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Terrorism and the Mass Media

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Executive Summary

TERRORISM IS COMMONLY defined as a form of politically motivated violence and intimidation, which uses communication strategies to amplify its intended effect of causing terror. It employs a wide range of platforms, including so-called 'traditional' news media such as newspapers and television, as tools. However, the role of the mass media in the advancement of terrorism's objectives is controversial, even within academic literature, as it is difficult to draw direct lines of causation due to the diversity of factors contributing to terrorism and the process of radicalisation. This paper synthesises the existing literature to explore what academic theories say about the role of the media in relation to three questions:

- Does traditional mass media influence the threat of terrorism by encouraging or discouraging radicalisation, recruitment and mobilisation to violence?
- Does traditional mass media amplify or suppress the social and psychological effects of terrorism? For example, does it amplify levels of public fear or impact social cohesion by damaging community ties?
- Does the traditional mass media in the UK inadvertently advance terrorist objectives?

The paper has a particular focus on the UK's traditional mass media and does not include analysis of social media or online media platforms. It uses a literature review of English-language sources to analyse the role of the mass media and its effect on the impact of terrorism. Research for this paper has not included any primary research with journalists or analysis of media reporting. Taking this next step with the research could help to bring first-hand perspectives and support recommendations for what responsible reporting guidelines would be most effective. Ultimately, the paper provides an analysis of the theoretical base, showing that traditional mass media can and sometimes does inadvertently contribute to advancing the objectives of terrorism.

The scope of this paper is limited to recommending that improved guidelines could help to limit potential negative impact, and it suggests a balanced approach to encouraging the media to develop a more far-reaching set of responsible reporting practices for terrorism as part of a process which enshrines editorial independence and public interest.

Key Findings

- Mass media can provide the publicity which terrorists seek. There is widespread consensus that the media's reporting on terrorism does this, and there is a clear synergy between the media's desire for a sensational story and terrorists' desire for publicity.[1] This is a symbiotic relationship because terrorism cannot flourish without the 'oxygen

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1. Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication: A Critical Introduction* (London: SAGE, 2013).

of publicity'.[2] The challenges of this relationship are multiplied in the modern era given the rapid advancement and accelerating pace of the news cycle, due mostly to digital advances.[3]

- Mass media can play a contributory role in amplifying negative impact. While levels of fear are difficult to measure empirically, this research found substantial theoretical agreement that the media can amplify the negative impacts of terrorism and collective levels of public fear. This is primarily due to its role in broadcasting the story to more people than would have been immediately affected by the attack.[4]

- Journalists are not neutral. Due to their role in producing news and influencing opinion, journalists can become participants in the radicalisation process.[5] Their discourse and how they frame their reports can have an impact. For example, they can sometimes reproduce inaccurate information (thus spreading disproportionate fear) or frame terrorist incidents in a way which amplifies prejudices and stereotypes.[6]

- Mass media reporting can contribute to imitation of terrorism. Social contagion theory suggests that the reporting of terrorist events encourages the spread of terrorist behaviour among like-minded individuals. This theory is sometimes cited to suggest that media reporting of a terrorist attack can be the tipping point for someone who had previously been considering carrying out a violent act. Mimetic theory, or the theory of imitation, suggests that imitation of terrorist attacks might occur for the purpose of achieving the same publicity or recognition. This paper found that imitation theory is more useful than contagion theory in explaining how media reporting of terrorist attacks may encourage use of a particular method of attack (for example, aircraft hijackings in the 1970s and 1980s).[7] This theory could be applied to the multiple European attacks which were carried out with vehicles over the last several years.

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2.   In the 1980s, then UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, coined this phrase in reference to the reporting of IRA attacks in the media giving free publicity to terrorism. See Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*.

3.   Charlie Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames: Reporting Terror in a Networked World'*,* Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 22 September 2016, <https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/coverage_terrorism_social_media.php>, accessed 13 October 2019..

4.   Cynthia C Combs, *Terrorism in the Twenty-First Century* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017).

5.   Katherine Brown et al., 'Lost for Words: Questioning the Relationship between Trauma and Radicalisation', Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, 15 September 2017, <https://dartcenter.org/resources/lost-words-questioning-relationship-between-trauma-and-radicalisation>, accessed 13 October 2019.

6.   Charlie Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.

7.   Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* (London: SAGE, 2017), pp. 240–41.

- Ethical codes of practice and responsible reporting guidelines have a positive effect on minimising the negative impacts of reporting.[8] Ethical codes[9] are in place for most traditional media sources and include guidelines (such as reporting accurately and objectively, identifying sources where possible, and avoiding stereotyping). Many news organisations have adapted responsible reporting guidelines for different circumstances, such as violent crime and suicide, but many are not sufficiently adapted for reporting on terrorism specifically.

- Ultimately, it must be recognised that media reporting on terrorism does not affect everyone equally or all the time or always to the same degree.[10] Therefore, causation is difficult to prove. The mass media can be a contributory factor to terrorism. Fear, radicalisation, imitation and other potential negative impacts are unpredictable. Thus, the recommended improvement of responsible reporting guidelines should be balanced with independent reporting and public interest.

Key Recommendations

In light of the above, this paper supports the following key recommendations encouraging the development of guidelines for responsible reporting of terrorism:

- Journalists should be aware that discourse and the way in which media reports are framed can have an impact on levels of fear, the process of radicalisation and the threat of imitation.[11] As with practices developed specific to other issues, such as suicide, responsible reporting guidelines should be defined for terrorism. Discourse and framing should be accurate, balanced, unsensational and contextual. Avoid emotive language, except when reporting on what others (for instance, politicians) have said. Journalists should not use discourse in a way which glamourises or demonises perpetrators of attacks, as this could encourage imitation or perpetuate prejudices. Journalists should be as objective as possible, examining their own preconceived biases and possibly unsubstantiated theories. They should also be up front about their level of expertise on

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8. Cristina Archetti, 'Terrorism, Communication and the Media', in Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Gordon Cubb and Simon Mabon (eds), *Terrorism and Political Violence* (London: Sage, 2014).

9. Each media organisation has a set of codes as well as central guidance from bodies such as the National Union of Journalists (NUJ); see National Union of Journalists, 'NUJ Code of Conduct', 2011, <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/>, accessed 17 October 2019; see also Society of Professional Journalists, 'SPJ Code of Ethics', last updated 6 September 2014, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>, accessed 17 October 2019.

10. Barrie Gunter, 'Media Violence: Is There a Case for Causality?', *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 51, No. 8, 2008), pp. 1061–122.

11. For example, the BBC has published guidelines for their reporters on the challenges and varied implications of the word 'terrorism' along with recommended guidelines for its use. See BBC, 'Section 11: War, Terror and Emergencies – Guidelines', <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/war-terror-emergencies/guidelines>, accessed 17 October 2019.

terrorism as well as the sources of their information, to engage the public in a critical debate about the issues.

- Reporting on terrorism needs to be proportionate. Overemphasising the threat of terrorism amplifies its negative impact and may inadvertently advance terrorist objectives. Journalists should be careful of misinformation from terrorist propaganda, the government or other potential actors such as foreign governments. Misinformation is a serious risk to independent reporting and public understanding. The police and security authorities can be key partners in providing timely and detailed information to the public and press to help counteract sources of misinformation.

- Self-imposed ethical codes of practice and responsible reporting guidelines are important to mitigate the negative impacts of reporting on terrorism. These guidelines should be flexible, informed and conscious of the challenges of reporting on terrorism, a particularly nebulous topic. Terrorism experts should be included in the further development of these guidelines, as well as in training journalists and editors on terrorism and the potential impact of their reporting.[12] By encouraging a collective discussion, guidelines could also increase the potential for the media to have a positive effect: journalists can construct narratives to empathise with the victims and encourage resilience. Responsibility for content is necessary, while remembering that editorial independence is essential to modern democracy.[13]

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12. Editors are key to ensuring guidelines are being followed, especially given the speed at which stories are being prepared in modern society.

13. Jean-Paul Marthoz, 'Self-Restraint vs. Self-Censorship', Committee to Protect Journalists, <https://cpj.org/2017/04/self-restraint-vs-self-censorship.php>, accessed 20 February 2020.

Introduction

SINCE THE CHRISTCHURCH attacks in New Zealand in March 2019, there has been increased scrutiny on the role of mass media in terrorism, as well as a focus on determining the best ways to mitigate any potential negative impacts of media reporting on terrorism and terrorist attacks.[1] With the prevalence of modern global media, reporting of terrorist attacks reaches a much wider audience than in the past. Therefore, this paper seeks to analyse the role of mass media in amplifying terrorism.

As a literature review of English-language sources, this paper analyses peer-reviewed papers alongside reports from organisations and institutions on various avenues of enquiry into the relationship between the mass media and terrorism. To assess whether the media can encourage like-minded individuals to commit terrorist attacks in a similar vein to those being reported, an in-depth examination of social contagion theory and mimetic theory is included. This is followed by an analysis of the importance of discourse and the way in which reporting on terrorism is framed.

This paper analyses the wide range of opinions on the role of the media. At one end of the spectrum are those who believe that the mass media causes terrorism. At the other end are those who see the media as a victim of terrorists seeking publicity. There is no clear consensus on whether the relationship between the media and terrorism is causal or contributory. As a result, this research aims to understand how traditional mass media influences the threat of terrorism by encouraging or discouraging radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation to violence and imitation. It also analyses the influence of the traditional mass media on the impact of terrorism by amplifying or suppressing the social and psychological effects of terrorism. Finally, it examines the extent to which traditional mass media outlets in the UK inadvertently advance terrorist objectives.

The speed of contemporary reporting and round-the-clock news consumption present challenges to the ethical processes established by traditional news organisations. Therefore, this paper recommends a balanced approach to ensuring that reporting practices are tailored effectively to reduce any possible negative impacts of media reporting on terrorism while respecting editorial independence and the public interest.

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1.   Martin Innes et al., 'From Minutes to Months: A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Impact of Media and Social Media During and After Terrorist Events', Five Country Ministerial Countering Violent Extremism Working Group, July 2018.

Research Questions

This research is intended to synthesise and analyse academic arguments around the role of the mass media in terrorism, with a particular focus on the UK. The research questions which are addressed are as follows:

- Does traditional mass media influence the threat of terrorism by encouraging or discouraging radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation to violence and/or imitation?
- Does traditional mass media amplify or suppress the social and psychological effects of terrorism? For example, does it amplify levels of public fear or impact social cohesion by damaging community ties?
- Does traditional mass media in the UK inadvertently advance terrorist objectives?

The first two questions have no specific geographical focus but cover the post-9/11 period. The third question focuses on an assessment of the UK mass media, primarily relating to the post-2013 period. However, important analysis of the UK government's handling of media reporting of Irish republican terrorism is included from the 1980s onwards.

Definitions

In generic terms, media refers to 'all methods or channels of information and entertainment'; but more specifically, traditional mass media 'encompass[es] newspapers, radio and television'.[2] The scope of this paper only encompasses sources of traditional mass media mentioned above. Therefore, any further references to 'media' relate to these sources. This paper does not extend into the realm of social or online-only media. Though such limitation indicates a significant gap in this paper's research, it lies beyond its scope and can be rectified by continuing research. However, digital media platforms of traditional media outlets are included in its scope, as they are held to the same ethical codes of journalism (which require maintenance of objective and factual reporting).[3] These codes have been challenged by the speed of reporting required for digital platforms and the pressure of competition from social media platforms, which may not yet have developed a set of guidelines by which to govern their reporting processes.[4]

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2.   Paul Wilkinson, 'The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 1997), p. 51.

3.   Most journalistic codes of conduct share the same principles of honesty, objectivity and minimisation of harm. They are governed by bodies such as the National Union of Journalists; see National Union of Journalists, 'NUJ Code of Conduct', 2011, <https://www.nuj.org.uk/about/nuj-code/>, accessed 17 October 2019; see also Society of Professional Journalists, 'SPJ Code of Ethics', last updated 6 September 2014, <https://www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp>, accessed 17 October 2019.

4.   Charlie Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames: Reporting Terror in a Networked World', Tow Center for Digital Journalism, 22 September 2016.<https://www.cjr.org/tow_center_reports/coverage_terrorism_social_media.php>, accessed 13 October 2019.

Definitions of terrorism are often contested, as 'deciding whether a particular act of violence constitutes an "act of terrorism" relies on judgements about the context, circumstances and intent of the violence, rather than any objective characteristic inherent to it'.[5] Some commonly cited definitions include: violence used by non-state actors to incite fear among a target audience in order to achieve a political goal.[6] Bruce Hoffman expands on this definition and describes terrorism as being 'designed to create power where there is none or to consolidate power where there is very little'.[7] He also notes that 'through the publicity generated by their violence, terrorists seek to obtain the leverage, influence, and power they otherwise lack to effect political change on either a local or an international scale'.[8] The media plays a role in expanding terrorism's footprint by broadcasting events which – more often than not – only directly affected a relatively small number of people. Many different types of events – which may have previously been labelled simply by the nature of the act (for example, bombings, assassinations and threats) – are now referred to as terrorism, therefore increasing their sensational value to media reporting.[9]

As this paper calls for an investigation of the role of the mass media in encouraging radicalisation, this term also needs defining. Radicalisation is a contested term with various definitions,[10] but it is commonly understood as the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist ideologies.[11] This is usually a non-linear, fluid and often idiosyncratic transition affecting different people in diverse ways, and does not necessarily imply a path towards violence. Often, radicalisation instead describes a process by which an individual's beliefs move from being relatively mainstream to seeking a drastic change in society: this is not immediately synonymous with terrorism and typically remains non-violent. However, once an

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5.   Richard Jackson, Marie Breen Smyth and Jeroen Gunning, *Critical Terrorism Studies: A New Research Agenda* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), p. 35.

6.   Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2006); Walter Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017); Robert Anthony Pape, *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* (London: Random House, 2006).

7.   Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, p. 41.

8.   *Ibid*., p. 41. Part of the difficulty of defining terrorism is often that terrorist movements are very small and unpredictable. Walter Laquer states that 'while historians and sociologists can sometimes account for mass movements, the movements of small particles in politics as in physics often defy any explanation'; see Lacquer, *A History of Terrorism*, p. 80. This is important to consider as this paper is largely focused on reducing instances of imitation by lone-wolf actors taking inspiration from media reporting of terrorism.

9.   Joseba Zulaika and William Douglass, *Terror and Taboo: The Follies, Fables, and Faces of Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 1996).

10. Mark Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 22, No. 4, 2010), pp. 479–94.

11. This definition is adapted from European Commission, 'STRIVE for Development: Strengthening Resilience to Violent Extremism', 2019, p. 6.

individual decides that terror and violence are justified means to achieve ideological, political and/or social change, they become a violent extremist.[12]

This term reflects a certain complexity as to how people come to accept and support the use of violent means to achieve political objectives. The process of radicalisation is the 'process of ideology, grievance, and mobilization converging together'.[13] Radicalisation can be 'blamed on many things, including exposure to ideology, victimization, alienation, socialization, social networks, the internet, deficiencies in family bonds, trauma, relative social and economic deprivation, and "cultures of violence"'.[14] Most of the literature analysed for this paper generally refers to terrorism as acts of violence committed by non-state actors to inspire terror in order to achieve political or ideological goals. Unfortunately, the concept of terrorism is not often clearly differentiated from radicalisation.

Methodology

This paper is based on a literature review of English-language, peer-reviewed academic sources from the fields of communications, journalism, psychology, terrorism studies and critical terrorism studies. The journals it has examined include: the *Journal of International Criminal Justice*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *American Behavioral Scientist*, *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, and the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*. Government and think tank reports were also scrutinised, and stemmed from organisations including the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, VOX-Pol, the Policy Center for the New South (formerly the OCP Policy Center), the Five Country Ministerial Countering Violent Extremism Working Group, the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism and UNESCO. Several of these organisations have already developed guidelines for media reporting of terrorism. A small amount of grey literature, such as the London School of Economics blog, was also examined.

The author analysed secondary source material and identified implications for responsible reporting of terrorism, as well as relations between the media and law enforcement. Actual media reports constitute primary source material and were therefore beyond this paper's scope. However, journalistic sources, where these are analytical or theoretical (as opposed to actual reportage of incidents or issues), are included.

Structure

The paper is divided into three chapters, even though there is some degree of overlap between the areas covered. Chapter I synthesises various strands of literature on the role of the media.

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12. Sedgwick, 'The Concept of Radicalization as a Source of Confusion'.

13. Ryan Shaffer, 'Jihad and Counter-Jihad in Europe: Islamic Radicals, Right-Wing Extremists, and Counter-Terrorism Responses', *Terrorism and Political Violence* (Vol. 28, No. 2, 2016), p. 384.

14. Katherine E Brown, 'Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures', in Margaret L Satterthwaite and Jayne Huckerby (eds), *Gender, National Security, and Counter-Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), p. 37.

It includes: examination of causation versus contribution; analysis of social contagion and mimetic theories; areas of potential negative and positive impact; the importance of discourse and framing in reporting; and examination of existing ethical standards.

Chapter II focuses on the first two research questions, which are designed to analyse the possible impact of traditional mass media on the threat of terrorism by encouragement of radicalisation, recruitment and/or mobilisation to violence. It also examines the impact of media reporting on the amplification of social and emotional effects of terrorist attacks. This chapter mainly synthesises literature focused on international events from the 9/11 attack onwards.

Chapter III addresses the final research question regarding the reproduction of terrorist propaganda. Focusing on UK media reporting, it mainly concerns attacks since 2013 (but includes literature looking at how the UK government handled media reporting of Irish republican terrorism from the 1980s onwards). Literature is examined on the topic of 'inadvertent advancement' of terrorists' objectives by the media, encouragement of radicalisation through reproductions of prejudices and stereotypes in media reporting, and the possibility of cumulative radicalisation.

I. Role of the Media

THIS CHAPTER EXAMINES the role of the media in the 'ecosystem' of information, of which traditional mass media is a part.[15] Due to the diversity of factors in the radicalisation process, it is impossible to prove a causation effect between traditional media reporting and the radicalisation of individuals or the motivation behind terrorist attacks. However, there is the possibility of a contributory relationship between the media and terrorism, due to the role the former plays in shaping and disseminating information. This role will be analysed here. First, social contagion and mimetic theories and their impact will be examined. Second, it will look at the concept of negative impact or 'harm', which is abstract and difficult to prove. However, an assessment of pertinent literature can evaluate the existing theoretical and empirical evidence on the negative effects of reporting of terrorism in the traditional media. Third, it will consider different aspects of reporting, such as discourse and framing, as the discourse that journalists use and the way that they frame reporting on terrorist attacks can contribute to terrorism. Finally, current ethical practices will be examined and gaps assessed.

There is a wide spectrum of theories on the role of the media in terrorism. Mahmoud Eid argues that the news media is driven by competition and profit, and subsequently thrive on violence and controversy.[16] They profit from sensationalising stories as much as possible, as it boosts their ratings and viewer numbers. Thus, the media is happy to broadcast the violence of terrorist attacks, giving a platform to perpetrators of violence and expanding their impact across the globe.[17] This perspective places the media as culpable participants in the cycle of violence. However, according to many, this is an oversimplified view.

Kevin G Barnhurst states that there are two models of the relationship between the media and terrorism. In the first model, the media is culpable for terrorism.[18] This means there is a causal relationship between the media and terrorism. This relationship leads to a solution which requires media regulation, as its coverage of terrorism incites similar attacks. In the second model, the media is vulnerable to terrorism and victimised by its role in the amplification of terrorism. Here, regulation of the media would only encourage terrorists to switch to other means of communications, which are readily available in liberal societies (for example, social media and other online media platforms).[19]

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15.   Innes et al., 'From Minutes to Months'.

16.   Mahmoud Eid, 'The New Era of Media and Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 36, No. 7, 2013), pp. 609–15.

17.   *Ibid.*

18.   Kevin G Barnhurst, 'The Literature of Terrorism', in A O Alali and Kenoye Kelvin Eke (eds), *Media Coverage of Terrorism: Methods of Diffusion* (London: SAGE, 1991), pp. 112–37; Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication* (London: SAGE, 2013), pp. 125–26.

19.   *Ibid.*

The middle of that spectrum – and the most commonly held view of the role of media in terrorism – is that a symbiotic relationship exists. Essentially, this means that mass media does not actively seek out terrorism to boost its viewing figures, but that the two mutually benefit from each other. There is a complicated, interconnected relationship between the two entities: the media desires to produce a good story and terrorists seek to provide a compelling, if terrifying, one which often fits the requirements.[20] Hoffman says that '[w]ith the help of the media – willingly or not – terrorism easily reaches a global audience. Between media and terrorism, there exists a very interactive (symbiotic) relationship'.[21] Ted Koppel, a host on ABC in the US whose career was built on reporting terrorism, famously summed up this relationship: 'Without television, terrorism becomes rather like the philosopher's hypothetical tree falling in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it has no reason for being. And television, without terrorism, while not deprived of all interesting things in the world, is nonetheless deprived of one of the most interesting'.[22]

The way that mass media approaches the reporting of terrorism has evolved rapidly over the last several decades with the impact of globalisation and development of communications technology. However, the lasting influence of the sensational way in which terrorist acts of violence were first commonly aired by mass media in the 1970s remains – it affected not only how future media would report terrorism, but also showed terrorists how to look and act to generate the most coverage.[23]

Some view the media's role in terrorism as an inadvertent relationship which has risen out of the global environment. This point of view lies in the middle of the spectrum and does not hold the media responsible for creating the relationship. Because the mass media reaches an international audience, it has inspired terrorists to take advantage of this opportunity to become globally visible and showcase their methods of attack and violent strategies.[24] In line with this perspective, terrorists can be seen as directors of a drama, tailoring their strategies and attack plans to cultivate the largest possible viewing audience – in a way, terrorism becomes more about those who are watching than those who are actually immediate victims of the attack. As Brian Jenkins put it, '[t]errorism is theatre'.[25] This theory of 'terrorism as performance' explores how terrorists aim to increase their own publicity with a calculation to terrorise as many people as possible (because if they are not witnessed and thus successful in creating terror, then they

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20.   Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*.
21.   Hoffman quoted in Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*, p. 54.
22.   Ted Koppel, quoted in Steven Anzovin, *Terrorism* (New York, NY: H W Wilson, 1986), p. 97.
23.   Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.
24.   Mark Sedgwick, 'Inspiration and the Origins of Global Waves of Terrorism', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 30, No. 2, 2007), pp. 97–112.
25.   Brian Jenkins, 'International Terrorism: A Balance Sheet', *Survival* (Vol. 17, No. 4, 1975), pp. 158–64.

are not truly terrorists).[26] In this way, terrorism is seen as a form of communication, with the main goal being the worldwide audience rather than the immediate victims of the attack.[27]

The symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism can be broken down into three parts. First, the role of the media is as a conduit for terrorist propaganda by offering terrorists the 'oxygen of publicity'.[28] Second, excessive reporting on terrorism distorts understanding of the magnitude of the terrorist threat. Third, coverage of terrorist attacks in the media can inspire an imitation phenomenon or copycat terrorism.[29] All three of these aspects are related to how the media covers terrorism, not why they cover it. Therefore, they can be mitigated – at least to some degree – by responsible reporting practices. The power of the media as a socialising agent has increased exponentially alongside its prevalence in society. Therefore, the media can be an amplified communicative battleground, writing and producing history while weaving informal social networks.[30]

The role of the media as a conduit of terrorist propaganda can represent the victimisation end of the opinion spectrum. In this view, terrorists exploit the media to increase visibility and more widely distribute their cause: 'The conduit metaphor is the notion that, when communicating, humans use the media for encoding purposes – that is, (1) putting ideas into words, signs, or symbols; (2) moving them along a conduit (e.g., channel or medium); and (3) getting them across to the receiving end. According to the perspective of the conduit metaphor, terrorism is a communicative strategy that thrives on the oxygen of publicity'.[31]

This view seems to theoretically relieve journalists of any responsibility in the process of amplifying terrorism or reproducing terrorist propaganda in the news. It does not, however, consider the role that the media plays in choosing discourse, framing terrorist violence and other aspects of decision-making in reporting.

The media's role does not imply that it shares the values or goals of the terrorists about which it reports. Rather, it indicates that the open nature of liberal societies makes the media vulnerable to being exploited and manipulated by terrorists, who are looking to reproduce and amplify their

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26. Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Religious Terrorism as Performance Violence', in Michael Jerryson, Mark Juergensmeyer and Margo Kitts (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

27. Maximiliano E Korstanje, 'Preemption and Terrorism: When the Future Governs', *Cultura* (Vol. 10, No. 1, 2013), pp. 167–84.

28. In the 1980s, then UK prime minister, Margaret Thatcher, coined this phrase in reference to the reporting of IRA attacks in the media giving free publicity to terrorism. See Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*.

29. Mohammed Elshimi, 'Thinking about the Symbiotic Relationship between the Media and Terrorism', OCP Policy Center, Policy Brief No. PB-18/12, May 2018.

30. Stephen Vertigans, *Terrorism and Societies* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016).

31. Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*, p. 46.

agenda. According to Paul Wilkinson, where mass media is concerned, this agenda generally centres on 'four main objectives':

- To convey the propaganda of the deed[32] and to create extreme fear among their target group/s.
- To mobilise wider support for their cause among the general population and international opinion by emphasising such themes as the righteousness of their cause and the inevitability of their victory.
- To frustrate and disrupt the response of the government and security forces, for example by suggesting that all their anti-terrorist measures are inherently tyrannical and counterproductive.
- To mobilise, incite and boost their constituency of actual and potential supporters and in so doing to increase recruitment, raise more funds and inspire further attacks.[33]

Causation versus Contribution

When discussing the role of the media and where it lies in the spectrum of responsibility, the question of causation arises. With the ecosystem of information and a multitude of other influential factors, it is difficult to support a causal link between media reporting and terrorist violence. In a review of the literature on media and antisocial behaviour, Barrie Gunter determined that:

> Despite the vast volume of published literature that has concluded that the causal link between media violence and antisocial behaviour is established, there have been more cautious and even dissenting voices that have challenged the strong effects position. Some writers have accepted that media violence can influence viewers, but not all the time and not always to the same degree in respect of different members of the audience.[34]

This analysis of the link between the media and antisocial behaviour should encourage a similarly sceptical attitude towards a claim of a direct causal link between the media and terrorism. However, media coverage of terrorism does sometimes contribute to terrorism and behaviours of terrorists or terrorist groups. For example, there is a good case to be made that media coverage of terrorism can contribute to the unintended consequence of encouraging terrorists to continue attacking or to use similar methods as those which have been framed as

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32. 'Propaganda of the deed' was a 19th-century term for the act of political violence. Neville Bolt has argued that the term has been reimagined by modern terrorists to have an impact beyond just unsettling government credibility; it also exploits grievances and destroys community ties. See Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (London: Hurst and Company, 2012).

33. Wilkinson, 'The Media and Terrorism'.

34. Barrie Gunter, 'Media Violence: Is There a Case for Causality?', *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 51, No. 8, 2008), p. 1063.

particularly 'successful'.[35] Also, specific ways of reporting terrorist attacks could further spread fear in society and contribute to the recruitment of more followers to a terrorist organisation.[36] This is not a consistent or reliable outcome, so it does not imply causation. Rather, it can be referred to as a contributory relationship in which media coverage sometimes contributes to the negative impacts of terrorism.

Some scholars have tried to test for a causal connection between the representation of terrorism in the media and subsequent attacks. Michael Jetter conducted a study analysing 61,132 days on which an attack occurred across 201 countries alongside coverage by the *New York Times*.[37] Here, the link appears causal – one additional article was suggested to produce 1.4 attacks (on average) over the following week. This seems to indicate that if terrorists do not receive media coverage, attacks will decrease, but 'it has been proven difficult to empirically test the systematic interplay between media attention and terrorism, not to mention studies allowing for a causal interpretation. In addition to limited data availability and comparability, persistent endogeneity concerns have plagued such studies'.[38]

Due to the diversity of difficult-to-measure factors affecting the viability of empirical studies on causation, there is not a strong evidence base for censorship based on media culpability arguments. Instead, highlighting the contributory relationship can encourage media to examine their practices. For example, the media industry has largely accepted self-imposed restrictions on the way that they report on issues such as suicide. In the UK, this was encouraged by the research of the Samaritans organisation, which outlined the contribution reporting can make to further incidents of suicide.[39] Their recommendations include limiting coverage of the method and individual as well as accompanying the story with assistance information to counteract a potential negative impact.[40] This paper was commissioned to see if the same approach of raising awareness in the media industry and encouraging them to moderate their own reporting practices on terrorism could also be effective.

There are significant problems with the way in which some of the traditional mass media currently report on terrorism, which could amplify its negative impact and/or encourage its spread. By sensationalising the dramatic acts of violence and destruction committed by terrorists, some might say that the media have thus 'caused' attacks by offering a platform to fulfil terrorists' purpose of spreading terror. Although 'it is well beyond the powers even of the

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35. Michael Jetter, 'The Effect of Media Attention on Terrorism', *Journal of Public Economics* (Vol. 153, 2017), p. 32.
36. Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames: Reporting Terror in a Networked World'.
37. Jetter, 'The Effect of Media Attention on Terrorism', p. 32.
38. *Ibid.*
39. Samaritans, 'Suicide Facts and Figures', <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/research-policy/suicide-facts-and-figures/>, accessed 21 February 2020.
40. For example, see Samaritans, 'Best Practice Suicide Reporting Tips', <https://www.samaritans.org/about-samaritans/media-guidelines/best-practice-suicide-reporting-tips/>, accessed 17 October 2019.

modern mass media to create a terrorist movement or a terrorist state … once terrorist violence is under way the relationship between the terrorists and the mass media tends inevitably to become symbiotic'.[41]

Ways in which the relationship between the media and terrorism can be responsibly managed have been researched by experts in several fields including communications studies, law, political science and sociology.[42] Some of the problems identified with media coverage of terrorism include:

- Ineffective editorial discretion.
- A lack of specialisation within media organisations focusing on terrorism. Often, reporters do not have the depth of understanding of terrorism to moderate their own stories.
- Misinformation given to journalists by the government and/or security agencies as well as by the terrorists.
- News media obstructing counter-terrorism efforts in the hurry to obtain a scoop or report an event.
- Sensationalisation of violence and attacks.
- Absence of a mechanism to 'deny a platform' for terrorists seeking to take advantage of news.
- A lack of corresponding reporting on positive community responses, such as acts of solidarity and disavowal of extremism, which helps to proportionalise or contextualise reporting of terrorism.[43]

These problems are among those that can cause 'harm'. However, given that the media cannot and must not be censored in a liberal and democratic society, finding a solution can be challenging.[44]

Social Contagion and Mimetic Theories

When discussing causation with regard to the role of the media, there is a commonly held debate about social contagion and mimetic theories.[45] Social contagion theory has been used to describe how the media contributes to the spread of violence and suicide. Therefore, this paper examines the relevant literature to see if the same theoretical principles can be applied to the media's role in 'spreading' terrorism. Social contagion of terrorism is a complicated and highly debated issue. However, the argument that media reporting of terrorism leads to imitation

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41. Wilkinson, 'The Media and Terrorism', p. 52.
42. Jeffrey Ian Ross, 'Deconstructing the Terrorism–News Media Relationship', *Crime, Media, Culture* (Vol. 3, No. 2, 2007), pp. 215–25.
43. *Ibid*.; Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*; Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.
44. Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*.
45. Mimetic theory is the theory of imitation.

of the depicted violence is easier to support theoretically.[46] Unfortunately, these concepts are often conflated and their definitions are frequently stretched. Concepts such as clusters, waves and copy-cats are often discussed in relation to mimetic and social contagion theories. A consensus is yet to be reached, but there is significant support for the role of mimetic theory in the spreading of violence.[47]

Social contagion theory refers to the influence individuals within social networks have on each other and the behaviours which are passed through these networks. With viral contagions there are patterns of increase and decline – the same is true with social contagion. An individual might have more or less contact with people at different times, or they might develop varying kinds of resistance which reduce the odds of behavioural transfer even if there are exogenous contributing factors. Social contagion dynamics indicate an endogenous process, in which the spreading of social norms occurs only from within the group and high levels of interaction between members of that group. However, even once the originating individual of the behaviour may have subsided, the contagious behaviour can still grow and spread, much like the influenza virus.[48] Similar to the way that viruses spread in germ theory, violent tendencies spread from one individual or community to another through close social contact, unless individuals or communities are prepared to resist or have developed immunities. Some examples of immunities which might help individuals or communities to resist social contagion include: access to quality education; increased political participation; higher socioeconomic status; increased access to resources; and access to economic and political power.[49]

While empirical studies on social contagion and terrorism are limited, multiple studies have been conducted on social contagion theory in relation to other forms of violence, such as gun violence.[50] These forms of mass violence, while separate phenomena, can contribute to the discussion about contagion and terrorism. Ultimately, they illustrate why this paper finds that mimetic theory is more applicable to the role of mass media in amplifying terrorism. These studies use contagion theory to examine if epidemic models, based on person-to-person transmission through a social network, can explain how this type of violence spreads. One study found that social contagion could account for 63.1% of the 11,123 occurrences of gunshot

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46. The imitation of terrorist methods is a concern largely in the context of lone-wolf actors imitating methods of attack being broadcast by the media. However, it is possible that larger, more organised terrorist organisations also take cues from mass media coverage.

47. Elisabetta Brighi, 'The Mimetic Politics of Lone-wolf Terrorism', *Journal of International Political Theory* (Vol. 11, No. 1, 2015), pp. 145–64.

48. Jeffrey Fagan, Deanna L Wilkinson and Garth Davies, 'Social Contagion of Violence', in Daniel L Flannery, Alexander T Vazsonyi and Irwin D Waldman, *The Cambridge Handbook of Violent Behavior and Aggression* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 688–724.

49. Kayla Kirkpatrick, 'The Social Contagion of Violence: A Theoretical Exploration of the Nature of Violence in Society', California Polytechnic State University, Winter 2012.

50. James N Meindl and Jonathan W Ivy, 'Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation', *American Journal of Public Health* (Vol. 107, No. 3, 2017), pp. 368–70.

violence in Chicago.[51] It found that the victims of gun violence were shot (on average) 125 days after their 'infection', with the method of transmission being their exposure to the person most responsible for introducing them to gun violence. This offers a quantitative, scientific explanation of the way in which violence can spread through social contagion and interactions with carrier individuals or communities. However, this study concludes that contagion is only one piece of the puzzle in determining who is carrying – or at risk of being affected by – the social contagion of violence.[52] More of these kinds of quantitative studies are needed to empirically assess the causal effects of social networks, as far as possible. Further statistical development could improve the impact of many similar studies on social contagion theory, which have thus far run into some unavoidable limitations of qualitative social studies.[53] If studies can show that the spread of violence only occurs through close social contact, then this indicates that the media is not necessarily playing a role in the spread of terrorism through contagion, because a more intensive relationship is needed for this kind of spread.

Thus far, research on social contagion theory has lacked a clear definition of terms. A review conducted of 340 records, which included social contagion theory mostly related to suicide, indicated at least three major divisions in uses of the term.[54] In 20.3% of the records, contagion was being used as equivalent to event clustering. In 68.5% of the records, contagion was being linked to various, potentially unrelated mechanisms underlying the clustering phenomenon. In 11.2% of the records contagion was used without any clear definition. The largest group (68.5%), which used contagion as a mechanism, highlighted four mechanisms which explained how clusters occurred: transmission; imitation; contextual influence; and affiliation. Qijin Cheng and colleagues note that:

> Contagion-as-affiliation and contagion-as-context involve mechanisms that are common mechanisms that often occur independently of apparent contagion, or may serve as a facilitating background. When used indiscriminately, these terms may create research blind spots. Contagion-as-imitation combines perspectives from psychology, sociology, and public health research and provides the greatest heuristic utility for examining whether and how suicide and suicidal behaviors may spread among persons at both individual and population levels.[55]

As indicated above, there is no clear definition of the way in which social contagion is being used, and this is detrimental to the rigour of the research process. This lack of clarity leads to

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51. Ben Green, Thibaut Horel and Andrew V Papachristos, 'Modeling Contagion Through Social Networks to Explain and Predict Gunshot Violence in Chicago, 2006 to 2014', *JAMA Internal Medicine* (Vol. 177, No. 3, 2017), pp. 326–33.

52. *Ibid*.

53. Nicholas A Christakis and James H Fowler, 'Social Contagion Theory: Examining Dynamic Social Networks and Human Behavior', *Statistics in Medicine* (Vol. 32, No. 4, 2013), pp. 556–77.

54. Qijin Cheng et al., 'Suicide Contagion: A Systematic Review of Definitions and Research Utility', *PloS One* (Vol. 9, No. 9, 2014).

55. *Ibid.*

the concept of contagion being used synonymously with imitation, which does not allow for clear examination of their distinctive impacts.

A recent study on mass shootings suggested that social contagion shares similarities with the copycat effect 'wherein the occurrence of one mass shooting increases the likelihood of another mass shooting occurring in the near future'.[56] It found that after a mass shooting another is more likely to occur within an average of 13 days. This kind of prediction is limited to temporal contiguity, or two events being associated due to their closeness in time. This is not the prediction of indicators or particular factors which might influence another individual to carry out the next attack. Not all research into social contagion theory has come to the same conclusions. Another study which examined social contagion of suicide and mass murder (often involving suicidal offenders), compared chronological clusters of mass killings in the US from 2006 to 2013. This study reached the conclusion that there was no evidence of short-term contagion, although there was the possibility of a heightened, long-term copycat effect.[57]

Therefore, there are no unanimous findings on the theory of social contagion. The scientific assessments, which indicate that the perceptions of individuals, their internal reasoning systems and their risk perceptions are based on relations with social networks of like-minded individuals, are those which support some version of contagion theory and 'infection' of behaviours. However, 'infection' is not the only way in which political violence is spread. Diffusion is similar to contagion but focuses instead on the spread of ideas and behaviours through the physical expansion of conflict across borders. Rather than catching new behavioural contagions from a close social network, they might be passed through refugees who are ethnically, religiously or culturally similar. The behaviours are most likely to take hold in a contagious way only if some kind of linking similarities are observed between the groups.[58]

Even though social contagion and diffusion are often used interchangeably, there is a clear distinction. Diffusion can lead to 'a process where multiple terrorist acts are undertaken independently in response to external stimuli, or where multiple terrorist events are attributable to a single entity (individual or group) over space and/or time'.[59] Often, contagion or diffusion can be the source of what is referred to as a 'wave' or 'hotspot' of terrorism (namely, the erratic pattern of a few closely spaced events occurring after a relative period of inactivity).[60]

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56. Meindl and Ivy, 'Mass Shootings', pp. 368–70.

57. Adam Lankford and Sara Tomek, 'Mass Killings in the United States from 2006 to 2013: Social Contagion or Random Clusters?', *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* (Vol. 48, No. 4, 2018), pp. 459–67.

58. Christina Cliff and Andrew First, 'Testing for Contagion/Diffusion of Terrorism in State Dyads', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 36, No. 4, 2013), pp. 292–314.

59. Gentry White, Fabrizio Ruggeri and Michael D Porter, 'Endogenous and Exogenous Effects in Contagion and Diffusion Models of Terrorist Activity', *arXiv* (No. 1612, 2016), p. 2.

60. *Ibid*.

The term 'cluster' is also commonly used, often in relation to suicides. 'Clustering' is another term for socially networked behaviour, and some argue that those who tend towards suicide form clusters with other like-minded individuals. When an individual in that cluster commits suicide or the group is exposed to suicide and its representation in the media or other negative stimuli, the negative impact is felt throughout the cluster. This might lead to one or more imitative suicides.[61] Therefore, 'clustering' is another expression of imitation or social transfer of behaviour through a group. While there are some differentiations between the terms used for this process, there is evidence for the process itself.

So, the question becomes whether the social networks upon which social contagion theory are based can be influenced by mass media. Even though social contagion theory borrows from epidemiology to describe the spread of behaviours across a group, there are some differences. In contrast to diseases, behaviours need a mechanism by which to spread. This is how imitation varies from contagion on more than just a semantic level. Imitation is a behavioural mechanism which has been well documented by the field of psychology, and it can help explain the increased probability of someone engaging in behaviours similar to those to which they have been exposed. Imitation indicates a learned behaviour strengthened over a period of time, which is similar in nature to an observed act. It will not always be an exact copy of the act, but it will be something with similar characteristics. External variables are accounted for by imitation, which are more difficult to factor into contagion theory. For example, people are more likely to imitate a model with whom they share similarities (such as age or gender) who possibly has a more elevated social status or who has been recognised or rewarded.[62]

In this context, the argument can be made that 'imitation' more aptly describes the effect that mass media can encourage with coverage of terrorism. It is more applicable than the theory that media spreads terrorism as a social contagion, which requires immediate contact with another individual in a close group or community. In most cases, those who carry out mass killings are not imitating personally witnessed events. James N Meindl and Jonathan N Ivy found that, often, it is the case that all the information which could serve as a model for imitative behaviour for a mass murderer was delivered via some avenue of media, including traditional mass media.[63] Therefore, media can encourage imitative behaviour. This is possible through live broadcasts of violent events or even through in-depth descriptions. Although this study covered non-terrorism related mass shootings, this can also be a method of terrorist attack; therefore, the same principles can be applied to media broadcasting of terrorism. Their study suggests that, through its broadcasting choices, the media plays a role in increasing the probability of imitation. These types of choices can regard content such as large amounts of coverage which repeatedly identifies the shooter, their manifesto or their life story. This recognition can encourage imitation by conferring status and notoriety to the mass murderer or terrorist. For

61.   Thomas E Joiner Jr, 'The Clustering and Contagion of Suicide', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* (Vol. 8, No. 3, 1999), pp. 89–92.

62.   Meindl and Ivy, 'Mass Shootings', pp. 368–70.

63.   *Ibid.*

example, possible imitators might identify with the details of a murderer's life and therefore be more inclined to imitate them in order to seek the same level of recognition.[64]

Mimetic theory suggests that individuals are not sovereign entities, because they are heavily shaped by external influences.[65] People may be unaware of the level to which imitation affects their decision-making. Elisabetta Brighi argues that mimetic rivalry may be a driver of terrorist attacks.[66] Due to a strong enough contributory link found in many academic studies between imitation and repetition of suicides and mass murders, the role of the media is considered significant in the prevention of copycat tragedies. A study which focused on the nature of social contagion theory concluded that media violence of all kinds (such as traditional media, films and video games, to name a few) poses a threat to public health because it can lead to an increase in real-world violence and aggression in individuals.[67] This study focused on audio-visual expressions of violence and found that violence televised on news broadcasts contributes to increased social violence, especially in relation to imitative acts of suicide or aggression.[68] There are, of course, moderating factors in these relationships, such as the nature of the media content or the other social influences on an individual. However, this study found there was a large enough contributory relationship for media violence to be categorised as a public health risk.[69] The World Health Organization even considers representations of violence in the media such a threat to public health that they have developed recommendations for responsible reporting guidelines of suicide and homicide.[70]

Even with this support for the impact of the media on imitations of terrorism, the problem of loose definitions and mixed levels of evidence still exists. There are also varied opinions on what elements of the media have the most negative impact. For example, some experts find that the media's framing of terrorist attacks in a compassionate light causes the contagion or imitation effect in like-minded individuals. Gus Martin notes that:

> When terrorists manage to get wide exposure or a higher degree of compassion from the media and their audience, future terrorists may be inspired to emulate the methods of the first successful incident. True cases of successful contagion effect [sic] include political and commercial kidnappings for payment and concessions in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, hijackings in support of Middle Eastern

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64. *Ibid*.
65. Namely, the theory of imitation.
66. Elisabetta Brighi, '"Charlie Hebdo" and the Two Sides of Imitation', in Christian Borch (ed.), *Imitation, Contagion, Suggestion: On Mimesis and Society* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).
67. L Rowell Huesmann and Laramie D Taylor, 'The Role of Media Violence in Violent Behavior', *Annual Review of Public Health* (Vol. 27, 2006), pp. 393–415.
68. *Ibid.*
69. *Ibid.*
70. Yann Auxemery, 'The Mass Murderer History: Modern Classifications, Sociodemographic and Psychopathological Characteristics, Suicidal Dimensions, and Media Contagion of Mass Murders', *Comprehensive Psychiatry* (Vol. 56, 2015), pp. 149–54.

causes (usually Palestinian) from the late 1960s to the 1980s and the hostage taking of Westerners in Lebanon in the 1980s.[71]

Other experts focus on the negative impact of disproportionate coverage of mass murders. Most people only learn about these events through media coverage and are not directly affected. However, because the media response to terrorist attacks is often immense, these types of events are given salience and greater public attention, thus increasing the probability of imitation.[72]

Some who argue against contagion theory claim that, although media reporting might lead to the imitation of methods, it does not create terrorist intent. Techniques of attack are only of interest to those individuals or groups who have already made the decision to adopt a strategy of terrorism.[73] Method imitation is not as much a threat as inspirational contagion would be, as the latter could lead to the formation of new organisations and cells.[74] This view is supported by Vincent Miller and Keith J Hayward, who state that 'typically, criminologists and terrorist scholars tend to focus on either the 'psychology' of individual terrorists or wider structural or ethno-political issues, such as religion, ideological doctrine or the role of terrorist organizations in converting and recruiting people to violence'.[75]

A study analysing the phenomenon of the rise of vehicle-ramming attacks from 2015 to 2017 suggests that the act of violence itself has a certain impact on imitation. The act of violence 'travels through our contemporary mediascape, to be internalized and imitated by an increasingly varied set of subjects with varying motivations, psychologies, ideologies and circumstantial backgrounds'.[76] Assigning power to such acts is a new and concerning phenomenon, to which the media contributes through the global broadcasting of terrorist attacks. However, only acts of a certain sensational nature warrant the relational energy required to induce the mimetic power of terrorism.

Other arguments against the media's impact on the social contagion of violence include that it is impossible to prove empirically due to the diversity of influential factors.[77] However, even many

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71. Gus Martin, *Understanding Terrorism: Challenges, Perspectives, and Issues* (London: SAGE, 2017), p. 66.

72. Madelyn S Gould and Michael Olivares, 'Mass Shootings and Murder-Suicide: Review of the Empirical Evidence for Contagion', in Thomas Niederkrotenthaler and Steven Stack, *Media and Suicide: International Perspectives on Research, Theory, and Policy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), pp. 51–76.

73. Sedgwick, 'Inspiration and the Origins of Global Waves of Terrorism', p. 102.

74. Brigitte L Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).

75. Vincent Miller and Keith J Hayward, '"I Did My Bit": Terrorism, Tarde and the Vehicle Ramming Attack as an Imitative Event', *British Journal of Criminology* (Vol. 59, No. 1, 2018), p. 1.

76. *Ibid*.

77. Cristina Archetti, 'Terrorism, Communication and the Media', in Kennedy-Pipe, Cubb and Mabon (eds), *Terrorism and Political Violence*.

of these arguments concede that there is a link between media coverage of terrorist events and other follow-on events imitating them in an effort to receive the same publicity. This impact can be mitigated, to some degree, by media framing.[78] The idea that social contagion theory underestimates the audience's intelligence and assumes their inability to disassociate action from media reaction is also frequently discussed.[79]

Brigitte L Nacos suggests that drawing a link between media reporting and terrorism frightens some opponents of social contagion theory, as they believe this opens the space for government censorship.[80] To avoid this type of censorship, this paper recommends that the most effective method of mitigating the possible negative impacts of media reporting of terrorism would be for media organisations to self-impose responsible reporting guidelines for the coverage of terrorism. These responsible reporting guidelines should be developed by those with expert-level knowledge of terrorism and journalism, alongside training for editors and journalists on the potential impacts of their reporting on terrorism.[81]

Negative versus Positive Impact of Mass Media

Daniel Koehler states that journalists need to be aware that, as soon as they step into the process of reporting on terrorism, they are no longer neutral.[82] While responsible reporting practices call for objectivity, there is always a certain degree of personal bias and shaping of the narrative which is impossible to avoid, putting journalists in the position to influence the effect and/or impact of terrorism reporting.[83] To maintain as much objectivity as possible, Yonah Alexander and Richard Latter argue that the media need to avoid being manipulated by either terrorist or government propaganda. A fine line exists between ethical reporting practices, appropriate censorship and competition for a 'good story'.[84]

Alex P Schmid argues that many experts agree that the negative impact of media reporting of terrorism could be mitigated by self-censorship, if media organisations were willing to prioritise

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78.   Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*.
79.   Philip Schlesinger, Graham Murdock and Philip Elliott, *Televising Terrorism: Political Violence in Popular Culture* (New York, NY: Scribner, 1984).
80.   Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*.
81.   Paul Wilkinson recommends that necessary training of journalists and editors is important to make all actors aware of the implications of their relationship with terrorism. See Wilkinson, 'The Media and Terrorism'.
82.   Daniel Koehler, interviewed in Katherine Brown et al., 'Lost for Words: Questioning the Relationship between Trauma and Radicalisation', Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma, 15 September 2017, <https://dartcenter.org/resources/lost-words-questioning-relationship-between-trauma-and-radicalisation>, accessed 14 October 2019.
83.   Zulaika and Douglass, *Terror and Taboo*.
84.   Yonah Alexander and Richard Latter, *Terrorism & the Media: Dilemmas for Government, Journalists and the Public* (Dulles, VA: Brassey's Inc, 1990).

internal guidelines over external competition.[85] These guidelines must acknowledge that terrorists seek free publicity through their acts of violence and that sensationalising attacks can amplify the negative impact of terrorism.[86] Those responsible for creating internal guidelines should also consider the fact that media coverage can cause direct harm by invading the privacy of victims, interfering with police management, or causing disruption to public order.[87]

Most terrorist organisations in history have not possessed the resources to establish their own professional media operations. As a result, they have targeted the attention of global media organisations. The attacks at the 1972 Munich Olympics by the Palestinian group, Black September, are a strong example of this: hostage-taking and counter-terrorism operations were broadcast live around the world. Furthermore, the 9/11 attacks were one of the most-watched live TV events in history.[88] These kinds of events clearly display terrorist groups' ability to manipulate global media for their own propaganda purposes.[89]

The government can also override the ethical practices of the media. For example, Greg McLaughlin and David Miller note how, during the 1990s, the media was used to broadcast the British government's position on the struggle with the Provisional IRA.[90] The latter was framed as the only cause of the conflict, and some media outlets at the time even considered it their duty in the struggle against terrorism to abandon objectivity and only report the government's perspective. Here, it is clear that all sides try to use the media to their own advantage, making the media key players in the drama of terrorism coverage and impeding their ability to maintain their own reporting guidelines.[91] Police and security authorities can help to mitigate misdirection and the spread of misinformation, which threatens independent reporting and public knowledge, by engaging the public and press with timely and accurate information in the case of terrorist attacks. However, they can also use this platform to further their own agendas.[92]

In the modern era of mass media, digital platforms are crucial to the way in which people consume news, thus presenting a new challenge to ethical reporting on terrorism. Digital platforms of traditional media sources are normally held to the same ethical code as the broadcast and print

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85.   Alex P Schmid, 'The Way Forward on Counter-Terrorism: Global Perspectives', *Strathmore Law Journal* (Vol. 2, 2016), p. 49.

86.   *Ibid.*

87.   Ratnesh Dwived et al., 'International Terrorism and Television: An Analytical Discourse Based on Media Regulation on Coverage of Terrorism in Pre and Post 9/11 Scenario', *Indian Journal of Health & Wellbeing* (Vol. 9, No. 2, 2018), pp. 296–302.

88.   Maura Conway and Joseph Dillon, 'Future Trends: Live-Streaming Terrorist Attacks?', VOX-Pol, 2016, p. 2.

89.   *Ibid.*

90.   Greg McLaughlin and David Miller, 'The Media Politics of the Irish Peace Process', *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* (Vol. 1, No. 4, 1996), pp. 116–34.

91.   *Ibid.*

92.   David L Altheide, 'The Mass Media and Terrorism', *Discourse & Communication* (Vol. 1, No. 3, 2007).

media. Unfortunately, digital media sources not connected to traditional mass media are often not bound by the same ethical guidelines or supported by the same journalistic expertise as traditional news media outlets, even though these platforms play a significant role in filtering information and framing news stories.[93] This presents a significant challenge, which needs to be addressed in future research.

The mass media can also have a positive impact, by acting as a peacemaker or highlighting community and cross-community solidarity.[94] The media can heighten public awareness of security threats and emergency procedures in a non-dramatic way, and encourage public conversation and debate on the social and political implications of terrorism. Cristina Archetti recommends that in the modern era, the media needs to understand how 'strategic communications' and 'narratives' can be used as effective tools in countering extremism.[95] She acknowledges, however, that there are many problematic assumptions which need to be overcome for this to be realistic.[96] Ultimately, self-imposed media guidelines can help to reduce the potential negative impact of media reporting of terrorism. The next three sections will discuss particular mediums through which this is possible.

Discourse in Reporting

Due to the absence of clear definitions for terrorism and radicalisation, a lack of understanding of the impact of pertinent media discourse persists. The interchangeable use of these terms in media reporting encourages public confusion regarding the complexity of the issues. Since 9/11, the use of terms such as Islamist or Muslim 'radicalisation' has drastically increased, alongside a more general rise in anti-Muslim rhetoric.[97] Though there have been attempts to introduce other terms in an effort to reduce targeting, all of the commonly used phrases indicate a lack of understanding about Islam and terrorism – they frequently link religion to the violence of terrorism, which enforces negative stereotypes.[98] Often, media organisations even use the terms 'radicalisation' and 'violent extremism' without context, attributing more and more acts to terrorism. Clearly, there is a lack of appreciation for how language shapes our understanding of the world and how the actions we take lead to particular consequences.[99] However, this disregard is not present in all media organisations and it must be noted that some have taken steps, for example, to limit the use of the term 'terrorism' to quotes by others.[100]

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93.   Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.

94.   McLaughlin and Miller, 'The Media Politics of the Irish Peace Process'.

95.   Cristina Archetti, 'Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age', *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Vol. 9, No. 1, 2015).

96.   *Ibid.*

97.   Brown et al., 'Lost for Words'.

98.   Katherine Brown and Nimisha Patel, interviewed in Brown et al., 'Lost for Words'.

99.   *Ibid.*

100. For example, Reuters have rules disallowing reporters from using the word 'terrorism' or 'terrorist' unless they are quoting someone they are reporting on. See *Reuters*, 'Handbook of Journalism', <http://handbook.reuters.com/index.php?title=T>, accessed 16 October 2019.

Another element to consider is the impact of the visual content of a report. Attitudes which indicate bias or sensationalise violence have been subject to political and ideological examination, but little attention has been paid to the choice of what visual content is included in reporting on terrorism and how it can become an expression of the same bias or sensationalism. Further analysis of the visual content of terrorism reporting might help indicate the impact of self-imposed censorship in the media and whether they are following responsible reporting guidelines. Comparing the visual content of these reports with the discourse used could help to distinguish between routine and exaggerated coverage. Very little academic research has been completed thus far on how much airtime and how many column inches are actually devoted to terrorism.[101]

Other major influential factors in the discourse of reporting are censorship and narrative control. These can be active or passive, self-imposed, government-driven or even a product of competition. As discourse is a powerful tool which is amplified and disseminated through the reach of global reporting, the media must be careful of external powers attempting to influence its objectivity. This comes from terrorists themselves trying to manipulate their audience into sympathy or support, as well as by the government trying to implement security strategies through supportive media discourse. Since 9/11, there have been major changes that have been implemented in US foreign and domestic policy which went essentially unreported and thus unchallenged by major news organisations. This, through extensive qualitative media analysis, is shown to be at least in part due to the messaging prepared by political decision-makers to encourage domestic support for the new leading role the US would take in combating terrorism.[102] This type of government messaging was slipped into the pre-existing crime-related discourse of fear promoted by the mass media in the US. This discourse places fear as a central feature of everyday life, expressed through pervasive communication, symbolic awareness and the expectation of danger and risk.[103]

The government can also exhibit narrative control or censorship through trying to suppress reporting of terrorism to reduce levels of social fear. However, in a liberal democratic society, too much government intervention or censorship appears heavy-handed and the state can lose its legitimacy if it suppresses unpopular or unofficial views. In using the media to delegitimise opponents while also trying to maintain their own image, governments find themselves threading a fine line.

In addition to terrorist manipulation and government intervention on discourse, there is also the increasing pressure of competition across media organisations. The growing commercialisation of mass media may prove to be a larger threat to objective reporting and use of discourse than direct political control. This is due to the content and standard of what is reported being increasingly determined by what is popular and sellable. In a way, therefore, the market is

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101. Barnhurst, 'The Literature of Terrorism', in Alali and Eke (eds), *Media Coverage of Terrorism*, pp. 112–37; Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*, pp. 125–26.

102. Altheide, 'The Mass Media and Terrorism', pp. 287–308.

103. *Ibid.*

exhibiting self-censorship over the discourse of media reporting and attempting to limit public information or range of opinion.[104]

Framing Terrorism

How the media 'frames' terrorism reporting is an extension to the discussion on discourse. Developed in communications studies, framing theory relates to the agenda-setting tradition, but goes a step further by suggesting that the media focuses attention on certain events (which are then put within a particular field of meaning through framing).[105] Going beyond the selection of discourse, framing also considers the tone, imagery and implications of reporting on terrorism. It represents 'persistent patters of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events. Decisions and common practices in newsgathering – determining what and how stories are covered – contribute toward these frames'.[106] The way in which the media both reports and frames terrorism affects their impact, and Archetti states that 'communication is the very enabler of social interaction. Acknowledging the relevance of communication allows understanding how identities are formed [sic], how people come to share a political cause and mobilise around it, as well as how political action can turn to violence'.[107]

Often, there are persistent frames, as journalists tend to shape stories similarly over time. Persistent framing tends to carry the story in the same light even if the situation has changed. For example, this can gradually escalate the discourse of fear around terrorist violence, and inadvertently promote particular interpretations of events. In the US, for example, the threat of terrorism has decreased since 9/11, but the level of social fear has increased.[108] This has led to a massive shift in US public opinion on the implementation of national security and foreign policy.[109] The use of persistent frames can also de-escalate reporting on terrorism as stories become less engaging for the public and thus less 'newsworthy' for media organisations. The concept of persistent news frames challenges the extent to which coverage of extremism can ever meet the objective standards set in ethical guidelines. Journalists can lean towards the message of terrorism by legitimising violence and possibly encouraging further attacks, but they can also lean towards the 'official' version of events and the interpretation of the government through a framework provided to them by public officials.[110] While censorship is greatly frowned upon by the media, Nacos and colleagues point out that there is some level of acceptance of a two-way conversation between the government and journalists on shaping acceptable frameworks in

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104. Schlesinger, Murdock and Elliott, *Televising Terrorism*.

105. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1974).

106. Pippa Norris, Montague Kern and Marion Just (eds), *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), p. 4.

107. Cristina Archetti, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 33.

108. *Ibid.*

109. *Ibid*.

110. *Ibid*.

which terrorist attacks can be reported.[111] The media are also happy to magnify any concerns expressed by the government, as this grants them a sensational story. Unfortunately, this can also unnecessarily amplify the threat of terrorism, because a government-led increase in the threat level is often much more emphasised than any reductions. This may encourage a higher level of social fear, contributing to a more polarised political climate.[112]

David L Altheide has conducted several research projects to track how the media uses the discourse of fear in multiple topics (for example, crime, drugs and immigration).[113] In one of these projects, document analysis techniques were used to track words, themes and frames over a period of time, across various issues and media outlets:

> The aim in this study was to compare coverage of terrorism with crime and victim and note how these may be related to use of the word fear. The project examines the conceptual and empirical support for the politics of fear thesis, which may be stated as follows: The terms crime, victim, and fear are joined with news reports about terrorism to construct public discourse that reflects symbolic relationships about order, danger, and threat that may be exploited by political decision makers.[114]

Others have used different methods to research the media's framing of terrorism. For example, one study used a multi-proximity model to analyse the content of news reports.[115] Regression analysis showed the differential impact of multiple proximities in ideology, religion and bilateral relationships on media frames. For instance, if the media host country and the country which experienced an attack have a close bilateral relationship, then the media tends to frame the terrorist attack in a more negative way. Interestingly, this did not hold true in relation to the proximity of ideology between the two for explanation of the media frames.[116] Therefore, these studies have found that intentional and unintentional framing of terrorism reporting in the media does occur to varying degrees. This suggests that responsible reporting guidelines and ethical journalism practices are important for the maintenance of media objectivity.

Ethical Practices

There exist commonly accepted journalistic and editorial ethical practices and responsible reporting guidelines. These include guidance from communal professional bodies such as the

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111. Brigitte L Nacos, Yaeli Bloch-Elkon and Robert Y Shapiro, *Selling Fear: Counterterrorism, the Media, and Public Opinion* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

112. *Ibid*.

113. David L Altheide, 'Terrorism and the Politics of Fear', *Cultural Studies ↔ Critical Methodologies* (Vol. 6, No. 4, 2006).

114. *Ibid*., p. 422.

115. Liu Yang and Huailin Chen, 'Framing Terrorist Attacks: A Multi-Proximity Model', *International Communication Gazette* (Vol. 81, No. 5, 2019), pp. 395–417.

116. *Ibid.*

National Union of Journalists and the Society of Professional Journalists, as well as individual media organisations. Most ethical codes include principles of:

- Honesty.
- Objectivity.
- Impartiality.
- Accuracy.
- Transparency.
- Minimisation of harm.[117]

The media is also bound by a legislative duty to report objectively to prevent it from becoming a conduit for any particular political or ideological position.[118] These guidelines are generic journalistic and editorial codes of ethics. However, many organisations also develop sets of responsible reporting guidelines for particular reporting circumstances (for example, war, suicide and crime). Often, terrorism has been lumped in under wider categories of war or conflict and thus responsible reporting guidelines have not been tailored for terrorism. Some guidelines have, however, been developed specifically for terrorism by international bodies and research centres. Examples include:

- UNESCO.[119]
- The Tow Center for Digital Journalism.[120]
- The Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma.[121]
- The Annenberg Public Policy Center.[122]

These organisations have collaborated with journalists and academics to establish specific guidelines on responsible reporting practices for terrorism. Many of the points across these guidelines overlap. The scope of this paper does not extend to highlighting these specific examples, but it supports the development and adoption of responsible terrorism specific reporting guidelines. These would help to mitigate negative impacts and acknowledge that a balance must be found between factual and sensitive reporting. For example, guidelines should omit high-risk information (such as detailed descriptions of methods of attack), while recognising the importance of editorial independence and the public's right to information.

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117. See NUJ, 'NUJ Code of Conduct'; SPJ, 'SPJ Code of Ethics'.
118. McLaughlin and Miller, 'The Media Politics of the Irish Peace Process'.
119. Jean-Paul Marthoz, *Terrorism and the Media: A Handbook for Journalists* (Paris: United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2017).
120. Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.
121. Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma, 'Terrorism', <https://dartcenter.org/topic/terrorism>, accessed 13 October 2019.
122. David Gudelunas et al., 'Reporting on Terrorism: A Newsroom Discussion Guide', Annenberg Public Policy Center, 2002.

It must also be recognised that the nature of terrorism and its manifestations are constantly changing, which often coincides with changes to the way in which terrorists use both traditional mass media and digital platforms to further their aims. Therefore, guidelines must be flexible and adapt to new trends (for example, the recent increase in focus on right-wing extremism) in the UK and worldwide.

In general, the media has been adapting its reporting practices in some positive ways. Several mass media organisations (such as the BBC, Reuters and Sky) have adopted practices in line with the recommendations made by the above organisations for reporting on terrorism. These types of changes, in practice, include:[123]

- Increased attention to humanising the victims.
- Reduction in the prominence of imagery of the perpetrators.
- Promotion of narratives of community and cross-community solidarity.
- Discretion in using terrorist- or extremist-generated media materials.

This paper recognises the positive direction of these changes and would recommend a more systematic and widely disseminated application of responsible reporting guidelines such as these. Additionally, even though there is often a difference in the approach and capabilities of large, national-level media organisations versus small and local media, each has a vital and different role to play. Each needs to abide by ethical codes and responsible reporting practices to keep their impact as positive as possible.

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123. Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.

II. Impact

B Y CONTINUING THE synthesis of literature on the impact of the traditional mass media on the threat of terrorism, this chapter focuses on answering the first two research questions posed in the introduction. It asks whether media reporting impacts the threat of terrorism by encouraging or discouraging radicalisation, and recruitment or mobilisation to violence. It also reviews literature on the role of the traditional mass media in the potential amplification or suppression of the social and psychological effects of terrorism, such as levels of fear and/or social cohesion. Emphasis is placed on post-9/11 literature, and the analysis encompasses an international perspective on terrorist attacks.

Encouragement of Radicalisation, Recruitment and/or Mobilisation to Violence

The first research question engages the debate between social contagion and mimetic theories. It asks whether the traditional media influences the threat of terrorism through encouragement or discouragement of radicalisation, recruitment and/or mobilisation to violence. A general consensus exists that media representation of terrorism may encourage people, who are already committed to a terrorist strategy, to act or perhaps to use a method which was represented by the media in a certain way.[124] However, there is less agreement on whether media coverage of terrorism can be held responsible for the social contagion of violence.

As discussed in the introduction, 'radicalisation' is commonly linked to extremism and a tendency for ideology to take the lead in a process of personal and social grievances, driving an individual to adopt a violent strategy. As mimetic theory does not cover the necessary depth of motivation it would take to encourage radicalisation, this pushes the question of encouragement/ discouragement into the realm of social contagion theory. There are studies which support the spread of behavioural contagion through a group.[125] If the catalyst of this contagion was media reporting of terrorism, then it could be seen as encouraging the behavioural contagion, which might induce an individual to model themselves after other terrorists. However, finding evidence that the media is the primary catalyst is not practical, as there are many influential factors – these include potential catalysts such as social media, recruiters, blogs and chatrooms, as well as social milieu.[126]

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124. Brighi, 'The Mimetic Politics of Lone-wolf Terrorism'.

125. Madelyn Gould, Patrick Jamieson and Daniel Romer, 'Media Contagion and Suicide Among the Young', *American Behavioral Scientist* (Vol. 46, No. 9, 2003), pp. 1269–84.

126. Judith Sjetske Begeer, 'How Media Reported Violence Spreads, the Contagion of Suicide Terrorism', Master's thesis, Leiden University, June 2016.

The strongest theoretically supportable relationship between the media and radicalisation is that the former can be seen as a contributing factor to the latter. There is robust theoretical agreement that the media can encourage radicalisation.[127] Some argue that the media contributes indirectly to the process of radicalisation and the appeal of militant groups through its reporting of social and political events, and problems and crises around the world.[128] Furthermore, the globalisation of the media landscape exposes more people to the behaviours of individuals from around the world and enables them to receive their communications through media reporting. One case study comparison found that this indirect impact of media reporting encouraged the delegitimisation of consensual ideologies, which in turn left more room for the legitimisation of militant discourse.[129] Furthermore, where the traditional mass media's encouragement or discouragement of recruitment is concerned, it is possible that media reporting of terrorism could incite an individual, who was already considering terrorist strategies, to seek recruitment or to be open to the influence of recruiters.

For example, Jessica Stern has suggested that women's participation in terrorist attacks in the Middle East is largely due to 'social contagion'. Her definition of the term revolves around the permeation of the symbology of death in Palestinian culture and social status granting the highest honour to those who choose a martyr's death.[130] Through this elevation of suicide, the terrorist agenda and associated cultural values have increased the probability of imitation among both men and women in Middle Eastern society. This is due, in part, to the media's framing of this method of terrorist attack as 'honourable'.

The third part of the question analyses the traditional mass media's impact on encouragement/ discouragement of mobilisation to violence. Where encouragement is concerned, mimetic theory provides a framework for understanding the roles that media coverage and the framing of events play in encouraging others to imitate terrorist acts (although there are, of course, a diverse range of influential factors). It has been argued that the media's overemphasis of high-profile and sensational violent events – partly due to media organisations' desire to maximise viewing numbers and profits – makes them more culpable to the encouragement of mobilisation to violence in susceptible individuals.[131] Ultimately, it is impractical to try to empirically prove whether the media directly encourages or discourages radicalisation, recruitment or mobilisation to violence, due to the variety of interconnected factors. However, it is nonetheless evident that media reporting of terrorism does have an impact and does not remain neutral in these processes.

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127. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*; Archetti, 'Terrorism, Communication and New Media'.

128. David L Altheide, *Terror Post-9/11 and the Media* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2009).

129. Vertigans, *Terrorism and Societies*.

130. Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York, NY: Harper Collins), p. 52.

131. Grant Duwe, 'Body-Count Journalism: The Presentation of Mass Murder in the News Media', *Homicide Studies* (Vol. 4, No. 4, 2000), pp. 364–99.

Amplification of Social or Emotional Effects of Terrorism

The second research question asks how traditional mass media influences the impact of terrorism through amplification or suppression of the social and psychological effects of terrorism.[132] It demands an analysis of the wider effects of media representation of terrorism on society, rather than on those who themselves might engage in terrorist activities.

As global broadcasting networks unequivocally distribute coverage and awareness of terrorist attacks to a much wider audience than would be immediately affected by the attack, the question of amplification is relatively straightforward. However, the amount of coverage terrorist attacks receive is often determined by how many media personnel are present to cover it. For example, there is less Western media coverage of attacks in non-Western parts of the world, at least in part due to a less commercialised media presence there. Whether this exposure to global coverage of terrorism overemphasises its ability to impact any society – thereby amplifying social levels of fear – is a more contested point.[133]

On one side of the argument, the government is seen to take advantage of the media's role in the amplification of fear. The media's culpability in this may come in the form of their accounts of terrorism and violence, which have the tendency to decontextualise complex events and focus the narrative on simplistic explanations. These often demonise an 'other', and feed into the 'politics of fear'. [134] Altheide points out that:

> The terms crime, victim, and fear are joined with news reports about terrorism to construct public discourse that reflects symbolic relationships about order, danger, and threat that may be exploited by political decision-makers. The news media's use of these terms is tied to a long-standing linkage of fear and victimization with crime and insecurity.[135]

He argues that the media is often exploited by official sources to spread fear through the framing of news stories on terrorism, to create both a public belief that 'things are out of control' and a collective need to concede to government intervention with stronger domestic security policy.[136] This pervasion of fear could be seen to negatively impact social cohesion as there is a collective sense of victimisation linked to terrorism which influences how people perceive everyday life, interact with each other and view events and experiences.[137]

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132. The social and psychological effects of terrorism include, but are not limited to, impact on public levels of fear and community cohesion.
133. Matusitz, *Terrorism and Communication*.
134. Altheide, 'Terrorism and the Politics of Fear'.
135. Altheide, *Terror Post-9/11 and the Media*, p. 43.
136. *Ibid*., p. 47; David L Altheide, 'The Mass Media, Crime and Terrorism', *Journal of International Criminal Justice* (Vol. 4, No. 5, 2006), pp. 982–97.
137. Altheide, *Terror Post-9/11 and the Media*, p. 56.

On the other side of the argument, terrorists are taking advantage of the amplification of fear through global media broadcasting of their attacks to a wider audience.[138] Terrorists rely on the media to publicise their actions and motivations; therefore, media reporting is part of their communications strategy.[139] There are also additional goals besides amplification of fear, such as polarising public opinion, encouraging recruitment, publication of demands, misleading enemies, communication with partners, obtaining hostage or counterterrorism information and more. Contemporary terrorists are often quite adept at media exploitation, even without the cooperation of journalists.[140] As Hoffman noted, however, disseminating fear to a wider audience is not unique to this globalised era's media capabilities. As far back as the Zealots and Assassins of the Crusades, acts of terrorism were designed to have far-reaching repercussions.

Sun Tzu, the ancient Chinese military strategist, famously stated: 'kill one, frighten 10,000'.[141] Now, with the advances of modern global media, tens of thousands quickly turn into millions.[142] The permeation of fear thus grows in modern society. This is due, at least in part, to the public perception of a dramatic increase in the threat posed by terrorism which has been perpetuated by media reporting, even though the likelihood of being directly affected is relatively small.[143]

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138. The amplification of fear is one of many reasons terrorists rely on the mass media. Other reasons include: polarising public opinion; encouraging recruitment; publication of demands; misleading enemies; communication with partners; and obtaining hostage/counterterrorism information.

139. Noemi Gal-Or, *International Cooperation to Suppress Terrorism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015).

140. Jesper Falkheimer, 'Crisis Communication and Terrorism: The Norway Attacks on 22 July 2011', *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* (Vol. 19, No. 1, 2014).

141. Cited in Henry Prunckun, 'The First Pillar of Terror – Kill One, Frighten Ten Thousand: A Critical Discussion of the Doctrinal Shift Associated with the "New Terrorism"', *Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles* (Vol. 87, No. 3, 2014), pp. 178–85.

142. Vertigans, *Terrorism and Societies*.

143. Scott Eliason, 'Murder-Suicide: A Review of the Recent Literature', *Journal of the American Academy of Psychiatry and the Law* (Vol. 37, No. 3, 2009), pp. 371–76.

III. Reproduction

B Y FOCUSING ON the academic literature regarding the reproduction of terrorist content in the traditional media, this chapter analyses the extent to which the mass media plays a role in the inadvertent advancement of terrorist objectives. Though this chapter is primarily concerned with media reporting in the UK from 2013 onwards, it also analyses the contentious approach of the UK government in censoring media coverage of attacks by the Provisional IRA, beginning in the 1980s.

As a follow-on analysis, this chapter also synthesises the literature looking at the extent to which the media is responsible for perpetuating or encouraging prejudice as a result of its reproduction of terrorist content. Finally, it examines whether this implicates the media as playing a role in cumulative radicalisation. For example, by framing their reporting on Islamic religious extremism in a certain manner, do the media inadvertently advance the radicalisation process of far-right extremists, who base some of their views on anti-immigrant sentiment?

Inadvertent Advancement of Terrorist Objectives

Though there is extensive debate regarding the extent to which the traditional mass media plays a role in inadvertent advancement, the fact that the media does play a role – willingly or unwillingly – is largely undisputed. Walter Laqueur has gone so far as to say that '[t]he media are the terrorists' best friend. The terrorist's act by itself is nothing; publicity is all'.[144] With this in mind, it could be argued that the media, by filling terrorism's need for publicity, encourages further terrorism through its reporting. However, holding the media responsible for terrorism, a complex problem with political roots, is not a valid claim. Instead, it can be said that the media contributes inadvertently, through a mimetic 'escalation' effect. The amount of coverage terrorist attacks receive in the news may become a source of encouragement for others to imitate the actions in search of the same level of publicity. This allows a small group of people to have an enormous amount of power in the social and political forums and keeps the issues alive.[145]

Nacos indicates that terrorists commit their acts of violence to achieve three main goals: to gain attention, recognition and some degree of respect or legitimacy. Media reporting can inadvertently advance these objectives by allowing them to achieve one or more of these goals. Terrorists can even leverage the coverage given to them by the media (and the impact this has on the social levels of fear and cohesion) to enter the political conversation.[146] This may

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144. Laqueur, *A History of Terrorism*, p. 104.
145. Zoe C W Tan, 'Media Publicity and Insurgent Terrorism: A Twenty-Year Balance Sheet', *International Communication Gazette* (Vol. 42, No. 1, 1988), pp. 3–32.
146. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*.

ultimately allow them to achieve their political goals. Thus, the mass media becomes a channel of communication between terrorists and the government, driven by social fear.[147] This suggests that the mass media is taking a role in the democratic process of governance, indicating the need for some form of regulation.

Self-imposed responsible reporting guidelines informed by an academic understanding of the underlying issues of the media–terrorism nexus seem to be the best solution to minimising the extent to which the media inadvertently advances terrorist objectives. It is not, however, only terrorists that exploit the media for the reproduction of their propaganda:[148] the government uses the media for messaging purposes, as it did through the censorship of IRA attacks in the UK media. In this case, the UK government controlled what journalists could say about the attacks and pressured them to take a certain political position on the motivation of attackers. This resulted in 'megaphone diplomacy' and brinkmanship, and culminated with the Broadcasting Ban of 1988, which threatened a faltering peace process.[149] The media, in this way, has been a victim of the battle which ensues between governments, terrorist organisations and fear.

Alternatively, UK media organisations can also play an active role in determining the discourse used and the framing of terrorism, which can result in amplifying or minimising the impact of fear. They can be successful moderators, if responsible reporting guidelines are used. Such guidelines are often more common with public television coverage rather than commercial.[150]

Perpetuation or Encouragement of Prejudices

Due to the accelerated pace of the news cycle and the lack of specialist knowledge within reporting on the complicated and diverse implications of terrorism, there is widespread agreement and concern that journalists and the traditional media reproduce terrorist content in media reporting. This can spread fear and confusion and often encourages prejudice or hostility, based on preconceived notions and unfounded opinions. This is especially true for 'breaking' news, given that there is little time to check facts and a complex information flow with a variety of external influencers is offering constant updates.[151] Poor verification practices and a lack of context in reporting can perpetuate harmful stereotypes, which can lead to a rise in alienation and prejudice – two factors which can help terrorists to boost their recruitment, in addition to

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147. Manuel R Torres-Soriano, 'Terrorism and the Mass Media After Al Qaeda: A Change of Course?', *Athena Intelligence Journal* (Vol. 3, No. 1, 2008), pp. 1–20.

148. Tan, 'Media Publicity and Insurgent Terrorism'.

149. Celeste Michelle Condit and Simon Cottle, 'Reporting the Troubles in Northern Ireland: Paradigms and Media Propaganda', *Critical Studies in Mass Communications* (Vol. 14, No. 3, 1997), pp. 282–96.

150. Muhammad Zubair Iqbal, 'The Media–Terrorism Symbiosis: A Case Study of Mumbai Attacks, 2008', *Asian Journal of Communication* (Vol. 25, No. 2, 2015), pp. 197–212.

151. These external influencers include: digital media; government messaging; third parties; and the terrorists themselves.

giving them free publicity. The responsible framing of media reporting on terrorism is key to minimising the reproduction of prejudice and stereotypes.[152]

Studies have been conducted on audience reactions to media coverage of terrorism. In these, the emotional and attitudinal responses of participants watching terrorism – and non-terrorism – related violent broadcasts were measured. Findings revealed that levels of anxiety, anger, stereotyping and enemy perception were higher after media exposure.[153] Coverage of terrorist attacks often dominates the news cycle after a new occurrence, although not all attacks receive the same levels of attention – determining factors such as the location of an attack, the targets and the number of fatalities can impact this.

Some argue that, given the recent focus on Islamist terrorism, the perpetrator's religion plays the most influential role in how much coverage is granted in the media. For example, one study found that the disparity of coverage of terrorism is so pronounced in the US that coverage of attacks perpetrated by Muslim terrorists received, on average, 357% more coverage than other attacks.[154] This disparate coverage can encourage the perpetuation of anti-Muslim prejudice and stereotyping, which can often reach a point in the US media that it has major implications for the formation of public opinion, and therefore on government policy.[155]

The media's portrayal of Islam as linked to terrorism, especially in the US and the UK, has been a hotly debated issue. A number of research projects have found that the media plays a vital role in associating Islam with terrorism in the wider public view, which encourages people to show prejudice against and to stereotype Muslim people.[156] Journalists, editors, broadcasters and even publishers must acknowledge the role that they play in the perpetuation of prejudice through their reporting of terrorism. What they say or write can impact the lives of thousands of people. Therefore, they have an ethical and moral responsibility to follow responsible guidelines.[157]

The general public are also accountable in terms of ensuring that they are consuming media reporting responsibly. Often, people are unaware of the challenges encountered in the reproduction of content on terrorist attacks or intelligence. This sensitivity and corresponding lack of clear information can be responsible for leading public discussion astray. To some

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152. Beckett, 'Fanning the Flames'.

153. Anat Shoshani and Michelle Slone, 'The Drama of Media Coverage of Terrorism: Emotional and Attitudinal Impact on the Audience', *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (Vol. 31, No. 7, 2008), pp. 627–40.

154. Erin M Kearns, Allison E Betus and Anthony F Lemieux, 'Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?', *Justice Quarterly* (Vol. 36, No. 6, 2019), pp. 985–1022.

155. Brigitte L Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, *Fueling our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007).

156. Sofia Hayati Yusof et al., 'The Framing of International Media on Islam and Terrorism', *European Scientific Journal* (Vol. 9, No. 8, 2013).

157. William E Biernatzki, 'Terrorism and Mass Media', *Communication Research Trends* (Vol. 21, No. 1, 2002).

degree, this can be mitigated through police and security authorities providing timely and accurate information. Due to both the public and journalistic limitation of accurate knowledge on terrorism, it is often unavoidable that, at least initially, reporting of terrorism will mesh with existing views and stereotypes to obtain credibility, thus expanding the role of the media in perpetuating and encouraging prejudices.[158]

Cumulative Radicalisation or Extremism

The concept of cumulative radicalisation is relatively new and still being debated, so it is difficult to determine the extent to which media coverage of terrorism might be encouraging or discouraging this effect. The concept of cumulative extremism, which is directly related to cumulative radicalisation, first gained traction in policy and academic analysis in 2006, after the Bradford riots in 2001 and the London bombings in 2005.[159] It is a concept which suggests that one form of extremism can feed off and amplify other forms of extremism, and it can also be used in reference to the ability of opposing illiberal camps to radicalise an otherwise liberal democratic public. Thus far, the term has been applied to far-right extremist responses to Islamist religious extremism, and vice versa. The connectivity between different forms of extremism is still a nascent area of study and needs to be further researched. However, a Demos study indicates that following a terrorist attack, there is a measurable increase in 'revenge' attacks for a short period of time.[160] Care must be taken, however, not to assume that this short-term escalation is itself indicative of a self-sustaining cumulative process.

The Demos study has been the most significant study published thus far on the impact of cumulative radicalisation in the UK. In its analysis of spiralling violence between Islamist and right-wing extremism groups in the UK since the murder of Lee Rigby in 2013, the study notes that this relationship is not necessarily dichotomous: it can also be applied to other forms of extremism. This interconnected increase in violence levels has caused public and policy concern. Due to this, academics have increased investigation of the possible cumulative or reciprocal effects in radicalisation or extremism, but further research is still needed before there is practical value of this concept for policymaking.[161] Further research is also needed to determine the extent of the role of the media in this phenomenon. It is still not known whether the perpetuation of prejudices or stereotypes in reporting contributes to this cumulative effect, either in the general public or in those already committed to extreme ideologies.

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158. Philip Jenkins, *Images of Terror: What We Can and Can't Know About Terrorism* (London and New York, NY: Routledge, 2017).

159. Matthew Feldman and Mark Littler, 'Tell MAMA Reporting 2013/14 Anti-Muslim Overview, Analysis and "Cumulative Extremism"', Teesside University Centre for Fascist, Anti-Fascist and Post-Fascist Studies, July 2014; Roger Eatwell, 'Community Cohesion and Cumulative Extremism in Contemporary Britain', *Political Quarterly* (Vol. 77, No. 2, 2006), pp. 204–16.

160. *Ibid.*

161. Jamie Bartlett and Jonathan Birdwell, 'Cumulative Radicalisation Between the Far-Right and Islamist Groups in the UK: A Review of Evidence', Demos, November 2013, p. 3.

Conclusion

A S THIS LITERATURE review reveals, there are many considerations when examining the role of the media in impacting the threat of terrorism, the amplification of fear, or the inadvertent advancement of terrorist objectives. One of the areas focused on in this paper is the debate on media reporting and social contagion of terrorism or imitation of terrorism. Social contagion theory has been used to explain the way in which behaviours can be transferred within a group of like-minded individuals or communities, in much the same way a virus is transferred in epidemiology. However, the concept of contagion remains more controversial than mimetic theory. This paper finds the argument for imitation to be more substantiated than contagion theory, with the media having the potential to contribute to imitation of methods or to encourage attacks due to the desire for similar notoriety. Relatively few people are directly affected by a terrorist attack, so most people learn this behaviour from viewing terrorism through some version of media. However, the media's relationship to terrorism is at its strongest a contributory one. This is due to the complex and non-linear nature of radicalisation, including a diversity of influential factors, as well as to the lack of consistency of effect across individuals or time.

In sum, while there is disagreement within the academic community on the applicability of both social contagion and mimetic theories to terrorism, there is significant empirical evidence in the literature to suggest that the media can and sometimes does contribute to radicalisation, recruitment, mobilisation to violence and imitation of terrorist attack methods. However, although media reporting may contribute to the threat from some individuals, it does not impact everyone all the time or in the same way. Furthermore, the traditional media can contribute to the negative impacts of terrorism – it has the power to both amplify and suppress the social and psychological effects of terrorism (for example, levels of fear or social cohesion) – but is not consistently responsible for either impacts.

Media coverage of terrorism in any form amplifies the effects of terrorism, because it broadcasts attacks to a larger audience than would be immediately affected. However, elements of discourse and framing can reduce the negative impact of reporting on terrorism. Analysis also indicates that inadvertent advancement does occur, due to the communication of terrorism through reporting. In this context, this paper proposes that different elements of inadvertent advancement can be mitigated by responsible and ethical reporting practices. Such practices can help to ensure that inaccurate information, which spreads disproportionate fear, does not get reproduced, and that the media's framing of terrorism incidents does not encourage the perpetuation of prejudices and stereotypes.

There is a continuum of opinions which place the media somewhere between culpable and victim to terrorism. This paper finds that the most substantiated position lies in the middle. A symbiotic relationship exists between the media and terrorism, and there is an ongoing struggle

between influencing factors (such as government messaging, terrorist objectives and public consumerism) which pressure the traditional mass media to report terrorism in certain ways. It is therefore essential that responsible reporting guidelines and ethical practices, alongside more extensive training on the complexity of terrorism issues, informs the discourse used and the way in which journalists and editors choose to frame their reporting on terrorism. These choices have ripple effects which can have an impact on the amplification of fear, the reproduction of prejudice, and the inadvertent advancement of terrorist objectives. The key is to find a balanced approach to reducing negative impact, increasing positive impact, and enshrining media independence and the public's right to know.

About the Author

Jessica White is a research fellow in RUSI's Terrorism and Conflict group. Her expertise encompasses counterterrorism and countering violent extremism methods, as well as gender mainstreaming in programme design, implementation and evaluation. She conducts research on a range of topics, including the far right and terrorism in the media and online. She is currently completing her PhD in the Department of Political Science and International Studies at the University of Birmingham. She holds an MSc in Conflict Resolution from Kingston University London and a BA in Political Science and International Studies from the University of Kansas. Before beginning her PhD, Jessica spent six years as an intelligence and Arabic language analyst in the US Navy.