Chapter 1

Terroredia: Exchanging Terrorism Oxygen for Media Airwaves

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism and the media have a unique relationship that has been long evident in history and academia. Due to modern advancements in communication and information technologies, the relationship has grown strong and widely influential. Mutual interaction, dependency, and inseparability have characterized the co-existence of terrorists and media personnel. Looking into the various dynamics, discussions, and descriptions of this relationship, this chapter offers a conceptualization of this relationship by introducing and defining a new term. Terroredia is the interactive, codependent, and inseparable relationship between terrorism and the media, in which acts of terrorism and their media coverage are essentially exchanged to achieve the ultimate aims of both parties—exchanging terrorism’s wide-ranging publicity and public attention (i.e., oxygen) for media’s wide-ranging reach and influence (e.g., airwaves).

It is highly unlikely for people to believe that terrorists and media personnel could be best friends forever. One’s initial thoughts may be that friendship is considered a positive phenomenon while terrorism is a pejorative term. However, on second thought—after a thorough reconnaissance—many might agree to this metaphoric statement. Strong friendships can exist among the same and different kind of criminals. This is not to say that media personnel are criminals; moreover, terrorists have not been even considered normal criminals, if at all, by many individuals, groups, organizations, and states, depending on which adversary in a terrorist event they side with. Instead, it goes without much argument that friends usually help, if not necessarily benefit from, each other. The unique relationship between terrorists and media personnel can be extremely helpful for each party, not only to achieve their ultimate goals, but also to survive. This had been the case all over the long history of terrorism, persists in our present time, and will certainly continue to evolve in the future.

Modern terrorism “can be understood as an attempt to communicate messages through the use of orchestrated violence” (Tsfati & Weimann, 2002, p. 317). Terrorists use the media as a key
mechanism to communicate a message to “members of the public that are not directly harmed by the violence” that “could be harmed by future attacks” (Braithwaite, 2013, p. 96). Brigitte L. Nacos (2007) asserts that understanding terrorism should focus on the centrality of communication via the media in terrorists’ calculations of the actions’ consequences, the likelihood of gaining media attention, and the likelihood of gaining entrance into the triangle of political communication (between civil society, government decision-makers, and the media).

Since the introduction of the printing press, there has been always a relationship between terrorism and the media that has been growing stronger over time due to modern development of media and communication technologies (Eid, 2013). Numerous studies have discussed this relationship (e.g., Alexander & Latter, 1990; Alger, 1989; Biernatzki, 2002; Cho et al., 2003; Crelinsten, 1989; Elmquist, 1990; Finn, 1990; Freedman & Thussu, 2012; Grinyaev, 2003; Kelly, 1989; Nacos, 2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2005, 2006, 2007, 2012; Picard, 1990; Protheroe, 1990; Robinson, 2000; Steuter, 1990; Wittebols, 1992). This relationship “has existed for centuries,” since the time when the means pre-mass media relied on “after the event word-of-mouth dissemination;” its roots are “traceable to nineteenth century anarchists and their concept of ‘propaganda of the deed’” (Surette, Hansen, & Noble, 2009, p. 360).

Terrorists have become increasingly aware of their relationship with the media; they are clever in achieving utmost benefits through both using the media in the best way of obtaining public attention and also avoiding to be used by the media. The media are terrorism’s “two-edged weapons” used both by and against it (Combs, 2013, p. 166). They are “instruments of terrorism,” “agents in the spread of terrorist acts,” and “tools for manipulation by both terrorists and their adversaries” (Schmid & Jongman, 2008, p. 111). The media “are not simply external actors passively bringing the news of terrorist incidents to global audiences but are increasingly seen as active agents in the actual conceptualization of terrorist events” (Freedman & Thussu, 2012, p. 10). They possess great abilities to enhance or diminish terrorism stories and ideas (Eid, 2013). The media are “the primary vehicle that the public has come to know and thus fear terrorism” (Chermak, 2003, p. 6). Meanwhile, terrorists sometimes “feel ‘used’ by the media which pick up their action, but offer no guarantee of transmitting their message” (Schmid, 1989, p. 559). To avoid manipulations of their messages by the media, terrorists have found new media and the Internet to be good alternatives through which they can produce and publicize their messages.

Terrorism has become “mediaized” as demonstrated in the direct links between terrorists, political processes, and the success of media outlets (Louw, 2003). As Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher once said “publicity is the oxygen of terrorism” and that terrorists “understood this and acted accordingly” (Nacos, 2006, p. 208). Terrorists choreograph events to leverage media coverage during and after their attacks (Surette, Hansen, & Noble, 2009). The media that play a fundamental role in relation to terrorism are not only limited to press, radio, television, or Internet news, they involve “the whole of the contemporary mediascape” (Conway & McInerney, 2012, pp. 4-5), including films, television entertainment, television drama, graphic novels, computer games, and so on. These “multiple media . . . transmit powerful images” and “help to trigger highly emotional responses to the terrorist event;” through television, the Internet, and other networked information technologies, “we see terrorism everywhere in real time, all the time” (Der Derian, 2005, p. 26). Particularly, television has become the leading news medium through which terrorist events are framed for audiences (Biernatzki, 2002). Media organizations and professionals have a powerful influence on audiences and have the ability to impact public opinion; the framing of their messages is par-