

Terrorism and the media:
Countering one means collaborating with the other

by Tim Dunne

The news media, by the tenets of their profession and the fundamental nature of their work, are drawn to terrorist events as moths to a flame. Negligent, careless or irresponsible reporting, however, can prolong an event, or result in the injury or death of innocent people and security personnel. Security forces, therefore, must be able to work with journalists; to marginalize or exclude them from an event would be to force terrorists to escalate the level of violence to a point where it cannot be ignored or shielded.

Those who use terrorism as a political tool are increasingly aware of the capability of generally-accepted mass media and non-traditional media to increase the public impact and to raise the level of worldwide public knowledge of their existence, ambitions and methods. As such, media coverage is planned and incorporated as a “force multiplier.”

Modern beginnings

Modern first generation terrorism began in 1886, when German immigrant, August Spies, wrote in the Anarchist newspaper, the *Arbeiter Zeitung*, “a pound of dynamite is worth a bushel of bullets.” On 4 May of that year, 180 police arrived at Chicago’s Haymarket Square to break up a labour meeting when someone threw a bomb, killing seven policemen and wounding sixty-seven. The police attacked the crowd, killing an undisclosed number and injuring more than 200. Anarchists went on to use explosives in France, Italy, Spain, Germany Austria, and the United States.

Second generation terrorism extended beyond borders and marked the beginning of institutionalized international terrorism. Though its roots are found in the late 1940s when the British Labour Government attempted to hand over the mandate for self-government to the people populating Palestine, it began on 22 July 1968, when three armed Palestinian terrorists of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine hijacked an Israeli passenger airliner flying from Rome to Tel Aviv.

Subsequently, European university students and disaffected people impatient because of ineffective street protests and confrontations, began to bomb, shoot and kidnap. This new manifestation of personal and clandestine violence spread quickly across Europe, America, Turkey, and even into Canada.

Third generation terrorists employed the use of the mass media to promote an awareness of the nature, aims, objectives, and operations of their groups. Terrorist TV was born 4:30 a.m., 5 September 1972, when five members of Black September, posing as Olympic athletes, climbed the two-meter fence surrounding the Olympic Village at Munich and captured the attention of a worldwide television audience of 500 million.

Fourth generation uses unconventional weapons and weapons of mass destruction, such as gaseous toxins and airliners as missiles to attract the public attention to its aims, objectives and philosophies.

Tokyo's subway system provided the gateway, when the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyo released sarin nerve gas on 20 March 1995.

Al Qaeda launched into notoriety with the first attack against a target on American soil since Pearl Harbour – the World Trade Centre (WTC) bombing on 26 February 1993 by Umar Abd al-Rahman. The second attack on the WTC (11 September 2001) brought the terrorist campaign against the United States into the nation itself, proving that being surrounded by oceans is no longer a deterrent to attack.

The events of 9/11 demonstrate how much “bang” can be achieved for how little “buck.” Al Qaeda believes that by provoking the U.S. and its Arab allies into indiscriminate acts of oppression, they will turn them into recruiting agents for their cause. Success depends less on the initial attack than on instigating an escalatory spiral, controlled by the terrorists themselves.

If terrorists can successfully draw democracies into this spiral and control its upward acceleration, they will begin to dictate the terms of the encounter. Success becomes a matter of inflicting losses, enduring harms, and gambling that the enemy has less endurance than they do.

Media management

Whether we like it or not, the mass media has more impact than most other agencies in how these events are perceived by the outside world. Their coverage is instant and can be worldwide if the circumstances warrant.

Past interaction between the news media and terrorist movements suggests an almost symbiotic relationship. Though voluntary self-restraint is the general media's preferred policy on terrorism coverage – major media organizations have adopted guidelines for their staff with the aim of preventing the more obvious pitfalls – nonetheless, terrorists are continually attempting to manipulate and exploit the free media for their own ends.

Competition between media organizations only heightens this: those who perpetrate terrorist acts understand this and carefully script and choreograph to attract the coverage they want. Western media cannot ignore an event that has been fashioned specifically for their needs.

Consequently, when media start covering spectacular events, security forces must have someone there who can take charge of the journalists, provide them with accurate information and ensure that their journalistic needs are met. An effective media relations program must begin prior to any terrorist or hostage-taking incident, and will go a long way to demonstrate to journalists that this is a criminal act and not the efforts of so-called freedom fighters.

Government, police, military and security forces need a more productive approach than the open hostility journalists normally receive. There are consequences to this cold reception: if none of the “good guys” will speak to them, then representatives of the “bad guys” will. This isn't media irresponsibility, but the failure of government forces to recognize the need for a strong media relations response to the crisis. There is a tendency for security officials to disregard journalists and marginalize them, largely based on fear of the immense power and influence of journalism. Rather, they should engage and include them.

Whether the media should be able to cover terrorist or hostage situations requires the reconciliation of a number of competing interests, including a free press to inform the public, victim safety and the risk of exacerbating the challenges for the police. In response to these requirements, the U.S. Department of Justice, based on the principles of minimum intrusiveness and complete, non-inflammatory coverage, made a number of recommendations, including:

- § When necessary, use a media pool to cover the situation
- § Self-impose restrictions on lighting, use of cameras and other special news-gathering technologies
- § Limit direct interviews with hostage-takers during an incident
- § Avoid inquiries to reveal tactical information detrimental to police operations
- § Delay the reporting of details which may inflame the situation
- § Rely on official government spokespersons, when available
- § Balance the coverage of self-serving terrorist propaganda with contrasting information from official sources.

Government and security authorities should adopt an assertive media relations strategy that capitalizes on the news media's reach and impact, and one that promotes a strong complimentary working relationship with professional journalists. This must begin before any terrorist event happens; media should be involved in training exercises, not to cover the preparations, but to play within the scenario.

Security personnel may ask, why not simply silence the media and not give them access?

Of all the foundations of a free and democratic society, the most basic freedom is to be informed. If freedom of the press and freedom of expression by the media are sacrificed in the name of combating terrorism then we have allowed terrorists to destroy one of the key foundations in our democratic society, and have, in a major way, helped them to achieve their goals.

To close the door on media coverage would be to deny the terrorist the coverage that they so desperately want. However, this would effectively force the terrorists to escalate the level of violence to assure that western media cannot ignore what they are trying to achieve.

Conclusion

As the public depends on the media to learn about events and issues, journalists are accorded a privileged position in their coverage of events, incidents, crises and emergencies. With privilege and authority comes a commensurate degree of responsibility and accountability. Concurrently, public and police officials must also take steps to hold news personnel accountable when they exercise their prerogatives irresponsibly. To do otherwise could result in losing control of a situation with the potential of dire consequences.

Tim Dunne is a retired military public affairs officer who served on peacekeeping missions in Israel, Egypt, Syria and the Balkans, and with NATO's peace support missions in Bosnia Herzegovina, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, Albania and Kosovo. He is currently the military affairs advisor with the Nova Scotia Department of Intergovernmental Affairs. The opinions are his own, and are drawn from a more comprehensive paper available electronically (cpc@eastlink.ca).