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AUTHOR Picard, Robert G.
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ABSTRACT

The literature implicating the media as responsible for the contagion of terrorist violence has grown rapidly, but, under scrutiny, it appears to contain no credible supporting evidence and fails to establish a cause-effect relationship. Some students of terrorism have borrowed conclusions from the literature about the effects of televised violence and crime on viewers and have attempted to project them onto the coverage of terrorism. But not all terrorism scholars fully embrace this view, and some cite the diffusion of innovations such as bombing techniques and technical training rather than media coverage as the contagion factor. Conclusions drawn from studies of diffusion of innovations in other situations do not provide much support for the view of the media as contagion agents. This does not exonerate the media from excesses in coverage, although one important school of thought suggests that coverage may actually reduce the possibility of terrorist violence by removing terrorists' need to resort to violent acts to gain coverage. While it is probably inappropriate for journalists to interview terrorists while their group's terrorist acts are in progress, interviews not conducted during a specific event should be helpful. The chances of this idea being widely accepted, however, are very slim. Whatever the results of legitimate terrorist research, it will move closer to reality than the views that the media are wholly at fault and wholly blameless. (HTH)

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NEWS COVERAGE AS THE CONTAGION OF TERRORISM:
DANGEROUS CHARGES BACKED BY DUBIOUS SCIENCE

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By
Robert G. Picard, Project Director
Terrorism and the News Media Research Project
and
Associate Professor
Manship School of Journalism
Louisiana State University

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Robert G. Picard

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When NBC News broadcast a three-and-a-half minute interview in May with Abul (Mohammed) Abbas, head of the Palestine Liberation Front that hijacked the Achille Lauro last year, the news organization was subjected to swift and pointed criticism.

"Terrorism thrives on this kind of publicity," charged State Department spokesman Charles Redman; he said it "encourages the terrorist activities we're all seeking to deter."¹

A similar response was seen in Great Britain when the British government attacked the BBC for its plans to broadcast the documentary "Real Lives: At the Edge of the Union," which included an interview with Martin McGuinness, a spokesman for the legal political wing of the Irish Republican Army who is accused of being a top-ranking official in the outlawed paramilitary group.

Home Secretary Leon Brittan asked the BBC not to air the program saying it was "wholly contrary to the public interest."²

Such incidents have led to calls for more control over what is broadcast and printed about terrorism and those who engage in such political violence. At the American Bar Association Meeting in London this past year, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher told the gathered attorneys that democracies "must find a ways to starve the terrorists and hijackers of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend."³ Her statement met with support from U.S. Attorney General Edwin Meese and other U.S. officials.

While these efforts have been aimed at getting media to adhere to voluntary guidelines, other individuals have suggested that legal restraints be imposed. Imposition of such restraints would face greater difficulty in the U.S. than abroad, due to the First Amendment, but many argue they are necessary to control terrorism and protect public safety.

Behind the efforts to induce self restraints or impose government restraints on the media is the belief that coverage of terrorism and terrorists creates more terrorism and terrorists. The idea that media are the contagion of terrorism has been widely heralded and is repeatedly used to justify efforts to alter media coverage.

This has occurred despite the fact that there is no significant evidence that media act as a contagion.

This paper will review the argument that media coverage spreads terrorism by giving encouragement to those who engage in such violence and explore the literature upon which it is based. It will also suggest paradigms within which to view and explore media effects on terrorists that offer a variety of important research opportunities.

The Contagion Literature

During the past two decades the literature associating media with terrorism and implicating media as a contagion of such violence has grown rapidly. When carefully dissecting that literature, however, one finds it contains no credible evidence that media are an important factor in inducing and diffusing terrorist acts.

Most books, articles, essays, and speeches on the topic are comprised of sweeping generalities, conjecture, supposition, anecdotal evidence based on dubious correlations, and endless repetition of equally weak arguments and non-scientific evidence offered by other writers on the subject of terrorism.

As one reviews the literature it becomes shockingly clear that not a single study based on accepted social science research methods has established a cause-effect relationship between media coverage and the spread of terrorism. Yet public officials, scholars, editors, reporters, and columnists continually link the two elements and present their relationship as proven.

The dearth of evidence associating the two variables is not the result of conflicting studies or arguments over interpretation of evidence, but rather the inexplicit absence of research on the subject. At times some scholars have attempted to overcome that problem or to place the pallor of respectability over their opinions by "borrowing" conclusions from the literature of the effects of televised violence and crime on viewers and then projecting similar effects to coverage of terrorism.

The use of this questionable tactic is disquieting to anyone who ascribes to social science research philosophy. It is especially disturbing when one considers the potential abrogation of civil liberties that could result and the unsettled state of knowledge about the effects of televised violence and crime.

Without wishing to cast aspersion on mediated violence research, it is safe to say that, in aggregate, the thousands of studies on the subject are contradictory, inconclusive, and based on widely differing definitions, methods, and assumptions. The literature has been subject of some of the most heated debate in the social sciences.

Social learning, arousal, and disinhibition theories on the effects of media portrayals of violence and crime have nevertheless been transferred to the issue of terrorism portrayal. The results of studies supporting the views of terrorism researchers have been accepted in the face of conflicting evidence.

This has occurred despite the fact that studies on the effects of portrayals of violence and crime have yielded no cause-effect relationship. At best, it can be said that media portrayals do not cause the audience to become violent but may affect some media users who have anti-social tendencies and spread uncertainty and fear among others.

While these violence research findings suggest reasonable hypotheses for terrorism research, no research along those lines has been conducted. Instead, what should only be hypotheses about media and terrorism have been accepted as fact.

Another of the more fascinating pseudo-scientific evidence offered in support of the notion that media are the contagion, reported in some of the most important sources on media and terrorism, are public opinion polls of political and law enforcement officials, as well as members of the public, about the relationship between media and terrorism.

While the polls present interesting insights into the perceptions of these individuals at given times, and add something to the understanding of how terrorism affects people, they are used by some writers as evidence that media are indeed the contagion of terrorism. Because the public and officials believe them to be the contagion, media must be the culprit, we are told.

Because the opinion of these groups of people is presumably affected by the agenda set by the past statements of government officials, media critics, and terrorism control researchers--all of whom have repeatedly alleged the link between media and terrorism--it is not surprising that other officials and the public should parrot their views.

Despite such problems, the contagion argument is continually used against media.

Rudolf Levy, a Defense Department expert on terrorism who has taught at the U.S. Army Intelligence Center and School, recently conveyed the media as contagion view throughout the military community in the publication Military Intelligence, saying:

Experts believe that this type of coverage often has adverse effects, such as:

- * Encouraging the formation of new groups. Tactical successes and successful exploitation of the media lead to terrorists taking a advantage of the momentum of previous actions and, thus, to an increase in terrorist acts.
- * Keeping the terrorist organization's name before the public and "the masses" on whose behalf the terrorists supposedly act.
- * Leading other less successful groups or individuals to commit more daring acts of terrorist violence.
- * Tempting terrorists, who have received favorable media coverage in the past, to attempt to seize control of the media.⁴

A similar view has been expressed by the American Legal Foundation, a right-wing group that recently urged to the government to restrict media coverage. The group argues that "because they give the terrorists a convenient stage to vent their political grievances, the media actually encourage terrorism and may promote the increasing violence and drama of terrorist attacks."⁵

Some of the most recognizable names in terrorism research are less sanguine about the accuracy of the contagion hypothesis, but they have nevertheless embraced and/or diffused it widely.

M. Cherif Bassiouni, who has written widely on the subject and taught many who are carrying on research and activities aimed at preventing or controlling political violence through legal means, recognizes the problems with the contagion idea but nevertheless does not reject it.

"Although this hypothesis would not appear entirely susceptible to empirical verification, at least with respect to ideologically motivated individuals, concern over this contagion effect has been repeatedly expressed, and the theory retains a certain intuitive reasonableness," he wrote.⁶

Other experts such as Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf at the Centre for the Study of Social Conflicts in The Netherlands are willing to accept the contagion effect despite the lack of empirical evidence that it exists or that

it would not exist if the media coverage were removed. Although admitting gaps in knowledge about the contagion effect they still argue:

The most serious effect of media reporting on insurgent terrorism, however, is the likely increase in terroristic activities. The media can provide the potential terrorist with all the ingredients that are necessary to engage in this type of violence. They can reduce inhibitions against the use of violence, they can offer models and know-how⁷ to potential terrorists and they can motivate them in various ways.

Robert L. Rabe, assistant chief of police for the Metropolitan Police Department in Washington, D.C., promoted the view that there may be value in the hypotheses as well. In his address at a terrorism conference, he stated:

And what of the contagion of such detailed coverage of a terrorist incident? By glorifying terrorist activities with extensive news coverage, the event is projected as an attraction for others to emulate. If such is the case, terrorism has truly made the television media a pawn in the great game of propaganda.⁸

Even members of the media have accepted the contagion idea. NBC News President Larry Grossman recently presented that view in a more popular form to a Society of Professional Journalists' meeting.

"Does television allow itself to be 'used' by terrorists and does television coverage, therefore, encourage terrorist acts? The answer is yes to both" he said. "The very existence of television undoubtedly bears some responsibility for the 'copycat' syndrome of terrorism today."⁹

But not all terrorism scholars fully embrace the view. Brian Jenkins, director of the Rand Corporation's terrorism research, has argued that the media cannot be solely blamed for the spread of terrorism. "(T)he news media are responsible for terrorism to about the same extent that commercial aviation is responsible for airline hijackings." he says. "The vast communications network that makes up the news media is simply another vulnerability in a technologically advanced and free society."¹⁰

While there has never been a scientifically based study on the contagion effect of media coverage per se, several related contagion studies have been conducted and are of interest. The most significant study has been conducted by Midlarsky, Crenshaw, and Yoshida who sought to answer the question of why terroristic acts spread across nations in Western Europe and Latin America. Using the theory of hierarchy, the authors attempt to explain the spread of terrorism among the nations. In the case of Western Europe the authors found that "terrorism spread from the least powerful to the most powerful, from the weak states to the strong."¹¹

The Midlarsky study found that European terrorist groups, for example, borrowed ideology, rhetoric and methods from the Third World. The biggest contagion effect was found in the transfers of the technique of bombing in both Latin America and Europe, with kidnappings most significant in Latin America and hijacking to a lesser extent there. Media were never mentioned as a cause of the diffusion of terrorist techniques.

Security adviser Edward Heyman and CIA researcher Edward Mickolus later disputed the full findings of the Midlarsky study, citing inadequacies in its data base and some of its inferences, but they did not dispute its general concept. The two argued that their own research indicated two non-contagion diffusion factors were important as to the spread of violence: extensive intergroup cooperation and the idea of transporting terrorist acts to locations where they could best be carried out. They argued that transportation was the biggest factor. Again, no mention of media coverage was made as an important cause of the spread of terrorism.¹²

Rand Corporation studies have found some evidence of contagion in the diffusion process of terrorist activity types. Jenkins, although unwilling to completely damn news coverage as the culprit, has noted clusters of

occurrences in airline hijackings and embassy sieges and indicated media might have played a role in those occurrences.¹³ The inference, however, is based on no scientific evidence.

Other research on terrorism has noted that in the case of many airline hijackings in the 1970s, for example, terrorist hijackers often had specific knowledge of radio, navigation, and operating equipment on aircraft and of commercial aviation practices, suggesting they had specialized training and that extensive planning of campaigns of hijacking had occurred. These factors tend to indicate that some of the multiple hijackings were planned well in advance and that the "clustering" of hijacking may not necessarily be blamed on media coverage alone.

Diffusion Theory Possibilities

General conclusions that can be drawn from studies of diffusion of innovations in other situations do not provide much support for the view that media are crucial elements as a contagion. Mass media have been found to be best at assisting diffusion when combined with interpersonal channels and when used in reinforcing rather than persuasive roles. These findings are consistent with and an outgrowth of the two-step flow theory research of Lazarsfeld and Katz and others who have shown that interpersonal influences are much stronger than media in altering attitudes and behavior.¹⁴ This interpersonal influence approach arose in the 1940s as social scientists were forced to reject the stimulus-response based theories of media effects offered in the 1930s. Those theories placed media influences on individuals very high, but were not supported by scientific research.

If one accepts general diffusion theory as having relevance to the spread of terrorism one would have to hypothesize that media may play a role in the

awareness aspect of the adoption process of terrorism, but only a minor part-- at best--in the evaluative, acceptance, and adoption portions of the diffusion of terrorist techniques.

Diffusion principles also provide a testable explanation for the increasing number of acts of political violence. Because they provide an established normal S-curve of cumulative adoption of innovations, researchers on terrorism could develop methods to analyze adoption of various techniques and practices to determine whether the adoption followed normal patterns or was unusual.

I do not wish to fall into the trap of using the evidence from diffusion research as conclusive evidence about the role of media in terrorism, as many terrorist researchers have done by accepting results from violence research. The general conclusions drawn from diffusion research, however, have not been the subject of the heated debate that has surrounded the violence research because they have been much less contradictory and inconclusive.

The diffusion principles suggest hypotheses that are well suited for testing in the realm of terrorism, although no such studies exist today that add evidence to the discussion of media and terrorism.¹⁵

It is clear, then, that no causal link has been established using any acceptable social science research methods between media coverage and the spread of terrorism. Without such a link, media are being unjustifiably blamed for the increasing acts of violence throughout the world.

I do not wish to be interpreted, however, as taking the position that no link can ever be established, only that one cannot do so with the state of knowledge today.

The fact that media cannot be shown to be the contagion of terrorism does not exonerate it from excesses in coverage that have been shown to harm

authorities' ability to cope with specific incidents of violence, have endangered the lives of victims and authorities, have been unduly sensational, and have spread fear among the public. For such errors in judgment and violations of existing industry standards, the offending media must bear the responsibility. One would hope that such problems will diminish as journalists become more acquainted with the techniques of terrorists and discuss the problems and implications of their coverage.

Coverage as a Preventative of Terrorism

If media cannot be shown as the cause of the spread of terrorism, can they be shown to be useful in preventing or reducing the scale of violence in terrorist attacks?

One important school of thought suggests coverage may actually reduce the possibility of future violent action on the part of those who engage in terroristic violence by removing the need for individuals and groups to resort to violence in order to gain coverage.

The view that some coverage may reduce terrorism is not held solely at the fringes of the terrorism research community, although it receives little support among the government officials and those to whom they most often turn for advice in combatting terrorism.

Abraham H. Miller, who has written extensively on legal issues involving media during terrorist incidents, notes the major elements of the view: "If terrorism is a means of reaching the public forum, violence can be defused by providing accessibility to the media without the necessity of an entry fee of blood and agony," he writes.¹⁶ Indeed, that was a conclusion reached at a conference of terrorism at Ditchley Castle in Oxfordshire, England, in 1978.

Another conclusion urging full, complete, and serious media coverage of such violence was reached by the Task Force on Terrorism and Disorders, which noted that

The media can be most influential in setting the tone for a proper response by the civil authorities to disorders, acts of terrorism, and political violence. It can provide an outlet for the expression of legitimate public concern on important issues so as to act as a safety valve, and it can bring pressure to bear in response to public sentiment in an effective manner to redress grievances and to change official policies.¹⁷

The response to the problem of terrorism should be more not less news coverage, the task force argued: "The news media should devote more, rather than less, space and attention to the phenomena of extraordinary violence."¹⁸ If such coverage avoids glamorizing the perpetrators of violence, provides reliable information, and gives appropriate emphasis to the consequences of violence, it will increase public understanding, reduce public fear, and assist in reducing violence, the report indicated.

These conclusions were reached by the task force despite the fact that it generally accepted a stimulus-response view of media effects. While admitting no authoritative evidence directly linked media and violence, the group accepted the premises that media directly or indirectly influence potential perpetrators of violence and potential victims and that coverage of such violence affects the ability of authorities to respond.

If one accepts the view that unrequited grievances, frustration, and despair lead to political rebellion, and that those who rebel are denied forums in media because media are institutions which support and perpetuate the dominant political order of the states in which they operate, one must conclude that normal media channels are regularly denied to these extreme dissidents.

This being the case, the only possible avenues left for gaining a media forum are acts designed to force their way into the forums. Violence, as we are all too painfully aware, is an effective way of achieving such forums.

The provision-of-forums-as-a-means-of-combatting terrorism view holds that reasonable provision of forums in noncoerced environments may help reduce the frustration that leads to such violent acts and lead to an understanding of the issues or points of view of the dissidents.

Two psychologists who conduct research in the area of terrorism, Jeffrey Rubin of Tufts University and Nehemia Friedland of Tel Aviv University and the Project on Terrorism at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, recently argued that governments should help provide access, which would be necessary in most nations where broadcasting is government operated or government related. The two argued:

Governments should also try to reduce the destructiveness of terrorism by making it clear that a less dramatic performance will suffice to get the desired audience attention. Cameo appearances, for example, might be invited or encouraged as a substitute for full-scale productions [Terrorist theater]. Imagine that Yasir Arafat or George Habash were to be invited to meet the press on Israeli television to express their views on what they consider to be political reality in the Middle East. Such an arrangement would provide these actors with the element of legitimacy they seek and would air issues without resorting to anything more violent than the savagery of the Israeli news media.¹⁹

As with most of the theories surrounding the role of media in terrorism, there is little supporting evidence--only intuition--bolstering this free-expression-as-a-means-of-controlling-violence theory. The theory has merit and deserves to be studied closely, however, as do some principles from the diffusion approach.

Several possible studies come to mind here, including behavioral analyses of groups whose views have been carried by media without coercion. In recent times, IRA, Palestinian, Basque, Red Army Faction, and other groups have

received platforms to express their views through interviews and other forums. A study of the behavior of these groups in the periods after their interviews would be enlightening. One would hypothesize that the behavior would become less spectacularly violent after the forums are provided--a hypothesis borne out by casual observation in the case of Yasser Arafat's supporters since international forums were provided the PLO in the 1970s.

It would appear to be inappropriate for journalists to interview members of groups taking part in terrorist acts while such acts are underway. This type of interview has occurred during the course of hijackings, building sieges, kidnappings, and other prolonged acts of terrorism.

Interviews under such conditions are a direct reward for the specific act of terrorism underway and can interfere with efforts to resolve the crisis. There is also some evidence that such coverage can prolong crises. In addition, such interviews all too often increase the spectacle of the event, spread fear, and provide a coerced platform for the views of the groups involved.

I do not believe, however, that interviews not conducted during a specific event need be treated in the same manner, despite protestations to the contrary by government officials. Interviews such as those of Abul Abbas and Martin McGuinness, mentioned at the beginning of this paper, clearly do not provide a reward for a specific violent act, do not interfere with authorities' efforts to control a specific incident, do not endanger the lives of any hostages or authorities attempting to cope with hostage situations, and obviously cannot prolong a specific crisis since none exists. If the coverage-as-a-preventative-measure theory is correct, such interviews should be helpful.

When such coverage is provided, however, journalists should not allow their media to become mere propaganda vehicles for those who engage in

violence. Such occasions should be used as a means of exploring the causes and factors that led to violence, of discussing policy options, and of encouraging non-violent alternatives. This means that the journalist must exercise control and judgment in the interview, not allowing the subject of the interview to control to topics covered or the time spent on specific issues. The journalist must steer the subject away from overtly propagandistic statements with probing serious questions aimed at getting to the heart of the issues; that is, the journalist must truly question the interviewee, not merely provide a forum.

I am not sanguine about the idea of forums being provided to terrorists, however. The idea of opening media to alienated and disenfranchised persons and groups as a means of reducing violence seems preferable to nearly any other option for controlling violence, but the chances of the idea being widely accepted are very slim. The media themselves would be reluctant to do so out of fear of offending audiences and experiencing revenue losses, as well as fears of being accused of supporting terrorists. A measure of existence of that disapprobation can be seen in the criticism heaped on NBC by other media and journalists after the Abbas interview.

In addition, media are not likely to convey such information conflicting with the views of the government in the nation in which they operate or that is likely to create a conflict between the media and the government. Philip Schlesinger has noted that media generally reflect their government's perspectives when covering terrorism--regardless of the type of state in which they exist--and that perspectives which conflict with the government's views are rarely carried.²⁰

As a result of such problems, I believe it will be difficult to convince government officials and their terrorism advisers that media may possibly aid the campaign against terrorist violence.

Summary

The lack of scientifically acceptable evidence about media and terrorism, and the absence of criticism of the scanty and questionable evidence about media effects that is offered by some government officials, security advisers, and researchers leave media open to significant attacks by legislators and executive agencies.

Because there will be continuing terrorism in the years to come and no projected decline in such activity, there is great danger ahead for media in all nations that suffer from terrorist attacks. Movement toward restricting the flow of information through media is gaining momentum, backed by dubious studies couched in the scientific jargon of the social sciences. Most officials and members of the public do not know enough to be able to question that evidence.

Those of us in the social sciences who appreciate and understand the contributions of media to society have a duty to help the public and officials part the veil of ignorance that shrouds the subject of terrorism and the media. We must help set and undertake a research agenda that can be realistically expected to answer the serious charges and questions about journalism's roles in the spread of terrorism.

I do not mean that we should set out with our own set of biases to "prove" the media are innocent. But we do need to set out to find out just what the reality is. I suspect we will find that media are a contributing factor in the spread of terrorism, just as easy international transportation, the easy availability of weapons and explosives, the intransigence of some governments' policies, the provision of funds to terrorists by a variety of supportive governments, and a host of other factors are to blame.

Whatever the results of our research, it will move us closer to reality than the views offered by those who argue that the media are wholly at fault and those who argue media are blameless. The resulting knowledge will make it less likely that governments will act precipitously to control media coverage and that journalists will gain a better understanding of terrorism that will leave them less open to manipulation and more aware of the consequences of their actions.

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