

Terrorism and Censorship: The Media in Chains

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When Israel invaded south Lebanon on 6 June 1982, I had been covering southern Africa out of Johannesburg for nearly a year and was eager to get out. Southern Africa was quiet and I was restless. Lebanon was a war — the world's biggest story — and I was a journalist. The Middle East was the natural place to go.

Lebanon was exciting. The country fascinated me with its religious diversity, its endless complications, its small feuds and larger wars. The Maronites, the Sunnis, the Shi'a, the Druze, the Palestinians — each had splintered factions and shifting goals. There was incredible violence at a scale and intensity I had never seen before in my six years as a foreign correspondent. But there were also the stubborn, brave, independent people who somehow survived the brutality.

By 1982, Western reporters had become accustomed to wandering freely around Lebanon — subject to the occasional verbal abuse or roughing up — but accepted by even the most radical of factions as journalists, independent of and apart from the U.S. and British governments. A year later, however, the atmosphere had begun to change.

Beginning with the victory of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran, Iranian money poured into Lebanon to influence the Shi'a, a Muslim sect disaffected with their native leadership. Religious conflicts intensified, and Washington's shifted position on Lebanon inspired a more personal hatred for the United States in particular, and the West in general. In Beirut, more and more bearded men — young Shi'a — appeared on the streets, carrying signs echoing Iran's revolutionary fervor and anti-Western propaganda. Journalists' encounters with such bitter gunmen became a little harder to escape without injury.

In December 1983, a group of Iranian-inspired Shi'a launched an attempt to destabilize Kuwait with attacks on the U.S. and French embassies, power stations and other installations. Despite the destruction, the attempt failed miserably. Hundreds of Shi'a were rounded up, and 17 were charged. Some were given long prison terms and others were handed death sentences. As it took place far off in the Gulf, the event was soon forgotten — at least by the West. There was no immediate connection with events in Lebanon, no hint that the repercussions would involve half a dozen countries and leave Westerners, including me, in chains for months or years.

By the time I was kidnapped in March 1985, the U.S. embassy and the Marine barracks had been bombed; Malcolm Kerr, the president of the American University, Beirut had been murdered; and a handful of Westerners had been taken hostage. Beirut had turned into a kind of perpetual chaos.

The U.S. embassy had been quietly warning Americans to leave Beirut — a warning that most news people just ignored, although a few took the advice or moved to East Beirut, which was considered a much safer place. I stayed, determined to cover the story. On 16 March 1985, I was kidnapped.

The Islamic Jihad claimed responsibility and demanded the release of the Da'wa 17, the 17 jailed in Kuwait. Thus began my almost seven years in captivity — seven years during which I witnessed firsthand the tenuous and powerful relationship between terrorism and the press.

THE MEDIA-TERRORISM RELATIONSHIP

There can be no denying it: The media are part of the deadly game of terrorism. Indeed, the game can scarcely be played without them. In my experience, publicity has been at once a primary goal and a weapon of those who use terror against innocent people to advance political causes or to simply cause chaos. And they are quite good at the public relations game — which is why their attacks, kidnappings and murder are usually so spectacularly vicious.

In my opinion, the very reporting of a political kidnapping, an assassination or a deadly bombing is a first victory for the terrorist. Without the world's attention, these acts of viciousness are pointless. Furthermore, unless the terrorist can attach his political

message to the headlines he has caused, he has failed. When newspapers run long analyses about the Islamic Jihad, its hatred of Israel and the West and its reliance on fundamentalist interpretations of Islam, "Islamic Jihad" becomes a legitimate force — something politicians and civilians alike must take seriously.

No matter that the analyses may be uniformly condemnatory, and that the reader has automatically and completely rejected the organization's premises. The acts that have won terrorists this public notice — whether kidnapping or bombing or murder — are seen by terrorists as successful. They have forced the world to take notice of them, indicating their sense of self-importance.

THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA

Everyone uses the media. Journalists are accustomed to being used by presidents, kings, parliaments, entertainers, political activists or ordinary citizens trying to attract the world's attention — that's a major part of the media's role. The media carry messages to anyone from anyone with the knowledge, skill or importance to make use of them. It may be propaganda or it may be truth, but either way, the media carry powerful influence.

I was raised in journalism by old-fashioned editors who ingrained in me a fundamental belief in objectivity. According to my teachers, journalists were meant to present the facts and the facts only, and the audience — armed with seemingly unbiased material — was appointed to analyze and draw conclusions. The journalistic ideal means by allowing the public access to the widest possible range of information, they will be able to judge that which rings true and seems useful, and then utilize it to develop informed opinions and make wise decisions. The ideal is tested constantly in this age of mass marketing, public relations and so-called spin doctors who attempt to distribute information with a specific goal in mind.

But there are facts and there is truth. During my years in captivity, I had plenty of time to reassess the journalist's role in covering news. Objectivity and neutrality are vital, but they do not necessarily entail putting aside a personal desire to see the violence that we cover come to an end.

TERRORIST MANIPULATION OF THE MEDIA

I am not the first to question the precarious relationship between media and terrorism. A wide-ranging debate about the subject was initiated after the 1979 seizure of the U.S. embassy and the taking of American hostages in Iran in 1979. The Teheran hostage crisis dominated network television coverage of Iran ----- indeed, the percentage of stories about that country escalated from about one percent in the early 1970s to over 30 percent by 1980.¹

A half decade later, one event in particular made clear the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism, setting off a second flurry of analysis: the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 to Beirut. Here, the media — television in particular — became the primary conduit between the terrorists and the governments.²

During the hijacking, the captors set up televised interviews with the hostages and held the first televised hostage news conference. Early on, the event turned into a shameful circus with one television network buying the rights to the story from the Shi'a Amal militia, and thereafter taking over the Summerland Hotel where the hostages were trotted out to meet the press. The amount of money involved is unknown except to those who paid and received it, but rumors suggested it was in the tens to hundreds of thousands of dollars, cash. Regrettably, the fact that one American, Navy diver Robert Stethem, had already been murdered by the hijackers and dozens of lives were in the balance became only a reason for more hype — not for caution and prudence. This was a big story; it was especially a television story and the media were not about to turn off their cameras.³

In my situation, the Islamic Jihad did not wage a similar all-out public relations campaign. For months on end, they offered the media so little information that we hostages were deemed forgot-

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1. James F. Larson, "Television and U.S. Foreign Policy: The Case of the Iran Hostage Crisis," *Journal of Communication* 36 (1986) p. 116.
 2. Patrick O'Heffernan, "TWA Flight 847: Terrorism that Worked (Almost)..." in Patrick O'Heffernan, *Mass Media and American Foreign Policy: Insider Perspectives on Global Journalism and the Foreign Policy Process* (Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1991).
 3. For more specific analyses of TWA incident, see Robert G. Picard, *Media Portrayals of Terrorism: Functions and Meaning of News Coverage* (Ames, IA: Iowa State University Press, 1993).

ten, and friends, relatives and colleagues felt compelled to wage their own campaign for publicity. But when the Islamic Jihad did use tactics to manipulate the media, they were generally successful.

The players on both sides of this long game displayed their understanding of the media in many ways. The Reagan administration first tried to cut the press out of the game. They insisted that there would be no "deals with terrorists," while pursuing the favorite tactic of diplomats — secret negotiations.⁴ When the so-called arms-for-hostages deal blew up in their faces, they tried to use the press, through purported unofficial leaks in a campaign to "devalue" the terrorists.

When that failed as well, they sent signals to Iran, which sponsors and funds Hizballah, that they were willing, even eager to discuss the matter.⁵ Iran returned the signals frequently. Yet it was in comments to independent newspapers, or by government-controlled newspapers in Iran, that the idea of a swap of hostages for Lebanese prisoners held by Israel was first publicly suggested.⁶ The kidnappers blatantly used the press to push their agenda, finally signalling their willingness to talk, and even to publicize their disagreements with Iranian sponsors.

Similar manipulation of the media was shown by captors of American officials at the U.S. embassy in Iran five years earlier. Hostage-takers aired their demands through staged demonstrations scheduled to coincide with nightly newcasts and ABC's "America Held Hostage" program, now known as "Nightline."⁷ Many terrorist organizations have press offices, complete with spokesmen, press releases and audiovisual material.

In our case, photographs and videos were released along with demands as if our faces — mine in particular — were some sort of instantaneous press pass. No media outlet could deny their audience, and especially not a hostage's relatives, a glimpse of the Americans held in Lebanon. It was a natural way to grab the world's attention.

4. *Los Angeles Times*, 28 July 1986.

5. "Bush Seems to Appeal to Iran on Hostage Issue," *Washington Post*, 21 January 1989.

6. *The Washington Post*, 30 April 1990.

7. Picard, p. 53.

Still, the videos — a clear manipulation of the media by our captors — were also our only connection to our families, and for that reason alone, allowed us a bit of hope. At least the world would know we were alive. It was by no means an easy thing to do. When one day one of my keepers told me to make a videotape, I thought long and hard about whether I should refuse. I reflected on my Marine Corps training about how to behave as a prisoner, and struggled with the notion of aiding and comforting the enemy.

But in the end, I decided nobody would believe any of it; nobody would really think these were my opinions, and it was likely to be the only way I could reassure my family that I was alive and well. So I read their propaganda — rationalizations of their actions, attacks on President Reagan, vague but ominous threats couched in harsh language — and by so doing, I played a part in the media game.

There were times, however, when the media game — especially the release of videos — backfired on our captors. Terrorists pay enormous attention to the news reports about the things they do. In 1986, when Father Martin Jenco was released, he carried with him a videotape made by fellow hostage David Jacobsen. In the tape, Jacobsen sent his condolences to the “wife and children” of William Buckley, who had died some time before in prison.⁸ Jacobsen did not know that Buckley was not married.

An over-enthusiastic journalist used that discrepancy to construct a theory that there was a so-called secret message on that tape. Worse, his television network prominently speculated on the theory. We were allowed by our captors to watch the first few television news reports of our companion’s release. I remember seeing a yellow banner across the television screen in one report, emblazoned “Secret Message?” The question mark, I guess, was meant to justify use of the story.

Our captors also saw the story. They were very paranoid people, and believed it. They were extremely angry. We suffered, losing the few privileges we had — books, pen, paper — and

8. William Buckley was a CIA bureau chief stationed in Beirut. He was kidnapped, tortured and killed by the Islamic Jihad.

were dumped in a vile and filthy underground prison for the next six months. We were lucky one or more of us was not killed.

THE QUESTION OF CENSORSHIP

How do we balance the public's right to know — so vital to our society — and the duty of the press to reveal, with the knowledge that publicity seems so often to serve the purposes of terrorists? Because terrorists want and need publicity, should we therefore *not* give it to them? Should there be censorship, imposed or voluntary, about such news reports?

Persistent analyses of how the media should and should not respond to terrorism will continue as long as such activities take place, and we may never come up with satisfactory answers. I believe — like all journalists I know — that the press must fulfill its duty to expose and present information objectively, thereby serving the public good. Censorship by government officials would be a grievous mistake, and so-called general guidelines are too often vague or unsuited to particular events to be useful in these kinds of situations.

However, when lives are at stake, journalistic self-restraint may be necessary. In some cases, it will be imperative that information be reported even if the result is loss of life. In others, a journalist will have to choose whether to release, delay or withhold information. In each case, the individual journalist must ask him or herself: Should I report this if it jeopardizes a human life?

When the arms-for-hostages deal was revealed in the press, I was due to be the next hostage released. New clothes to wear home had been bought for me. But the news reports blew the whole deal out of the water. It was five years before I would finally be free. Nonetheless, I agree with the decision my colleagues in the press made to make the negotiations public. The very highest officials in the land, even the president, were engaged in talks that directly contradicted their public statements, indeed broke both U.S. law and violated the Constitution. That was more important than my fate, or that of the others still held.

Such is not often the case. There are times, I have learned, when information *should* be withheld. In early 1983, when I was reporting on the Middle East out of Beirut, I became aware through impeccable sources that the Palestine Liberation Organization was negotiating with the kidnapers of David Dodge, another

president of the American University, Beirut who had been snatched in 1982. The PLO believed it had some hope of winning Dodge's freedom, and at the very least had confirmed he was alive and well — something no one had been able to do in the six months since his abduction.

Though I had second thoughts about the wisdom of reporting the negotiations, I allowed my boss to talk me into filing the story. It got "good play" — headlines in many papers in the United States. My sources, who had not realized how much they were telling me, were furious, and fearful that reports would kill the negotiations. As it happens, they did not: Dodge was eventually released. Still, I knew I had made a mistake. The story served no purpose and advanced no ideal, except maybe my career. If I had wanted Dodge's family to know I had learned he was alive and well, I could have told them privately. As it was, my report could very well have blown the secret talks away, as publicity later did to the arms-for-hostages deal. It could have cost the elderly Dodge more years in filthy prisons.

That realization had a strong effect on me. When I later had occasion to learn information about people who had been kidnapped, I was very, very careful how I used it, and often did not.

There is no simple formula. My experience as both journalist and hostage has provided me with a personal look at terrorists' manipulation of the media and the impact of the media's coverage of such events. The reply seems obvious: Don't give the terrorists what they want. Don't give them publicity. Don't report on their demands, or even — for the most adamant of media critics — on their actions. If they cannot expect publicity, they will go away.

As with most obvious answers, this one is both philosophically mistaken and practically impossible. We are, after all, a democracy. That means at least theoretically — and I believe in practice to a greater extent than cynics would have us believe — that the public decides important issues by electing its representatives and changing them when they do poorly. They cannot do so intelligently without a free press, for any controls on the press become rapidly political ones, and in my opinion, will be used by those in power to keep themselves there.

But even if the theory behind full reporting of terrorist acts is sound, what about the practice? Surely the media behave irre-

sponsibly often in the single-minded pursuit of headlines or air time.

We are a nation that has learned to be very suspicious of our leaders, and in particular any attempt by them to overtly control the information to which we have access. A bomb in a public place, or even the kidnapping of a prominent person, are not events that can be easily hidden or ignored. Trying to do so simply gives rise to rumors and false reports — always exaggerating the extent of the incident, and therefore giving the terrorist something he likes even more than publicity — the spreading of fear. I have found that the best antidote to fear is information, even if the information is bad.

Furthermore, the media are not a single entity that can be cautioned, leaned on or controlled. It is difficult to get a group of journalists to agree on something as simple as a basic code of ethics. It is unrealistic to expect any widespread voluntary restraint in matters that involve such attention-grabbing events as terrorist attacks.

Another factor that mitigates against control is that the public does not want it. Despite disparagement of the media for its so-called sensationalism, people seem to want blood-and-guts reports in their daily newsfare. A news organization that does not supply this kind of variety will not last long.

CONCLUSION

The philosophical justification for full reporting on terrorist acts does not give journalists a free hand. In each case they must weigh the theoretical or philosophical value of what they do with the fact that individual human lives are at stake. What they report can have a direct impact on the victims, as terrorists pay enormous attention to the news reports about the things they do.

I tell my colleagues: In each and every report you do where a human life is at risk, you must see in your mind that person's face. You must understand that what you report might well kill the person, and accept the responsibility for that. That doesn't mean you will abandon or even tone down your report. In some cases, one person's life, or even the lives of several people, cannot outweigh the necessity to publish the story.

When a government pleads with journalists to withhold stories about terrorists or terrorist incidents because of national security,

or danger to negotiations involving hostages, should the journalist bow to those entreaties? Should the well-being of the hostages override all other considerations, as far as journalists are concerned? Or are there other things that are more important? I believe that each of these questions that so many journalists encounter in their work can only be answered individually, and as each case occurs. They should be, and I believe for the most part are, answered with intelligence and responsibility, and a full and careful regard for the lives that may be at stake. But general "guidelines" too often do not fit all cases. Certainly, we should not allow, or implicitly approve censorship by government officials, who will try to impose censorship in any case. Public approval of their acts simply encourages an even heavier hand.

