THE INTENSIFICATION OF THE NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATION ON TERRORISTS’ ACTS AFTER SEPTEMBER 11, 2001

Yessi Olivia

Department of International Relations, University of Riau
E-mail: yessi_o@yahoo.com

Abstrak


Kata Kunci: Terorisme, Media Massa, Intensifikasi

Introduction

It is said that the media created hype over the event of September 11 so as to expose the issue of terrorism. In motion pictures for example, September 11 tragedy has inspired several film based on terrorists-attack. Productions such as United 93 or World Trade Centre are based on the September 11 tragedy. Although films with terrorist-plots cannot be considered as a new genre, the year 2001 has become the watershed for cinema industry to produce similar films.

In the news media in particular, the relationship between media and terrorists has been developing long before 2001. Yet, the sheer magnitude of the September 11 incident can be persuasively argued as a turning point in how the news media’s representations of terrorists’ violence have intensified. The aftermath of September 11 has led to an obsession among
journalists in reporting terrorists attacks, especially with the declaration of the ‘war on terror’ by the U.S. government.

The main discussion of this paper is based on the intensified representations of terrorists’ acts in the broadcast news program (or the 24/7 news networks) after September 11. The intensification itself is arguably triggered by several factors. First is the changing nature of the act of terrorism where it is become more violent and causing a high number of causalities. Second is the competition among TV stations in reporting terrorism. Third is how terrorism since 2001 has become the main concern of every state in the world and how the government, especially in the case of United States posts 2001, relies on the news media to gain public support on its counterterrorism policy. However, even though those factors mentioned above demonstrate some new features within the main actors; the media, the government and the terrorists, this paper argues that the relations among the three actors remain the same. The media’s portrayals of the acts of terrorists are not only served the interests of both terrorist groups and the government, but also the interest of the news media industry.

This paper will be divided into several parts. The first part elaborates some of the theoretical arguments on the relationship between the media, the terrorists and the government. The next part demonstrates how the news media covered the terrorist attacks before year 2001. The last part analyses on the factors that contribute to the intensification of media’s portrayal of the act of terrorism post September 2001 and how in the case of ‘war on terrorism’ in Afghanistan and Iraq, the interconnectedness between the three actors is demonstrated.

The Media, the Terrorist and the Government

This section begins with a brief explanation of the term terrorism followed by a discussion about the nature of the relationship between the media and terrorists. In general, the representations of political violence in the media serve the interests of all the parties involved. That includes the terrorists who are looking for recognition and sympathy for their struggle, the government who seek public supports for its counterterrorism policy, and the media that need ratings approval.

First of all, it is worth noting that there is no general agreement in defining terrorism. Each analyst or institution develops their own explanations on what constitutes terrorism and
the results are sometimes ambiguous or biased. The term terrorism has also been reconstructed through times. In the eighteenth century for example, the state was the executor of terror while most of the perpetrators of terror these days are non-state actors. Nonetheless, the main idea can be drawn from the different perspectives that terrorism is a political violence taken by non-state actors or even state-sponsored groups to generate fear among civilians. The manifestation of political violence can range from hijacking to kidnapping, murdering or bombings.

Another difficulty besides explaining terrorism is labeling certain groups as terrorists. Since it is a contentious subject, the media usually follow what the government refers to call ‘opposition’ groups. As a result, there is inconsistency within the media in implementing the words terrorists and terrorism. Media often mix up these words with other terms, such as guerillas and guerilla warfare, nationalists and nationalism, revolutionaries and revolution, or even criminals and crime.

In regards to the relationship between terrorism and media, the academic discourse on this matter is divided into two main arguments. On the one side there is the idea that demonstrates the intense correlation between media and terrorists. J Bowyer Bell described it as a ‘symbiotic relationships’ and Walter Laqueur emphasized the relations in a statement that “the media are the terrorists’ best friend”. One of the infamous analogies of the media-terrorists relationship comes from Ted Koppel, a legendary news broadcaster in the U.S. He argued that a terrorist without media is like “the philosopher’s hypothetical falling tree in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it does not exist”.

The basic idea of the arguments about the media-terrorist mutual relationship relies on terror as propaganda, rhetoric and the means used by the terrorist groups in order to draw awareness from people and government. This is where the relationship starts. Terrorist groups see media as the best medium to link them with the government and public, while the media see terrorist attacks as valuable news sources since it consists of drama, conflict and tragedy. This argument shows how the role of media for terrorist groups is crucial. Bell has even argued that the proportion of media coverage on terrorist acts determines assessment of the accomplishment of terrorist groups.

Besides these pro-arguments there are analysts who challenge the notion of a reciprocal relationship between the media and terrorists. Grant Wardlaw cited from Biernatzi, for example, points out the lack of evidence that media coverage influences
terrorists to act more profoundly. Furthermore, Michel Wieviorka\textsuperscript{12} posits the theory of terrorist-media correlation that demonstrates the ‘indifference’ of terrorists to publicity in the media. Through different modes of indifference Wieviorka shows how terrorists groups develop from denying the purpose of terror as propaganda, lacking interest in media publicity to acting aggressively towards the media.

Wieviorka’s arguments, however, are irrelevant to the current situation. It is clear that terrorists will always rely on communication tools to transmit their messages to their targeted audience.\textsuperscript{13} In fact, engaging in the modern means of communication is one of the characteristics of terrorist groups in this “new age of terrorism”.\textsuperscript{14} Most contemporary terrorists in the twentieth century do not just rely on the mainstream media for publicity, but they are actually utilizing communication technologies to connect with their audience. The Internet, for example, has been used by radical groups not only to spread their messages but also to recruit new members.\textsuperscript{15}

Brigitte L. Nacos\textsuperscript{16} is one of the academics that provide an in depth analysis of media-terrorist relations. She coined the term \textit{mass-mediated terrorism} which basically illustrates how terrorists use the media to draw the attention from the government and public. Since terrorists are the ‘outsiders’ within the political system, the only way to ‘communicate’ with the government is through demonstrating political violence. Therefore, mass media are then seen as the best tools to connect terrorists groups with the authority and the public. Furthermore, what is also important is that terrorist groups are not the only party who depends on media. Government also draws on the media’s publicity to promote its counterterrorism policy.\textsuperscript{17}

According to Nacos\textsuperscript{18}, there are at least four objectives that terrorist groups want to achieve with their actions:

1. The attention/ awareness goal where, by producing more lethal and massive acts, terrorists are expanding their audience beyond their targeted groups through the media’s publicity.

2. The recognition goal. Nacos points out that as the impact of media’s coverage, the public will be involved in the discourses to find what motivated the terrorist groups in the first place. As Nacos concluded, this will release terrorist groups from the obligation to explain their political statement to the public, since the public will find it on their own.

3. The respect and sympathy goal especially from “those in whose interest they claim to act”.\textsuperscript{19} This can be seen by how Timothy
McVeigh claimed to act on behalf of white Americans or Osama bin Laden speaks in the name of all Muslims in the world.

4. The quasi-legitimate status goal which basically is the demand to obtain “the same media treatment that other legitimate political actors receive”.

The interconnectedness between “the triangle of political communication” (media, government and public) and terrorist groups does not stop in the domestic discourse only. With wider coverage coming from the international media and the Internet, political violence within one country will also generate responses from foreign governments and international public.

It is also worth noting that for many years media have been receiving criticisms for publicizing terrorists’ political statements and motives. The main concern that critics point
Moreover, the media's constraints also resulted in the failure of terrorist groups to send messages to their audience.\textsuperscript{24} Nevertheless terrorists do need publicity and media exposures do determine the level of achievement of terrorists' acts. These two incidents below illustrate how terrorists depend on publicity in order to express their grievances.

First is the case of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)'s terrorist actions in September 1970. PFLP managed to create a dramatic deed by taking hostage of 600 passengers of an international airplane into a deserted place in Jordan. However, this effort failed in attracting the world's attention due to the limited communication technologies and the isolated location. Even though several media in the U.S. and the Europe did cover this story, the public did not obtain much information of PFLP's political motives.\textsuperscript{25}

The second case, on the contrary, illustrates how through perfect timing and placement terrorist groups have succeeded in gaining popularity through their violence. Black September, another Palestinian liberation group was responsible for killing and abducting several Israelis athletes and officials in the middle of Olympic Games in Munich in 1972.\textsuperscript{26} Through massive media coverage, Black September became the first modern terrorist group that succeeded in drawing the world's attention to their deed. Although international society condemned the action as inhumane, exposure of Munich's misfortune influenced people to know more about Black September's motive. What is also important is that it had a huge impact on the political issue of Palestine where, after being abandoned for several years, the Palestinian plight was then treated as an international issue.\textsuperscript{27}

The second feature of news reporting of terrorism in the 1970s and also the 1980s is the tendency to choose particular terrorists' actions to report. Hijacking and abducting for instance were gaining more exposure rather than bombing because of the dramatic effects of those incidents. Another significant factor for the news media to give wider coverage is when their national interests are under threat.\textsuperscript{28} The Iranian hostage crisis in 1979 is the best example to illustrate this. The seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran for more than two months and the abduction of several Americans resulted in enormous publicity in the U.S. Not only that, the media's overblown treatment of this case also affected the U.S. domestic politics where President Jimmy Carter lost popularity for mishandling the Iranian crisis.\textsuperscript{29}

News coverage in the 1980s, however, was quite different from previous years. Firstly, the news media industry was entering a new phase with the rise of 24/7 news networks, pioneered by the Cable News Network (CNN) in 1980. With modern
communication technologies, these news broadcasts have been able to relay information throughout the world on real-time bases. Indeed, this particular feature has turned major news media such as CNN, into 'soft power' that has the ability to influence not only common people but also policy makers.\textsuperscript{30}

Secondly, because the news media are selective and cover only the high profile cases, terrorist acts in the 1980s have become bloodier. It seems that terrorist groups are involved in a 'race' to create spectacular plots hoping that their voices will be covered in the news. As shown, within the period of the 1980s, only several cases of terrorists' attacks received massive coverage, such as the 1988 Lockerbie bombing and the execution of U.S. marine Lt. Col. William Higgins by a Lebanese group.\textsuperscript{31}

It can be argued that terrorist violence in the 1970s and the 1980s was politically driven, whether it was undertaken by freedom movements or some groups that demanded prisoners' release. The period of the 1990s was marked by the increasing number of religious-based terrorists.\textsuperscript{32} With a narrow interpretation of religion's doctrines as basic justification, this type of terrorists is difficult to handle because of their irrational objectives. This is why their moves were unpredictable and lethal, such as the bombing of World Trade Centre in 1993 and the Sarin gas attack in Tokyo in 1995. The media exposure, however, only focused on the damages and failed in giving a better explanation of these groups' motives.

To sum up, the dynamic of terrorism within the period of the 1970s to 1990s indicates how the terrorists were aware of the media publicity. In fact, being reported in the media was part of their plan from the very beginning, because through the media they had a bargaining position to face the authority and public. It can be seen when during the Iranian hostage crisis, the Iranian students made a deal with the U.S. broadcast live in order to have a chance to speak in front of the camera. Even the TWA hijackers in Beirut held a press conference and were interviewed by the news media.\textsuperscript{33}

The Intensification of News Coverage on Terrorism Post September 2001

In the last part of this paper, the discussions begins with elaborating new features within the three actors, that this paper argues, contribute to the intensification of the news coverages post September 2001. Later on, this paper analyses the interconnectedness within the three actors: the news media, the terrorists and the government.
New features within the three actors

1. The terrorists

To begin with, the ultimate chaos of the September 11 attacks indicates how the world is now facing the new kind of terrorists. First, it shows that the lethal actions brought by the terrorist groups are well planned and professionally executed. Moreover, the attacks are not meant to create ‘political theatre’ per se, but aim to demonstrate the vulnerability of their enemies upon the attack. This can be seen by how well Al Qaeda as the perpetrators of September 2001, chose the World Trade Center as well as the Pentagon, which are the world economic and security power symbols, as their main targets. Second, terrorist groups these days are structured in a loose-based group which is widely spread in different countries. Their transnational structure and their ‘transnational mobility’\(^{34}\), in terms of financing and travelling, have resulted in the difficulty for the authority to diminish the influence of terrorist groups completely. And lastly, these groups tend to depend on the use of modern means of communication such as the Internet or satellite phone, even if they are considered as anti modern movements.\(^{35}\)

2. The news media

The globalization of the media industry in the past couple of years has significantly increasing the number of TV stations around the world. Particularly in the news network, CNN is no longer the sole 24/7 TV station that delivers news throughout the world within a second the event broke out. In the US alone, there are at least four other major news networks such as, Fox News, NBC and ABC, that compete each other in order to obtain rating approvals. In the case of reporting terrorism, these main news outlets (other term generally used is the mainstream news), has been challenged by the increasing numbers of news networks and independent journalists throughout the world. The Al Jazeera, for example, is one of the prominent news networks in the Middle East that contests the Western media in portraying issues in the Middle East. Besides the growth of news networks throughout the world, this so-called mainstream media have been challenged by the increasing numbers of Interned-based journalists. This online journalism is considered as a new phenomenon since the introduction of the Internet in the middle of the 1990s. By using Weblogs or simply called blogs, one can create an account that similar to personal journal and update its content with text or other media files. Since 2001 there is thousands of news blogs have been established and the number continues to grow. Although online journalism has been criticized for its
unconventional method in reporting the news, it is clear that this free and low-cost technology provides an alternative news outlet for journalists who do not want to be confined in corporate media’s rules. Weblogs also serve a democratic atmosphere, where any point of views is taken without any concern for censorships.  

3. The government

The significant impacts of the terrorist attacks in September 2001 to the international system are how vulnerable the state is to a threat coming from non state actors and how the concept of security threat is no longer determined by other states’ power and capability. Because of the advancement of science and technologies, this globalized world has helped people from across the nations to integrate despite time and space continuum. The downside of this situation is that it has created possibilities for crime and violent organizations, such as drug traffickers and terrorist networks, to emerge and flourish to different parts of the world. In the case of global terrorism, no state in the world has successfully able to dismantle the terrorist networks. This is due to several factors such as the loose structure of a terrorist group, the ability to recruit new members, to get fund and donors and to travel across borders.

The case of the ‘war on terrorism’ in Afghanistan and Iraq

The case of ‘war on terrorism’ in Afghanistan and Iraq can be applied in demonstrating the interconnectedness between the media, the government and the terrorist. As stated in the previous section, the relationship remains unchanged, where the news media tend to emphasis on drama and tragedy in reporting terrorist acts. The terrorists still rely on the media in gaining public as well as the government’s attentions. And lastly, government depends on the news media to broadcast its counterterrorism policy.

Terrorist attack in Afghanistan and Iraq itself had increased since the US launched its ‘war on terror’ in 2001 and 2003. Based on the Country Reports on Terrorism 2006 released by US State Department, terrorist acts in both countries contribute to the increase of 29% of terrorism worldwide. Not only was that, staggering data demonstrated by the National Counterterrorism Center, where ‘terrorist attacks are up 91 percent in Iraq and 53 percent in Afghanistan’.

In regards to the involvement of the news media, especially US media, in covering the news in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is worth to note how the news media reacted on the event of
September 11, 2001. It is no doubt that sheer magnitude of the terrorists attack on September 11 has stricken every single Americans. However, media’s over exposure on terrorists’ attacks only perpetuated the state of fear among people. This is because almost all major news networks such as CNN, ABC, FOX and NBC used the narrative framing where the horrific montages of destructions, grievances and deaths were relayed continuously regardless the psychological impacts that the viewers may have. In addition to that, every news stations and radios started the overlong discussions that actually did not give the accurate answer on why the tragedy happened. The situation even worsened when all the debates tend to shape public opinion on demonizing Islam.

The media’s over exposure on terrorists’ attacks has also contributed in establishing a one-sided patriotism among the Americans, where they presumed that “we” are good and “other” is wicked. As the Americans positioned themselves as the victims, all the anger, anxiety and fear reflected in the media have led them into war hysteria. Jargons such as ‘the clash of civilization’ and ‘war of the century’ were mentioned repeatedly by newscasters or radio announcers as if they were situated in the real war. It is interesting to find is that most of the U.S. media took an immediate stance to back up the Bush administration policy on counterterrorism. First the media praised the concept of ‘war on terror’ as the new concept of war regardless the vagueness of the concept is. Second by upholding the patriotism tone in every part of the news segments, the media successfully shaped public opinion to support Bush policies. Therefore, from announcing Al Qaeda as the perpetrator of the September 11 attack, to declaring the war in Afghanistan and Iraq in the following year, the society was persuaded by the idea that war as the best choice.

Furthermore, in regards to the relationship between the terrorist group and the news media, one can look at how Al Jazeera, for example, gained publicity for relaying Osama bin Laden provocative speech unedited. The same situation goes to bin Laden who was also getting the benefit of sending his messages to the world, especially to those he believes as the enemies. This publicity that bin Laden obtained from Al Jazeera made him popular among people who have negative images of the Western world. Al Jazeera’s decision to provide bin Laden a lot of air time had surely become a boomerang for the US government. This is because when Al Jazeera was first established in 1996, the existence of Al Jazeera was praised by the West as it became the symbol for democratization in the Middle East. Things has changed since the U.S. government launched an invasion to Afghanistan in response to the September 11, where Al Jazeera has become the subject of criticisms in the Western
countries for being "biased", "the mouthpiece of Osama bin Laden" and for "covering uncontextualized violence, death and torture".44

When the US invasion on Iraq started in 2003, Al Jazeera was among the leading news networks that have been providing the balance coverage through reporting the negative effects of war. Al Jazeera actively broadcasted images of casualties of war and continuously questioned US motives in invading Iraq.

Moreover, in terms on how the media serves the interest of the government one can observe how the Bush administration was arguably manipulated the over exposed news coverage on September 2001 in order to pursue their political agenda, particularly the military build-up.45 In order to achieve that, the Bush administration had been playing a dual key strategy. On one hand the government maintained the level of fear among the society through choices of words in every presidential speech. Terms such as ‘war on terror’, ‘weapon of mass destruction’ and ‘crusade’ for example, used to demonstrate how dangerous the world has become. On the other hand, while the U.S. government ensured any Muslim countries that the ‘war on terror’ was not against Islam, the Bush administration did not do much to stop the Americans from condemning Islam.46

The significant influence of Bush administration on the media is can be seen from the first time Bush declared the ‘war on terror’. It is interesting to find how the U.S. government stage-managed the facts from the allegation that Iraq has weapon of mass destruction to the link between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein, through the news media such as FOX news channel.

What is interesting in the case of reporting ‘war on terrorism’ in Afghanistan and Iraq is how there are two side of a story. First, there was news that was arguably fabricated by the US government and its allies in order to draw support from their people to support their actions. The sanitation of war is the concept regularly applied in order to describe how the US embedded news media in Afghanistan and Iraq, and in return of guardianships while reporting the wars, the journalists are set into certain rules such as the ban from reporting the death of civilians or the US soldiers.47 In contrast to the first type of news, there were news that channeled through alternative news outlet, such as Al Jazeera and independent news organization such as Indymedia, which covered the dark side of the war.
Conclusion

This paper discusses the intensification of representations of terrorists’ acts in the broadcast news program (or the 24/7 news networks) after September 11. It is argued that the relationship within the media, the terrorist and the government remains the same even though each actor, especially the media and the terrorist, has been through several changes in their forms and features. The discussion begins with reviewing the theoretical insights on the relation between the three actors. The next section describe how the news media reporting terrorism before 2001, and why post September 2001, the media portrayals on terrorist acts intensified.

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