

# Mass media: the terrorist's force multiplier



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What is meant by the term “force multiplier,” and how do terrorists use the media as a force multiplier? Force multiplier is defined as, “A method of increasing striking power without increasing the number of combat troops in a military unit.” (White). Terrorist groups use the media to spread fear. The fear that is instilled in the audience is often enough to prevent a fight altogether. So, what is the role of the media with respect to disseminating and reporting stories related to terrorism? It is the only tool capable of making information available to the masses. Such information includes acts of terrorism around the world. Therefore, despite the role of the media, to make people aware of what is going on around them. Terrorist cells all over the world are using the media like a puppet, in a way that enhances their operations and terrorist activities. This paper will first inform you of the media's role in terrorism, then it will present an argument on possibilities to decrease that role or lessen its force multiplier.

The media coverage of terrorism and terrorist incidents have often been criticized due to its sensationalism and obsessive publicity. Any terrorist attack is newsworthy, and the media's wide coverage often ensures that the terrorists' agenda of stoking fear to the general is attained. The nightly news has been as guilty of this problem as any other form of media. It is common to see news networks showing the videos and images of terrorist attacks repeatedly, seeking firsthand accounts from terrified witnesses and having lengthy segments where panelists debate who is to blame for the attack. Additionally, the evening news often exaggerates the threats of these terrorists, often making their audiences fearful. For example, after 9/11 nightly news continuously showed videos of the Al Qaeda members training

in the desert and mimicking attacks. Such coverage only serves the goal of the terrorists by traumatizing the audiences and affecting their everyday lives by causing fear. It is important to understand terrorism now more than ever. With the media's inability to provide coverage of terrorism without rhetoric, bias, and framing of certain religious groups or ethnicities, being able to differentiate reality from propaganda is necessary. For example, the awareness of Arabs and Muslims by the American people is limited to oil and potential terrorism, without understanding that these groups' way of life, their world, and culture. Similarly, after the 9/11 attack, due to flawed media coverage, the public opinion shifted towards war with the Islamic countries alleged to be harboring terrorist. Understanding terrorism and how the media covers it enables us to have rational opinions, think critically and prevent radicalization.

What better place to inform as many people as possible of your actions than the news? A great quote to think about is " Terrorists try to exercise influence over targeted officials on nations through intimidation of the public and arousal of sympathy for the social and political causes they espouse. Without widespread publicity, terrorist acts can achieve neither of these effects" (Bandura, Albert qt. In Nacos). Terrorists need mass media to get the publicity, and mass media is a willing accomplice. The news media and social media are contributing to terrorism, and as such, they should develop a set of standards that could limit the terrorist ability to get their message out during terrorist situations.

Terrorism is the use of violence against innocents to bring about political or religious change through fear. The relationship between terrorism and the

media is symbiotic. As terrorists require widespread attention, the media needs news (Miller v-vi). Terrorism is a form of advertisement, the event itself states the terrorist's goals and what they want to be accomplished. Terrorists in the past and present have used the media for four main reasons. The first reason was to broadcast their message while simultaneously striking as much fear as they could into their foes. The second was to win support from the public for their cause, by stating the righteousness of their cause, and the assuredness of their victory. Third, they used the media to disrupt local government and first responders, by suggesting that they are the victims. Finally, the fourth is to raise the morale of their current members, raise recruitment, and encourage more attacks. " If the media were not there to explain their political and social significance [their goals and motives], terrorism would cease to exist" (Nacos).

With all the interaction between the media and terrorism, an option being considered by many countries is censorship of media's coverage of terrorist events. During many terrorist incidents, the police do not want all the information that they have gathered to be released, for fear of the public's safety, and the security of their future actions. When the media starts reporting on live events, they need some restraint so that the terrorist do not get a live view of the first responder's actions. An example of this is back on the 30th of April in 1980, a terrorist group captures an embassy in London. As the first responders began to move their greatest advantage at the time was the element of surprise. That was almost lost though when a cameraman for a local independent television, broke past the barricade and

started a live feed of the breach team going into the embassy. I could only imagine what would have happened if the terrorist were watching the tv at that moment.

I believe that 100% censorship is not the answer. With complete censorship, terrorism will increase. The increase is because terrorist groups will feel free to engage in terrorist acts without being exposed and criticized by the local media. Hitler's reign was possible because people did not have a clue what was going on until it was too late. Complete censorship of the media's coverage during, and after terrorist situations is not necessary if the media as a whole reformed its procedure for covering terrorist situations. CBS has set up a list of guidelines that all the reporters must follow during terrorist situations (Alali). An option to combat this would be for all news agencies to agree to a standard operating procedure when it comes to reporting on terrorism. The media needs to stop exaggerating events that are already sensational. They should also start paraphrasing terrorist demands, so the terrorist does not get their political messages out. Also, they should not broadcast live coverage of terrorist situations without authorization from the individual that is in charge of the response team of that event. News reporters should also have permission to talk with terrorists if given permission these interviews should not interfere with the ongoing negotiations and investigations from the government. Finally, reporters on the scene of a terrorist event should adhere to the warnings and orders of law enforcement officials on the scene. When the media as a whole can set a standard operating procedure for terrorism, complete censorship of coverage will not be needed. But, if complete censorship of media's coverage of

terrorist events becomes policy, many believe that there will be mistakes made by first responders, that will go unreported to the public and the proper authorities.

Police agencies feel that reporting, exaggerations, and the threat of news agencies missing their deadline should not drive the content of news stories. There needs to be equal coverage of the terrorist and police actions not just targeting one or the other solely. The police need the support of the public and to get it they need the support from the media, this aids the police in their counterattacking of terrorist. The police and the media are committed to the maintaining democracy, and how they act reflects that commitment. An example of when the police agencies fouled up a hostage situation was in 1972, at the Munich Olympics. When the hostages were moved to a local Airport the police made several mistakes which led to the deaths of nine hostages and one policeman. (Miller). If there were no media around, these events would never have been reported and would have been long forgotten and those at fault would never have been reprimanded for their mistakes. Despite all their mistakes made public, the police do not wish for complete censorship of media coverage during terrorist events. The police use the media as a tool in helping them combat terrorism. The media is a powerful tool for vanquishing rumors, clearing up misinformation, and combat fear (Miller). While the media can sometimes hinder the police, it is also a great asset there for their disposal in combating terrorism.

In conclusion, when the media emphasizes terrorist events it helps the terrorist in two ways. The first is terrorist gain's notoriety and attention is drawn to their beliefs. The second is that when mass media shows terroristic

events and overemphasizes, they are influencing public attitudes about the root of the terrorist politically motivated violence. Total censorship of terrorist events is not a cure. The only solution is that the media needs to work out a standard operating procedure that as a whole they will follow when covering acts of terrorism. They need to be professional giving equal emphasis on the terrorist activities and the police forces dealing with the terrorists. As well as they need to remain uncensored and not let either the terrorists or the local enforcement take control of what they report. “ Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not the actual victims. Terrorism is theater” (Jenkins, Brian M. qt. In Nacos

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