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The Media and the Terrorist: Is There a “Right” Way to Cover Political Violence?

Acts of terrorism are inherently dramatic. They arouse strong feelings. They challenge governments and invade the lives of ordinary people, bringing death and destruction sometimes on such a scale as to destabilize countries and shock the entire world.

They are, in short, big news. The 11 September 2001 airplane attacks and the series of events they set in motion—including the launch of the “war on terror,” which was used to justify the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—changed the course of history, dominated the presidency of George W. Bush, and provided the international media with the biggest news story of the early years of the twenty-first century.

Media coverage of terrorism matters. Terrorism is a means of sending a message, and the media provide the channel by which that message is carried, beyond the immediate victims, to reach a mass audience. Killing and destroying are the means the terrorist uses to “speak” to the government and to citizens, seeking to spread fear and destroy their resolve. The power of the message is amplified by the scale of death and carnage, and by the mode of attack. In the case of a suicide bomber, for example, the intended message goes roughly as follows: “I am prepared to die for my beliefs. You are facing an enemy who is so committed to his cause that you have no chance of defeating him.” In the words of Sir Richard Dearlove, former head of Britain’s foreign intelligence service, MI6: “Terrorism is an extreme act of political communication.”¹

This immediately confronts the media with a dilemma: How can they report on terrorism without amplifying the terrorists’ message? If they report what the terrorists are saying, are they abetting them, even doing their work for them? Depending on how and what they report, media are in a position to provide many of the things that terrorists seek, including publicity, an understanding of their cause, legitimacy, and the maximizing of panic and fear.²

Coverage that hypes up the drama of terrorist violence may have the effect of heightening public anxiety. An account in a British news magazine of attacks on Mumbai, India, which killed more than 150 people in November 2008, was critical of news media for precisely this reason: “The terror instilled by the attacks was somehow deepened by the news coverage, with its melodramatic music, its repetition of rumours and supposition, and its sheer ghouliness and relentlessness.”³

Even responsible media that recognize the pitfalls of rumor, hype, and ghouliness may feel themselves obliged to supply their readers and viewers with blanket coverage of events so dramatic and compelling that they find they simply cannot afford to ignore them.

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During the seventeen-day hijack of TWA flight 847 in June 1985—which had 104 Americans and 49 others on board—a study of coverage in the *Washington Post*, *New York Times*, and *Los Angeles Times* found that stories on the crisis dominated all three newspapers, featuring on 31, 28, and 23 percent, respectively, of the pages in their main news sections throughout the entire episode.⁴ Television coverage was proportionately even more intensive: the US networks ABC, CBS, and NBC devoted, respectively, 68, 62, and 63 percent of their airtime to the crisis. In a study, Dutch academic Alex Schmid argued that extensive media coverage of the plight of the hostages’ distraught families had “increased the price” of the captives in a way that placed overwhelming pressure on the US and Israeli governments to do a deal. The Islamic Jihad group had demanded the release of 776 Shiite prisoners from Israeli jails, and its demands were eventually met almost in full: 756 were freed, in return for 39 hostages. “The media’s profuse exposure of the hostage families and their grief thereby played into the hands of the terrorists,” Schmid argued.⁵

A Symbiotic Relationship?

It is common among experts on terrorism to speak of a relationship of symbiosis—mutual dependence—between terrorists and the media: According to this argument, the terrorists need media coverage to advance their cause, while the media need the drama of terrorist attacks to fill their pages and news broadcasts, thereby maximizing their audience and their profits.

Britain's Paul Wilkinson argues that the relationship between terrorists and the mass media tends inevitably to become symbiotic once terrorist violence is under way. In a 1997 article, he cited the example of the seizure and massacre of Israeli athletes by the Palestinian Black September movement at the Munich Olympic Games a quarter of a century earlier, which was relayed to an estimated worldwide television audience of over five hundred million (a fraction of the number that would have access to coverage of such an event today). Terrorists, Wilkinson wrote:

. . . want to appear on prime time TV to obtain not only massive, possibly world-wide, publicity but also the aura of legitimisation that such media attention gains for them in the eyes of their own followers and sympathisers. For the mass media organisations the coverage of terrorism, especially prolonged incidents such as hijackings and hostage situations, provides an endless source of sensational and visually compelling news stories capable of boosting audience/readership figures.⁶

Other leading academics such as Walter Laqueur have gone even further: It has been said that journalists are terrorists' best friends, because they are willing to give terrorist operations maximum exposure. This is not to say that journalists as a group are sympathetic to terrorists, although it may appear so. It simply means that violence is news, whereas peace and harmony are not. The terrorists need the media, and the media find in terrorism all the ingredients of an exciting story. Their attitude towards terrorism has run the gamut from exaggerated respect to sycophancy (such as calling a terrorist a freedom fighter, an activist, a patriot, a militant or a revolutionary). Media coverage has supplied constant grist to the terrorist mill; it has magnified the

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political importance of many terrorist acts out of all proportion. In some cases it has even been responsible for the murder of innocents and obstructed complicated rescue missions. The media cannot ignore terrorism, but society would certainly be better off if the media were not driven by sensationalism.⁷

However, the idea that terrorism requires the participation of the mass media ignores the fact that terrorism existed long before the modern communications era. To assert that the media are somehow allies of the terrorist is to overlook the valuable role in society that responsible coverage can play. It provides a vital channel through which the authorities can counter terrorist propaganda, rally society against the threat, and enlist the participation of the public, for example, by telling people how to behave in an emergency and step up their vigilance in case of further attacks. By investigating the motivations of the perpetrators and critically examining their stated aims and beliefs, the media can also help society to answer one of the biggest and most basic questions that terrorist atrocities raise: "Why did they do this to us?" Raising the level of understanding of terrorism by both the populace and the decision makers is an important first step toward helping a society to formulate an effective counterterrorism response.

The idea, moreover, that the media depend on terrorists to supply them with fodder for maximizing profits is not only grotesque but wrong. First, the staple diet of the popular media in many western countries is based far more on celebrities, sex, show business, and sports—readers and viewers would quickly tire of a relentless diet of stories on terrorism. Second, it is worth noting that coverage of the "war on terrorism"—as defined by President George W. Bush to include the military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq—has cost media organizations heavily, in terms of both the financial outlay and the number of journalists killed.

Even among academics, the "symbiotic relationship" between terrorists and journalists is a matter of dispute. French sociologist Michel Wieviorka argued that the attitude of terrorists toward the media ranged from pure indifference to cases where they come to view

the media themselves as enemies.⁸ William Biernatzki, writing in 2002, noted that: One could as easily say that government officials and insurgent terrorists are in some kind of symbiotic relationship, the officials using the terrorist threat in one way or another to strengthen their own hold on power, and the terrorists referring to officials' wrongdoing to justify their own violent acts. In fact, the interrelationships among media, terrorists and government are extremely complex and multivalent.⁹

“Oxygen of Publicity”

A case study in these interrelationships—and how they can go wrong—was the British government's attempt to suppress media coverage of the militant republican movement in Northern Ireland in the late 1980s and early 1990s. At the height of the British government's struggle against the Irish Republic Army (IRA), only nine months after it had narrowly failed to blow her up in a bomb attack on a hotel, Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher made a famous speech:

For newspapers and television, acts of terrorism inevitably make good copy and compelling viewing. The hijacker and the terrorist thrive on publicity: without it, their

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activities and their influence are sharply curtailed. There is a fearful progression, which the terrorists exploit to the full. They see how acts of violence and horror dominate the newspaper columns and television screens of the free world. They see how that coverage creates a natural wave of sympathy for the victims and pressure to end their plight no matter what the consequence. And the terrorists exploit it. Violence and atrocity command attention. We must not play into their hands. . . . We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend.¹⁰

Thatcher was infuriated by the media attention being given to the IRA and its political wing, Sinn Fein. In her determination to “starve the terrorists of oxygen,” she introduced restrictions that prevented groups believed to support terrorism from broadcasting directly on the airwaves. The main target was Sinn Fein, but the law failed to achieve what Thatcher had hoped. Media got around it by conducting interviews with Sinn Fein leader Gerry Adams and then paying actors to read out his words. Not only did she fail to stop him getting his message across, but she handed him a publicity coup and made him look like an underdog, the victim of an unfair ban on free speech. The attempt to gag him was widely ridiculed; nevertheless, the broadcast ban on Sinn Fein lasted from 1988 until the IRA declared a ceasefire in 1994.

If censorship failed to silence the IRA's voice decades ago, it would stand even less chance today. Al Qaeda's message is out there, on thousands of websites around the world. As of 2008, one Israeli research institute was monitoring 5,800 militant sites.¹¹ Some of the best-known al Qaeda-linked forums, including one that in 2007 published a guide on how to kidnap Americans,¹² are hosted by Web service providers in the United States. But under US freedom of speech laws there is no way of shutting them down. Security and law enforcement professionals might not even want to, as they provide a window on the jihadists' world and an easy way of monitoring the enemy's propaganda. Even if they were closed down, they would pop up somewhere else. These websites carry regular statements from al Qaeda leaders but also from lesser known and more shadowy figures.

Media considering whether to report such statements need to ask themselves whether they are gratuitously supplying al Qaeda with the “oxygen of publicity” or whether the content can justifiably be seen as news. When Osama bin Laden made his first video appearance for nearly three years in September 2007, it made news largely because it disproved persistent speculation he was dead or gravely ill. Likewise, bin Laden's periodic offers of various types of truce or accommodation with western countries have been worth reporting because they provide a glimpse of al Qaeda's tactical thinking and purported openness to making deals, although they have always been roundly rejected by the target governments. Many other statements by al Qaeda figures have amounted to pure propaganda, without news value, and have correspondingly attracted little or no coverage. That is the way it should be. Responsible media do not routinely give air time to al Qaeda, but only when it makes major pronouncements that tell us something new about its thinking and strategy.

Moreover, it is only by identifying and exposing the arguments of bin Laden—notably his core narrative that Islam is the target of a western crusade of persecution—that the media can help its audience understand the phenomenon of al Qaeda. Societies need to know their enemy and what they are up against. You have to hear what your adversary is saying in order to argue back.

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Drawing the Line

Of course, there are limits to what the media should say or show: As responsible actors with a duty to society, they must not endanger life by divulging information that could compromise a counterterrorism operation such as a hostage rescue. Likewise it would be wrong to broadcast a bin Laden message that might contain coded instructions to al Qaeda members to carry out attacks; in fact, though, US officials have made clear they do not believe his statements contain such signals.

It would also be abhorrent and wrong to show the public footage of atrocities such as the murder of hostages who have been forced to plead for their lives before being beheaded. First, such material goes way beyond the limits of “acceptable violence” that broadcasters can show their viewers, and could deeply traumatize those who watch it. Second, screening it would only serve the purpose of groups like al Qaeda by spreading the fear and terror that they crave. In practice, however, such footage has been posted directly on the internet by insurgent groups. The emergence of the World Wide Web has made terrorists less dependent than before on the traditional media because it offers them publishing and broadcast channels of their own to reach many millions of people.

According to Manuel R. Torres Soriano, writing in 2008: “For the first time in history, cyberspace allows for there to be direct communication between a terrorist and his ‘public.’”¹³

Codes of Practice

Faced with the challenges of reporting on terrorism, media organizations have put in place codes of practice for journalists. The BBC offers the following guidance on reporting of “terror”:

We must report acts of terror quickly, accurately, fully and responsibly. Our credibility is undermined by the careless use of words which carry emotional or value judgements. The word “terrorist” itself can be a barrier rather than an aid to understanding. We should try to avoid the term, without attribution. We should let other people characterise while we report the facts as we know them. . . .

We should convey to our audience the full consequences of the act by describing what happened. We should use words which specifically describe the perpetrator such as “bomber,” “attacker,” “gunman,” “kidnapper,” “insurgent,” and “militant.” Our responsibility is to remain objective and report in ways that enable our audiences to make their own assessments about who is doing what to whom.¹⁴

Reuters’ policy goes further, telling journalists not to refer to specific events as terrorism or to use the word “terrorist” to describe specific individuals, groups, or events. This international news agency tells its journalists:

Report the subjects of news stories objectively, their actions, identity and background.

Aim for a dispassionate use of language so that individuals, organisations and governments can make their own judgment on the basis of facts.¹⁵

Such guidelines do not imply that the media concerned deny the existence of terrorism.

They represent, rather, a recognition that “terrorist” and “terrorism” are emotive,

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value-laden terms. For media that strive for neutrality in their worldwide reporting, it is necessary to remain objective in describing even the most repugnant acts. These policies also reflect the view that using the terrorist label in even one instance would invite pressure from governments, lobby groups, and other parties all over the world to apply it in other cases that are far less clear-cut. As the BBC guidance states:

Some will argue that certain events are so evidently acts of terror (and, therefore, perpetrated by “terrorists”) that those descriptions are reasonable, and non-judgemental.

However, the language we choose to use in reporting one incident cannot be considered in isolation from our reporting of other stories. So to use the word in incidents which we may consider obvious creates difficulties for less clear-cut incidents.¹⁶

The guidelines go on to quote a former editor of BBC World Service News, David Spaul, writing in 1988:

Accepting that there are some actions which most people would recognise as a terrorist act—the hand grenade thrown into a crèche, the airport queue machine-gunned—we should still avoid the word. In the first place, our audience is as perceptive as we are, and can make up their own minds without being provided with labels. In the second place, there are actions which are not quite so clearly terrorism and we should not be forced into the position of having to make value judgements on each event.¹⁷

There is another argument against the use of the “T-word” in media coverage—namely, that it designates the group concerned as being beyond the pale, tending to preclude the possibility of any negotiation or narrowing of differences. The phrase “one man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter” is a cliché. But Menachem Begin of Israel, Yasser Arafat of the Palestine Liberation Organization, and Nelson Mandela of the African National Congress were all members of organizations that were labeled terrorist by their opponents, and they all went on to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Those who today are branded terrorists may be the very people we will need to engage and potentially negotiate with tomorrow, however loathsome that idea might seem.

Media Choices

Reporting on governments’ counterterrorism methods can present the media with difficult choices. In November 2005, Dana Priest of the *Washington Post* broke the following story, which made headlines around the world.

The CIA has been hiding and interrogating some of its most important al Qaeda captives at a Soviet-era compound in Eastern Europe, according to US and foreign officials familiar with the arrangement. . . .¹⁸

The article went on:

The secret facility is part of a covert prison system set up by the CIA nearly four years ago that at various times has included sites in eight countries, including Thailand, Afghanistan and several democracies in Eastern Europe, as well as a small center at the Guantanamo Bay prison in Cuba, according to current and former intelligence officials and diplomats from three continents.¹⁹

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This was a “scoop” for the newspaper. Interestingly, however, the *Post* chose to withhold from readers some of the information it had gathered:

The Washington Post is not publishing the names of the Eastern European countries involved in the covert program, at the request of senior US officials. They argued that the disclosure might disrupt counterterrorism efforts in those countries and elsewhere and could make them targets of possible terrorist retaliation.²⁰

It is possible to argue against the line the newspaper took. Critics might say that the *Post* owed it to its readers—both in America and in the countries that allegedly hosted the secret prisons—to reveal the full details of what it knew. Was this an example of censorship, or self-censorship? Do citizens of democracies not have the right to know what policies their governments are pursuing in their name? Or is censorship justified in order to safeguard counterterrorism efforts and protect the countries involved against al Qaeda retaliation? In purely journalistic terms, the newspaper also ran the risk that other media might reveal the names of the countries concerned, and the *Post* might then be scooped on its own story. Whether or not one agrees with the newspaper’s decision, this was clearly an example of a media organization examining its conscience and responsibly weighing the impact that its coverage was likely to have.

A second example, also from the United States, showed a major newspaper taking a different decision: rejecting a request from the authorities not to publish sensitive information on security grounds. In mid-2006, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* revealed a previously secret US program in which authorities were tapping into records of an international banking consortium, the Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunications (SWIFT), to examine customer transactions. The US administration was furious

over the disclosure, saying it gave away important secrets about the fight against terrorism financing. Even at the *New York Times* itself, opinion was divided. The newspaper's reader representative initially supported the article. But he wrote several months later that he had been wrong to do so, because the program was not illegal under US law and there was no evidence people's private data had actually been misused.

In a column, the editors of the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times*, Dean Baquet and Bill Keller, defended the decision with an argument that encapsulates how many media see their role in relation to governments: "Our job, especially in times like these, is to bring our readers information that will enable them to judge how well their elected leaders are fighting on their behalf and at what price."²¹ Such cases illustrate the inherent tension between the role of the media and that of the state and its counterterrorism authorities. The tension is at its most acute when media are covering a terrorist operation that is actually under way.

Paul Wilkinson, in the paper cited earlier, writes, "It is important to emphasize that the objectives and concerns of the law enforcement agencies in terrorist situations are not only at variance with the aims of the media: they are intrinsically in conflict with them."²² He cites two examples of "media irresponsibility" in covering counterterrorism operations: the TV filming of British SAS commandos rappelling down the walls of the Iranian embassy to rescue hostages held there during a 1980 siege; and the intrusive media presence that prevented commandos from mounting a rescue operation at Larnaca airport in Cyprus during the 1988 hijacking of a Kuwaiti airliner by Hezbollah.

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Such examples contain an obvious lesson for governments, armies, and the police: They need to impose a media blackout on filming of counterterrorism operations in situations such as sieges and hijacks. Few would argue with the logic of such a measure. Likewise, it makes sense for authorities to refrain from giving a "blow-by-blow commentary" on running investigations, although they need to release at least basic levels of information to reassure the public. In the aftermath of the July 2005 suicide bombings in London, the Metropolitan Police addressed this issue by convening news briefings at which it read out statements but declined to take questions afterwards. This tactic enabled senior officers to address the clamor for information but avoid being placed in a situation where they might appear evasive or ill-informed by having to answer a multitude of questions with "No comment" or "We don't know."

Journalist Jonathan Foreman, writing on the 2008 Mumbai attacks, highlighted the problems of issuing either no information—leaving journalistic speculation to fill the vacuum—or too much conflicting information from competing sources:

These attacks have already been going on for more than a day and a half, and as they draw on, unresolved, rumor seems to grow more powerful, fed by TV anchors who need to say something even when there is nothing new to report. . . . It doesn't help that there is no central command post briefing the press. The police, the army, the commandos that flew down from Delhi, the naval commandos and the state government have all been giving briefings both on and off the record. There is apparently a bureaucratic imperative for all of them to seem important or in charge.²³

Handling the Media

Countries and intelligence services vary in their approaches to briefing the media. In Germany, for example, the agencies at state and federal levels have press officers who are available to all journalists, and the federal heads of domestic and foreign intelligence give news conferences at least once a year. This relative openness is a deliberate attempt at accountability in a country that for historical reasons is conscious of the need to subject its intelligence services to democratic control. In Britain, the MI5 and MI6 agencies have never held news conferences, and speak only to a small number of approved reporters specializing in security matters. The British approach has, nevertheless, evolved considerably in the past few years and it is clear the agencies are now convinced that they need to have a relationship with the media in order to get their side of the story across. In 2007, a major terrorism trial in Britain featured evidence that MI5 had encountered two of the July 2005

suicide bombers more than a year before their attacks, as part of surveillance of a different group of plotters.²⁴ MI5 was well aware that this news would provoke strong criticism in the media, who would demand to know whether the suicide bombers could have been stopped if leads from the earlier investigation had been followed up. The agency prepared its response well in advance, briefed reporters, and published information on its website explaining why the eventual suicide bombers had been peripheral to the original investigation.²⁵ The result was that the media were able to write the story with a much better understanding of the background, and MI5 was able publicly to defend its actions—although it was not successful in avoiding criticism altogether.

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This example shows how even a secret state organization may have an interest in briefing the media. Such contacts may serve to trumpet successes or, as in this case, to defend against criticism. Invariably information is given under strict conditions, agreed upon in advance, so that media know exactly what may be reported and to whom it may be attributed (e.g., “a security source”).

To Talk or Not to Talk?

Authorization to brief the media is, in this reporter’s experience, usually confined to one or two designated spokespersons within an intelligence organization. The individual counterterrorism officer may therefore be taking a calculated risk in deciding to speak to a journalist. Several factors may make this risk worthwhile. First, it may be possible to correct false information or wrong impressions, defend against criticism, counterbalance terrorist propaganda, and highlight CT successes with the aim of ensuring that these are fairly and positively portrayed in media coverage, damaging the enemy. Second, it may be possible to learn valuable information from a well-informed reporter. Journalists have some advantages over intelligence operatives, in that they may openly approach both parties to a conflict in search of information, rather than being forced to operate under cover. The best reporters therefore enjoy a vantage point that gives them both useful intelligence and a deeper analytical understanding of the dynamics of the conflict. In the relationship between the reporter and the CT professional, neither party will fully reveal his hand. But they may be able to enter—cautiously at first, and then more readily as trust develops—into a kind of transaction, exchanging information in such a way that each side benefits. This “two-way street” of information is at the heart of the reporter’s work in all spheres of journalism, not just the counterterrorism field.

Military or counterterrorism officials dealing individually with the media would also be well advised to agree in advance on the ground rules. Misunderstandings can arise when either the source, or the journalist, or both have failed to be sufficiently clear about the basis on which the conversation is taking place. The terms “off the record,” “on background,” “on deep background,” etc., may be used by different people to mean different things. For both sides, therefore, it is good practice to check. For the source, that means asking the journalist: What are you planning to do with this material? For the journalist, it means asking: Can I quote you, and on what basis? It is nearly always possible to come up with a formula that preserves the anonymity of the source while giving the reader an idea of how the journalist got the information. For the reporter, sourcing is a vital part of a news story that can significantly boost its authority and credibility. To write that a story is based on conversations with government sources, law enforcement, and counterterrorism officials gives it far more impact than to convey the information unsourced or to use vague formulations like “It is understood that. . . .”

It is also worth noting that journalists have a strong incentive to respect the confidentiality of their sources and to report accurately what they say. A journalist who betrays or “burns” a source guarantees that the person will never speak to him or her again.

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Conclusion

This chapter argues against the often-held view that terrorists and the media are inevitably

in a symbiotic relationship. It also acknowledges the real danger that sensational and irresponsible reporting can help terrorists to achieve their objectives. The challenge for the media is to avoid falling into that trap.

The media are naturally drawn to cover terrorism as a subject that is inherently dramatic, involves conflict, and throws up many wider issues for societies: religion, immigration, race relations, human rights, and the balance between security and freedom.

Journalists and their readers and viewers are also fascinated by the secretive world of the military and the security services, a world that for the most part is closed to them apart from tantalizing glimpses.

There are in fact several parallels between the roles of security correspondents and counterterrorism officials. Both are in the business of acquiring sources and persuading them to pass on information. Both have to sift through large volumes of material and make judgment calls about what is important and what can safely be ignored. Both have to distinguish between reliable data and deliberately misleading information, and to be on guard against attempts to manipulate or dupe them.

The sort of information that interests security officials is also of huge potential interest to journalists and readers—information about terrorist groups, threat levels, and specific plots and investigations. But this is where the tension between the press and the authorities becomes apparent. The need for operational secrecy means counterterrorism officials can tell journalists only a fraction, if anything, of what they know. The job of the security correspondent can be a frustrating one, trying to piece together fragmentary pieces of information in search of an elusive bigger picture.

The inherent tension in this relationship can lead to frustration on both sides. “Are you with us or against us?” one official demanded of me during a vigorous question-and-answer session after I lectured on “Media and Terrorism” at the George C. Marshall European Center for Security Studies in February 2008. The question is understandable, but it slightly misses the point about the role of the press. It is not the job of independent media to act as cheerleaders for governments, but to report as objectively as they can on the course of events. One of the most valuable services the press has performed in the course of the “war on terror” is to investigate flaws and abuses—the Abu Ghraib scandal, CIA rendition and secret prisons, the use of “waterboarding,” or the tapping of Americans’ phones without judicial warrants. That in turn has brought pressure on the US administration to adapt and improve its counterterrorism methods. The media would be failing in its task if it did not critically examine government policies from the point of view of both their moral justification and their practical effectiveness.

To whom, then, is the journalist ultimately responsible?²⁶ First and foremost, to readers, listeners, or viewers, who collectively represent society as a whole. The journalist enjoys a privileged position, with special access to protagonists and decision makers, and has a duty to ask the questions that ordinary people want answered. A journalist should

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never be a mere mouthpiece for the government or for the terrorists. He or she should critically report the words and actions of both sides, subjecting them to critical analysis and exposing what is false, duplicitous, brutal, murderous, or otherwise threatening to society and its freedoms. The journalist’s social duty includes the responsibility not to report information that could make society more vulnerable to attack or help terrorists to plan operations or resist capture. When Britain’s top counterterrorism police officer walked into the Prime Minister’s Downing Street office in April 2009 carrying documents—clearly visible through photographers’ lenses—that set out plans for a major counterterrorism operation, no journalist published the details. But the fact of the officer’s failure of judgment was—rightly—widely reported, and led to his resignation the next day.²⁷

As trained professionals fulfilling an important role in society, the media must expect criticism when they get things wrong. They must also, when reporting on matters of national security, submit to certain restrictions. Reporters “embedded” with troops in Iraq or Afghanistan, for example, may be privy to secrets that they cannot reveal because to do so would compromise operations against insurgents. This is plain common sense. There are,

however, less clear-cut cases—like the *Washington Post* and *New York Times* cases previously discussed—where the case for censorship or self-censorship is much more complex and nuanced.

At the same 2008 lecture already mentioned, a professor suggested to CT professionals that they think of the media as a gun on the table between the terrorist and the counterterrorist: whoever grabs it first can take advantage of a powerful weapon. That is an intriguing image, but it should also be remembered that most journalists are skeptics, and their worst fear is to be duped or exploited. Even as they seek the insights of the security experts, reporters are—or should be—questioning their agenda and wondering if they are being manipulated. This natural suspicion has if anything increased in light of recent experience, notably the fatally flawed intelligence-based case advanced by US and British leaders for invading Iraq to seize Saddam Hussein's alleged weapons of mass destruction. In the past few years, media have also become more cautious about relying on single, anonymous intelligence sources and will normally look for corroboration from at least two, and preferably more.

Remembering the characterization of terrorism as “an extreme act of political communication,” it follows that the worst thing journalists can do is to exaggerate the threat and make the terrorists' message louder. That serves only to deepen people's fear and sharpen the divisions in society the militants can then exploit further. That way, the media simply play into their hands.

On the other hand, we make a mistake if we play down the threat and accuse the military and security establishment of hyping it up to keep themselves in business and guarantee their budgets. A former counterterrorism specialist at the State Department, Larry C. Johnson, wrote in the *New York Times* on 10 July 2001:

Judging from news reports and the portrayal of villains in our popular entertainment, Americans are bedevilled by fantasies about terrorism. They seem to believe that terrorism is the greatest threat to the United States and that it is becoming more widespread and lethal. They are likely to think that the United States is the most popular target of terrorists. And they almost certainly have the impression that extremist Islamic groups cause most terrorism. None of these beliefs are based in fact.²⁸

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Ironically, Johnson said part of the blame for inflating the terrorist threat could be assigned “to 24-hour broadcast news operations too eager to find a dramatic story line in the events of the day and to pundits who repeat myths while ignoring clear empirical data.”²⁹ Nine weeks later, al Qaeda struck the United States, killing nearly three thousand people. The media walk a fine line, then, between exaggerating and underplaying the threat of terrorist violence. At their worst, they may fall into the trap of becoming the terrorists' mouthpiece. At their best, they strip away the romantic “freedom fighter” image and portray the brutal reality of terrorism and its appalling consequences. They alert the public to the dangers and help people understand the causes of terrorism by providing a forum for education and debate.

The media are often criticized, and sometimes rightly, over their coverage of terrorism. But for all their flaws, they perform on balance a positive role. Terrorists seek to exploit free speech and the media in the same way they try to exploit many of the rights and freedoms we enjoy, for the purposes of subverting those very rights and freedoms. That does not mean we should respond to the terrorist challenge by curbing the media and encroaching on free speech. That would be to hand the terrorists an important victory. As societies confront the threat of terrorism, the media carry an important responsibility. Terrorism cannot be beaten by law enforcement or military force alone, and the “war on terror” is not really a war: It is a contest between different ideologies and views of the world. You cannot defeat an idea on a battlefield. The way to conquer it is by force of argument and force of example, by showing that one's values and way of life are superior to those of the enemy who seeks to destroy them. And it is through the twenty-first-century global media that the competition between democratic societies and al Qaeda will partly be played out.

The CT officer needs, at the very least, to understand the role of the media in this battle of ideas. He or she should prepare for the possibility of encounters with the press and be ready with an individual media strategy for dealing with these. One simple option is to shun journalists altogether. A harder but potentially more productive approach is to engage with the reporter, take careful soundings, and find out whether there is something to be gained for both sides from such a relationship. The prizes are useful information and an opportunity to use the media as a weapon against the terrorist. By exchanging a passive stance for a proactive one, the thoughtful counterterrorism professional has potentially much to gain.

Mark Trevelyan Born in Manchester, England, Mark Trevelyan joined Reuters as a trainee journalist in 1986 after graduating from Oxford University with a first-class honors degree in French and Russian. He has reported from more than thirty-five countries, with postings in London, Brussels, Warsaw, Moscow, Berlin, and Wellington, New Zealand. Between 2003 and 2008, he held the position of Security Correspondent, Europe, Middle East, and Africa, writing on terrorism and counterterrorism and running a team of reporters spread across Reuters' network of bureaus. Among other stories, he reported on the March 2004 attacks on Madrid, the July 2005 London bombings, the Hamburg trials of suspected 9/11 plotters, the Alexander Litvinenko poisoning case, and the US military's counterterrorism initiatives in Africa. His work has appeared in many of the world's leading newspapers and on their websites, and he contributed chapters to the

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Reuters books on 9/11 and on Iraq. He is now working as a political and general news editor for Reuters and lives with his family near London. Mr. Trevelyan has lectured several times on media coverage of terrorism for the PTSS program at the Marshall Center.

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Notes

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