The Role of the Media in Reporting Terrorism: A Personal Viewpoint

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Abstract
Reporting on terrorism presents a number of dilemmas and paradoxes to journalists, whose responsibility is to inform the public objectively, fairly and accurately. There are many unsettling questions on the ways the media report terrorism. Such questions include whether or not the media are accomplices to the aims of the terrorists, who crave cheap publicity; whether the media are not actually magnifying the threat and fear in people in the way they report terrorism instead of allaying their fear; and whether or not the media are really objective and accurate in the way they report terrorism and in their narrative and framing of terrorists. These are the complex questions that this article attempts to put into perspective with the aim of providing a personal viewpoint on how the media has been reporting terrorism. The article argues that the theatrical and dramatic ways the media report terrorist acts encourage further violence.

Key Words: **Labelling, Framing, Narratives, Theatrical Reporting, Dramaturgical Paradigm, Priming.**

Introduction

One of the major functions of the mass media is the provision of adequate information about ongoing or current events in society as a way of serving the public need to know. The news media, in particular, serve this basic human needs by providing information on what, who, why and where of a particular event, which the media consider worthy of relaying to the public. Indeed, it is possible to argue that there is no particular time the public is more in need of information from the media than when the safety, or even the survival, of the public is threatened. In other words, the public is in greater need of more extensive information during a current danger in order to reduce uncertainty about the danger (Schlesinger, et al, 1983:114). No wonder then that the news media, particularly the broadcast media, become rallying point of the public when terrorists strike.

Nevertheless, reporting on terrorism presents a number of dilemmas and paradoxes to journalists whose responsibility is to inform the public objectively, fairly and accurately. It is a dilemma to them because one of the main objectives of a terrorist act is to maximize publicity in order to create a psychological effect on the public. This leads to some questions concerning the role of the media in reporting terrorism, For example: is the media acting as an accomplice to the aims of the terrorists, who crave cheap publicity; is the media not magnifying the threat and fear in the way they report terrorism instead of allaying the fear; are the media' reports of terrorism encouraging more such acts, as the terrorists may be more emboldened by the massive publicity they

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gain for their terror and intensify the acts of terrorism; are the media really objective and accurate in the way they report terrorism in their narrative and framing of the terrorists; how best should the media then report incidents of terrorists violence.

These are the complex questions that this article tries to put into perspective with the aim of providing a personal viewpoint on how the media has been reporting terrorism. The aim of this article is not to provide absolute answers to the questions because I think, there is no consensus on the complex issue of how   the media report should report on terrorism. Rather, it simply argues that the theatrical and dramatic ways the media report terrorist acts encourage further violence. Furthermore, it suggests that if any form of political violence goes unreported or not reported sensationally, it is likely to have a reducing effect on such violence. It also argues that the simplification of terrorist acts without recourse to historical details and motives of the terrorists by the media has not been helpful in reducing acts of terrorism. If the media go beyond the rhetoric of the official perspective and stop labelling terrorists and defining their acts as evil against good, and instead provide a deeper analysis of what motivates such acts, the media would have gone a long way to resolve the menace that has deeply taken root in the fabric of our national and international relationships. Lastly, the article proposes that instead of leaving the media to be self-regulating in how they report terrorist acts, there is a need for government to impose a certain limit of national security censorship, particularly in light of technological developments in the news environment and the growing stultifying commercial pressure on the news media.

As the basis for my argument in this essay, I first attempt to illuminate the interdependent nature of the relationship between the media and terrorists, which should help explain or expose the conventions and narratives the media adopt in reporting terrorist acts. These conventions and narratives have led to questions concerning the way the media reports on terrorism. As I discuss these issues, I will draw on pertinent theories of mass communication ranging from those that explain media representations to those that explain various effects of mass media.

The Relationship between Terrorism and the News Media
It is first necessary to take a brief look at the symbiotic relationship of terrorists and the news media to provide a basis for my position in this article. Bassioni (1981) observes that terrorists are drawn to news media coverage because they desire maximum publicity for their messages and symbolic actions. They achieve the desired maximum coverage by selecting a target and engaging in a kind of symbolic action that is visually dramatic (Tunman, 2003:135), and which is difficult for the news media to ignore. It is in this sense that Brian Jenkins (1975) says that "terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorist. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims".

Putting it in another way, terrorism is theatre and the news media, for their part, are seen as unable to resist the chance of a good story, so they obligingly provide extensive coverage of terrorist bombings, hijacks, kidnapping and assassinations (Schlesinger et al, 1983:12). Walter Laqueur (1976) supports Jenkins' observation by saying that "terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance in their campaigns that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing, whereas publicity is all" But the media, constantly in need of diversity and new angles, make fickle friends and so terrorists always have to be innovative. They are, in some respects, the super-entertainers of our time".

Media Conventions and Narrative in Reporting Terrorism

From the above conceptual analysis of the relationship between media and terrorism, we can see the alignment of news media practices with terrorists' objectives. The news media do not just give any information to the public; they select what information they give to the public as they select the events about which they provide information. The routines of selection form journalistic conventions through which they decide the newsworthiness of an event against the other. As Graber (1984:63) asserts, "story selection is a power struggle over what messages enter the symbolic arena". Since not all social actors have access to the media, those who lack the access can gain the attention of the media through what Molotch and Lester (1974) calls disruptive access by generating surprise or shock, which is a parameter of newsworthiness of an event to the media, and thus circumventing ongoing routines of newsgathering.

Thus, for an event to qualify as media event, the event must fall into one of the three categories of media event namely coronation, conquests and contests (Khatz 1992). The characteristics of these events, which actually attract media coverage, relate to their close connection to political and social authorities and their tendency to elicit symbolic and ritual acts of solidarity and conformity. In order words, they tend to strengthen the existing political order. Terrorism or terrorist acts possess these characteristics, and thus they conventionally attract intensive media coverage. However, over and above these characteristics is the unique level of gruesome nature of the terrorist acts, which is the reason why Weimann and Winn (1994: 92) categorise them as a unique type of media act, which they term coercive media events or coercion.

The news media, particularly the broadcast media, give massive coverage to terrorist acts because they satisfy their certain conventional requirements of live broadcasts, as they are emotionally significant or highly dramatic; compelling to view or read; involve some dramatic uncertainty; are delimited in time and space or they can be sufficiently focused to sustain the audience attentions; involve personalities at the centre of the unfolding drama-both heroic individuals or teams and anti heroes. Using Galtung and Ruge's (1965) thirteen point set of criteria that media use to determine whether or not an event is reportable also helps us understand the conventions which propel the scramble to report on terrorism. In other words, since terrorism complies with the routines and news judgement of media, they cannot ignore terrorist acts.

By and large, terrorism, according to Abraham Miller (1982:1), "is the media's stepchild, a stepchild, which the media, unfortunately, can neither completely ignore nor deny". Terrorists know the conventions and news gathering routines of the media, and so to achieve their objective of drawing attention to themselves and gain notoriety, they deliberately organise their actions to fit the key news values of drama, violence and unexpectedness (Crelinsten, 1989:332).

However, it is not the issue of conventional reporting of terrorism that really matters, what has been the centre of the polemic with respect to coverage of terrorism is the narratives through which it is reported. Importantly, news coverage and reports of terrorism are essentially focused on the spectacular and dramatic violence or carnage they involve. They use a narrative to underline the misery and misfortune of the victims, without any reference to their background or why they are victims (Schlesinger, et al, 1983:47). In other words, the narrative in the news stories about terrorist acts concentrates on the human interest angle, without emphasising or discussing on the historical background of the perpetrators of the violence acts or the victims of the violence acts. Although the media look for drama in all the events they consider worthy of being reported, the emphasis on the tragedy, violence, reactive and theatrical aspects of terrorist acts at the expense of detailed analysis of the events is so one-sided that one American political philosopher refers to broadcast coverage of terrorism, in particular, as a "phonograph of grief" (Weimann & Winn, 1994:101).

The objective of this kind of narrative is to unleash a common pattern of emotional display-thrill of anger, tension of anticipation, fear, anger and grief. This they do by the constant broadcast of dramatic and explicit images of horror, as exemplified by the repeated broadcast of the two aircrafts crashing into the two towers of the World Trade Centre in the 9.11 attack and the heroic flight impulse of the man who jumped from the top level of the towers.

This brings us to the main issue about the narratives through which terrorism is reported, which Schmid and de Graaf (1982) have called a dramaturgical paradigm consisting of good and bad. In such narratives, villains, who are the terrorists, are pitted against heroes while superstars, such as government authorities and experts on terrorism, contribute supplementary dramatic interest. Victims and their beliefs constitute heroic sufferers while counter-terrorists squads are heroic activists exemplified by the conspicuous and emotional appearance of emergency workers at the site of World Trade Centre on 9.11 and the dominant image of a good Samaritan who carried an injured victim from the wreckage of the bus that was torn apart by suicide bombers in the July 7th London terrorist attack. Underlining the narratives with which media report terrorist acts is the official perspective of what terrorism is with the symbolic aim of reinforcing the general public's repudiation of terrorists and their concerns. The official perspective that dominates the narratives reflects terrorists as irrational, brutal, and horrible; and it is pointless to understand their motivation, but they must rather be tackled with due process of the law1.

Therefore, paramount in the narratives through which terrorism is reported is evaluative language by which terrorists are defined and labelled. This evaluative language serves the purpose of priming and constructing a version of reality about terrorism to the public. Thus, in reporting terrorism, Tunman (2003: 35) notes that "media prime our discourse and preconception of and about terrorism, by their symbols and narratives, their interpretations and depiction of terrorism". The media, in the narrative ways they report terrorism, frame and prime our attitudes, our cognitive and affective feelings, towards the terrorists. This they do by the definition they give to us and the way they label the terrorists. Moreover, because they draw on the official perspective and official sources, their definitions and labelling and their general representation of the terrorists is ideological, which is constructed in a closed way that gives little room for negotiation of the meaning of the terrorists on the part of the target audience on whom it is being imposed. This means that the range of discourses about terrorism is limited by the labelling and definition drawn from institutional or official perspective and stereotyping terrorism and terrorists. Stereotypes, resulting from the mythologizing of terrorism, are aimed at maintaining sharp boundary definitions of who are clearly within and who is clearly beyond the boundary of acceptability etc. These stereotypes are meant to map out boundaries of acceptable and legitimate behaviour. This is what Stuart Hall (1996:258) calls a strategy of splitting. What this means is that the process of stereotyping does not just use visual clues, welded to cultural characteristics, to distinguish one group from another, it also divides the normal from the abnormal; the acceptable from the unacceptable.

As Hall further explains, when the media uses stereotypes to define one group, as in the definition and labelling of terrorists, they set up "a symbolic frontier between the normal and the deviant and the normal and the pathological, the acceptable and the unacceptable, what belongs and what does not or is other, between insiders and outsiders, us and them" (1996:258), with terrorists being part of the latter set of categories. 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, 1983:46).

Conclusion and Recommendation

 To me, the rhetoric and narratives with which the news media label and define terrorists do not really matter, what matters most is the dramatic narration and manners in which they report terrorist acts. This is the vital concern of many theorists who are interested in how the media have reported various terrorist acts. Labelling, derogatory definitions and mythologizing terrorists is, to me, as it is for many theorists, a form of discourse that entails power and resistance. On this basis, the negative labelling and definition of the terrorists might have some effect in terms of how they are framed and primed in the mind of the audiences, nevertheless, the current news environment provides a site for a struggle against such framing and priming in the minds of the public.

However, what the terrorists do not want to struggle against is the propaganda mileage they get from the considerable psychological effects of their acts, the registration of fear, thrill, agony and trauma in the minds of the public, and which the media, by their conventions, intensify through their dramatic reporting of the images of carnage and slaughter terrorists create through their acts. Thus, the way media, by their conventions and through their narratives, cover a terrorist act confers importance (status conferral theory) on the terrorists. In addition, the news media in particular have been a ready accomplice for the achievement of the terrorists' motives of creating fear in the minds of the public. The result of this achievement on the part of the terrorists can lead to what many theorists have called the contagion effect. In other words, the media's coverage of terrorism provokes both undue publicity for the terrorists and immeasurable fear, real or imaginary, in the minds of the public, and this, in the end, may embolden the terrorists to go further and raise the threshold of their violence. Livingstone (1982:63) argues that a heavy emphasis on the violent acts committed by terrorists may stimulate other terrorists to repeat the same crimes. In his view, there is evidence to suggest that detailed coverage of a terrorist act is apt to lead to a rash of similar acts. In fact, the contagion effect may spread beyond reducing the inhibitions of the terrorists towards violence to the unlearning of inhibition against the use of violence by many other people in the society, acquisition of know-how relating to the rational uses and applications of violence and provide great motivation for youths to act violently (Weimann &Winn 1994).

The only way out, as Schlesinger at al (1983:113) have argued, is censorship. According to Schlesinger et al, it is in the interest of the state to suggest that the war against terrorism is like a real war, and that, therefore, extra responsibility, self-restraint and understanding, like that shown during the Iran Embassy siege in   London, are needed from the media to assist in the state's struggle against terrorism.

Endnotes
[1]Schlessinger, et al, (1983), identify an alternative perspective of terrorism which include populist perspective that sees terrorism as bad and must be tackled in any ways even without following democratic or legal procedure; and oppositional view of the terrorist themselves that see their act as a legal pursuit of political ends.

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