

MASS MEDIA - AN ALLY OR AN ENEMY IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST TERRORISM?

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Abstract

Mass media represent a double-cutting edge sword, considering their role and influence within any human society.

Pushed by their chiefs or by their own desire to become famous, quite many journalists disrespect the deontological principles of being more cautious to air violent images and news.

During terrorist attacks, many publications, radio and TV stations were interested in having priority or even exclusivity to transmit those events to the public, although this manner of doing business is more in favor of terrorists who receive publicity free of charge.

Intentionally or not, being aware or not of the residual effects against public, by airing news and images about terrorist actions, the mass media from all over the world brought their contribution to stimulate terrorist actions.

Keywords: *terrorism, journalists deontological code, terrorists propaganda, media side effects, media dualism.*

1. CONTROVERSIES AROUND THE DEFINITION OF TERRORISM

The issue of terrorism is quite a delicate one - both politically and psychologically. The most controversial aspect about terrorism is its definition, as no consensus has been reached among the members of the international community upon its exact meaning. Up to now, more than 100 definitions¹ (even 200 (!), according to other authors)² might be in use. Even if some common elements may be found in several of the definitions elaborated and recorded in dictionaries, national and international normative documents, studies and academic courses, they differ in various aspects.

The first attempt at defining terrorism was made more than 8 decades ago, in 1934, from the part of France, which proposed to the League of Nations to create a work team for defining terrorism. The initiative was determined by the assassination of

king Alexander I of Yugoslavia and of the French Minister of External Affairs, Louis Barthou, in Marsilia, by a Bulgarian citizen, member of the Macedonian Revolutionary Organization, which militated in favor of the independence from Yugoslavia. The team forwarded to the League the draft of a Convention referring to terrorism, which was adopted on November 16, 1937. The definition of terrorism introduced in the Convention ("criminal actions oriented against the state, deliberately or meant at inducing terror in the minds of private persons, of groups of persons or of the population"³) was proposed for ratification to all member states, yet it was rejected.⁴

The situation characterizing the activity of the League of Nations was repeated at the level of the United Nations Organization (UN). Not all attempts made by this institution, materialized in 14 international legal instruments (conventions and resolutions) and their amendments, all concerning the combat of terrorism,⁵ were sanctioned by all its members, as no consensus was reached for accepting the definition proposed for the most dangerous threat at world security ("the criminal, deliberate or calculated actions meant at provoking terror in a public, in a group of persons or among private persons, for political reasons, are permitted under no circumstances, whichever the political, philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious motivations invoked for justifying them").⁶

The apple of discord is related to the right to resort to violence. The democratic states accept only the legitimate right granted to authorized institutions to use violence against any nonstate actor that disrespects the legal norms of social cohabitation, attacking the civil population, destroying properties and public structures, for

spreading fear, thus forcing people to put pressure upon governments to accept the requirements of terrorists. In their turn, the member states of the Arabian League demanded not to consider as terrorist the actions performed for "exerting the lawful right of peoples of resisting foreign occupation,"⁶ while the members of the Non-Aligned States Movement demand that "the legitimate struggle of the peoples under colonial domination and foreign occupation, for self-determination and national liberation"⁷ should not be assimilated to terrorism.

Such a situation supports the expression "one person's terrorist is another's freedom fighter,"⁸ however, in the opinion of the American senator Henry Jackson, it serves mainly terrorists, who want to maintain confusion in the minds of people and to obtain legitimacy and support of the population. He says that freedom fighters do not make hostages, do not kill children and civilians, do not blow up buses full of non-combatants, as terrorists do. In this respect, he considers that associating the notion of liberty, belonging to the thesaurus of democracy, with that of terrorism is a nonsense.⁹

The disagreements manifested within the international community around the definition to be given to terrorism seem to have influenced certain politicians to divide terrorists into good and bad persons, which is a wholly unacceptable situation. Following the attack with sarin gas, in the suburbs of Damascus, launched on August 21, 2013, part of the Western states, among which the USA, United Kingdom and France decided to support the opponents of the Bashar al-Asad regime. The decision was criticized by the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Serghei Lavrov, who asked how is it possible a war of the Occident against terrorism along with the support given to groups affiliated to Al-Qaeda, which represent part of the opposition in Syria. In other words, "how is it possible to divide terrorists into good and bad ones?"¹⁰

The continuous dispute provoked by the definition of terrorism determined some journalists, analysts and politicians to avoid terms such as terrorism and terrorist, preferring to classify the individuals and human groups which commit violent actions into "militants, bomb attackers"¹¹, etc.

Dissatisfied with the international blockage and also with states division as to the definition of terrorism, the Indian Prime Minister, Narendra Modi, in his speech delivered at the UN General Assembly on September 2015, demanded to the member states to reach a consensus on such matters. He considered that the 70 years passed since the foundation of UN are sufficient for attaining such an objective.

The same feelings determined the republican senator Mark Walker to elaborate a legal draft by which he asked the Congress reduced financial shares of his country to the UN budget - up to 10% - until the international organization will obtain the consensus of all its members for defining terrorism.¹²

Confronted with issues of juridical type in taking measures for preventing terrorist actions, several states elaborated and promulgated laws providing adequate instruments to the institutions, in their combat with this calamity. Apart from the fact that some countries, such as USA¹³ and India,¹⁴ and different institutions use different definitions of terrorism, upsetting and even rejection reactions, referring to certain normative acts, have been recorded from the part of their citizens. It was the case of the United Kingdom, following the promulgation of the *Terrorism Act 2006* law, which amends the previous law, *Terrorism Act 2000*, by introducing the incriminating action of inciting to issuing of declarations in support of terrorist actions.¹⁵ The journalist Mike Harris is afraid that the new law might punish all mass media professionals who discuss about terrorism by publishing opinions, photos and films which might be interpreted as modalities of inciting to terrorism.¹⁶

The importance of defining terrorism involves principal, juridical and operational aspects. The principal reasons are best reflected by the wise words of Mahatma Gandhi, who used to say "one cannot obtain justice without knowing what injustice is."¹⁷ In other words, no group and none of its actions can be labelled as terrorist if nobody shares similar, if not identical opinions upon them. From a juridical perspective, any judgement should begin from one and the same reference system, otherwise endless disputes and processes, which will further increase the present disagreements of the international

community, are to be expected. Operationally, statal institutions should have a legal basis, assuring suitable actions for preventing and counteracting terrorist deeds. The different opinions expressed by countries and international organizations prevent an efficient coordination, at global level, of the anti- and counter-terrorist actions,¹⁸ a situation exploited by the organizations considered as terrorist¹⁹ for obtaining moral, financial and material, direct and subversive support from the part of some individuals and states.

2. JOURNALISTS CAUGHT BETWEEN THE DEONTOLOGICAL CODE AND THE NEED OF MAKING AUDIENCE

The unprecedented development of communications has had and continued to have beneficial effects upon the evolution of the human society. However, unfortunately, the benefits of almost unrestricted communications are available, as well, to individuals and human groups with extremist-terrorist orientation, who organize illegal actions, among which terrorist attacks. Nowadays, no physical barrier (fence, wall, border etc.) or any type of obstacle exists for preventing the propagation of the flow of messages, data and images from the transmitter towards the receiver.

In some situations, mass media have been defined as "the watchdog of democracy,"²⁰ other times - "the fourth Estate",²¹ if considering their role of informing the public opinion and of monitoring the activity of statal institutions. On the other hand, however, media may also play a negative part, as they may be used for manipulation actions. Knowing their force of influencing the public opinion, some authors state that "mass-media are equally a mirror of people's will and a propaganda vehicle working against the masses,"²² so that they have been compared with a two-edge sword.²³ The independent and democratic character of the mass communication means depends on the medium created by the society, which means the absence of censorship from the part of the state, financial independence of the publications, radio and TV stations, that is, no sponsorships and bosses that might influence their orientation.

Vladimir Volkoff compares the mass-media with a "resonance box"²⁴ of the actions performed for influencing/manipulating public opinion, attributing to television the symbolical role of Olympus, while the internet plays that of Walhalla. In this respect, the author believes that "the struggle for supremacy against the internet"²⁵ is very important, once internet is the most widespread and simple modality of communication available today. As known, the virtual environment is boundless, which permits storage and diffusion of an impressive volume of data, in almost real time, in any place of the world. On the other side, this facility has the disadvantage of an almost unlimited access to internet, which may be used for both beneficial and malefic ends.

Journalists, as most of the professional communities all over the world have their "deontological codes" and "good practice standards" which value objectivity, impartiality, correctness in describing facts, and recommend the elimination of images with violent content. In spite of this, one may observe that numerous autochthonous and foreign journalists and mass media means gave up most of the principles taken upon themselves and got "enrolled" in the struggle for rating.

The appearance of "citizen-journalists"²⁶ and their considerable, continuously increasing number amplifies the ethical aspects in online communication. The present mixture, in the virtual space, of professional and amateur journalists, to whom one should add the bloggers, interested in making known their opinions in the absence of the slightest idea of any deontological codes, generated a "chaotic landscape"²⁷ whose physical and conceptual aspects are rapidly expanding. In classical journalism, the editors check the media products prior to their dissemination to the public. In the virtual space, anyone who has a computer and access to internet may be both a journalist and an editor. This means that the freedom of expression - actually misunderstood, meaning that anybody can say and transmit anything, doubled by the doubtful morality of the "citizen journalists" - of bloggers and of all those who display texts, images, films and other media products on various socialization networks - twitter, facebook, linkedin, etc. - can

be transformed into “assaults” to morality and legitimacy.

The fierce struggle for audience, influence, notoriousness and financial support, to which one should add the demands of sponsors and heads of the mass communication media, contributes decisively to the decision taken by journalists to give up the stipulations of the deontological codes in force. In most of the cases, mass media professionals who behave contrary to the ethical codes do not recognize this, more than that, they try to justify their attitude by interpreting the codes in a manner serving their scopes. Thus, the stipulation of observing the truth in journalistic productions is understood by some journalists as a reflection of the real situations, asserting that “we live in a real world and we should accept that it is ugly,”²⁸ even if the legal regulations impose to journalists to avoid publishing news and images which propagate violence, for not negatively influencing children and teenagers,²⁹ if considering their insufficient power of discernment.

Disquieting, indeed, is the attitude of some well-known professionals, such as Larry Grossman, former president of the American NBC News television, who disregards the responsibility of anticipating the consequences of what he issues in press, considering that “the job of the press is to tell the truth, not to worry about the consequences of its coverage . . . As much as those of us as in the press would like to be popular and loved, it is more important that we are accurate and fair”³⁰. The attitude of Larry Grossman seems tributary to the unofficial slogan of numerous mass communication means: “if it bleeds, than it should have priority,”³¹ a tendency also recognized by Grant Duwe, the author of the book *Mass Murder in the United States: A History*. He wrote: “in order to survive in a competitive industry like journalism, you have to present news that sells”, “history has shown that the public is generally more interested in crime which is unusual and dramatic and something that is violent and occurs infrequently”. But that doesn’t absolve media outlets from covering murders and terrorist acts responsibly.”³³

3. ROLE OF MASS MEDIA IN THE STRUGGLE AGAINST TERRORISM

Experts in communication, national and international security, as well as politologists, studied the impact of violent events airing, especially of images (photographs and films) in the media and, surprisingly, reached diverging conclusions. Some of them consider that making public events and images about terrorist attacks affects negatively people’s psychic condition, while other experts state that there exist no sufficient elements to support, in a convincing manner, the conclusion that airing of news and imagines of this type might have negative effects upon the audience³² – readers, radio listeners, spectators.

The supporters of the negative influence of news about terrorist attacks upon people put forward the results of some studies, including both adults and children. Sonise Lumbaca and David H. Gray explicitly state that: “Media is an enabler for terrorist acts.”³³ They consider that, by inducing fear in human communities and by the free propaganda they assure when airing news about terrorist attacks, media have become an instrument in the arsenal of terrorists.

In a similar manner, Raphael Cohen-Almagor writes that: “ Today’s terrorists are well aware of the power of the media and manipulate them to their own advantage and need.”³⁴ The assertion is based on the conclusions of studies and pools performed in the USA, United Kingdom of Great Britain and North Ireland, Canada, Germany and Israel.

Walter Laqueur asserts simply that mass media have become the best friend of terrorists, making public their violent actions, a type of advertising without which they would not exist, any more.³⁵

Psychiatrist Dr. James Hutchinson from Bethesda Hospital and former president of the Washington Society of Psychiatrics, discussing the effects of violent news upon people, asserts that: “television news is designed to tweak the most basic human response to a threat”³⁶, while Mark Schuster, the leader of the work group of Rand Corporation, who elaborated a study devoted to the same topic of the influence, upon people, of violent news and images disseminated by mass media and published in *The New England*

Journal of Medicine, declared to the journalists from *Reuters* agency that "People react as they had been attacked personally."³⁷

A study performed by *Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma* in USA, analyzing numerous data on the effects of the terrorist attacks provided by mass media upon the citizens of the USA, Israel, Australia and Kuwait, evidences an increased anxiety of the adult population, and also of children, after having watched news about terrorist actions, namely the so-called *Post Traumatic Stress Disorder* (PTSA). The author of the study states that all data provided by the experts who analyzed the reactions of the people after having listened to such news offered no definite answer to the question: "if people become more evil after watching violent news or if those with most severe reactions to stress are exactly those who choose to watch such broadcastings for a longer time."³⁸

Doward Jamie, in an article published in *The Guardian* concludes - on the basis of several studies - that airing, by mass media, of scenes from terrorist attacks will stimulate violence even more. Consequently, he believes that, in this way, media becomes "the oxygen of advertisement" for terrorists.³⁹

Experts in security discovered handbooks in which terrorists are instructed to plan and execute attacks for obtaining maximum attention from the part of mass media. For example, the members of the Irish Republican Army (IRA) used to plan their actions in North Ireland always on Thursday, between 5 and 6 p.m., so that the main newspapers of Friday should announce this on their first page, with sufficient details and comments. A terrorist action performed on Thursday, yet after 6 o'clock p.m., would have received less attention if aired only briefly, and the effects expected by terrorists would have been less important.⁴⁰

Professor Michael Jetter from Western University of Perth/Australia, who studied the data provided by the sources referring to terrorist attacks and the manner of their reflection in mass media, and elaborated a mathematical model permitting to evaluate the impact induced by news on violent actions upon people and also to estimate the probability - referring to both time interval and place - with which a new terrorist

attack will occur; in an article issued on this topic, the author concludes - citing Melnick and Elder,⁴¹ that mirroring of terrorist actions in mass media "has a magnitude similar to the advertising made for some top international corporations."⁴²

David Lake asserts that, by their actions: "terrorists wish to provoke the target into a disproportionate response that radicalizes moderates and drives them into the arms of terrorists, expanding their supporters."⁴³

Eugenis Katherine estimates that, if mass media do not reflect their actions, any more, the terrorists have no other means of communicating to the people what they intend, being thus obliged to find either another way to obtain that necessary media attention or to search for other, perhaps legitimate, tactics in order to enact change. Fortunately for terrorists (and unfortunately for us, n.n.), there is a propensity for traditional media to focus on the violent events that happen around the world."⁴⁴

Sybille Reinke de Buitrago, who analyzed the role of mass media *versus* terrorism for more than 4 decades, draws the conclusion that professionals in communications, both editors and journalists, are all involved in the competition with those who use other mass communication means for having an as high audience as possible to the large public. One of the solutions is to reflect the violent actions of terrorists, sometimes even exaggerating them.⁴⁶

In an interpretation similar to that of Sybille Reinke, Arik Burakovsky writes that: "Media attention is generally an important way for terrorist groups to communicate with the public and to promote their goals, consequently mass media are essential for terrorist organizations"⁴⁷. In my opinion, nowadays, the situation is different, as terrorists have by now sufficient funds and instructed people who created their own sites on the web; also, they may use socialization networks for addressing both the world and their mates. In other words, terrorist leaders can coordinate and even monitorize, at distance, the actions of their teams, they can post propagandistic messages and also buy pieces, arms, know-how for improvised explosive devices, they can instruct their men, make new recruits and even attack the official informatic networks of various countries⁴⁷ etc.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Even if mass media have been defined as "the fourth Estate" and as "the watchdog of democracy," they play a dual role in their relation with the audience expected to serve. A special role of mass communication is that of reflecting the terrorist actions, which appears as an increasing part, in spite of the recommendations of the deontological codes and of the legal norms in force.

In spite of the fact that terrorist organizations are especially interested in having the "free-of-charge advertisement" offered by publications and audio-visual means, considered by some experts as necessary to them as oxygen -, terrorists have created their own sites on the internet, by which they address both the public and their members.

Giving up objectivity and independence - the case of some journalists and internal and international mass communication means - in analyzing the crises in the Balkans, Caucasus, Middle and Near Orient, North Africa, Ukraine and other zones of the world is a disquieting and, unfortunately increasing phenomenon.

Caught between the sense of duty, to which they are obliged by the deontological code of their profession, the need of attracting sponsors and their financial support, and the pressure exercised by their heads, by political decision-makers or by their own wish to distinguish themselves, some journalists left aside the ethical principles specific to their work.

The evolution of events in Ukraine and Middle East has been negatively influenced by the attitude of the internal and international mass-media, which amplified the already existing tensions and induced emotional reactions followed by the direct involvement of the audience from the whole international community.

As we live in the era of globalization and information, sending of messages, of data and images in the virtual space cannot be stopped by any barriers or barrages. In such a context, states borders became irrelevant for the communication through internet and socialization networks.

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 35. Cohen-Almagor, Raphael, *Media Coverage of Acts of Terrorism: Troubling Episodes and Suggested Guidelines*, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, Vol. 30, No. 3, 2005, („Today's terrorists are well aware of the power

- of the media and manipulate them to their own advantage and need. By giving unusual events extensive coverage, the mass media evoked the notion that "you cannot be revolutionary without a color TV: it's as necessary as a gun"... The German terrorist Michael (Bommi) Baumann wrote in *How It All Began*: "We took a great interest in the press. We always immediately looked how the newspapers, especially in Berlin, reacted to our actions, and how they explained them, and thereupon we defined our strategy"), <http://www.cjc-online.ca/index.php/journal/article/view/1579/1734>, consulted 21.01.2016.
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 41. North Anna, *How Media Coverage Influences Terrorism*, *BuzzFeed*, 20.04.2013, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/annanorth/how-media-coverage-influences-terrorism#.sjlQY2W0r>, ("Terrorism is basically a media phenomenon," says Jerrold Post, director of the political psychology program at George Washington University and author of *The Mind of a Terrorist*. "You can look at it as a species of psychological warfare waged through the media." Which means that while we know terrorists influence the media, media coverage also influences terrorists. "The larger terror organizations have, in effect, a VP for media relations," says Post. "We have captured handbooks with instructions on how to gain maximum media attention." He also says bombings in Northern Ireland tended to spike between 5 and 6 p.m. on Thursdays, because 6 was the deadline for Friday's edition of the newspaper – an attack between 5 and 6 was least likely to be analyzed in context, and most likely to be simply reported with a sensational headline.), consulted 20.12.2015.
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 44. Lake, David, *Rational Extremism: Understanding Terrorism in the Twenty- First Century*, *Dialogue* 10 1(1), 2002, pp. 15-29 („According to Lake (2002, 16), terrorists seek "to provoke the target into a disproportionate response that radicalizes moderates and drives them into the arms of terrorists, expanding their supporters." By inspiring further revenge, Islamic fundamentalist organizations such as al-Qaeda seek to end Western pollution of Islamic culture, force the United States to withdraw from the Middle East, and destroy Israel.... As a result, 9/11 made the public much more attuned to terrorist activities and therefore made media outlets – which derive their profits mostly from advertising to their consumers – much more likely to report it (Cho et al. 2003; Altheide 2006). In response to 9/11, many countries expanded their homeland security measures, and the United States initiated the War on Terror to crack down on al-Qaeda and the Taliban in Afghanistan. Since then, the world has seen a rise in terrorist activities despite substantial counterterrorism efforts by numerous governments.... Annual terrorist activities more than quadrupled in the decade after 9/11, from 982 in 2002 to 4564 terrorist incidents globally in 2011. The American government often cited the issue of

- Muslim fundamentalist terrorism as impetus for the 2003 invasion of Iraq.”), consulted 20.01.2016.
45. Eugenis, Katherine, *Who will Tell the Story? Terrorism's Relationship with the International News Media*, Bachelor of Science in Political Science, Northern Arizona University, 2011, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, May 2013, <http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2823&context=thesesdissertations>, („When random acts of violence no longer attract the attention of the media, terrorist groups are without communication to the mass public, leaving them no choice but to find either another way to obtain that necessary media attention or to search for other, perhaps legitimate, tactics in order to enact change. Fortunately for terrorists, there is a propensity for traditional media to focus on the violent events that happen around the world.”), consulted 10.01.2016.
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