

## The Persuasive Appeal of Mediated Terrorism: The Case of the TWA Flight 847 Hijacking

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Research on terrorism and its relationship to the media is not sufficient to warrant firm conclusions regarding how terrorism affects distant observers. This essay explores the effects of terrorism by approaching it as a persuasive form of human communication rather than a dysfunctional sociological act. It (1) describes the rhetorical functions of terrorism, (2) evaluates the persuasive appeal of a mediated narrative, and (3) applies narrative theory to analyze the TWA Flight 847 hijacking incident of 1985 and the role of terrorist spokesman Nabih Berri. The analysis indicates that Berri successfully used the news media to persuade Americans that the just and reasonable solution to the hostage crisis was to trade the release of Shiite prisoners in Israel for the release of American hostages in Beirut. The study suggests that narrative theory provides a valuable means to analyze media coverage of terrorism and its affects on distant audiences.

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**M**ASS MEDIA COVERAGE of international terrorism has become controversial during the past two decades. The trend of terrorist activities during the 1980s produced a steady rise in fatalities (Jenkins, 1985). From 1975 to 1984, the average number of terrorist incidents reported rose from 10 per week to nearly ten each day (Risks International, 1985). The recent bombings of Pan Am Flight 103 over Scotland and of a French D-10 over Niger are painful reminders of the cost of human lives and destruction of property that makes the study of terrorism an important academic concern.

The effects of international terrorism are complex, because distant audiences and public opinion are influenced through media reports of terrorism. News coverage of terrorist events often evolves into dramatic stories that induce audience involvement in the same way melodramas do (Alexander, 1978, 1980; Bassiouni, 1982; Dowling, 1986; Lacqueur, 1976; Levy, 1985; Weimann, 1983; Wilber, 1985). The impact of terrorism on mass audiences cannot be assessed without analyzing media stories that focus on terrorist acts. A research approach is needed to evaluate whether or not media coverage enables terrorists to achieve

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their objectives. Such an approach is absent in present studies of the effects of terrorism.

Research findings concerning how media coverage may have benefited terrorists are contradictory and inconclusive. An analysis of *The New York Times* and *The London Times* by Kelly and Mitchell (1981) indicated that very little coverage of terrorist events dealt with the grievances, causes, and motivations of the terrorists. Paletz, Fozzard, and Ayanian's (1982) analysis of reports of terrorism in *The New York Times* yielded no evidence to support the claim that the mass media legitimize the causes of terrorists or advance their political objectives.

However, another group of researchers, emphasizing the psychological impact of terrorism on mass audiences, arrived at different conclusions (Bassiouni, 1982; Stoil & Brownell, 1981; Weimann, 1983; 1985). These researchers found that the media enabled terrorists to influence the perceptions of media users, especially television audiences. Several studies linked television news coverage of terrorist events with the ability of terrorists to gain political leverage (Behr & Iyengar, 1985; Larson, 1986; Palmerton, 1988; Sadeghi, 1987). Researchers who have studied media accounts of international terrorism contend that news coverage played a critical role in forming public opinion of terrorists (Brown, 1987; Larson, 1986; Palmerton, 1988; Sadeghi, 1987). It is not clear, however, how public opinion is affected by news coverage of terrorism.

The present essay seeks to explain how media narratives of terrorism can benefit terrorists. In contrast to past studies that have focused on the quantity and type of media accounts of terrorism, the present evaluation focuses on how the narrative elements of mediated terrorism affect mass audiences. My thesis is that the rhetoric generated through an act of terrorism is often organized by the news media into a dramatic narrative that helps terrorists to achieve their objectives. To understand how this occurs, the rhetorical functions of mediated terrorist discourse and the persuasive appeals of a mediated narrative will be considered. The theoretical explanation offered in this essay will then be applied in an analysis of the 1985 TWA hijacking.

#### RHETORICAL FUNCTIONS OF MEDIATED TERRORISM

Mediated terrorism functions rhetorically in two ways. First, terrorism has a symbolic function. An act of terrorism is both physical (meaningful violence) and symbolic (capable of audience inducement). A bomb, assassination, or hijacking that is intended to influence others is rhetorical, because it involves the use of symbols as a means of persuasion (Burke, 1950, p. 43). The symbolic function of terrorism occurs when a terrorist act induces an audience to search for motives and meanings to explain and interpret the act. For example, when an audience first learns of a bomb that exploded in a supermarket or on an airliner, the audience wants to know who planted the bomb and why.

Some acts of terrorism are meant to speak for themselves, as in the case of bombings not accompanied by ideological claims or statements. Such acts are rhetorical, without spoken communication, because they include symbols of power that influence people. The implicit message of such acts is that the world must pay attention to what the terrorist is trying to communicate.

Second, terrorism generates discourse that affects distant audiences. Although a terrorist act usually affects a small number of people directly, the discourse generated during a terrorist incident has a much broader impact. Terrorists use words to pursue their objectives, not just violence. Terrorist discourse functions rhetorically when terrorists strategically disseminate statements to obtain specific objectives. Dowling (1986) argues that three of these objectives are to gain recognition, to acquire legitimacy, and to achieve political ends. The ability to achieve these objectives is greatly determined by the type of media coverage terrorists attract. Extensive media coverage enhances the rhetorical power available to terrorists, because it enables them to gain public recognition and present their claims and ideologies to the public.

The first objective of terrorist discourse, the gaining of recognition, occurs when an audience identifies the terrorists with a specific cause. For example, most people would be able to identify the major objective of the Irish Republican Army (IRA): to free Northern Ireland from British control. Without media coverage of IRA objectives, such an association would not be made by the general public.

The second objective of terrorist discourse, achieving legitimacy, occurs when the causes or demands of terrorists are perceived as being justified by accepted values such as self-determinism. For example, in the early days of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), very few nations recognized their legitimacy as a political body or their demand for a Palestinian homeland. Today there is recognition by most members of the United Nations that the PLO has a legitimate right both to exist and to seek a homeland. Brock's (1988) recent historical analysis of the rhetoric of the PLO indicates they have been very successful in inducing a favorable public opinion shift in the United States toward the Palestinian cause, despite the PLO's history of violence.

Without media coverage of the rights for which Palestinians have been fighting, international exposure to the PLO's claims of legitimacy would be impossible. Public awareness of the PLO cause enabled the PLO to build public support for their claims. Although media coverage of a political group or ideology does not always lead to public support, the media can enhance the legitimization process once public support is expressed.

The third objective of terrorist discourse identified by Dowling (1986) is the achievement of political goals. The removal of American troops from Lebanon was partially achieved through the rhetoric of Islamic

revolutionaries. The Lebanese Shiites, with the support of Iran, waged a publicity campaign against Western influence. This example shows that terrorism is often used strategically as a political weapon to gain outside nations as an ally. Although not all terrorist activities are intended to gain recognition, legitimacy, and political influence, the rhetoric of terrorists often achieves one or more of these three objectives.

Terrorists and their spokespersons produce two different kinds of rhetoric, that which appears to be cooperative and that which is antagonistic. Griffin (1964) calls these two broad categories persuasive rhetoric and coercive rhetoric. Coercion takes place when an individual or group is forced to make a specific decision by a power originating outside of themselves (Simons, 1977). In contrast, persuasion involves free choice and is a voluntary, moral and rational process. Rhetoric becomes less persuasive and more coercive to the extent that it limits the viable alternatives open to receivers (Andrews, 1969).

Both coercive and persuasive rhetoric are generated during a terrorist event that receives media coverage. Discourse consisting of threats of violence or claims of responsibility for violence is regarded as coercive. Effective coercive rhetoric influences behavior through fear and intimidation and induces involuntary compliance.

Although direct statements by terrorists and their supporters are often coercive, much of the rhetoric generated during a terrorist incident is persuasive. Discourse regarding the causes of terrorism, the political objectives of terrorists, and audience responses to terrorism, is persuasive rhetoric. Persuasive communication especially abounds when extensive media coverage creates a public forum focusing on terrorism. Palmerton (1988) notes that it is a mistake to attribute the persuasive effects of terrorism only to the rhetoric of terrorists (direct statements, slogans, demands, etc.). The rhetoric of audiences who respond to terrorists is also important.

Combining the three objectives of terrorist discourse with the two types of rhetoric generated during mediated terrorism results in a model for illustrating how the media diffuse both coercive and persuasive messages during a terrorist incident (Figure 1). The model includes examples of statements spoken by the Shiite terrorists and their supporters during the 1985 TWA hijacking that addressed the Shiites' quest for recognition, legitimacy, and political power.

#### THE PERSUASIVE APPEAL OF A MEDIATED NARRATIVE

The persuasive impact of rhetoric generated by mediated terrorism depends on the nature of the narrative created by the media. One question that frequently arises is, how can a mediated terrorist incident persuade audiences to look sympathetically upon terrorists? If, as many contend, the media help to advance the objectives of terrorists through the inducement of public sentiment, then there must be a theoretical

Figure 1. Types of rhetoric generated during the 1985 TWA hijacking incident.

OBJECTIVES OF TERRORIST DISCOURSE	PERSUASIVE	COERCIVE
RECOGNITION	"They have only the willingness to die [to] become an example for all freedom seekers in the world. They are not terrorists."	"We are suicide terrorists. We don't want money. All we want to do is die."
LEGITIMACY	"Those people [Shiites] being held there [in Israel] are hostages also. They are civilians."	"We'll take this marine [a passenger killed by the hijackers], one of the Marines who shelled national Beirut."
POLITICAL INTENT	"Instead of looking upon it as terrorism, which it is not, Americans should think about their own Middle East policy."	"To the people of Palestine, we say . . . it is only through Islam that you can liberate your land."

explanation that can account for either the terrorists' success or failure. In addition, this success or failure must be related to the way in which the media creates the narratives that describe terrorism.

When terrorism is reported by the media in the form of a news story, the structure of the narrative can enhance the story's persuasive appeal. Newsworthy events are framed by the media in an organized and cohesive fashion to develop narratives that will make sense to the news audience (Bennett, 1983; Gans, 1979); resulting in a distorted vision of events (Paletz & Entman, 1981). The sense-making activities of the media often lead to inaccurate stories, especially when events are reported from overseas (Bennett, 1983; Larson, 1984, 1986).

Terrorism represents a facet of human behavior that is very difficult to understand. Most individuals would not choose to engage in dialogue with terrorists. Yet, when the news media report the acts and rhetoric of terrorists to the public, they promote a dialogue between the terrorists and their intended audience. The media explain to the public the identity of terrorists, their intended purpose, and reasons why they resort to terrorism. The public then evaluates the accounts given by terrorists and responds accordingly. These responses are diffused by the news media, thus focusing public dialogue on issues raised by terrorists. Agenda-setting studies have demonstrated that to a large extent media coverage determines both the salience and importance of events in the minds of the public (MacKuen & Coombs, 1981; Rogers & Dearing, 1988). Therefore, mediated terrorism promotes public thought and discussion on matters important to terrorists.

Terrorism is also dramatic, and dramatic stories induce a high degree of audience involvement. A number of scholars have emphasized the

dramatic attributes of mediated terrorist episodes (Alexander, 1978; Bassiouni, 1982; Dowling, 1986; Lacqueur, 1976; Weimann, 1983) which produced narrative accounts through the use of analogies, metaphors, theories, and ideologies (Bennett & Edelman, 1985). Audience perceptions of terrorists are formulated on the basis of the attitudes, symbols, and theoretical constructs employed by media storytellers (Ellul, 1965). As the dramatic development of a media story becomes more intricate, the involvement of viewers and the persuasive impact of the story increases (Bentley, 1964).

Audience involvement in media stories is important because narratives make arguments that are persuasive to audiences. These arguments are not always based on formal logic. Often rhetoric on behalf of or by terrorists is dismissed as irrational, because it fails the "rational-world paradigm" applied to it. Such dismissals falsely assume that the rhetoric of terrorists and their spokespersons only influences people through coercion, and not through persuasion.

Instead of focusing on formal logical analysis, the persuasive appeal of terrorists can be assessed by focusing on the narrative rationality of media stories generated by acts of terrorism. The informal logic described by narrative rationality, "the logic of good reasons," provides an appropriate test for evaluating mediated terrorist discourse, because it regards human values as more persuasive than other modes of argument (Fisher, 1987, p. 48). Values serve as powerful psychological forces that provide warrants for accepting or rejecting the narratives we encounter. Narrative theory predicts that stories which exhibit a greater probability (coherence) and fidelity (verisimilitude) will most likely become guides for thought and action in our lives (Fisher, 1987, p. 47). Media stories of terrorism that are coherent and consistent with the realities experienced by media audiences will have a greater impact than stories that fail to provide warrants for the actions of terrorists.

Viewing the communication that occurs during a mediated terrorist event as storytelling enables one to evaluate the adherence to the persuasive messages of terrorists and their spokespersons as a selection process. In this process the public chooses from a competing set of stories in order to give meaning and understanding to the behavior of terrorists. A story that makes sense and sounds right will be more adhered to by an audience than a story that does not seem reasonable.

In summary, a terrorist event that receives extensive media coverage functions rhetorically, because it is a special kind of symbolic act, a mediated narrative, that generates persuasive communication. Mediated terrorism produces stories that display the human emotions, struggles, values, motivations and needs of its participants and can captivate an audience with a constructed reality that affects public opinion.

#### **A CASE STUDY OF THE TWA FLIGHT 847 HIJACKING INCIDENT**

No other single event during 1985 received as much media attention as the TWA Flight 847 hijacking (Sadeghi, 1985). The story

dominated the U.S. news for three and one-half weeks. The hijacking began on June 14, 1985, when two armed Shia Muslims took control of a passenger flight en route to Rome from Athens. After the hijackers commandeered the plane for two days, flying back and forth from Lebanon to Algeria, releasing some passengers in each location but killing one passenger, the plane landed in Beirut with 39 American hostages. For a two-week period the hostage-takers and their spokesperson, Nabih Berri, negotiated for the release of more than 700 Shia Muslims being held at Atlit Prison in Israel in exchange for the safe return of the Americans. After a lengthy diplomatic process, the hostages were released on June 30, 1985, and the Lebanese prisoners were subsequently released by Israel, some immediately and others much later.

Through a narrative analysis of TWA stories published in *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report* from June 24 through July 8, and of selected broadcasts of *ABC World News Tonight* and *Good Morning America* from June 14 through June 30, in 1985, the present case study seeks to explain why most Americans favored giving the terrorists who hijacked Flight 847 their primary demand. ABC coverage of the TWA incident was selected for analysis because it was the most extensive of the three major U.S. television networks (181 TWA news stories). Atwater's (1987) analysis of television news coverage of the TWA incident indicated that the amount of coverage by networks was similar from one day to the next, and there was a homogeneity in topical emphasis among the TWA news stories broadcast by the networks. Therefore the news sources analyzed were considered to be representative of other media sources. The following analysis of the TWA hijacking shows how these media accounts demonstrated the three functions of terrorist objectives: to gain recognition, legitimacy, and political influence.

### *Recognition*

The terrorists who hijacked TWA Flight 847 were able quickly to gain recognition due to the international nature of the event. Responses to international news coverage of the hijacking came from many nations. The TWA story recreated by the media spanned three continents, involved 145 passengers from several nations, and was covered live via satellite television throughout much of the world.

Shortly after the hijackers took control of Flight 847 by gunpoint, they identified themselves as Shiites and demanded the immediate release of Shiite prisoners in Israel. When a Lebanese army negotiator tried to talk with the hijackers in Beirut, one of the hijackers responded, "I don't want to talk to you; I'll only talk to Amal" ("Mideast Terror," 1985, p. 11), referring to the Shiite group in Lebanon.

Major news magazines such as *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report* published feature stories on the Shiites in the Middle East,

linking the hijacking to Shiite goals. One story indicated the wave of hijacking and bombing assaults in Lebanon represented a Shiite strategy to "purge Western influence from the Islamic world" ("Shiite Extremists," 1985, p. 10). The immediate goal of the Shiites was identified as "seeking the release of 700 Shi'ites from Israeli custody" (Smith, 1985a, p. 19). Thus the hijackers achieved the recognition of an international audience. The news media communicated the identity of the hijackers, their immediate objectives, and their long-term cause. Without the media, such recognition by mass audiences would be impossible to achieve.

### *Legitimacy*

No published systematic study thus far has attempted to evaluate how American public opinion of the Shiite demands was affected by the media coverage of the TWA event. It is difficult therefore to assess whether or not the Shiite terrorists achieved legitimacy in the minds of the American public. However, a poll conducted by the Gallup Organization for *Newsweek* indicated that most Americans believed the United States should have persuaded Israel to release the Shiites they held, thus granting the hijackers one of their primary demands ("Is Reagan Tough Enough," 1985, p. 21). The results of this poll, partially reproduced in Figure 2, indicated that a slight majority of Americans also felt that the United States should be willing to compromise on terrorist demands to ensure the safe release of American hostages.

Responses to one question in the Gallup poll indicated that most Americans also felt Israel should speed up the process of freeing Shiite

Figure 2. Gallup Organization poll for *Newsweek*

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Q: Which is more important: ensuring the safe release of American hostages even if it means working out some compromise on terrorist demands or discouraging future hostage taking by refusing to deal with terrorist demands even if it risks the lives of American hostages?	
R: Ensuring hostages release: 47%	Refusing to deal: 42%
Q: Israel has already promised to free over a period of time all the Shiites that President Reagan says were detained and taken to Israel illegally. Should that process be speeded up to free the current hostages or should it not be speeded up so as to deny terrorist demands for the Shiites' immediate release?	
R: Speed up the Shiites release: 56%	Not speed up: 29%
Q: How effective do you think . . . refusing to negotiate for U.S. hostages . . . would be in preventing terrorist hostage taking in the Middle East?	
Responses:	Very effective: 24%
	Somewhat effective: 26%
	Not effective: 39%

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The Gallup Organization interviewed a national sample of 1,016 adults by telephone on June 20 and 21, 1985. The margin of error is plus or minus 4 percentage points. Responses of "don't know" and "no opinion" are not included in the percentages above.

