MASS MEDIA AND TERRORISM: WHO CALLS THE SHOTS?

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Abstract
The rise in terrorist activities and fast-growing media coverage of terrorism forms the fulcrum of this study as it examines the relationship between mass media and terrorism and to find out whether actually a symbiotic relationship exist between them. Terrorism is a word that is politically and emotionally charged as it involves the use of force, violence and threats in bringing about political, religious or ideological change. There can no meaningful terrorist act without the mass media. The media, therefore, to an extent, are catalysts that facilitate terrorist activities. Terrorists need mass media for publicity and mass media owe the society the right to know what is happening around it. This symbiosis has resulted in prolonged debates among scholars in attempt to determine who calls the shots: mass media or terrorism. This study, therefore seeks to determine whether actually a symbiosis exists between mass media and terrorism and extent of influences.

Key words: Terrorism, mass media, counterterrorism strategies, Boko Haram.

Introduction/Conceptual Clarification
The terrorist attacks on the World Trade Centre (WTC) in the US on September 11, 2001 ushered in a new phase of modern terrorism and its attendant media coverage. The unfolding news stories that followed reinforced a long-held belief that communication media are a defining characteristic of a country’s political, social and cultural systems. The media coverage of the attack and rescue effort in all media was knowledgeable, courageous and sensitive. The September 11 attack was not only unprecedented in human history, but also showed that the mass media can bind communities together by disseminating messages that become a shared experience. However, there still exist a marginal gap between media coverage of terrorist activities in developed countries and developing countries. The recent activities of the dreaded Islamic Boko Haram in Nigeria calls for serious discussion on the effectiveness of the media in the fight
against terrorism and to examine at what extent do the mass media call the shot in the fight against terrorism.

**Mass media**

Mass media are the channels of disseminating messages as well as institutions and personnel that transmit mass messages to mass audience. Mass media are pervasive in modern life. People need the mass media to express their ideas widely without which, expression of ideas would be limited to people within earshot. The new paradigm of terrorism is somewhat a consequence of sophistication of information and communication technology which is particularly manifested in the fact that terrorist organizations have recognised the importance mass media has on the accomplishment of their aims. It is the aim of terrorists to appear in the most popular programmes in order to gain not only mass publicity, but also legitimacy. The media, therefore, make it possible for terror groups to use the mass media as a powerful gun, in such a way that mass media serve in the interests of terrorists against its own will. To achieve their aims, terrorists carefully select the places in which they carry out their attacks in order to provide the best media coverage. Television, for instance, is a veritable medium for reportage of terrorist activities due to its audiovisual quality and timeliness. After terrorists flew jetliners into the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, most American adults turned to the three major networks to follow the story. There was no measurement of the daytime television audience on September 11, 2001 but that night, at least 80million Americans were watching ABC, CBS or NBC throughout prime time. Television has become the leading news medium in reporting terrorist acts and most preferred medium by terrorist organisations to drive their ideological messages to a wide audience and government. This is because television imposes its own perversions on the other information media, beginning with its fascination with pictures and the basic idea that only what is visible deserves to be news. Television therefore, tends to set the agenda of all news media (Ramonet, 2002). The obvious example is the 9/11 attacks in New York where media of all sorts were able to capture and document this incredibly visual attack with sensational pictures, videos and personal stories. One major objective of terrorist groups is to get maximum publicity for their terrorist activities especially through television medium. Television medium is an effective tool for terrorists because of the images and pictures they broadcast to the public thereby creating fear. The images have so much influence on the public, the policy makers and influence both local and foreign policies.

**Terrorism**

Definitions of terrorism vary considerably due to its inherent ferocity and violence. Terrorism involves the use of threat of violence and seeks to create fear, not just within the direct victims but among a wide audience. It is designed to have psychological effects that reach far beyond its impacts on the immediate victim or object of an attack. The causes, nature and modus operandi of terrorist activities make it a very complex trend to discuss, thus Sproat (1991, p.27) calls for extreme care in defining and applying the term ‘terrorism.’ He argues that labelling of a particular group that has implemented such actions as ‘terrorists’ per se is either theoretically impossible because it is the individual acts that are terrorists. Legal statutes in most countries around the world regard terrorism as a crime as a result of the use or threat of action designed to influence the government or to intimidate the public or a section of the public for the purpose of advancing a political, religious or ideological cause. By whatever reason or cause, terrorists attempt to justify their use of violence, by arguing that they have been excluded from, or frustrated by the accepted processes of bringing about political change. The degree to which it relies on fear distinguishes terrorism from both conventional military forces and guerrilla warfare. Koh (2002, p.148) defines terrorism as criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes whatever the considerations of a political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them. Terrorist groups rely on dramatic, often spectacular, bloody and destructive acts of hit-and-run violence to attract attention to themselves and their cause. Through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence and power theory otherwise lack. Carsten (2008) definition of terrorism underlines the psychological and tactical aspects of terrorism. According to him, terrorism is defined as political violence in a asymmetrical conflict that is designed to induce terror or psychic fear (sometimes indiscriminate) through the violent organisation and destruction of non-combatant targets (sometimes iconic symbols). Such acts are meant to send a message from an illicit clandestine organisation. The purpose of terrorism is to exploit the media in order to achieve maximum attainable publicity as an amplifying force multiplier in order to influence the targeted audience(s) in order to reach short-and mid-
term political goals and/or desired long-term end states. Terrorist attacks are usually carried out in such a way as to maximise the severity and length of the psychological impact.

United States Federal statute defines terrorism as ‘violent acts or acts dangerous to human life that appear to be intended (i) to intimidate or coerce a civilian population; (ii) to influence the policy of government by intimidation or coercion; or (iii) to affect the conduct of a government by assassination or kidnapping.’ This definition appears in United States Code, Title 18, Section 2331 (18 USC 2331). Terrorism is a form of asymmetric warfare and is more common when direct conventional warfare will not be effective because forces vary greatly in power. The strategy of terrorist is to commit acts of violence that draws the attention of the local populace, the government and the world to their cause such as in 1972 at the Munich Olympics; the Black September Organisation killed 11 Israelis. The Israelis were the immediate victims but the true target was the estimated 1 billion people watching the television event. Coakley (2009, p.226) vividly describes the 1972 Munich Olympics mayhem. On that fateful early morning hours of September 5, 1972, members of a Palestinian terrorist group called Black September entered the Olympic Village in Munich, Germany. Dressed in athletic warm-up suits and carrying sport bags containing grenades and automatic weapons, they entered a bedroom that housed Israeli athletes participating in the Summer Olympic Games. They shot and killed a wrestling coach and a weightlifter and captured nine other Israeli athletes, one of whom was from the United States. After a twenty-one-hour standoff and a poorly planned rescue attempt, seventeen people were dead – ten Israeli athletes and one coach, one West German police officer and four terrorists. The remaining terrorists were sought out and killed by Israeli commandos.

The targets of terrorism are usually innocent citizens in order to create an atmosphere of fear, intimidation and insecurity. Some terrorists deliberately direct attacks against large numbers of ordinary citizens who simply happen to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. They can as well target diplomats and diplomatic facilities such as embassies and consulates; military personnel and military bases, business executives and corporate offices and transportation vehicles and facilities such as airlines and airports, trains and train stations, buses and bus terminals and subways.

In conclusion, we can therefore deduce that there are three perspectives of terrorism: the terrorist, the victims and the general public. This relationship forms a tripartite matrix, for instance, terrorists do not see themselves as evil but freedom fighters. They believe they are legitimate combatant fighting for what they believe in, by whatever means possible. A victim of a terrorist act sees terrorists as criminals with no regard to human life. Often, the victim is affected as a result of accident or a malicious object of target. The general public’s view of terrorism is the most unstable due to its different views about what constitutes a terrorist activity. A terrorist act may be viewed different by the general public depending on the ideological viewpoints of the terror group and modus operandi.

Mass Media and Terrorism: A Symbiotic Relationship

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on US soil opened a new epoch in the understanding of modern terrorism and its attendant media coverage. The hijack of four commercial airplanes by suicide terrorists associated with al-Qaeda and its massive destruction of the World Trade Centre complex and a large portion of one side of the Pentagon killing more than 3,000 people left the world in utter awe. Ever since the awful incident, media coverage of terrorism has remained remarked with each striving to determine who calls the shots.

Terrorism and media are mutually related in many ways. Terrorists need media coverage in order to achieve maximum publicity for the messages they intend to express to the public. There exist symbiotic relationships because media industry trends and patterns for media contents production head towards preference of sensation-seeking contents, whereas terrorist organisations can, due to their actions, ensure themselves maximum presence in the mind. Terrorists need publicity preferably free publicity in order to alert the world that problems exist that cannot be ignored and must be addressed. Through the media, they aim to publicise their political causes, inform both friends and foes about the motives for terrorist deeds and explain their rationale for resorting to violence. The news media, particularly the broadcast media, give massive coverage to terrorist acts because they satisfy their certain conventional requirements of live broadcasts, as they are emotionally significant or highly dramatic; compelling to view or read; involve some dramatic uncertainty; are delimited in time and space or they can be sufficiently focused to sustain
Explaining the symbiotic relationship between mass media and terrorism, Hoffman (2003, p.133) outlines two special areas in which the symbiotic relations between media and terrorism has a negative influence on public and government decisions. The first is the public notion in terms of personal danger from terrorism, due to which, for example, arises a certain fear of travelling and tourist arrangement are being cancelled. Second are the pressures the media impose on the governmental decision making especially in crisis management. For Wilkinson (2007, pp. 51-64), media exposure may be a primary goal of those carrying out terrorism, to expose issues that would otherwise be ignored by the media. However, some consider this to be manipulation and exploitation of the media. The modern technologies have made it possible for small terror groups to use the mass media as a powerful gun, in such a way the mass media serve in the interests of terrorists against its own will. But, opinions on the real relationship between media and terrorism vary greatly. Truman (2003, p.135) observes that terrorists need media coverage in order to achieve maximum publicity for the message. They achieve the desired maximum coverage by selecting a target and engaging in a kind of symbolic action that is usually dramatic. Terrorists carefully select the places they carry out their attacks in order to provide best media coverage and win government and people’s sensitivity to their messages.

The audiovisual quality of television makes it a veritable tool of media coverage of terrorist activities. Terrorists have learnt that the media are of paramount importance in their campaign that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing whereas publicity is all. Through the media, terrorists seek a favourable understanding of their cause if not their acts. Terrorists believe the public 'needs help' in understanding that their cause is just and terrorist violence is the only course of action available to them against the superior evil forces of state and establishment.

The symbiotic relationship between terrorism and mass media is anchored on what media want when covering acts of terrorism and what terrorists want from mass media. The media play vital role in the public enlightenment of terrorist acts. When dealing with media coverage of terrorism, it is important to consider the different effects which that coverage has. In covering terrorist incidents, media want to protect the society’s right to know and to make the story as timely and dramatic as possible. Without media’s coverage, terrorist acts are arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack rather than reaching the wider ‘target audience’ at which the terrorists’ violence is actually aimed (Hoffman, 2006, p.174). However, Wieviorka (1993, p.43) dismissed the symbiotic theory of media and terrorism relationship and offered the following modes of relationship between the media and terrorism: (i) pure difference in which the terrorists neither seek to frighten a give population group beyond their intended victims nor to realise a propaganda through their acts; (ii) relative indifference in which perpetrators are indifferent on news about terrorist’s violence; (iii) the media-oriented strategy in which terrorists use mass media as an instrument to spread messages of threats and finally, (iv) total break-relationship in which terrorists come to view the media organisations, editors and journalists as enemies to be punished and destroyed.

Terrorists’ means of communication greatly vary. Technological advancement in communication and modern warfare software and military hardware have tremendously facilitated terrorist acts and enable terrorist groups to utilise media tools with greater convenience. They employ newest information technology such as Internet to post messages to web audiences instantaneously and simultaneously. Terrorist organisations know that any terrorist action without the media will have no effect on the targeted audience. As a result, they want the media to recognise their ideological cause and give legitimacy to their modus operandi.

Are Mass Media Collaborators in Terrorism?
News on terrorist activities has also pitched mass media against society. The question is: are mass media collaborators in terrorism? The fact is that there can never be successful terrorist act without mass media.
Terrorist groups seek media coverage that causes damages to their enemy. This is particularly noticeable when the perpetrators of the act and the rationale for their acts remain unclear. They want the media to amplify panic and fear in order to influence government policies or drive home an ideological viewpoint.

On the other hand, the media want to protect society’s right to know and to make the story as timely and dramatic as possible. It is argued that in essence, media are not collaborators but media practitioners often have no objection to playing a constructive role in solving specific terrorist situations if this can be done without excessive cost in terms of story loss or compromise of values.

Mass Media and Counterterrorism Strategies
The media play vital role in counterterrorism strategies. The main objective of terrorist organisations is to get maximum publicity. As one of counterterrorism strategies, mass media censor organisations through self-restraint and regulation in order to discourage terrorist activities. In doing this, irresponsible media behaviour can be neutralised if one sees to it that an expert link with the media and planned news broadcasting become an indispensable part of security and intelligence services’ response to every terrorist campaign as well as of the process of planning and crisis management. Government want media coverage to advance their agenda and not that of the terrorists and to have the media present terrorists as criminals instead of glamourising them. As counterterrorism strategies, Wilkinson (2002, p.125) identifies the following strategies:

- responsible and accurate reporting on incidents may increase vigilance among the public (e.g., with respect to unusual parcels, suspicious persons and behaviours);
- the media may transmit warnings issued by the police to the public as well as instructions on how to behave in dangerous situations;
- the media with international reach may offer valuable data on foreign movements, relations between various persons and terrorists and different terrorist organisations, new types of weapons and possible future threats, such as the planning of an international terrorist spectacle or signs warning of a novel threat;
- the media also constitute an absolutely indispensable forum for quality discussions on terrorism’s social and political implications as well as for the development of appropriate procedures and countermeasures;
- the media will remind authorities that the response to terrorism should comply with the rule of law, basic rights and requirements for social justice.

Media Coverage of Terrorism: A Case of Boko Haram in Nigeria
The word ‘Boko’ in Hausa language means ‘book’ while ‘Haram’ means ‘forbidden, ungodly or sinful.’ Boko Haram literally means ‘book (Western education) is sinful.’ The Islamic sect has over the years unleashed terror and mayhem on Nigerian government and citizens in its anti-Western education campaign. Like the mustard seed, the sect grew in size and sophistication of warfare operations against government agencies, the media, churches and innocent citizens. In swift commando styles, the dastardly terrorist activities of Boko Haram sect have manifested in various attacks on police and military formations, personnel and churches across the Northern parts of the country.

Ever since the activities of the sect assumed wider dimension, the Nigerian mass media have remained at the forefront as agent of counterterrorism strategy. Unlike the symbiotic relationship that usually exists between terrorist groups and mass media, the relationship between Boko Haram sect and the Nigerian mass media has been anything but symbiotic. The sect accuses the media of unfair and inaccurate reporting of its activities while Nigerian mass media accuse the sect of infringing on the media right to objective reporting of the activities of the sect. The effectiveness of media response to the activities of the dreaded Boko Haram sect hinges on media’s role in creating public perception, acceptance or rejection of criminal behaviours the world over. The mass media can achieve this by building positive and courageous attitudes in the people in response to the sect’s threats.

Conclusion
It is indispensable that terrorism and mass media are interrelated in a specific way. Whereas terrorist groups use the media as conduit pipe to send their ideological viewpoints to the public in form of
intimidation and violence, the media highlight what is going on in the society to make people more aware of what is going on and to prepare them accordingly. The media also have a moral obligation to create awareness and educate citizens about how to counteract and prevent various acts of terrorism. Terrorists have become ‘media competent’ by knowing and applying the principles of attracting media in most of their activities.

References