

Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al Qaeda: A Change of Course?

Reviewed by Jessica Baran

Abstract

Manuel R. Torres Soriano. Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al Qaeda: A Change of Course? *Athena Intelligence Journal* Vol. 3, No 1, (2008), pp. 1-20.

Soriano begins his exploration of the relationship between media and terrorism with the words of Marshall McLuhan, whose statement that “without communication, terrorism would not exist” is taken by Soriano to be “relatively precocious”, but essentially correct. Though terrorism existed prior to mass media, Soriano argues that it was always about making a public statement, and that new technologies have simply allowed the dissemination of terrorist messages to reach a broader audience with a more concise message. It seems fair to say that there exists a mutually beneficial relationship between terrorists and the media of today.

According to Brigitte Nacos, one of the scholars that has most studied this issue, terrorists commit violent acts looking for three universal objectives: to get attention; to gain recognition; and to obtain a certain degree of respect and legitimacy. These objectives are attainable for those individuals who are capable of receiving the most media coverage. However these universal objectives seem too simplistic in regards to the complexity of terrorism and the media. These objectives can be achieved outside of violent acts, thus there must be reference to violence and the symbiotic relationship between media and terrorists.

Modern terrorism and TV logic

This article first focuses on the TV media. It argues that this media relies heavily on the visuals it can collect for a story and the less sensational the visuals for the story the less important the story becomes to the television news media. Terrorists carefully select the places in which they carry out their attacks in order to provide the best media coverage. The obvious example of this is the 9/11 attacks in New York, where media of all sorts were able to cover the story immediately. Not only were the media able to capture this incredibly visual attack, but the people who were in New York, residents and tourists alike, were also able to document this event with sensational pictures, videos and personal stories. An important thing to keep in mind here, that Soriano does not mention, is that Al Qaeda has never officially taken responsibility for the 9/11 terrorist attacks, though it is the common belief that this organization is behind the attacks. The simple action of not taking responsibility may indeed go against an argument that television coverage of this event was an important motive.

The article goes on to explain that terrorists also recognize that media is a fast paced industry where interest in stories is lost quickly. There needs to be a certain novelty behind stories that are covered, so it is argued that this influences what the next terrorist act may be. There is trust in what one can see, so the television media automatically receive a level of trust that other media do not. However, being that the story is visual, a story that is occurring in the world with no visuals to go along with it could receive little to no coverage by the television news media, even if it is a story that could potentially have an influence on other important regions.

Soriano goes on to examine the television media's strong tendency to "personify" the stories they cover. Making their stories more relatable to the general public by humanizing the people involved within the news story creates the ability for the watcher to become more personally involved, even if they are buying into a cliché.

It can be ascertained, then, that the better the terrorist organization understands television media, the more coverage they will receive. One would have to agree with Soriano that some terrorists are well aware of how the media works, and thus use this knowledge in the creation of their terrorist attacks. Soriano also points out that, because of the nature of television news media being short (90 second) stories, it is impossible to tell the whole story and give context to the events unravelling before the viewer's eyes. The television media does not go into any real detail, thus simplifying the story for the viewer to the point that it has little to do with the actual events. This has great implications for society and social pressure on the government, though one would have to assume this is not beneficial to the terrorist organization. The terrorist organization would receive massive media coverage for a visual, easy to cover attack, however, this does not mean that the viewers would be aware of why the attack occurred or the ultimate goals of the terrorist organization. This is a complex situation in which the television media are both beneficial and detrimental to the cause of the terrorist.

Categorizing the relationship between terrorists and the media

Soriano examines the relationship between terrorists and the media, suggesting that there are several different levels of relationship. He cites Michael Wieviorka, a French sociologist, who splits these relationships into four different levels: Complete Indifference, where terrorists complete their act of terror with no regard to media coverage; Relative Indifference, in which terrorists complete their act of terror with an understanding that media could assist their cause, but are still uninterested in media coverage; A Media-Oriented strategy, in which terrorist are aware of and utilize the media to further their message; and Complete Breakaway, in which the media is seen as the enemy and the terrorists will respond to the media in the same way they respond to any enemy.

Soriano points out that terrorists can have a combination of several of these views, or alternate between them. One should also keep the role of the government in terms of the terrorist-media relationship in mind (though Soriano later touches on this). As the media are responsible for reporting truth to the public, they are also responsible to the government and public alike to ensure national security, and some might even say the promotion of nationalism. So within this terrorist-media relationship the media will never be able to give a full and fair report, as access to the terrorists for information and interviews is extremely limited.

The jihadist perception of the media

Soriano places Al Qaeda in the last two of Wieviorka's levels of relationship; Media Oriented and Complete Breakaway. In this regard he argues that though Al Qaeda realizes that the media furthers their message, they also regard the media as the enemy when this is not done or distorted. He goes on to say this view of Western media as the enemy is perpetuated through their bias reporting and ignorance to the motivations behind Al Qaeda's actions. However, it is likely the case that Western media understands the motivations behind Al Qaeda's actions, but are limited in their ability to give a full report in regards to this due to time limitations and government pressure. Soriano insinuates that it is easier and more sensational for Western media to refer to terrorists as madmen, and for Al Qaeda to insist that the Western media lies about the jihadist movement and motivations, and furthers this by adding that these lies end not at the media, but exist also at the government level. Certainly, the power of the media is to promote some perspectives at the expense of others, and governments know how to use this to their advantage. It is also true, however, that there are fundamental limitations in broadcasting a balanced story, and more emphasis will naturally be placed on the local impact of a story because this is what the audience is most concerned with.

Soriano gives some attention to the fact that Al Qaeda and jihad movement believe the West is using media as a tool of war by lying about the motivations behind both the jihad movement and the motivation of Western governments. He argues this in four points, from what Soriano tells us is the jihad point of view:

the media diverts the attention of the Muslim population by focussing on issues that are small of little importance considering the bigger picture; the media exaggerate the military strength of the west; the media distorts the Arab image and motivation to that of madmen; and the media promotes Western aggression against Islam thus creating a scenario in which American military violence against Al Qaeda is widely accepted. One could go even further to say that the violence against Muslims and Arabs that the US media helps to rationalize extends beyond military violence, and includes person to person or person to property civilian violence as well.

As the article points out, however, this goes both ways: as the West uses the media as a war-tool, so does Al Qaeda. To this end, Soriano discusses the example of the Al Qaeda's 1996 "Declaration of War against the United States" – which received almost no coverage or reaction from the West – and Osama Bin Laden's "World Islamic Front for Jihad Against Jews and Crusaders" which was declared just two years later and received much more world media coverage. The difference being Osama Bin Laden's devotion to being in the news media in the two years leading up to this second declaration. However, even within the second declaration the television media coverage of this was minute in comparison to any violent terrorist attacks.

Al Jazeera: The turning point

A significant portion of Soriano's argument focuses on Al Jazeera, the Arabic satellite television station created by the monarchy in Qatar in order to provide a more independent Arab point of view, differing from other Arab stations that are heavily controlled by their respective governments. Al Jazeera follows a more Western framework for its programming, and employs respected reporters from around the world. The 9/11 terrorist attack increased Al Jazeera's popularity, and made way for the station to become spokespeople for Bin Laden. Though the station presented both the Western and the Taliban sides of the conflict, by giving both sides an equal footing, Bin Laden finally had a television media outlet in which he had control over the message being sent to the public. However this is not necessarily true, as Al Jazeera would never agree that Bin Laden had control over the message being sent to the public, insisting instead that they are dedicated to presenting both sides equally. Also, it is known that Al Jazeera has chosen not to air footage of Bin Laden, though one can not be sure of their motivation.

Outside of the Bin Laden point of view, Soriano points out that Al Jazeera was able to focus on the victims of the American offensive, both in Afghanistan and Iraq. He illustrates the economic benefit to showing the Al Qaeda viewpoint, as these videos have proven to be lucrative for the station. Though there is discrepancy around the loyalty that Al Jazeera has for Al Qaeda, and whether or not they act as direct mouthpiece for Osama Bin Laden, showing his videos sans editing or not, it is clear there is more sympathy in Al Jazeera's programming to the Iraqi militants, Palestine and the Muslim world. Soriano's claim that Al Jazeera now plays an incredibly important role in the dissemination of the Al Qaeda message is difficult to verify, and Soriano rests this part of his argument on conjecture. Though Al Jazeera is referred to as "spokespeople" within this article, this may be implying too much of a connection between Al Jazeera and Al Qaeda without supporting evidence.

The Internet and approaching the media indirectly

Though the internet offers mobility and global access, Soriano first explains the complex way in which Al Qaeda utilizes this new technology. In order to maintain a secure location, it was revealed in 2005 that Al Qaeda uses a network of messengers who travel 70 miles in a period of up to 12 weeks to reach their final destination of Islamabad, where, though usually physically brought to television stations, the message may also be sent via the internet. US intelligence reportedly broke through this secure network in order to carry out the attack of Damadola in 2006, which apparently led to the deaths of some key Al Qaeda members.

Soriano insinuates that this attack may have pushed Al Qaeda to rely more heavily on the internet as a medium by which they reach the media. The internet is not only safe and immediate, but allows Al Qaeda to speak directly to their audience with an untainted message. Soriano also states that because the internet acts as a direct media with no filter for the language, message or imagery used, this may push television to show visuals that they would have shied away from in the past. The insightful point here is that new

communication technologies are pushing the boundaries of what television audiences are used to viewing.

Soriano does not touch on the use of the internet for directly rallying new members of Al Qaeda or radicalizing Muslim supporters, however. His focus is mainly on the use of internet to access the mass media. Though the internet is used for video distribution, it is also used to disseminate writings and allows for members to publicly blog their opinions. Also, it allows for two way communication between the audience and the terrorist. There is much more complexity to internet usage than what is represented within this article.

Conclusions

Soriano concludes that Al Qaeda has evolved its media techniques along with the evolving media and technological landscape of the world today. Though Western media had traditionally dominated over public opinion, this is changing as new mediums such as Al Jazeera and the internet offer new options for Al Qaeda to speak to the public. With strong ties to Al Jazeera and the seemingly low risk access to the internet, Al Qaeda is moving forward with a new media strategy that gives them access to an “unlimited public”. This is all very true, but this article only skims the surface of the complexity of this issue. The symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorists is multi-layered and, though this case study addresses some of the key elements, there is much more to consider in terms of the media being a tool of those who wish to manipulate audiences into supporting violence and terror.

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