ABSTRACT
                Terrorism has become not merely a political act, but
a carefully designed and rhetorically sophisticated attempt at
communication. What role should the communication scholar play in the
investigation of terrorism? Specifically, there are six areas within
which the communication scholar may actively contribute to an
understanding of terrorism as communication: (1) mass media, (2)
applied communication, (3) small group/interpersonal communication,
(4) rhetoric, (5) intercultural communication, and (6) the ethics of
communication. Impact of terrorist coverage upon the general
audience, and impact on other terrorists must be considered. Research
may indicate that audiences are incited to panic or that other
terrorists are incited to further violence. Small group and
interpersonal communication research is needed to study the
relationship between hostages, terrorists, and mediators and to
determine options available in negotiations. Terrorism occurring in
other countries, but which is aimed at audiences in the United
States, presents peculiar problems to scholars in intercultural
communication. Finally, the morality of media coverage of terrorist
violence and self or government regulation is an area of discussion
wide open to contribution by communication research. (HTH)

TERRORISM AS COMMUNICATION

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Terrorism as a tool of political groups is not in its infancy.
From the Khan's annihilation of reluctant villages, to the simple
murder of Russian Grand Dukes, the notion of striking fear into the
hearts of the powerful has been popular and often used. In this age
of the electronic "global village" the target of terrorism has been
subtly shifted from those in power to those who, through the mass
media, are made the audience of the terrorist act. Concomitantly,
the motives for committing acts of terrorist violence have shifted.

From acts intended to frighten those with power to change the
status quo, terrorism has somewhat paramorphetically changed into
statements designed to engender support or draw the attention of
masses of viewers and hearers. Thus terrorism has become not merely
a political act, but a carefully designed and rhetorically sophisticated
attempt at communication. Increasingly, terrorists have eschewed
simple killing and destruction of property in favor of acts which
capture the attention, imagination, and possibly the support of an
audience. As Jan Schreiber argues:

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The more one considers terrorism as a phenomenon,
the less it resembles other forms of violence and
the more it looks like a form of communication.
There is a "speaker" (the terrorist), an "audience"
(the primary victim and all the other onlookers in the
world), and a "language" (the threat of violence
against an innocent party).[1]

Adding force to the terrorist "coup de theatre"[2] is the conduit

supplied by the pervasive system of mass media communication

through which we gather information concerning everything from

the weather to world politics. As Robert Friedlander insists:

The communications media, whether consciously or
otherwise, has well served the terrorist cause.
Political terrorism is now viewed as an instant
means of communication and is aided and abetted by
contemporary technology, utilizing the dramatic
force of the mass media.[3]

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[1] Jan Schreiber, Terrorists and World Order (New York: Morrow and
Company, Inc., 1978), p. 113.

[2] Robert A. Friedlander, "Coping with Terrorism: What is to be
Done?", in Terrorism: Theory and Practice, edited by Yonah Alexander,
David Carlton, and Paul Wilkinson; Westview Special Studies in National
and International Terrorism (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1979), p. 236.

[3] Ibid., pp. 236-237.

As scholars intent upon analyzing and understanding the elements, processes, and effects of all forms of communication interaction, we must begin to ask ourselves a very fundamental question: What role should the communication scholar play in the investigation of terrorism as an attempt to communicate radical ideological arguments to an audience?

It is this question upon which w wish to focus our discussion today. Specifically, there are six areas within which the communication scholar may actively contribute to an understanding of terrorism as communication: 1) mass communication, 2) applied communication, 3) small group/interpersonal communication, 4) rhetoric, 5) intercultural communication, and 6) the ethics of communication. As a prelude to the panel's discussion, we will consider possible topics for consideration in each research area.

While much of our information on terrorist activity is not complete, there are at least two solid "facts" upon which any scholar may rely: the terrorist is going to continue to be active, and the mass media will continue to provide a forum for that activity.

As a rule, the mass media in the United States has been reluctant to severely curtail its coverage of terrorist acts for reasons of a philosophical-legal nature, as well as the fact that

terrorism makes good headlines and provides interesting video
tape for news broadcasts. As Desmond Maberley, of Reuters news
service, explains:

> We think all major events must be reported. We
> would only withhold facts if doing so will save
> lives. We will listen to requests to postpone
> distribution of certain facts in order to save
> lives but reserve the right to make the decision
> ourselves.[4]

Added to the media's conviction that terrorism is legitimately
"newsworthy" is the history of First Amendment freedom afforded
the press in this country. In testimony before the Subcommittee
on Civil and Constitutional Rights, Deputy Attorney General
Benjamin Civiletti:

> emphasized that terrorist incidents are legitimate
> news events and that the First Amendment prevents

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[4]Desmond Maberley, Reuters, in Staff Report, Subcommittee on
Civil and Constitutional Rights, Federal Capabilities in Crisis
Management and Terrorism (December 1978), p. 84.

the government from imposing a "prior restraint"
on the media's coverage of a terrorist incident.[5]

Given the fact that both the government and the media are ill-at-
ease with the notion of imposing restrictive regulations with
regard to coverage of terrorist activity, the question of
possible effects from coverage of the terrorist activity looms
large indeed.

There are at least two areas of possible impact which come
immediately to the forefront of our discussion. First, there is
the question of the impact upon a general audience. For example,
does the middle class American consumer of television news, with
a limited knowledge of most of the terrorist groups active today,
feel moved to sympathy for the terrorist? Does he instead feel
moved to reprisals against the terrorist group? Is he not moved
at all? The question is not an easy one with which to deal. On
the one hand it is argued that:

> Members of the public, following newspaper or
> television reports of an airplane hijacking or the
> kidnapping of a diplomat, ordinarily identify with
> the victims. They do so for the very good reason
> that reporters concentrate on the victims' point of view.[6]

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[5] Maberley, p. 15.

[6] Schreiber, p. 41.

On the other hand, some argue that the terrorist himself becomes
a "victim" and therefore the object of the viewing audience's
pity. Schreiber argues:

> Unless the crowd — the international media
> audience — has been moved to ecstasies of
> bloodthirsty patriotism, it is not likely to turn
> thumbs down on the victim /terrorists/ when the
> well-paid, well-trained and well-armed minions move in
> for the kill. Recognizing this, the terrorist
> knows that it is in his interest to be seen as the
> underdog and even to lose a few battles with
> superior forces.[7]

Scholars in the field of communication may discover, through
rigorous research, what reactions are likely to be triggered in a
given situation by media coverage of terrorist violence.

The second "effects" question has to do with the impact of
media-covered terrorism on other terrorists who are, if only
temporarily, members of the audience. Bluntly put, does the
splashing of terrorist violence across the television screens of
the world stimulate more terrorist activity? Here, again, we
find that the research to date has left the question begging for
an answer. Evans and Murphy argue:

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[7]Schreiber, p. 80.

> The role of the mass media in combating terrorism
> remains largely unclarified. Yet, undeniably,
> . . . publicity and "armed propaganda" constitute an
> important element of terrorism today.[8]

Contrary to this position is the conviction enunciated by
Maberley:

> It is a matter of opinion whether extremists
> specifically use the media to get publicity for
> their views or to advance their causes. Violence
> on behalf of a cause existed long before the media
> got into the act. On this basis, what is
> unchallengable, we think, is that extremists use
> force as an instrument of policy and would
> continue to do so even if there were no media for
> them to exploit.[9]

The contradictory viewpoints expressed in relation to the media's

power to generate terrorism from exposure given to terrorist

activity, as well as other issues cited earlier, serve to

underline the inchoate nature of research in the realm of terrorism

as communication.

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[8]Alona Evans and John Murphy, Legal Aspects of International
Terrorism, 1978, p. 437.

[9]Maberley, p. 84.

Heretofore we have spoken exclusively of the relationship between terrorism in its communicative role and the mass media systems which disseminate the terrorist's messages. There are, however, other areas in which communication scholars may make contributions.

Communicologists in applied communication research, small group communication, and interpersonal communication could easily join forces with sociologists and psychologists to study the relationship between the various participants in the terrorist act — the hostages, the terrorists, and the negotiating agency. Much work is needed to determine the options available to those negotiating with hostages, what decision making process to use in formulating responses, etc. What are the dynamics of the communication between the hostages, the terrorists, the press, and the legal authorities? These questions and many others are open for research.

One primary function of governmental authorities must be to counteract arguments made by the terrorists in the course of their activity. For instance, the United States government must either confess to sins of the past and admit that the Iranian terrorists are waging a just offensive against us, or offer counter-arguments to bolster the confidence of the American

public and attract supporters abroad. In this endeavor scholars
of rhetoric and argumentation theory may offer valuable
insights. Working with political scientists and members of the
government, communication scholars may indicate which rhetorical
strategies will be most effective and which should be avoided.

Terrorism occurring in another country, but which is aimed
at an American audience, presents peculiar problems which may be
addressed by scholars in intercultural communication. Is it
indeed possible for a media audience from one culture to
understand in any fundamental way the urges which lead to
terrorism in another culture? If not, then is there some step
which should be taken to minimize the frustration which must
accompany failure on the part of the terrorists? If the result of
such frustration is to encourage the terrorists to engage in
ever more outrageous and destructive acts of terrorist violence,
the question could indeed be of a most urgent nature.

Ultimately, of course, we are drawn to the ethical
responsibility of the scholar who engages in research in
terrorism as communication. If we find that coverage of
terrorism by the media, for instance, does in fact lead to more
acts of terrorism, and that terrorism does indeed play an
effective role in achieving specific political goals, we must

decide whom to inform. That information is not merely another piece of intellectual minutiae to add to the often obscure and marginally useful stock of research findings. It is, in a very basic sense, an invitation for more violence, more terrorism, more attempts to acheive a coup de theatre. Such findings could also fuel the impulse to control the mass media's power to freely cover terrorist activity, thereby conjuring up questions of First Amendment rights afforded to our free press.

Finally, we are confronted by the demands of every communicative act — we must respond. Three possible responses to terrorist violence come immediately to mind. We may maintain the status quo, characterized by self-regulation of the media.[10] We may seek to curtail the coverage of terrorism by the media in a legal manner and systematize the governmental responses to the acts. And, from the most controversial perspective, we may guarantee access for all terrorists and potential terrorists to assure that the media stage will be

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[10]The status quo restrictions on coverage of terrorism are simply extensions of the willingness of newspaper editors to self-censor information which they perceive to be of a potentially harmiful nature, and the statements found in the NAB code regarding the "due care" which must be taken in covering potentially dangerous situations. See Evans and Murphy, p. 441, and Schreiber, p. 115.

available without the necessity to commit overt acts of violence simply to gain access. It is with these questions and one final observation with which we wish to open this discussion.

Much of the research into terrorism is done, but not disseminated by the parties doing the research. Much could be gained by releasing this information to the academic community. Studies could be validated by scholarly research, and new ideas could be discussed freely to assure that the responsible agencies are operating with the best possible information. That research which has been popularly disseminated is often of poor quality. Many of the sources cited in this introduction are based on speculation and offer "facts" which border on innuendo and even fantasy. It is urgent that true research begin in earnest.

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