

Terrorists in the News, as Reflected in Three News Magazines, 1980-1988

By Brian K. Simmons and David N. Lowry

A content analysis of 185 articles sampled from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* in the 1980 to 1988 period finds that the "terrorist" label is used in two-thirds of the stories. "Gunman," "guerrilla," and "attacker" are among the other terms used, but less frequently. The "terrorist" label is more often used when Americans are caught in events, or when people opposed to American foreign policy are involved in events.

► Many researchers have come to see terrorism as a form of communication. Thus, it is necessarily worthwhile to examine its communicative impacts. This is primarily done by investigating the manner in which the media reports the terrorist's act.

The earliest empirical research into the media's labeling of terrorism was done by Epstein.¹ He conducted a content analysis of the coverage of political violence in Latin America during the period 1970-1971 in three major United States newspapers. The purpose was to specifically examine how the term "terrorism" was used. His results showed that the term was used on the average only 21% of the time. Most often the term was used to refer to forms of "left-wing extremism," such as political kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations by antigovernment organizations. And, significantly, 62% of the time the three newspapers used the term to describe an event which could have been described using another term. In only one-fifth of the cases did the term apply to cases of government violence.

The next serious research into the matter was conducted by Schmid and de Graaf.² They surveyed several international journalists and editors asking them what kinds of political violence their medium commonly labeled as terrorism. They found that nine different actions were given the label of terrorism. In order of decreasing frequency they were: hijacking for coercive bargaining, bombing, assassination, hostage-taking, guerrilla warfare, hijacking for escape, torture, kidnapping, and sabotage. While revealing, the authors state that their sample size (n=27) was too small to be of anything other than indicative value. Still, their work provides a glimpse into the mindset of the mass media.

Weimann provided the first micro-investigation of the media's labeling of terrorism.³ The basic assumption of the study was that the con-

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tent elements of the media's coverage should be considered. He hypothesized that an inverse correlation existed between the geographical distance, political distance, and rate of violence of a political event and the positive evaluative loading of the label used in the press to describe the terrorists. His content analysis of 381 terrorist incidents in the Israel's major newspapers from January 1979 to December 1981 revealed that the most effective factor in determining the use of a positive or negative label is political distance. In addition, it was found that a wide variety of labels were used to describe what his study defined as terrorism. Weimann's study is useful. However, it is limited somewhat by the fact that it was confined to the Israeli press—a nation beset by domestic terrorism with deep convictions on the subject. Unfortunately, its applicability to U.S. media is suspect.

A more recent study of the media's labeling of terrorism dealt with the characteristics of acts and the perpetrators of political violence in elite U.S. daily newspapers.⁴ Three elite newspapers were content-analyzed for their coverage of terrorist acts during the period 1980-1985. The resulting characterizations were dichotomized into categories of nominal, descriptive, and neutral. The study also classified the characterizations according to whether they were made by government officials, witnesses, or journalists. Picard and Adams found that media personnel and witnesses to the violence tend to use nominal characterizations, and government officials tend to use descriptive characterizations. The results call into question the charges that the media are sensationalistic in their coverage of terrorism. It was also noted that over 94% of the characterizations were made by the media, suggesting that attribution is used infrequently in the coverage of terrorism. The major shortcoming of this research is that the categorization of terms as "nominal" or "descriptive" does not appear to have been done scientifically.

Method

A systematic random sample of articles dealing with terrorism from *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* during the period March 1980 through March 1988 were content analyzed. This time period was chosen because it coincides with a period of increasing media coverage of terrorism. The total study population was 370, of which 185 articles were selected. The study population represents the total number of newsmagazine articles under the headings of "Terrorism" or "Terrorists" in the appropriate volumes of *The Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature*. Each article served as the unit of analysis, and the first label attached to the perpetrator of a terrorist act served as the coding unit. The articles were also coded for the factual circumstances surrounding the act. The circumstances used as variables included the newsmagazine publishing the article, the descriptive label used, the type of terrorist act, the degree of carnage involved in the act, the political orientation of the terrorists, and whether U.S. citizens were involved

1. Edward C. Epstein, "The Uses of Terrorism," *Stanford Journal of International Studies* 12:68-71 (Spring, 1977).
2. Alex P. Schmid and Janny De Graaf, *Violence as Communication* (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1982).
3. Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorists or Freedom Fighters? Labeling Terrorism in the Israeli Press," *Political Communication and Persuasion* 2:433-445 (Winter, 1985).
4. Richard Picard and Paul D. Adams, "Characterizations of Acts and Perpetrators of Violence in Three Elite U.S. Daily Newspapers," *Political Communication and Persuasion* 4:1-10 (Winter, 1987).

in the act as victims. Each dependent variable was cross-tabulated with the independent variable (descriptive label) in order to yield a frequency count for each and an identification as to how the label use broke down according to dependent variables. The resulting data were then descriptively summarized and a chi-square analysis (significance < .05) of the matrix was done using version 4.21 of the Number Cruncher Statistical System (NCSS).

Results

A total of 13 different labels were used by the three newsmagazines (See Table 1). The most commonly used term was "terrorist," being used 65% of the time (120 uses). The second most widely used label was "gunman," which appeared seven percent of the time (13 uses). It should be noted that the 13 labels observed were inclusive of the list which Picard and Adams found in their study of elite U.S. daily newspapers.

Table 1
Labels Used to Describe the Perpetrators of Terrorist Acts

Descriptive Label	Frequency	Percent of Total
Terrorist	120	64.9
Gunman	13	7.0
Guerrilla	11	5.9
Attacker	9	4.9
Extremist	8	4.3
Radical	8	4.3
Hijacker	6	3.2
Revolutionary	4	2.2
Nationalist	2	1.1
Armed Man/Men	1	0.5
Leftist	1	0.5
Rightist	1	0.5
Militiaman/Militiamen	1	0.5

N - 185

With respect to the involvement of U.S. citizens in terrorist acts, it was found that U.S. citizens were involved in 91 of the 185 reported terrorist acts (49%). When U.S. citizens were involved, newsmagazines chose to use the label "terrorist" to describe the perpetrators on nearly 80% of the occasions. However, when U.S. citizens were not involved, they used the term only 51% of the time. Interestingly, "terrorist," "rightist," and "hijacker" were the only labels to be used more frequently when U.S. citizens were involved than when they were not. "Hijacker" was used five times as often when U.S. citizens were involved. And, only one term, "extremist," was selected equally as often under both conditions (4 uses each). A statistically significant relationship between the involvement of U.S. citizens in a terrorist act and the newsmagazine's choice of label was found ($p < .05$).

With respect to the political orientation of terrorists, it was found that the only comparison which could be made was between those who opposed U.S. policy and those neutral toward it. This was because the third category (those favoring U.S. policy) had an unacceptably low number of observations (5) to be of any value. The findings revealed that those opposed to U.S. policy committed nearly twice as many ter-

rorist acts as those classed as neutral toward U.S. policy. Those who opposed U.S. policy were labeled as "terrorists" 55% of the time, while those neutral toward U.S. policy were labeled as "terrorists" only 55% of the time. Labels "gunman," "leftist," "extremist" were all used more frequently to describe those who opposed U.S. policy than to describe those who were neutral toward it.

With respect to the degree of carnage, all categories of carnage were used. 73% of the time (41 of 55 cases) the loss of one life was included in the carnage. For example, when only one life was lost, when two to five lives were lost, and when six to eleven lives were lost. Only when eleven or more lives were lost did the categories begin to approach that of a terrorist act. Of the thirteen labels shown, all categories changed. An increase in the number of lives found. When there was no carnage, the labels "terrorist," "gunman," "guerrilla," "attacker," "extremist," "radical," "hijacker," "revolutionary," "nationalist," "armed man/men," "leftist," "rightist," and "militiaman/militiamen" were used. Then, the labels "terrorist," "gunman," "attacker," "hijacker," "extremist," "radical," "guerrilla," "revolutionary," "nationalist," "armed man/men," "leftist," "rightist," and "militiaman/militiamen" were used. Further, the labels "gunman," and "attacker" were used.

Discussion

The present study grew out of a concern about the media's coverage of terrorism. It was found that the incorrect choice of labels by the media grants them undue legitimacy and sympathy for their cause. The findings do not indicate that the newsmagazines are romanticizing terrorists. The label "terrorist" in a variety of contexts could be shown to be romanticizing terrorism. While this study does not prove this, the results strongly suggest the need for a more careful approach.

Second, it can be fairly inferred that the media's sympathy was not granted by the newsmagazines on the media to describe terrorism. They are doing so. The use of labels spanned all variables. To the extent that it should be obvious that what is being done so in negligible amounts, it is not directly support such a conclusion is implied.

Finally, the present study has raised questions and charges levelled at the mass media's nature. Often, sweeping statements are made without proof. It was alleged that the

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rorist acts as those classified as neutral (113 to 67). When those
 opposed to U.S. policy committed a terrorist act, newsmagazines
 labeled them as "terrorists" 72% of the time. However, the same term
 was used only 55% of the time when the act was committed by those
 neutral toward U.S. policy. Yet, the term "terrorist" still led the way
 among all labels for those neutral toward U.S. policy. In addition, the
 labels "gunman," "leftist," "rightist," "revolutionary," "hijacker," and
 "extremist" were all used more frequently to describe those opposed to
 U.S. policy than to describe those neutral towards U.S. policy.

With respect to the degree of carnage, the label "terrorist" pervaded
 all categories of carnage. When no lives were lost, the term was used
 73% of the time (41 of 55 observations). However, once the degree of
 carnage included the loss of lives, the use of the term dropped off. For
 example, when only one life was lost, the term was used 53% of the
 time; when two to five lives were lost the term was used 64% of the time;
 and when six to eleven lives were lost, the term was used 46% of the
 time. Only when eleven or more lives were lost did the frequency of use
 begin to approach that of acts where there were no lives lost. None of
 the thirteen labels showed a linear increase or decrease in use as the
 categories changed. An interesting pattern of dispersion was also
 found. When there was no loss of life, the newsmagazines used nine
 terms. However, when there were two to five lives lost, 11 of the 13
 labels were used. Then, the remaining categories of carnage used only
 six of the 13 labels. Furthermore, four terms ("terrorist," "guerrilla,"
 "gunman," and "attacker") were mentioned in each category.

Discussion

The present study grew out of a body of literature critical of the mass
 media's coverage of terrorism. In particular, it has been claimed that
 the incorrect choice of label for terrorists at once romanticizes them,
 grants them undue legitimacy, and contributes to the growth of their
 cause. The findings do not support such claims. First, there was no
 indication that the newsmagazine's choice of label could be construed
 as romanticizing terrorists. What was found was a consistent use of the
 label "terrorist" in a variety of situations. Unless that particular term
 could be shown to be romantic, it must be concluded that the opposite
 is true. While this study does not purport to measure such per se, the
 results strongly suggest the rejection of such unfounded claims.

Second, it can be fairly inferred from the results that undue legitima-
 cy was not granted by the newsmagazine's choice of label. Critics call
 on the media to describe terrorists as they really are. It would seem
 they are doing so. The use of the word cut across all situations and
 spanned all variables. To the extent that it clearly dominated this study,
 it should be obvious that whatever legitimacy is being conferred is
 being done so in negligible amounts. Again, the results of this study do
 not directly support such a conclusion per se, but they are strongly
 implied.

Finally, the present study has given empirical answers to many of the
 questions and charges leveled against the media. Much literature con-
 cerning the mass media's coverage of terrorism is speculative in
 nature. Often, sweeping statements are made without any substantive
 proof. It was alleged that the media labeled terrorists as anything but

terrorists. The present study revealed that "terrorist" was the overwhelming choice of U.S. newsmagazines when labeling terrorists. It was alleged that the political nature of the perpetrators of terrorist acts determined the label they received. The present study revealed that in reality no such statistically significant relationship exists. Thus, one can conclude that this study helps disspell many false notions as to the nature and effects of the media's coverage of terrorism.

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