Chapter 7

Media Stereotypes of Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyzes different stereotypes used by media when covering terrorism events. It discusses topics such as: media stereotypes of different terrorist groups, how media responses differ according to the type of terrorism, type of medium (e.g., print, broadcast, and on-line), location of the headquarters of the medium (regional subjectivity), the audience of the medium (national, transnational, or international), and the political affiliation and market orientation of the medium. This chapter attempts to provide an additional analysis of the way that these stereotypes are formulated by the use of basic and not so basic rhetorical techniques of the invention, arrangement, style, memory, and delivery applied. All the above are analyzed against the background of the basic social determinants of journalism: political pressures and censorship, technological possibilities, news management and public relations strategies of the army, economic pressures and professional culture, and the basic news values or news selection criteria (e.g., timing of the event, negativity, meaningfulness, and reference to elite nations and persons).

INTRODUCTION

Some scholars believe that acts of terrorism are nothing without the publicity from media, and terrorism results from freedom of the press (Biernat, 2002; Jenkins, 1983; Laqueur, 1976). However, they ignore that terrorism groups exist for thousands of years preceding the establishment of the press and when press was heavily censored.

Many justify these ideas with evidence that television (now combined with the Internet) is the leading news medium, and television and the Internet allow for strong visual impact and can play with the audiences’ emotions. Ramonet says that “events which produce strong pictures [and emotional shock] . . . consequently go to the top of the news hierarchy” (cited in Biernat, 2002, p. 5). Therefore, all terrorists need to do is create visual situations in which they can gain attention and spread fear.

Yet others, such as Wardlaw, argue that “there is no clear evidence that publicity (by the media) is responsible for significantly affecting the occurrence of terrorism” (cited in Biernat, 2002, p. 6). Two models developed by Barnhurst (1991) further analyze the situation. In the “culpable-media model” media are seen as part of the cycle: media coverage of terrorism causes more acts
of terrorism, which stimulate increased media coverage. It was found, however, that if coverage of terrorist attacks is censored from the media, even larger acts of violence might be resorted to (Biernatzki, 2002). The “vulnerable media model” depicts the media as victims of terrorism because, “any control on coverage, even a natural one, will be ineffective because terrorists can shift to other forms of communication by striking vulnerable points in the infrastructure of liberal societies” (Ibid, p. 7).

Despite the above, the reality is that terrorists might be given the floor to speak to the media, but they never actually have real “access” to the media; they are not given an opportunity to define the agenda, the platform, or the issues to be discussed. It is always the case that the final spin on the story is given to journalists relying on official sources, making them responsible for the “framing” of the story (Gitlin, 1984).

It is this “framing,” which is defined by official sources, that usually defines the stereotyping of terrorist groups. For example, media publicity is received by al-Qaeda, however, they never gain real access to the media in the sense of defining the agenda and receiving positive framing from mainstream media. As Schmid and de Graaf point out, while terrorists may still have considerable influence on the way the media report on their actions, their opponents, “the government and its security forces, are in fact the main sources for the media” (1982, p. 98) and they always have the “last word,” (i.e., the opportunity to comment, or “the last reply” and determine the “spin” of the story).

Further, as Brian McNair (2003) explains, the audience observes limited elements of attacks—such as the bomb exploding or the suspect waving his weapon. However, they are rarely provided with the justification, historical background, or political context of the event taking place. Kelly and Mitchell describe the basic model of terrorism stereotyping “by sapping terrorism of its political content, the media turn the crusader into a psychopath” (1981, p. 288).

TERRORISM AND MEDIA COVERAGE

Terrorists know that their activity is 10% violence and 90% publicity, whereas the US response in Afghanistan and Iraq is 90% violence and 10% strategic communications (Taylor, 2009, p. 14).

It should be noted that it is not the purpose of this chapter to discuss extensively the term “terrorism.” Instead, this chapter focuses on the part of the definition that sees terrorism as a media management strategy with which terrorists try to reach different audiences, and the “reaction” of the media to this strategy, targeting mainly but not exclusively on the stereotypes they use.

Regional Subjectivity

There are several ways to categorize terrorist groups, such as separatist, revolutionary, religious, and social—with their communication strategies varying accordingly. One of the ways is based on the geography of their operations, as national, transnational, international, or global. The majority of the terrorist organizations operate within national borders for the majority of their actions (e.g., Euskadi Ta Askatasuna (ETA) in Spain, Chechens in Russia, the Shining Path in Peru, or the Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan (PKK) in Turkey). Moreover, there are terrorist organizations that have national goals but also perform terrorist acts transnationally (e.g., the Tamil Tigers). Additionally, there are terrorist organizations that both operate transnationally and also have transnational goals (e.g., the Irish Republican Army) and finally, there are also terrorist organizations that have global goals and actions (e.g., al-Qaeda).

Further, several ways to classify the media exist; for instance, the geographical base of the headquarters and the audience of the media also influence the stereotyping of the terrorists. There are geographical- and audience-based definitions of media, which classify them as: