembling voice in the seconds leading to his death. In a similar fashion, an amateur video published by LeMonde’s online version showed victims running away from gunmen during the hostage crisis of the November 13 2015’s attack on the Bataclan, depicting insufferable images of wounded people dragging themselves away from the scene and calling for help and of panicked people hanging from windows in attempt to get away

from the shooters. Relaying such material constituted a clear infringement to the public's right not to know and to the victims' right to decency (Benhamou, 2018).

Despite the clear danger the manipulation of media by terrorists poses to society, it seems imposing a media blackout regarding terrorist acts could pose some more. The restriction and/or censoring of media by the government would strongly undermine its democratic nature. Moreover, the broad spectrum of media outlets, channels and mediums available nowadays, makes it impossible to control them all, rendering a media blackout not only theoretically problematic but practically impossible to sustain. Avoiding treating subjects pertaining to terrorist acts could further rumours and conspiracy theories as well as damage the public's trust allocated to medias and to the government. Medias should thus be encouraged to follow precautionary guidelines but by no means should these be legally enforced by the government as it would undermine both the media and the government's "raison d'être", trustworthiness and legitimacy at home and internationally. (Ganor, 2011).

When covering acts of terrorism and mass violence it is vital that news media show restraint. They need to think particularly carefully before the publication of disturbing content, particularly the showing of explicit images of violence or human suffering.

Above all, media should avoid publishing any information that might empower terrorists, or encourage "copy-cat" acts of violence. Media should take account of what police and public authorities are advising in making their judgements.

The ethical obligations are clear - report accurately, show humanity to the audience, do not publish harmful material, and, above all, do not sacrifice the public purpose of journalism by rushing to publish and exploit sensational information for profit.

6. The rise of urban lone wolf terrorism-a new challenge to media

Live television news events have been dominated by incidences involving lone-wolf terrorist attacks recently. This has presented new challenges to the broadcast news media.

Lone-wolf terrorists' acts are not only meant to inflict pain and death but also to spread terror and fear. They commit these crimes to catch the attention of the public and indeed of the state. Their expectations are that terrorising nations will create pressure from the public and force states to amend their policies and subsequently meet their demands. The new wave of violent propaganda has prompted much debate about the role of the Islamic State's videos in attracting militants as well as the degree to which the media itself is responsible for providing terrorism with the "oxygen of publicity" (Burke, 2016).

The transnational nature of this new form of terrorism is largely dependent on mass and social media. The readiness of the news media organisation to cover such events facilitates the spread of terror.

Furthermore, terrorists use the material from these organisations to recreate videos, train and recruit terrorists for further attacks.

The rise of lone-wolf terrorism, as this phenomenon is often called, presents a new challenge in the fight against modern day urban terrorism.

France and the United Kingdom (UK) have suffered tremendously the brunt of lone-wolf terrorist attacks over the last years. Naturally, these incidences have attracted huge media attention. Various media pundits have sounded an alarm that major news outlets focused on terrorist attacks in Western Europe, such as the 13 November attacks in Paris and the 22 March attacks in Brussels, with 24/7, wall-to-wall coverage while giving scant attention to equally deadly and destructive terrorism attacks in Turkey, Lebanon and Africa (Hartman, 2016).

The manner in which these events are covered by the news media and the discriminate attention they receive polarises global public consensus on the fight against the terrorism. Importantly, it has also raised a very poignant question regarding the extent to which lone-wolf terrorists are exploiting the media, particularly television, to achieve their objectives.

Car and truck bombs targeting major financial or political centers (such as the Irish Republican Army bombing in London in the 1990s, and attacks in New York and Oklahoma City during that same decade) have been superseded by person-borne devices, especially suicide attacks; mass shootings; the deliberate targeting of crowds with vehicles; and knife attacks. From an urban planning perspective, this means that terror groups are increasingly aiming at soft targets and crowded places that cannot be altered without radically changing how we experience our cities.

While obvious, there is no one-size-fits all response to urban terrorism. Preventing attacks by so-called "lone wolves" or "sleeper cells" in the U.S. requires a very different set of tactics than those used to counter sophisticated networks of highly-trained operatives in an active war zone like Yemen. In cities like Mosul, Mogadishu or Mumbai, terrorists are fielding highly elaborate operations and weaponry. Their goal is to deny the government's ability to secure the city for as long as possible.

A new generation of social media monitoring systems is also held up as another front against urban terrorism. The idea is to track millions of Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and Instagram feeds to detect would-be perpetrators who might telegraph their intentions.

7. Conclusion

Cities are on the frontline of 21st Century urban terrorism. Therefore, if the objective of terrorism is to inflict fear and terror, then the rolling coverage of acts of terrorism facilitates those objectives. The media attention and coverage of terrorist attacks require a rethink particularly as terrorist organisations change their tactics. The lone-wolf attack is a new strategy of inflicting terror and creating turmoil. It is no longer about numbers but about the attention their acts receive in the media. More and more cities are being held hostage to the threat of terrorism. Media has therefore become key in their strategy of furthering their objectives.

The results are quite consistent in suggesting that more coverage causes more attacks. On average, news coverage of al-Qaeda and ISIS on *CNN*, *Fox News*, *NBC*, *CBS*, in the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, is suggested to cause one to two al-Qaeda or ISIS attacks worldwide in the following week.

The lack of coverage of terrorist incidence demonstrates how discretion in coverage could allow normality amidst havoc and how less coverage of terrorism events could reduce terrorism incidences in future.

In sum, we are now relatively confident that covering terrorist groups actively encourages those organisations to attack more. It makes them more famous. And it makes it easier for them to recruit followers. All in all, this should be sufficient for journalists and editors to think twice about whether we should really cover these groups.

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