Terrorist Groups and the 'Oxygen of Publicity'

One of the criteria by which democratic societies are judged is the existence of free media through which events can be accurately reported and governments can be subjected to scrutiny and held accountable for their actions (Freedman, 2008, Gerston, 2015, Weir and Beetham, 1999). The existence of terrorist organisations, which are often intent on the destruction of such societies, presents problems for both free media and the democratic governments. A fundamental issue connected with this is that the free media provide an outlet for terrorist organisations to spread their message to potential followers, and to terrorise the rest of the population (Carruthers, 2011, Ciment, 2015, Cottle, 2006, Kavoori and Fraley, 2006, Martin, 2006, Rozell and Mayer, 2008). British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher's speech to the American Bar Association in 1985 sought to address this issue, stating that, 'democratic nations must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend' (Thatcher, 1985: 1). This suggests it is worth sacrificing some measure of freedom in order to deny groups bent on violence any outlets by which their actions can be reported. It should be pointed out immediately that Thatcher's comments did not suggest that the media should be prevented from reporting on terrorist movements. A less publicised extract from the speech went on to say:

In our societies we do not believe in constraining the media, still less in censorship […] but ought we not to ask the media to agree among themselves a voluntary code of conduct […] under which they would not say or show anything which could assist the terrorists' morale or their cause while the hijack lasted (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Breen-Smyth, 2011: 118).

Moreover, the specific context of Thatcher's original comments helped to sharpen the debate. Her speech was made shortly after the hijacking of TWA flight 847 and the murder of navy SEAL, Robert Dean Stethem. At that time, there was widespread criticism of the media for providing a platform upon which the terrorists' actions could be presented. Indeed, at the congressional hearings about the media's behaviour, the CBS News President, Fred Friendly, identified 'egregious errors' committed by reporters seeking exclusive stories in a 'haphazard frenzy of competition' to outdo each other (Pagano, 1985: 1):

Terrorism is the new war […] a species of guerrilla warfare whose battlefield is the television screen and the front page […] We need to get it across that you can't shoot your way onto our air (ibid).

This essay will aim to show that the 1985 debate has been almost completely overtaken by events. For one thing, the examples of the Provisional Irish Republican Army (IRA) and the African National Congress (ANC) show how some terrorist acts can play a part in publicising a political cause and in leading to former terrorists occupying positions of power within the established and conventional political structures. For another, media organisations still observe restrictions on their coverage of terrorist attacks and governments can place prohibitions on them, such as the British Government's D-Notice which bans the publication of any stories which threaten national security (Bignell, 2004, Wilkinson, 2009). At the same time, most democracies accept that the reporting of terrorism is a necessary constituent of life in a free society; not to do so would seem absurd, especially when their presence is a danger, and plain to those living in the area, and such events will be reported on social media in any case (Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis and Chen, 2016, Archetti, 2013). Most importantly of all, it will show that rather than relying on conventional media owned by others, modern terrorist organisations provide their own oxygen of publicity by presenting their 'events' in their own way, on their own broadcasts, websites and social media accounts (Hoffman, 2006, Nacos, 2007). In order

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to do this, it will be necessary to show that terrorist organisations have rarely subscribed to the minimal impact theory regarding the media's influence on politics (Davis, 1994, Perloff, 2014). More persuasive would seem to be the hypodermic needle theory whereby the media has a direct, immediate and powerful impact on audiences (Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis and Chen, 2016, Archetti, 2013, Chadee, 2016, Fourie, 2007, Rozell and Mayer, 2008). Nevertheless, this has not been sufficient for the more modern terrorist groups who have sought to take control of the syringe and inject a precisely controlled substance into the public realm. Even more recently still, terrorists have sought through social media to follow reinforcement theory by providing information and images that will turn sympathisers into active supporters or even activists (Burgess and Akers, 1968). These later theories have been informed by the terrorists' understanding that without their own propaganda channels to report their attacks, the western and democratic media will always portray them negatively. But whatever the modernity of their tactics, present day terrorists are still keeping faith with their predecessors who understood very well that if an event was not widely reported, it might just as well not have occurred.

Modern terrorism originated in the second half of the 18th century. As Malcolm Nance points out:

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon; it may be one of the oldest forms of illegitimate political dissent. The use of violence or the threat of violence to ''send a message'' to political leaders, or society at large, has occurred throughout recorded history. […] It was the French Revolution leader Maximilien Robespierre who coined the term ''terrorism'' (Nance, 2014: 45).

The 19th century brought a rapid growth of both mass media and democracy, and this led to wider reporting of terrorism (Gorman and McLean, 2009). This was not coincidental: without the media few people would know a terrorist act had taken place; without democracy, those in power would have no cause to pay attention to the public reaction provoked by violence. Nearly thirty years before Thatcher's speech, the Algerian political revolutionary Ramdane Abane wondered whether it was preferable to slaughter ten enemies in a remote location or to kill 'a single man in Algiers which will be noted the next day' by audiences in other countries whose reaction might shape policy (Hoffman, 1983: 61). Well before Thatcher uttered her sound-bite, terrorists clearly realised the necessity of their actions being reported. This understanding has only increased over time as Martin Golumbic points out:

Terrorist organizations depend on the publicity accorded to them, without which they cannot exist. In this sense, a symbiotic relationship exists between terror and the media insofar as without the publicity and advertising provided to terrorist organizations by the media, their struggle would have no value (Golumbic, 2008: 31).

Although terrorism was clearly not a new phenomenon in 1985 – Thatcher herself had only just escaped death when Brighton's Grand Hotel was bombed during the Conservative Party Conference in 1984 – it was not as common as it has become in the 21st century. Media organisations were still getting used to covering the different types of terrorist attack and Thatcher's qualification 'while the hijack lasted' probably reflected, albeit unintentionally, that inexperience (Jackson, Jarvis, Gunning and Breen-Smyth, 2011: 118).

In the 21st century, mainstream media have become much more skilled when it comes to covering terrorist events and there are certain moments, an actual beheading for example, which the media will not broadcast. Both the BBC and the Qatar-based TV network al-Jazeera have ethical codes, and terrorists who send homemade videos to the Middle Eastern channel find that they are not shown (Ward, 2013, Weaver and Willnat, 2012). Nevertheless, simply announcing that the moment of execution is not being broadcast, as occurs on the BBC, merely leaves the gruesome details to the imagination of the viewer. In certain respects, therefore, any consideration of the degree to which the media provides terrorist groups with the oxygen of publicity will have to consider both the use to which terrorists put mainstream media, over which they have no control, and their own media, whose detailed output they control very carefully. One example may serve to illustrate the value placed on publicity by the terrorist. In March 2012, Mohammed Merah killed three off-duty soldiers, a rabbi and three children in France (BBC, 2012, Guardian, 2012). He filmed the murders with a camera attached to his body and spent much of the last day and a half of his life editing the results down to a 24-minute video clip (ibid). He posted this video clip on a USB stick to al-Jazeera, although to do so, he needed to escape the police cordon which surrounded his flat (ibid). The video featured an eight-year-old girl being shot in the head and al-Jazeera refused to broadcast it (ibid). One of the things which is interesting about

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this incident is once he had sent the USB stick, Merah returned to his flat to await the firefight and his inevitable death (ibid). His final non-violent act in this world was his attempt to ensure that his previous murders were publicised (ibid). Merah was a minor terrorist, but he understood the value of broadcasting violent and graphic images of his actions.

This use of the media has become more sophisticated and bloody since Merah's death. The emergence of Islamic State (Isis) has seen videos of western aid workers and journalists being executed in addition to Syrian government soldiers, spies, suspected homosexuals, Christian migrant workers and others (Saul, 2015). The methods of execution have included being blown up, thrown off a tall building or burned alive (Sherlock, 2015). This use of the media serves at least two purposes. Watching on their laptops, some Western Muslims may be inspired to follow Merah's example (Virginie and Harris-Hogan, 2013). On the other hand, those living in liberal democracies are terrified by the brutality and many encourage their government to make some sort of peace with the terrorists (Collins, 2016). Some of these videos can even be viewed on a British newspaper's website after an advertisement for family holidays. Only the actual murders are deleted. Such developments illustrate Bruce Jenkins' argument:

Terrorism is violence for effect – not primarily, and sometimes not at all for the physical effect on the actual target, but rather for its dramatic impact on an audience. Developments in world communications, particularly the news media, have expanded the potential audience to national and, more recently, to international proportions (Jenkins, 1975: 4).

Media coverage does indeed provide terrorist groups with the 'oxygen of publicity', but rather than relying on a thirty-year-old metaphor of a life-giving gas to explain its importance, it should be understood that the advantages of media coverage are now quite sophisticated and the complex methods used to publicise attacks are no longer confined to mainstream media. A comparison between al-Qaida and Isis helps to illustrate these complexities. When the 9/11 attacks were launched on the World Trade Centre, Osama bin Laden watched the event from a media truck that had been prepared on his orders a few days earlier (Burke, 2016). The attacks were so devastating that no news organisation could ignore them; 9/11 remains perhaps the most widely covered event since the end of the Second World War. Plainly, the attacks served the purpose of terrifying people in the western democracies while energising young Islamists – some of them living in ghettoes in those societies – who were looking for some evidence that what they saw as decadent, economically-dominant western capitalism could be resisted. However, operations like 9/11, the bombings of US embassies in east Africa in 1998, or the attempt to sink a US warship off Yemen in 2000, were all complex operations. They had to be planned in camps and the recruits chosen for them had to receive careful instructions. The blanket coverage such events received in the mass media was the result of months of preparation.

In recent years, two substantial changes have taken place in the relationship between the media and terrorism. Firstly, modern terrorists have realised that large, complex attacks are no longer necessary to attract the attention of the media. Relatively small scale operations involving one or two operatives are all that are required. The Nice and Stockholm truck attacks and the Berlin Christmas market attack all required very little planning, yet were devastating and widely reported in the media. Rather than flying a plane into a tall building, all that has been required recently has been to steal a truck and drive it at high speed into as many people as possible. Such attacks are particularly effective because the public know that they can happen anywhere, at any time without warning. This is further concerning as security services are limited in their ability to prevent such 'lone wolves' sacrificing their lives to achieve their goals. The media are obliged to report such events and the impact of these atrocities has been perfectly analysed by Mahmood Eid:

The attention generated by suicide attacks demonstrates the strong hold that terrorist activity can have on the media […] Suicide attacks instigate mass terror among audiences. In this tactic of terrorism, the media are fixated and mesmerized by the severity of such attacks; meanwhile, terrorists are able to disseminate their messages through media platforms (Eid, 2014: 5).

The second change in the relationship has been even more radical and effective. Both large and small scale attacks were reported by mass media and, as has been outlined, the consequences were diverse: some members of the public were terrified and altered their travel or holiday plans; others resolved to live a normal life in defiance of the atrocities. Furthermore, some young people, either Muslim or recent converts, were impressed by the sacrifice of

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suicide bombers and sought to join terrorist organisations in the Middle East and/or establish cells in the west. Finally, the work of the security services and the number of security checks increased massively to take into account these developments. Such a scattergun impact has not been enough for the terrorists who plainly believe in the hypodermic needle theory of media impact but wish to use it more subtly and selectively than mainstream media.

Thus, rather than depending upon old media for the provision of 'oxygen', Islamic terrorists regard the publication and dissemination of their actions as so important that they take responsibility for it themselves. Instead of depending on western news organisations to present their attacks, they have their own media upon which beheadings can be shown and other outrages filmed. The media which provides terrorists with the 'oxygen of publicity' are frequently, though not exclusively, home-made. Richard Schaffert explains:

On some occasions terrorist groups have seized broadcast facilities. Terrorist demands often include publicity, and recently some terrorist groups have facilitated the transmitting of their violence through homemade videos, taped as their atrocity is being committed (Schaffert, 1992: 47).

However, although some terrorists have utilized 'home-made' broadcasts and productions as discussed above, others have appreciated the value of producing higher quality productions. Some of the larger and better funded terrorist groups, such as Isis, have the capability to produce news broadcasts which are surprisingly high quality, with edits, music and special effects added into the reports of their atrocities. This gives their cause and their actions an air of legitimacy as they try to appear as similar to the other news reports, as well as giving the impression that their movement is cohesive and strong at all levels.

The rapid development of digital technology has led Isis to realise that they can provide their own media coverage of both large scale attacks and also the private execution of western citizens carried out somewhere in Syria or Iraq. Both the propaganda clips showing public executions and the statements made by terrorists before they committed the attacks in Paris in November 2015 were all carefully edited using relatively cheap video equipment and lapel microphones. Nevertheless, they had high production values and could be disseminated in full on the internet. Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan describe the vast changes that have take place as a result of the digital revolution and Isis's desire to communicate directly with its followers:

The last eighteen months of international war against ISIS have yielded a surplus of valuable studies in how ISIS proselytizes and recruits, relying on its own vast and well-run propaganda apparatus. This includes a glossy monthly magazine, an entire media division that issues daily videos – in multiple languages and with alarmingly high production values – and more social media accounts relaying and regurgitating the ISIS message than intelligence agencies can keep track of (Weiss and Hassan, 2016: xvi).

The contrast between these productions and Osama bin Laden's rambling communiques is very sharp. News editors in the west were able to edit the latter or not show them at all. The same news editors often had to edit the more gruesome parts of the Isis videos, but the fact that they had had to be edited was newsworthy in itself. The media were following the story. One of the more important figures in effecting this change to smaller media operations was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Zarqawi was one of the first to realise that the hypodermic theory of media impact could be refined by the digital revolution (Aly, Macdonald, Jarvis and Chen, 2016, Archetti, 2013, Chadee, 2016, Fourie, 2007, Rozell and Mayer, 2008). Extremist organisations no longer had to produce content that would appeal to western news editors. They could make their own productions designed to convince a specific target audience and broadcast them on the internet. This did not mean that the large operations were going to end, but it was an indication that terrorists would in future place greater emphasis on relatively cheap operations involving three or four suicide operatives. In the place of western media showing expensive operations like 9/11, Zarqawi broadcast cheap but professionally-produced videos showing the executions of suspected traitors, western aid workers etc. For example, the execution of the American contractor, Nicholas Berg, was sent straight to a militant website and made Zarqawi one of the most important Islamic militants (Burke, 2016). No longer need he or any other insurgent worry about what news editors might judge too horrific to broadcast. Zarqawi was killed by an airstrike in 2006 but the digital revolution and its

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impact on the wider media's coverage of terrorism merely accelerated. The growth in sophistication of smartphones allowed people to see whatever they wanted wherever they wanted. In recent years, smartphones have also contributed to the growth of Facebook, WhatsApp and other media which were virtually unknown when 9/11 took place. The first group to realise the opportunities presented by this new technology was Isis, led by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. In 2011, Isis sent clips of the killings of Iraqi government soldiers and police to the phones of the victims' former comrades, many of whom resigned (ibid). If this was the oxygen of publicity, it was unlike any oxygen imagined by Thatcher. If this utilisation of the media subscribed to the hypodermic needle theory of media production, it did so in a more precise fashion than could have been imagined by Osama bin Laden or any of the older terrorists. Isis did not even need to send specific activists to commit attacks; rather it could wait for sympathisers to take the initiative and then adopt them retrospectively in a tweet or Facebook post.

It is difficult to underestimate how rapidly terrorist groups' use of the media is changing. Curiously, the activists who launched the terror attacks in Paris in November 2015 did not carry video cameras. This may have been a simple error or a reflection of their awareness that they were going to die. It may have also have been an acknowledgment that the attacks they were to launch on restaurants and the Bataclan concert venue were bound to be widely reported on conventional media in any case and did not require particular terrorist production values. In this of course, they were not disappointed and it justifies the cyclical theory put forward by Golumbic:

Mass media channels competing for viewers may play into the hands of the terrorist organizations, which provide abundant drama, and are liable to disseminate their propaganda unknowingly and unwillingly. Thus, a vicious cycle is created: the more media coverage is given to terrorist organizations, the greater is the potential for acts of terror. This cycle naturally raises questions about the scope and nature of media coverage of terror attacks (Golumbic, 2008: 31).

However, while this theory may still hold good for terrorist spectaculars, it has been replaced by what one might call the triple hypodermic theory of terror, mobilisation and polarisation. It was the pursuit of these goals which causes Isis to edit its videos to speak to the 'three critical audiences' with a different message for each (Burke, 2016: 89). Firstly, as had long been the practice, those who opposed the Islamic State were terrified by the appalling acts they could watch. Secondly, those who were committed to the cause could be mobilised by the apparent power on display. And thirdly, those who were undecided might have their doubts removed by the speeches which often prefaced such attacks and decide to become part of the campaign against western oppression and decadence. To these different ends, a series of films have been produced illustrating the brutality of the terrorists. In November 2014, the remains of a decapitated US army ranger were shown. At about the same time, eighteen Syrian Air Force pilots were decapitated by eighteen militants and in January 2015, a Jordanian pilot was locked into a cage and burned alive (Saul, 2015, Sherlock, 2015). None of these actions seems to have dissuaded Isis recruits from travelling to the Middle East. Indeed, the conclusion to be drawn from the escalation and sophistication of homemade media coverage is that the rapidly changing media environment provides terrorists with just the type of publicity they need to fulfil their different goals. It substantiates the hypodermic theory of media coverage and reflects a precision which would be unfamiliar to any terrorist in 1985 when Thatcher delivered her speech. Far from abandoning media coverage or leaving it to mainstream media, terrorist organisations have sort to utilise digital technology with ever growing precision and discrimination. The medieval nature of the punishments they film can be contrasted with the modern media skills by which those punishments are shown. This development seems likely to accelerate in the immediate future.

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