



DIGITAL MEDIA REVOLUTION AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

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This paper explores the role of digital media revolution in political violence, the frequent interplay between media reporting and the use of violence by extremist movements.

As the media evolves, the risks change as well. Psychological trauma from seeing violent incidents in news reporting is an increasing risk for journalists.

The research hypothesis in this article is that the digital media is playing a vital role, permits the terrorists directly to outline their message, spread of the movement and its cause and legitimization of the movement and its activities.

The objective of this article is to more closely examine the emergence of new trends that influence the relationship between the media, the terrorist, and government.

Keywords: Political violence, Digital media revolution, Communication, Risks, Trauma.

Introduction

With the advent of the new millennium, the number of terrorism attacks increased worldwide. Whereas the literature offers no single embracing definition of terrorism, scholars can agree that terrorism includes the use of violence against civilians, with the intention of creating fear or terror, and the intention to force specific belief systems upon others. With the advance of technology, the threat of terrorism has been of growing concern, especially because the Internet has helped terrorists recruit new members, plan their attacks, and amplify their messages.

Today the emergence of an array of new digital platforms has turned media competition into a fierce contest to capture people's shortening attention spans. This has led to hyper-sensationalization in the way terrorist activity is reported, a tendency perhaps most apparent in television, still the general public's main source of information.

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 You Tube 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).

As all technology continues to evolve, it is not difficult to imagine how the advanced information and technology of the new millennium could cause more terrifying realities in the world today. Cooper

(2001) explained that the onward sweep of technology makes it possible to undertake newer and more efficient ways to create the fear that is at the heart of terrorism.

Without doubt, during this period of profound technological changes, researchers should study the relationships among media, society, and the new paradigm of terrorism. As Cummings and Frost (1995) wrote, academic studies are an influencing source that legitimizes ideas and research findings. The studies here, therefore, provide valuable knowledge and offer key directions for current and future terrorism research within our discipline.

Research on media and terrorism is crucial, especially amid the increase in terrorism activities. Comparatively, however, investigating the role of media in communicating such trends has been a relatively new field of research.

Media Business

The ruthless nature of the news business can also be seen in the media coverage after the shocking first days of a terrorist attack. Once the novelty of the strike wears off, news organizations race to be the first to broadcast or publish so-far undisclosed details of the police investigation. To pick just two examples: in 2015, several major media outlets reported on how, after the Charlie Hebdo shooting in Paris, Belgian police killed two jihadists after intercepting suspicious calls; and in the United States, CNN broadcast how the damaged handsets found near the San Bernardino shootings in December 2015 helped the FBI track a confidante (CNN, 2015). Such detailed coverage of terrorism investigations raise concerns about whether the media goes too far in reporting police findings that may be of some help to bloodthirsty fundamentalists (Rivera, 2016).

The media business is primarily driven by ratings and advertisement revenue. (Of course, public news networks are less driven by the latter but are equally dependent on the former). The media's readiness to focus on terror-related developments will continue for as long as journalists and editors have incentives to use emotionally powerful visuals and story lines to gain and maintain ever-shrinking news audiences (Gadarian, 2014).

New technologies have not only made it possible to produce propaganda with astonishing ease – they have also made it far easier to disseminate these films and images. ISIS videos include the executions of western aid workers and journalists, Syrian government soldiers, alleged spies and suspected homosexuals, a Jordanian pilot, Christian migrant workers, and others. Some have been decapitated, others shot, blown up, hurled from tall buildings or burned alive. A representative sample can be viewed, entirely uncensored, with a few simple clicks on the device in your pocket or on which you may be reading this. One such video appears on a popular British newspaper's website after an advertisement for family holidays. The scenes of actual killing have been removed but little else.

As such material began to reach our screens, many expressed shock that ISIS had exploited modern media technology for the purposes of propaganda. Such surprise appears rooted in the expectation that a supposedly "medieval" organisation would use "medieval" means. The group's use of social media marks it out from predecessors such as al-Qaida. So, too, do the high production values and visual language derived from video games and Hollywood blockbusters. But terrorists have always exploited the latest technologies, whether dynamite or digital communications. And the group's exploitation of cutting-edge contemporary media falls squarely within the long tradition of terrorist organisations rapidly adapting to change (Burke, 2016).

But certain crucial elements have received less attention. One is the way in which new technology has shaped both the media itself and terrorist organisations in ways which are strikingly similar. A second is the role we may be playing – albeit unthinkingly and against our better intentions – in the evolution of the media strategies of the very groups we so abhor. Neither of these possibilities is particularly comfortable to contemplate.

New Trends Influencing Terrorism and the Media

A series of recent terrorist acts indicates the emergence of trends that influence the relationship between the media, the terrorist, and government. These include:

- A trend toward anonymity in terrorism;
- A trend towards more violent terrorist incidents;
- A trend towards attacks on media personnel and institutions and
- A trend toward use and rise of social media

Anonymous terrorism

Today we see instances of anonymous terrorism where no one claims responsibility and no demands are made. This allows the media a larger role in speculation, and generally removes most basis for charges that they are amplifying a terrorist's demands or agenda. Reportage is inevitable; especially if it includes unbridled speculation, false threats or hoaxes; coverage can advance terrorists' agendas, such as spreading panic, hurting tourism, and provoking strong government reactions leading to unpopular measures, including restrictions on individual liberties.

More violent terrorism

In the context of advanced information and technology, a trend suggesting more violent terrorism cannot be ignored. The while worldwide instances of terrorist acts have dropped sharply in the last decade, the death toll from acts is rising and the trend continues "toward more ruthless attacks on mass civilian targets and the use of more powerful bombs. If, and as, terrorism becomes more violent, perceptions that the press is to some degree responsible for facilitating terrorism or amplifying its effects could well grow. Increasingly threatened societies may be prone to take fewer risks in light of mass casualty consequences and may trust the media less and less to police itself.

Attacks on media personnel and institutions

According to the Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at St Andrew's University, international terrorism kills around 350 people each year. While they are exceptional, events like 9/11, the Bali bombings, and the Beslan school massacre create a spectacle of horror, which inscribes itself into the cultural imaginary of the international community. In many respects, terrorism, as it is infused through the spectacle of media discourses, becomes the antithesis of our modern project, creating a new threat, a new disorder that challenges the trajectory of a global political and social harmony (Lewis, 2005).

Some commentators suggest that the level of community fear is somewhat disproportionate to the actual risk posed by global terrorism (Wilkinson, 1997). This view, however, tends to parenthesize the symbolic amplitude of terrorism and the ways in which the media and public discourse constitute a social imaginary that re-presents the world of phenomena as social knowledge.

Attacks on journalists who are outspoken on issues of concern to the terrorists seem to be on the rise. Recent attacks occurred in Algeria, Mexico, Russia, Chechnya, and London, but there have been cases as well in Washington, D.C. at the National Press Building and at the United Nations in New York (CPJ, 2018).¹ The apparent back-to-back murders of two American freelance journalists by the same group are unprecedented in Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ's) history. The beheadings on camera in a two-week period of first James Foley and then Steven Sotloff appear to be an acceleration of a pattern--dating at least to Daniel Pearl's killing in 2002--of criminal and insurgent groups displaying the murders of journalists to send a broad message of terror. Islamic State is not the first group to use the beheading of

¹ According to the New York based Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ) more than 1313 journalists have been murdered since 1992 as a consequence of their work and 108 media workers. 35 journalists were killed since the beginning 2018. See website address <http://www.CPJ.ORG/>. Last visited 16 August 2018.

journalists as a way to make a point. With the rise of mobile Internet technology and social media in recent years, nonstate actors like Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram have tried to leverage platforms like Twitter and YouTube for themselves, bypassing traditional media to disseminate their messages directly.

A trend toward use and rise of social media

As these organizations become more flexible as well as desperate for supporters, they expand their reach to non-traditional audiences in their own lands as well as the West. There is evidence to indicate that terrorist Web sites are now targeting women and children. The West is targeted for both public opinion as well as potential sympathizers. The reliance on the Internet is growing, and all trends indicate that it will continue to grow, especially because hacking and shutting down Web sites is neither a serious response nor a real threat to these parties. Terrorist organizations that are devoted to their cause continue to dedicate the extra resources necessary to maintain an online presence while relying on the latest technologies, from Facebook to GPS, to further their cause.

New Age Terror

Peter Kratcoski believes that the world, at the turn of the twenty-first century, is on the “threshold of a new era in the relationship between terrorism and media reportage,” and bases this view on H. W. Kushner’s emphasis on the increasing competition among media and on their ability to broadcast live from any part of the world. Kratcoski goes on to assert that “research has demonstrated a link between media coverage of terrorism events and the creation of traumatic reactions from those who view them.” Viewers not only react in fear of further victimization, but they also undergo desensitization to depictions of violence and reduced concern for its victims” (Kratcoski, 2001).

Nacos (2000) has outlined a “calculus of violence” that distinguishes among different “target types that enter into the terrorists’ objectives.” Terrorists who commit violent acts are looking for three universal objectives: to get attention, to gain recognition, and even in order to obtain a certain degree of respect and legitimacy. These objectives are attainable for those individuals that are capable of receiving the most media coverage. In addition, those that obtain it have more opportunities to influence others. Terrorists always calculate the effect that their actions will have in the media and the overall probability that this will provide them with the opportunity to be a member of the “triangle of political communication” (Nacos, 2002).

Terrorists’ ultimate objectives are political, even if promoted as religiously motivated. Some want national independence, others vie for regime change, still others demand the withdrawal of foreign powers from countries or regions. Whatever their ultimate goals may be, terrorists know that publicity and propaganda are necessary means to their larger ends. Thus, when terrorists strike or threaten to commit violence, they have the following media-dependent objectives in mind:

- First, terrorists want the awareness of various audiences inside and outside their target societies and thereby condition their targets for intimidation.
- Second, terrorists want the recognition of their causes, they want people to ask, Why do hate us? Why do they attack innocent civilians?
- Third, terrorists want the respect and sympathy of those in whose interest they claim to act.
- Four, terrorists want a quasi-legitimate status and the same or similar media treatment that legitimate political actors receive.

In view of these objectives, one wonders whether and to what extent news coverage furthers one, several, or all of these terrorist imperatives.

While domestic terrorists tend to target high-level political, diplomatic, military, or corporate leaders as immediate victims, international terrorist spectacles directed against the United States and her allies in the war on terror, have mostly affected random victims who happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. In most instances the immediate victims’ identities do not matter, but their nationality, their

presence in certain locations, or their professions place them automatically into an identifiable 'enemy' category? (Nacos, 1990). In both domestic and foreign cases, however, the media are a significant factor, advertising the act and setting a media agenda focused on the terrorists' goals.

Schlagheck asserts that, "the free press is the primary conduit connecting terrorists, the public, and governments," and adds "violent incidents can advance the terrorists' goals only if these kinds of incidents are widely reported" (Schlagheck, 1988).

When terrorists successfully and violently manipulate important symbols, relatively weak movements can influence governments and societies. Even when a terrorist unit fails to complete its mission, intensive media exposure can lead to a propaganda victory (Gus, 2011).

Mass Media and Terrorism

The majority of experts justly call the contemporary terrorism mass media oriented terrorism. Namely, by analysing terrorist activities one may notice that in the majority of cases they are carried out precisely in order to draw the attention of the international media. It could be said that terrorist acts aim at causing heavy casualties, but also at raising fear with the public which, thanks to the media, participates" collaterally in every terrorist attack. The modern technologies have made it possible for small terror groups to use the mass media as a powerful gun, in such a way the mass media serves in the interests of terrorists, against its own will. But, opinions on the real relationship between media and terrorism vary greatly. Modern media technology and communications satellites have had a marked effect in increasing the publicity potential of terrorism, giving them – the oxygen of publicity".²

The issue is crucial because this coverage of terrorism reveals the position of the media within society. "A reporter's ability to practice responsible reporting and due-diligence with the speed needed in our digital age is critical to fulfilling the civic duty that journalists maintain in our world," said Somali-American journalist Mukhtar Ibrahim following the 2013 attack on the Westgate Mall in Nairobi (Mukhtar, 2013).

Terrorists rely upon conventional journalistic codes of drama, violence and surprise, especially for television. But with the exponential development of the Internet and social networks, the battle of images and words has taken on an unprecedented scale. As highlighted in a report by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, terrorist groups are using the legal web, especially social networks such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, (UNODC, 2012) but also the Deep Web and the Dark Web as a means of propaganda, networking, recruitment and funding. "For the first time, terrorists no longer have to depend upon other people to spread their message," writes Shyam Tekwani, a researcher from the Singapore Internet Research Centre, regarding Asia. (Smith, 2005). "In addition to creating their own websites, groups such as the Moro Islamic Liberation Front or the Abu Sayyaf group are using technologies such as electronic mail, mobile phones, SMS and radio and video technologies to communicate with each other and to disseminate their messages to the general public." This allows them, he adds, "to frame their actions and ideology however they want, getting around government or media censorship."

This shift in the 'oxygen of terrorism' towards the online space has driven some organizations, including governments, to fight back against violent extremist websites and to demand that major web platforms closely monitor and "clean up" the Internet. The emergence of the Islamic State group has exacerbated this phenomenon, in that the group has implemented a much more sophisticated system of global strategic propaganda than Al-Qaida. Its messages exploit both psychological and religious well-springs and bypass in part (but only in part) the traditional media. The media effect of attacks on the target population, designed to generate fear, is also a kind of 'staging' aimed at seducing new supporters (Marthoz, 2017). The Islamic State group has mastered communication techniques and social networks

² That term was used by the former British PM Margaret Thatcher.

and, above all, it proposes an alluring “narrative” of heroism and virility, sometimes relayed unwisely by traditional media.

Terrorism and Trauma

The Global Terrorist Index therefore defines terrorism as ‘the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation.’ (Global Terrorism Index, 2018).

This definition recognises that terrorism is not only the physical act of an attack but also the psychological impact it has on a society for many years after. Therefore, the index score accounts for terrorist attacks over the prior five years.

Covering an attack or an armed conflict at the heart of “Terrorland” risks having an emotional impact on the journalists called upon to cover the event. First of all, this is experienced as anxiety, insomnia, irritation and physical problems such as fatigue or headaches. More seriously, it can lead to Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which can cause incapacitating feelings of horror, fear and despair. Currently, too few media have adopted sufficient procedures to protect collaborators placed in situations of extreme stress. In February 2014, one of the reports published by the Media Council of Kenya on the coverage of the Westgate mall attack, which took place in Nairobi in September 2013, noted that “Some of the reporters were traumatised and shocked and received no counselling after the incident.” (Abuga, 2014).

There is also a risk of traumatism for the journalists who are not in the field, but who view images of beheadings or the testimonies given by the victims of attacks or torture, to check their authenticity and decide what will be disseminated in their own media. This is what a study published by the Eyewitness Media Hub at the end of 2015 calls the new “digital frontline”, which Jackie Spinner from the Columbia Journalism Review called “a place where journalists can be battered by repeated exposure to trauma even if they never have to put on a bulletproof vest”. She added: “Like a correspondent in the field who witnesses horrific events, social media reporters and editors who view such content on their computers can end up feeling isolated or experience nightmares and flashbacks, typical symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder.” (Spinner, 2015). According to the study, 40% of the journalists who were interviewed admitted that viewing video testimonies had had negative effects on their personal life.

They could therefore reduce the number of viewings, conceal certain parts of the image when analysing the video, reduce the luminosity of the screen or schedule frequent breaks (DART Center for Journalism and Trauma, 2016).

The challenge, as Bill Kovac, former curator of the Nieman Foundation at Harvard, writes in the preface to the Dart Center Manual, *Tragedies and Journalists*, is to “help us all think more deeply and creatively in dealing with the residue of destructive fear and uncertainty while producing the kind of journalism that informs effectively” (Hight and Smyth, 2003).

Digital platforms are now where many people consume news about terrorism. They are influential in filtering information and shaping the flow of news, but they do not have the same ethos or practical capacity and experience as news organizations. They also have not yet come to fully understand their role or accepted their responsibilities in the mediation of terrorism, and are still negotiating their relationship with news media.

Digital platforms have a special dilemma as open environments that also seek to protect their users from offense. While they provide an immense opportunity for journalists and the public to be better informed and to interact around these events, their algorithms and editing policies are still problematic (Beckett, 2016).

Challenges of Covering Terror Events

This part looks at the challenges of covering terror events. Some of these are new problems, created by technological innovation or economic and political factors. Some are longstanding issues that have become much more complex in the digital environment, making good editorial practices more difficult to carry out.

News media organizations need to have detailed guidelines on all aspects of terrorism coverage. They need to deal with language, significance, and context, as well as accuracy and balance. Coverage needs to be backed up by a self-conscious iterative process that allows journalists to reflect, discuss problems and best practices, and improve. Especially for those organizations that are larger or are multiplatform, these guidelines need to be communicated widely. Coordinated internal systems, including systems such as Slack, should be put in place to make sure best practices are maintained even in breaking news or developing story situations. (Beckett, 2016).

The propensity of those in print and broadcast media has been to give priority to terrorist incidents in their news reports. This is understandable, given the influence, terrorism can have on policy making and either domestic or international political environments. However, the media have not been consistent about which incidents they report or how they report them. They frequently cover some acts of political violence extensively but provide little if any information about others (Rainey, 2005).

The relationship between the credibility that one gives to what he or she perceives visually and this use of the trust factor by the media has been an object of reflection. This signifies that the product that TV stations offer is “reality in and of itself,” without taking into account the context and a group of other circumstances that “surround” these images. Given this visual advantage, television does not hesitate to claim its capacity to reach the news story wherever it may take place. This proclamation, however, holds a dangerous misconception. Financial limitations cause the media to concentrate its resources where “it is believed” that there is higher news interest. This leads to a situation in which their interests in every corner of the planet have more to do with determining beforehand where a certain news event “can” take place than with where news is really happening (Laquer, 2003).

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).

The process for deciding which events to report is often driven by evaluating what kind of news is likely to attract an audience. If it is decided that dramatic incidents will bring in sizable shares of viewers, the media will not hesitate to prioritize such incidents for the day’s editions or broadcast. The media can be highly selective about which terrorist incidents to report. The ultimate decision tends to weight in favor of what most affects readers or the viewing public.

The Recruiting Function of Social Media

Religious extreme groups relay heavily on social media platforms to recruit new supporters, including women and children and using different languages, such as English, French, Turkish, Bengali, in addition to Arabic. Recently, some of these extreme groups, in particular, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda affiliated group, Jabhat Fateh al-Sham,³ have started using FM radio waves to live broadcast their propaganda materials.

Some contents are recorded before being posted on YouTube. Until very recently, the Islamic State broadcasted local news twice daily via a YouTube channels (YouTube, 2018).

³ Previously referred to as al-Nusrah Front. The Front was designated by the Secretary of State as terrorist organization on May 15, 2014 (<http://www.state.gov/j/ct/rls/other/des/123085.htm>).

The internet offers terrorists the ability to host message boards and chat rooms where information such as fundraising and recruitment can take place or planning for actual coordinated and synchronized attacks.

Digital camera, video cameras and various other technologies made it to individual consumers at an affordable price. As a result, terrorist groups no longer solely depended on news agencies. Not only could they produce their videos and forward them to news agencies, but with the invention of the internet, groups created websites that hosted their videos, publications, audio files, fundraising and various other materials that promoted their cause and attracted new recruits.

When U.S. forces launched their attacks in Kabul, Afghanistan in 2001, members of Al Qaeda fled, leaving behind documents that painted a grim picture of how sophisticated of an enemy they are. Many of the documents yielded profiles of well-educated and computer-trained terrorists; demonstrating a well evolved and technological savvy form of terrorism (Rollin & Wilson, 2007).

In 2016, the number of individuals who have cellular network coverage in the zone where they reside is around seven billion. As of January 2017, there are 2.789 billion active social media users globally, with a 10% annual growth for Internet users since January 2016. With this massive increase of usage, extremists around the world are having a podium where they are spreading their propaganda and actively recruiting new members. Those disturbed individuals have been using social media as a major tool to get support of various kinds such as acquiring funds as well as to spread their extremists' ideas (Ammal and Xu, 2018). The major problem is that with the increasing adoption of social media applications in the world, religious extremists' organizations such as ISIS are using those networks tactically in their advantage to appeal to viewers, specifically the ones who are prone to radicalization of both Muslims and Westerners. They now have a wider range of viewers whom they can preach to.

Reynaldo Gonzalez has a lawsuit against three of the largest social media companies: Google, Facebook, and Twitter for the decease of Nohemi Gonzalez, his daughter, during the unfortunate Paris attack in 2015 (Los Angeles Times, 2016). He alleged the companies' facilitation for terrorists to communicate and orchestrate unlawful actions in their platforms. The lawsuit was filed in June 2016, only 1 month after those three companies as well as another social media giant have pledged to remove any terrorist-and hate-related content from their applications. Gonzalez claimed that social media companies need to be answerable for what happens in their platforms (The Washington Post, 2016). The main dilemma that social media companies and the government are facing is how to strike a balance between restricting content and at the same time allowing users to have freedom of speech.

Conclusion

This paper explained the delicate relationship between the media and political violence in order to achieve a better understanding of the relationship between the two entities.

The purpose of this paper was focused on the relationship between media coverage and terror attacks themselves, raising the question of whether increased coverage has an effect on increased terrorist attacks.

The diversity of causes, ideologies, and social and cultural conditioning factors that inspire different terrorist groups are equally applicable to the type of relationships that these groups establish with the news media.

This paper investigated the role of media in terrorist environments. Particular consideration was given to terrorists' efforts to publicize their cause, their manipulation of mass communication, and the prospective impact of the new Media.

In all places in the world, the architects of terrorism take advantage of the mass-media—including the Internet for the benefit of their operational effectiveness, information gathering, recruitment, fund raising, and propaganda methods.

In the future, technological developments would allow terrorist attacks to be pulled out in ways that were previously unthinkable. Terrorists found an influential partner in the mass media that would help them obtain public attention for the group and its demands.

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