MEDIA
COVERAGE
OF TERRORISM

Methods of Diffusion

A. Odasuo Alali
Kenoye Kelvin Eke

editors

MEDIA COVERAGE OF TERRORISM

Methods of Diffusion

A. Odasuo Alali
Kenoye Kelvin Eke
editors

SAGE PUBLICATIONS
The International Professional Publishers
Newbury Park   London   New Delhi

Copyright © 1991 by Sage Publications, Inc.

OTHER RECENT VOLUMES IN THE
SAGE FOCUS EDITIONS

Contents

Preface

Although terrorism has for a long time been used as an instrument of control and warfare by states, and as an instrument of subversion by groups seeking to change a particular political order, it did not receive much attention from academics, governments, or the mass media. This picture was to change in the 1970s and 1980s for a number of reasons. A partial list of the causes of this change would include the following: an increase in the number of groups that believed in the profitability of terrorism as a means of changing the status quo; a substantial increase in the incidents of terrorism committed against Western targets; the proliferation of technological know-how on explosives manufacturing; and, perhaps most importantly, the recent advancements in telecommunications technology, which have increased both the size of the audience and the speed with which news and information travel.

Along with this change from benign neglect to a reasonable diffusion of news on terrorist events has come a concern for the role of the mass media in this diffusion. This concern has mostly been expressed in the form of questions on whether or not media coverage of terrorism has a contagion effect. There have also been questions raised on what the proper role of the media, especially television, ought to be.

1

Unfortunately, for students of terrorism and those of us who teach courses on this phenomenon, these questions are heard the loudest in the period immediately following a high-profile terrorist event and subside shortly thereafter. Consequently, there is a paucity of literature on the subject matter. This book attempts to fill the void that exists on the comprehensive treatment of these and other questions concerning the media and terrorism. We have assembled in this book what we believe are excellent analyses of specific aspects of the media's role in the diffusion of news on terrorism.

Finally, we acknowledge our indebtedness to those who have played active roles in our intellectual and personal growth. They include: Laura Ann Fleet, Solomon Iyasere, Robert Nwankwo, Annette Brock, Hanes Walton Jr., James Powell, Joy G. Eke, K. J. Kelvin-Eke, and our past and current students. It is to them that this book is dedicated.

— *A. Odasuo Alali*
Kenoye Kelvin Eke

Introduction

Critical Issues in Media Coverage of Terrorism

KENOYE KELVIN EKE
A. ODASUO ALALI

The proliferation and intensity of incidents of terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s earned terrorism the attention of scholars, government officials, and the mass media. This attention has resulted in the publication of studies on the why and how of terrorism, and the type of individuals and groups who commit terrorist acts by academics and journalists alike (Flyn & Gerhardt, 1990; Melman, 1989). While these studies have dealt with terrorism in all of its complexities, there is yet to be an agreement on what terrorism is. This lack of definitional consensus on terrorism is important not only to academics, who need it for scholastic veracity, but also for the media, which as an institution play an important role in the characterization or labeling of acts of political violence. The definition of terrorism has an impact on whether or not the perpetrators of an act of violence are labeled "criminals," "terrorists," or "freedom fighters." It is especially important given that media's choice of label in their coverage of an act of violence stands to influence, tremendously, the audience's perceptions of the perpetrators of the act.

The Problematique of Defining Terrorism

While consensus has eluded scholars, there has not been any reluctance on their part to understand terrorism. One such effort is that of

Walter Laqueur (1987, pp. 11-12) who, in his book *The Age of Terrorism*, grapples with the intricacies of the term *terrorism* and the label *terrorist* as he traces their origin and meaning over the years to contemporary usage. In his view terrorism has undergone changes in character over the last century and these changes compound the definitional problems one faces in dealing with it.

Understanding terrorism has meant trying to define it. One of the most serious attempts to define terrorism has been that of Paul Wilkinson (1974). First Wilkinson makes a distinction between four types of terrorism (criminal, psychic, war, and political) before defining political terrorism as "the systematic use or threat of violence to secure political ends" (p. 17). He further distinguishes political terrorism into three broad types: "revolutionary," "subrevolutionary," and "repressive." According to Wilkinson the first type, revolutionary terrorism, is a systematic use of violence with the ultimate goal being to obtain a radical change in the political order. The second type, subrevolutionary terrorism, is the use of terroristic violence to effect a change in public policy without altering the political order. The third type, repressive terrorism, involves the use of violence to suppress or restrain certain individuals or groups from forms of behavior considered undesirable by the state (pp. 36-40). Whereas the first two types are used by individuals and nonstate actors against target states, the latter is used by states to maintain a status quo that may be advantageous to those belonging to a particular class, ethnic or racial group, or religious faith. States that practice this form of terrorism usually explain their repressive actions as being in the interest of national security even though the real purpose of their actions may have been to maintain regime security. South Africa is a good example of a nation in which this form of terrorism is practiced.

In his contribution to our understanding of terrorism, Andrew Pierre (1984) focuses on terrorism of the international variety. Although conceding the difficulty of endowing international terrorism with a universally acceptable definition, he sees it as "acts of violence outside national boundaries, or with clear international repercussions" (p. 85). He goes on to list factors that motivate international terrorists. According to him:

(1) The terrorist is dedicated to a political goal which he sees as one of transcendent merit. . . .

(2) The terrorist seeks attention and publicity for his cause. . . .

(3) The terrorist aims to erode support for the established political leadership or to undermine the authority of the state by destroying normality, creating uncertainty, polarizing a country, fostering economic discord and generally weakening the fabric of society. . . .

(4) The terrorist's actions can be a measure of deep frustration where there is no legitimate way to redress grievances. . . .

(5) The terrorist may seek to liberate his colleagues in foreign jails. . . .

(6) Finally, the terrorist may desire money so as to buy arms and finance his organization. (pp. 86-87)

Further, Pierre (p. 85) is of the opinion that international terrorism is usually but not exclusively carried out by nonstate actors.

Implicit in discussions of international terrorism of the type presented by Pierre is that there is terrorism of a domestic variety. Although there have been relatively fewer incidents of domestic terrorism in the United States, according to a recent study by Bruce Hoffman (n.d., p. 1), there are groups in the United States whose motives for acts of violence are similar to those of groups engaged in international terrorism (pp. 3-8).

The difficulty identified by Pierre (1984) of defining international terrorism is not unique to scholars. The same problem has plagued the efforts of U.S. government officials and agencies in defining international terrorism. However, in this case, the definitional problem and confusion pertains mostly to the sponsorship of these acts (Bernstein, 1986, pp. 149-167; Casey, 1986, pp. 59-72; Motley, 1987, pp. 15-23). This is manifested in the fact that although the Departments of State, Defense, and Justice and the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) all have issued definitions of terrorism that are couched in terms of the use of violence, intimidation, or force as the means to a political end, there are differences in their interpretations. Each tends to be selective in the way it interprets acts of political violence. Their interpretations of terrorism seem to be motivated by each agency's objectives relevant to policy or use of resources. For instance, the State Department officially defines terrorism as "the threat or use of violence for political purposes by individuals or groups whether acting for or in opposition to established governmental authority when such actions are intended to shock, stun, or intimidate a target group wider than the immediate victims" (Treisman, 1986, p. 91). This definition has been conveniently interpreted to exclude nonstate groups (such

as the counter revolutionaries or Contras in Nicaragua) and agents of the state (such as the U.S.-trained Atlacatt battalion of El Salvador's army) that have allegedly committed terroristic acts (pp. 91-96).

Conversely, nonstate actors and nation-states whose ideological views are at variance with those espoused by top government officials and agencies are conferred with the pejorative label *terrorists* or *practitioners of state-sponsored terrorism,* as the case may be. The State Department's list of terrorists and sponsors of terrorism has typically included the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), and cited Libya, Iran, Syria, and North Korea as supporters of terrorism (Shultz, 1986, pp. 49-55). This list can be shortened or lengthened as foreign policy imperatives demand. That was the case recently when the U.S. response to the Persian Gulf crisis demanded the addition of Iraq, after it invaded Kuwait on August 2, 1990, to the list while Syria's alleged role as a supporter of terrorism was being downplayed by the State Department (Friedman, 1990, p. A16).

Apparently, defining terrorism is like a chimera. The complexity of the term not only has created definitional problems for society, but also has confused and indeed polluted the debate on how to characterize acts of political violence. This leads us to pose the question: When is an act of political violence an act of terrorism, and when is it a legitimate instrument of struggle for a people determined to escape a political cul-de-sac? Differently put, when is one accurate in labeling an act of violence, an individual, or group *terrorist,* and when should the more sympathetic label *freedom fighter(s)* be conferred on an actor or group of actors?

Thus far, the literature suggests to us that labelling acts of political violence is situationally dependent and idiosyncratic—it depends on who is being labeled and the party doing the labeling (Chomsky, 1986, pp. 1-6). There is no doubt that the choice of label has implications and is therefore very important to those who cover violent political events: the media, and the consumers of the news they cover—the audience which, thanks to technological innovations, is being globalized.

In this book, we present the reader with two chapters on characterization and labeling. The analysis by Robert Picard and Paul Adams in Chapter 2 focuses on characterization by three elite U.S. dailies: the *Los Angeles Times,* the *New York Times,* and the *Wash-*

ington Post. The discussion by Brian Simmons in Chapter 3 analyzes labeling as done by U.S. newsmagazines.

Media Coverage and Its Consequences

The media interest in terrorism that we alluded to earlier, manifested in increased coverage of terrorist events, has brought on a new debate. This debate on whether or not media coverage of terrorist events encourages "terrorists" to carry out more such acts has not only involved media personnel, but has also received the attention of academics. However, before we discuss this debate, let's first examine the nature of media coverage of terrorism. Doing this dictates that we look at the methods of diffusion of news, stories, and other programs on terrorism, and the functions that the media perform.

The two broad methods of disseminating information on terrorism are through the electronic media and the print media. The electronic media comprise radio, over-the-air television, and cable television, and the print media include newspapers and newsmagazines. Of these methods of diffusion television is the most pervasive and profound. It is the primary source of news and entertainment for the average American (Graber, 1989, p. 3). Television's premier position as the primary source of news for Americans will not be challenged by any of the other methods any time soon given the ever-increasing penetration of cable and satellite television into the American culture. The attractiveness of cable as a delivery system for news as well as entertainment has resulted in it penetrating over 50% of American households (pp. 376-378). This penetration is significant and especially germane to our focus because cable outlets such as Cable News Network (CNN), with their news orientation and resultant ability to get reporters on the scene of a news event quickly, can afford to do in-depth coverage of terrorist events. In-depth news coverage is not unique to CNN—the newspapers, newsmagazines, and television networks provide this kind of coverage but usually only in crisis situations. The clamor for the scoop and in-depth coverage in crisis situations tend to lead to what Doris Graber (1989) calls "pack journalism." According to Graber (pp. 315-316), pack journalism often leads to inaccuracies in reportage being replicated throughout the media. In Chapters 6, 7, and 8, we present case studies done by three scholars (Tony Atwater, John Viera, and Jack Lule,

respectively) on the different forms that media coverage of terrorism take.

Although the methods of diffusion may differ, there are a set of functions that the media as an institution perform. These functions may impact on the roles that individual media personnel play in their coverage of terrorism. Graber (1989), à la Harold Laswell, believes that the media performs three major functions. These functions are: (a) surveillance (public and private) for the purpose of spotlighting and publicizing ongoing events on the world stage; (b) interpreting the meaning as well as consequences of various events; and (c) serving as an agent of political socialization of the dominant values of the society (pp. 5-11). Graber expands this Laswellian typology to include manipulation as a fourth function being served by the media through their use of muckraking to generate information that will impact on the political process (p. 12). Perhaps there are grounds for one to quarrel or disagree with Graber's fourth function, but not many grounds exist for disagreement with her first three functions. It has been argued, as the discussion in Chapter 4 by Robert Picard will attest, that journalists' perception of their function influence their coverage of news, especially when that news is about terrorism.

Whereas there seems to be no argument about the impact of media coverage of news on its audiences, the same is not true concerning its impact on "terrorists." On this matter, there are two schools of thought. Proponents of the first school contend that media coverage of terrorist events has a contagion effect. According to a leading proponent of this school of thought, Brian Jenkins (1983), "Terrorism is a product of freedom, particularly, of freedom of the press" (p. 160). Another proponent of this school of thought, Yonah Alexander (1979), argues that a consequence of extensive media coverage of terrorism "is the exportation of violent techniques which, in turn, often triggers similar extreme actions by other individuals and groups" (p. 336). Aside from the contagion criticism, other criticisms have been leveled against the media. They range from romanticizing terror to the media as participants, albeit with television cameras, in terrorist events (Livingstone, 1982, pp. 62-71).

The arguments of the proponents of contagion theory are countered by those of a group we shall call the "non-believers," for the lack of a better label. Those who oppose contagion theory tend to share Grant Wardlaw's (1989) position that "there is no clear evidence that publicity (by the media) is responsible for significantly affecting the

occurrence of terrorism" (p. 78). As our contribution to this ongoing debate, we offer you Robert Picard's essay, "News Coverage as the Contagion of Terrorism: Dangerous Charges Backed by Dubious Science," as Chapter 5. Picard's discussion puts him squarely within the ranks of the non-believers.

The Media and Counterterrorist Strategy

With many government officials believing that media coverage of terrorism has a contagion effect, it comes as no surprise that the media are seen as having an important role to play in any effort to combat terrorism. Another group that takes a similar position is the contagion theorists. In fairness to contagion theorists, however, expectations of a media role in an effective counterterrorist strategy have not been limited to them; even the non-believers concede a role for the media in view of their symbiotic relation with terrorists and terrorism. The crucial questions that separate these groups, however, are: exactly what form should the media's role take? And at whose behest should the necessary policing of the media come?

On the first question, suggestions for a media role involve some type of news management—a euphemism for censorship, some argue. News management could take different forms, ranging from the media being limited in their coverage of terrorism to its surveillance function and not engaging in interpretations, all the way to news suppression, either temporary or permanent. The harshest of these measures—news suppression especially of the permanent type—has aptly received the loudest criticisms because it is at odds with the glasnost that is pivotal to a democratic society. This conflict with democratic principles has earned a measure of disdain from some media personnel such as Ted Koppel, who while moderating a panel on "Terrorism and the Media" posed the question to the panelists: "Does one oppose terrorism by using methods that are non-democratic—such as censoring the press—or by so doing does one undermine democracy itself?" (Anzovin, 1986, pp. 96-108).

The clash with democratic principles aside, news management, especially of the extreme variety, raises the question of practicability. The question is whether it is realistic to expect industrywide conform-

ity given the competitiveness, both individual and organizational, that characterizes the industry.

Like the previous issues, the question of who should do the policing of the media's role is not devoid of controversy. The controversy on this matter centers on whether the government should provide guidelines for the media's coverage of terrorism, or whether the industry should engage in self-restraint in order to avoid the former. While law enforcement officials and other government officials in agencies concerned with terrorism would like to see government regulation, the sentiments among media personnel seem to favor self-policing as a preemptive action against any legislative policy or government intervention (Anzovin, 1986, p. 105). In keeping with these sentiments many news-gathering organizations and television networks have devised voluntary guidelines to govern coverage of terrorist events by their reporters. Prominent among the television networks that have adopted these types of guidelines is CBS (Dominick, 1990, p. 554; Livingstone, 1982, p. 74). Given the economic milieu in which the media operate, is optimism regarding compliance with self-generated guidelines warranted? We are not certain.

If our discussion in this chapter did not settle any of the issues, it was intentional. It was not our aim to lay to rest any of the issues raised in our discussion; instead, our aim was to remind our readers of some of the critical issues concerning the media and their role in the coverage of terrorism. We hope that our discussion and the contributions included in this book by the scholars of media coverage mentioned previously, along with that from Kevin Barnhurst in Chapter 9, give you food for thought.

References

Alexander, Y. (1979). Terrorism, the media, and the police. In R. Kupperman & D. Trent, *Terrorism: Threat, reality, response* (p. 336). Stanford, CA: Hoover Institution Press.

Anzovin, S. (Ed.) (1986). *Terrorism*. New York: H. W. Wilson.

Bernstein, A. (1986, Spring). Iran's low-intensity war against the United States. *Orbis*, pp. 149-167.

Casey, W. (1986). International terrorism: Potent challenge to American intelligence. In Steven Anzovin (Ed.), *Terrorism* (pp. 59-72). New York: H. W. Wilson.

Chomsky, N. (1986). *Pirates & emperors: International terrorism in the real world*. Brattleboro, VT: Amana.

Dominick, J. R. (1990). *The dynamics of mass communication*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Flyn, K., & Gerhardt, G. (1989). *The silent brotherhood: Inside America's racist underground*. New York: Free Press.

Friedman, T. L. (1990). Baker will go to Syria for help against Iraqis. *New York Times*, September 11, p. A16.

Graber, D. A. (1989). *Mass media and American politics* (3rd ed). Washington, DC: CQ Press.

Hoffman, B. (n.d.). *Recent trends and future prospects of terrorism in the United States*. Santa Monica, CA: Rand Corporation.

Jenkins, B. (1983). Research in terrorism: Areas of consensus, areas of ignorance. In E. Burr, D. Soskis, and W. Reid (Eds.) *Terrorism: Inter-disciplinary perspectives* (p. 160). Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Association.

Laqueur, W. (1987). *The age of terrorism*. Boston: Little, Brown.

Livingstone, N. C. (1982). *The war against terrorism*. Lexington, MA: Lexington.

Melman, Y. (1986). *The master terrorist: The true story of Abu-Nidal*. New York: Adama.

Motley, J. B. (1987, Fall). Low intensity conflict: Global challenges. *Teaching Political Science*.

Pierre, A. J. (1984). The politics of international terrorism. In C. Kegley and E. Wittkopt (Eds.), *The global agenda* (p. 85). New York: Random House.

Shultz, G. (1986). Terrorism: The challenge to the democracies. In S. Anzovin (Ed.), *Terrorism* (pp. 49-55). New York: H. W. Wilson.

Treisman, D. (1986). Terror error. In S. Anzovin (Ed.), *Terrorism* (p. 91). New York: H. W. Wilson.

Wardlaw, G. (1989). *Political terrorism: Theory, tactics, and counter-measures* (2nd ed). New York: Cambridge University Press.

Wilkinson, P. (1974). *Political terrorism*. London: Macmillan.