

THE WHOLE WORLD IS WATCHING: DOES THE MEDIA AID TERRORISM?

STEVE GOLDSTEIN

SLIDES 1 AND 2:

Before I left the States, two events attracted unusual security because of fears of terrorism. One was the celebration of the 100th anniversary of the first flight by the Wright Brothers, which was attended by President George Bush. The other was a parade that attracts hundreds of thousands of people before a significant college football game. Why the fear for this event? Because it was televised. Television has created targets. So does the media create targets?

SLIDE 3: THE BEST DECISION IN A WORST CASE SCENARIO:

How does the media make decisions on how to report a terrorist event? Everything happens very fast. There is a desire for the media to cover it quickly – get it out there. Always we are providing the oxygen – publicity – for the terrorists. But each crisis brings its own set of decision points. This may mean selecting the best course of action – coverage – among several not very attractive options.

CASE STUDIES

SLIDE 4: TERRORIST THREATENS ANTHRAX UNLESS NEWSPAPERS PUBLISH HIS MANIFESTO

1) In the first example, a terrorist contacts media outlets and threatens to continue letters containing anthrax unless a statement from him revealing his views is published by three prominent newspapers. What should the newspapers do?

SLIDE 5: UNABOMBER

The real life example was of the so-called Unabomber, who killed three people, wounded 23 others and terrorized many more by sending ingeniously constructed bombs through the mail. In June 1995 he promised to curtail his bombing campaign if the New York Times or the Washington Post printed a 35,000-word manifesto. The newspapers printed the document, which argued against technology, modernity and the destruction of the environment. As a result of the publication of the document, Theodore Kaczynski, a former University of California at Berkeley mathematician, was arrested, charged with the bombings and convicted. His brother had recognized some of the arguments in his writing and called police.

SLIDE 6: HOSTAGES TAKEN BY 'THE NETWORK' TERRORIST GROUP

2) In our second example, an organization known as The Network takes some humanitarian relief workers hostage. Officials attempting to free the hostages warn that media attention to the workers and their families may harm efforts to win their release. Should the media back off?

SLIDE 7: CNN REPORTER JEREMY LEVIN IN BEIRUT

CNN reporter Jeremy Levin believes that only sustained media coverage of his hostage situation kept him alive during the 11 months he was held by Hezbollah in Beirut in 1984.

SLIDE 8: TRUE CONSEQUENCES OF A BIOLOGICAL ATTACK ARE HIDDEN

3) In our third study, a biological agent is used on an attack on an mid-sized American city on the east coast. Officials are intentionally vague about the agent used and how far it has spread, fearing panic. If the media obtains this information, should it be revealed?

SLIDE 9: PANIC OR CREDIBILITY

What guidelines might enable journalists to decide how to proceed, and give them rationale if anything were to go awry/

Is their an obligation to consult the authorities before revealing the information/What if they still decline/When does the issue of credibility enter/

SLIDE 10: RICHARD JEWELL –ATLANTA BOMBING

In the aftermath of a bombing at the 1996 Summer Olympics, law enforcement officials were under intense pressure to solve a crime that looked like another example of domestic terrorism like the Oklahoma City bombing. The rush to a solution caused the FBI to focus on a security guard named Richard Jewell. This information was leaked to the press, which placed the man under intense scrutiny. Ultimately, after many months and a nearly ruined life, Jewell was cleared. The bombing is now believed to be the work of an anti-abortion activist named Eric Rudolph, who bombed an abortion clinic in Alabama.

The media responded to the information given to them. What did they do wrong? Were they irresponsible?

SLIDE 11: ACCIDENT ... OR TERRORISM?

The way the media approaches all large-scale disasters – except natural ones -- has changed since Sept. 11. In August, an electricity outage that affected much of the northeastern United States was relatively quickly labeled by authorities as an accident and not some terrorist attack. But the earlier explosion and disintegration of the space shuttle on re-entry did not bring such a quick response from the authorities. Because the government left a vacuum there was speculation by the media which authorities said “bordered on irresponsibility.” The same happened with a New York City plane crash shortly after 9/11. So where does the line get drawn? When does speculation become irresponsible – and when is it just doing its job?

SLIDE 12: DELIVERING THE MESSAGE: WHAT’S THE ALTERNATIVE?

Since the beginning of these events, the media has provided an outlet for terrorists – for their demands, their hopes and aspirations and their personalities – humanizing the so-called inhuman. Through the media, the public learn of the nature of the terrorists and their demands. We provide publicity and exposure. Some believe that we provide legitimacy. I would argue that once the media has accepted the responsibility – yes, responsibility – of reporting about a terrorist act, then we have the duty to follow up by providing information that questions every aspect of the act: it’s origins, it’s rationale and

it's purpose. There is no useful discussion, I believe, that takes the media out of the equation. The better response is to make the equation yield a better result. Here are some possibilities:

SLIDE 13: STERN: UNDERMINE THE LEGITIMACY OF TERRORISTS

Jessica Stern of Harvard University is a respected expert on terrorism and particularly the motivations of terrorists. Her most recent book explored why religious militants commit criminal acts. She suggested that, if the media is considered to be a facilitator to terrorists, the most obvious response is to undermine their legitimacy. Research their background, their claims to find out if they accurately represent the cause they espouse. If they are Muslim, have other Muslims analyze their actions and motivations. If the terrorists are not religion-based, then undermine/investigate their motivations and claim for 'justice.'

Journalists must not allow manipulation, but question motives.

Sometimes interviews before attacks, essentially anytime can defuse anger or enable these groups to get their message out in a non violent way

SLIDE 14: OMAR AL-ISSAWI – CO-CREATOR OF AL JAZEERA

IN an interview with the creator of the most successful television medium in the Arab world, he told me ways in which they try not be simply be a tool of terrorist groups. Before airing tapes of Osama bin Laden or other members of al Qaida, he told me they are always analyzing these tapes. Not only to discover if they are genuine but to decide if they are connected to Islam or consistent with Islam's view.

I'm quoting him now: "There are bin Laden tapes we haven't broadcast because they are not newsworthy or too fanatical – even beyond his own abnormal norms. We've taken a decision not to do this because we don't want to be regarded as the fanatics network."

"after we report it, we bring in analysts and journalists to critique, analyze and criticize." Whether this is in anyway connected to Islam or consistent with islam's view.

He also addressed the contention that al Jazeera is broadcasting coded messages and thereby acting as a tool of al Qaida. He said this has happened before, even in the time of the deposed Shah or Iran. All they can do is analyze the message carefully and decide what to do.

Quoting again: "I think it's the public's right to know (which is why we broadcast). But the truth requires these analyses and these critiques. It's our job to report this stuff."

He cited the example of when al Zawahiri, a bin Laden lieutenant broadcast a message last fall calling upon Arab citizens to attack westerners in small groups. "How many attacks were there?" he asked. "Our viewers are smarter than that. Lets not underestimate the intelligence of viewers or listeners or readers."

SLIDE 15: PEGGY HAMBURG

Ms. Hamburg is a former official in the Clinton administration who was charged with dealing with the consequences of WMD attacks and particularly the use of the biological agents. She now holds a similar position with a private non-proliferation organization. I posed this question to her: Should government officials ever withhold information from the public or not be completely candid about a biological or chemical weapons attack?

She answered that information should not be withheld if it relates to the health consequences, the spread of the agent or preventative steps – but perhaps on the course and nature of an investigation, including suspects.

But she stressed this that withholding information or a lack of candor will almost certainly cause journalists to turn away from official (authoritative) sources and look for other sources of information that may not be as reliable. The media should not necessarily be faulted for taking this approach.

SLIDE 16: BRUCE HOFFMAN: THE MEDIA MADE ME JOIN –NOT

Hoffman is a long-standing analyst of terrorism, mainly for the RAND Corporation. I asked him what he thought the media should do differently in its reporting on terrorist events. How do we avoid becoming accessories, if you will, to terrorist acts?

He said it has become clear since 9/11 that the media should avoid reporting on ongoing military and intelligence operations because this information puts lives at risk and can set back the progress of an investigation. There is also a risk of compromising intelligence technology so that it becomes useless.”

Hoffman doesn't believe that the media serves as recruiting tool for terrorists.” When you talk to them, they will never say it was the media that caused them to join a group.”

He noted that the shrinking of foreign bureaus around the world has led to a loss of expertise on many of these terrorism-related issues. Is it possible to reverse the trend and have journalists who are better informed, people who know context.

Terrorists however are bypassing the media and going to their own outlets: websites, radio and other means. Terrorists are becoming more media-savvy, looking to control their message. Going to their own outlets and bypassing the media. Looking to put their own spin on events.

The media should not ban speech and messages by terrorists completely. Allow them to speak up to a point. ‘They can make fools of themselves’ he said. After 9/11, many of intercepted conversations and messages of bin Laden were about his planning of the act, incriminating himself.

SLIDE 17: TRUTH, OR ITS CONSEQUENCES

Recommendations for those handling response at terrorist events/crisis managers:

- 1) Provide the media with a steady flow of information
- 2) Understand that the media can calm and reassure a nervous public (and the reverse)
- 3) Media can be used by emergency responders to facilitate their response, especially making sure the public knows what to do and not to do
- 4) Professionals must monitor media reports to check accuracy, but also to make sure the information does not endanger hostages, emergency personnel or compromise a rescue

SLIDE 18(CONT)

- 5) Can limit or deny access to site/scene if it endangers personnel or compromises rescue efforts
- 6) Establish reporting guidelines. Anticipate guidelines will not be followed.

7) Showing a human face, while trying to be cool and professional, can be helpful to public

8) The Internet will allow response managers to communicate directly with each other and with the public, if necessary

You know, some people believe that – I will exaggerate – terrorism will somehow die without the oxygen of the media.

Gilles Kepel, a well-known French scholar of Islam, suggested that without media exposure, bin Laden was “fading.” He added, “Terrorism requires the media, but he’s become invisible. It becomes less and less important to kill him, except as a trophy.” (from new yorker).

Bin Laden may be a trophy, but I don’t think that the answer to reducing terrorism is to somehow disengage the media from the events. That is short-sighted, cowardly and most importantly, it will not work. But the media can do things more responsibly. We need some strength of will on this.