

SOCIETAL REACTIONS TO TERRORISM IN BULGARIA: MASS MEDIA AND COMBATING TERRORISM

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How and when mass media will reflect a certain terrorist act is an issue of greater significance in working out a specific terror strategy in modern societies than conducting the terror attacks themselves. Even more – we could say terrorism had converted itself in “a tragic form of audiovisual show business”. Terrorism dictates new rules of news rating in TV and Internet trying in this way to manipulate audience.

Reflecting terrorist attacks and giving publicity of terrorists’ wants is part of the role society attributes to contemporary mass media. On the other hand, exercising its public role media “help” terrorists to achieve their goals. What kind of a language is or should be used by media when depicting terror attacks appears to be of great importance.

At the present moment in Bulgaria the positive role of media could be revealed in two directions: First, in the popularization of the specific preventive institutional work that has been done as fortunately there are no international terror attacks directly committed against Bulgaria. And second, mass media could facilitate the balance in connections between anti-terror institutions and present in this way useful information to civil citizens.

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Media and Terrorism

*“...if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thoughts.
A bad usage can spread by tradition and imitation,
even among people who should know better.”*

– George Orwell (1968, p. 167)

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The language that mass media use when report and comment terrorist acts and terrorist organizations is of great importance as the language they use often set the framework of public understanding of these events. During the first year after the attacks of 9/11, for example, newspapers across the western world struggled to respond to events as they unfolded. Since a terrorist attack of this scale had never occurred in a western nation – and certainly not in the United States – editorial boards needed to develop new language to describe the strikes and historical connections to explain their context and scope. This intersection of language and history provides a means for substituting one idea for another, developing patterns of associations between what we do and do not know (Pollio, 1974; Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). As writers described specific angles through which they might develop some perspective in which to ground this new figure, various situations, places, people, and organizations were framed in language. When writers used the term “Ground Zero,” they asked readers to hold in mind both the World Trade Center site alongside the original, atomic notion of a “Ground Zero,” symbolized by Hiroshima and Nagasaki, couched within the familiar ground of World War II. When they spoke of a “War on Terror,” they asked readers to imagine a war of ideas and emotions as well as a more traditional, military conflict. Finally, writers established causality: because we had a “Ground Zero” in New York, we now have a worldwide “War on Terror.” And more, different writers would reflect terror acts within their own cultural, historical, and linguistic experience (Stoitsova & Pollio, 2005). And this is one side, the positive side of the problem.

In order to be strict and objective usually when reflecting terrorist acts writers are forced to adapt to a certain extent the phraseology of the terrorists and even to turn this specific language into terminology of terror. Therefore, if terrorists and counter-terrorist groups can succeed to induce the media to accept their nomenclature, we can say they have already won an important psychological victory. And this is the other side of the problem, the negative one.

Of course, the relationship between mass media and terrorism is “symbiotic” in the sense that terroristic groups use mass media in order their political messages to be heard by the target audience while at the same time supplying media with “exciting news”. Let’s underline that media, however, do not only adopt the language of terrorists. De Graaf pointed out that ‘in many cases’ the