

**TERRORISM AND THE MEDIA©**

**“Asleep in the same bed, but with different dreams”**

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Terrorism in its current form is the willful maiming and murdering of civilians to produce fear in a large viewing audience for the purpose of pressuring a government to change its policies. Yet, despite the awesome increase in this barbaric activity, the ominous nature of this new brand of terrorism has failed to register with, the public at large, democratic governments and certainly the media.

Although the most visible crime of our time there is no evidence that the United States and its western allies have a coherent strategy to combat its menace. Rather, by our own ignorance and inaction, we have made this form of political violence cost effective as we acquire the reputation as a target that can be struck with impunity.

What are the salient features of this new strain of terrorism? First of all, with sponsorship and financing from sovereign states, this modern brand of criminality has become international in character. Once the exclusive weapon of isolated idealists, fringe fanatics or political anarchists, terrorism has emerged as a career path to privilege and prestige. Accepted and protected by national governments, terrorists live a life style of travel, fame, financial security, excitement and even respectability.

Henceforth the new terrorists will no longer come just from the urban poor and illiterate but will be recruited from the more educated middle class. This means they will have the capability to stage more spectacular acts of mayhem that produce more victims and engender more worldwide publicity.

Second, the current strain of terrorist violence ignores the traditional distinction between civilian and combatant. Indeed, one of the most frightening aspects of contemporary terrorism is that innocent victims, selected either for their symbolic value or mere availability, are treated as potentially disposable objects. As Clare Sterling has said in her book, The Terror Network, “what matters is not the identity of the corpse, but its impact on the audience”.

Third, while terrorism was once used as a strategy of last resort, employed against tyrannical regimes, nowadays from the outset, it is aimed primarily at constitutional democracies. Undoubtedly, states committed to freedom of information and sensitive to shifting public opinion are much more vulnerable to propaganda and extortion than closed and repressive societies. For the most part, this accounts for the conspicuous absence of terrorism in totalitarian regimes.

Finally, today’s terroristic acts are “trijuncta in uno”, requiring along with a perpetrator and a victim, the public, for who it is all carefully choreographed, to gain maximum attention. Grievance claims, self-display and propaganda all come together in a theatrical performance for an audience, whose participation is solicited.

Since advertising terrorism increases its effectiveness by drawing attention to the insurgents and their announced cause, publicity is essential. However, publicity, important as it is, is not the only goal being sought. Also significant is the establishment of terrorists as political actors, which acceptance of their adversary role in a negotiation

process necessarily implies. In other words, the ultimate achievement for the politically powerless terrorist, is to gain recognition of the legitimacy of their grievances and victimization by taking part in government sanctioned bargaining.

Accordingly, the mass media is an intrinsic element of international terrorism. For it provides the oxygen that gives life, to what otherwise would be a stillborn event. Driven primarily by competitive zeal, the television reporter especially, “has camera and will travel”. As a result, from the Iranian hostage crisis, to the hijacking of the Achille Lauro, we have seen too many instances where electronic journalists have shown deference to the criminal captors, or usurped the legitimate role of government. For example, David Hartman on Good Morning America concluded an interview with Nahbi Berri of the Shi-ite Amahl, by asking, “is there anything else that you might want to say to President Reagan?”

Obviously it would be unrealistic to believe that the networks might avoid covering these potential dramas. However, is it too much to ask, that they not cast themselves in a collusive role, in what ultimately takes on the appearance of a made-for-TV docu-drama?

Responding to this loaded question, network representatives react in knee-jerk fashion, with The Cosell Cliché, “We’re just telling it like it is”. But we all know that you cannot separate the observer from what is observed, or the mere act of covering an event, changes its very nature. Since all human beings respond to events as perceived, not necessarily to objective reality, the media’s active involvement in these terrorist spectacles, has the effect of shaping both its own, and the audience’s perception. In sum, they give us a map, but in most cases, it does not correspond to the territory.

By indiscriminately menacing, maiming or murdering innocent people, the terrorist attempts to disorient and intimidate the viewing audience. What appears as a random atrocity, is so frightening to our sense of personal security, that we virtually need to assume the existence of an understandable reason, cause or explanation behind it. So we are already predisposed to learn the “underlying grievances” or “root causes”, which we think must have produced this frightening effect.

Living in “An Age of Alibi” we find it easy to mistake an antecedent event for the proximate cause (i.e. Using George Will’s illustration ... “The rooster crows so the sun rises”), while at the same time making us more susceptible to the righteous self-justification of criminal thugs, especially if they proclaim a political motive. (From the philosophy of Jean Jacques Rousseau to the lyrics of Steven Sondheim, the refrain has been the same: “We’re depraved on account of we’re deprived”.)

There’s no doubt about it, television especially, can and does shape the way we think. It sapped our will to continue the Vietnam War. It held all of us hostage on a 444-day emotional roller coaster ride after our embassy was seized in Iran. For most of us, it supercedes any first hand knowledge and experience that we might have about situations involving domestic or international conflict. It guides us in formulating models and

judgments, helps us determine credibility and by its very nature and structure, conveniently frames the issues at stake.

Unfortunately, despite an awesome increase in visual coverage, the ominous nature of the new variety of terrorism has failed to register with the media at large. It may even be argued that the major network's attempt at "balanced reporting", has only served to perpetrate a mythology of terrorism and contribute to the "take a terrorist to lunch mentality".

Harsh as this judgment may seem, evidence exists that coverage of "terrorist theatricals", have been a contributing factor to the current state of muddled thinking, which is legitimizing terrorism and even elevating it to respectability.

First, is the media's tendency to adopt the terminology of terrorists: for example, how often have we heard felons referred to as "commandos", "guerillas" and "freedom fighters". Since words define and limit our thinking, this corruption of language must be resisted. In sum, brutal torture should not be called "trials" or "interrogations" and criminals do not "execute", but murder their victims.

Second, is the application of a doctrine of moral equivalency, whereby those on our side are often given equal weight with the perpetrators of indiscriminate violence. Because of the adversarial relationship between the news media and government, there is a presumption an administration will attempt to conceal anything which might cause their actions to be questioned. So the media somehow feels obligated to contact academicians, foreign nationals and those with strange sounding names, to serve as a counterweight to the "official line". Of course, there are not always two sides to each and every conflict. Sometimes some things are just plain evil and cruel and fairness might require "one-sided reporting".

Lastly, the media must make every effort to avoid justifying the criminal acts of individuals because of purported noble causes. As referred to earlier, this "Officer Krupke Cop-out", would have us believe that terrorism stems primarily from political or socio-economic injustices. In reality, when we examine specific cases, the root cause seems to be psychological and pathological. Illustrative of this point would be the Japanese terrorists responsible for the Lod Airport Massacre of May 1972. According to the lone survivor, Koza Okamoto, he and his cohorts were recruited by North Korean agents, trained in Lebanon and Syria, financed by West Germans, armed in Italy and given their instructions by members of George Habash's People's Front for the Liberation of Palestine.

Reviewing the more recent terrorist episodes, such as the skyjacking of TWA Flight 847, the occupation of the Achille Lauro, the explosives planted on commercial airlines by Sikh and Tamil nationalists and the Berlin disco bombing, it is noteworthy that none of these crimes had a military or economic motive. What they have in common, is that all of these horrible actions were carefully designed and orchestrated to

gain international publicity for hopeless causes. In each case, the media, albeit unwittingly, supplied the vehicle by which this primary objective was achieved.

It should be obvious that the quality of our lives has already been altered and degraded by the disgraceful phenomenon of international terrorism. Yet, most of the media has been slow to recognize its complicity in this growing threat to our culture and survival. One notable exception has been syndicated columnist, David Broder, who has written, "If we thought about it more and understood its essence, we would probably stop writing about it, or we would cover it with considerably more care and respect".

Still, accepting the danger presented by international terrorism does not mean any less commitment to a free and independent press. Rather the media itself must balance the public's right to know with related responsibilities: Its obligations to safeguard human life and to ensure the preservation of a democratic society, if only for its own self-interest.