

# Terrorism and the mass media assignment

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Terrorism and Mass Media What makes someone so powerful that if they were murdered, they would be labeled as assassinated? A similar question can be asked to that of terrorism—when can an act of violence properly be called “terrorism”? In the wake of 9/11, then President Bush declared war against terrorism but just who specifically he was referring to is still being debated today. However, one piece of the puzzle in making that determination is the use of mass media to combat terrorism.

Definitions of terrorism is abound but the general consensus is that terrorism is a criminal act that puts people in a state of terror and/or uses force or violence. The observation that “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter frequently can be applied to statements about terrorist actions made by both governments and mass media. The media is becoming increasingly competitive and commercial pressures are complicated by the fact that many top executives come from the corporate world and no longer from the ranks of journalists.

Television has become the leading news medium, with newspapers only supplementary to TVs instant, live, emotional coverage. Events produce strong pictures that consequently go to the top of the news hierarchy. The emotional shocks of these pictures are what sell. Terrorists know that if they get the attention of the mass media that they have promoted their cause, whatever it might be. Walter Laqueur said that “the media are the terrorist’s best friends,...the terrorists’ act by itself is nothing, publicity is all. Research has demonstrated that a link between media coverage of terrorism events and the creation of traumatic reactions from those who view them. Viewers not only react in fear of further victimization, but they also undergo a

desensitization, to depictions of violence and reduced concern for its victims. The free press is the primary conduit connecting terrorists, the public, and governments. Violent incidents can advance the terrorists goals only if these kinds of incidents are widely reported.

Terrorists have three universal goals: to seek attention by spreading fear and anxiety among their target audience; to seek recognition of their demands and grievances and their causes; and to gain a degree of respectability and legitimacy in their target societies. Much like terrorists differ from country to country, so does the media. American media are more interested in personal, human interest stories, while European media prefer to describe the broader picture. Across the board though, journalists are becoming literally asphyxiated.

They are collapsing under an avalanche of data, reports and files which distract them from the essential. It encourages them to become lazy since they do not have to look for information, instead information comes at them of itself. Media personnel face ethical dilemmas when determining a news story and interviews—is it ethical for them to interview a terrorist and agree as a result not to give up their location—all in the name of news or reporting the news? Terrorists are likely to view the media as reluctant allies and at worst, hostile and powerful enemies.

The mass media can play either a positive or negative role from the terrorists' perspective, arousing either support or rejection of their efforts. Some terrorists let these explosions speak for them, others may prefer not even to be known as their activities function anonymously to disrupt the

status quo. Possibly the most accurate description of the relationship between the mass media and terrorists is that the media have come to constitute such a major portion of modern culture that most of today's terrorists have factored them into their tactics in one way or another.

This incorporation creates the impression of a symbiosis: that terrorism requires the participation of the media, and that the media, in their turn, rely on terrorist acts to provide much of the sensationalism upon which the media thrive. The mass media, in general, are so totally addicted to expanding their audiences and thereby their profits that they are tempted to use any and all means of doing so. Sensationalism attracts audiences, so the media are especially vulnerable to manipulation by terrorists who are willing to use violence to publicize their causes.

On the other hand, the media can be enemies of the terrorists, carrying counterterrorist propaganda and using criticism and innuendo to discredit the terrorists' motives and goals as well as their methods. Reporters, editors and commentators need to keep their own ideologies out of their writing and broadcasting about violent acts or they will be in danger of making a bad situation worse. Mass media are not all-powerful, but they are omnipresent in contemporary society and contribute to setting agendas.

The media may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling us what to think about. The responsibility of the media to tell the truth, and the whole truth, consequently remains great, while their difficulty in finding out the whole truth about particular "terrorist" acts??? as about other events??? becomes

increasingly more difficult in an information world saturated by conflicting messages of their writing and broadcasting about violent acts or they will be in danger of making a bad situation worse. [http://cscs.scu.edu/trends/v21/v21\\_1.pdf](http://cscs.scu.edu/trends/v21/v21_1.pdf)