

## **SPECIAL SECTION: TERRORISM AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIASCAPES**

### **Editors' introduction: terrorism and contemporary mediascapes—reanimating research on media and terrorism**

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#### **Introduction**

This special section of *Critical Studies on Terrorism* is devoted to an exploration of terrorism and contemporary mediascapes. In this introductory essay, I want to tease out a number of themes that bear upon the articles selected for inclusion herein, and also go to the larger issue of widening the scope of terrorism and media research.

Staun, in a similar fashion to countless other critical terrorism studies (CTS) scholars, has stated that '[t]errorism is not a word that corresponds to some thing or praxis "out there" in real life that is independent of time, place and borders'. Rather, he argues: 'terrorism is a concept, the content of which is dependent on the very definitions made by governments, judicial systems, public debates and to a certain extent, academics. And these definitions differ over time and from country to country' (2010, p. 403). I concur, except there is a crucial category of 'definers' missing from Staun's listing, media. Staun goes on to argue that

research should instead focus on describing which political actors are involved in defining terrorism, how they frame the threat and when and why they do so. Researchers should ask which groups or individuals are involved in drawing up definitions. How and with what linguistic tools are the supposedly threatening individuals or groups singled out as a threat? What are they said to be threatening, and in what way? (2010, pp. 403–404)

The study of media – widely conceived – in all its individual variety and increasing convergences gives us access to terrorism's shifts and variations and some of the most important uses to which these have historically and are currently being put (Staun 2010, p. 406). It is 'most important' because it is through media consumption that a majority of individuals learn about terrorism, and also 'widely conceived' because it is not through 'news media' alone that this learning takes place.

#### **'Media' or 'medium'?**

In its simplest understanding, 'media' is the plural of 'medium': something that is intermediate or between two others. Like some other plural words, 'media' is often employed today as if it were singular. This is because, in ordinary language/speech, 'the media' has become a shorthand descriptor for all those mass mediums that dominated the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: newspapers, magazines, photography, film, radio and

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television. One significant drawback of using the term 'media' in this way is that it obscures differences between industries and forms that are important and distinct. It also tends to obscure the roles and responsibilities of individuals (such as creative workers, owners, producers, users, etc.) across media industries, institutions and forms. The 'media' of, for example, media studies is much more than these however, it extends to advertising, computer games and popular music, for example. The use of the qualified term 'mass media' to refer to all of the latter reflects a concern with the form of media messages, in these cases, from a single source to a mass anonymous audience (or listenership, readership, etc.).

Some other forms that are clearly aimed at mass audiences, like popular fiction and non-fiction publishing and most forms of art, are not generally conceived as falling into the realm of either 'the media' or '(mass) media' more generally. From a disciplinary – say, media studies – perspective, this is probably because the study of these is seen to be the domain of other academic disciplines, such as English Literature or Art and Design. From the perspective of the woman or man 'in the street', this is probably because of the aforementioned equation of media with 'the media' and conceptions of the latter as being composed of journalistic institutions and mediums, thence 'the press', radio and television. What then of mixed media forms such as, for example, cartoons, comic books, and graphic novels? These are clearly aimed at mass audiences and, in fact, oftentimes appear or have their genesis in accepted 'mass media' publications, but their creators are not viewed as journalists. Are the latter therefore open to claim by all-comers? Roger Sabin's primer *Adult Comics* (1993) contains a chapter on the relationship of adult comics to other media (ch. 16) while at the same time locating adult comics as objects of study on courses in not just literature, languages and cultural studies, but also media studies (p. 2 and p. 292). Comics and graphic novels bring up another interesting aspect of the concept of media: the idea that some media *are* and perhaps *should be* privileged over others. In this notional hierarchy, news media rank above the so-called 'entertainment media' and the latter are sometimes not conceived as media at all. Comics, for example, were for a long time and in some circles still are 'dismissed as insubstantial and disreputable' (Hajdu 2004; see also Sabin 1993, p. 210).

Traditionally, other communication mediums such as telephones and faxes have not been considered as 'media' because generally they are used for delivery of messages from a single source to a single receiver. However, the advent of the Internet has hugely complicated matters in this regard. Recent advances in mobile technologies mean that the contemporary generation of phones can act as receivers for radio, television and the Internet (including the capacity to interact on social networking sites and micro-blogging sites, such as Twitter), as well as offering their users the ability to play games (directly on their handset or via their handset online), take photographs (and instantly upload these to Flickr or, via Instagram, to their social networking profiles) and record video (which may also be immediately uploaded to digital video platforms, such as YouTube or DailyMotion). These capabilities mean that anybody with a laptop, tablet or even a new-generation mobile phone can act as a media producer and distributor (Jenkins 2002).

### **Studying 'terrorism and media'**

There are at least three ways in which the above discussion is relevant to terrorism and media scholars. Firstly, if 'media' were simply the plural of 'medium', then the way forward would be obvious: terrorism and media scholars should engage in straightforward descriptive activity, asking: 'What is the message? Who is the sender? And to whom is it directed?'

However, such an approach fails to account for the complexity of media production, delivery and consumption, and the inter-play of these. In particular, it fails to take account of the possible effects of delivery mechanisms (i.e. the medium) on message transmission. This should probably already be obvious from the range of media already discussed and the differences among these. Film and television are both moving image forms and thus have similarities, but also evidence considerable differences. Newspaper cartoon strips clearly have commonalities with graphic novels, but here again the differences are also stark (Sabin 1993, p. 2). Given these similarities and differences, it is incumbent upon us to examine the technicalities of message transmission, explore the messages themselves and their authors, and what happens to messages in the process of communication, who receives them and in what circumstances. Concentrating exclusively on the individual messages (i.e. the content) of contemporary media forms, in other words, risks missing the way in which the form(s) and dimensions of individual mediums contribute to meaning.

Secondly, the above discussion also raises the question of what media forms should be admitted for study under the banner of ‘terrorism and media’? There is a fairly large body of scholarly work exploring the intersections of terrorism and media dating back to the early 1970s. The bulk of this research treats the traditional mass media or so-called ‘news media’ – newspapers and television news – and their coverage of terrorism perpetrated in or against Western countries. In fact, the bulk of empirical research in this area draws on newspaper reporting rather than television coverage for its empirical data, which may be confirmed via a quick survey of articles appearing in the major mainstream terrorism studies journals (i.e. *Terrorism and Political Violence* and *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*). There is nothing ‘wrong’ with this *per se* as the traditional mainstream news media, despite the growth of the Internet, remain an integral shaper of public perceptions. From a terrorism researcher perspective, there is probably an ‘ease of use’ issue at play here too: easy access to databases of newspaper articles, such as Lexis-Nexis, that provide relatively deep (i.e. in time) and wide (i.e. geographically and across types of publications) press coverage of terrorism, make newspaper content analyses and framing studies an attractive option. This may also partially explain the significant increase, again apparent from a survey of articles contained in mainstream terrorism journals, in research focusing on the Internet as a terrorist medium in recent years.

Thirdly, study of the intersection of terrorism and media is not restricted to terrorism scholars of course. It is carried out by media scholars and researchers from a host of other disciplinary backgrounds. Research for a recent paper on media portrayals of female terrorists (Conway and McInerney 2012), for example, elicited relevant articles – in addition to Nacos’ (2005) seminal paper in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* – from *Feminist Review*, *Global Society*, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* and *Women and Language*, amongst others. Interestingly, in this instance too, a majority of the articles relied on newspaper coverage, as opposed to analysis of any other types of media, including television news, for their data. Despite this, it is pertinent to ask about media studies what Richard Jackson has recently asked about conflict analysis and peace research and its relationship to terrorism studies. ‘How is it’, Jackson enquired:

that the ‘known’ knowledge of the causes and resolution of violent political conflict (including conflicts where terrorism was present), which has accumulated from decades of conflict analysis and peace research, among others, remains largely ‘unknown’ within the terrorism studies

field? Why is it that within terrorism studies research continues apace on questions related to terrorism's causes and effective responses without reference to the key scholars and existing studies of peace and conflict studies? (2012, p. 12)

Reformulating Jackson's question then, we might ask: 'How is it that knowledge of the intersections of media and conflict (including conflicts where terrorism was present), which has accumulated from decades of media and communication research, among others, remains largely "unknown" within the terrorism studies field? Why is it that within terrorism studies research continues apace on questions related to terrorism and media, including increasingly the Internet, without reference to the key scholars and existing studies of media and communication research?'

Piers Robinson in his editors' introduction to *Critical Studies on Terrorism's* special issue on 'Communicating Terrorism' (2009, Vol. 2, Issue 1) draws attention to how 'political communication scholarship, and its associates, have been more willing to engage in the kind of critical and progressive thinking about terrorism that is largely absent in the existing field of orthodox terrorism studies' (p. 2). A problem with the five articles selected for inclusion in the special issue however is that, their critical content aside, taken together their conception of not just 'media' in this instance, but in fact 'communication', is reduced to 'the mass media' (in this instance, newspapers and television; radio is largely absent from terrorism-media research, not just this special section). Having said this, *Critical Studies on Terrorism* as a whole has a better track record than its 'mainstream' competitor journals as regards inclusion within its pages research and analysis of 'media' conceived more widely than simply 'mass media' or 'news media', having treated within its first four complete volumes to date not just newspapers and television news, but also film (Dodd 2008, Nash 2011), television serials (Erickson 2008) and photographic images (Shepherd 2008). By contrast, *Terrorism and Political Violence* has, since 1997, published just a single article on media that treats neither newspapers nor the Internet: John Cotter's (1999) 'Sounds of hate: white power rock and roll and the neo-Nazi skinhead subculture'; while the extent of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism's* engagement with media broadly conceived, since 1997, is a single article on the Detroit Project's SUV advertising campaign (Zichermann 2006) and two later articles on terrorism and fiction writing (Jones and Smith 2010, Michael 2010). Neither of the two mainstream terrorism journals has published a single article on terrorism in film or in television serials in the past 15 years and all three journals rely disproportionately on newspapers *qua* 'media'.

### **Where we do we go from here?**

In terms of treatment of terrorism and media, the Internet has come to predominate in mainstream terrorism journals as its ubiquity and impacts simply could not be ignored. But there are other media that have much longer histories and also have large audiences that continue to be the subject of little-to-no scholarly analysis. Critical terrorism studies has paid attention to some of these, especially film and television, but critical terrorism scholars have continued like the mainstream to largely – although not entirely – ignore what we might term, following Jackson's (2012) 'subjugated knowledges', 'subjugated media', to include not just film and television, but also radio, popular music, popular fiction and non-fiction books, magazines, blogs, cartoons, comics, graphic novels, console computer games, online games, advertising, posters, murals, graffiti, and so on. The vast majority of terrorism scholars – mainstream and critical – who have addressed the intersection of terrorism and media have concentrated almost exclusively on 'news media', most especially

‘the press’, to the exclusion of ‘entertainment media’ and this needs to be remedied. One way in which to do this may be for critical terrorism-media scholars to focus their analyses not on media, but on ‘mediascapes’.

The Internet and the ways in which it operates are quite distinct from older media forms which, coupled with its increasing ubiquity, is causing us to communicate, think and ultimately live differently (Wolfe 1965). Today’s world is interactive in ways that are strikingly new in their orders and intensity at all levels (Appadurai 1996, p. 27). This has caused some media theorists to describe ours as a ‘convergence culture’: ‘convergence represents a cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content’ (Jenkins 2006, p. 3). Convergence is occurring at the levels of both production and distribution; newspapers, television and music once had very different physical productions, but can now be produced via a single multimedia computer or high-end mobile phone. At the distribution level, previously discrete channels are absorbed into a single-networked online process, with news, music, and so on, all accessed through the Internet. Convergence is also occurring at the level of content with, for example, news and entertainment being combined and recombined in new ways.<sup>1</sup>

Although he never employed the term convergence, Arjun Appadurai summed this up well in his discussion of what he called ‘global cultural flows’ or the relationship between what he termed ethnoscapas, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes.

The world we live in today is characterised by a new role for the imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense); the idea of the imagined community (in Anderson’s sense); and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations, which is no more and no less real than the collective representations of Emile Durkheim, now mediated through the complex prism of modern media. (1996, p. 31)

Appadurai employed the suffix *scape* ‘to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes’. Like terrorism, as described by Staun (2010), ‘these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors’. Appadurai’s *scapes* are thus ‘the building blocks’ of what, following Benedict Anderson (1983), he called ‘imagined worlds’: ‘the multiple worlds that are constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe’ (1996, p. 33). Appadurai described mediascapes, which he conceived as closely related to ‘ideoscapes’, as referring to:

both to the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information (newspapers, magazines, television stations, and film-production studios), which are now available to a growing number of private and public interests throughout the world, and to the images of the world created by these media. These images involve many complicated inflections, depending on their mode (documentary or entertainment), their hardware (electronic or preelectronic), their audience (local, national, or transnational), and the interests of those who own and control them. (1996, p. 35)

The most important aspect of mediascapes, he emphasised, is that they provide ‘large and complex repertoires of images, narratives and ethnoscapas to viewers throughout the world, in which the world of commodities and the world of news and politics are profoundly mixed’. This results in audiences spread across the globe experiencing media forms ‘as a

complicated and interconnected repertoire of print, celluloid, electronic screens, and billboards'. The upshot of this is a blurring of individuals' realistic and fictional landscapes, which results in their construction of 'imagined worlds that are chimerical, aesthetic, even fantastic objects, particularly if assessed by the criteria of some other perspective, some other imagined world' (1996, p. 35).

Appadurai's approach is attractive, because although dated – he mentions cassettes on a number of occasions! – it neither subscribes to a media hierarchy, whether in terms of content (news versus entertainment) or delivery (e.g. newspapers versus online), nor dismisses our 'imagined worlds'. Dismissing with hierarchy, in terms of both content type and delivery form, is crucial to extending our understanding of the intersections of terrorism and media, particularly the construction of our imagined worlds because our too narrow focus to date on 'news media' means that analyses of many of the crucial building blocks of those worlds remain unavailable to us.

### **Overview of the special section**

The articles included herein were originally prepared for a conference on 'Terrorism and New Media: Building a Research Network' hosted by the School of Law and Government and the Centre for International Studies at Dublin City University on 8–9 September 2010.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the conference was to bring together academics from a broad range of disciplines with policy-makers and security practitioners in order to facilitate advances in the study of terrorism and new media, particularly the Internet. In our Call for Papers, we solicited papers and panels reporting on innovative research into any aspect of terrorism and new media. We were particularly interested in papers that reported novel results or described and employed innovative methodological approaches, and explicitly sought 'Critical responses to research on, reporting of, and governmental responses to the conjunction of terrorism and the Internet' and papers treating 'Ethical issues surrounding online terrorism-related research'. In the event, the largest number of proposals received and papers eventually presented at the conference fell squarely into 'mainstream' Terrorism Studies. Nonetheless, we did have a small number of papers presented at the conference that took a more critical approach or raised issues of direct relevance to critical terrorism studies scholars. Four of these papers have been selected to appear in this special section. These papers are more wide-ranging in their subject matter than the bulk of the papers presented at the conference, thence the title of the special section, which emphasises not the relationship between terrorism and the Internet, but instead seeks to renew research and interest in the area of terrorism and media, but with a focus on the multi-modal nature of contemporary mediascapes rather than the narrow focus apparent in this area to date on analyses of print media, particularly newspapers. The media analysed in the papers synthesised below are popular non-fiction books, graphic novels, film, television and the Internet.

Benedict Anderson famously argued that 'the act of reading things together' (Appadurai 1996, p. 28) effectively changed the world. More books with the word 'terrorism' in the title have been published in the twenty-first century than the combined total of all such books prior to that. Over half of these were on the subject of 'Islamic terrorism'. The sheer volume of such texts, without even taking into consideration their contents, contributes to rendering as 'true' the existence of the phenomenon they publicise. In her article, Azra Naseem argues that such an increase in the literature on the subject of Islamic

terrorism was made possible by an overall relaxation of usually strict enunciative rules and regulations governing discursive production and explores the effects of the loosening of the latter controls through an analysis of popular non-fiction books published on the subject of terrorism in the United States in the early years of the ‘War on Terror’ and the authors of these, as the existence of these texts – never mind their influence – has been ignored by terrorism scholars to date. Azra notes in her article that the authors she discusses, including Robert Spencer, Walid Shoebat and Brigitte Gabriel, did not restrict themselves to selling their terrorism ‘knowledge’ via their book projects, but accessed further large audiences via re-mediation of their narratives across every available platform from television to the press and radio to the Internet.

Visual media, outside of film and television, are almost entirely ignored by terrorism and media researchers. In her article, Elaine Martin, whose background is in German language and literature, explores a subgenre of the comic book most often referred to as the graphic novel. In the article, Martin describes and analyses representations of terrorism, both written and visual, in eight paradigmatic graphic novels that purvey variously victim, survivor and perpetrator perspectives, and makes a case for the graphic novel form as an antidote to dominant interpretations of political violence ranging from the state terrorism of the Holocaust to the events of 9/11. Her argument is thus that the graphic novel medium itself has within it a critical tendency. In September 2011, however, a California comic book publisher released a graphic novel about the US military attack that killed Osama bin Laden. *Code Word: Geronimo* (Dye et al. 2011) described as ‘an author and long time consultant on military films including *Platoon* and *Saving Private Ryan*’ who had ‘already done books, music videos, video games about the military’. The aim of his text, Dye said in an interview for the *Washington Post*, is to ‘celebrate what happened, especially among youngsters’. ‘The people who pulled this off are calm, solid professionals, not a bunch of . . . assassins’, he said. ‘I want very much for people who read this to understand that we’re still a nation that can produce those people – patriots like that who are willing to lay it on the line at every turn’. The author’s wife, Julia Dye, who did some of the background research for the text said that she wanted the killing of bin Laden to be remembered as ‘something we all did together’ and likened the graphic novel to ‘a souvenir program’ (Ukman 2011). *Code Word: Geronimo* and similar titles raise the question of whether there is a necessary connection between the graphic novel medium and the adoption of a critical stance with regard to terrorism and counterterrorism, especially in light of the huge contemporary market for ‘adult comics’.<sup>3</sup>

Brereton and Culloty’s disciplinary background is in film studies; their article examines the representation of counterterrorism in *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) and *24* (2001–2010) (i.e. film and television) and surveys its reception among active online audiences. They argue that contemporary televisual counterterrorism fiction presents viewers with conventional hero-driven narratives wrapped in a spectacle of high-tech surveillance technologies. As counterterrorism is an inherently covert exercise, the widespread popularity of these Hollywood franchises raises questions about how the public understands the capabilities and ethics of counterterrorism. These questions are addressed through an analysis of the generic and aesthetic features of the texts along with a survey of audience responses on the *Internet Movie Database (IMDb)*. The purpose of surveying the responses of *IMDb* users was to evaluate audience reaction to representations of counterterrorism and comprises 500 reviews of the series *24* and 769 reviews of *The Bourne Ultimatum*. While the majority of these reviews were submitted by US reviewers, there is

a significant spread of nationalities represented that reflects the worldwide popularity of these Hollywood franchises.

The final article is authored by Ted Reynolds, who is studying for a PhD at the University of St Andrews in Scotland. Ted's contribution to the special section illustrates how studying the Internet, especially social networking sites, but also more traditional websites and platforms, is not concomitant with studying 'the media' as traditionally understood. The advent of the Internet heralded both an enormous increase in and steadily eroding barriers of access to violent political extremist and terrorist online content. This content has become the focus of an increasing amount of academic research, particularly as it pertains to the potential functions of this online content in processes of so-called 'violent online radicalisation'. Both the United Kingdom and United States governments, among others, acknowledge that not enough is known about this phenomenon and there is an urgent need for more substantive research in the area of violent political extremists and terrorists' use of computer-mediated communication. However, as Ted shows in his article, research in this area carries with it some serious ethical and legal concerns that cannot and should not be ignored. Not only do EU data protection laws impose serious responsibilities upon researchers engaging in online data collection, but UK law makes it difficult for terrorism studies researchers and other academics to conduct this online research without potentially violating the UK Terrorism Act 2006. Ted advocates proceeding with caution in this research area and, in particular, paying careful consideration to the ethical issues surrounding data collection methods and developing knowledge of and adhering to data protection laws, along with notifying proposed research to law enforcement authorities to insure compliance with the UK Terrorism Act.

### Notes

1. Convergence can also refer to the way that media ownership is becoming concentrated through the merger of corporations that historically operated in different media sectors (e.g. the merger between AOL and Time-Warner in 2000).
2. The conference website is <http://www.dcu.ie/~cis/TNM/index.html> [Accessed 20 August 2012]. Another selection of papers from the conference was published as a special issue of the journal *Media, War & Conflict*, entitled 'Terrorism in Old and New Media', earlier this year (5 (1), 2012).
3. More information about the text is available from <http://www.idwpublishing.com/news/article/1839/>. Some sample images from a draft of the book are available at <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/nation/bin-laden-comic/index.html> (both Accessed 20 August 2012).

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