

## Unveiling the Complexities of the Media-Terrorism Symbiosis: A Critical Meta-Analysis

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### Abstract

*Over the last twenty years, terrorism has resulted in thousands of deaths and has sparked major economic, political, and humanitarian crises in numerous parts of the world. The media often take advantage to generate sensationalism to grab the attention of viewers. This theoretical journalistic supposition develops a mutually beneficial relationship between media and terrorism, usually called 'symbiotic,' where each relies on the other for its gain. Terrorist groups adeptly manipulate media platforms to propagate their ideologies, use their glorification to instill fear among target audiences and disrupt government and security responses. Through social and traditional media platforms, they garner wider support for their causes by emphasizing themes such as the legitimacy of their grievances and the inevitability of their success. By doing so, they aim to mobilize and radicalize both current and potential supporters, thereby enhancing recruitment efforts, increasing financial support, and inspiring further acts of violence. Conversely, media outlets are often complicit in this dynamic, as they benefit from sensationalism and increased viewership, and coverage of terrorism gets great attention, thereby enhancing profitability. This meta-analysis emphasizes a balance of the public's right to information with the risk of militants exploiting media coverage to spread their ideologies.*

**Keywords:** Media, Terrorism, Symbioses. Causes, Remedies

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### 1. Introduction

Since 9/11, there has been a surge in terrorist attacks, with over 8,400 attacks recorded globally by 2012, setting a record high (Jetter 2014). The media often exploit these tragedies to create sensationalism and attract viewers. This theoretical journalistic supposition posits a 'symbiotic' relationship between media and terrorism, where each entity benefits from the other. The more the press covers such incidents, the more ratings they bring for the media outlets, ultimately turning into profit and elevating the outlet's status. This type of media practice, driven by financial incentives, unintentionally provides perpetrators the platform they seek to publicize their terrorist events in leading media organizations (Najem, T. 2018). This unintended consequence of media coverage allows terrorists to view the media as their most powerful tool for gaining legitimacy within society, allowing them to carve out an illegitimate space within a legitimate framework. The media's coverage of terrorist attacks is embodied in gaining publicity (Najem, T. 2018). Nevertheless, this symbiotic relationship is complex and controversial, with the media often criticized for enabling terrorist propaganda. According to Al Ibrahim, D., & Shi, Y. (2019), the new media has augmented this facilitation by allowing terrorists to spread their messages globally. This study examines the evolving, symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism, highlighting how new media can be both a tool for terrorists and a crucial force in combating terrorism. Informal communication methods, such as gossip exchanged in hostels, mosques, bazaars, and ceremonies, are traditional communication approaches that also spread terror-related information (Rawan & Siraj, 2018; Klein, 2023).

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This meta-analysis leverages interdependency typology to tackle a crucial research question: What underlying factors foster the symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism? To dissect this complex dynamic, the author meticulously reviewed a range of scholarly research papers that scrutinize the portrayal of terrorism in the global elite press. These studies reveal how media coverage informs public perception and may inadvertently amplify the influence of terrorist activities. Besides, the researcher critically examined essays, annotations, and reports of the security agencies that document and analyze the media's depiction of terrorist incidents. This meta-analysis highlights the reasons for the mutual relationship between the media press and terrorism. These reports also highlight the reasons why media outlets may become unwitting partners in the realm of terrorism, where their coverage can inadvertently serve the objectives of the terrorists. By synthesizing these sources, the study questions whether the media's pursuit of sensationalism and instant reporting could be complicit in the very terror they aim to report, thus raising ethical concerns about the role of journalism in a landscape increasingly shaped by violence and fear.

## **2. Terrorism: An Analytical Overview**

The Britannica Encyclopedia describes terrorism as violence intended to generate widespread fear in a population to accomplish specific political aims. This method is utilized by nationalist and religious groups, revolutionaries, and sometimes by state entities like military forces, intelligence agencies, and law enforcement.

Terrorism is a complex and controversial concept, marked by its inherent violence and stigma. As stated by the UN on Drugs and Crime (2018), the word "terrorism" originated first in the French Revolution, and it refers to acts of state violence. It is still called violence to influence governments or topple regimes to instill fear in a broad audience. Terrorists often target public spaces like schools and transportation hubs to maximize shock value and undermine public security, aiming to pressure political leaders through fear (Siraj, 2012; Wiewiorka, M. 1993; Schmid, A. P., & Jongman, A. J. 2005).

According to McCauley, C. (2001), there are many perspectives on terrorism, including psychological, dealing with personal motives such as hatred or the desire for power, as demonstrated by Auguste Vaillant's 1893 bombing of the French Chamber of Deputies, driven by class hatred. Schmid, A. P. (2024) points out that terrorism stems from a group's beliefs and goals, including political or religious objectives, as seen in the Kashmir Liberation Front, IRA, Afghan Taliban support to Terik Taliban Pakistan (TTP) for terrorist activities in Pakistan to pursue their interests, etc., which has an ideological perspective. Terrorism from a strategic standpoint is a response to failed political efforts, like Libya's alleged bombing of Pan Am 103 in 1988 in retaliation for Western actions McCauley, C. (2001). Schmid (2024) identifies five key characteristics of terrorism: 1) to create extreme fear; 2) To target a broad audience; 3) to attack random, including civilians; 4) to disrupt the conventional norms for handling disputes, protests, and dissent; and 5) its primary aim is to influence, politics, governments ruling, and groups.

### **2.1.Kinds of Terrorism**

For readers' insight, it is important to explain the various shades of terrorism and how they pose threats briefly.

*Religious Extremism:* Religious extremism involves rigid and intolerant interpretations of religious doctrines that justify violence as a sacred duty. Extremist groups use modern technology to spread their ideology and recruit followers globally. A notable example is Al-Qaeda, which, under Osama

bin Laden, used religious extremism to fuel a global jihadist movement responsible for significant attacks like those on September 11th (Smith, 2001; Johnson, 2005).

**Nationalism:** Nationalism can be a powerful motivator for terrorism, often arising from perceived historical injustices or the denial of self-determination. While nationalism can unite and drive progress, it can also incite violence and division. The conflict in Northern Ireland, characterized by violence between Catholic Republicans and Protestant Unionists, exemplifies how nationalism can drive terrorism (Doe, 1998; Brown, 2003).

**Ideology:** Ideologies provide narratives that frame social, political, or economic conditions as injustices inflicted by an enemy. For some, extremist ideologies offer a sense of purpose and belonging, sometimes legitimizing violence to achieve goals like a utopian society. Understanding these ideologies is crucial for effective counterterrorism strategies, as seen in various right-wing extremist movements (Taylor, 2010; Green, 2012).

**State-Sponsored Terrorism:** State-sponsored terrorism involves acts of violence conducted with the support or endorsement of national governments. This support can include funding, safe havens, and logistics. While international efforts have reduced state sponsorship, some terrorists have turned to criminal enterprises for financing. The involvement of states in supporting terrorism highlights the complex relationship between political realities and terrorist activities (White, 2007; Black, 2011).

## **2.2.Terrorist Targets and Methodology**

These terrorist entities have distinct characteristics that present significant threats. They create fear through deliberate attacks, target victims indiscriminately, including civilians, and ignore conventional methods for handling disputes, protests, and disagreements. Their goal is to impact the political behavior of governments and social institutions (Siraj, 2010). Since the 1980s, religious groups and global crime organizations, like drug cartels and the Mafia, have increasingly used it to scare authorities and other gangs (Schmid, 2024).

According to the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime. (2018), terrorism universally involves violence, such as killing or devastation, to force governments or other target groups to achieve desired achievements. With this reason in view, the terrorists engage in enormous acts of destruction to demonstrate the seriousness of their threats, which often leads to the misconception that media coverage is somehow responsible for terrorism itself. However, the power to create a terrorist movement or state does not lie within the realm of modern mass media. To truly understand how terrorist groups form, one must delve into their motivations, objectives, ideologies, religious beliefs, and strategies.

Terrorists use a range of tactics, such as attacking tourists randomly, killing foreign NGO personnel, kidnappings, hostage situations, and attacks on crucial infrastructure like energy, transportation, banking, and tourism. They also create disturbances with hoaxes, such as bomb threats, to disrupt transportation and tourism, causing significant local impacts. Furthermore, they increasingly use the Internet to collect information, spread propaganda, raise money, communicate, and plan their activities (Schmid, 2024; Siraj, 2010; Siraj, 2028).

The weapons of terror are still the most commonly used means in terrorist attacks, as demonstrated by incidents like the burning of the Pak-India ‘Samjuta’ train and hundreds of passengers (Siraj, 2010). Terrorists particularly favor vehicle bombs due to their effectiveness in causing high casualties and widespread damage. Suicide attacks have also become more frequent in regions like the Middle East and Sri Lanka, with predictions that this trend may persist (Siraj, 2010).

In addition to these conventional methods, terrorists have employed chemical weapons, such as sarin nerve gas. A significant example is the 1995 Tokyo subway attack by the Aum Shinri Kyo

cult, which was the first major incident involving nerve gas. During the morning rush hour, the cult released sarin gas on subway trains, resulting in twelve deaths and injuring around 5,500 people (Tokuda et al., 2006). Sarin is a highly toxic nerve agent that causes severe respiratory issues and can lead to death (J. Zhuang, 2008). This attack underscored the potential for terrorists to use chemical weapons to generate fear, inflict mass casualties, and attract global attention.

Making the security foolproof is a great concern, as previous security measures have prompted terrorists to seek a different attack method (Okumura Et al., 1998). The use of a nuclear weapon by terrorists is very unlikely due to strong security measures and the fact that no country would support using such a weapon for terrorism. However, spreading radioactive substances in a terrorist attack is still a possible threat. Despite the potential advantages of nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons, terrorists generally prefer conventional weapons because they are more familiar and easier to use (Smith, J. (2020).

According to Lutz, D. S., & Lutz, P. A. (2020), the threat to the airline business highlights the horrifying shifting of terrorism. Hoffman, B. (2006) reports the terrorist attacks in Algeria, killings of women and children, and truck-bomb explosions at the US Embassies in Nairobi, Kenya, and Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, which resulted in over 260 deaths. Similarly, a train bomb terrorist attack in Pakistan killed and injured many people (Siraj, 2010). These events demonstrate that terrorists remain determined and capable of attacking a wide range of targets across various locations. Terrorism, being a multifaceted issue, requires exceptional domestic and international collaboration to address the dangers it poses. In the past, enhanced intergovernmental partnerships have led to a significant decrease in international terrorist incidents. However, despite this decline, terrorist violence continues to create an uncertain security environment. It remains a persistent threat to global and domestic stability and the safety and well-being of countless individuals (Enders, W. & Sandler, T. 2012).

### **3. Media and Terrorism: An Evolving Relationship**

The media has evolved from being government-controlled pre-1990s to becoming a powerful global force that shapes world affairs and public perception. It plays a crucial role in delivering and framing messages, influencing audiences' reactions to events, especially during crises like terrorist attacks (Thomas, 2001). The media acts as an instrument of power (IOP), amplifying the impact of events such as 9/11 and the 7/7 London attacks, where the widespread coverage fueled fear and distrust, thereby influencing public sentiment and government actions (Cox, 1997).

Terrorist groups exploit the media to spread fear and gain attention, using the media's visual and symbolic power to shape perceptions according to different demographic factors (Miller, 2001). The media's role as a reflector of global reality influences political communities. It can escalate the impact of terrorist acts, as seen in the worldwide response to 9/11, where the media, rather than governments, became the primary source of information and security updates (Volkmer, 2002). This phenomenon highlights the media's growing influence as a key player in global events and its role in the strategic calculations of terrorist groups. In contemporary society, the media acts as a nervous system of information, but terrorists can manipulate it to spread misleading and violent messages (Schmid, 2024).

#### **3.1. Media and Terrorism: A Symbiotic Relationship**

In sociology, symbiosis refers to a relationship where different groups depend on each other in complementary ways. Modern advancements in media technology, such as communications satellites and widespread television access, have significantly amplified the reach and impact of terrorism. McEvoy et al. (2022) pointed out a striking example of this was the 1972 Munich Olympics, where the Black September terrorists' attack and the massacre of Israeli athletes were

broadcast to an estimated global audience of over 500 million people. The writer argues that terrorists depend on media coverage to accomplish their objectives. Mark Juergensmeyer (2024) describes terrorism as "performance violence," suggesting that if terrorism is akin to a performance, terrorists aim to stage their acts where there is a large audience. Thus, the effectiveness of an attack is judged not only by the casualties and the fulfillment of demands but also by the level of public exposure and attention it receives (Siraj, S. A., & Hussain, S; (2016; Siraj, 2012).

Terrorism is typically defined as politically motivated violence and intimidation designed to induce fear. It employs various communication methods and leverages different platforms, including traditional media such as newspapers and television, to amplify its impact (Wilkinson, 2006). Bilgen, A. (2012) explains the way terrorists manipulate and exploit the press in their propaganda efforts. According to Rawan and Siraj (2018), media organizations must critically observe the extended coverage of terrorism, like hijackings and hostage situations, as a continual opportunity for sensational and visually engaging news stories. Such coverage tends to glorify the terrorists and significantly increases audience engagement and readership. While terrorist attacks continue, the media will continue covering them to gratify their audience with dramatic stories involving both the perpetrators and their victims. As a matter of journalistic requirement, the more novelty there is in the event, the more likely it is to be published (Elshimi, 2018; Bilgen, 2012; Wilkinson, 2006).

Violence without the intention to instill terror does not qualify as terrorism. **Wieviorka, M.** (2012) introduces the concept of 'relative indifference,' where perpetrators of violence are not concerned with media attention because they use alternative communication channels to express their views. These channels include traditional media like legal and relatively free press and institutions such as universities, churches, and mosques. However, "existing channels" also encompass alternative media platforms, such as the Internet, which terrorist groups increasingly utilize (Da'jah, 2008; Delgado Rivera, 2016). Consequently, Wieviorka's category of relative indifference might be considered inadequate, as it overlaps with these alternative media platforms (Azim, 2024; Klein, 2023; Da'jah, 2008; Delgado Rivera, 2016; Wieviorka, M 2012). According to Siraj (2012), the most effective responses in a democratic society are those where the media exercise voluntary self-restraint and self-regulation. However, the mass media must enhance their efforts to develop appropriate and effective self-regulation measures (Jenkins, 2022; Siraj, 2012).

In efforts to spread terror among a broad audience, some form of communication channel, whether informal or localized, is inevitably used. Laqueur, W. (1977) argues that historical evidence shows that sectarian groups in the early ages relied on word of mouth in public spaces to portray their violence, while the separatists in Russia and Balkan used similar methods to instill fear. Historically, terrorism served as a political weapon, not a tool for media producers or journalists (**Laqueur, W.** 1977). However, contemporary terrorists and the mass media can sometimes engage in a mutually beneficial relationship. Terrorists seek prime-time TV coverage to gain extensive publicity and validation from their followers. Meanwhile, media organizations benefit from covering terrorism, especially dramatic events like hijackings and hostage situations, as these provide sensational and visually striking news stories that attract large audiences and boost readership (Azim, S. 2024; Gordon, A., & Roberts, M. 2023; Delgado R., J. 2016; Jetter, M. (2012).

As long as mass media remains active, terrorists will persist in seeking what former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher described as "the oxygen of publicity." Similarly, the press will persist in covering these violent acts to satisfy the public gratification of both the attackers and the victims. Even in cases where terrorists do not claim responsibility or their identities are uncertain, such as

the 1996 bombing of the American base in Dhahran, extensive media coverage still follows, demonstrating the ongoing connection between terrorism and the media.

### **3.2.Factors Driving the Symbiosis**

The symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism has become inevitable due to the advancement of communication technologies, which have made media reach larger audiences and deliver breaking news more quickly. Ramluckan T. et al. (2009) view mass media as a key source of information for the public, relying on it heavily during crises. Concomitantly, terrorism has also progressed, targeting global audiences with increasingly bold and dramatic acts to capture media attention, which helps in spreading their messages and gaining notoriety. This paper explores the connection between terrorism and the media and examines the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and mass media.

Delgado R. (2016) argues that the symbiotic relationship between media and terrorism arises because extremists meticulously plan their attacks—considering factors such as scale, target, location, and timing—to maximize media exposure. By turning these incidents into global advertisements for their ideologies, terrorists seek to gain a sense of achievement, influence, and power through extensive and prolonged media coverage. As Bruce Hoffman, Director of the Center for Security Studies at Georgetown University, says, "Terrorists strive to expand the terror and outrage to a much broader audience to achieve the maximum impact" (Hoffman, 2016). Referring to a research study, Delgado R. (2016) reports that sensationalist television coverage of terrorism leads to more aggressive attitudes toward security policy among Americans. The study concluded that the more television people watched, the more likely they were to adopt hawkish views on security matters.

The media's coverage of terrorist attacks often becomes sensationalized once the initial shock wears off. News organizations rush to broadcast detailed aspects of investigations, sometimes inadvertently providing useful information to potential terrorists. The need for higher ratings and advertising revenue drives this focus (Klein, A. (2023; Delgado R, 2016). The media also finds terrorism highly attractive for coverage due to its dramatic and sensational nature, which includes elements like danger, tragedy, and shocking footage. This appeal leads to increased viewer ratings and profits. Violence, central to modern television culture, drives the media's focus on terrorism (Lewis, 2005). The expansion of TV and radio channels and the rise of mega-media organizations have intensified competition, pushing the media towards sensational "infotainment" to captivate audiences (Nacos, 2006). Additionally, the corporate background of many top media executives today, rather than journalism, contributes to the media's profit-driven approach to covering terrorism (Biernatzki, 2002).

Bilgen, A. (2012) views that the issue with media coverage of terrorism is not the fact that it covers such events but rather how it covers them. Bilgen argues that the media often sensationalizes terrorist acts by emphasizing dramatic, anecdotal stories and excessively repeating images. Bilgen further argues that media coverage can traumatize audiences by exaggerating threats, as seen with the continuous replay of combat scenes, specifically in the case of 9/11. According to Altheide (2009), the predominant theme in contemporary news and popular culture is the "politics of fear," which intertwines with "victimization" narratives, making crime, danger, and fear salient in daily life (Altheide, 2009; Long, 2002; Vasterman, Yzermans, & Dirkzwager, 2005).

Research shows that attacks in Western countries, like Paris, receive much more media attention compared to those in conflict-prone regions such as Baghdad or Beirut, reflecting a pattern of 'horror fatigue' and audience relatability (Delgado R, 2016). This disparity in coverage influences public perception and highlights the media's tendency to prioritize stories that engage their

audience, sometimes at the expense of a balanced global perspective (Falk, R., 2023; Elshimi, M. (2018; Delgado R., 2016; Delgado Rivera, J. 2016). Hoffman (2008) argues that without media attention, the impact of a terrorist act is limited to the immediate victims, whereas terrorists aim to reach a broader audience. Stohl (2002) supports this by stating that terrorists are more concerned with how the audience reacts than with the victims themselves. This desire for widespread attention drives terrorists to choose locations for their attacks that are likely to attract significant media coverage, as seen in the 9/11 attacks, where the media played a crucial role in disseminating the event globally (Baran, 2008).

Moreover, terrorists use the media not just to gain attention but also to publicize their political causes, explain their motives, and legitimize their actions (Nacos, 2006). The media, in turn, contributes to reducing the power imbalance between terrorists and their adversaries, helping to amplify fear and create a global audience for their messages. The advent of new media technologies, like the internet, has significantly improved terrorists' ability to communicate directly with the public, circumventing traditional media channels (Baran, 2008; Nacos, 2002a). This development has allowed terrorists to spread their messages more broadly and with greater control, though they still use traditional media for specific purposes (Nacos, 2002b).

#### **4. Discussion**

Today's world has changed dramatically over the past decade, largely due to terrorism and extremism and their portrayal in the media. Terrorism, defined as the use of threats, murder, injury, or destruction to intimidate governments or target groups, relies heavily on media coverage to amplify its threats to a wider audience. This creates a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media.

While the free press does not align with terrorist values, media outlets in open societies operate in a competitive environment. They face pressure to be the first to report news and provide engaging content, often leading them to cover dramatic and negative events, including terrorist acts. Although terrorists don't control the mass media, they frequently attempt to manipulate it for their purposes. Consequently, media professionals and the public must remain vigilant against such manipulation. Media organizations and journalists can also become targets when they critically report on extremism. A notable example is the murder of CNN journalist Daniel Pearl while covering terrorism in Karachi, Pakistan.

Pakistan is a significant target of international terrorism, which affects its social dynamics, growth and development, and democratic process. In such contexts, the interaction between terrorism and the media underscores how terrorists can exploit and manipulate media coverage, as they thrive on the attention and publicity they receive.

##### **4.1. Media's Role and Challenges**

- The free press does not represent terrorist values.
- Media organizations operate in a competitive market, pressured to be first with news and provide exciting content.
- This competition for ratings and profit often limits the media's response to terrorist acts, even though these events are dramatic and newsworthy.
- Terrorists aim to exploit and influence the free press to achieve their goals.
- Media workers and the audience must be watchful against such manipulation.

#### **5. Conclusion**

In open societies, the free press remains highly susceptible to exploitation by terrorists who seek to capitalize on the media's capacity for widespread publicity. This intricate relationship between terrorism and the media profoundly influences global perceptions and societal dynamics as

terrorists stage dramatic acts to capture media attention and amplify their impact. While recent studies show increased public trust in the media's handling of terrorism coverage, ongoing vigilance is crucial. Both media professionals and the public must stay alert to prevent terrorist manipulation. The dynamic between terrorism and the media is not immutable; strategic policy changes can shape it. By fostering responsible and cooperative media practices, we can limit the publicity terrorists crave, thereby diminishing their influence and strengthening our efforts to combat terrorism more effectively.

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