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# TERRORISM AND THE MASS MEDIA



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**TAOQ RESEARCH**



TAOQ تائق

E-mail: [info@taoqresearch.org](mailto:info@taoqresearch.org)

Phone: +966 114890124

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## TERRORISM AND THE MASS MEDIA

**The media** plays a vital role across different walks of life, the most notorious is terrorism; the media has become a conduit that catalyzes the interaction between the recipient audience and terrorist individuals and groups. The influence of the media-mediated terrorism has become deeply ingrained on the perception of the audience and their positions. Media research argues that the media-generated impact received by audience goes beyond the impactful repercussions of a given incident. The Royal United Services Institute for Defense and Security Studies (RUSI), UK, has a special interest in examining the relationship between terrorism and traditional media. In May of 2020, RUSI issued an analytical report on this topic, conducted by Jessica White, featuring TERRORISM AND THE MASS MEDIA.

## Detailed Analysis

The report provided an in-depth analysis of the controversial relationship between terrorism and the media in various aspects, including the roles of the media and their negative and positive effects on terrorism, the conceptual controversy between terrorism and extremism, the factors and causes that fuel extremism and incite violence in all manifestations, revisiting social contagion theory or imitation of terrorism. The report defined its substantive scope in the traditional media, such as newspapers, radio and television, and further included the associated digital platforms; it excluded the websites and online platforms that do not follow the traditional media, especially the various social media.

## Media Impact

Since the Christchurch attacks in New Zealand in March of 2019, there has been increasingly growing scrutiny on the role of mass media in terrorism, and a special focus on determining the best methods to cushion down any potential negative effects of media reporting on terrorism and terrorist attacks carried out by terrorist groups. Given the ubiquitous prevalence of modern global media, reporting of terrorist attacks has reached a much wider audience than was in the past.

There is no clear consensus on whether fueling terrorism (causal relationship) or in using such media as propaganda for terrorist groups (symbiotic relationship). Given the differing opinions on the relationship between the two variables, many important questions have been raised about how the media should address terrorism. Could it be through media follow-up or media blackout? Does carrying out media follow-up do any good to public opinion or does it fuel terrorism and terrorists who carry out such operations?

Equally important, one more question remains not yet attempted: How can the media determine the time for media follow-up of terrorist attacks? When should the media avoid such accidents to curb their effects on the general public? With these questions framed, the report aimed to answer the main question: Are the media and terrorism yoked together in a causal relationship or symbiotic relationship?

## Controversial Definitions of Terrorism

There has been no consensus on clear definition of terrorism despite terrorism per se has received

increased attention by the world politicians, leaders and officials across the entire globe! Definitions have contested, given the various manifestations of terrorism, the multiplicity of methods and patterns and the different international views and political trends. Shaped by the heterogeneous beliefs and ideologies espoused by the world countries, the recognition that a given violent act is a terrorist action depends on the context and circumstances of the perpetration of violence and the intention thereof.

The definition of terrorism overlaps with other similar concepts and terms, such as violence used by non-state actors to incite fear among a target audience in order to achieve a political goal.

Taken together, the definition of terrorism is uneasy to develop, as seemingly implied by the word frequently used in the media; the term terrorism overlaps with many other terms, such as conflict, crime, warfare, and violence. Many definitions of terrorism have come into play, including psychopathological violence that is akin in form and content to criminal behavior. Violence can be briefly defined as the unlawful use of physical or material coercion to achieve personal, social, religious, ideological or political goals.

The concept of terrorism overlaps with the concept of extremism, which has no consensus on its definition; extremism in general is the social and psychological adoption of an extremist ideology or principle, often related to beliefs. The common ground between the two terms is violence, especially violence used when an individual or group makes an ideological, political or social change.

## Media and Terrorism

The development of communications and information technology has unknowingly provided a great service to terrorist organizations to feed and capitalize on, hence to achieve their ill-intentioned goals and carry out their criminal and terrorist operations. Mahmoud Eid, Assistant Professor at the University of Ottawa, Canada, argues that the news media are driven by competition and profit. Terrorist groups are champing at the bit, looking for a media blitz to gain a mass support and community fame through media propaganda and propagation. Triggered by following up terrorist operations, the media aims to attract a wide spectrum of audience and strengthen the evaluations of such media, while terrorist groups receive free propaganda, even unwittingly.



In a similar vein, Kevin G. Barnhurst, Associate Professor at the School of Mass Communication at Syracuse University in New York, pointed out two examples of the role played by the mass media while following up terrorist issues. The first model believes that media follow-up substantially contributes to fueling terrorist ideologies; rather, it instigates more violence, and the proponents of this model are supporters of the causal relationship between the media and terrorism. The second model sees the media as victimized, among others, by terrorism. As such, the regulation and control of the media may often fuel terrorists to switch to other means of communication made available in open communities and milieux, such as social media or new media.

### Momentum of Relationship

Based on the foregoing, it can be considered that the most common role of the media and associated impact on terrorism relates to a mutually symbiotic relationship marked with a three-layer perspective:

**First Layer:** the role of the media as a propaganda conduit that provides terrorist groups with oxygen of publicity.

**Second Layer:** the amplification of terrorism, which negatively affects the real perception and understanding of the magnitude of the threats imposed.

**Third Layer:** the possibility that the media follow-up of terrorist attacks may influence the media as an inspiration to other groups that may seek to imitate such incidents.

Combined together, the media does not assume a critical importance due to the tool-generated influence it wields only; rather, the media is seriously influential in how such tools are instrumentalized as well. Reality tells that a mutually symbiotic investment-catalyzed relationship exists between terrorism and the media in general: terrorism initiates an incident, and the media propagandizes and drums up for such an incident, and then media coverage of terrorism may unwittingly contribute to an unintended result, which is inciting terrorists to carry out more infamous operations, termed in the nineteenth century as action propaganda.

The report approached the attempts of some specialists to test the causal relationship between terrorism in the media and the number of terrorist attacks to investigate deeper aspects of this mutually symbiotic relationship. In this vein, Michael Jetter conducted a research study published in the *Public Economics Journal*, featuring **THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON TERRORISM**, in which he analyzed the link between terrorist attacks and media follow-up, and concluded that the rate of terrorist operations is increasingly growing in the wake of

media follow-up of previous terrorist operations. This reveals that the limitation of the media when covering terrorist events to an abstract news framework; that is, immediate and urgent media coverage to develop more media scoops contributes to inciting terrorist groups to carry out other operations. The media brushes aside conducting objective analyses and telling interpretation of such terrorist attacks. Social reactions disapproving such bloody practices have no room in the media coverage, which is often goes in the interest of these terrorist groups.

The report also points out that addressing violence in the traditional media was one of the topics that most motivated the research of mass communication media, characterized by expansion, complexity and controversy; some have argued that the accumulation of a large number of relevant specialized studies prove the validity of the assumption of a causal relationship between violence in the media and aggressive behavior. The media, spearheaded by television, influences the target audience, as they can form new convictions, refute existing ones and legitimize something by persuading and mobilizing energies.

With these instrumentalized triggers coming into play, they can create a type of audience who believes in what you are proposing, even if it disagrees with own convictions; the consistency between what is being proposed while being drummed up for repeatedly makes such ideologies deeply entrenched by the target audience. Hence, the audiovisual word assumes a direct effect on society, especially in light of the heavy load of satellite TV channels broadcasting different programs worldwide. More vehemently. Some satellite TV channels broadcast content that fuels terrorism among individuals and groups that promote terrorism and some others directly cause entire impact on individuals.

### Contagion and Imitation

The Social Contagion Theory was used to describe the media-made contribution to spread all manifestations of violence in society. Media follow-up often leads to more terrorist operations. This theory indicates that individuals in social networks are affected by each other, and the behavior that becomes ubiquitously common across these networks is more like contagion, acting very much like viruses. By the same token, violent propensities balloon and snowball from one individual to another and from one community to another by social communication, unless it is channeled by a deep-

seated and driving passion developed by individuals or community to resist such practices. To this effect, a set of indicators should be met in society: quality of education, political participation and socioeconomic improvement.

Relevant research studies were conducted on the Social Contagion Theory, and on the different types of violence, such as the use of firearms. Many of those research studies conclude that the Social Contagion Theory is only one of several methods for explaining those most vulnerable to violence. To find out the various reasons and motives for the Social Contagion Theory, it is necessary to conduct more quantitative research studies, hence to conduct practical evaluation as much as possible of the negative effects of social networks.

There is no clear explanation for how social contagion comes into play, making research and analysis poor and lack authenticity, especially when social contagion is used synonymous with imitation, which has been proven by several recent studies regarding mass shootings and suicide or mass killing. The research-based analysis of these studies was limited to temporal communication, and on limited indicators that would be difficult to generalize to other studies that reviewed and analyzed the Social Contagion Theory.

With this in mind, there is no consensus on the results of the Social Contagion Theory, especially its assessment of the reliance of individuals' perceptions, thinking patterns, and risk perception on the relationships in social networks, and the presence of other like-minded individuals. Contagion is not the only way in which political violence is spread; spread per se is similar to contagion, but it is concerned with the transmission of behavior and ideology, and their frequency on a larger scale, so instead of picking up a new behavioral contagion from a narrow social network, contagion may be transmitted through refugees of similar ethnicity, religion or culture.

In this regard, the report concludes that the imitation factor may be more appropriate to describe the trigger effect of terrorism on media coverage, and that it is more consistent than the interpretation that states: the media spreads terrorism as a social contagion. This means that the media may incite the practice of imitated behavior by repeatedly broadcasting live violent events, leading up to ubiquity of social violence.

Vincent Miller and Keith J Hayward conducted a research study published in the British Journal of Criminology,





featuring I DID MY BIT: TERRORISM, TARDE AND THE VEHICLE RAMMING ATTACK AS AN IMITATIVE EVENT. They analyzed the rise of vehicle ramming attacks on buses and cars between 2015-2017, and found the act of violence perse has a certain impact on imitation. The act of violence travels through our contemporary mediascape to be internalized and imitated by an increasingly varied set of subjects with varying motivations, psychologies, ideologies and circumstantial backgrounds.

The research study reveals that the media broadcasts terrorist attacks for the world to watch, but this assessment is not related to all events; rather, it is only related to the operations that are important or have a special nature, which are those that provide a model that incites the imitation of terrorism. In this case, the media carries out a suggestive and motivational act for members of a new generations, pushing them to join existing terrorist groups, which we can consider as one of the worst and most threatening results of media treatments of terrorism.

Strikingly enough, media violence of all kinds (such as traditional media, films and video games) poses a threat to public health because it can lead to an increase in real-world violence and aggression in individuals. This study focused on audiovisual expressions of violence and found that violence televised on news broadcasts contributes to increased social violence, especially in relation to imitative acts of suicide or aggression.

There are moderating factors in these relationships, such as the nature of the media content or the other social influences on an individual. However, the study conducted by L. Rowell Huesmann and Laramie D. Taylor (2006), featuring THE ROLE OF MEDIA VIOLENCE IN VIOLENT BEHAVIOR in Annual Review of Public Health found that violence in the media is a strong influence in the indicators against which the state of public health is measured in society, which has prompted the World Health Organization (WHO) to pay attention to content that incites violence in the media.

In her MASS-MEDIATED TERRORISM Brigitte L. Nacos (2016) suggests that the most effective method of mitigating the possible negative impacts of media reporting of terrorism would be for media organisations to self-impose responsible reporting guidelines for the coverage of terrorism. These responsible reporting guidelines should be developed by those with expert-level knowledge of terrorism, displaying special impartiality, integrity, education and accumulation of subject-matter knowledge; their expertise and professional capabilities ensure that they perform a solid and objective analysis, hence to conduct an objective and accurate assessment of what is presented in the media on terrorism cases.

The report does not indicate in this case that the assumption that television has an important effect on shaping the attitudes of the target audience and imitation-driven actions necessitates acknowledgement that in



educational psychology this tradition means acquiring behavior and acting by imitating models that the target audience admires, especially children and youth. Taken together, it is incorrect to restrict responsibility for the tradition that helps spread violence in television only, as there are other contributory factors, including illiteracy, unemployment, religious extremism and political conflict. In a similar vein,, it has become clear that the relationship between watching television and rates of violence differs from one country to another, as the influence of televised media on the audience varies according to culture along with economic and educational factors.

### Negative VS Positive

The impact of traditional media in following up and addressing terrorism cases is very important in shaping public opinion. Therefore, the media discourse should be moderate and balanced, which requires the editors of such media to have some qualifications and characteristics, including keeping away from the campaigns of skepticism and defamation of some groups of society due to the impact on community cohesion, which causes rebellion against society and its values, and the infancy terrorism when it snowballs into reality.

It should be noted that the media follow-up of satellite channels and newspapers on terrorism cases is a two-way effect: positive and negative:

The positive aspect is manifested by properly and objectively discussing and analyzing the news of counter-terrorism efforts and supporting affiliation,

solidarity and cooperation. TV watching of terrorism would lead to a good response. In light of the terrorist operations, exceptional media follow-up is active for all media outlets to provide information to the public, which increases awareness and knowledge.

The negative side in unintended propaganda of terrorism exaggerates the losses and negative and humanitarian impact of their actions. Those in charge of media channels should avoid as far as possible using footage of terrorists' victory and the killing of victims against governments.

Alex P. Schmid remarks many experts agree that self-censorship can reduce the negative effects of media follow-ups of terrorism if media institutions are willing to set internal guidelines to wield control more than being driven behind by cut-throat competition; they must be aware that terrorists seek free propaganda with acts of violence, and that the method of media follow-up of attacks of an exciting or humanitarian nature can amplify the negative impact on terrorism. Therefore, account must be taken to avoid violating the victims' privacy or causing any disturbance of public order.

The report cited the 9/11 Attacks of 2001 to confirm how terrorist groups can take advantage of the international media being whipped into a frenzy and employ media follow-ups for their own propaganda. Following the 9/11 Attacks of 2001, the US government employed the supportive media discourse to support its security strategies, without being subject to media follow-up, and the media did not perform any adverse function.



## Framing Terrorism

The framing theory is about setting an agenda that guides media practice. The essence of framing is to attract the audience to specific events and convey specific meanings. Framing includes written speech and audiovisual materials; it introduces an integrated package of materials of a coherent interpretation of events and a premeditated evaluation.

Driven by fixed frames, journalists formulate stories in similar manners, then the matter turns into continued framing even if the situation changes. The intimidation speech of violence and terrorism steadily goes more heated, and unintentionally propagates certain interpretations of events. For instance, the threat of terrorism decreased in the USA in the wake of the 9/11 Attacks of 2001, while the level of fear among citizens is on the increase. This caused a major shift in the attitudes of the American public towards national security and foreign policy issues.

Given the constant use of framing, events become less attractive; follow-up among media organizations becomes on the wane. The repetition and urgency associated with framing poses a major challenge to media follow-ups fulfilling the objective criteria provided for in codes of conduct and ethical guidelines. Journalists may spontaneously slip towards embracing the message of terrorism, by legitimizing violence, which may encourage more terrorist attacks. Otherwise, the media may adopt the official interpretation, and the narration of the framework used by officials. Some analysts reveal that there is a mutual willingness between the US government and journalists to conduct dialogue, hence acceptable frameworks come into play.

Some scholars have researched into terms widely used in media content such as crime, victim and fear; they explain their effects as tools for framing. While others used different methods to research the media framing of terrorism, showing the influence of religious beliefs and bilateral relations in media framing. For instance, if there are close bilateral relations between the country of the media belonging to and the country that was attacked, such media outlets frame a given terrorist attack in a more negative fashion. Interestingly, this correlation does not fully apply in doctrinal and ideological convergence; the same effect in framing does not exist.

Research studies reveal the existence of varying degrees of intentional and unintentional media framing

on terrorism, which highlights that the guidelines and ethical rules are important for preserving the objectivity of the media.

## Controls and Standards

Nowadays, the digital platforms of the mass media have become an essential tool for news circulation and usually maintain the same codes of conduct for the parent media. Digital media platforms do not often adhere to the same ethical controls, nor to the same professional quality controls. This is reflected negatively in media follow-up, and this is undoubtedly a major challenge that must be addressed to maximize the benefits of using such tools and to limit the damages resulting from misuse.

The media can have a positive impact in peacemaking and turn the spotlight on community solidarity. The media can increase public awareness of security threats and emergency measures, and encourage public debate about the social and political implications of terrorism.

Cristina Archetti recommends the media needs to understand how strategic communications and narratives can be used as effective tools in countering extremism. Archetti acknowledges, however, that there are many problematic assumptions which need to be overcome for this to be realistic. It can be pointed out that propaganda has become part of the media activity, albeit unintentionally, when factors come into play to make news media follow-up an act of propaganda without being the goals of the journalist. The political and cultural controls that direct the journalist to choose specific events may make follow-up news an act of propaganda.

The propaganda effect of the news may be stronger; the media follow-ups turn into propaganda news that contributes to spreading news of terrorists, and this is what the terrorists doggedly whip up. Therefore, persistent demands have voiced limiting the media follow-ups of terrorist acts to as narrow limits as possible to prevent terrorists from achieving their goal of obtaining the widest possible international propaganda.

Therefore, the media needs to display impartiality and professional ethics in disseminating information on terrorism to avoid causing political tension among the audience and readership. The media should contribute to providing solutions and advice to the audience and readership, promoting ethics, education, positive insights and confronting terrorist ideologies and tempting the assimilation of national morals. Some researchers believe that the media has failed to address terrorism by providing the audience and readership

with unclear and inaccurate view of terrorist events, causing mixed interpretations of terrorism issues and associated consequences.

The report also explains that the codes of ethics of the media are affected by the prevailing media policy. There are international press and editorial controls agreed upon for the development of official reports, such as standards of transparency, objectivity, impartiality, harm reduction and accuracy. These principles are embodied in media legislation or codes of honor approved by many press unions and media institutions. Most of the global declarations and international conventions on the media revolve around the freedom of expression, the development of objective reports, and the non-instrumentalization of these media outlets into tools in the hands of any political or ideological group.

Therefore, many international institutions such as UNESCO and the Center for Digital Journalism have developed a set of principles to be adhered to in addressing terrorism issues to further mitigate any negative effects, such as the elimination of dangerous information, while taking into account flexibility in applying these principles because the nature of terrorism is constantly changing due to time, place and circumstance factors. Many media organizations have accordingly adopted such principles and standards, such as Reuters, Sky, and BBC. There has been increased interest in humanizing, reducing the appearance of graphic content of perpetrators and strengthening the discourse of social solidarity.

The report calls for a serious and systematic application of these principles and standards, highlighting the disparity in vision and capabilities between large media institutions at the national level vis-à-vis small and local media, each of which has a different vital impact, and both need to adhere to ethical rules and responsible media follow-ups to ensure that the positive impact of each is preserved as much as possible.

The report recommends the importance of media organizations adhering to these ethical and methodological principles when addressing terrorist incidents objectively, considering the when and how to release such news. Incitement should be avoided, while being mindful not to conceal any facts or else this may erode confidence in the media institution. Also, caution must be exercised in publishing reports on terrorist events.

The report brushed aside the role played by the media in or after political or economic crises, especially internal crises, where the media is an important tool for crisis management. This is critically important and clear when the media plays a negative role in addressing such crises by blackout and ignorance, causing misguided public opinion. This issue is of special importance in the Arab region. It is imperative to impose ethical controls and standards that media organizations adhere to when addressing terrorist incidents and operations to achieve the main purpose of media follow-up, which is to reveal the fallacies of these groups and their misuse of religious claims.



## Society-Driven Repercussions

A major aspect of the relationship between terrorism and traditional media is related to the influence of traditional media on the social and psychological aspects of terrorism. In some ways, the media is accused of serving terrorism, by following up on its news and operations in such a way that creates a favorable atmosphere rife with fear and panic. This, in turn, leaves an adverse impact on the safety and cohesion of society.

The issue is not limited to news media follow-up, as other media frameworks, such as reports, stories and comments have a major impact on the public. In fact, they could be described as one of the important instigators of terrorist acts. In search of publicity and promotion of their cause, which helps spread their ideas and attract more individuals to join their ranks, terrorists seem to have found in media their golden goose.

For this reason, Walter Laquer once argues that the media is the terrorists' best friend. Studies have been conducted on public reactions to the media follow-up of terrorism, especially when terrorist groups belong to a particular religion or belief. It turned out that religion or belief has a profound effect on the amount of media coverage allocated by the media. For instance, a research study conducted in the USA shows that there is an inconsistency amounting to a contradiction between underestimation and overestimation, in the media follow-up of terrorism. Accordingly, if the perpetrator of a terrorist act is a Muslim, the media coverage usually goes to extremes. The percentage of media follow-up of attacks carried out by Muslims vis-à-vis those carried out by non-Muslims has reached nearly 357%.

This has an impact on shaping public opinion and society perception of Muslims, in a way that encourages ordinary people (target audience) to show prejudice against Muslims, and to confine them in certain mental stereotypes.

Therefore, it is necessary to carry out more analytical studies on the culture of media workers and their professional qualification. For when addressing any terrorism-related media content, media workers show their true colors. It is only then that their cultural and ideological education and their convictions are manifested. The report therefore calls on media professionals to acknowledge that the media coverage of terrorism can affect the lives of thousands of people. Thus, they have an ethical and moral responsibility to adhere to guidelines and codes of conduct.

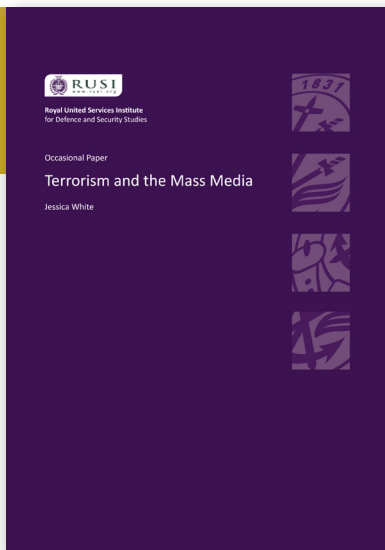
Equally responsible is the target audience as they should choose to follow reliable and responsible media. This would increase the chances of truthfulness and accuracy in the information and opinions directed to people through those media outlets. Owing to the limited knowledge of accurate information about terrorism, media professionals find themselves forced to cope with existing opinions and stereotypes so as to gain the confidence of the audience. This appears evident in deepening the media impact in the perpetuation and accumulation of biases.

The report discusses the accumulation of extremism that has recently begun to stimulate research and specialized interest. This interest specifically emerged in the aftermath of the riots in Bradford in 2001, and then the London bombings in 2005. The gist is that one type of extremism can feed other types. The use of the term Accumulation of Extremism concerns the two-way responses between the far-right extremism and Islamist religious extremism! Nevertheless, caution must be exercised; as this conditional link is still quite uncertain. Further studies are needed, particularly given other factors that have an impact on fueling mutual escalation of extremism. Media is unquestionably one of the most crucial of these factors.

## Traditional Media

The report defines its research scope on the topic of traditional media, but it also includes the digital platforms associated with these media outlets. The domain includes an aspect of the new media and associated images, which is the websites of those traditional means. This choice leads to the question about the standard adopted in determining the nature of the media that is the subject of study, for the distinction between traditional and new media is subject to a main criterion which is the nature of the media used: newspaper, satellite TV channels and radios.

The new media exclusively uses the cyber-space for broadcasting, with diverse media, across interactive websites, platforms for communication and open community interaction, websites and networks for conversation, in addition to the multiplicity of media providing content, which combines written text and photographic images alongside audio or video footages and snippets. Hence, the inclusion of digital platforms of traditional media in the scope of research in the report opens the door to reconsidering the normative basis for the definition of traditional media, and distinguishing it from the new media.



## **TERRORISM AND THE MASS MEDIA**

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