

Thinking about the symbiotic relationship between the Media and Terrorism

By Mohammed Elshimi

Summary

In terms of counter-terrorism, mass media coverage of terrorist acts created a situation where a symbiotic relationship is established between the media and terrorism. To elaborate, both of these parties rely on each other to further strengthen their presence, which is disadvantageous towards counter-terrorism efforts, but simultaneously beneficial for both terrorist and media organizations. The media has become a platform for terrorist communication in some respects, while unintentionally being the influence for copycat terrorism, as seen with the increase in lone actor terrorist acts in recent times. The nature of this relationship is often underplayed and understated by policy-makers and this brief attempts to instigate a re-evaluation of counter-media approaches to terrorism.

Since 2001, considerable political, financial and emotional investment has been expended in tackling terrorism in many countries at many levels- international, regional, national and local. National Security strategies are increasingly dominated by preventive approaches to terrorism, widely characterised as 'Countering Violent Extremism' (CVE). The premise of CVE is that terrorists are made and not born, but that human behaviour can be changed by increasing 'resilience' and decreasing 'vulnerabilities' amongst targeted populations. This is to be done with the help of civil society through various forms of interventions- community cohesion projects, education, counter-narrative and de-radicalisation. Counter-Terrorism strategies have also been adopted at both the multilateral (EU 2005) and the international (UN 2006) level.¹ In 2016, the UN launched the Plan of Action to Prevent Violent

Extremism (PVE) and called on member states to develop national and regional PVE action plans. These provisions have been accompanied by legal mechanisms designed to prohibit incitement to terrorism, criminalising the financing of terrorism and prosecuting Foreign Terrorist Fighters.²

However, the role of 'old media' in countering terrorism- print media, film, radio and television- has not been sufficiently addressed by the panoply of counter-terrorism measures developed since 2001. This is contrasted with the attention paid to the role of 'new media' (e.g. the internet, social media, mobile apps, computer games et cetera), which has been examined recently, revealing that social media companies are playing a greater role

1. The EU's Counter-Terrorism Strategy and The UN Global Counterterrorism Strategy

2. Key UN Security Council Resolutions underpinning this multilateral CT strategy include: 1373 on terrorist finance, 1624 on incitement to terrorism and 2178 on foreign terrorist fighters.

in countering terrorism.³ This brief therefore attempts to resurrect an old established argument in terrorism scholarship- namely that there is a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media.⁴ The following highlights three aspects of the terrorism-media symbiosis. First, the media plays a role as a conduit for terrorist propaganda by supplying terrorists with the 'Oxygen of publicity'. Secondly, surfeit media coverage of terrorism creates a distorted understanding of the terrorist threat. Thirdly, media coverage of terrorism inspires the phenomenon of copy-cat terrorism. The problem, then, does not lie in why the media covers terrorism, but lies in how the media covers terrorism.

Terminology: media, symbiotic, terrorism

Media is a generic term that describes a diversity of channels of information and entertainment that encompasses TV, newspapers, radio, the internet, social media and other forms of communication such as film, literature, theatre, music and the visual arts. The media performs several critical functions for society: it informs, holds powerful institutions and individuals to account, investigates, monitors, entertains, and acts as public forum, to name but a few. While acknowledging the heterogeneity of the media landscape, not to mention the professionalism of many outfits and individual journalists, the following brief will refer to 'media' in the singular to denote a multifaceted and complex terrain of actors, practices and outputs.

An important caveat to note is that the media does not create terrorist organisations nor does it promote terrorism. The principal distinction to bear in mind is: once terrorism gets going, the relationship between terrorism and media becomes symbiotic. In sociology, the term symbiosis is taken to mean 'relations of mutual dependence between different groups within a community when the groups are unlike each other and their relations are complementary'.⁵ Symbiotic' explains how these strikingly different actors become interlocked in a relationship hinged on a convergence of interest: the media's insatiable drive to supply newsworthy content is simultaneously mirrored

by the strategic necessity of terrorist movements for the oxygen of publicity.

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Despite the existence of over 109 definitions of terrorism,⁶ it is nevertheless critical to stress a conception of terrorism that situates political violence as a tactic of persuasion and psychological coercion. Whereas military action tries to damage the enemy's ability for retaliation in order to prevail, terrorism strikes from a position of weakness- from an asymmetrical starting point- and therefore aims at something else altogether: theatre and spectacle. Terrorism is famously referred to as "propaganda by the deed," serving as an example to others, which inspires violent action.⁷ This brief stresses the theatrical, communicative and psychological aspects of terrorism, best encapsulated by Brian Jenkins observation that "terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theatre."⁸

Media as a Platform for Terrorist Communication

Communication is conceptualised as each act of transmitting information. Information, here, is meant in the broader sense: thoughts, actions, ideas and emotions. Terrorism is a communicative act in the sense that it seeks to send a message to multiple audiences: to a government, to a wider population, to captivated audiences at home, to their own movement/organisation, to a constituency of sympathisers and to prospective recruits. The murder of innocent civilians is a secondary by-product, since victims are "the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience."⁹

3. In 2017, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube launched the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT). The GIFCT is committed to working on technological solutions to help thwart terrorists' use of our service.

4. The relationship between terrorism and the media is well researched academically. See N. Brigitte Terrorism and the Media, New York: Columbia University Press, 1994. G. Weimann and C Winn The Theater of Terror. Mass Media and International Terrorism, New York: Longman, 1994.

5. P. Wilkinson, Terrorism Versus Democracy: The Liberal State Response, Oxon: Routledge, 2011, p. 150

6. A. Schmid, A. Jongman, Political Terrorism, A New Guide to Actors, Authors, Concepts, Databases, Theories, & Literature, 1988, p. 5

7. The phrase is associated with Mikhail Bakunin (1814–1876), in his "Letters to a Frenchman on the Present Crisis"

8. B. Jenkins International Terrorism. Los Angeles: Crescent Publication. 1975

9. Schmid, A. & J. de Graaf, Violence as Communication. Beverly Hills: Sage. 1982 p. 14

The media provides a platform for terrorist movements to broadcast and amplify their message to global audiences. Without this platform, the message of terrorist movements would not reach beyond its very immediate locale and therefore would remain unknown to most people outside the confined boundaries of the attack. Bruce Hoffman explains the underlying impact of this symbiosis for terrorist organisations:

"...Without the media's coverage, the act's impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, rather than reaching the wider 'target audience' at whom the terrorists' violence is actually aimed."¹⁰

"The 9-11 attacks introduced a new level of mass-mediated terrorism because of the choices the planners made with respect to method, target, timing and scope. The targets chosen for 9-11 (the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC), for example, were symbols of American wealth, power and heritage."

In the competitive and over-crowded field of the 'attention economy', more and more actors jostle for people's increasingly diminishing attention.¹¹ In this context, attention is considered an economic problem because it is a scarce resource when information is abundant- too much information creates a 'poverty of attention.'¹² As with any economic problem, competition increases when the resource becomes scarcer. Neumann and Smith have written about the "escalation trap," which argues that the psychological impact of terrorism ultimately becomes self-defeating.¹³ However, attention economics suggest that escalation may simply continue if the aim is to maximise the increasingly scarce resource of attention. It is this vying for audience attention that makes it more appropriate to perceive terrorists as being more like theatre producers than army generals.¹⁴

Media-wise, terrorists are able to elicit attention by orchestrating attacks with the media as a major consideration. They select specific targets, locations and timing of their planned attacks deliberately and according to media preferences, trying to satisfy the media criteria for newsworthiness. Through the lens of 'theatre of terror', the September 11 2001 attacks on America ("9/11") were a perfectly choreographed production aimed at American and international audiences. The 9-11 attacks introduced a new level of mass-mediated terrorism because of the choices the planners made with respect to method, target, timing and scope. The targets chosen for 9-11 (the World Trade Centre in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC), for example, were symbols of American wealth, power and heritage.

"Social media has been criticised for creating echo chambers for vulnerable people who watch emotionally provocative videos. Media-savvy organisations like Daesh have taken the theatre of terrorism to new heights."

Terrorists also prepare visual aids for the media through means such as video clips of their actions, taped interviews and declarations, as well as press releases.¹⁵ Terrorist organisations, like Daesh, exploit Twitter to 'propagandize for core Jihadist tenets that are translated into symbolic images for a generation of social media users who prefer pictures to text'. In fact, Daesh deploys the power of images to induce both psychological dread to their enemies and to demonstrate credibility as the world's pre-eminent revolutionary vanguard movement. Their penchant for using images is vividly exemplified by the recording of beheading videos. Whereas these videos were previously filmed in dark rooms, produced to low-quality resolution, now such beheadings videos are filmed in the open and to a high standard of quality. The videos are slicker, utilising cinematic effects, e.g. voice overs, soundtracks, and slow-motion techniques.¹⁶ Social media has been criticised for creating echo chambers for vulnerable people who watch emotionally provocative videos. In fact, media-savvy organisations like Daesh have taken the theatre of terrorism to new heights.

10. B. Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (2nd ed.), New York: Columbia university Press, 2006, p. 174

11. J. Burke, "How the Changing Media is changing Terrorism", <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/feb/25/how-changing-media-changing-terrorism>

12. H. Simon, *Administrative Behaviour: A Study of the Decision Making Processes in Administrative Organisation*, The Macmillan Co, New York, 1948; 4th edition, Free Press, 1997

13. P. Neumann and M.L.R. Smith, *The Strategy of Terrorism: How it works, and why it fails*. Oxon, New York: Routledge, 2008, p. 76-93

14. N. Harrari, "The Theatre of Terror, The Guardian, 31st January 2015, [https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/31/terrorism-spectacle-how-states-](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/31/terrorism-spectacle-how-states-respond-yuval-noah-harari-sapiens)

[respond-yuval-noah-harari-sapiens](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/jan/31/terrorism-spectacle-how-states-respond-yuval-noah-harari-sapiens)

15. B. Nicos, *The Terrorist Calculus Behind 9-11: A Model for Future Terrorism?* Studies in Conflict and Terrorism, vol. 26 (2003): pp. 1-16.

16. J. Klausen, *Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, 38:1, 1-22, 2015, p. 19.

It is hard not to conclude that terrorism judged on its own terms- as a way of getting attention and arousing alarm- has been a success. This contradicts the evidence that proves that most terrorist movements fade away without attaining their strategic goals.¹⁷

Media Frames a Distorted Threat Perception of Terrorism

The symbiotic relationship between terrorism and media produces a particular perception of terrorism as an existential threat to the security of Western countries. The media plays a critical role in producing the illusion that terrorism is an existential threat to the security of Western countries. There is a difference between security and existential threats. An existential threat is a threat to a nation-state's survival. In many developing countries, the systematic effects of terrorism are real- e.g. things that can affect more than one person should they happen- posing a genuine existentialist threat to the state (as seen in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Nigeria, Pakistan, Somalia, Syria and Yemen). The existence of actors with the capacity for violence other than the state is always a threat to state legitimacy and, under certain conditions, can precipitate civil conflict.

However, the current terrorism threat posed to Western countries represents a security threat, not an existential threat. The disproportionate framing of the threat levels can partly be attributed to the fact that the media does not report 'good news' but primarily focuses on 'bad news', as explained by Steven Pinker: "Plane crashes always makes the news, but car crashes, which kill far more people, almost never do."¹⁸ Another explanation for the distorted placement of terrorism at the top of people's concern of threat, enabled by the media, is what Daniel Kahneman calls the 'availability heuristic':

"People tend to assess the relative importance of issues by the ease with which they are retrieved from memory—and this is largely determined by the extent of coverage in the media."¹⁹

There are two biases emanating from the availability heuristic: ease of recall and retrievability. It is because of the availability bias that perceptions of risk may be in

error. This availability heuristic with respect to terrorism- the fact that terrorism is framed disproportionality to its actual threat and impact in Western countries- has been exacerbated by the growth of the 'new media ecology'.²⁰

This 'new media ecology' is defined by two features: first, that media cultivates the feeling and impression of events as being the result of 'effects without causes'. Second, it describes the hyper connectivity between people, places, and ideas. Terrorism becomes associated first and foremost through the vivid images, narratives and language of the 'new media ecology' in terms of 'effects without causes', which merely serve to intensify feelings of uncertainty and apprehension among publics. It also depoliticises the threat, making it seem random or evil.

"The communicative aspect of modern terrorism is often underplayed (albeit acknowledged in scholarship and among security agencies), not to mention the understated fact that both the media and terrorism rely on each other and dynamically recalibrate their respective interests in relation to each other."

Consequently, terrorism becomes code word for mystery and uncontrollable threat. The assessment of 'threat' is a by-product of various forms of calculations: objectives assessments of the facts made by several agencies, tough posturing by politicians in response to terrorism, competition between various state agencies, bureaucratic group-think, imagination of the worst-case scenario and the role of 'performativity' by political and social actors. The term 'performativity' describes that effect the political and societal reactions to terrorism has; the fact that politicians react to terrorism, that the media report on it and the public safeguard against it, means that everyone brings the threat into existence through language and practice.²¹ The result of this 'threat assessment': there is a ubiquitous danger threatening the life of every citizen.

The surfeit media coverage of terrorism in Western countries can be contrasted with the dearth treatment of terrorism in other parts of the world where the bulk of terrorism actually happens. In fact, 75% of global terrorist attacks take place in just five countries: Nigeria,

17. Audrey Cronin 2011; V. Fortna, Do Terrorists Win? Rebels' Use of Terrorism and Civil War Outcomes, Volume 69, Issue 3, Summer 2015, pp. 519-5

18. S. Pinker, Enlightenment Now, the Case for Reason, Science, Humanism and Progress, Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2018, p. 42

19. D. Kahneman, Thinking, Fast and Slow, London: Penguin, 2011, p.8

20. N. Akil, A. Hoskins and B. O'Loughlin, Radicalisation and media: connectivity and terrorism in the new media ecology, Oxon: Routledge, 2011, p. 5

21. B. Buzan, O. Weaver and J. de Wilde, Security: A New Framework for Analysis, Colorado: Lynne Rienner Publishers 1997

Syria, Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iraq.²² but even these numbers are deceptive. In the rest of the world outside Western countries, terrorism is considered a phenomenon of war so what used to be called 'insurgency', 'guerrilla warfare', 'revolutions' and civil conflict- all of which may deploy terrorism as a tactic- is now often classified as 'terrorism'.²³ The rise of terrorism since 2011 is not a sign of how dangerous the world has become, but in fact the opposite. Robert Jarvis observes that the placement of terrorism at the top of the threats list "in part stems from a security environment that is remarkably benign."²⁴

In summation, terrorism represents a security threat in Western countries that must be tackled, but once it goes through the conveyor-belt of political machinations and media representation, it is transformed from something manageable into something altogether different: 'existential', global and ubiquitous.

Media Coverage Inspires 'Copy-Cat' Terrorism

The representation of terrorism also inspires imitation of action for certain individuals and groups- known as 'copy-cat effect'. The copycat effect is the tendency of sensational publicity about violent murders or suicides to result in more of the same through imitation.²⁵ In 1968, an El Al Israel Airlines plane departing from Rome and headed for Tel Aviv, Israel, was hijacked by the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). They successfully diverted the plane, carrying thirty-two passengers and ten crew members to Algiers.²⁶ This spectacular form of terrorism, designed to get global attention, would become a regular occurrence in subsequent years. Significant for the security services, copy-cat attacks have the tendency to produce the phenomenon of waves: several attacks are attempted following a major one. Following the Westminster attack in March 2017, for example, the UK was subsequently hit by a wave of attacks from Jihadist terrorism²⁷ - three successful and nine foiled plots.

This copy-cat trend is currently manifested through the use of cars, trucks, vans and cleavers in the execution of terrorist acts. These low sophisticated attacks have made it very difficult for the security apparatus to respond effectively, both in terms of prevention and detection. Broadcasting these attacks communicates a powerful signal to prospective lone actors and would-be terrorists: publicity is possible with minimal effort. The images and newsreels played on repeat on peoples' TV screen and on social media maximises the exposure of the terrorist act to potentially billions of viewers transmitting in the process a simple idea: the method. An unexpected consequence of the media coverage of low-tech attacks is that it has lowered the bar for entry into terrorism. All that is needed now for an attack to be ascribed with the label 'terrorism' is a cleaver or a vehicle. Vans, in particular, have become the new 'terrorist's guided missile'.²⁸

Copy-cat terrorism provides terrorists, particularly lone actors, with the fame that they seek. Similar to celebrities, lone actor terrorists desire to become somebody- which they believe is attainable through terrorism. While there is no standard profile of a lone actor terrorist, according to research conducted by RUSI, it was also the case that among a third of the lone-actor terrorists examined by the study - again, both right-wing extremists and violent Islamists - there were potential signs of underlying mental health condition.²⁹ Research has also shown that many of the Jihadist lone attacks after 2013 were committed by individuals with criminal backgrounds.³⁰ Lone actors have a diversity of motivations and fantasies (e.g. revenge, recognition, redemption and transcendence), but embrace ideologies compatible with their chosen identity, or claim affiliation to a cause or terrorist organisation before undertaking terrorist acts. Doing so confers a higher sense of purpose and meaning to an otherwise criminal act. By broadcasting their faces and actions the media gives lone actors the opportunity to fulfil their fantasies of going out in a blaze of glory.

22. Institute for Economics & Peace, The Global Terrorism Index 2017, p. 16

23. R. Muggah, "Terrorism is on the rise- but there's a bigger threat we're not talking about," World Economic Forum, 2016, <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/04/terrorism-is-on-the-rise-but-there-s-a-bigger-threat-we-re-not-talking-about/>

24. R. Jervis, Force in Our Times. International Relations, 25, 2011, p. 411

25. L. Coleman, The Copy Cat Effect: How the Media and Popular Culture Trigger the Mayhem in Tomorrow's Headlines, New York: Gallery Books, 2004.

26. BBC, Profile: Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-30099510>

27. A. Asthana, "Nine Terrorist attacks prevented in UK in the last year, says MI5 Boss", The Guardian, 5th December 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/>

uk-news/2017/dec/05/nine-terrorist-attacks-prevented-in-uk-in-last-year-says-mi5-boss

28. S. Jenkins, "Barcelona is Europe's seventh vehicle attack in a year. What can be done?", The Guardian, 18th August 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/aug/18/barcelona-attack-europe-seventh-vehicle-what-done>

29. C. Ellis and R. Pantucci at al. , Lone Actor Terrorism, RUSI, 2016

30. R. Basra, P. Neumann and C. Brunner, Criminal Past, Terrorist Futures: European Jihadists and the New Crime-Terror Nexus, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2016

Conclusion

The media-terrorism symbiosis is a neglected dimension of counter-terrorism thinking among policymakers, even though the influence of 'new media' has hitherto occupied generous attention. Missing however from discussions about terrorism is how it is mediated and represented through media in a holistic sense (that includes the effect of old and new media in tandem). The communicative aspect of modern terrorism is often underplayed (albeit acknowledged in scholarship and among security agencies), not to mention the understated fact that both the media and terrorism rely on each other and dynamically recalibrate their respective interests in relation to each other. By examining the role media plays in broadcasting terrorist propaganda, in inflating the security threat and by inspiring copy-cat terrorism through unfettered coverage of terrorist attacks, this brief attempts to re-elevate the media-terrorism symbiosis to the fore. Although terrorist campaigns and organisations eventually came to an end ³¹, the threat of terrorism can never be eliminated. The most we can do is to contain terrorism and reduce the risk of terrorism to a manageable level. To this end, this brief tries to provoke a reconsideration of counter-terrorism approaches to media.

31. A. Cronin, *How Terrorism Ends: Understanding the Decline and Demise of Terrorist Campaigns*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011; M. Libicki and S. Jones, *How Terrorists Groups end: Lessons for Countering Al-Qaeda*, RAND, 2008

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