

## **The Media as an Enabler for Acts of Terrorism**

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### **Abstract**

This article examines the relationship between terrorism and the media. Terrorists use different types of media in a variety of ways, namely as an information instrument, to generate publicity and draw attention to their cause. This fatal attention is a critical component of understanding the concept of terrorism and explains why terrorists are drawn to the media. Moreover, the media and the resulting coverage serve as an enabler for acts of terrorism. Various types of media are discussed in the article. In conclusion, the relationship between terrorism and the media is analyzed. This paper asserts that the media does indeed function as an Enabler for Terrorism.

**Key words:** International Terrorism, Media, International Security, Information Operations

### **Introduction**

Various terrorist groups today realize that targeting their enemies through physical violence, while influential, is not solely the best recourse to gaining an overall victory for their cause. Sophisticated terrorists such as Osama Bin Laden, realize that in initiating their terrorist campaign, which not only is patience a factor, but there is also a piece called propaganda that is heavily involved in the orchestration of activities. The shaping of calculated events before during and after can determine how successful a huge and coordinated attack, such as those that took place during September 11, can be in causing panic, devastation and psychological effects on a government and its citizens.

Whether it be television, radio or the internet, terrorists realize that these instruments are valuable resources in instilling fear within a community or winning the hearts and minds of the populace. This paper will discuss why media has been placed in the "toolkits" of terrorists, the history and evolution of terrorist groups utilization of the medias as propaganda; compare and contrast how groups leverage the medias within their region; and finally, discuss that while the media has been an enabler for terrorist groups, it has also worked against their efforts. Further, methods can be used to further counter terrorism efforts will be discussed.

## **Fatal Attraction: Why Terrorists are Drawn to the Media**

Since the 1970s, the degree of global interconnectedness has been demonstrated throughout the world from economies to cultures. New methods of global communication have broadened the possibilities in organizing and mobilizing like-minded individuals and groups throughout the world to include activities of transnational criminal and terrorist networks like Al Qaeda. (Baylis & Smith, p. 20) "The technological advances associated with globalization have improved the capabilities of terrorist groups to plan and conduct operations with far more devastation and coordination than their predecessors could have imagined. In particular, technologies have improved the capability of groups and cells in the following areas: proselytize coordination, security, mobility and lethality." (Baylis & Smith, p. 489)

In the past, states have had the ability to control information flow and use far superior resources to undermine terrorists and their cause while simultaneously winning the hearts and mind of the populace. However, because of globalization, particularly in the area of technology, terrorist groups share in the ability to leverage media technologies to work in their best interest. The increase in internet service providers and the access to more proficient and inexpensive computer, software and wireless technology has empowered terrorist groups with the ability to advertise their causes through the World Wide Web. Further, enabling these groups are states with relaxed or ambivalent policies and authorities to govern the content shared with the mass audiences. (Baylis & Smith, p. 489) "Once limited to mimeographed manifestos, some terrorist and their supporters are now capable of building web sites to post any information they choose." (Baylis & Smith, p. 489)

Terrorists use different types of media in a variety of ways, namely as an information instrument, to generate publicity and draw attention to their cause. "Through propaganda, terrorists seek to communicate a particular message to a particular target audience." (Hoffman, p. 199) The purpose and messages behind their communication differs and is dependent on the targeted audience. These messages are designed to be informative, educational, rallying, for soliciting support, and for recruitment. They can also be coercive by being either threatening or winning over its audience through flattery. Through coercion, these groups hope to intimidate and undermine the populace's confidence in the government and leadership, and as a result cripple government and the security forces' ability to prevent, defend and or strike back when attacked. This information instrument can also be used by terrorist towards their own members in order to strengthen cohesiveness, boost morale and relieve groups of internal strife. In sum, sympathy and support from the populace for their cause is the ultimate goal.

## **The Evolution of Psychological Weapon**

Terrorist organizations did not always have the internet, television and other technologies to propagate their ideologies, recruit and influence the populace. They took plenty of their leads from the conventional war fought throughout history. Archaic forms of influence from intimidation to kidnappings to assassinations were once the norm. And while some of these methods are continued today, history has demonstrated that overtime the population grows weary and numb to the violence and no longer are fully affected as much by this form of influence. Over time, leaflet and more sophisticated forms of literature made its way into the toolkits of terrorist organizations.

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With technology improving at the turn of the century and thereafter, movies were added and winning over the populace became a key element. The silent film "Birth of a Nation," which was released in 1915, is set in the aftermath of the Civil War and introduces the Ku Klux Klan (KKK). In the silent film, the KKK is depicted as heroes and the saviors of southern whites from renegade freed slave. (PBS, 1915) Once viewed by the various audiences, "the Klan used the picture as a recruitment tool and experienced a revival directly attributed to the film. National membership peaked in 1920 at an estimated 4.5 million, and Griffith's heroic portrayal of the Klan allegedly inspired several lynchings." (PBS, 1915) Over the course of the 20th century, the movie was used to revive and recruit new members for the Klan.

Radio soon lent itself to the toolkits of terrorist organization after being successfully used to disseminate propaganda during WWI, WWII, the Korean War and various other conflicts. Nicknamed Tokyo Rose, Axis Sally and various other names by troops, these radio personalities' main goal was to demoralize troops in the opposition and their nations. Terrorist groups took their cues from this form of propaganda and since adapted it to their strategy in disseminating misinformation and winning over the population.

Prior to the creation of the internet and other medias, right-winged and leftist terrorist groups such as the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA) and Hamas have historically telephoned media agencies or distributed leaflets to claim their involvements in attacks. (Cragin & Daly, p. 37)

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, p. 12)

### **Internet**

The internet is an information tool used in namely all parts of the world. The internet has made life a lot simpler for the average person who is looking to earn a degree, engage in commerce exchanges, make purchases, write friends and look up information. Unfortunately while it yields these benefits, this capability is a double-edged sword; these benefits are also open to terrorists. Whether right-winged or left, terrorists view the internet as a powerful tool; it is inexpensive, easy to set up and can be found just about anywhere.

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. By using the internet as a "one stop shop," these groups have virtually limited the amount of work that goes into conducting their activities. No longer do they have to reveal themselves and become known targets for counterterrorism agencies. They can conduct meetings, make purchases for bomb-making devices, purchase travel tickets under aliases, coordinate attacks and gather in one location without physically being present. Through

this capability, can also influence and inform those who are on the fence about social and political change. The internet is a home that hosts a plethora of capabilities that facilitate groups' causes; they include capabilities such as hosting websites, videos, video games, literature and music used to leverage propaganda to draw in its targeted audiences.

## Websites

Virtually all terrorist groups host websites. Despite the diversity and ideologies of terrorist groups and their websites, they all share a variety of key characteristics. They are well designed, colorful, full of "eye-popping" graphics and host a variety of content to hold the individual viewer's attention. Whether right-winged or leftists, these sites publicize the terrorist group's history, mission, ideologies, and their overall goal in annihilating its adversaries. Additionally, these websites have gone as far as to set up donation sites in hopes of collecting funds from individual and state sympathizers. (Hoffman, p. 206-207)

Don Black, the former leader of the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) created the first white supremacist website, Stormfront. Websites like his, spread the Klan's conventional message of hatred towards African-Americans, Jews and immigrants. "One Klan site proclaims goals such as maintaining and defending "the superiority of the White race," observing "a marked difference between the White and Negro race," and educating "against miscegenation of the races" (ADL, 2000), while another site "pledges to "stop the uncontrolled, outrageous and unprecedented plague of immigration." (ADL, 2000)

Other right-winged terrorist groups such as Neo-Nazis and the Aryan Nation have created and maintained websites publicizing the anti-Semitic and racist ideologies of Adolf Hitler's Nazi party. (ADL, 1998) "Additionally, many neo-Nazi skinheads, such as the Oi! Boys and Hammer Skin Nation have established websites, many of which are devoted to racist hard rock music." (ADL, 1998) The World Church of the Creator (WCOTC), have taken their hate and have created a number of attractive, well-designed websites, many of which depict vicious drawings of the group's supporters brutalizing African-Americans and Jews. (ADL, 1998)

In the far left, "Middle East Arab terrorist organizations in particular are seen as being on the "cutting edge or organizational networking," having demonstrated an ability to harness information technology for offensive operations, as well as using the more typical propaganda, fund-raising, and recruiting purposes of other groups." (Hoffman, p. 207) They effectively mastered the use of the internet to leverage propaganda material on their websites. Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's al Qaeda cell in Iraq was quite proficient in their use of websites. His group posted video footage of roadside bombings, mutilations and kidnappings of their victims. Further other members of al Qaeda released short propaganda movies to further their cause. (Kaplan, 2006) These images were orchestrated to intimidate and amplified the sentiment that al Qaeda meant serious business and was a force not to be crossed.

Terrorists have evolved their user level skills to one that demonstrates a proficiency in mastering the intricacy of multiple levels in operating a website and computer systems in general. "Terrorists have developed sophisticated encryption tools and creative techniques that make the Internet an efficient and relatively secure means of correspondence." (Kaplan, 2006) Terrorists also use their websites to fundraise. Donations are accepted through online sites as common as "Pay Pal." (Kaplan, 2006)

## Audio and Visual

As discussed previously, terrorists use media in a variety of way. One of the ways they leverage their propagandizing efforts is through audiovisual products. The audiovisual projects are either posted on their website or sent directly to news agencies. These products glorify their achievements and advance their goals and range from short video clips of attacks on their targets to recorded addresses by leader, such as al Qaeda cell leaders, to longer films relevant to the terrorist group's cause (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 25) Most video clips posted to websites run the gamut of a few second to a couple of minutes, identify the groups responsible for the message and, if religious in nature, provides a religious message. (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 26)

Both right-winged and leftist use the influence of music not only to attract their audiences but also through this medium, hope to influence individuals and groups thoughts on social and political issues and even influence violence. The song "Your Worst Nightmare," by the white supremacist band "Bound for Glory" promotes violence against African-Americans, labeling them as "niggers" and "parasites of society." The song gives a vigilante-like overtone with verses stating, "I'm the man, I'm taking the stand, to rid the world of you is my plan." (lyricstimes.com) What is more alarming, like many other hate oriented songs that entice violence, "Your Worst Nightmare" can even be sent to just about anyone as a cell phone ringtone. (lyricstimes.com)

According to the Anti Defamation League, racist and anti-Semitic rock music has become the major recruitment tool and source of funding for hate groups. Annual sales have soared into millions of dollars for these hate movements. (ADL, 2004)

Left-winged terrorists groups use music and audio sounds in a similar manner. Like right-winged groups, their music is used as a recruitment tactic to draw in followers and entice violence. The Revolution Armed Force of Columbia (FARC) maintains "approximately 14 of its own radio transmitting stations, known as the "Bolivarian Radio Network," which helps the group communicate with its members in the large area under its control. One of these stations, "Voice of the Resistance," transmits FARC propaganda, recruitment messages, and popular local music." (Cragin & Daly, p. 38)

Other Middle East Arab terrorist groups have taken their music and have created audiovisual files that are made available for viewing on their websites. "Songs provide the soundtrack to many attack videos and virtually all longer films. In keeping with Salafi practice, male choirs perform songs without instrumental accompaniment. The tone is either martial, with gunfire and explosions audible in the background, or plaintive, with the former genre predominating." (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 31) On both right-winged and leftist websites, groups make their songs and audiovisual files available for downloading to make dissemination of their ideological message easier. (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 31)

## Publications

Various groups published weekly and monthly publications and even occasional leaflets to distribute to the populace. Since technology has become more and more affordable, and decreases the cost of production of publications and the use of manpower to disseminate, the internet is also used by these groups to post their publications. While documents are still printed in regions where the internet is not as easily accessible due to the lack of infrastructural

development, the internet has become the main mode of dissemination. Terrorist groups post these publications, which are in some cases professionally laid out with full color photographs, to further catch the eye of their targeted audience members.

The Aryan Nation have posted violent literature and publications to their website. Some documents on their website includes "Metzgar's War" newspaper and "Essay of a Klansman," by Louis Beam. (Berlet, p.3)

While most will argue that it is not a terrorist organization but rather a facilitator of hate paraphernalia, Resistance Inc., founded by the 24 year old white supremacist George Buri, is a company that provides documents that publicizes right-winged ideologies. On top of video documentaries, the Resistance Inc. website hosts its magazine, other forms of literature and order sheets for racist publications. (Schneider, 1995) Ansar al-Sunnah, an Iraq based militant Salafi group, produces 41 issues of a monthly publication called the Mujahidin Roundup. The publication hosted military operational press releases, and sometimes the images of ID cards of executed adversaries. (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 21) Sawt al-Jihad (Voice of the Jihad), another leftist publication, in 2003 was al Qaeda's "premiere" online magazine that focused on the Arabian Peninsula's jihad and mujahidin. The publication focused on al Qaeda endeavors in Saudi Arabia and aspects of the terrorist movements in Iraq. (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 23) Some of these group and individuals have written books about their movements. Right-winged groups have used books such as Adolph Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and William Luther Pierce's "The Turner Diaries" as a recruitment and how to manual tool. "The Turner Diaries" is probably the most widely read book among far-right extremists; many have cited it as the inspiration behind their terrorist organizing and activity. (ADL, 1998) FBI agents removed clippings of "The Turner Diaries" from the vehicle of Timothy McVeigh, the man convicted in the Oklahoma city bombing. Similar to the bombing conducted by McVeigh, "The Turner Diaries" included a plot of a bomb attack of a federal facility. (CNN, 1997)

Leftist terrorist groups, such as al Qaeda in Iraq and leading thinker in the "global jihadist movement," have authored some books as well. "Announcement to the People of the Birth of the Islamic State," authored by Uthman bin Abd al-Rahman al-Tamimi is a book that provides justification for al Qaeda's establishment of the Islamic state of Iraq. All books can be accessed electronically for downloading. (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 24)

## News Media

Besides the internet and publications, terrorist have sought out other means in broadcasting their ideologies. "All that terrorists want is a large audience, and they have learned to exploit the media's own modus operandi to maximize their reach." (Martin) By committing violent acts they hope to draw attention through news media which broadcasts their violent activities across the globe. While the aim of embarrassing and demonstrating that a country like the U.S. is vulnerable to terrorist attacks, the mastermind behind the September 11 incidents, knowing the media, recognized that the mass media coverage of the incident would take place and have a huge psychological impact on the world. "Terrorist therefore plan their operations in a manner that will shock, impress and intimidate, ensuring that their acts are sufficiently daring and violent to capture the attention of the media, and in turn of the public and government as well." (Hoffman, p. 255)

For example, on tactic used, according to Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, in "Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media," the Red Brigades, chose Wednesdays and Saturdays as "their preferred communication days" so that their activities would make it into the more robust Thursday and Sunday newspapers. (Martin) Another example of this occurred during 1972 Olympic games in Munich where Israeli athletes were kidnapped. Black September, the terrorist group responsible for the kidnappings, recognized that just about every news agency would be present to cover the event and as a result used this opportunity to be heard. (Ross, 2007) "The competition between global news outlets ensures that the images of successful and/or dramatic attack reach the widest audience possible." (Baylis & Smith, p. 490) This applies to both Western and Pan-Arab audiences. "Mainstream Arab media amplify the [terrorists'] efforts, transmitting their message to an audience of millions." (Kimmage & Rodolfo, p. 3)

Taking the news media one step further, rather than getting their "15 minutes of fame" by being mentioned on local and national news channels, both right-winged and leftist groups have either created shows on local access networks or created their own news stations. During the late 1980s, the Aryan Nation hosted its own television show called "Race and Reason," on local cable access channel. (Berlet, p. 4) Resistance Inc. established by some 250 American and Canadian hate groups, also hosts shortwave radio broadcasts and citizen access television. (Schneider, 1995)

Similar to leading the pack on website technology, Middle East terrorists have embarked on owning their own television stations. "Among the pioneers in this process has been Hezbollah, whose al-Manar television station along with its news website on the internet, have afforded this movement an unprecedented ability to shape and tailor its external communications." (Hoffman, p. 222) By owning their television stations, terrorist groups have the ability to assume complete control over what is broadcasted on their stations. (Hoffman, p. 222) Al-Manar started off with limited air time and content when it first began broadcasting in 1991. Within a decade, the station was able to transmit via satellite 24 hours a day in various languages and countries to include France, Iraq, Kosovo, Kuwait, Russia, Sweden, Syria, and even the U.S. (Hoffman, p. 223)

### **Conclusion: Biting the hand that feeds it**

On October 29, 2008, one of the headlines on ABC News read "NATO Commander In Afghanistan On Media Offensive To Counter Negative Headlines." In the article U.S. general Gen. David McKiernan argued that the media is focused too much on negative reporting and that "[news agencies] don't report the positive events or the absolute brutality of the illegitimacy of the Taliban." (Straziuso, 2008) Further into the article, the general highlighted an event where insurgents, after planting a roadside bomb, grabbed children and used them as human shields when they came under attack by NATO Forces. This reporting by the general, although it highlighted the brutish behavior of the Taliban, it painted an intimidating picture of a group ruthless enough to have no regard for even the life of a child. Rather than focus on this fact, the general could have used this opportunity to discuss all of the positive things that U.S. troops have accomplished thus far in Afghanistan. In reading the article there is no way of telling if the general did in fact tell a few good news stories during his interview. The point is, if he did, the "human shields" seemed more news worthy to print.

By opening this conclusion with this media event that took place, the hope is to identify that while this form of counterterrorism attempts to win over the population, unintentional self-inflicted wounds can occur as well.

Often, websites and other forms of media are used as counterterrorism measures to protect citizens; whether it be at the agency level or in some public information venue. Whether it is an informational piece in a news cast or a website that informs an individual on how to protect themselves from terrorist threats, terrorist groups will leverage this information to create more effective and efficient means to counter this counterterrorism effort. For example, terrorist groups have videotaped their improvised explosive device (IED) attacks on Coalition Forces in both Iraq and Afghanistan. The U.S. was losing many of its sons and daughters on the battlefield to this form of devastation. To inform the U.S. population that their hard earned tax dollars were in fact going toward protecting America's sons and daughters, an information campaign throughout the media was launched to publicize the newly up armored M1114 humvees. The media allowed for this information not only to be shared by Western media, but naturally made it way to adversarial groups. Terrorist groups recognized that their IEDs were not as effective on these new vehicles; as a result they created more powerful and destructive bombs to counter this effect. They again videotaped the results and posted it to their website as they have done in the past with other propaganda types of material. The U.S. military in return had to develop a stronger and more impact resistance vehicle and other methods to counter terrorism efforts; it is an ongoing battle and will continue as long as the information is publicized, shared and as long as terrorist groups continue to dominate their societies and the world with their ideologies.

While these wounds can negatively impact counterterrorism efforts, this does not make terrorist groups immune either as described with the humvee case. "The same technologies and processes giving terrorism its global reach also enables more effective means of states to combat them." (Baylis & Smith, p. 495) These technologies allow counterterrorism agencies to formulate patterns of terrorist groups activities and prevent attacks before they occur; financial information can be tracked and analyzed regardless of what the fundraising event is for; and various other tracking, comparison and analyzing can be conducted through the same technologies used by terrorist groups. (Baylis & Smith, p. 494) The only solution to this dilemma is for counterterrorism agencies to continue to keep pace or remain one step ahead of terrorist groups. The other option is to handicap these groups by taking away their technical subject matter experts into custody. While this is quite a difficult task to do and may only work in some countries, in the U.S. where freedom of speech is paramount, any arrest or detainment is in violation of an individual's first amendment rights.

Freedom of the press and speech is another challenge faced. Some argue that limiting access to the press to obtain information is wrong and that the public deserves to know what is taking place throughout the world. Sadly they fail to understand the impact of unlimited dissemination of information when arguing limitations. Appeals to patriotism to muzzle independent media; legal and legislative measure in place; self-censorship; and steps taken to restrict privacy on the internet and encryption software to protect email traffic are just some of the tools that some argue should not be used against the media. (UNESCO 2002) This is a highly debatable and disputed topic. The one thing that is indisputable is that the media feeds on violence; and whoever can tell the most violent story wins the audience. This is not really about freedom of speech, but rather who will get the biggest audience and thus reap the capital benefits. While this may be the case, it is the audience that provides the media with the feedback and direction it needs to take to please them. The audience's hunger for violence can be deemed



as one of the challenges; especially in places where a population goes unrecognized (such as Palestine), and where violence seems to be the only mechanism that measures success or gives the populace a voice.

Countries that allow groups like Hezbollah air their television shows, are in fact enabling this group to capitalize on its information campaign. Similar to freezing accounts that support and enable terrorist groups, foreign governments could stop their channels from running in their country. For the U.S. in particular, while blocking these broadcasts could very well be the answer, it again intrudes upon individual rights; which could in fact ignite quite a few domestic debates.

Google has taken a step in the right direction; however, not because they want to but because foreign law has prompted them to. In order to avoid legal liability, Google's French and German no longer offer anti-Semitic and pro-Nazi websites to surf; however these sites still remain on Google's main U.S. based site. (McCullagh , 2002) German law considers the publication of Holocaust denials and similar material as an incitement of racial and ethnic hatred, and therefore illegal. In the past, Germany has ordered Internet providers to block access to U.S. Web sites that post revisionist literature. France has similar laws that allowed a students' antiracism group to successfully sue Yahoo in a Paris court for allowing Third Reich memorabilia and Adolf Hitler's "Mein Kampf" to be sold on the company's auction sites. (McCullagh , 2002) However, in November 2001, a U.S. judge ruled that Yahoo was free from liability because of the First Amendment's guarantee of free speech. (McCullagh , 2002)

Another site banned from Google.de and Google.fr listings is Stormfront.org, a site previously mentioned as a white supremacist website. Because Google is a private organization and does not fall under the government, it has the right in general to determine what site can be listed and the way it will appear. (McCullagh , 2002) A Google spokesman stated that the company takes these kinds of decisions seriously and does everything it can to limit legal exposure, while providing high quality search results. (McCullagh, 2002) Clearly, Google in their decisions to keep some of these sites on their main sites while removing them from others is dealing with harsh politics. What this boils down to, again, is winning over the populace.

This paper can end by stating that the First Amendment should have caveats when it comes to terrorist activities; however, many of America's sons and daughter have died so that individual and groups can have this right of freedom domestically and on foreign soil. Further, there are sons and daughters all over the world that are making the same sacrifices so they too can share in similar liberties. So, this is not the answer. The answer is more complex than this and requires a continuous concerted effort on winning over the hearts and minds of the populace coupled with continued counterterrorism efforts. By winning over the populace, more groups like the Egyptian Islamic Jihad and Japanese Red Army will lose support and fail in their existence.

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