MASS MEDIA AND TERRORISM: DECONSTRUCTING THE RELATIONSHIP

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Abstract

Issue of terrorism came to surface in this early twenty first century through a number of acts violence that have killed hundreds and injured thousands of people. At the same time, these events have been dominated the mass media contents. Principally, mass media and issue of terrorism are inseparable. This paper examines the relationship between mass media and terrorism. It is done through the deconstruction of the concept of terrorism and how terrorism is understood as a communicational process. Further, this paper examines how mass media relates to terrorism.

Keywords : *terrorism, communication, mass media*

Introduction

Terrorism has become a global issue since the attacks of the World Trade Centre twin towers in New York and Pentagon building in Washington D.C. on 11 September 2001, famously known as 9/11. More than 3,000 people were killed and hundreds of people injured in the attack. Some big terrorist acts occurred since then, namely Bali bombing (12 October 2002), the bombing of a harbour by MILF in Davao, Philippines (2 April 2003), the bombing of some housing complexes where many international citizens live, in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia (12 May 2003), the bombing of Australian Embassy in Jakarta, Indonesia (9 September 2004), and the bombing of public place and bus in London, England (7 July 2005).

The latest terrorist attack occurred in Mumbai India. On 26 November 2008, approximately 30 people with automatic weapons and grenades launched attacks in nine places, including Chattrapati Shivaji Terminus train station, Leopold Cafe, Taj Mahal Hotel, Oberoi Hotel, Jewish Center and Cama Hospital. This attack had killed 160 people (including 15 Indian police) and injured 400 people.

What follow these events are globalized coverage of the events by variety of news media institutions. National as well as global media networks continuously reported the events. For several days, for instance, television stations reported the event live from the scenes in Mumbay. The visualizations and sounds of the shooting between the anti terrorist force and terrorists, the explosions that occurred at top floor of the hotel, the dead and injured victims and the desperate faces of rescuers who were looking for survived victims and families who expected to see their loved ones alive have created a drama to all audiences who watched the events on television. At the same time, printed media, like newspapers and news magazines, developed analytical reportage that attempted to explain the causes and impacts of these acts of terror. In Lewis words when describing the twin tower attack in New York, 'the mediated visions of a chaotic and terrible death, of burning and shattered bodies, and of destruction of our towering symbols of progress and social order have become etched into a new consciousness, a new fear that is both pessimistic and strangely ennobled by the imperatives of a heroic defence. 'Terrorism' becomes the rubric for an insidious and

darkly imagined power - the risk conditions of an annihilation which randomly assaults the integrity of our history, institutions, community and being' (2005, p. 21).

How global community's perception of the terrorism events then is influenced by the way the media represent the issue in their reportage. At a particular point, these terrorism events that have occurred in other part of the world have triggered the discussion of the meaning of terrorism. There has been a discourse among political analysts that meanings or definitions of terrorism and terrorists are determined by Western (America) governments who have the interest to introduce the values of western democracy. Thus, who the terrorists are depends on the interpretation of the West. At the same time, the relationship between terrorism and media is important to be contested as there has been a growing understanding that the media contributes to the escalation impact of terrorism. It is believed that terrorism can be regarded as a communication process and that media can be regarded as part of this process.

The act of terror and its relation with mass media raises some interesting questions. What is terrorism and how does it different from ordinary crime? How terrorism is understood as a communication process? And why has the media been said as the 'oxygen' of terrorism as stated by Margaret Thatcher, the former England Prime Minister?

This paper examines the relation between terrorism and media. The analysis is focused on how the perpetrators of acts of terrorism have taken advantages of the globalised media networks to disseminate their goals and how the role of media, whether realised or not, has supported these acts of terrorism.

Understanding Terrorism

The attempt to define the meaning of terrorism has become controversy among scholars and political analysts. Different analysts, institutions and even governments have their own way and context of giving meaning to the concept. As Truman notes, 'academicians and theorists have fared no better at defining the word than governments and the experts they employ. This has led to a multiplicity of possibilities and has created its own kind of chaos about the word '(2003). On one level, the definitional difficulty is rooted in the evaluation of one and the same terrorist act as either a despicable or a justifiable means to political ends, as either the evil deed of ruthless terrorists or the justifiable act of freedom fighters and/or warriors of god. On another level, controversies over the definition of terrorism are rooted in the disagreement about how to classify the use of force by politically motivated groups or individuals on one hand and by governments on the other (Nacos 2002). It is argued that basically the definition of the meaning of terrorism is culturally constructed. By this I mean that the concept of terrorism develops within a broader cultural context that may involve historical, political and social factors which change from time to time. Martha Crenshaw believes that the task of definition through a study of the historical and political contexts that enclose a scenario involves, in her words, 'transforming "terrorism" into a useful analytical tool rather than a polemic tool' (Crenshaw 1995; Whitaker 2004). Nevertheless some common characteristics from various definitions are identifiable. If so, what constructs terrorism? What makes terrorism different from warfare or ordinary crime?

The usage of the concept of terrorism has changed for several times. In relation to the historical context, definition of terrorism is only really intelligible, according to Crenshaw, if the enfolding contexts of time and place are taken into account (Whittaker 2004). Historically, the word 'terrorism' comes from terror regime - or what Nacos (2002) calls as violent actions from the state - that occurred in the wake of the French Revolution in the 1790s. During this period, terrorism meant the mass guillotining of the aristocracy and other real or perceived enemies of the state. In the nineteenth century, the concept of terrorism broadened to include violent actions from below, like the assassinations of prominent politicians by anarchists. In the twentieth century, terrorism came to mean mostly political violence perpetrated by non-state actor, such as autonomous or state-sponsored groups and individuals (Vetter and Pearlstein: Hoffman 1998).

Politically, most of the acts of terrorism are

meant to reach political goals. It is clear, for instance, in the case of Bali bombing in 2002 by radical group called Jemaah Islamiyah that had used Islamic values like *Jihad* to justify its act of terror. For the international world, the attack in the tourists resort where many foreigners from overseas came to spent their leisure times, especially from western countries, symbolizes the dislike of this group who claimed that the 'West' had oppressed Islam or Moslems. They claimed that globalization and capitalism are new forms of colonization sponsored by western countries towards the third world and Moslem countries. At the same time, to Indonesian government, the attack represented an attempt by this group to politically foster the government to change the governmental system into Islamic governmental system, based on al-Quran (the holy book of Moslems) and the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad.

The political goal of the act of terrorism has become one of the characteristics of the concept. David J. Whitaker, in an attempt to present some criteria of terrorism, says that, terrorism is a premeditated, politically motivated use of violence or its threat to immediate or coerces a government of the general public;… power is intrinsically at the root of political violence - its acquisition, its manipulation and its employment to effect changes;… goals may be understood generally as political, social, ideological, or religious, otherwise terrorists would be thought of as delinquent criminals (2004:1-2).

Horgan (2005) also states that terrorism involves the use or threat of use of violence as a means of attempting to achieve some sort of effect within a political context. Many terrorist groups like Basque Fatherland and Liberty (ETA) and Red Army Faction (RAF) are formed to achieve political goals. ETA, for instance, determines the freedom and Marxism as its principles and against and pressure Spanish government through the act of terror. ETA also sabotages government in the Basque province by creating economic crisis and terror in the province. Thus, politically the act of terrorism is deployed to suppress or attack particular government.

The perpetrators of terrorism acts can be individual as in the case of Timothy McVeigh who bombed a federal building at the Oklahoma City; group like Jemaah Islamiyah who is in charge of several bombings in Bali and Jakarta; and possibly a state such as Libya which sponsored Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine which was accused for the bombing of Pan Am Flight 103 in 1988.

The meaning of terrorism is also socially constructed. In this sense, terrorism is different and distinct from murder, assault, arson, destruction of property, or the threat of the same, primarily because of the impact of terrorist violence and destruction reaches more than the immediate targeted victims (Tuman 2003). In most cases, the immediate victims caused by the act of violence are the media for the terrorists to convey their message toward the existed government or a state.

In short, the definition of terrorism develops in a cultural process where symbolic interaction between terrorists, acts of violence, victims as immediate target and government agencies as a state form are taken place. The dynamic relationship between each element which occurs in a different time and place has formed variety of definitions and meanings of terrorism.

Since there have been many attempts to define the meaning of terrorism, some terrorism analysts have tried to synthesize the meaning by observing and analysing terrorism events. Brian Jenkins, who has been working as a consultant on terrorism and counter terrorism security, gives the most basic and simple definition of terrorism. He suggested that *terrorism is the use or the threatened use of force designed to bring about a political change*. Some prefer Jenkins' definition because they find comfort and comprehensiveness in its simplicity - for terrorism here is political violence- regardless of other motives, and irrespective of the nature of the target of the violence (civilian, law enforcement, or military personnel) or the perpetrator of the terror act (whether an individual, group, criminal enterprise, or state) (Tuman 2003). Despite its simplicity, the definition gives broad interpretation to those who have interest in using the concept. For instance, by not limiting and clearly identifies who the perpetrator of the terror act is, one could claim that a state can also become a terrorist, like what Nacos (2002) and

Tuman (2003) call as terrorism above. Compare the definition to that of Martha Crenshaw who says, '*Terrorism is a conspirational style of violence calculated to alter the attitudes and behaviour of multitude audiences. It targets the few in a way that claims the u of the many. Terrorism is not mass or collective violence but rather the direct activity of small groups*' (in Tuman 2003). Crenshaw's definition denies the possibility of the involvement of a state or a person that can perform the act of terror as shown by Libya that supported the bombing of Pan Am Flight 105 and Tymothy McVeigh who bombed the federal building in Oklahoma City. Nonetheless, the simplicity of Jenkin's definition also becomes the weakness as it invites debate over what constitutes political in this concept. Another issue is also how to classify violence that involve act of terrorisms.

Indonesia government, following the Bali bombing event, issued Terrorism Elimination Act No. 15/2003. Chapter 6 of this act defines the definition of act of terrorism as follows: everyone who purposively uses violence or threat of violence and creates terrorised atmosphere or fear toward wider public or causes massive victims by confiscate freedom or cause death to other people, or cause damage or destroyed toward vital and strategic objects or environment or public or international facilities.

Another synthesized meaning of terrorism has been given by A. P. Schmid, who identifies several definition and draw some characteristic that form the concept. Schmid offers the following comprehensive definition of terrorism: terrorism is an anxiety-inspiring method of repeated violent action, employed by (semi) clandestine individual, group, or state actors, for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are not the main target. The immediate human targets of violence are generally chosen randomly (targets of opportunity) or selectively (representative or symbolic targets) from a target population, and serve as message generators. Threat – and violence-based communication process between terrorist (organization), (imperilled) victims, and main targets are used to manipulate the main target

(audience(s)), turning it into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention, depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought. (Horgan 2005)

In the case of the reason of terrorism, Schmid's definition is similar with Whitaker (2004) and Horgan (2005) who recommends us to define the meaning in terms of methods used which is meant for more than just 'political' reason. It can be political, ideological, social or religious. The definition also acknowledges the variety of terrorism actors, which include the state and single actor. In terms of terrorism actors, Walter Laquer also argues that terrorism can be perpetrated by the state and state agencies (1987). He classifies terrorism into top-down and bottom up terrorism. In this context, it is possible that state agencies activities like the CIA's assaults on state agencies and involvement in the political processes of Nicaragua, the Sudan and various parts of the Middle East are not entirely dissimilar to the activities of national and international terrorist organizations that have been sponsored by specific states such as Libya, Taliban Afghanistan and Saudi Arabia (Lewis 2005).

Schmid also emphasizes how the victims, who are usually not the main target, become the instrument to increase the fear of the act of terror to the main target, which is usually government of a state or group. In this context, terrorism can also be seen as a communication process where the terrorists send their messages through the act of violence they deploy.

Compare to Jenkin's definition which is familiar with its simplicity, Schmid's definition is comprehensive and more complex. In this definition of terrorism, Schmid very clearly states exactly what he means by terrorism, allowing for objectives including terror, demands, and attention as well as examining the means by which objectives are accomplished in intimidation, coercion, or propaganda (Tuman 2003). For the purpose of this paper, Schmid's definition has led to a better understanding of how to look at terrorism as a communication process. How terrorism is understood as a communication process? This issue is discussed in the next section.

Terrorism as a Communication Process

It is important to understand that the violence and destruction associated with terrorism have always been about something greater than the immediate impact they have on their victims. Why? Because if we only see the attack toward nine places in Mumbay India was merely an attempt to kill people as many as the perpetartors could, than we can refer terrorism as merely a kind of murder or a destruction of public property. But, if we look at this terrorism act as an attempt by the terrorist to gain attention of the government and obtain greater goals, then we have seen terrorism as a communication process. In the case of the Bombing of Paddy's and Sari night clubs in Kuta Bali in 2001, Jemaah Islamiyah claimed its terror act was to show their dislike toward western government that had marginalised Moslem world and Indonesian government who in the perspective of this radical Islamic group was considered secular government.

There is no doubt that communication is the central element of terrorism as Nacos (2002) claims. It is because to convey their message to the main target which is usually a government or a state, terrorists create a situation through the use of violence toward immediate victims. The selection of immediate victims is to broaden the impact of their action and to get attention of the existing government. As Schmid and de Graf have pointed out, for the terrorist, the "immediate victim is merely instrumental, the skin of a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience. As such, an act of terrorism is in reality an act of communication. For the terrorist, the message matters, not the victim" (Schmid and de Graaf 1982, 14). In relation to this issue, Tuman (2003) argues: A terrorist sends a message to a target audience (the public, a nation-state, an organization, or the government) by engaging an act of violence or destruction. The message is not the violence or destruction itself; rather, it is encoded within such activity. In this way, terrorism as a communication process has a rhetorical dimension that is independent of the simple coercion associated with violence for its serve to provoke discourse among target audiences. Or it may be a symbolic expression of the terrorist's rage or a demonstration of

revenge. The process of encoding may depend upon the symbolic nature of the violence and destruction, as well as the potential for using different media to convey such message.

The target audience decodes this message by relying upon the methods and tools it has for constructing its own sense of reality. These methods and tools may refer back to language and word choice, to discourse about the terrorism-often suggested by official government interpretations and responses of and to the message-and to discourse about how receivers of a mass-mediated message are to interpret and/or understand symbols of all kinds.

In light of the understanding above, what are the objectives to be achieved from communicating? Schmid's definition of terrorism provides some guidance here. At one level, it is possible that the terrorist may be looking to create terror, panic, anxiety, and chaos; or possibly to attract attention to the issue the government, institution or world has ignored. In any of these situations, the real goal of the communicated message in terrorism may be considered persuasion: to persuade audience members that chaos and fear will be their lot in life, to persuade them to pay attention to an issue they have ignored, or to persuade them to do something they might not otherwise do.

It is also noteworthy that acts of terrorism principally transmit their messages through symbolic representation, which is part of communication process. The attacks toward the twin tower and Pentagon buildings which symbolised the prosperity and military force of the United States in the 9/11 act of terror indicate how the perpetrators, which according to the US government was carried out by Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaeda, conveyed their messages that even a super power state like the US was fragile and unsafe from the terror attacks. In the case of the bombings of two night clubs in Bali, JW Marriott Hotel, and Australian Embassy in Jakarta, these symbolic acts of terror were launched to show the dislike toward western government (America government in particular) that were represented by the choices of places.

The acts of violence or terror themselves may also symbolize certain attempt the perpetrators try to accomplish. In the case of Timothy

McVeigh and the Oklahoma City Bombing, Mc Veigh's act was symbolic of his rage over the suffering inflicted by his own government. At trial, prosecutors made much of the T-shirt McVeigh had worn on the day he drove the truck to the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. On the shirt were written Thomas Paine's famous words: "The tree of liberty must be refreshed from time to time with the blood of patriots and tyrants" (Tuman 2003, p. 50).

Thus, in terrorism, symbolism may be found in the act of violence and destruction itself, in the implements and tools of terror, or even in the spesific targets of the terror act-all of which significantly contribute to the manner in which we construct what terrorism means for us. These symbolic acts of terror are exacerbated through mass media and new media technology. The need to inform public what is considered important by mass media institutions have brought advantages to the terrorist groups. The relation between mass media and terrorism is therefore further discussed in the next section.

Mass Media and Terrorism

Mass Media has been described by Campbell as "the cultural industries-the channels of communication-that produce and distribute songs, novels, newspapers, movies, internet services, and other cultural products to large numbers of people" (20003, p.6). Based on this definition, mass media can be seen as a conduit through which information about culture is transmitted to potentially sizable audiences. Mass media, news media in particular, work through the dissemination of messages to public. In countries where democratic values are upheld and people have the right to seek, own, and disseminate information, the responsibility to inform public has made the press to freely inform news without afraid of being banned by the government. This condition, added with the fact that mass media as economic institutions, have made the strong relationship between mass media and terrorism. Terrorist groups have taken this advantage to bring their acts of terror to a higher level by emerging threats and terror toward government via the help of news media.

Understanding entertainment media as one of the types of mass media, we can then see an act of terror within a frame of a drama. As Hoffman argues, "here is a strong theatrical element in most terrorism" (1999, p.132). It can be said that terrorism is a stage upon which political 'drama' is performed for specific audiences, (national or international publics, particular groups or individuals, or political elites) to achieve particular goals which is usually against the government.

Adopting the media triangle proposed by Lewis (2005), it is understood that the theatrical impact is created through the pressing crowd of reporters, camera crew and technicians sent to bring an event on to the screen. Media institutions have to compete with each other to give the best coverage of the event. At the same time, the media institutions have to consider various policies that come from the owner of the media, editorial board and government. They may also need to pay attention to unwritten policy that comes from society or interest groups. In some developing countries like Indonesia, interest groups can force their interest to the media which affect the way the media report an issue. Media institutions also need to consider their readers which later determine how the media convey their message. What cannot be ruled out, according to Whitaker, is at least the temptation to make terrorist incidents so presentable in media-conventional terms that objectivity may take second place to the visually gripping (2004). It is sometimes remarked that the intentions of terrorists and of the media are similar. Both deal with publicity and will do their best to keep the story alive and exciting. Both try to personalize the drama of the incident by describing the terrorist-actors briefly and making more of the emotions of victims and onlookers- their anguish, fear and anger.

What is presented in the media contributes to how the audience form their opinion of the event. Media texts, added with information from past history of similar event have become the context of how audience respond to the terrorist event. At the same time, media responsibility to inform the public has given the terrorist the way to gain publicity. The rapid growth of telecommunication industries these days has resulted in events on one part of the world can be seen by audience at the

exact same time on the other part through television set that receives signal via telecommunication satellite. The Gulf War in the 1990s is a good example of this and CNN Television Network determines itself as the global key player in media industries as the news television station. Through media, terrorists can increase the level of threat which later creates wider state of fear toward both population and government. They can exploit far-reaching, instant, and global media networks and information highways to carry the news of their violence along with what has been called "propaganda of the deed". Thus, when terrorists hurl a rocket into Great Britain's foreign spy headquarters, bomb the hull of the USS Cole, hold hostages in a remote part of the Philippines, or hijack an Indian airliner, they do not simply commit violence-they execute premeditated terrorism that virtually assures a great deal of news coverage (Nacos 2002).

This publicity aspect of mass media, somehow has put mass media in the dilema when reporting issue of terrorism as it benefits the perpetrators of acts of terror at the same time. In the case of Timothy McVeigh, years following the bombing and preceding his execution in June 2001, he expressed deep satisfaction that his deed had received attention. He told an interviewer, "I don't think there is any doubt that the selected the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City blast was heard around the world." McVeigh also revealed that he selected the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City for his attack because it had "plenty of open space around it, to allow for the best possible news photos and television footage." Again, McVeigh statement proves the relationship between mass media and terrorism.

Nevertheless, mass media also plays different roles in dealing with issue of terrorism. The government, for instance, also needs the media to inform society what sorts of policies are taken to overcome the issue and how the government will prevent similar event occurs in the future. There are times where government and media work together to deal with terrorism issue. When the most wanted terrorist in Indonesia, Dr. Azahari, was killed in Batu, Malang in November 2005, Indonesian Police Headquarter used mass media to announce the result. The police also informed that it still pursue the second most wanted terrorist, Noordin Moh Top. The coverage of the event carries various meanings to audience. To the government, the coverage signifies the seriousness of the government to overcome the terrorism network in Indonesia and that it will protect the society.

On the other hand, the mass media, as part of its role as the watchdog of the state, plays its role to remain the government the importance of having a standardized policy to deal with the issue seriously as terrorism is a threat toward social, political and cultural existence of civilised society. In mass society in which direct contact and communication between the governors and the governed are no longer possible, the media provide the lines of communication between public offices and the general public. American mass media, for instance, has become the partner of Bush government when he declared war against terrorism. It is exemplified in the research result by Todd M. Schaefer when he analysed the framing of the US Embassy bombings and September 11 Attacks in African and US Newspapers (Norris, Kern and Just 2003). Schaefer discovered that US Newspapers tended to cover the effect of, and retaliation for, the September 11 attacks, and more coverage was devoted to public officials, politics, and international relations. It means that the mass media has taken position along with the government in dealing with the issue of terrorism.

Thus, it can be claimed that mass media principally plays different roles in reporting issue of terrorism. There are cultural, economic and political contexts that may affect the way mass media represents issue of terrorism.

Conclusion

Defining a concept such as terrorism is an important first step in seeing how terrorism is fundamentally a communication process. To convey their message to the main target which is usually a government or a state, terrorists create a situation through the use of violence toward immediate victims. The selection of immediate victims is to broaden the impact of their action and to get attention of the existing government. Terrorism as an act of violence and destruction can also be un-

derstood by the symbolic value attached to the terror act.Therefore, terrorism is principally communicational.

The relationship between mass media and terrorism is strong as terrorism uses the global media networks to convey its message and create the state of fear toward wider audience for various purposes through the use of method of violence. Media, on the other hand, reports terrorism extensively and continuously as this issue has high news values. In reporting the issue, media institutions must take into account historical or cultural, political and social factors. Media audience actively 'read' the news based on their previous references of the event to make sense of the meaning presented in the media text.

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