"Terrorism," the Media, and the Liberal-Democratic State: A Critique of the Orthodoxy

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> The government must promote its own cause and undermine that of the enemy by disseminating its view of the situation, and this involves a carefully planned and co-ordinated campaign of what for want of a better word must regrettably be called psychological operations.
>
> *Major-General Frank Kitson* [1]

> The Conference succeeded in bringing about a better understanding of the respective problems faced by newsmen and government officials in dealing with terrorism. Most participants agreed that a postponement of information for a few days was acceptable if either human life or national security were at stake. While there will always be some degree of mutual suspicion between press and government in a democratic system, mutual cooperation and proper working procedures in times of crisis can produce an acceptable balance between the interests of the state and the press.
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> *Mr. Peter Galliner, Director, International Press Institute* [2]

[1] Maj.-Gen. Frank Kitson, *Low-Intensity Operations* (London: Faber, 1971). General Kitson is Britain's most celebrated "counterinsurgency" theorist and practitioner of "psyops."

[2] *Terrorism and the Media* (London: International Press Institute, 1980). This con-

THIS essay explores an issue which has received little systematic attention within the sociological literature: the media reporting of terrorism in Western democracies. In what follows I shall pursue three themes. First, I will indicate how the term "terrorism" is conventionally related to the question of legitimate political activity and to the concept of practical rationality. Such a semantic dimension is relevant for understanding how media discourse may routinely reproduce dominant meanings. Next, the essay turns to an examination of official and semiofficial orthodox views on the role of the media in reporting terrorism. And finally, to reinforce the arguments of the second section I shall make some points about the control of the media reporting of terrorism in the United Kingdom, as this is a particularly good test case which confutes the easy generalizations of the antiterrorism experts. I shall conclude by stressing the need for careful further investigation of the issue, particularly through a comparative analysis of state systems in articulation with their national media and through an analysis of the specific causes of political violence.

Terrorism: Official and Unofficial

The language used by the media in describing acts of political violence is of crucial importance in the eyes of state agencies. The standard official view was clearly stated at the International Press Institute's 1978 conference on "Terrorism and the Media" by Lord Harris, then Minister of State in the British Home Office. In an "off the record" contribution he is reported to have said that "the Italian media allowed themselves to be caught up in the language of the Red Brigades

which had kidnapped and murdered Aldo Moro. The so-called communiqués of the Red Brigades were just an example of *play-acting* staged for the benefit of the *media*, which accepted them with too little caution. 'Terrorists . . . are common criminals: they do not have courts, they do not issue communiqués, and they do not have the status of public servants'."[3]

The rest of Lord Harris's views are, unfortunately, not publicly available. However, Dr. Conor Cruise O'Brien provides a reasoned elaboration of this position, one which is not without interest given his former post as Minister for Posts and Telegraphs in the Irish government and his advocacy of censoring broadcast interviews with IRA spokesmen. Dr. O'Brien states a central axiom which stands neatly for virtually all the thinking done on this subject: "The force used by a democratic state is legitimate while the violence of the terrorist is not legitimate."[4] Thus a controlled political discourse is an essential part of the liberal-democratic state's fight against its enemies:

The terms "force" and "violence" are . . . like "terrorist" and "freedom-fighter" largely emotive propaganda terms; which we use about a given act depends, not on the degree of force or violence, but on a view of its justification.[5]

Talking principally about the IRA, Dr. O'Brien argues that as both the British and Irish states pursue rational procedures for solving political problems they are legitimate, and the IRA's campaign of violence is not justified. In this view, liberal democracies are embodiments of rationality while terrorists, being violent, are quintessentially irrational. Their notions of liberation, whether universal or nationalistic, are but quasi-millenarian; they concern articles of faith, not practical reason. Hence, political debate with a terrorist should be refused, for "though he can argue fluently from his own peculiar premises, he is not accessible to rational argument on premises

[3] Claudio Pontello, "Terrorism and the Media," in *Terrorism and the Media*.
[4] Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Liberty and Terror: Illusions of Violence, Delusions of Liberation," *Encounter* 49 (October 1977): 38.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

other than his own."[6] Terrorists should receive no publicity and should be dealt with by military rather than political means.

Whatever their undoubted advantages, liberal democracies are not embodiments of rationality. For one, proper adherence to democratic practices coupled with widespread inequality, suffering, and the anarchy of production might, on other criteria, be thought less than fully rational, if not positively irrational. Moreover, Dr. O'Brien fails to question the use of force in the pursuit of national security. Must it invariably be above suspicion? On his view, yes, for he engages in a definitional sleight of hand in which rationality and democratic institutions mutually imply one another. It is, furthermore, important to recognize that political violence employed against the liberal-democratic state is not *inherently* irrational. It depends upon the likelihood of a successful outcome, which may be a morally unappealing view but is nonetheless attuned to current political realities. In short, the use of political violence by those opposed to the state is *prima facie* evidence neither of rationality nor of irrationality.[7]

Lord Harris and Dr. O'Brien propose a form of linguistic surgery in order to effect an ideological closure in which the good elements within the polity are radically distinguished from the bad, the orderly from the chaotic. This rigorous drawing of the conceptual lines has attendant dangers. By being overwhelmed by moral repulsion and by criminalizing politics, one is apt to overlook the possible political rationale of those acts which one rejects. A general presumption of political rationality would seem to be an important precondition for analyzing a "terrorist problem." Moreover, the dehumanization of the state's enemies endangers civil liberties. These positions have been eloquently argued by Professors Edmund Leach and Franco Ferrarotti.

inherent effects theory

[6] *Ibid.*, p. 38.
[7] Cf. Ted Honderich, *Violence for Equality: Inquiries in Political Philosophy* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1980).

Leach observes that there are problems when divergent concepts of rationality, order, and criminality coexist "within the matrix of a single political domain." Although real consensus may be absent, the legal apparatus is obliged to produce a consensual view which identifies and treats criminals not merely as unheroic but also as inhuman. Thus,

> according to the value system which is taken for granted by the press and radio, anyone who refuses to accept the prevailing conventions of how hostilities should be conducted should automatically be categorised as a criminal, lawless, barbarian, terrorist, a savage who can properly be likened to a reptile or a wild beast.[8]

In the cast of mind of those who engage in indiscriminate terrorism, thinks Leach, potential victims are thought of as " 'people quite unlike us,' sub-human others, people to whom *my* rules of morality do not apply."[9] This refers both to agents of the state and to its opponents. For states engaged in counterterror there is the peril of mounting "crusades of reprisal" and of obscuring the sources of political violence:

> However incomprehensible the acts of the terrorists seem to be, our judges, our policemen, and our politicians must never be allowed to forget that terrorism is an activity of our fellow human beings and *not* of dog-headed cannibals.[10]

This humanistic caution would seem to be well made at a time when liberal-democratic states such as Britain, Italy, and West Germany have acquired "exceptional" legal powers such as the Prevention of Terrorism Act, the *Berufsverbote*, and the *Legge Reale*.[11]

[8] Edmund Leach, *Custom, Law, and Terrorist Violence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1977), p. 26.

[9] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

[10] *Ibid.*, p. 36.

[11] Cf. S. Cobler, *Law, Order, and Politics in West Germany* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978); Suzanne Cowan, "Terrorism and the Italian Left," in Carl Boggs and David Plotke, eds., *The Politics of Eurocommunism: Socialism in Transition* (London: Macmillan, 1980); Brian Rose-Smith, "Police Powers and Terrorism Legislation," in Peter Hain, ed., *Policing the Police* (London: John Calder, 1979), vol. 1.

Franco Ferrarotti has gone further than Leach in trying to outline a set of humanistic assumptions within which violence, including political terrorism, should be evaluated. First, in terms redolent of Leach, he argues that "the violent are not 'mad wolves' but fully human beings." Second, he suggests that violence has a "specific historical determination" and that its causes require empirical exploration. Last, he proposes that violence is the "perversion of a virtue" and a search for meaning in order to escape the straitjacket imposed by a rational, bureaucratic society. It is this deeper metaphysic which leads him to be skeptical of those who would treat violence as the symptom of a "sickness." Mere repression, he suggests, is a theoretical error with the likely consequence of eventually increasing violence rather than abating it.[12] One might add that the manipulation of the media by states pursuing short-term "psywar" goals will also come home to roost.

As Professors Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman have pointed out, the dominant assumptions about order, legitimacy, and rationality embed themselves in a "semantics of terror.'"[13] Like Dr. O'Brien they recognize the importance of language in propaganda battles. But rather than endorse the liberal-democratic state as perfectly rational, they are concerned to point to U.S. support for repression in the Third World and the ideological function of "human rights" rhetoric. While the substance of their study extends well beyond the performance of Western media reporting of violence, it is their focus upon this theme which makes it relevant here.

Chomsky and Herman argue that U.S. policy toward Third World states provides, at any given time, an ideological framework within which "the spectrum of acceptable and un-

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12 Franco Ferrarotti, "On Violence: Paradoxes and Antinomies," typescript translation of ch. 7 of his *L'ipnosi della violenza* (Milan, 1980). Also cf. "Anche i terroristi sono esseri umani," *La critica sociologica* 43 (Autumn 1977).

13 Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism* and *After the Cataclysm*, vols. 1 and 2 of "The Political Economy of Human Rights" (Nottingham, Spokesman Books, 1979).

acceptable bloodshed" may be defined. Central to this framework are "the words 'terror' and 'terrorism'" which "have become semantic tools of the powerful in the Western world."[14] These terms, they rightly contend, "have generally been confined to the use of violence by individuals and marginal groups. Official violence which is far more extensive in both scale and destructiveness is placed in a different category altogether."[15] In the public discourse of the West, those who oppose established orders are the terrorists, while state terrorism is a category virtually never employed, unless it refers to the Communist bloc. In the course of their analysis Chomsky and Herman develop a provocative distinction. They talk, on the one hand, of "official violence" as resulting in "wholesale terror," and on the other of "unofficial violence" as producing "retail terror." If adopted, this quantitative criterion would doubtless lead to a transvaluation of present values about terrorism in Western democracies. But it is unlikely to be persuasive either to the Western media or to the "accredited spokesmen," in Stuart Hall's apt phrase, who provide the primary definitions of social reality which the media largely reproduce. Instead, as Chomsky and Herman argue, the Western media have for the most part fallen in with the officially endorsed usage, which, in "the 1970s has been institutionalised as a device to facilitate the exclusive preoccupation with the lesser terror of the alienated and the dispossessed, serving virtually as a disguised form of apologetics for state terror and client fascism."[16]

A caveat is in order, lest in acknowledging the justice of Chomsky's and Herman's critique we uncritically go overboard for the "alienated and dispossessed." An acceptance of the quantitative critique and its implications for linguistic reform does not mean abandoning the need for moral and political

[14] Ibid., 1: 85.
[15] Ibid., 1: 6.
[16] Ibid., 1: 87.

opposition to indiscriminate political violence by the repressed. E. P. Thompson puts it well when he observes that

> in conditions of extreme repression, democrats and socialists may be forced to take arms in self-defence or in a strategy of insurrection. And in such conditions they merit our solidarity. But where other measures of organization and agitation remain open, the recourse to terrorism is at best romantic, self-defeating and profoundly elitist (people who cannot be moved by arguments must be terrorized by guns), and at worst merely sick and villainous.[17]

Although this essay is concerned with, in Chomsky's and Herman's terms, "retail terrorism," one should bear in mind the integral links between the *internal* policing of dissent through mechanisms of control such as the media and the *international* dimension. Chomsky and Herman make some relevant points here. First, and most Northern Ireland coverage in the British media has taken this form, by commonly representing revolutionary terrorism as the initiating force, state violence may be seen as purely "responsive" and states therefore as justified in riding roughshod over civil liberties. Second, official violence in, for instance, Latin American states such as Brazil and Uruguay is redefined in the Western media and thus implicitly endorsed. Again, to take an "internal" example, in Northern Ireland state-sanctioned torture of prisoners was redefined first by a judicial inquiry, and then by the media, as "inhuman and degrading treatment." Third, retail terrorism is presented as an irrational activity, and its seeming irrationality the more persuasively presented in virtue of inadequate contextualization. Finally, they note, in the United States supporters of the anti-Vietnam War movement were effectively discredited by being labeled as "terrorists." Again, in Britain and elsewhere, the expanded category of "subversion" elides the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate dissent in much the same way.

17 E. P. Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight* (London: Merlin, 1980), p. 171.

The Orthodox Consensus and Its Limitations

The debate about the media reporting of unofficial terrorism in Western capitalist democracies has primarily developed within the compass of the psychological warfare aims of the state.[18] In this respect there are significant parallels with the way in which information policy is located in Latin American states governed according to an ideology of "national security" which is fixated upon the "enemy within."[19] During the past decade, and especially since the mid-1970s, an international conventional wisdom has been elaborated within official and semiofficial circles in which the media are conceived of pragmatically, as instruments which can contribute to, or impede, final victory. Although mere expediency might seem to dictate outright censorship in order to deny violent opponents of the state the supposedly clear-cut advantages of publicity, matters are not so simple. Overt censorship threatens the legitimacy of the liberal-democratic order, one in which the received conception of press freedom is that the media are completely separate from the state. Hence, it is advantageous for the state to set in train an information policy which integrates the media into a national-security design while, at the same time, preserving the necessary appearance of separation. The dominant view in the current orthodoxy has been succinctly expressed by Major-General Richard Clutterbuck, the British counterinsurgency expert:

> The television camera is like a weapon lying in the street. Either side can pick it up and use it. If governments use it in this way—encouraging their officials, policemen and soldiers to help the media-men, and to answer their questions—it is far more effective than any kind of censorship or government control.[20]

[18] I have so located it in my essay "On the Shape and Scope of Counterinsurgency Thought," in G. Littlejohn et al., eds., *Power and the State* (London: Croom Helm, 1978), esp. pp. 112–114.

[19] Armand and Michèle Matterlart, "Information et état d'exception," in *De l'usage des médias en temps de crise* (Paris: Alain Moreau, 1979).

[20] Maj.-Gen. Richard Clutterbuck, *Living with Terrorism* (London: Faber, 1975), p. 147. Cf. his *Guerrillas and Terrorists* (London: Faber, 1977), where he advocates

Aside from seeking media cooperation there would seem to be two possible options. First, there is overt censorship. But this is rarely argued for in an across-the-board manner—except when "news freezes" are sought, and even then media compliance is usually forthcoming. In general, open censorship is advocated for broadcasting rather than the press, and in such limited contexts as refusing to allow interviews with spokesmen of illegal organizations engaged in political violence. Dr. O'Brien has persistently pursued this line in Britain and the Irish Republic as part of his wider argument that "a liberalism, relevant to the dangers of the day should be concerned to support and strengthen the principle of authority under the law."[21] It has also been advocated by some counterinsurgency theorists and the London-based right-wing Institute for the Study of Conflict.[22]

Falling outside the orthodoxy is the much less frequently stated libertarian case as proposed, for instance, by the U.S. political scientist Bernard Johnpoll: "It is useless to discuss what the media can do about terror. The media are not judicial institutions; their sole role in modern society is to transmit information. How to erase terror is a judicial and ethical question: not a question of the media."[23] Perhaps this could be seriously argued only in the United States, and, moreover, by a confirmed believer in the separation-of-powers doctrine both as reality and as ideal.

In U.S. law-enforcement circles different grounds are advanced for noninterference. Patrick Murphy, a New York police chief, offers three reasons: censorship "concedes a victory to terrorists" by suppressing freedoms: the media "can and do play an important and positive role" by stilling rumors

[21] Conor Cruise O'Brien, "Freedom and Censorship," a lecture at the Independent Broadcasting Authority, London, Mar. 28, 1979, p. 9.

[22] E.g., Paul Wilkinson, *Terrorism and the Liberal State* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 169, and *Television and Conflict* (London: Institute for the Study of Conflict, 1978).

[23] Bernard Johnpoll, "Terrorism and the Mass Media in the United States," in Yonah Alexander and Seymour Maxwell Finger, eds., *Terrorism: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* (New York: John Jay Press, 1977), p. 160.

and speculation; and the government does not have the expertise to "fine tune" the media.[24] The last point is particularly disingenuous, and the other two are plainly informed by a long-term psywar outlook. H.H.A. Cooper of the Task Force on Disorders and Terrorism also argues for noncensorship in news reporting, but advocates "care" in commentaries and investigations, suggesting that the media should recognize the possibility of their being abused and therefore be "responsible."[25]

This argument for "socially responsible" media is developed against the background of some highly questionable assumptions about the nature of the contemporary liberal-democratic state and the operation of the media within it. These are: that liberal democracies are very vulnerable and they do not censor news; that the media are willing victims of terrorist propaganda and function as open conduits for such views; that media coverage has a "contagion effect." As noted, Conor Cruise O'Brien has argued, in effect, that liberal democracies need to take on an "exceptional" character, "relevant to the dangers of the day." This is but an extension of the view that such states' are presently highly vulnerable, especially when confronted by publicity-seeking terrorists. They are presumed to lack an effective repressive apparatus and to be perfectly open. This line has been canvassed by Professor Walter Laqueur of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, Washington, D.C., and Dr. J. Bowyer Bell of the Institute for War and Peace Studies, Columbia University, both of whom are prominent writers on political violence.[26]

However, this assumption needs to be critically evaluated by

[24] Patrick Murphy, "The Case of the United States," in *Terrorism and the Media.*
[25] H. H. A. Cooper, "Terrorism and the Media," in Alexander and Finger, *Terrorism.* He uses typical psywar language: "he who controls the media is most powerfully equipped to win the hearts and minds of the people" (p. 145); "The terrorist needs the media as a fish needs water" (p. 150).
[26] Walter Laqueur, *Terrorism* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson. 1977), pp. 109–110; J. Bowyer Bell, *A Time of Terror: How Democratic Societies Respond to Revolutionary Violence* (New York: Basic Books. 1978), p. 78.

reference to the recent growth of research suggesting that there have been significant alterations within the liberal democracies in the direction of what is variously termed a "strong state," "authoritarian statism," or the "national security state." The development of European antiterrorism legislation and police and military cooperation for "internal defence," the weakening of the rights of defendants in both criminal and political trials, the growth of high-technology police surveillance of whole populations, the expanded category of "subversion," restrictions upon the rights of trade unions and of political demonstrations, the use of repressive technology in civil policing are all manifestations of this shift.[27] Against such a background, which, to be sure, in part represents a response to unofficial political violence, it is difficult to concur with the picture of present vulnerability which is drawn in the writings of the "terrorism studies" experts—where, indeed, one rarely finds any analysis at all of the operations of the present advanced capitalist state.[28]

But where the vulnerability-of-liberal-democracy thesis is retained it is but a small step to promote the role of the media of communication in exacerbating that weakness to one of crucial significance. Thus Professor Laqueur remarks:

> Terrorists have learned that the media are of paramount importance in their campaigns, that the terrorist act by itself is next to nothing, whereas publicity is all. But the media, constantly in need of diversity and new angles, make fickle friends. Terrorists will always have to be innovative. They are, in some respects, the superentertainers of our time.[29]

[27] In Britain there has been a spate of concerned literature, including C. Ackroyd et al., *The Technology of Political Control*, 2nd ed. (London: Pluto Press, 1980); T. Bunyan, *The History and Practice of the Political Police in Britain* (London: J. Friedmann, 1976); Thompson, *Writing by Candlelight*. Cf. also Nicos Poulantzas, *State, Power, Socialism* (London: New Left Books, 1978) and Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, "An Address on German Democracy to the Citizens of New York," *New Left Review*, no. 118 (November–December 1979).

[28] A notable exception in Bowyer Bell's still rather cursory analysis of the Italian and Irish states in *A Time of Terror*.

[29] Laqueur, *Terrorism*, p. 223.

These few remarks command widespread assent. Bowyer Bell links the centrality of the media to subversive strategies for publicity: hence "it matters a great deal not only why and how a rebel kills, but also where and when. The television terrorist understands prime time, the need to escalate his deed, to manipulate the media, to reach the masses."[30] He goes on to argue that manipulation of the media by terrorists requires that several conditions be satisfied. First, there should be a good locale with communications facilities, such as the Munich Olympics in 1972. Second, the media need to be enticed by the prospect or actuality of violence. And finally, in order to hold the media's attention a terrorist "spectacular" should contain frequent shifts of scene, as in, say, an aircraft hijack.[31]

For Bowyer Bell the terrorist is a publicist or showman. This dramaturgical perspective is present throughout similar writings. So Laqueur talks of "superentertainers," while Brian Jenkins, the Rand Corporation's expert on international terrorism, likewise observes: "Terrorists choreograph their violence. Terrorism is theatre."[32] In a perspective which sees political violence as unambiguously effective drama it is not surprising that media coverage is accorded such importance. Assuming the simple convergence of terrorist actions and the values and needs of capitalist media, it is no great step to the view that the media are the willing victims of the superstars of violence. However, Laqueur does qualify this by noting that they are "fickle."

In the orthodox view, then, liberal democracies are seen as uncensored with media engaging in the untrammeled pursuit of news values stressing violence and drama, the result being disproportionately great publicity. But this argument runs against actual developments where some liberal-democratic regimes, in strengthening their repressive apparatuses, have also developed sophisticated policies for the management of

[30] Bowyer Bell, *A Time of Terror*, p. 54.
[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 110–116.
[32] Brian Jenkins, "Responsibilities of the News Media—I," in *Terrorism and the Media*.

publicity. State strategies toward the media in West Germany are a case in point.

Mr. Armin Grünewald, the West German government's official spokesman, has observed that the media "play a substantial part in the terrorists' logistic organization" and that the state therefore has a right to insist on collaboration from the press and broadcasting. In the 1970s "information policy has become a stable component of every consultative moment of the situation," and principles of collaboration between the media and state have been developed involving centralized channeling of information. He has illustrated this process of control revealingly. During the month-long "news freeze" during the kidnapping of Hanns Martin Schleyer, head of the West German industrialists' organization,

> the Secretary of State, Herr Bölling, granted dozens of interviews, made statements and took part in a series of debates almost entirely centering round the meaning and legitimacy of these restraints. *This was not only a quest for understanding but a conscious calculation. Self-restraint by the media, the most important element of the news operation, is feasible only if they are urged to deal with questions that are not dangerous for police tactics.*[33]

Successful control of media coverage was achieved without legal compulsion, for such powers did not exist.

The Vice-Chairman of the Bonn Criminal Police, Mr. Reinhard Rupprecht has given a similarly frank account of the control of news during the Schleyer kidnapping. Preferring the more euphemistic "deferment of news" to "news freeze," Mr. Rupprecht argues that the media were of crucial importance in achieving public cooperation in the hunt for those suspected of the kidnapping. A few minutes after Schleyer's body had been found a police information film was broadcast and the entire press carried a

> whole-page insert with photos and distinctive characteristics of the 16 wanted terrorists, together with summaries of certain

[33] Armin Grünewald, "Government and the Press: National Security and the Public's Right to Know," in *Terrorism and the Media*; emphasis added.

pieces of evidence and details which would on the one hand arouse suspicion should the terrorists rent flats that could be used as meeting or hiding places or purchase used cars, and on the other be useful in recognising any forgery of passports, identity cards and driving licences.

Other aspects of this public mobilization for "national security" included a further nine police films broadcast on television at prime time on nine consecutive days "with no need to have recourse to the right of divulgation on radio and television which was reserved to the Federal government."[34] Special research on the use of pictures and graphics was commissioned in order to make this "search operation" more effective. When one considers evidence such as this of the effectiveness with which the media may be subject to state direction at times, it is hard to accept the general picture of limp-wristed liberal democracy current in the orthodox view.[35]

Let us now turn to the last standard assumption—that the media, by reporting terrorist acts, have "contagious effects." This has been advanced, for one, by Professor Yonah Alexander of the State University of New York. But while he says that publicity legitimizes terrorism, he provides no sound evidence to support this contention. For instance, he cites the results of two U.S. public-opinion polls which indicated "greater awareness" of the PLO during 1974–75, years when that organization was attracting lots of media attention. However, he seems not to realize that public recognition of a group's existence does not indicate that its goals are now publicly favored. Nor, indeed, does recognition mean that the public necessarily understands the political aims of the group in question in terms that it itself would wish. For the media treatment of sieges, bombings, and hijackings may well result

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[34] Reinhard Rupprecht. "The Case of Federal Germany—I." in *Terrorism and the Media*

[35] Not all states have such effective systems of control, it is true. The continual leaking of information during the Aldo Moro kidnapping to the Italian press has led to calls for news freezes and for a code of practice. Cf. Robert Solé, *Le défi terroriste: leçons italiennes à l'usage de l'Europe* (Paris: Seuil, 1979), esp. pp. 221–230.

in their ostensible rationale being either excluded entirely, ridiculed, challenged, distorted, or played down.[36]

A further variant of this naive "effects" argument is Alexander's suggestion that publicity for terrorism leads to the exportation of violent techniques which are taken up elsewhere. Yet the evidence cited is exiguous indeed: we are merely told that Nelson Rockefeller, Andrew Young, and Major-General Clutterbuck believe this to be so. The following illustration is offered:

> Several weeks after Argentina's Montoneros removed the body of ex-President Pedro Aramburu to secure the return of Eva Peron's body from Spain, Burmese terrorists stole the body of U Thant for the purpose of using it in negotiations with the Burmese government.[37]

But surely a particular technique, body-snatching, cannot be considered in total isolation from the social relations in which it occurs. One must specify the mediating conditions which explain *why* such acts occur. It is not enough to assert loose correspondences between actions in Latin America and in Asia with the supposed explanation that terrorism is a "world-wide theatrical attraction [which] tends to encourage angry and frustrated groups beyond a particular country to understake similar acts out of their helplessness and frustration."[38] Which angry groups? Why them especially? In which societies and in which circumstances do they use such techniques? Do they have alternatives? Such basic questions for research cannot be made to vanish by the magical invocation of media effects.

In fact, Professor Alexander's argument is yet another variant of the venerable and quite unproven contention that the portrayal of violence on television, or in the cinema, or before

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[36] As occurred for instance with the "Angry Brigade" in Britain. Cf. S. Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News* (London: Tavistock, 1977), pp. 95ff.

[37] Yonah Alexander, "Terrorism, the Media, and the Police," *Police Studies* (June 1978): 47. Given his energetic promotion of "terrorism studies" and his editorship of the journal *Terrorism*, Alexander's views are probably quite influential.

[38] *Ibid.*, p. 47.

that in the nineteenth-century theater, has had deleterious effects, especially upon impressionable children. There has been a long-standing debate on this question in cultural criticism and mass-communication research which makes it plain that no simple cause-effect relationship between the portrayal of violence in the media and a given social response has so far been established. Indeed, to conceptualize the problem in those terms at all is to leave out any study of popular attitudes, their production by given social relations, and the highly complex process of the mediation of meaning which communicative activities entail.[39] When Alexander asserts that "by providing extensive coverage of incidents the media give the impression that they sympathize with the terrorist cause thereby creating a climate congenial to further violence,"[40] he is actually posing a problem for future research into the reporting of political violence and its public interpretations, not stating an established proposition.

Some Aspects of the British Model

The "terrorism studies" experts' views on the media reporting of political violence are entirely innocent of any serious analysis of the process of news production and the constraints it faces in a liberal democracy shifting to an "exceptional" modality of rule armed for psychological warfare. The British model of media control during the past decade provides a particularly good illustration of how crass overt censorship by the state may be avoided and instead be substituted by indirect control coupled with media self-censorship. The appeals of this solution are international. At the 1978 IPI conference on "Terrorism and the Media" it was widely hailed

[39] Cf. James D. Halloran, "Mass Communication: Symptom or Cause of Violence?", *International Social Science Journal* 30 (1978): Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media, and the 'Ideological Effect,'" in James Curran et al., eds., *Mass Communication and Society* (London: Edward Arnold, 1977).

[40] Alexander, "Terrorism, the Media, and the Police," p. 51.

as an example worth following. One can readily see why. For by avoiding evident censorship the state's ideological capital remains intact, and the media, by being socially responsible and by pursuing voluntary self-restraint." also retain their public credibility. And yet the solution does have its costs for the state, for, at given moments, the institutional imperatives of the media supervene over the doctrine of national security, and so they rock the boat. This contradictory situation may be illustrated by reference to the coverage of the continuing crisis in Northern Ireland, one which has involved British troops in fighting an undeclared "small war" for the past decade.

The sociopolitical impasse in Northern Ireland has contributed to a wider "crisis of legitimacy" within the British state at the root of which lies the continuing inability of successive governments to discipline labor and to restore adequate profitability to capital. The drift toward more authoritarian forms of rule has made much more crucial the role of the media in winning consent for increasingly coercive policies. Since the late 1960s, a framework of interpretation for quite separate forms of dissent has been elaborated, based upon the notion of a society suffering from the malaise of violence. Industrial-relations conflicts (notably picketing), street crime, juvenile hooliganism, political demonstrations, and antistate violence (such as the continuing IRA campaign) have all been assimilated to the "violent society" framework.[41] It is in such a context that state strategies toward the media should be seen. I shall touch only very selectively upon several instances which cast further doubt upon the standard assumptions of the experts.

The coverage of Northern Irish affairs in the British media, as Philip Elliott has pointed out, has tended to simplify violent incidents, to avoid historical background, to concentrate upon human-interest stories, and to rely heavily upon official sources. Even during the periods of the most intense constitu-

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[41] For elaborations of this argument, cf. Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1978) and Chibnall, *Law-and-Order News*.

tional political activity, the story has been preeminently one of violence, and of irrational, inexplicable violence at that.[42] Aside from weaknesses in the journalistic practice of the British media, there can be little doubt that the one-dimensional coverage reflects, at least in part, the effective long-term strategy of attrition waged by the British state in its psychological-warfare campaign, one which has involved increasingly sophisticated public-relations techniques.

Most public attention in Britain has focused upon the British state's repeated efforts to control broadcast news and current-affairs coverage without stepping over that fatefully delegitimizing line into overt censorship. It is a struggle which has been waged patiently and with skill, and, moreover, one which has aroused little public disquiet. As both main political parties have been involved in prosecuting the war effort, opposition has come from within the media themselves and from civil libertarians. Aside from those trade unionists directly involved in media production, however, it has no mass character at all.

It is impossible to do justice to this complex history here, but at the risk of oversimplification some general indications of its course may be given.[43] In general the British state has been largely successful in inducing the broadcasting organizations to censor themselves under the guise of "responsibility." Television, as the medium with the largest news audiences and the highest credibility, is seen as especially important in the psychological-warfare campaign. The public service British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and the commercial Independent Broadcast Authority (IBA) are responsible for all radio and television programming in the United Kingdom.

[42] Philip Elliott, "Reporting Northern Ireland," in *Ethnicity and the Media* (Paris: UNESCO, 1977).

[43] For a detailed account, cf. Philip Schlesinger, *Putting "Reality" Together: BBC News* (London: Constable, 1978), esp. ch. 8. Cf. also Anthony Smith, "Television Coverage of Northern Ireland," *Index on Censorship*, no. 2 (1972). Informative articles are contained in *The British Media and Ireland* (London: Campaign for Free Speech on Ireland, 1979).

The BBC is financed by a license fee levied by the state, but has a charter of independence from government. The IBA's finances are regulated by the government, which takes a levy from its advertising revenue, and it is subject to a Broadcasting Act. The public legitimacy of these central cultural institutions (which is great) derives from their formal independence from the state and from their obligation to provide "impartial" and "balanced" news and current-affairs coverage.

At the beginning of the 1970s the formal adherence to impartiality, which had only formerly been waived over race-relations issues, was abandoned over Northern Ireland. This shift came at a time when the British Army became increasingly involved in direct conflict with the IRA. As state pressure for "responsible" broadcasting mounted, the broadcasting authorities began to develop detailed internal guidelines for reporting the conflict. These included a virtual ban upon interviews with members of illegal organizations, one which has been so effective that only four such interviews have taken place on the BBC to date. More importantly, Irish Republican views, without knowing which the conflict cannot be understood, have received little serious analysis. Both the BBC and the IBA tightened controls on programs about Northern Ireland. The BBC, for instance, developed a system of "reference upwards" under which editors and reporters wishing to produce stories about Northern Ireland had to take their requests to the highest editorial levels of the organization. This had the undoubted effect of deterring investigative reporting of abuses by the state, such as the employment of torture or "dirty tricks" by the security forces. Moreover, it has inhibited an examination of the essentially political character of the crisis, resulting in an overemphasis upon manifestations of violence. The IBA, too, insisted upon viewing potentially controversial stories made by the companies it regulates and, like the BBC, has banned, censored, and delayed several programs. It is important to note that not only have news and current-affairs reporting been inhibited but also dramatic

works and major historical documentaries dealing with the roots of the Irish crisis have been censored or banned. Thus the effective restriction of public enlightenment has operated across the spectrum of programming, reinforcing the deficiencies of the educational system and of the wider culture, which provide no basis for an understanding of Britain's imperial role vis-à-vis Ireland.

Over the years, the broadcasting authorities have developed a "public order" policy on Northern Ireland which contains three elements. First, they generally support the efforts of the security forces in law enforcement. Second, they delegitimize "extremism" and "terrorism," especially that of the IRA, which is presented as the principal enemy and as the initiating cause of violence. Finally, there is a stress upon the avoidance of "inflamatory" coverage. The first two characteristics are shared by much of the press.

Nevertheless, there are real tensions in the relationship between broadcasters and the state, and the past decade has been spotted with a number of quite dramatic rows. One typical instance occurred in July 1979. A BBC television program interviewed a member of the group which claimed to have assassinated the Northern Ireland spokesman of the Conservative Party a few months earlier. The interview, given the virtual ban in force, was really quite exceptional. Its transmission produced an outburst of rage in Parliament, with the Conservative Prime Minister, Mrs. Thatcher, saying: "I am quite appalled it was ever transmitted." The opposition Labour Party home-affairs spokesman joined in the chorus of condemnation, calling the decision a "grave error."

In its defense the BBC pointed out that it had considered the matter carefully and that the last such interview had taken place five years earlier. The BBC's Director of News and Current Affairs argued that from time to time it was right "to show the public by way of reminder who and what the extremists are" and that

the media have a very real contribution to make, in particular, a contribution to the maintenance of the democracy which is under threat, both by providing a forum where the harshest differences of opinion can be aired, and by reporting and courageously investigating the unpalatable truths which underly the problems of the province.[44]

This typical liberal defense did not impress the goverment, which instructed the Attorney-General to investigate whether the BBC could be prosecuted under the Prevention of Terrorism Act for withholding information likely to lead to the apprehension of a terrorist. No prosecution was to eventuate. However, a further twist was given to the existing techniques for the intimidation of broadcasters.

The highly "responsible" way in which the British media have reported political violence in Northern Ireland hardly gives credence to that favorite argument of the counterinsurgency experts and the politicians that the media (somehow) produce violence on the streets. The political causes of such disaffection lie elsewhere in fact, and far from producing deleterious "contagious effects" one might instead argue that the media frequently rally behind the state. Such a process occurred when, for instance, Lord Mountbatten was assassinated. Philip Elliott has labeled this an "affirmatory ritual," one in which press and broadcasting have emphasized the integrity of the social order. Terrorism is represented as inhuman and irrational and as the very embodiment of encroaching chaos.[45]

A few illustrations from the press coverage of Lord Mountbatten's assassination in August 1979 will make this point more concretely. The tone of the coverage was highly reverential, almost sacral, given his kinship to the Queen. Mountbatten was presented as the epitome of the finest

[44] *The Listener*, July 17, 1979, p. 74.
[45] "Press Performance as Political Ritual." *The Sociological Review Monograph on the Press and Journalism*, Keele University, forthcoming.

British qualities: soldier, hero, noble, statesman, family man
par excellence. His passing was widely referred to as the "end of
a legend." The newspaper and television programs ran
stockpiled obituaries, interviews with acquaintances and
friends, and tributes from across the globe. The act of killing
was widely interpreted as irrational, as that of "evil men" (*Daily
Mail*), "wicked assassins" (*The Sun*), "psychopathic thugs" (*Daily
Express*), "murdering bastards" (*Daily Star*), as "cowardly and
senseless" (*Financial Times*) and as the product of "diseased
minds rather than political calculation" (*Daily Telegraph*).
There was, therefore, a counterpoint between, on the one
hand, the irrational and evil forces threatening the state and,
on the other, the virtues of an exemplary citizen whose death
is inexplicable.

Much less prominence was given to the simultaneous disas-
ter which befell the British Army, namely, the killing of some
15 crack troops in an IRA ambush. A close reading of some
papers disclosed that sources in the security forces, far from
seeing the two linked incidents as an irrational exercise, saw
them rather as indicative of a more sophisticated strategy of
armed struggle. Only one newspaper printed in full the IRA
communiqué which specified the reasons for Mountbatten's
killing. This talked of his assassination as "one of the dis-
criminating ways we can bring to the attention of the British
people the continuing occupation of our country."[46]

This brief sketch suffices to make the point that the or-
thodox view of the media as "willing victims" of the terrorists
is without foundation. It fails to attend to how the media
routinely deny the rationality of antistate political violence and
how in some circumstances they invoke the sacred dimension
of nationhood to ward off subversive evil. The question of the
extent to which the public accepts the invitation to participate
in such rites remains open to investigation. The points made

[46] *The Daily Mirror*. Aug. 28, 1979.

here are by no means peculiar to Britain; Lavoinne, for instance, has argued much the same for France.[47]

The process of ritual affirmation is quite spontaneous and located within the hegemonic ideology. To indicate further how conscious strategic calculation is at work in the British model too, let us consider a last example. A good instance is that of the development of "voluntary self-restraint" by the press in the reporting of sieges, kidnappings, and hostage-takings. An agreement between the national media and the police in 1975 was initiated by the then Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Robert Mark. The media were asked to be "responsible" in their reporting in the interests of saving human life. In practice, what was required was for them to withhold, at the police's request, information deemed to be of use to kidnappers or hijackers.

The policy was rapidly tested at the Spaghetti House and Balcombe Street sieges and in the case of a girl kidnapped for ransom, incidents all of which occurred in 1975. During the first siege, the media agreed to suppress news of the capture of one of the gunmen's accomplices. In the second, the BBC, at the request of the police, broadcast the news that a crack Special Air Service squad was present at the scene. The IRA gunmen who were tuned in to radio broadcasts surrendered rapidly. In the kidnapping case, the police succeeded in achieving a total news freeze for nine days in return for daily press briefings, and the story was published only when the girl was finally released unharmed. Such extensive cooperation was unprecedented, and its success led to the London model being extended to the provincial media.

Even greater cooperation was achieved during the siege of the Iranian embassy in 1980.[48] In this case, radio, especially

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[47] Yves Lavoinne, "Presse et cohesion sociale: le cas des prises d'otages," *Revue francaise de communication* (Winter 1979): 35–41.

[48] This account draws upon my lengthy analysis of this siege, its implications, and the wider security and media policy background to it. Cf. my paper "The Media Politics of Siege-Management: Princes Gate, 1980," in *Screen Education* (Winter 1981).

the BBC's news service, was of crucial importance. This was because one of the express objectives of the gunmen was to achieve some publicity for their views. The authorities had an equally express strategy of preventing them from communicating their demands. One way in which this was achieved was by cutting off all telex and telephone links between the embassy and the outside world: these had been used at first by the media to make contact with the gunmen. The gunmen had radio receivers and constantly monitored them to listen for news of their demands being met, so the process of attrition could be aided by delaying the achievement of publicity objectives. The security forces knew what these were because they had the embassy bugged. One of the extraordinary twists in the tale lay in the fact that two BBC television newsmen were among the captured hostages. It was they who transmitted the gunmen's initial demands to their newsroom. One of these demands—a request for mediation by the ambassadors of several Arab countries—was suppressed by the BBC at the request of the British government, which was unwilling to yield its control over the bargaining process. In return, the BBC was taken into the confidence of the authorities, it would appear, and its top officials were privy to special security briefings. The BBC became more deeply involved when one of its senior news executives was brought into the bargaining process and was instrumental in ensuring that publicity was traded for the release of some hostages. The close cooperation of the BBC and the Independent Television News Service with the security forces seemed to mark a further step forward in the absorption of the broadcast media into the crisis-management apparatus of the state. But such a development could occur only because of the longer-term strategy of seeking cooperation which had been pursued throughout the decade. The control of publicity at the Iranian embassy was an integral element in a siege-management approach which actually led to a shoot-out using the Special Air Service.

Future Directions

This essay has presented a critique of the orthodox assumptions concerning the media reporting of what Chomsky and Herman call "retail terrorism." Given the evident importance of this topic, there is surprisingly little writing on it which has been informed by any focused research. There would seem to be an urgent need for an investigation into existing policies and national debates on "terrorism and the media" in Western capitalist democracies. The orthodox arguments, which derive from the instrumental preoccupations of a national-security-minded officialdom, point in the perilous direction of increased censorship and enhanced secrecy. Before further progress is made down that restrictive road, some dispassionate analysis, addressed to the widest possible public, of the real significance of publicity in present struggles to "suppress terrorism" would seem to be called for.

Some of the lineaments of an approach to the problem have been set out here. Unquestionably, we need to pay careful attention to the specific forms of political violence within a given state and to their causation. Detailed attention needs to be given to the organization of national media systems and the ways in which they articulate with the state. A comparative approach would have the merit of highlighting how national peculiarities have affected the evolution of psychological-warfare strategies. Such a systematic study of the dialectical interplay between media, political violence, and the state has hardly begun.[49]

[49] A research project along the lines indicated, which I am codirecting, is in its initial stages at Thames Polytechnic.