Chapter 8
Tactics of Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Palestinian terrorists staged a number of spectacular hijackings of commercial airliners, exploited the often prolonged hostage situations to win massive news coverage of their political grievances, and seemed to inspire other groups to use the same tactics to highlight their grievances and demands. While the bombing of facilities was in the past and remains today the preferred mode of terrorist attacks, terrorists have also carried out assassinations, suicide missions, and kidnappings with various tactics fashionable at certain times and less so during other periods. For that reason, terrorism scholars, government officials, and journalists have pondered the question of mass-mediated contagion for decades without agreeing whether news about terrorist attacks inspires copycat strikes. Given the advances in communication and information technology and changes in the global media landscape during the last decade or so, this chapter reconsiders arguments surrounding contagion theories and contends that old and new media are important carriers of the virus of hate and instrumental in tactical and ideological contagion.

INTRODUCTION

On July 22, 2011, Anders Behring Breivik, a 32-year old Norwegian, detonated a car bomb near government buildings in Oslo killing eight people. He then made his way to the nearby island of Utoya, where he shot to death 69 people, most of them teenagers, in a camp of the Norwegian Labor Party’s Youth League. From his arrest through his trial in the spring of 2012, Breivik justified his deeds as defensive actions of a Christian crusader against the onslaught of Muslim immigrants and Norway’s “Islamic colonization.” The particular targets were liberal multiculturalists because they support immigration. Breivik revealed in court that he had consulted various media accounts, especially the Internet, to study the tactics of terrorist groups and lone wolves in order to determine how to carry out his own attacks. He was well informed about the ingredients of the truck bombs used in the first World Trade Center Bombing in 1993 and the Oklahoma City Bombing two years later. But most of all he studied the tactics of al-Qaeda Central and like-minded groups calling them “the most successful revolutionary movement in the world.” In spite of their opposing views and goals,
Breivik expressed his admiration for al-Qaeda’s tactics and suggested that they should inspire his fellow nationalists as they inspired him and his actions. “I have studied each one of their actions, what they have done wrong, what they have done right,” he told the court. “We want to create a European version of Al Qaeda.”

Breivik had hoped to copycat another and particular gruesome al-Qaeda tactic, the beheading of captured enemies. Obviously informed that former Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland had scheduled a visit at the youth camp on the day of his attack, he planned to take her hostage, decapitate her and post the video of her execution on the Internet. To his regret, when he arrived on the island, Brundtland had already returned to the mainland.¹

In this case, a terrorist used his trial as global propaganda stage and an opportunity to describe in considerable detail that he was directly influenced by the reported tactics of other groups and individuals, when he planned his own terror attacks. Media conducted contagion, however, comes in different forms and is not always as obvious as in the case of Anders Breivik as the following example demonstrates.

On April 19th, 1995 Timothy McVeigh ignited a homemade truck bomb that destroyed the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in downtown Oklahoma City, killed 168 persons, injured close to 700 others, and triggered massive news coverage in the United States and abroad. Five days later the director of the California Forest Association, Gilbert Murray, was killed instantly when he opened a small package that had been mailed to his office. The enclosed message revealed that the sender was the mysterious person, dubbed “Unabomber” by the FBI, who had killed already two other people and injured 23 via mail bombs since 1978. That same day, The New York Times received a letter from the Unabomber threatening another deadly mailing unless the newspaper published a 35,000-word manifesto he had written to explain his motives. It is difficult to imagine that there was not any link between the non-stop coverage of the terrorist spectacle in Oklahoma City on the one hand and the timing of the simultaneous mailings to Murray’s office and the Times on the other. My guess was then and is now that the Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, was miffed because of the relatively modest news his mail bombs had received over the years compared to the tremendous attention the mass media paid to the Oklahoma City bombing. More importantly, whereas McVeigh’s grievances and motives were prominently covered since he had intentionally posited clues in his car (i.e., references to the lethal clashes between federal agents and anti-government groups and individuals at Waco and Ruby Ridge), there had been no definitive news about the Unabomber’s causes in the wake of his long mail bombing trail.

Thus, he wasted no time to finally get his share of media attention and recognition of his causes by sending off another mail bomb and a threatening letter to the country’s leading newspaper. By September 1995, when The Washington Post published his full-length manifesto “Industrial Society and Its Future”—sharing the printing costs with The New York Times—the Unabomber had already overtaken McVeigh as terrorist newsmaker-in-chief and seen his causes widely publicized and discussed in the mass media.

If the deadly mail bomb, the letter to the Times, a follow-up threat to bomb the Los Angeles airport contained in a letter to the San Francisco Chronicle, and a host of demands and threats communicated to several newspapers and magazines were indeed inspired by the high volume and nature of news about Oklahoma City in order to get comparable coverage—and I believe that they were—it is impossible to prove media-related contagion here unless the imprisoned Kaczynski were to confirm such an effect with respect to the timing of a terrorist bombing and a threat some time in the future.

While this case speaks to the difficulty of finding conclusive evidence for direct media-induced