The Information Battleground

CHAPTER 11

Terrorist Violence and the Role of the Media

OPENING VIEWPOINT: MEDIA-ORIENTED TERROR AND LEBANON'S HEZBOLLAH

Lebanon's Hezbollah has long engaged in media-oriented political violence. In the aftermath of its attacks, Hezbollah leaders and supporters—sometimes including the influential Lebanese Sunni Amal militia—engaged in public relations campaigns. Press releases were issued and interviews granted. Statements were made to the world press claiming, for example, that attacks against French and U.S. interests were in reprisal for their support of the Lebanese Christian **Phalangist** militia and the Israelis. This public linkage between terrorist attacks and a seemingly noble cause served to spin the violence favorably and thereby justify it.

Hezbollah intentionally packaged its strikes as representing heroic resistance against inveterate evil and exploitation. They produced audio, photographic, and video images of their resistance for distribution to the press. For example, some of Hezbollah's attacks against the Israelis in South Lebanon were videotaped and sent to the media—with images of dead Israeli soldiers and stalwart Hezbollah attackers.

Young Hezbollah suicide bombers recorded videotaped messages prior to their attacks. These messages explained in very patriotic terms why they intended to attack Israeli interests as human bombs. These tapes were widely distributed, and the suicidal fighters were cast as martyrs in a righteous cause. Photographs and other likenesses of many Hezbollah "martyrs" have been prominently displayed in Hezbollah-controlled areas.

Hezbollah continues to maintain an extensive media and public relations operation and has an active website. The website contains a great deal of pro-Hezbollah information, including political statements, reports from the "front," audio links, video links, photographs, and e-mail links.

This chapter explores the role of the media in a terrorist environment. There is frequent interplay between media reporting and the use of violence by extremist movements. If terrorism is a strategy characterized by symbolic attacks on symbolic targets, it is also a strategy characterized by the intentional manipulation of the news media. Since the inception of the modern era of terrorism, "terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press."[1] In the modern era, the truism that **information is power** is very clearly understood by the media and governments; it is also understood by terrorists, their audiences, and their adversaries.

The ability of modern news agencies to use satellite and digital technologies to broadcast events as they happen "live"—and graphically—to a global audience has not been lost on violent extremists. Terrorists understand that instantaneous media exposure for their grievances simply requires a dramatic incident to attract the world's press. Terrorists seeking publicity are likely to garner a large audience if they dramatically carry out targeted hijackings, bombings, hostage takings, assassinations, or other acts of violence. The press also has its own incentives to report major terrorist incidents. From the media's point of view—and aside from their fundamental responsibility to objectively report the news—drama guarantees increased attention from potential viewers. Concurrent with this context, violent extremists have become expert at using the Internet, social networking media, and other digital communications platforms to disseminate propaganda and recruit new followers. In this regard, the Internet and social networking media represent a parallel information outlet for extremists—one that they can control at will.

❖ Two Perspectives: The Media and Governments

A brief introduction to two perspectives is useful for understanding the role of the media; both will be developed further in this chapter. The first is from the media's perspective, and the second is from the perspective of governments.

The Perspective of the Media

For journalists, the time-honored professional ideal is to report the news objectively, without placing too much "spin" on the information. The concept of **media spin** refers to the inclusion of subjective (opinionated) interpretations when reporting the facts. Interpretation is, of course, very desirable at some point during a terrorist incident, but there is an urge within the media to immediately create a mood or a dramatized atmosphere when reporting the news. This is typical of many news outlets and reflects the modern trend toward tabloid talk radio, reality shows, and family-oriented television news—even in major urban outlets. The fact is that a **news triage** (selection process) does occur, so some news items are given a higher priority than others. Editors must decide what information to report and how it should be reported. As a consequence, dramatic news such as terrorist incidents often reflects the personal, political, and cultural biases of editors and reporters and contains a great deal of emotional human-interest content.

Because the news triage is a significant factor in the processing of information by audiences, it can be a critical element in the audience's analysis of a particular terrorist environment. For example, editors generally focus on and report terrorist violence without critical analysis of the terrorists' cause or the symbolic message conveyed by their behavior. This can leave the recipient audience with an incomplete understanding of the terrorist environment, and it gives rise to misperceptions and misinterpretations of the terrorists, the grievances of their championed group, and government responses.

❖ **Photo 11.1** The damaged car in which two foreign journalists were killed at the police station in the town of Latifiya. Polish war correspondent Waldemar Milewicz and a Polish Algerian colleague were killed when their car was raked by machine-gun fire in an ambush south of Baghdad.

The Perspective of Governments

Policy makers are challenged to develop coherent and consistent policies to respond to acts of terrorism. They are also challenged to develop popular policies that are accepted by the public. When

democratic governments try to create a national consensus, they seek to control the media's spins on the terrorist incident. Unfortunately for policy makers, the media can be—and usually are—a source of concern. This is because the press is adept at creating political environments that can sway public opinion. In societies that pride themselves on protecting freedom of the press,

> terrorism . . . can cause enormous problems for democratic governments because of its impact on the psychology of great masses of citizens. . . . Terrorist bombings, assassinations, and hostage-taking have, in nations with a free press, the ability to hold the attention of vast populations.[2]

For this reason, some level of contention or animosity is frequently present in the relationship between government officials and members of the media when terrorism moves to the forefront of public discourse. In the United States, this tension occurs at all levels of government interaction with the media, from the president's spokespersons to cabinet-level federal representatives to local law enforcement officials. At each level, there is often an instinctive (and noticeable) attempt by officials either to keep the media at arm's length or to manipulate the conditions for media access to information. One example of animosity between government and the media occurred in May 2005, when the U.S. newsmagazine *Newsweek* published a report that American interrogators and guards at the detention facility in Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, had desecrated the Qur'an, the Muslim holy book. As a result of the report—which alleged that guards had flushed the Qur'an down a toilet— anti-American protests in the Muslim world were widespread and violent. After strong government denials and after initially (and strongly) defending its position, *Newsweek* retracted its story and apologized for publishing the report without proper confirmation.[3]

The discussion in this chapter will review the following:

- Understanding the Role of the Media
- A New Battleground: The War for the Information High Ground
- The Public's Right to Know: Regulating the Media

❖ Understanding the Role of the Media

In societies that champion freedom of the press, a tension exists between the media's professional duty to objectively report the news and the terrorists' desire to use the media to promote their cause. This is a tension between the necessity to keep the public informed and deliberate attempts to manipulate the world's media to disseminate propaganda. **Propaganda** is defined as "any systematic, widespread, deliberate indoctrination or plan for such indoctrination."[4] It is used by organizations, movements, and governments to spread their interpretations of the truth or to invent a new truth. Propaganda can incorporate elements of truth, half-truths, and lies. Underlying all extremist propaganda is a particular political agenda.

The media sometimes tread a fine line between providing news and disseminating the terrorists' message. This happens when they report the details of terrorist incidents, broadcast interviews with terrorists and their extremist supporters, or investigate the merits of the terrorists' grievances. In *theory,* the media will be mindful of this fine line and will carefully weigh what news to report and how to do so. In *practice,* some media outlets are blatantly sympathetic to one side of a conflict and completely unsympathetic to the other side. In authoritarian states, this occurs as a matter of routine because the government heavily regulates the media. In democracies, the free press enjoys the liberty to apply whatever spin is deemed desirable in its reporting practices. Some media purposely use provocative language and photographs to attract an audience.

The following discussion will review several factors one should consider when evaluating the role of the media:

- Publicizing the cause
- Spreading the word: Mass communications and the terrorists' message
- No more printing presses: Mass communications and the "new media"
- Truth and consequences: Reporting terrorism

Publicizing the Cause

Terrorists frequently try to **publicize their cause**, hoping to reach as broad an audience as possible. They do this by adapting their tactics so that their methods are accredited in a public environment. Media-oriented terrorism refers to terrorism that is purposely carried out to attract attention from the media and, consequently, the general public.[5] Methods and targets are selected because they are likely to be given high priority by news outlets. The purpose of media-oriented terrorism is to deliver the terrorists' message. "Thus, terrorism . . . may be seen as a violent act that is conceived specifically to attract attention and then, through the publicity it generates, to communicate a message."[6]

Terrorists and extremist movements that seek broad exposure have been known to directly and indirectly cultivate relationships with reporters and to establish aboveground organizations that promote media relations. For example, the mainstream Irish Republican political party Sinn Féin has long had a sophisticated information operation, which has historically included close relationships with the print and broadcast media.[7] Some terrorists and rebel movements have also cast themselves as the "military wing" of political movements. For example, both Sinn Féin and the Colombian Communist Party engaged in aboveground political public relations while the Irish Republican Army and Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) waged armed rebellion.

For terrorists concerned about delivering their message, the main questions are: How can the dissident group communicate its grievances to the world (or a regional) community? Which institutions are most likely to publish the underlying reasons for the group's revolutionary violence? Governments and other targeted interests are highly unlikely to "get the word out" about the merits of the cause—if anything, they will denounce the incident and the cause. Governments and targeted interests are also quite likely to try to control the flow of information and to craft their comments in a manner that will sway an audience against the extremist movement. The best solution to this problem is for terrorists to access and use the technologies of **mass communications**. They can do this in a number of ways, including appropriation of technologies for their own use to personally send their message to the public (perhaps through aboveground sympathizers) and skillful "packaging" of their message, hoping to send it through international media outlets.

By cleverly manipulating these technologies and the world's press, terrorists can create a mood among target audiences that can lead to public pressure for the government or other adversary to "do something"—perhaps even grant concessions to the movement. For example, when the media focus on terrorist victimization (which they usually do), "it is clear that media coverage of victimization can aid in the generation of messages from terrorists to their various target audiences."[8] At the same time, media attention can affect the behavior of target governments: "By stimulating and exacerbating public reaction to victim suffering and family tragedy, it is clear that media coverage can also increase pressure on targets of demands."[9]

Thus, when a message is filtered into the intended audience, and this message has been manipulated in an advantageous manner, the terrorists have successfully publicized their cause.

Spreading the Word: Mass Communications and the Terrorists' Message

Mass communications is the technological ability to convey information to a large number of people. It includes technologies that allow considerable amounts of information to be communicated through printed material, audio broadcasts, video broadcasts, and expanding technologies such as the Internet and social networking media. Modern revolutionaries consider mass communications an invaluable

tool for achieving the goals of their cause. In fact, the theories of "armed propaganda" are partly technology driven. Furthermore, the mass media are used as a recruiting tool by violent extremists and in this regard have become a force multiplier for revolutionary movements. For example, in his influential discussion of armed propaganda, Brazilian revolutionary Carlos Marighella wrote,

> The urban guerrilla must never fail to install a clandestine press and must be able to . . . produce small clandestine newspapers, pamphlets, flyers, and stamps for propaganda and agitation against the dictatorship. . . . The urban guerrilla engaged in clandestine printing facilitates enormously the incorporation of large numbers of people into the revolutionary struggle. . . . Tape recordings, the occupation of radio stations, and the use of loudspeakers, drawings on the walls . . . are other forms of propaganda.[10]

For terrorists, efficiency, timeliness, and coherence are critical components to mass communication. *Efficiency* is necessary so that one's message will be delivered in an orderly (as opposed to garbled or chaotic) manner and received in an intelligible and easily understood form. *Timeliness* is also necessary because the message must be received while it is still fresh and relevant. It makes little sense to send a message before an issue has had an opportunity to ripen; it likewise makes little sense to send a message after an issue has become moot. *Coherence* refers to delivering a message that is easily understood by a target audience. Chapter Perspective 11.1 demonstrates the importance of delivering a coherent message to the target audience.

Chapter Perspective 11.1
Delivering the Message

Extremist movements will often use coded language to convey their message. This language is often peculiar to the particular group or ideological movement and is not easily interpreted by nonmembers. From the point of view of laypersons and people not attuned to this language, the group's message is sometimes incoherent. The following example demonstrates how an extremist group's propaganda can become lost in its own rhetoric.[a]

Against Social-Democracy and Liquidationism— For Steadfast Revolutionary Work!

Reformism does not mean improving the conditions of the masses; on the contrary, the vital role that reformism has played in the capitalist offensive shows that reformism means collaborating with the bourgeoisie in suppressing the mass struggle and implementing the capitalist program. . . .
The work of the Marxist-Leninist Party has been a beacon against the opportunism of the liquidationist and social-democratic trends. The Marxist-Leninist Party has persevered in steadfast revolutionary struggle, while the opportunists, as fair-weather "revolutionaries," are reveling in despondency and renegacy, are denouncing the revolutionary traditions from the mass upsurge that reached its height in the 1960s and early 1970s, and are cowering behind the liberals, labor bureaucrats and any bourgeois who is willing to throw them a crumb.[b]

Communiqué on the Second Congress
of the Marxist-Leninist Party, USA
Fall 1983

Notes

a. See Sargent, Lyman Tower, ed. *Extremism in America: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press, 1995, pp. 85ff.
b. Communiqué on the Second Congress of the MLP, USA; Ibid., pp. 88–89.

Thus, if one's message is delivered efficiently and in a timely manner, it will have a stronger impact on the target audience. In fact, if the terrorists can successfully create identification between the audience and some sympathetic symbol of a terrorist incident, the audience could become a factor in resolving the incident. For example, when American hostages were taken during the 1980s in Lebanon and during the hijacking of **TWA Flight 847** (discussed in this chapter), an interesting dynamic occurred:

Powerful pressure groups [were] created, demanding the safe return of the victims of kidnappings at almost any price. . . . The release of [the Lebanon] hostages was a major reason why the U.S. president sent arms to Iran. In the case of the hijacked TWA Flight 847 (June 14–30, 1985) the media exposure of the hostages generated enough pressure for the American president to make concessions.[11]

Since the advent of printing presses using industrial-age technologies in the 19th century, terrorists and extremist movements have used virtually every available mass communications technology. The following technologies are commonly used by modern political extremists:

- print media
- radio
- television
- the Internet and social networking media

Print Media

Printed news and propaganda have been used extensively since the 19th century, when the printing press was improved through the use of steam power and then electric power.

These technologies permitted the mass production of multiple-page documents. Privately owned newspapers became common, as did the dissemination of politically critical publications and propaganda. Collectively, these outlets constituted the **print media**.

Dissident movements relied on the printed word throughout the 20th century to disseminate their message. Sympathetic publishers and clandestine printing presses were instrumental in promulgating propaganda on behalf of dissident causes. Governments readily understood the power of the press to sway public sentiment, and there were many cases of crackdowns on aboveground newspapers. There were also many examples of the deployment of security forces to locate and shut down clandestine presses. In an interesting example of how political blackmail can be used to promulgate an extremist message, the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* published the political manifesto of Ted Kaczynski, the so-called Unabomber, on September 19, 1995. Earlier in 1995, Kaczynski stated that he would cease his bombing campaign if major newspapers published his manifesto. If they did not do so, he promised to continue his campaign. On the recommendation of the U.S. Department of Justice (which hoped Kaczynski's writing style would be recognized), the *Times* and *Post* published his document, titled "Industrial Society and Its Future."

Radio

Radio broadcasts were used by many dissident movements prior to the advent of television. Many 20th-century movements continued to issue radio broadcasts in societies where large numbers of people were unable to receive uncensored television broadcasts and where shortwave radio was widely used. In 1969, the Brazilian groups National Liberation Action and MR-8 kidnapped the American ambassador to Brazil; as one of the terms for his release, they successfully demanded that their manifesto be broadcast over the radio. Historically,

John Downing/Hulton Archive/Getty Images

❖ **Photo 11.2**   The nature of the job. A British war correspondent travels with southern Sudanese rebels. The rebels, who practice Christianity or traditional religions, fought a long and brutal war against the northern Islamic government from 1983 to 2005, leading to the founding of the Republic of South Sudan in 2011.

clandestine radio broadcasts have been instrumental in publicizing the cause to selected audiences, including potential supporters—shortwave radio was particularly effective in reaching a broad audience. As has been the case with dissident printing presses, governments have used security forces to root out clandestine radio stations.

Television

The first widespread television broadcasts during the 1950s included news broadcasts. Prior to that time, the only moving visual images of political issues were broadcast in movie houses as newsreel footage. Newsreels were often little more than short propaganda films that presented the government's and mainstream society's points of view; they were useless to extremists unless their movements were depicted as the favored side in the broadcast. With the advent of mass broadcasts during the 1960s, news of the day was received relatively quickly in people's homes. For example, the Vietnam War became the modern era's first "television war," and for the first time, unflattering and even horrific images were regularly seen in American households—this was especially so because the evening news was broadcast in the early evening at dinnertime.

Television has since become the medium of choice for terrorists, especially in the era of cable and digital feeds. It provides immediate visibility and increases the size of the audience. Television also allows for the broadcast of dramatic images, many of which are relatively uncensored in sympathetic markets.

Television news breaks very quickly—often within minutes of an incident—and is broadcast worldwide. Satellite feeds can be linked from almost anywhere in the world. Television has thus become quite useful for promulgating the terrorists' message both visually and with dramatic, on-the-scene audio. All that is required is for the terrorists to manipulate the media into broadcasting a sympathetic spin for their grievances. The terrorists "use television as the main instrument for gaining sympathy and supportive action for their plight by presenting themselves as risking their lives for the welfare of a victimized constituency whose legitimate grievances are ignored."[12]

If successful, terrorists can bring images of their war into the homes of hundreds of millions of people worldwide nearly instantaneously—possibly with sentimental content that can potentially sway large audiences to their side. Televised broadcasts can be easily captured and uploaded on Internet websites, so original content can be viewed repeatedly and redistributed over time.

The Internet and Social Networking Media

Computer and social communication technologies are now used extensively by many terrorist groups and extremist movements. It is not uncommon for websites to be visually attractive, user-friendly, and interactive. Music, photographs, videos, and written propaganda are easily posted on Web pages or disseminated via social networking media. E-mail addresses, mailing addresses, membership applications, and other means to contact the movement are also common, so a "virtual world" of like-minded extremists thrives on the Internet.[13] One apt example of the anonymity and scope of the Internet was the activities of a purported member of the Iraqi resistance against the American-led coalition who called himself Abu Maysara al-Iraqi. Al-Iraqi regularly posted alleged updates and communiqués about the Iraqi resistance on sympathetic Islamic websites. It proved to be very difficult to verify his authenticity or even whether he (or they) was based in Iraq because he was accomplished in the skillful substitution of new online accounts.[14]

Tweeting, texting, and other social networking media platforms are used to record incidents (often graphically) and tout claimed successes. The fundamental attraction of social networking media is that it affords the capability to send messages and images "live" as they occur. This is an advantage for media outlets or individuals who wish to be the first to break a story. Activists quickly adapted to this capability, first most notably during the Arab Spring in 2011, when protesters tweeted and texted videos and other information during antigovernment demonstrations. Extremists also took advantage of social networking media by recording and disseminating real-time images of fighting, executions, beheadings, and casualties.

Many Internet postings by extremists portray the sense of a peaceful and rich culture of a downtrodden group. Graphic, gory, or otherwise moving images are skillfully posted, sometimes as photo essays with dramatic background music that "loop" for continuous replay. Bloggers have posted links

to hundreds of websites where viewers may obtain *jihadi* videos.[15] The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) became very adept at creating well-crafted dramatic videos for recruitment and propaganda purposes—these videos are uploaded on *jihadi* websites and captured for further promulgation.

Both Al-Qa'ida and ISIS publish digital online newsmagazines that are expertly produced and notably report current information in multiple editions. Al-Qa'ida's *Inspire* online magazine was originally overseen by American Anwar al-Awlaki prior to his death in 2011 and continued to be published after his death. ISIS's *Dabiq* online magazine likewise reported recent events in sequential editions. Both online magazines provide detailed information on how to plan and carry out terrorist operations, how to construct explosive devices, and proper use of other weapons.

All of these digital platforms—social media, videos, websites, online magazines—proved to be very successful instruments for recruiting Muslims, Europeans, Americans, and others to join the Islamist cause. A particularly successful example of the recruitment value of these technologies is the case of the Raqqa 12, also named the Legion by U.S. officials. Founded by British Islamist Junaid Hussain, who joined ISIS in 2013, the Raqqa 12 were a group of young cyber recruiters who are believed to have convinced thousands of followers to join ISIS's self-described caliphate by mid-2015. Hussain was killed by a U.S. drone strike in August 2015, as were most remaining members of the group soon thereafter.[16]

As a counterpoint to such online activism, private organizations independently monitor extremist websites for their origin and content. For example, the Search for International Terrorist Entities (SITE) Intelligence Group maintains a website dedicated to identifying Web postings by several extremist organizations and terrorist groups.[17]

No More Printing Presses: Mass Communications and the "New Media"

The traditional and new resources just discussed are not the only media outlets. In the United States, there is a growing market in, and consumer demand for, the so-called **New Media**. New Media use existing technologies and alternative broadcasting formats to analyze and disseminate information. These formats include talk-show models, tabloid (sensational) styles, celebrity status for hosts, and blatant entertainment spins. Strong and opinionated political or social commentary makes up a significant portion of New Media content. These qualities represent a distinctive media style:

> New media are mass communication forms with primarily nonpolitical origins that have acquired political roles. These roles need not be largely political in nature; in some instances they are only tangentially so. What distinguishes these communication forms . . . is the degree to which they offer political discussion opportunities that attract public officials, candidates, citizens, and even members of the mainstream press corps.[18]

Common types of New Media include "political talk radio . . . television talk . . . electronic town meetings . . . television news magazines . . . MTV . . . and print and television tabloids."[19] These media are innovative in their formats and sensational in their delivery. They do not hesitate to make admittedly provocative and completely biased statements. An important quality of the New Media is that they are very innovative and frequently experiment with untried formats and issues. Some extremist groups have appeared in the New Media, but terrorists have not been particularly active in attempting to manipulate this resource.

Truth and Consequences: Reporting Terrorism

The print and broadcast media have shown a propensity for giving priority to terrorist incidents in their news reports. This is understandable, given the influence terrorism can have on policy making and domestic or international political environments. However, the media have not been consistent about which incidents they report or how these incidents are reported. The news triage frequently gives extensive coverage to some acts of political violence but provides little if any information about other incidents.[20] For example, during the post–September 11, 2001, invasions of Afghanistan and

Iraq, American cable news outlets focused on the military campaign and laced their broadcasts with on-the-scene reporting from embedded journalists who were advancing with the troops. In contrast, Qatar's Al Jazeera cable news outlet regularly broadcast images of injured civilians or destruction from the fighting and laced its broadcasts with on-the-scene reporting from journalists on the street and inside hospitals. Hezbollah's television station, Al-Manar TV, likewise provided a popular non-Western perspective on events in Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and the Middle East.[21]

Thus, media reports attach inconsistent labels to the perpetrators of political violence, and there can be a disproportionate amount of media interest in the sheer violent nature of terrorism, without an exploration of the underlying causes of this violence. Because of these disparities in reporting, organizations such as the Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI) have been established to bridge the gap between Western and Middle Eastern media outlets.[22]

Chapter Perspective 11.2 discusses Al Jazeera, the independent satellite news network based in the Persian Gulf nation of Qatar.

Chapter Perspective 11.2

Al Jazeera

Al Jazeera, literally translated as "the island" in Arabic, is an independent satellite news network based in Qatar. Launched in 1996, it immediately found its market niche as a result of the closure of the BBC's Arabic language feed. The network eventually found its independent presence in Qatar after the Saudi Arabian government attempted to censor a documentary about executions under Islamic law. It has since established respected credentials within the news industry, although governments and political leaders periodically criticize some reports and stories.

Al Jazeera's broadcasting reputation stems from its independent reporting and interviews on controversial subjects. For example, the network filed news reports from Israel, broadcast interviews and statements from insurgents, and provided news analyses from different perspectives on political issues. It was the only network to report live from Iraq during the initial phase of the 2003 war, and its news feeds were broadcast by Western networks. Significantly,

Al Jazeera's "on the ground" reporting of civilian casualties led to accusations of bias from Western political leaders. Nevertheless, the network received critical acclaim for objectivity from the journalistic community. The periodic criticism of Al Jazeera has largely come from governments and political leaders who are opposed to the network's depictions of their favored policies. In 2017, Saudi Arabia led an Arab coalition to politically isolate Qatar with a list of demands, including the closure of Al Jazeera.

Al Jazeera English was launched in 2006 and was successful in employing respected journalists for its broadcasts. In the same style, Al Jazeera launched sister stations as news outlets directed to the Balkans, Turkey, and elsewhere. Al Jazeera also branched into other nonpolitical areas of journalism, such as sports reporting. The international team and worldwide reporting of Al Jazeera eventually moved the network into what is widely regarded as the upper tier of satellite news networks.

Market Competition

The news media are owned and controlled by large corporations that are mostly motivated by market shares and profits. This affects the style, content, and reporting practices of the modern media. The fact is that objective reporting is often outweighed by other factors, such as trying to acquire a larger share of the viewing market vis-à-vis competitors. The "scoop" and the "news exclusive" are prized objectives. Thus, coverage can be quite selective, often allowing public opinion and government pronouncements to set the agenda for how the news will be spun. In this type of political and market environment, the media will often forgo criticism of counterterrorist policies. Coverage can also be quite subjective, with the biases of executives, editors, and commentators reported to the public as if they were the most salient features of a particular issue.

The following discussion illustrates the conflict between theoretical objectivity in news reporting and actual inconsistency when these reports are released. It summarizes the dilemma of *which* incidents are reported and *how* they are reported.

Deciding Which Incidents to Report

The process for deciding which events to report (the news triage) is often driven by evaluating what kind of news is likely to attract a viewing audience. If it is decided that dramatic incidents will bring in sizable shares of viewers, the popular media will not hesitate to give such incidents a high priority for the day's editions or broadcasts.

The media can be highly selective about which terrorist incidents to report. The ultimate decision tends to weigh in favor of news that affects the media's readers or viewing public. In a striking example of this phenomenon, 12 people fell victim to terrorist attacks in Israel in 1985, two British soldiers were killed in Northern Ireland the same year, and the number of Americans killed by terrorists in 1982 was seven. There was great publicity in all these cases, whereas the tens of thousands killed in Iran and Iraq, in the Ugandan civil war, and in Cambodia (where hundreds of thousands were killed) were given far less attention, because Western media either had no access or were not interested.[23]

The personal stories of participants in a terrorist environment are particularly appealing to the media. Strong emotions such as outrage, grief, and hatred play well to many audiences. Certain kinds of terrorist incidents are particularly susceptible to the media's use of "human-interest" spins because readers and viewers more readily identify with the victims of these incidents. For example, "hostage takings, like kidnappings, are human dramas of universal fascination."[24] Personal identification will always attract the public. The key task for the popular media is to find personal stories that resonate well with their readers or viewers. When this happens, the personal stories that do not resonate are likely to be left out of the mass media news.

Deciding How to Report Incidents

The process of deciding how to report terrorist incidents is, from the readers' or viewers' perspective, seemingly a subjective exercise. Media reports have never been consistent in their descriptions of the perpetrators of terrorist incidents, nor have they been consistent in characterizing examples of extremist violence as terrorism, per se. **Labeling** by reporters vacillates in connotation from the pejorative term *terrorist* to somewhat positive terms such as *commando.* These decisions in semantics sometimes reflect social norms. For example, "democratic societies value compromise and moderation so that the term extremist tends to be opprobrious."[25] This point is further demonstrated by the following sequence of reporting that occurred in 1973:

One *New York Times* leading article . . . [described] it as "bloody" and "mindless" and [used] the words "terrorists" and "terrorism" interchangeably with "guerrillas" and "extremists." . . . The *Christian Science Monitor* reports of the Rome Pan Am attack . . . avoided "terrorist" and "terrorism" in favour of "guerrillas" and "extremists"; an Associated Press story in the next day's *Los Angeles Times* also stuck with "guerrillas," while the two *Washington Post* articles on the same incident opted for the terms "commandos" and "guerrillas."[26]

These labels reflect a tendency to use euphemistic (indirect or vague) language to describe what might otherwise be appalling behavior.[27] Euphemisms are also used by governments, policy makers, and others to apply words outside of their normal meaning to mask or soften the language of violence. This practice is deliberately media oriented so that the press and general public will more easily accept an incident or policy. Recent examples of **euphemistic language** used by government officials and soldiers at war include the following:

- "collateral damage"—dead civilians
- "deniability"—ability to plead ignorance
- "enhanced interrogation"—applying physical and psychological duress to force information from a prisoner
- "extraordinary rendition"—kidnapping a person in one country and forcibly sending the person to another country

- "KIA"—killed soldiers
- "neutralize" or "suppress"—destroy or otherwise eliminate
- "preventive reaction strike"—air raid
- "robust"—aggressively violent
- "terminate with extreme prejudice"—assassinate
- "waste"—kill
- "wet work"—assassinations
- "WIA"—wounded soldiers

A Word About Terrorist-Initiated Labeling

Terrorist groups also engage in labeling and adopt euphemistic language. They primarily do this in two circumstances: first, when they label enemy interests as potential targets, and second, when they engage in self-labeling. This language is promulgated in communiqués to supporters and journalists.

Labeling Enemies and Targets. Terrorists use symbolism to dehumanize potential targets. This is a universal trait of violent extremists regardless of their ideology. For example, leftists might recast Western business travelers as imperialists. Or Armenian nationalists could symbolically hold Turkish diplomats to account for the Armenian Genocide of the early 20th century. Or anti-Semitic and religious terrorists might label a Jewish community center as a Zionist interest. In the era of the New Terrorism, Al-Qa'ida and its sympathizers denounce Western culture and values as being contrary to Islam and the values of the faithful; they also denounce secular Arab governments as apostasies. This labeling process creates important qualifiers for acts of extreme violence, allowing terrorists to justify their behavior even though their victims are often noncombatants.

Self-Labeling. Choosing organizational or movement titles is an important task for terrorists. Those who engage in political violence consider themselves to be an elite—a vanguard—that is waging war against an implacable foe. They consciously use labels and euphemisms to project their self-image. Members of the cause become self-described martyrs, soldiers, or freedom fighters. Hence, organizational and movement titles always project an image of freedom, sacrifice, or heroism; negative or cowardly images are never conveyed. This pattern is universal among groups on the extremist fringe and is likely to continue. Table 11.1 surveys a few examples of self-labeling and euphemistic language.

❖ A New Battleground: The War for the Information High Ground

Mass communications technologies can become weapons of war in modern conventional and asymmetrical conflicts. Because the mass media deliver vast amounts of information to large audiences, this informational battleground has become a front line in modern conflicts. Propaganda has, of course, been used by adversaries since the dawn of organized conflict. However, new technologies provide new opportunities and dangerous pitfalls for combatants. The following discussion surveys the manipulation of the media in terrorist environments.

Adversaries in a terrorist environment frequently try to shape the character of the environment by manipulating the media. For terrorists, the media serve several useful purposes: First, the media may permit the dissemination of information about their cause; second, the media may facilitate the delivery of messages to their supporters and adversaries; and third, the media may serve as a "front" in their war to shape official governmental policies or influence the hearts and minds of their audience.

Table 11.1   Public Relations: The Organizational Titles of Violent Extremists

Terrorists seek to project an image that casts them in the role of liberators and soldiers. They are often conscious of their public image and can become quite media savvy.

The following table illustrates how organizational titles reflect terrorists' self-designations as military organizations, the purpose of their movements, and their championed groups.

Organizational Title	Self-Designation	Purpose	Championed Group
Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine	A united front; a forward position in a war	Liberation of a people	Palestine and Palestinians
Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant	A prototypical nation	Liberation movement creating a caliphate	Faithful Muslims in the region
Irish Republican Army	An army; members are soldiers	Republican unification	Northern Irish Catholics
New People's Army (Philippines)	An army; members are soldiers	The continuation of a people's liberation movement	The people
Party of God (Hezbollah)	Movement representing God's will	Carry out God's will on Earth	The faithful
Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Sri Lanka)	Warriors possessing the fierceness of tigers	Liberation	Tamils
Quebec Liberation Front	A united front; a forward position in a war	Liberation of a people	Quebec and people of Quebec

For governments, the media can be a powerful tool for the suppression of terrorist propaganda and for the manipulation of the opinions of large segments of society. This is why every regime will intensively deliver selective information to the media or, as in the case of authoritarian regimes, officially suppress the reporting of some stories.

Practical Considerations: Using the Media

Terrorists and their supporters use time-honored techniques to attract media attention. In the tradition of mainstream media-savvy organizations (and aside from acts of dramatic violence), terrorists have invited the media to press conferences, issued press releases, granted interviews, released audio and video productions, and produced attractive photographic essays. Two outlets that have greatly expanded the reach and solidarity of extremists are Internet chat rooms and websites that post messages.

Extremists have come to understand that there are many ways in which they can adapt their methods and styles of violence to attract the media.[28] These adaptations can include

- the degree of violence applied,
- the use of symbolism, and
- the performance of very spectacular or special deeds.[29]

These techniques have created environments wherein the media have been eager to receive the terrorists' message. There is a tendency for the media to sensationalize information, so broadcasts of terrorist audio and video recordings, news conferences, or written statements often take on an entertainment quality.

Terrorists' Manipulation of the News "Scoop"

News outlets compete in trying to preempt the newsworthiness of their competitors' stories, known colloquially as **media scooping**—that is, being the first to report breaking news. Even when there is no breaking news, news outlets will often spin human-interest or background stories to give the audience an impression of urgency and drama. To accomplish this task, journalists will frequently probe the feelings of participants in terrorist environments, including the terrorists themselves and their supporters. "This is a situation that, however unwittingly, is tailor-made for terrorist manipulation and contrivance."[30] Terrorists and other radicals have in fact successfully manipulated this propensity for scooping and sensationalizing news on a number of occasions. Several examples follow:

- Ilich Ramírez Sánchez (Carlos the Jackal) did not make his escape during the December 1975 Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries hostage crisis until the television cameras arrived. After their arrival, he dramatically and publicly made his getaway from Vienna to Algeria with 35 hostages in tow.[31]

- During the November 1979 to January 1981 seizure of the American embassy in Iran, there were several incidents of Iranian crowds playing to the cameras. Crowds would come alive when the cameras were on them, so some sections of the crowd would act temporarily militant while other sections of the crowd were rather quiescent.[32]

- In May 1986, ABC News broadcast a short interview with Abu Abbas, the leader of the Palestine Liberation Front (PLF). The PLF was notorious at the time because a PLF terrorist unit had carried out the October 1985 hijacking of the *Achille Lauro* cruise ship, in which American passengers were terrorized and one was murdered. During the interview, Abbas threatened to carry out acts of terrorism in the United States and referred to President Ronald Reagan as "enemy number one." The case of the *Achille Lauro* will be explored further in Chapter 13.

One former member of the leftist West German June 2nd Movement terrorist group made the following argument for the manipulation of the media by West German terrorists: "The RAF [Red Army Faction] has said, this revolution will not be built up by political work, but through headlines, through its appearance in the press, which reports again and again that guerrilleros are fighting here in Germany."[33]

Points of Criticism

Because of these and other examples of overt (often successful) manipulation of the media by terrorists, critics have identified a number of problems in the reporting of the news. These include the following:

- First, critics argue that journalists sometimes cross the line between reporting the news and disseminating terrorist propaganda. The theoretical problem is that propaganda can be spread even when the media objectively report the motives of terrorists. When motives are broadcast, events can be intellectually rationalized.

- Second, critics argue that the media's behavior sometimes shifts from objectivity to sensational opinion during particularly intense incidents. Journalists' urge to create a mood or to adopt roles other than as news reporters—such as de facto negotiators—can complicate terrorist environments.

- Third, critics argue that the ability of the mass media to reach large audiences, when combined with the foregoing factors, can lead to realignments within the political environment. The concern is that strongly symbolic attacks by terrorists—in combination with skillful publicity operations by aboveground supporters—may be interpreted by audiences as the acts of rightfully desperate people. This could affect the dynamics of the terrorists' behavior and the government's policy-making options.

A possible outcome of these problems is that some types of reporting can interfere with official efforts to resolve crises. In the case of the United States, for example,

> the media contribute to the process of transforming an international issue into a domestic political crisis for the president. There is perhaps no other type of situation that subjects the president to such intense scrutiny, and the president is aware that his image as a decisive and effective leader is constantly at risk.[34]

Thus, in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, political and media critics hotly debated whether the media should continue to broadcast feeds from Al Jazeera news service. Al Jazeera is one of the rare independent news services in the Middle East, and it has broadcast extensive footage of injured Afghani and Iraqi civilians, whom the U.S. classified as the unfortunate "collateral damage" of war. Al Jazeera also aired film clips of Al-Qa'ida leaders Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri that were delivered to the station by Al-Qa'ida. The fear in the United States was that uninterpreted broadcasts of these images could spread enemy propaganda or send messages to sleeper cells. For this reason, American news services were asked to limit Al Jazeera coverage.

Applying these concerns to our model of participants in a terrorist environment, it is conceivable that interviews with terrorists, media scooping, and other reporting practices may

- send messages to terrorists, possibly encouraging or suggesting targets for further acts of political violence;
- encourage supporters, thus improving morale and strengthening the terrorists' base of support for ongoing operations;
- cause victims to react, possibly demoralizing them or forcing shifts in public opinion and perceptions;
- engage the target in a global (rather than domestic) forum—this can hurt the target politically and can possibly lead to international pressure to moderate behavior toward the terrorists' championed group;
- elicit sympathy—or at least understanding—from onlookers; and
- convince political and journalistic analysts to affix favorable labels to the group or movement.

This may affect the world's perception of the terrorists, possibly transforming them into heroic guerrillas or freedom fighters.

Chapter Perspective 11.3 discusses the case of WikiLeaks and the unauthorized reporting of private and classified information.

Chapter Perspective 11.3

WikiLeaks

WikiLeaks is an independent organization founded by Australian Julian Assange and others in 2007. It maintains an international online presence through its domain wikileaks.org, operating in accordance with self-described central principles that include:

> the defence of freedom of speech and media publishing, the improvement of our common historical

record and the support of the rights of all people to create new history. We derive these principles from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In particular, Article 19 inspires the work of our journalists and other volunteers. It states that everyone has the right to freedom of opinion and expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and

(Continued)

(Continued)

ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers. We agree, and we seek to uphold this and the other Articles of the Declaration.[a]

WikiLeaks publishes documents and other information obtained from anonymous volunteers, including classified information not intended for release. In particular, WikiLeaks has obtained information from volunteers who may be subject to criminal prosecution or other sanctions if their anonymity is compromised. This occurred when United States Army Private First Class Bradley Manning was arrested in May 2010 for allegedly delivering hundreds of thousands of classified documents to WikiLeaks.

The documents and information released by WikiLeaks have on occasion incited strong international debate about wartime policies. For example, in 2010 WikiLeaks released

U.S. military reports under the titles "Afghan War Diary" and "Iraq War Logs." These releases together accounted for one of the most voluminous releases of classified information in modern U.S. history.

Other controversial releases of information included the 2012 release of U.S. Department of Defense documents concerning Guantánamo Bay detainees and several million e-mails from the private intelligence company Stratfor. In June 2015, WikiLeaks released classified reports and documents from the U.S. National Security Agency (NSA), which WikiLeaks titled "Espionnage Élysée." It reported NSA surveillance of French government officials.

Note

a.   WikiLeaks. http://www.wikileaks.org/About.html.

Counterpointing the Criticism

As a counterpoint to the foregoing criticisms, and in defense of journalistic reporting of terrorist incidents, some proponents of the free press argue that full exposure of terrorism and the terrorists' grievances should be encouraged. In this way, the public can become completely informed about the nature of terrorism in general and about the motives of specific terrorists. Thus, "defenders of media coverage feel that it enhances public understanding of terrorism and reinforces public hostility toward terrorists."[35]

Information Is Power: The Media as a Weapon

The notion that information is power is a concept that politicians, governments, dictators, and extremists have accepted for some time. Controlling informational spins and the mechanisms of distribution are critical components for success, regardless of whether one wishes to sell a product, promote a political agenda, or impose an ideology. As pointed out in previous discussions, information outlets have been purposely sought out to spread the extremists' message, so the manipulation of information has become a primary strategy in the modern era.

For terrorists and other extremists, information can be wielded as a weapon of war, so **"media as a weapon"** is an important concept. Because symbolism is at the center of most terrorist incidents, the media are explicitly identified by terrorists as potential supplements to their arsenal. When terrorists successfully—and violently—manipulate important symbols, relatively weak movements can influence governments and entire societies. Even when a terrorist unit fails to complete its mission, intensive media exposure can lead to a propaganda victory. For example, during the 1972 Munich Olympics attack by Black September terrorists, "an estimated 900 million persons in at least a hundred different countries saw the crisis unfold on their television screens."[36] As one Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) leader later observed, "World opinion was forced to take note of the Palestinian drama, and the Palestinian people imposed their presence on an international gathering that had sought to exclude them."[37]

Case in Point: Hezbollah and the Hijacking of TWA Flight 847

Lebanon's Hezbollah (first discussed in Chapter 6) has demonstrated its skill at conducting extraordinary strikes, some of which ultimately affected the foreign policies of France, Israel, and the United States. It regularly markets itself to the media by disseminating grievances as press releases, filming and photographing moving images of its struggle, compiling "human-interest" backgrounds

of Hezbollah fighters and Shi'a victims, and packaging its attacks as valiant assaults against Western and Israeli invaders and their proxies. This has been done overtly and publicly, and incidents are manipulated to generate maximum publicity and media exposure. For example, the January 1987 kidnapping in Beirut of Terry Waite, the Archbishop of Canterbury's envoy, was broadcast globally. He was released in November 1991.

On June 14, 1985, three Lebanese Shi'a terrorists hijacked TWA Flight 847 as it flew from Athens to Rome. It was diverted to Beirut, Lebanon, and then to Algiers, Algeria. The airliner was flown back to Beirut, made a second flight to Algiers, and then flew back to Beirut. During the odyssey, the terrorists released women, children, and non-Americans, until 39 American men remained on board the aircraft. At the final stop in Beirut, the American hostages were offloaded and dispersed throughout the city.

❖ **Photo 11.3** TWA Flight 847. A terrorist waves a gun to cut short a press interview with TWA pilot John Testrake during the hijacked airliner's odyssey around the Mediterranean. The terrorists skillfully manipulated the international press.

As the hijacking unfolded, the media devoted an extraordinary amount of airtime to the incident. The television networks ABC, CBS, and NBC broadcast almost 500 news reports, or 28.8 per day, and devoted two thirds of their evening news programs to the crisis.[38] "During the 16 days of the hijacking, CBS devoted 68% of its nightly news broadcasts to the event, while the corresponding figures at ABC and NBC were 62% and 63% respectively."[39]

The hijackers masterfully manipulated the world's media. They granted carefully orchestrated interviews, held press conferences, and selected the information they permitted the news outlets to broadcast. It was reported later that the terrorists had offered to arrange tours of the airliner for the networks for a $1,000 fee and an interview with the hostages for $12,500.[40] After the hostages were dispersed in Beirut, **Nabih Berri**, the leader of Lebanon's Syrian-backed Shi'a **Amal** movement (an ally and occasional rival of the Shi'a Hezbollah movement), was interviewed by news networks as part of the negotiations to trade the hostages for concessions. In the end, the terrorists' media-oriented tactics were quite effective. They successfully broadcast their grievances and demands to the world community and achieved their objectives. "[The] media exposure of the hostages generated enough pressure for the American president to make concessions."[41] In effect,

> the most pernicious effect of the crisis was its validation of terrorism as a tactic. The Reagan administration, driven by intense domestic pressure generated by the hostages' plight, in turn compelled Israel to accede to the hijackers' demands and release 756 Shi'a.[42]

The hostages were released on June 30, 1985.

As a postscript—which was sometimes forgotten during the episode—a U.S. Navy diver had been severely beaten, shot, and thrown down to the Beirut airport's tarmac by the terrorists. The murder occurred during the second stopover in Beirut. The leader of the terrorist unit, Imad Mughniyah, and three others were later indicted by U.S. prosecutors for the killing. One hijacker, Mohammed Ali Hamadi, was convicted in Germany of the Navy diver's murder and sentenced to life in prison.

The Contagion Effect

The **contagion effect** refers to the theoretical influence of media exposure on the future behavior of other like-minded extremists.[43] This concept can also be applied "to a rather wide range of violent behavior [other than terrorism], including racial disturbances."[44] In theory, when terrorists

successfully garner wide exposure or a measure of sympathy from the media and their audience, other terrorists may be motivated to replicate the tactics of the first successful incident. This may be especially true if concessions have been forced from the targeted interest. Assuming that contagion theory has merit (the debate on this point continues), the question becomes the extent to which the contagion effect influences behavior. Examples of the contagion effect arguably include cycles of

- diplomatic and commercial kidnappings for ransom and concessions in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s,

- hijackings on behalf of Middle East–related causes (usually Palestinian) from the late 1960s to the 1980s,

- similarities in the tactics of left-wing Western European ideological terrorists during their heyday from the late 1960s to the 1980s,

- the taking of Western hostages in Lebanon during the 1980s,

- the taking of hostages and the committing of beheadings and massacres in the Middle East during the 2000s, and

- the skillful use of social networking media during the 2010s to broadcast images for recruiting purposes and to disrupt enemy populations.

Assessments of the contagion effect produced some consensus that the media do have an effect on terrorist cycles. For example, empirical studies have indicated a correlation between media coverage and time lags between terrorist incidents.[45] These studies have not definitively proven that contagion is a behavioral fact, but they do suggest that the theory may have some validity.

The era of the New Terrorism arguably presents an unprecedented dynamic for contagion theory, because transnational cell-based movements are a new model for—and may suggest new assessments of—the theory. Transnational organizations such as Al-Qa'ida engage in a learning process from the lessons of attacks by their operatives around the world. The advent of communications technologies such as faxes, cellular telephones, e-mail, text messaging, and the Internet—especially in combination with focused manipulation of the media—means that the terrorists' international learning curve can be quick and efficient. Hence, in theory, the contagion effect may be enhanced within New Terrorist movements on a global scale.

❖ **Photo 11.4** Disseminating information. A Rewards for Justice program poster disseminated by the U.S. Department of State's Diplomatic Security Service. It depicts the aftermath of the 1993 bombing of the World Trade Center in New York City.

Problems on the New Battleground: The Risk of Backlash

As the examples of TWA Flight 847 and other incidents demonstrate, terrorists purposefully try to force concessions or environmental shifts through the media. In a terrorist environment, "the media, then, do more than inform us when reporting on terrorism. They give tiny numbers of violent men access to millions of homes and allow the terrorist newsmakers to horrify us by sudden unprovoked killings of innocents."[46]

Unfortunately for terrorists, this widespread exposure does not always work to their advantage. Governments are also experts at spinning the nature of terrorist violence to the media. When the violence is truly horrific, and when the victims, targets, or onlooker audiences recoil in popular disgust, the terrorists can significantly diminish their influence over their adversary. They can, in effect, actually strengthen the adversary's resolve. Hence, "a vital factor in gaining access to the media, lethality, can sow the seeds of a terrorist group's own destruction. Terrorist groups can experience an irremediable backlash, even among supporters, as a result of doing injury to innocents."[47]

Public opinion among victims, targets, and onlooker audiences is critical to the success of media-oriented terrorism. However, one should bear in mind that terrorists often play to their supporter audiences, so success is always a relative term in the battle for the media.

❖ The Public's Right to Know: Regulating the Media

Freedom of the press is an ideal standard—and arguably an ideology—in many democracies. The phrase embodies a conceptual construct that suggests that the press should enjoy the liberty to independently report information to the public, even when this information might be unpopular. News editors and journalists, when criticized for their reports, frequently cite the people's right to know as a justification for publishing unpleasant information. The counterpoint to absolute freedom of the press is regulation of the press. This issue arises when the media publish unpleasant facts (often in lurid prose and images) about subjects that the public or the government would rather not consider. Regulation is also a genuine option when matters of national security are at stake. When these and other concerns arise, regimes and societies are challenged to address the following policy questions:

- Should the media be regulated?
- If regulation is desirable, how much regulation is acceptable?

The following discussion addresses these questions within the contexts of the **free press** and the **state-regulated press**.

The Free Press

The international media operate under many rules that emanate from their cultural environments. Some media operate with few if any codes of professional self-regulation, whereas others have adopted rather strict self-standards.[48] For example, the Netherlands Broadcasting Corporation has traditionally had no formal code of operations, whereas the British Broadcasting Corporation operates under a detailed set of rules.[49] Consensus exists that ethical standards should be observed when reporting terrorist incidents. These include the following:

- [Do not] serve as a spokesman/accomplice of the terrorists . . .
- [Do not] portray terror as attractive, romantic, or heroic; [instead, employ an] honest portrayal of motives of terrorists . . .
- Hold back news where there is clear and immediate danger to life and limb . . .
- Avoid . . . unchallenged terrorist propaganda . . .
- Never try to solve a situation.[50]

Gatekeeping

In societies that champion freedom of the press, one model professional environment is that of **journalistic self-regulation**. Journalistic self-regulation is sometimes referred to as **media gate-keeping**. If conducted under established standards of professional conduct, self-regulation obviates the need for official regulation and censorship. In theory, moral arguments brought to bear on the press from political leaders and the public will pressure them to adhere to model standards of fairness, accuracy, and objectivity.

This is, of course, an *ideal* free press environment; in reality, critics argue that journalistic self-regulation is a fluid and inconsistent process. The media report terrorist incidents using certain labels and often create a mood by spinning their reports. Some media—acting in the tabloid

tradition—sensationalize acts of political violence, so very little self-regulation occurs. Chapter Perspective 11.4 illustrates this criticism by contrasting different standards of gatekeeping by the American media at various points in time when reporting news about several U.S. presidents.

Chapter Perspective 11.4

Self-Regulation and the American Media

Gatekeeping is a process of self-regulation by the press, using professional standards of restraint and industry guidelines about fair and objective journalism. The American media have traditionally practiced self-regulation with relatively little hindrance from government regulators, except in times of war (particularly during World War II).

Reporters working in the White House press pool, or otherwise reporting on the U.S. presidency, have developed gatekeeping standards that until recently ensured that the personal lives of presidents would not become front-page news. This hands-off approach to reporting details of presidential personal qualities has not been consistent. For example:

The reporting of *Franklin Delano Roosevelt*'s (FDR) administration was highly self-censored. FDR was the only U.S. president with a limiting disability. His legs were paralyzed, and he used a wheelchair from the age of 39. President Roosevelt wore thick braces on his legs to prop him up when he delivered speeches. And yet, the media published no photographs of him in his wheelchair, most likely because American culture at the time was biased against people with disabilities. During his last years in office, he has been described as a dying man. Nevertheless, his declining health was never reported extensively to the public. The press also never reported persistent rumors about FDR's alleged long-term extramarital affair.

Likewise, the reporting of *John F. Kennedy*'s (JFK) administration was self-censored. JFK symbolized the youth and idealism of a new generation. However, he suffered from poor health during much of his adult life. For example, he had Addison's disease, severe allergies, and spinal problems, and he contracted malaria in the South Pacific during the Second World War. The media were captivated by JFK, portraying him as a man of great vigor and youth. As was the case with FDR, the press never reported rumors of alleged extramarital affairs.

In contrast, the reporting of *Bill Clinton*'s personal life was lurid and long term. Extramarital rumors were reported, interviews were broadcast of his accusers, and the Monica Lewinsky episode was front-page news around the world. For Bill Clinton, the media's self-regulatory gatekeeping practices were virtually nonexistent—particularly in comparison with the reporting of the personal lives of previous presidents such as Roosevelt and Kennedy.

Regulation of the Free Press

Many governments occasionally regulate or otherwise influence their press community while at the same time advocating freedom of reporting. Governments selectively release information, or release no information at all, during terrorist incidents. The rationale is that the investigation of these incidents requires limitations to be placed on which information is made available to the public. This occurs as a matter of routine during wartime or other national crises.

A number of democracies have state-run and semiprivate radio and television stations. For example, Great Britain, France, Germany, and other European democracies all have government-affiliated networks. These networks are expected to promote accepted standards of professional conduct and to practice self-regulation for the sake of good taste and national security. In some democracies, the law permits the government to suppress the reporting of news. The following are some examples:

- In Great Britain, the televised media were prohibited from broadcasting the statements of Irish terrorists or their supporters. No broadcasts were permitted of the Marxist Irish National Liberation Army. Even aboveground and somewhat mainstream broadcasts were banned, so television broadcasts of interviews with Sinn Féin leader Gerry Adams were proscribed.

- Also in Great Britain, the **Official Secrets Act** permitted the prosecution of individuals for the reporting of information that was deemed to endanger the security of the British government.

- The Canadian Official Secrets Act proscribes any communication of information that may be prejudicial to the safety or interests of Canada.

The State-Regulated Press

State-regulated media exist in environments in which the state routinely intervenes in the reporting of information by the press. This can occur in societies that otherwise have a measure of democratic freedoms. For example, Turkey has frequently suppressed its media and has one of the worst records among democracies. Hundreds of journalists were prosecuted in the past, receiving harsh sentences for writing offensive articles. In another example, the state-regulated presses of most countries in the Middle East led many people in those countries to believe that the September 11, 2001, attacks either were not the work of Al-Qa'ida or were the work of "Zionists." Some Middle Eastern media disseminated far-fetched rumors. For example, mainstream commentators reported and supported a popular conspiracy theory that anonymous telephone calls warned thousands of Jewish workers in the World Trade Center to leave the buildings before the attack—and therefore no Jews were casualties.

Different scales of intervention can emanate from the state, ranging from permitting independent (but regulated) newspapers to creating government-controlled propaganda enterprises. Here are a couple examples:

- Under authoritarianism,[51] the press can be privately owned and may be granted some latitude in reporting the news. However, information is sometimes officially censored, and the publication of unfavorable articles can be punished. Singapore (a democracy) has a history of suppressing articles that make "libelous" accusations against the government.

- Under totalitarianism,[52] the government operates on a more restrictive scale of intervention. In totalitarian systems, the state controls all information reported in the media, and the press is relegated to a state-controlled enterprise. For example, the People's Republic of China permits no independently published criticism from the media. During the bloody June 1989 suppression of the Tiananmen Square protests in Beijing, the Western press interviewed a number of Chinese civilians, eliciting some criticism of the government's actions. The interviewees were reportedly arrested.

In **authoritarian** and **totalitarian regimes**, terrorists have no chance to rely on the media to sensationalize their deeds. In these societies, the media serve to promote the government's interests and often to disseminate government propaganda. There are no gripping stories that might sway an audience. The general public is never privy to sympathetic human-interest stories or to an extremist manifesto's call to arms. When terrorist incidents occur, they are either underreported by the government or manipulated to the absolute advantage of the regime. As a result,

one of the reasons for the virtual absence of terrorism in totalitarian states and other effective dictatorships, besides the efficacy of the police forces, is the suppression of publicity. Unless the terrorists succeed in killing the dictator, which would be impossible to ignore, their deeds will pass unheralded.[53]

In very restrictive societies, the media are used as outlets for propaganda on behalf of the existing regime. For example, former Iraqi dictator

U.S. Department of State

❖ **Photo 11.5** Daniel Pearl. An American journalist in Pakistan, Pearl was kidnapped and later murdered by Pakistani Islamic terrorists but not before they disseminated photographs and videotapes to the international media.

Saddam Hussein created an extensive **cult of personality** not unlike those of dictators Joseph Stalin in the Soviet Union and Kim Il Sung (and son Kim Jong Il and grandson Kim Jong Un) in North Korea. Cults of personality are used by dictatorial regimes to promote the leader or ruling party as the source of absolute wisdom, truth, and benevolence. Likenesses of the leader are widely distributed, usually in a variety of symbolic poses. Saddam Hussein, for example, was regularly depicted as a visionary, a warrior, the good father, a common citizen, a devout Muslim, and the medieval leader Saladin. Hussein, Stalin, and Kim promoted themselves, their regimes, and their policies by completely controlling the dissemination of information.

Chapter Summary

This chapter investigated the role of the media in terrorist environments. Particular attention was given to efforts by terrorists to publicize the cause, the manipulation of mass communications by terrorists, and the potential impact of the New Media. Issues regarding the reporting of terrorism by the media include questions about which incidents to report and how to report those incidents. The concepts of "information is power" and "media-oriented terrorism" were defined and explored as critical considerations for understanding the role of the media.

Evaluation of the new battleground for information requires that readers first explore this issue from the perspectives of participants in terrorist environments. Practical considerations for terrorists' treatment of the media include their manipulation of the media's desire to "scoop" their competitors. The contagion effect and the example of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 demonstrate how media exposure can become a weapon in the terrorists' arsenal. The use of

the Internet, social networking media, and other digital communications technologies by extremists were discussed as effective propaganda and recruitment platforms.

Regulation of the media is a challenge for every government. For authoritarian and totalitarian regimes, this challenge is easily resolved by simply prohibiting certain kinds of reporting practices. It is a more complex issue in most democratic systems, although most have adapted by implementing laws and practices that restrict media access to operational information.

In Chapter 12, readers will review terrorism in the United States. The discussion will investigate domestic sources of terrorism from the right and left, as well as cases of nationalist and international terrorism. Consideration will be given to terrorist environments and the reasons for terrorism in the United States.

Key Terms and Concepts

The following topics are discussed in this chapter and can be found in the glossary:

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cult of personality   310

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Prominent Persons and Organizations

The following names and organizations are discussed in this chapter and can be found in Appendix B:

Amal   305   Nabih Berri   305

Discussion Box

Freedom of Reporting and Security Issues

During times of crisis, governments restrict media access to information about matters that affect security policy. The logic is quite understandable: Governments believe that the war effort (or counterterrorism policy) requires limitations to be imposed to prevent information from helping the enemy and to prevent the enemy from spreading its propaganda. For example, the British Official Secrets Act was designed to manage the flow of information both *from* adversaries and *to* adversaries.

The challenge for democracies is to strike a balance between governmental control over information—for the sake of national security—and unbridled propaganda. The following examples illustrate how the United States and Great Britain managed the flow of information during international crises:

1. During the *Vietnam War*, journalists had a great deal of latitude in the field to visit troops in the field and observe operations. Vietnam was the first "television war," so violent and disturbing images were broadcast into American homes on a daily basis. These reports were one reason why American public opinion turned against the war effort.

2. During the 1982 *Falklands War,* news about operations was highly controlled and censored by the British government. Press briefings were strictly controlled by the government, under the rationale that useful information could otherwise be received by the Argentines and jeopardize the war effort.

3. During the 1990–1991 *Persian Gulf War,* news was likewise highly controlled. Unlike during the Vietnam War, the media received their information during official military press briefings. They were not permitted to travel into the field except under highly restrictive conditions.

4. During the Afghan phase of the *war on terrorism* in late 2001, news was highly restricted. Official press briefings were the norm, and requests were made for cooperation in not broadcasting enemy propaganda.

5. During the 2003 conventional phase of the *invasion of Iraq*, reporters were "embedded" with military units and reported events as they unfolded. Official press briefings were the norm.

Discussion Questions

1. Should the United States adopt information-control regulations similar to Britain's Official Secrets Act?

2. What are the policy implications of permitting journalists to have the same degree of access to information as occurred during the Vietnam War?

3. What are the policy implications of permitting journalists to have the same degree of access to information as occurred during the Gulf War?

4. Under what circumstances should the state increase restrictions on the media? How would you justify these restrictions?

5. Do you think that the media in democracies are more prone to manipulation by terrorists? Is this a myth?

On Your Own

The open-access Student Study Site at **edge.sagepub.com/martin6e** has a variety of useful study aids, including eFlashcards, quizzes, audio resources, and journal articles.

The websites, exercises, and recommended readings listed below are easily accessed on this site as well.

Recommended Websites

The following websites are links to major resources that regularly report news about terrorism:

Al Arabiya News Channel (Dubai): http://www.alarabiya.net/english.html/

Al-Manar TV (Lebanon): http://www.almanar.com.lb/english/main.php/

BBC (UK): http://www.bbc.co.uk/

CNN (USA): http://www.cnn.com/

Dawn (Pakistan): http://www.dawn.com/

Middle East Media Research Institute: http://memri.org/

New York Times: http://www.nytimes.com/

SITE Intelligence Group (USA): http://siteintelgroup.com/

Web Exercise

Using this chapter's recommended websites, conduct an online investigation of the reporting of terrorism by the media.

1. Compare and contrast the reporting of political violence by the referenced media services. What patterns of reporting can you identify?

2. To what extent are the media services biased in their reporting? How so?

3. To what extent are the media services objective in their reporting? How so?

For an online search of reporting of terrorism by the media, readers should enter the following keywords in the search engine on their Web browser:

"Media and Terrorism"

"Propaganda and Terrorism"

Recommended Readings

The following publications provide discussions for evaluating the role of the media in the reporting of terrorism, national conflict, and political dissent:

Davies, Nick. *Flat Earth News: An Award-Winning Reporter Exposes Falsehood, Distortion, and Propaganda in the Global Media*. London: Vintage Books, 2009.

Davis, Richard, and Diana Owen. *New Media and American Politics*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Edwards, David, and David Cromwell. *Newspeak in the 21st Century*. London: Pluto Press, 2009.

Gitlin, Todd. *The Whole World Is Watching: Mass Media in the Making and Unmaking of the New Left*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980.

Herbst, Philip. *Talking Terrorism: A Dictionary of the Loaded Language of Political Violence*. Westport, CT: Greenwood, 2003.

Kavoori, Anandam P., and Todd Fraley, eds. *Media, Terrorism, and Theory: A Reader*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006.

Knightley, Phillip. *The First Casualty: The War Correspondent as Hero and Myth Maker From the Crimea to Iraq*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004.

Nacos, Brigitte L. *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism*. New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

Nacos, Brigitte L., Yaeli Bloch-Elkon, and Robert Y. Shapiro. *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Paletz, David L., and Alex P. Schmid, eds. *Terrorism and the Media*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1992.

Pludowski, Tomasz. *How the World's News Media Reacted to 9/11: Essays From Around the Globe*. Spokane, WA: Marquette Books, 2007.

Seib, Philip, ed. *New Media and the New Middle East*. New York: Palgrave McMillan, 2007.

Tuman, Joseph S. *Communicating Terror: The Rhetorical Dimensions of Terrorism*. 2nd ed. London: Sage, 2010.

Weimann, Gabriel, and Conrad Winn. *The Theater of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism*. New York: Longman, 1994.