

The media and terrorism: Implications of the Unabomber case

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The elusive Unabomber has captured the American imagination, partly because Americans know so little about him. Although the FBI worked on the case for some 17 years, virtually all the agency knew prior to the arrest was contained in the acronym devised to identify him, an acronym standing for the victims of his bombs, those associated with university and airline enterprises.

Now we know that suspect Theodore Kaczynski (arrested in April 1996) was a product of the University of California system in the 1960s when environmentalism and political radicalism combined sometimes to nourish a furious hatred of technology. But still we possess little information, and in that vacuum the enormous media attention given to Unabomber matters has inevitably become repetitious.

Surprisingly, no one has commented on the obvious, which is how the Unabomber case challenges conventional wisdom about terror and the media. Most texts on terrorism have a very straightforward view of the relationship: ‘the media is the terrorist’s best friend’, or ‘publicity is the oxygen all terrorists need’. Yet the irony of the Unabomber case is that as long as he did not try to use the media to communicate a message, he remained, and was likely to remain, free. Perhaps the enormous attention given to the Oklahoma City bombing made him feel neglected, for shortly afterwards he began to use words to explain himself. For the first time we learned about his sentiments about technology; and when he wanted us to know more he insisted that the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, America’s most influential papers, publish his 35,000-word Manifesto. Attacks would cease, he promised, if they complied, and only if they complied.

The FBI encouraged the newspapers to accept this bizarre extortion proposal, but the editors endured heavy criticism anyway. How could the Unabomber be trusted to keep his word? Terrorist experts said a grotesque precedent would be set and predicted that many others would make similar demands soon. But to the surprise of most people, there were no imitators and paradoxically, if we have the right man, publication was the Unabomber’s undoing.

If the Unabomber case were unique, there would be no reason to rethink our views about the media-terrorist relationship. But it is not and history provides important interesting parallels. The Thugs of India whose reign of terror lasted at least 600 years shunned all publicity. Still they killed a million people to become the most deadly terrorist group ever known. The Assassins of medieval Islam and the Zealots of ancient Judaism created immensely durable and extraordinarily destructive structures too, though the facilities available for communication were primitive.

The development of the mass media in the late nineteenth century helped encourage many new terrorist groups to emerge, but those groups compared with their predecessors always had briefer lives and usually therefore less deadly careers. While the new terrorists sought to use the media, they often complained that the wrong message got out. The personal accounts of twentieth-century terrorists, such as those of the German Bommi Baumann and the Palestinian Abu Iyad, add another interesting element:

these authors warn that an obsession for publicity among terrorists is often a drug which destroys them.

The relationship between publicity and terror is indeed paradoxical and complicated. Publicity focuses attention on a group, strengthening its morale and helping to attract recruits and sympathizers. But publicity is pernicious to the terrorist group too. It helps an outraged public to mobilize its vast resources and produces information that the public needs to pierce the veil of secrecy all terrorist groups require. Terrorists themselves are often confused about the dangers of publicity, because they seem compelled to plan operations which produce the most publicity rather than those which help their cause most. The bizarre case of the Unabomber may have one healthy result: it could help us see the paradox of the troubling terrorist-media relationship in a more intelligible and constructive light.

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