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## RESEARCH PAPER

### Media Reporting of Terrorism: A Case Study of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS)

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# MEDIA REPORTING OF TERRORISM: A CASE STUDY OF ISLAMIC STATE OF IRAQ AND SYRIA (ISIS)

Lubna Sunawar\*

## Abstract

*Terrorist organizations have long realized the invaluable benefits of various media platforms, particularly social media, in achieving their tactical, operational and strategic goals. They have figured out how to make an impact through social media. Researchers have found that media plays a significant role in disseminating messages supporting terrorism. Since the September 11, 2001 attacks, terrorism has attracted much media attention. ISIS, in particular, has produced the most technologically sophisticated propaganda compared to other terrorist groups. Since terrorism has received so much media attention, it is vital to understand how it is presented in international news. This study, therefore, examines terrorists' use of media while focusing on ISIS as a case study. Research findings suggest that employing media as a weapon in combat is vital to ISIS's strategy to establish a hypothetical Islamic caliphate. ISIS uses media for three central goals: promoting its propaganda, recruiting new fighters, and inciting violence. The article employs framing theory, a study of comparative journalism and global media coverage of terrorism. This paper also explores the idea that media coverage may very well encourage acts of terrorism.*

**Keywords:** Terrorism, Media, ISIS, Propaganda, Framing Theory.

## Introduction

**T**he connection between terrorism and media has long been regarded as one of the most crucial areas of research on terrorism.<sup>1</sup> It is often believed to be symbiotic with terrorists delivering violent, thrilling stories that help sell news products. Media, directly or indirectly, provide a platform for terrorists to spread their message and instil fear in public, thus influencing how terrorists' messages are circulated. The relationship between terrorism and media refers to the 'theatre of terror,' which describes how terrorist organisations use media in a dramatic, theatrical manner to portray terror incidents for publicity.<sup>2</sup> This mutually beneficial relationship has been well-documented recently, most notably within the last two decades.<sup>3</sup> Numerous terrorist incidents throughout history have shown that terrorists use media for operational effectiveness, recruitment, fundraising, and propaganda schemes worldwide.<sup>4</sup> Terrorists employ media for attention, recognition, and perhaps even some legitimacy for their acts.<sup>5</sup> In return, media receive massive audiences, record sales, and public engagement, which are essential for their business sustainability. To put it another way, for terrorism

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to be successful, the media needs to report terrorists' actions in a way that both meet public demand for information and acceptability.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, it makes sense to think that terrorism and today's media mutually serve each other's purpose.

In this regard, two related questions must be addressed: 1) How do western media help promote the message of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) terror activities? and 2) What if the media do not cover terrorism at all? This study looks at how western media contribute significantly to ISIS terrorism, showing how news media is essential to understanding what makes ISIS an influential organization for spreading terror and fear among the public. By establishing a connection between terrorism exposure in media and public concerns, this study briefly goes through the effects of failing to report terrorism in media while taking both normative and practical considerations into account. This paper also seeks to understand why ISIS communications are crucial for cognitive processing and how they affect public perception.

### **Goals and Means of Terrorists in Media**

Without media coverage, an act's impact is arguably wasted, remaining confined to the attack's immediate victim(s) rather than reaching the target audience to whom terrorists' violence is aimed. Therefore, one of the key goals of terrorists is to gain the attention of media, nationally and internationally, immediately after their terrorist activities. Terrorists carefully select locations where they carry out their assaults to maximise media publicity. An obvious example is the 9/11 attacks in the US, which were reported by a wide variety of media immediately and discussed in depth later. Not only was the media able to catch the visual attack, but residents and tourists alike in New York City were able to document the event with photographs, videos, and personal accounts.<sup>7</sup>

Devoid of media attention, the impact of an act could be diminished. According to Hoffman, this results in terrorists' brutality "remaining closely contained to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, instead of reaching the broader target audience."<sup>8</sup> According to Bennett, Lawrence, and Livingston,<sup>9</sup> terrorists are more interested in how the audience responds than in victims' reactions, and audience's response is just as significant as the terrorist act itself. ISIS accomplishes this by deliberately choosing sites for their attacks to garner as much media attention as possible.<sup>10</sup> The goals of ISIS go beyond drawing public attention. They also use media to advance their political agenda, inform supporters and opponents of their terrorist goals, and justify their use of violence.<sup>11</sup> Media serve as a tool for terrorists to reduce power disparity between them and the entity they fight to create an atmosphere of fear and mistrust, legitimate their activities, and reach a larger audience.

The international community could not develop a successful counter-messaging campaign for ISIS's presence on social media due to a lack of knowledge of ISIS branding. For instance, US State Department's narrative against ISIS had little

appeal to its intended audience. This inability to communicate effectively was primarily caused by the lack of a clearly defined audience. ISIS, on the other hand, was able to perfect the art of deception because it simultaneously sent messages to potential allies and enemies. In recent times, the internet has arguably superseded the role of print media in the sphere of terrorism because terrorists may now send any message and images they choose directly to the online world, which has a global reach.<sup>12</sup> ISIS's use of social media is a case study of persuasive propaganda strategies that helped recruit, improved brand recognition, and quickly propagated terror. ISIS swiftly emerged as the first group to weaponize social media effectively.

Terrorist organisations usually frighten the public, but they are unable to rule. After the passing of al-Zarqawi in 2006, the group, a descendant of al-Qaeda in Iraq, struggled to find its bearings. However, Baghdadi's group (ISIS) developed clear lines of authority, taxes and educational systems, trading marketplaces, policing, and a judiciary (covering civil, criminal, and religious complaints).<sup>13</sup> Land acquisition and control are only a portion of what ISIS sees as the organisation and its adherents' destiny. While establishing a hypothetical caliphate is undoubtedly desired, ISIS's ultimate goal is more apocalyptic.<sup>14</sup> ISIS has been using a single message to promote propaganda on social media to a large audience that fits into a narrative of strength for supporters and a narrative of dread for the enemy to further the organization's goals. The most crucial thing they did was to attract new warriors to join them online and on the front lines in Syria and Iraq.<sup>15</sup> Given these motivations, ISIS terrorists are perhaps more organized in their attacks and well aware of the impact of media coverage on every section of society. To highlight this, al-Qaeda leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, claimed that "[al-Qaeda] is in a struggle, and more than half of that combat is taking place in the media battlefield."<sup>16</sup>

In fact, over the past ten years, technological advancements and changes in audience behaviour have made it simpler for terrorist organisations to employ media resources.<sup>17</sup> Terrorists can now broadcast their messages to the entire world at their convenience via websites, and "new technology has simply allowed the distribution of terrorist communications to succeed in a broader audience with a more succinct message."<sup>18</sup> Because the web is "far easier to use, more rapid, and far more successful than official media, terrorists do not rely on [print media] to propagate their message."<sup>19</sup> When their stories and messages reach the public through old or new media, whether they do it directly or indirectly, terrorists use projection tactics to recruit new members. In short, the internet has broadened the scope of terrorist activities and propaganda, making it the perfect tool for terrorists to achieve their operational goals at a low cost and with little risk.

## Foundations of Framing Theory

The theoretical idea of framing has undergone varied operationalization and application by researchers over the past few decades, despite its widespread use in media studies. Goffman first used the term 'frame analysis' to describe the idea of framing theory.<sup>20</sup> A modern and widely accepted description and conceptualization of framing

were put forth by Entman, who proposed a contemporary and commonly held definition, which states that framing "involves selecting a few parts of a seen reality and connecting them in a story that promotes a specific interpretation."<sup>21</sup> The value of framing theory is that it makes it possible to analyse frames to ascertain how information transmission affects human awareness.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, Reese elucidates the process by noting that "frames are organising principles that are socially shared and enduring through time, and they act symbolically to structure the social reality meaningfully."<sup>23</sup> These ideas emphasize the significance of framing in terms of how it can create, sway and mould people's opinions on events. Entman asserts that framing enhances the prominence of particular instances in a highly communicative text.<sup>24</sup>

ISIS strengthened its message worldwide by combining sophisticated marketing and cyber prowess. ISIS branding was the first item the group improved. Depending on viewers' beliefs, the organisation presents a distinct image to the world. Pictures uploaded on social media show power and strength to a follower. These pictures are terrifying and repulsive to non-followers. In other words, the organization wins no matter what it posts on social media since an identical message effectively reaches distinct audiences. Once a tweet enters mainstream media, amplifying those messages by starting trends on Twitter is sure to garner additional attention. Entman asserts that information is presented in a manner that promotes a specific problem description, causal interpretation, moral assessment, and therapy prescription.<sup>25</sup> These four roles are the foundation for Entman's method of framing theory. Problem definition requires figuring out what causes are involved and who will pay what prices and receive what benefits. These costs and benefits are usually evaluated using cultural notions and beliefs. Causal interpretation is to pinpoint factors that are driving the issue. The moral evaluation process involves evaluating causative actors and their effects. Treatment prescription suggests and rationalises solutions to problems while foreseeing probable outcomes.<sup>26</sup>

Entman asserts that broadcast frames can be found in four contexts: communicators, texts, recipients' thoughts, and society.<sup>27</sup> Communicators (such as news editors or reporters) are guided by frames that structure their belief systems and make conscious or unconscious framing judgments when determining what to mention. The use or absence of specific words, clichéd expressions, stereotypical images, sources of information, and sentences that offer thematically supportive clusters of information or conclusions are all examples of textual frames.<sup>28</sup> In news reporting, frames are typically used to cover three objects: political events, issues, and actors.<sup>29</sup> Twitter trends have benefited ISIS, and creating/ appropriating trends brought the group attention that would not have otherwise been seen on social media. It's important to consider how agenda-setting theory and framing theory overlap. In terms of media content analyses, assessing an issue's media coverage provides indirect insights into that issue's public salience, which can be expected to rise in tandem with the amount of media coverage, according to McCombs and Ghanem, is agenda-setting.<sup>30</sup> Media determines the public's agenda, highlighting issues and events while downplaying others. Public views of

terrorist incidents and the discourse surrounding them are influenced by how they are presented and how the media focus on them.

## Terrorism and Framing

Framing of terrorism-related events has been the subject of much investigation in recent years. According to Miller, there is a close symbiotic relationship between terrorism and media.<sup>31</sup> Any story, no matter how awful, can be made up by terrorism to get media attention. This relationship takes into account how events, people and beliefs are framed. The Middle East first made headlines in the US because of its links to oil, war and, to a lesser extent, terrorism.<sup>32</sup> According to academics, this influenced what little western viewers knew about the Middle East and produced an orientalist perspective.<sup>33</sup> After September 11 attacks, the media, in general, and the US, in particular, changed their respective approaches to terrorism; it went from being a concern to a full-fledged 'war on terror' for subsequent US administrations.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, how Muslims and the Middle East portrayed in the media. Since September 11, 2001, Muslims have replaced the long-running fight with communists in American news coverage, highlighting and maintaining a 'we' vs. 'them' mentality.<sup>35</sup> Depending on where they live, Muslims have also been portrayed in the press differently. For example, western broadcasters described Islam as being peaceful and acceptable within their territories while showing the same religion as being radical in other countries.<sup>36</sup>

In addition, US media outlets labelled Middle Eastern nations as 'friends' or 'enemies' based on their support for the US. According to the idea of domesticating events, "different perceptions actively evolve when news agencies construct their separate tales in familiar narratives and change foreign themes for a local audience."<sup>37</sup> In reporting on terrorism, it is asserted that there is a universal normative ruling stating that acts of terrorism should be condemned.<sup>38</sup> Similarly, the media adhered to a script<sup>39</sup> that differed from what the Bush administration did in the wake of the September 11 attacks. It condemned attackers while expressing sorrow for the victims. In this context, political players and elites significantly impact how news is produced.<sup>40</sup> In an analysis of terrorist incidents in the US between October 2001 and January 2010, Powell found that American media coverage of terrorism frequently presents it as an Islamic threat.<sup>41</sup> The ISIS social media presence often beats other regional *jihadi* organisations with the same number of followers or more due to the organization's aggressive communications strategy and branding. ISIS intends to engage a larger audience and communicate directly with everyone, in contrast to al-Qaeda, which mostly restricted its online activity to websites. In addition to propagating terror threats, many who turned to the group as new recruits to the war in Iraq and Syria were drawn to the group by its appearance as a potent state.

## Media's Role in Depicting Terrorism

The definition of terrorism has a significant impact on how it is portrayed in the media. While some illustrations underline the actual act of violence, others

emphasize victims, being civilians or innocent people. One of the most notable research was carried out by Altheide, who compiled a list of potential definitional criteria and used 109 distinct definitions of terrorism to create a consensus definition.<sup>42</sup> Suppose terrorism is defined as more than just violence against civilians by sub-state groups for political reasons and involves some form of communicational aspect in order to propagate a message; in that case, media play a critical role in understanding what makes violence terrorism. Although terrorist organisations and acts of terror have existed for centuries, there has been a considerable increase in the amount of attention devoted to them.<sup>43</sup>

The September 11 attacks not only changed how the American media covered terrorism for all time but also gave it more exposure in the global media. For instance, the media coverage used to frame President Bush's 'war on terror' as defined by his administration. According to Reese and Lewis, this framing supports the impact of state administrations on how events are reported.<sup>44</sup> It has long been argued in terrorism research that media is essential for terrorist organisations because it not only spreads terror and fear to a much wider audience than the relatively small number of direct victims but also serves as a tool for grabbing attention and disseminating the message of individuals or organisations. Because of this, the primary purpose of terrorism is not to do an act of violence or to kill a victim; instead, it is to instill fear and uncertainty in society at large. In addition, by making violent acts newsworthy, terrorism also spreads its message. The media may be viewed as terrorists' accomplices as it appears to create the oxygen of publicity.<sup>45</sup> ISIS's goals make the organisation particularly enticing to those who want to develop their religiosity. The killing of fellow Muslims is one peculiar aspect of ISIS recruitment. Ironically, ISIS is impervious to the possibility of blowback when killing Muslims; they increase recruitment with almost every execution video.<sup>46</sup>

Understanding how terrorism is portrayed in global media is essential. By examining news coverage on international television, it is possible to understand better how to frame similarities and contrasts. According to research, "Framing in international affairs serves multiple purposes by highlighting certain events as international problems that affect American interests (agenda-setting), identifying and explaining the source of any security threats (cognitive priming), and offering recommendations for specific policy solutions to contain these problems."<sup>47</sup> This study expands the body of knowledge on framing theory by highlighting terror organization. Second, "there is widespread agreement on how terrorist events should be portrayed inside any particular society (albeit not necessarily outside that community), especially among most mainstream leaders, including political interest groups, media, and hence the general public."<sup>48</sup>

Terrorists use media in three ways: first, to grab attention; second, to elicit support for their cause; and third, to incite fear and panic among the populace, leading to political change. Of the three strategies, only two have a history of success. There is little proof that how media portrays terrorism leads to public sympathy for terrorists or their causes, as Bruce Hoffman notes.<sup>49</sup> Getting people's attention and inciting fear

appears to be much more effective than the other two tactics. The latter (the spread of fear among civilians through maximum violence) is now the first weapon of terrorists using religion cards, as opposed to the former, which was once the first objective of terrorism (the spread of their particular message through, for example, TV interviews with terrorists during hijackings or hostage situations).<sup>50</sup> While 'new terrorists' are said to be driven by the desire to murder as many people as possible, 'old terrorists' favoured a considerable number of people watching instead of killing them. The logic and connection between terrorism and media seem unaffected when the number of victims is proportional to media coverage of a terrorist act.<sup>51</sup>

To put it another way, more violent activities are more likely to catch people's attention. Following the 2007 London bombing, there was a sharp increase in media coverage of terrorism in the UK. Terrorism can be viewed as a form of theatre when one considers the perfectly staged events of 9/11 that were broadcast live.<sup>52</sup> Because of the overall relationship between terrorism, media, public opinion and counterterrorism, it is crucial to grasp strategies for gaining attention and inciting fear in this context. In this situation, salience analysis, which gauges the prevalence of certain issues, may be quite helpful.<sup>53</sup> The decision-makers are under pressure to address these problems. They have less leeway to implement legislation without considering religious beliefs as public knowledge of terrorism increases. They also have more work to do to win public support.<sup>54</sup>

Regarding methodology, opinion polls or media content analysis is frequently used to gauge how important incidents like terrorism are to the general population. There is a strong association between the significance of a problem in media coverage and, as a result, the importance attached to public perception when assessing the amount of media attention provided to a subject, which is projected to increase in the number of coverage.<sup>55</sup> A challenge's visibility in media coverage and significance to the general public is strongly correlated.<sup>56</sup> Although there has been a lot of research on the framing of terrorist attacks, there has not been any comparison based on scientific research on how attacks are presented to support the classification of attackers or if there are variations in how attacks are covered across international news channels.

## **Preventing Terrorism Coverage in Media**

There are two significant barriers to any media outlet reporting about terrorist acts: one is normative, and the other is practical. While free media is not a bulwark of liberal democratic principles, it is nevertheless a crucial part of democracy. It is especially true regarding the normative question of filtering and regulating media coverage of terrorism.<sup>57</sup> Although media coverage of terrorist activities is typically prohibited because of limits on what is also publicly expressed (such as encouraging racial hatred), this is inconsistent with democratic ideals as well. Noting that news organisations should not be pressured to create voluntary terrorism, reporting guidelines are crucial. It can, for instance, entail a more thorough analysis of particular



words, ideas, or metaphors. However, these recommendations should stay unofficial 'best practices.'

Beyond the ethical dilemma of media censorship, the viability of such a strategy is called into question, particularly in light of the vast array of contemporary media channels that are now accessible to the general public via satellite and, increasingly, through the web.<sup>58</sup> Due to the widespread availability of the internet in nearly 80% of all homes and the rise in smartphone internet usage, the general public now has access to many different satellite and Freeview TV channels around the world, including highly professional English-speaking non-western channels like *Aljazeera*. Since there are so many modern media outlets and communication channels available online, it is difficult to prevent terrorist operations from being publicised. As a result, it is impossible to stop terrorist organisations from becoming widely known; however, given the communication method used by terrorist organisations to spread fear among the populace, it may be possible to lessen the psychological impact of terrorist actions on the public by openly expressing or raising awareness about terrorism in a certain way.<sup>59</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The mainstream media have given terrorism more attention as it has gained prominence over the past few decades. The government and media must interact in a mutually beneficial way to shape how terrorist acts are reported. Historically, terrorism was associated with organised groups, but more lately, the threat has shifted to individuals or 'lone hand terrorists.' Today, terrorism coverage heavily relies on television, the most effective medium for anyone looking to promote an issue and advance an agenda. However, ISIS uses social media to project power, instil fear in a global audience, and find like-minded followers. They continue to employ social media followers and trends to further their agenda. Social media formats are explicitly exploited by terrorist groups who lack access and legitimacy to induce their messages through television. Since 2014, ISIS has undoubtedly become the most dangerous and dreaded terrorist group worldwide. They have gained widespread support because of their apparent dominance of social media. The group's social media presence speaks volumes about how effective trend control is in amplifying voices and projecting power.

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