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Accomplice or Witness?
The Media's Role in Terrorism

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It was the opening day of the World Trade Organization meeting in Seattle, Washington in late 1999. Even before delegates from all over the globe assembled for their first session, violence broke out in the streets near the meeting site. While 40,000 men and women representing various organizations expressed their opposition to WTO policies peacefully, a few dozen masked protesters in fatigues retrieved hammers, M-80 firecrackers, and spray paint from their knapsacks and vandalized brand-name stores such as Starbucks, Nike, FAO Schwarz, and Old Navy. The rampage by self-described "anarchists" and the subsequent "Battle of Seattle" between protesters and police would have amounted to little more than a nuisance without the massive media coverage it received, since only modest property damage and minor injuries were sustained. Indeed, it was not the WTO proceedings inside the convention hall but the violence committed by a small group of people and the overzealous reactions of the security forces that became the major story in the domestic and international media.

Once again the publicity rationale undergirding political violence had worked. Although chiding the "corporate media" for biased reporting, the anarchists (said to share "Unabomber" Ted Kaczynski's antitechnology, anticonsumerism views) recognized the value of nonstop media attention. "The WTO protests are a watershed," they proclaimed on one web site (http://www.chumba.com/_gospel.htm);

"after the Battle of Seattle the anarchists will no longer be ignored." Although this may have been an overly optimistic assessment, the violence for political ends had triggered what one might call the calculus of terrorism: extensive media coverage of an incident that in turn results in public attention, and, most important, reactions by decisionmakers (in the wake of the events in Seattle, President Bill Clinton condemned the violence but expressed sympathies for the protesters' environmentalist and labor rights sentiments).

In the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, European and American anarchists resorted to far more lethal acts of violence for reasons quite different from those of their contemporary namesakes. But those who threw bombs into crowded theaters, chambers of deputies, or assassinated prominent political figures also pursued a strategy of "propaganda by deeds" that counted on ample press coverage of their actions and causes. And long before Gutenberg invented the printing press in the fifteenth century, ancient terrorists, such as the Zealots who targeted Roman occupiers in Palestine as well as moderate fellow Jews (66–70 A.D.), and the Assassins, a Shiite sect whose members fought for the purification of Islam (1090–1275 A.D.), preferred to commit their violent acts on holidays and in busy locations to ensure that news of their deeds would spread quickly and widely.

While publicity has been a central goal of most terrorists throughout history, the means of communication have advanced from word-of-mouth accounts by witnesses to news reporting in the print press, radio, newsreel, and eventually television, which has greatly enhanced terrorists' propaganda capabilities. More recently, the World Wide Web has emerged as a new and the perhaps the most potent propaganda vehicle for terrorist

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groups and "lone wolves," as well as for the advocates of political violence.

PUBLICITY: THE LIFEBLOOD OF TERRORISM?

Terrorism experts, public officials, and even some members of the media have blamed the mass media—especially television—for rewarding terrorist acts with disproportionate coverage that plays into the hands of terrorists. Moreover, since the most gruesome and deadly incidents receive the greatest volume of reporting, media critics have charged that terrorists resort to progressively bloodier violence to satisfy the media's appetite for shocking news. If terrorism is seen as political theater performed for audiences (domestic and international publics, particular groups and individuals, and, of course, political elites), clearly the mass media plays a crucial role. Without massive news coverage the terrorist act would resemble the proverbial tree falling in the forest: if no one learned of an incident, it would be as if it had not occurred. For this reason, media critics have suggested that political violence would radically decline, or even disappear, without the media's eagerness to highlight terrorist acts. Publicity in the form of news coverage is therefore perceived as the lifeblood or, as former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher put it, the "oxygen" of terrorism.

Not all experts agree on the centrality of publicity to terrorism. Some cite examples and statistics to establish that terrorists historically have perpetrated violence without claiming responsibility, therefore not advertising their motives. With the World Trade Center bombing in 1993, the Oklahoma City federal building bombing and the sarin gas attacks in the Tokyo subway system in 1995, and the series of major bombings in Saudi Arabia, Tanzania, and Kenya in the late 1990s, this position has gained currency among terrorist scholars. They argue that media coverage and the desire for propaganda cannot be important goals if terrorists do not tell their target audiences who struck and why.

But the idea of a new "terrorism of expression" that does not depend on publicity has weaknesses. Classifying the World Trade Center bombing as a milestone in the short history of so-called faceless or "new" terrorism is inaccurate because those terrorists, in a letter to the March 25, 1993 *New York Times,* did claim responsibility for the bombing and detailed their grievances against the United States.[1]

In other instances, terrorists have left important clues that revealed their grievances and motives. One such case was the Oklahoma City bombing. Obviously trying to avoid arrest, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols did not claim responsibility for the attack. Perhaps they planned to do so at a later date, had they not been arrested so soon after the explosion. Yet by detonating their powerful bomb on the second anniversary of the FBI's ill-fated raid on a group of armed religious extremists, the Branch Davidians, in Waco, Texas, the two ensured that the media would explore the most likely motive—that it was revenge for Waco—and bring it into the public sphere.

McVeigh and Nichols probably never imagined how well the calculus of terror would work for them. As the mass-mediated debate—both in the conventional media and on political talk radio and television programs—linked the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City to the fate of the Branch Davidians, public opinion changed radically with respect to the FBI's actions at Waco, which caused the death of more than 80 people. While the vast majority of Americans (73 percent) still approved of the FBI's actions against the Branch Davidians a few days after the blast in Oklahoma City, more Americans (50 percent) criticized than supported (43 percent) the FBI on this issue after several weeks of intensive media reporting. Because of this change in public sentiment, the Oklahoma City bombers achieved that which constant petitions and protests from right-wing circles had not: the United States Congress promptly scheduled and conducted hearings that revisited the Waco case and a similarly controversial incident at Ruby Ridge, Idaho in August 1992 in which the wife and son of Randy Weaver, a right-wing extremist, were killed in a confrontation with FBI agents.

Although the linkages among terrorism, media content, effects on public opinion, and decision-makers are not always as obvious as in the Oklahoma City incident, the calculus of terror has worked well for terrorists and will continue to do so. If nothing else, political violence—especially so-called terrorist spectaculars—always results in widespread news reporting and mass-mediated debates. Even when no "rogue state," group, or lone-wolf extremist such as the Unabomber claims responsibility for violent acts, the fears and anxi-

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[1]The FBI determined that the letter was authentic, and established that it had been written on a typewriter found in the possession of a member of the group that had plotted to bomb the center. The existence of the letter might have escaped some observers and supporters of the expressive terrorism theory because the *Times* delayed publication of the letter until the first suspects had been arrested.

eties of target societies left in the dark about their attackers can play into the terrorists' design.

Moreover, regardless of whether they claim responsibility, militarily weak terrorists send forceful messages when they strike powerful countries. In the case of the bombings of the United States embassies in Kenya and Tanzania in 1998, for which no group ever claimed responsibility, the terrorist message again was that even the world's remaining superpower with its vast military and economic superiority is no more than a paper tiger against determined terrorists.[2] And in the case of the 1995 nerve gas attack in the Tokyo subway system, the Aum Shinrikyo sect did not claim responsibility but triggered domestic and international media coverage that sent shockwaves through Japan and the rest of the world, creating a situation that fit well into the cult's end-of-the-world scenarios.

ATTENTION, RECOGNITION, RESPECTABILITY

Most terrorist groups or loners have short- and long-term goals that transcend their publicity objectives. Freeing imprisoned comrades, exacting revenge, or creating fear and confusion are common short-term goals that can be accomplished with a single violent act. The same group or person may also have far a more ambitious long-term goal—regime change or national independence, for example—that will not occur with one bold act of terror. To achieve these ultimate goals, terrorists need the attention of the mass media to manipulate, threaten, intimidate, or co-opt the general public, specific groups and individuals, and government officials. By resorting to more spectacular and brutal acts and thereby heightening the threshold of violence, terrorists are assured of substantial press coverage.

Attention is not the only media-related terrorist goal. Perpetrators of political violence, whether they fight for statehood, a ban on legalized abortions, or

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animal rights, also want recognition of their grievances, causes, and demands. Finally, many groups strive for respectability and perhaps even a degree of legitimacy in their own society and abroad. If a great deal of political violence is committed to gain attention, recognition, and respectability (and to advance through all of this the perpetrators' short-term and long-term objectives), how are these goals facilitated by the media?

The free press reports, as it should, on terrorism abroad and at home. In the aftermath of major terrorist strikes, the media often provide a vital public service similar to its role in the wake of natural disasters or urban riots. Following the World Trade Center and Oklahoma City bombings, the media—especially local radio, television, and newspapers—were instrumental in helping crisis managers inform the public about emergency phone numbers, traffic restrictions, working schedules, and donations of goods and services. But these exemplary reporting patterns also have another side. Because major terrorist incidents are rich in dramatic, shocking, and tragic human interest aspects, the news media tends to overcover such events. Communication scholar Shanto Iyengar found that between 1981 and 1986 the early evening television news broadcasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC carried 2,273 terrorism stories—more than their reports on poverty, crime, unemployment, and racial discrimination combined. Today the traditional news media—television, radio, and print—face stiff competition from the all-news cable channels, such as CNN, MSNBC, and FOX News, and their virtually nonstop coverage of a sensational event. As a result, when terrorists struck in the 1990s, their actions received even more media attention than earlier terrorist violence.

How do terrorists fare in their attempt to win recognition through the media? Early in his career as a mastermind of terrorist acts, George Habash of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) explained the reason for his activities when he said, "We force people to ask what is going on." Yet terrorists also force their target audiences to ask why they are at the receiving end of violence. The media are the most likely sources of this information—often by offering terrorists or their supporters the opportunity to directly communicate their

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[2]Based on several so-called fatwas (religious edicts) that were issued by Saudi-born suspected terrorist Osama bin Laden in the first half of 1998 in which he called on Muslims to kill Americans and their allies—civilian and military—in any country where it is possible to do so, American terrorism experts in the CIA, FBI, and other agencies linked the bombings in Kenya and Tanzania quickly to bin Laden and his organization, al Qaeda (the Base).

grievances, causes, and objectives. Unwittingly, the mass media thus accommodate terrorists' desire to advertise the reasons behind their violence. As NBC News anchor Tom Brokaw once explained, "I think we have to work harder to put [terrorism] into some kind of political context, however strong or weak that context might be."

Media critics, especially experts on foreign policy and national security matters who have held high government positions and dealt with terrorism, are not persuaded. Former Secretaries of State Henry Kissinger and Alexander Haig and former national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski are among those who have repeatedly criticized the media for allowing terrorists to convey their demands and grievances to their target societies—a tendency that often affects and limits government response options.[3]

Finally, it has been suggested that the news media, especially television, enhance terrorists' third publicity goal: to gain respectability. By treating terrorists, their sponsors, and sympathizers as legitimate political actors, the newscasts appear to bestow a degree of respectability on these figures—especially when known terrorists appear with government authorities, ambassadors, and other official personalities. Generally, the news coverage that plays into the respectability objective amounts to about 1 percent of terrorism coverage. But when terrorists and those who speak on their behalf make themselves available to the media during a terrorist situation, more than one-tenth the relevant television coverage tends to fit this category.

COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY AND TERRORISM

The proliferation of television and radio channels and, even more important, the vast technological advances in the transmission of news broadcasts, have greatly enhanced terrorists' chances of achieving their media-related goals. Two historical examples illustrate this.

In September 1970, members of the PFLP simultaneously hijacked four New York–bound airliners

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[3]What amount of news content on terrorist incidents addresses the causes and grievances of terrorists? Studies have found that newspapers in the United States and the United Kingdom typically devote about 10 percent of their terrorism coverage to this particular aspect. I found similar results when analyzing the content of American television news. The point is not that the media are in collusion with terrorists but rather that aggressive reporting in a highly competitive news business facilitates the recognition goal of terrorists who are often as media-savvy as Madison Avenue publicity experts or spin doctors in presidential campaigns.

carrying more than 600 passengers. Eventually, three of the planes were forced to land in a remote region of Jordan, where many of the passengers, mostly Americans and Europeans, were held for about three weeks. While the media in the United States and Europe reported extensively on the hijacking, the reporting paled in comparison to the great attention later hijackings and hostage situations received. The communications technology at the time did not allow instant live transmissions from remote locations. Satellite transmissions were in their early stages and extremely expensive; the live, nonstop reports that have become so common since then were not available. For the PFLP the spectacular hijacking was disappointing. The tense situation did receive media, public, and government attention, but no news organization overcovered the situation and forced President Richard Nixon or European heads of government to act under pressure. More important, the recognition goal was only slightly furthered: the mass public did not gain greater knowledge about the plight of the Palestinians because of the quadruple hijacking episode.

In 1972, during the Olympic Games in Munich, members of Black September, a Palestinian terrorist group, were far more successful in achieving the media-centered goals that had been sought by their PFLP brethren two years earlier. The group killed two Israeli athletes outright and took nine others hostage. As the deadly drama in the Olympic village unfolded, ending with the bloody massacre of the hostages at an airport near Munich during a rescue attempt by German security forces, an estimated 800 million people worldwide witnessed the live nonstop television coverage. In the process many in the global audience learned a considerable amount about Palestinian terrorist groups and their motives for violence. Black September undoubtedly chose Munich at the time of the Olympics because the technology, equipment, and personnel were in place to guarantee a television drama that had never before been witnessed in the global arena.

Nearly two decades later, hand-held cameras and new transmission technologies available to the news media allow terrorists to strike, hold hostages, and establish training camps without sacrificing publicity in the form of television coverage and especially powerful visual images. Yet while they will continue to exploit the traditional media, present and future terrorists are less dependent on the media gatekeepers because of an attractive new medium: the Internet. Web sites, message boards, chat rooms, and e-mail offer new opportunities for

terrorists to convey their messages directly to audiences everywhere, including like-minded people and potential new recruits, the traditional media, and the targets of their terrorist deeds and threats.

The possibilities of the Internet were first realized in late 1996, after members of the leftist Túpac Amaru guerrilla group infiltrated and took over the Japanese ambassador's compound in Peru's capital of Lima during a December 17 reception for 600 guests. Terrorism experts knew little or nothing about the small Túpac Amaru Revolutionary Movement, but information on the group was quickly posted on web sites that had been established and updated by members and supporters in North America and Europe, who stayed in touch with the abductors throughout the four-month ordeal (which ended when Peruvian troops stormed the embassy, killing the 14 guerrilla hostage-takers and freeing unharmed 71 of the 72 remaining hostages).

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, most, if not all, organizations perpetrating and advocating terrorism use the Internet in some manner: to communicate with each other, organize actions (often through the use of passwords and encryption to limit access to members and friends), rally supporters and sympathizers, enlist new members, advertise successful actions, honor fallen comrades—especially when they have died during suicide missions—and to convey grievances, threats, and demands to their targets at home and abroad.

According to counterterrorism officials in the United States government, the Saudi expatriate Osama bin Laden and his organization al Qaeda currently represent the greatest terrorist threat to the United States. While bin Laden, who is the FBI's "Most Wanted" fugitive, has repeatedly granted interviews to American and other Western journalists, his views and the full text of his various "fatwas" and declarations are available on many Internet sites. The World Islamic Front Statement of February 23, 1998, which was released on the web by bin Laden and four other leaders, contained the fatwa that proved prophetic less than six months later when more than 300 people were killed and 5,000 injured in the bombing of American embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. That edict—translated into English—remains posted on the Internet (http://www.fas.org/irp/world/para/docs/980223-fatwa.htm).

Domestic groups also use web sites to disseminate and reinforce their agenda, to rally their friends, and to frighten their foes. Even after antiabortion extremists killed and injured physicians and other workers at abortion clinics, some web sites of militant prolife organizations continued to indoctrinate, if not incite. One site (http://www.operationrescue.org), which displays a running counter of the number of abortions since the *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court ruling in 1973 and a photo gallery of aborted fetuses, reveals the names of "abortionists" and characterizes First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani, and others as "baby killers" because of their prochoice positions. The site recently urged supporters to do something against the storefront killing centers on "Main Street," arguing, "If you had a mass murderer/child molester in your community or church, wouldn't you want to know? Join the cry for justice and picket the communities, clubs, churches, and offices of baby killers."

The traditional media may carry excerpts such as this or bin Laden's edicts or describe the positions of these organizations, but web sites provide far more extensive information for the interested public—not only in the wake of a terrorist incident but on a continual basis. The same is true for information that details and condemns violent political deeds and threats.

This leaves a question: If terrorists indeed strike to be heard in the public sphere, will political violence subside or disappear once more people around the globe are connected to the World Wide Web and terrorists can circumvent the traditional media in their quest to communicate messages directly to friends and foes? The answer is that it is not likely in the foreseeable future, even if the Internet community grows more rapidly than predicted. Given the vast number of web sites, an actual act of political violence remains the best bet that the traditional media will report it at great length and in the process whet the public's appetite to obtain more information on the Internet. Just as business-to-consumer and business-to-business Internet companies spend considerable funds to advertise their existence and their services in the traditional media, terrorists, too, need print, radio, and television to draw attention to themselves. After all, without the devastating bombings in Saudi Arabia and East Africa, few people outside the circle of his associates and sympathizers would have had a reason to search the World Wide Web for information on bin Laden; and without the conventional media's generous coverage of the "Battle of Seattle," few people outside the small group of like-minded individuals would be interested in searching the Internet for information on modern-day anarchists in the United States and elsewhere. ■