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THE MEDIA, EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM: AN UNINTENTIONAL BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Although the goals of the press and terrorists are not the same, the two groups engage in a mutually beneficial relationship that often appears confusing to scholars and the public. Both the press and the terrorists need and crave the attention of the public. In this paper the authors examine the motives and the methods that the media and the terrorists attempt to achieve their goals. The terrorists need the attention to create terror and spread their propaganda to further their political causes. The media needs the sensationalism created by the terrorists to attract viewers or readers and to positively effect ratings. The study found that the stories about terrorism increased media ratings while unintentionally benefiting the terrorist by publicizing the terrorist cause.

Key words: media, relationship, terrorism

Introduction

Any examination of the relationship between the media and terrorism reveals a relationship that is mutually beneficial. For the media, the actions of the terrorists provide graphic stories of death and destruction. For the terrorists, media coverage brings attention to their agenda. With the development of what is called the New Media and the emergence of blogs and independent web-sites, the sharing of information on a large scale is no longer controlled by a few powerful media corporations. In this study the authors examine the methods and motivations of both the media and the terrorists to see how these two vary different goals interact.

Over the last several decades, the way people communicate has changed significantly. With the internet, satellite communications and access to communication devices such as cell phones and lap-tops, the ability to share information has reached a level unimagined just a few decades ago. Information can reach a global audience in a matter

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of minutes. No longer is the media controlled by a few media powerhouses. Today, individuals and small groups have established a variety of informational platforms from which they can engage in social media exchanges finding themselves as participates in a virtual communications universe. Information shared can inform and educate, influence and shape opinion and behavior.

As part of this revolution in communication is social media, which has become one of the most significant means in which people communicate [Kandemir & Brand, 2017]. For terrorists, the media is a multi-dimensional tool used to advance their radical agendas, recruit, inspire and communicate among members. It can also serve as an operational asset assisting in target reconnaissance/selection, and aiding financing and logistical efforts. Many members of terrorist groups play to the media and engage in Guerrilla Theater to make their political points. Weisman (1973) observed that Guerrilla Theater was used by revolutionaries and terrorists for "agitprop (read 'agitation and propaganda') aesthetics as an effective way of talking to their brothers." Terrorists and revolutionaries have long used propaganda to further their political agenda, recruit those of like mind and to strike fear in the hearts of the populace. [Guevarra, 1969] For those who wage the struggle against terrorism, the New Media and the virtual world provide opportunities within which counter-terrorism operations may occur.

Media Background

It is naïve to believe information shared through the various media outlets/portals is non-biased. The media is a powerful force. [Altheide, 1976] In the late 1890s, the New York media was significant in breaking the power of the long standing Tammany Hall political machine there [DiFabio, 2013]. During the latter part of the decade, the U.S. media was controlled by William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer. Their empires contained the nation's most powerful newspapers, and it was Hearst and Pulitzer who decided what the public would read. Both were quick to use sensational headlines to sell their newspapers, and left unchecked, they published stories with little regard to accuracy. They understood their newspapers had the power to sway public opinion and shape national policy. After the sinking of the USS Maine in Havana Harbor, the Hearst media proclaimed, without any evidence, the Spanish were responsible for the destruction of the ship. These stories were significant in shaping public opinion in favor of a conflict and pushed the United States into war with Spain, in what many view as the first press-driven war [Lemann, 2009].

World War II involved much media leverage. Hitler understood the power possessed by those who controlled the media. Once he and the National Socialist Party gained power in Germany, they took control of the media and used it to their advantage. This media control, combined with the establishment of a police state, ensured any opposing voices were silenced. The control of the press was a major step in allowing him and his Nazi leadership to push their anti-Semitism agenda and dreams of military conquest [Snyder, 2019]. During World War II, the media in the United States supported the war effort. That support was a key element in inspiring and sustaining military recruitment, the defense industry workforce as well as maintaining civilian morale on the home front throughout the conflict.

In the United States, the First Amendment guarantees freedom of the press, but that guarantee does not mean the information reported in the media is free from biases [Doss, et al. 2015; Altheide, 1976]. Even today, the major media corporations still control much of the information presented through a broad spectrum of news outlets, but social media, blogs and other information platforms have dramatically changed how we send, receive and share information. The issue becomes speed of access to the public, With modern communications and a wide variety of media available, viewers are often able to see what is actually happening as it actually happens. The reporter is able to "color" the

view of what they are seeing with their journalistic spin. [Hess & Kalb, 2003] Considered the New Media, many different communication channels have opened up the flow of information to almost a global audience [White, 2017]. Exceptions to the global access are populations that reside in areas where restrictions are put in place by governments. Nations that restrict internet access include North Korea, Iran, Ethiopia, Saudi Arabia, Vietnam, Cuba and China [Alexander, 2019].

Journalists seem to love a good terrorist attack, be it domestic or international. Reporters flock to an event, hungry to be the first to report the graphic details. The terrorists understand this attraction and further understand the more graphic, the greater the coverage. Theatrics sell airtime. Sensationalism gets viewers. [Altheide, 2006] Kerbel (2001) observed that: "If it bleeds, it leads!" The highly staged murders of hostages by ISIS, the kidnapping of young girls by Boko Haram and the massacre by Chechen terrorists of teachers and children in the Beslan School in Russia became global stories [White, 2017]. Coverage of these events continues for days and weeks. Sophisticated terrorists and terrorist organizations have long understood the value of the media and how to become a story. For those terrorist organizations which advocate an anti-governmental agenda, coverage by the media often proves the perfect platform to gain attention and suggest a governmental failure to protect its citizens.

Terrorists realize the internet, television and radio provide channels to potentially reach an international audience. They understand the media's value in transmitting a message and the role those messages play as a tool in the radicalization and recruitment of others. New Media resources can serve as a platform for gaining sympathy, transmitting threats and instilling fear, often at a level disproportionate to the true threat. The terrorists count on the media's power to shape public opinion and influence policy makers. It becomes a question of who can use the media most effectively, the terrorist or those combating terrorism [Burke, 2016].

The ability to share information globally has served terrorists well. Information accessible within the global communications network plays a role in the operations of terrorists. They realize the internet can be a source for data mining, providing valuable information allowing them to recruit or seek out and select targets for their attacks. Some attacks may be physical attacks, such as bombings or assassinations, however many include cyberattack/hacking, breaking into various web-sights or web-portals. As a communication tool, the Taliban recently used WhatsApp to share information pertaining to their humanitarian efforts distributing protective masks in areas in Afghanistan impacted by COVID-19 [Gannon, 2020].

Terrorists realize it is important to gain recognition if they are to be taken seriously. In 2014, President Obama referred to ISIS as a "JV team," suggesting they did not present an important threat in the Middle Eastern region [Ross, Hosenball, Park, & Ferran, 2016]. Unfortunately, his assessment was a tragic under-estimation of their capabilities. ISIS proved extremely efficient in not only achieving territorial gains, but also using the New Media, especially Twitter [Berger & Morgan, 2015], as a platform for command and control, recruitment, communication and as a logistical support asset. ISIS's success in the cyber world expanded their reach to other parts of the globe, inspiring lone wolves to embrace their cause and conduct independent attacks or provide other types of support [McElreath, et al., 2018].

A terrorist's goal is to advance and ultimately achieve a desired agenda. Terrorists are willing to injure or kill and fuel instability. Most acts of terror are committed to undermine those the terrorists oppose, gain publicity and, in doing so, instill fear within a population. They play to the media [White, 2017]. Without media coverage, much of the value of their attacks is lost. It can be argued, the media, working with a government, could potentially suppress news of the incidents and negate much of the value of the terrorists' efforts. A terrorist act, in and of itself, is often not as significant as the public and government reaction to it.

It is unfortunate that terrorist organizations have used the media for their benefit. For many, the 1972 Munich Olympics brought one of the first graphic displays of terrorism into homes. The world watched the tense days as terrorists held captive members of the Israeli Olympic Team. The actions of the terrorists and the tragic response by the Germans resulted in the deaths of twelve individuals, eleven being Israeli Olympic team members [Spaaij, 2016].

In 1976, the world's attention was again focused on the plight of the Air France hostages held in Uganda by terrorists. Media coverage provided a platform for the terrorists to share their demands. Declaring themselves members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, they demanded the release of fifty-three "freedom-fighters," the majority of who were held in Israeli confinement [Krift, 1977]. In this case, fortunately, the Israeli Defense Forces conducted a successful rescue operation, killing all of the terrorists and rescuing the majority of hostages. While a tactical defeat for the terrorists, the aircraft hijacking achieved global attention and gained awareness to their demands. Ultimately, the terrorists' demands for the release of those held by Israel were unmet, but the media coverage handed them a strategic victory.

The media has also covered the actions of domestic terrorists and domestic terrorist groups. The Ku Klux Klan has been covered extensively. The violence connected to the Red Scare in the 1920s drew media coverage [McElreath, et al., 2014]. In 1995, the bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building shocked the nation and made Timothy McVeigh a household name. The media shared hours of coverage of the devastation. In 1996, Eric Rudolph recognized the significance of the Atlanta Olympics as a terrorist target, believing bombing the Olympics would draw significant media attention to his agenda. Prior to his capture, Rudolph committed three additional bombings, each drawing media coverage [Spaaij, 2016].

The attacks of September 11, 2001 shocked the nation and the world. Though those responsible were foreign, the attacks, especially striking Washington and New York guaranteed global media coverage. The images of aircraft striking the World Trade Center Towers, people leaping to their deaths, along with images of first responders desperately racing to save lives remain vivid even today.

Media Resources and Terrorism

For terrorists, the New Media is another theater in which to wage war and use as a tool in the battle for hearts and minds. Terrorists hope to gain a media audience which will facilitate the spreading of their messages, and connect with those who will acceptance the purpose and goals of their movement or intimidate those who will not [White, 2017].

There are many terrorist related web-sites, some even established by those fighting the terrorist with the intent of disrupting their operations. Many sites are established by hard-core terrorist organizations with radical messaging [Kandemir & Brand, 2017]. In 1998, there were a total of 12 terrorist related websites active. By 2003 there were approximately 2,630 sites and by January 2009 an estimated 6,940 active terrorists related websites were counted [Bott, Dickens, Moffitt, Smith, & Rowley, 2009]. As with traditional media, sophisticated terrorists understand the benefit of New Media resources. Modern terrorists employ websites, chat rooms, online message boards and forums, making their propaganda accessible. ISIS was very effective in using the internet to spread their message and ultimately recruited thousands of extremist fighters from around the globe. Social platforms including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and RapidShare are now used. Al-Qaeda's virtual magazine Inspire can easily be found with a web-search [Kaczynski, 2013]. Another example was an audio version of Turner Diaries, being read by its author William Pierce on YouTube. Even Jihadist videos advocating the destruction of Israel and the United States, featuring Adam Gadahn, were easily located [Schmitt, 2015].

Since the initial years of the twenty-first century, social media use by extremist and terrorist entities increased dramatically.

https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_PIRUS_UseOfSocialMediaByUSExtremists_ResearchBrief_July2018.pdf

Synthesis and Commentary

The virtual world is real and is never going away. In the struggle, those engaging terrorists must stay current on their use of the resources of the virtual world and the New Media. Those conducting counter-terrorism operations realize the battle occurs on many fronts, in both the physical and virtual worlds. Those fighting terrorists must use the various elements within the New Media in the fight. This fight is conducted from several perspectives including data mining intelligence which can contribute to operational decisions and countering messages in the psychological struggle. While the New Media is a recruiting asset for terrorists, counter-terrorist operations can use the same platforms to disrupt recruitment by creating dissent and suspicion within terrorist organizations, providing information and incentives to those seeking to depart the groups, working to undermine support for the organizations [Kandemir & Brand, 2017] and striving to generally destabilize the organization. Efforts sharing information about rewards for the capture or elimination of high value targets, such as members of the organization's leadership have proven to be of great value.

Many technology companies, including social media organizations, actively participate in counter-terrorism efforts [Fishman, 2019]. The Brookings study of Twitter use by ISIS, found Anti-ISIS intelligence operatives created accounts that appeared to be linked to ISIS to gain, among other things, deeper operational insight [Berger & Morgan, 2015]. Also, Twitter has worked toward either closing or disrupting pro-terrorist accounts. From September through December 2014, it is estimated that at least 46,000 and 70,000 Twitter accounts were used by ISIS supporters, although not all of them were active at the same time [Berger & Morgan, 2015]. In 2016, Twitter reported that of its 390 million accounts, approximately 390,000 were closed for posting terrorist materials [Kandemir & Brand, 2017]. Facebook reported that in the first nine months of 2018 it removed 14.3 million pieces of content related to the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and their affiliates [Fishman, 2019].

Terrorist organizations produce a wide range of propaganda in the form of imagery, videos, and audio files [Fishman, 2019]. In the counter-terrorism struggle, information and materials terrorists share is analyzed to gain intelligence including image matching. This struggle is conducted internationally through the cooperation of governments and in many instances with the assistance of private partners such as banks, research agencies and others that choose to remain anonymous.

Television news reporting has also changed with a wide range of 24-hour news networks emerging, each presenting "news" typically with a social and political flavor. In the United States, FOX, One America News, CNN and MSNBC are readily accessible across the nation. Produced in the United Kingdom and shared internationally, the British Broadcasting Network [BBC] has a global reach. From the Middle East programing developed and presented through such networks as Al Manar sponsored by Hezbollah, and Al-Jazeera that both support and glorify terrorists.

When Bin Laden released an 18-minute video in 2004 in which he announced his goal of forcing the U.S. into bankruptcy, Al-Jazeera aired nearly the entire video [Barnett & Reynolds, 2009; Arak, 2004]. Bin Laden was attempting to create doubt in the minds of the citizens in America and in her allied countries regarding the cost of the Global War on Terror, and was able to exploit mass media to deliver his message.

Many of these groups exhibit professional marketing savvy by preparing statements, fact sheets, and follow-up videos for news media to use after an attack. For instance, before he attacked the London subway system in 2005, Shehzad Tanweer recorded a video that received airtime on the Al-Jazeera network during the aftermath of his attack. Within this video, Tanweer stated that the London subway bombing was the beginning of a series of attacks that would become increasingly stronger until British troops were withdrawn from Iraq and Afghanistan.

Both Shehzad Tanweer and Osama Bin Laden leveraged mass media as a means of disseminating their messages to mass audiences. Both sought to shape public opinion, generate doubt, incite fear, and impair the war effort. While both men ultimately failed to achieve their goals through violence and rhetoric, they were successful in transmitting their messages to mass audiences. For terrorists, any media coverage is good. Dr. George Habash, founder of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), said as media coverage of PFLP increased, he felt PFLP gained creditability, stating "at least the world is talking about us" [MacLeod, 2008].

In modern times, mass media is a major mechanism for disseminating ideology, serving as a receptor and delivery method for messaging. Over time, the repeated exposure to ideological messaging can affect personal individual views of "social reality," and with mass audiences, this accumulates into broader changes in society's overall opinion and perspective.

By using the internet and New Media resources for sharing a wide range of information, a focused effort can be used as a recruitment initiative. Many web forums and chat rooms appear to target older teens. This is where much peer-to-peer interactions occur and, for some, radicalization begins. Radical organizations recruit globally, especially targeting young individuals, drawing them into the struggle. Casting a wide net, the message sent by extremist groups has proven to achieve their intent of recruiting, and in some cases, inspiring individuals to violent action as lone wolves. These lone wolves are individuals often acting without a direct connection to the terrorist organization but are inspired by their message. In 2016, Mississippi State students Jaelyn Young and Muhammad Dakhlalla tried to travel to Istanbul with the intent of joining ISIS. Both were charged and convicted of conspiring to provide material support to a terrorist group.

Just as mass media news outlets must generate large audiences in order to survive as businesses, terrorist groups must access these large audiences in order to incite fear, further their rhetoric, influence public opinion, and recruit new members. Thus, news media and terrorist organizations can be said to have a co-dependency upon one another, as each perpetuates and sustains the other. Though news corporations can certainly prosper without terrorism coverage, those corporations which do cover terrorism will gain larger audiences and higher incomes than those which do not.

Media coverage of terrorist incidents invariably draws world attention to the group which perpetrated the attack, along with its cause, demands and grievances. Committing a terrorist attack is one of the most effective ways to obtain free, global publicity for one's cause.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Terrorist organizations see the New Media as a tool from which they disseminate their ideology, deeds, and rhetoric to a larger audience as they attempt to generate a groundswell of popular sentiment and force those they oppose to concede to their demands. Violence attracts attention and attention is one of the things terrorists desire [McElreath, et al., 2014].

The modern terrorist, both domestic and international, understands the value of the New Media. They see the cyber-world as a battleground where physical and psycholog-

ical warfare can be waged. Both the terrorist and those fighting the terrorist realize the impact of media coverage in this struggle. If the media limits or omits the propaganda message that terrorists desire shared, the terrorist act may lose value and be seen as little more than crime or sabotage [Martin, 2008]. For the terrorists, the ability to conduct an act of terror and gain attention, instill fear and draw attention to the agenda of their organization is of great value.

New media and cyberspace represent emerging entities wherein policies are emerging as events occur in due time. Typically, when assessing events and policy, average of 20 years of data should be accumulated and examined historically before an effective assessment of policy can occur [Frei & Ruloff, 1989]. In other words, about two decades should pass before one may strongly interpret historical events and their effects from policy perspectives. Given this notion, future studies may explore the emerging of policies addressing issues of the new media and terrorism. Such endeavors may examine not only the organizational policies of domestic and international entities, but also those of federal agencies and organizations.

The resources available through the various elements contained in the New Media are constantly evolving. As terrorists seek ways to exploit the internet and New Media, those fighting against them are also seeking ways to use the New Media's resources to their advantage. The media in their quest for ratings sometimes aids the terrorists wittingly or unwittingly. The terrorist know this and count on it.

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