

Chapter 11

Employing of Media during Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Communication has proven to be an integral component of the terrorism phenomenon. To unravel the opportunities and challenges embedded in employing the media during terrorism, this chapter draws on research findings and practical experiences around the world to identify prime actors associated with this issue and to describe their objectives, tactics, and channels of communication. It is argued here that media constitute a vital resource in the war on terror with both terrorist organizations and states harnessing communication to advance their causes in the public sphere. In this context, four categories of media users have been identified: media institutions, terrorist organizations, governments, and citizen groups. The chapter discusses enduring issues associated with each actor's use of media and calls for evolving new conceptual frameworks for understanding media use during terrorism. It concludes by arguing that while we seem to have a huge pool of research findings and practical experiences related to using the media during terrorism, we seem to have a critical shortage in how we conceptually account for the different variables that define the use of media in terrorism situations.

INTRODUCTION

It is virtually impossible to understand terrorism apart from the way it is communicated to national and international publics.¹ For many scholars and policymakers, while the battle against terrorism is waged in city alleys and rough terrains, it is also fought in the media sphere. Many believe that if it is through media that terrorists make their most stunning impact, it is also through media that they could be defeated. Brigitte L. Nacos argues that

“without massive news coverage, the terrorist act would resemble the proverbial tree falling in the forest: if no one learned of an incident, it would be as if it had not occurred” (2000, p. 174). In an emerging transnational communication environment marked by satellite television and the World Wide Web, the media sphere does not only offer ample opportunities for the global war against terrorism, but it also presents states and societies with serious challenges in that regard. The new media landscape has a greater reach; thrives on

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multimedia features and draws on interactive information that could be effectively harnessed to discredit terrorists' propaganda. On the other hand, dramatic media transitions have also enabled terrorist organizations to capitalize on new communication channels to promote their orientations and bolster their field plans.

To unravel the opportunities and challenges embedded in employing the media during terrorism, this chapter draws on research findings and practical experiences around the world to identify prime actors associated with this issue and to describe their objectives, tactics, and channels of communication. It is argued here that media constitute a vital resource in the war on terror with both terrorist organizations and states harnessing communication to advance their causes in the public sphere. In this context, four categories of media users have been identified: media institutions, terrorist organizations, governments, and citizen groups. The chapter discusses enduring issues associated with each actor's use of media and calls for evolving new conceptual frameworks for understanding media use during terrorism. It concludes by arguing that while we seem to have a huge pool of research findings and practical experiences relating to the use of media during terrorism, we seem to have a critical shortage in how we conceptually account for the different variables that define the use of media in terrorism situations.

EMPLOYING MEDIA DURING TERRORISM: DEFINING THE PARAMETERS

The emerging media sphere in its real and virtual expressions is a vast communication landscape buzzing with wide-ranging formats, messages, and users. Ever since the introduction of digital technologies in the late 1980s, the communication market has experienced its most dramatic transitions at national and global levels. Fueled

by a convergence of media, telecommunications and computer industries, the communication landscape has come to define not our media exposure patterns and habits, but the form and substance of the content we consume. Conventional media institutions remain important forces bearing on our daily communication experiences; but the emerging online media as enabled by the World Wide Web and convergence trends seem to have the most enduring impact on us as individuals and groups. New media have superior interactivity, more convenient accessibility, greater reach, and wider multimedia features than their conventional counterparts. In significant ways, new media, including social media, have not only been empowering for private individuals and groups long marginalized by media institutions, but they have also come to re-define our view of mass communication as a unidirectional process of information.

In this context of shifting media boundaries, it is important at this point to define the parameters of employing media as used in this chapter. Superficially, employing media suggests media channels being harnessed by certain actors to achieve specific effects on target audiences. In a democratic media system where institutions of mass communication pride themselves on being independent, this notion of media being used by other actors suggests some form of manipulation that renders media's editorial autonomy and professional integrity rather irrelevant. To avoid doing injustice to democratic media institutions, employing the media in this chapter is described only in the context of actors using media resources under their disposal according to their established standards. This suggests that journalists working for media institutions apply their professional values and conventions in their reporting of terrorism without falling under other actors' manipulation. Governments use their state-owned and operated media channels to promote their views and ideologies, but there are no formally-defined mechanisms through which governments force their views on

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