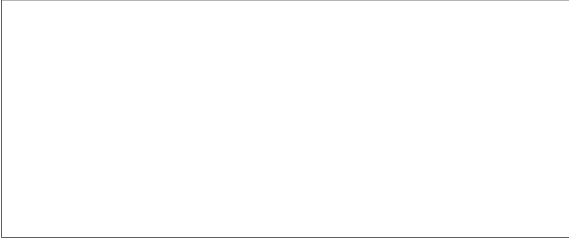


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Terrorism and the Media

By

Katharine Graham

Chairman of the Board

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Good evening. It's an enormous honor for me to be here, and I'm grateful that many of you braved the rain and delayed a mad dash to the country to attend this lecture. Ever since the Treasure Houses of Britain opened in Washington, we know all about the pleasures of country life here.

As I looked over the list of distinguished speakers who have preceded me -- and as I contemplated the monumental and intimidating legacy of the man in whose honor these lectures are named -- I felt only too keenly my own inadequacies.

Churchill was the only journalist who later became a world leader. I remember his inspirational voice on the radio from across the ocean during the war. His heroic leadership, articulated though his majestic command of the English language, inspired embattled people to fight for democracy and preserve our way of life.

I would not presume to address these cosmic issues of war and peace or the future of the English-speaking world. My background and my work equip me to speak of only one subject with which Churchill was familiar: the press. Fortunately, as he once said, "The press is an inspiring theme, especially to those who get their living by it."

This evening I propose to speak of the press and its role in one of the most challenging and dangerous phenomena of our time: terrorism.

Only too frequently, in recent months, have your country and mine been held in the grip of violent fanatics intent on having their way by threatening or harming innocent people.

I am greatly concerned that terrorist attacks will increase in the future -- in number, dimension and intensity. And because the media and the terrorist are locked in a kind of mutual dance of death, I am anxious that our role in covering terrorism be subjected to rigorous scrutiny.

However, local television stations and the printed press, with which I am most familiar, have only a limited part to play in the drama of terrorism. Network television is the star.

So to prepare for this talk, I spoke with the people directly involved. I spoke with several of our network news executives and the anchorman of one of our evening newscasts. I met with the heads of the CIA and the FBI. I talked to people at our State Department who specialize in the study of terrorism and the press. I spoke to a Lebanese Shiite who is an adviser to one of our networks. I even visited a psychiatrist who participates in terrorist negotiations. I hope what I learned about America's terrorist problems will have some relation to your own.

Let's construct a terrorist incident to discover what it tells us about the nature of the beast.

Picture a warm and sunny day, not in Brighton or the Middle East, but in Washington, D.C. The Israeli Prime Minister is in town and is scheduled to meet the President. At 11:00 a.m., the leader of an obscure Muslim sect and several accomplices armed with guns and machetes storm the headquarters of B'nai B'rith, a Jewish service organization. Three other members of the group seize the city's Islamic Center. Two additional fanatics invade Washington's City

Hall, killing a radio reporter in the process. Altogether, the terrorists take 134 hostages in three buildings by gunpoint, force them to the floor and threaten to kill them unless their demands are met.

The police and FBI surround all three buildings. And, as could be expected, the media descend on the scene en masse. Live television pictures carrying the group's warnings and demands soon go forth over the airwaves. One hundred and thirty-four lives hang in the balance.

Before proceeding, let me assure you that this crisis actually happened. On March 9, 1977, the Hanafi Muslims did indeed carry out this terrorist attack, on the very day Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin was meeting with President Jimmy Carter.

This incident, which fortunately ended with the surrender of the terrorists and no further loss of life, reveals a number of important characteristics of terrorism.

To begin with, it helps us define terrorism as goal-oriented. It is violence against innocent people in order to achieve generally political objectives. This distinguishes terrorism from other forms of civil disturbance, including urban riots. As we have found out in the United States and, alas, as you are discovering here, urban riots express frustration and rage. They rarely have specific objectives.

Even when terrorists issue no specific demands, as in the recent hijacking of the Egyptian plane, the goals remain, no matter how incoherent, vague or extremely broad they may be. The random bombings of the IRA are designed to drive Britain from Northern Ireland by, in effect, holding an entire nation hostage. And surely the hijackers of the Egyptian plane

wanted, as a minimum, to destabilize further the political structures of the Middle East.

A second characteristic is that, to be effective, acts of terror require an audience. The terrorist has to communicate his own ruthlessness -- his "stop-at-nothing" mentality - in order to achieve his goals. Media coverage is essential to his purpose.

Today's sophisticated technology -- which creates an instant worldwide audience through satellite transmission -- has added a new dimension.

Third, terrorism depends for its ultimate success on the high value some societies place on individual human life. Terrorist acts receive so much attention precisely because they put this supreme value at risk. They are dangerous. People could die and do. If the victim, society and government were willing to place other concerns above human life, the terrorist act could not succeed.

The particularly high regard in which our people hold human life, together with massive and generally unrestrained media, have made the United States and the United Kingdom especially vulnerable to terrorism.

And I believe we must acknowledge that it has encountered a fair degree of short-term success, at least in the case of the United States.

For example, the year-long seizure of the American embassy in Iran contributed to the downfall of the Carter presidency. And terrorism in the Middle East encouraged, if it didn't cause, America's military withdrawal from a region where our presence had been declared by President Reagan to be "in the national interest."

The success of terrorism in forcing political change has led some observers to conclude: terrorism is war. It is a form of warfare, moreover, in which media exposure is a powerful weapon.

As a result, we are being encouraged to restrict our coverage of terrorist actions. Mrs. Thatcher has proclaimed: "We must try to find ways to starve the terrorist and the hijacker of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend." And many people, including some reporters in the United States, share her view.

Most of these observers call for voluntary restraint by the media in covering terrorist actions. But some go so far as to sanction government control -- censorship, in fact -- should the media fail to respond.

Of course, the British and American governments have far different abilities to limit news coverage. American journalism operates under the First Amendment to our Constitution. The First Amendment forbids any laws abridging freedom of the press. We have no prior restraint, nor any censorship by the government except during actual wartime.

Moreover, our media consists of four private, national television networks, three national newspapers, countless magazines and thousands of local newspapers and television stations -- all independent of the government.

Britain is different in certain important respects. The BBC is a publicly funded entity that can be influenced by politicians. Even ITV is regulated by a board appointed by the government. There are D notices and an Official Secrets Act by which the state can control the news to some extent.

However, I am against any government-imposed restrictions on the free flow of information about terrorist acts.

I believe even media-sponsored guidelines would be too broad to be useful or would be forgotten in the heat of a crisis. Instead, I am in favor of as full and complete coverage of terrorism by the media as is possible. Here are my reasons.

To begin with, terrorist acts are impossible to ignore. They are simply too big a story to pass unobserved. If the media did not report them, rumor would abound. And rumors can do much to enflame and worsen a crisis.

Second, the specialists with whom I spoke find no compelling evidence that terrorist attacks would cease if the media stopped covering them. On the contrary, they believe the terrorists would only increase the number, scope and intensity of their attacks.

One of our reporters visited several PLO terrorists in jail in Israel. He was alarmed by the eagerness, the passion they expressed to start killing again as soon as they got out. I believe if we ignore them, the terrorists would turn up the volume until the world could not avoid hearing, whether it chose to listen or not.

Third, I believe our citizens have a right to know what the government is doing to resolve crises and curb terrorist attacks. Some of the solutions raise disturbing questions.

Just last month The Washington Post reported that to combat terrorism, President Reagan had authorized a CIA covert operation designed to undermine the Libyan regime headed by Colonel Qaddafi. Earlier this year, we reported that a counterterrorist group trained and supported by the

CIA, though acting without its authorization, had planted a car bomb in Lebanon that killed 80 people.

At the same time, I believe that the media can help the government resolve terrorist crises and save lives, even though it is not our role to do so.

Media coverage of terrorist events can be an insurance policy for hostages. The minute hostages appear on television, they may be somewhat safer. By giving the terrorists an identity, we make them assume more responsibility for their captives.

The government also relies, to some extent, on the news media for information about certain crises, information that can be used to resolve them. One government official acknowledged to me that American news organizations have more resources to devote to these crises -- in money, people and technology -- than does the State Department. We also sometimes have greater access to the perpetrators. In the Middle East, government officials are often sealed in their bunkers. Frequently terrorists refuse to speak to them. The terrorists want to talk to reporters.

I believe these factors are important. They have contributed to the resolution of terrorist crises and have helped save lives.

But I would quickly add that covering terrorist acts presents very real and exceedingly complex challenges as well. There are limits to what the media can and should do.

Three critical issues, in particular, must be addressed. They relate to covering terrorism, and they also apply to reporting urban violence, such as we both have experienced. All touch the central question of how the press can minimize its role as

a participant in the crisis and maximize its role as a provider of information.

The first issue involves knowing how to gather and reveal information without making things worse, without endangering the lives of hostages or jeopardizing national security.

One television news executive said to me: "Errors that threaten loss of life are permanent; others are temporary. If we have to make mistakes, we want to make the temporary kind."

In the early days of covering urban violence and the first terrorist attacks, the media would descend on the scene -- lights ablaze and cameras rolling -- in hot pursuit of the news.

Sometimes we didn't know what could put lives at risk. And we were often less than cooperative with the police attempting to resolve the crisis.

During the Hanafi Muslim attack that I described earlier there were live television reports that the police were storming a building when, in fact, they were merely bringing in food. Some reporters called in on public phone lines to interview the terrorists inside the building. One interview rekindled the rage of the terrorist leader, who had been on the point of surrender.

These potential disasters have led to discussions between the police and the media on how each could work better with the other in future crises. A more professional approach and mutual trust on both sides have resulted.

At the beginning of a crisis, most authorities now know it is best to establish a central point where reliable information can be disseminated as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

And the media, knowing that the authorities intend to help them obtain the information they need, are much more willing to cooperate.

In particular, the media are willing to -- and do -- withhold information that is likely to endanger human life or jeopardize national security.

During the American Embassy crisis in Iran, for example, one of our Newsweek reporters became aware that six Americans known to have been in the embassy were not being held captive by the Iranians.

He concluded these men must have escaped to the Swedish or Canadian Embassies. This in fact had occurred. However, we and some others who also know it did not report the information because we knew it would put lives in jeopardy.

And in the recent crisis in which a group of Lebanese Shiites hijacked TWA Flight 847 with 153 hostages aboard, the media learned -- but did not report -- that one hostage was a member of the U. S. National Security Agency.

Tragically, however, we in the media have made mistakes. You may recall that in April 1983, some 60 people were killed in a bomb attack on the U.S. Embassy in Beirut. At the time, there was coded radio traffic between Syria, where the operation was being run, and Iran, which was supporting it.

Alas, one television network and a newspaper columnist reported that the U.S. government had intercepted the traffic. Shortly thereafter the traffic ceased. This undermined efforts to capture the terrorist leaders and eliminated a source of information about future attacks.

Five months later, apparently the same terrorists struck again at the Marine barracks in Beirut; 241 servicemen were killed. No one is absolutely sure the news reports caused the traffic blackout. Some suspect they did. Whatever the answer, the detailed report didn't help.

This kind of result, albeit unintentional, points up the necessity for full cooperation wherever possible between the media and the authorities.

When the media obtains especially sensitive information, we are willing to tell the authorities what we have learned and what we plan to report. And while reserving the right to make the final decision ourselves, we are anxious to listen to arguments about why information should not be aired.

A second challenging issue the media have to address is how to prevent the terrorists from using the media as a platform for their views.

I think we have to admit that terrorist groups receive more attention and make their positions better known because of their acts. Few people had even heard of groups like the Hanafi Muslims or Basque Separatists before they carried out terrorist attacks.

However, the media must make every attempt to minimize the propaganda value of terrorist incidents and put the actions of terrorists into perspective. We have an obligation to inform our readers and viewers of their background, their demands and what they hope to accomplish. But terrorists are criminals. We must make sure we do not glorify them, or give them unwarranted exposure to their point of view.

Part of the challenge is maintaining control over the collection and dissemination of news during a crisis.

We often think of terrorists as unsophisticated. But many are media savvy. They can and do arrange their activities to maximize media exposure and ensure that the story is presented their way. As one terrorist is supposed to have said to his compatriot: "Don't shoot now. We're not in prime time."

Specifically, terrorists have done all of the following to influence media coverage:

- Arrange for press pools.
- Grant exclusive interviews during which favored reporters are given carefully selected information.
- Hold press conferences in which hostages and others are made available to the press under conditions imposed by the captors.
- Provide videotapes that portray events as the terrorists wish them to be portrayed.
- And schedule the release of news and other events so that television deadlines can be met.

There is a real danger that terrorists not only hijack airplanes and hostages, but hijack the media as well.

To guard against this, the television networks in our country rarely -- almost never -- allow terrorists to appear live.

They also resist using videotape provided by terrorists. If there is no alternative, our commentators continually report that the material is "terrorist-supplied" so that viewers can evaluate its veracity and meaning.

Likewise, when terrorists make hostages available for interviews, our commentators repeatedly indicate -- or they should -- that the captives are speaking under duress.

When one network reporter interviewed the hostages in the recent TWA hijacking by telephone, he said: "Walk away from the phone if you're under duress, or if you don't want to talk." One of them did walk away. Even when there is no evident coercion, the networks repeat that terrorists are standing by, although they are not visible on the screen.

We also try to identify carefully and repeatedly the backgrounds and biases of the people we interview, including the hostages themselves.

The Stockholm Syndrome, in which hostages develop positive feelings toward their captors, is well known. Network commentators point out again and again that the hostages themselves may not be aware of their own motivations.

But I admit that we could do a better job. The original spokesman for the hostages in the TWA crisis, for example, appeared quite sympathetic to the terrorists' cause. He was an employee of an oil company who had long lived in the Middle East. Although this background information was reported by the networks and by the press, I don't believe it was said often enough.

The problem, the network executives told me, is that reporters and editors get tired of saying the same thing over and over and eventually stop. Thus it's possible for new viewers to miss the crucial explanations.

But forbidding terrorists their platform goes beyond using specific techniques. It is more an issue of exercising sound editorial judgement.

Over the years, the media constantly have been confronted with attempts at manipulation. In the days of the Vietnam war, for example, we would get calls from protest groups saying, "We're going to pour chicken blood all over the entrance to Dow Chemical Company. Come cover this event." We didn't. But we did cover a Buddhist monk who wished to be filmed setting fire to himself.

How did we make the distinction? Here it was a question of trivial versus serious intent and result, of low versus high stakes. Clearly, the suicide was of cataclysmic importance to the monk.

The point is we generally know when we are being manipulated, and we've learned better how and where to draw the line, though the decisions are often difficult.

A few years ago a Croatian terrorist group in a plane demanded that its statement be printed in several newspapers, including The Washington Post, before it would release 50 hostages. In the end, we printed the statement in agate, the smallest type size we have, in 37 copies of the paper at the end of our press run. Now I'm not so sure we would accede to this demand in any form.

Nor do I believe we should put convicted murderers on the air to find out their political views.

The danger in terrorist crises is that reporters may develop a Stockholm Syndrome of their own, that they may be pulled into the terrorist's rhetoric. We may appear to be too respectful of the perpetrators -- although the fact they may be holding hostages at gunpoint tends to make us cautious.

That brings me to a third issue challenging the media: How can we avoid bringing undue pressure on the government to

settle terrorist crises by whatever means, including acceding to the terrorist's demands?

The State Department officials with whom I spoke say that media coverage does indeed bring pressure on the government. But not undue pressure. However, I believe there are pitfalls of which the media should be exceedingly careful.

One is the amount of coverage devoted to a terrorist incident. During a crisis, we all want to know what is happening. But constant coverage can blow a terrorist incident far out of proportion to its real importance. Overexposure can preoccupy the public and the government to the exclusion of other issues.

During the TWA crisis, our networks constantly interrupted regularly scheduled programming with news flashes of dubious importance. And one network devoted its entire 22-minute evening newscast to the crisis. Many important topics were ignored.

The media have become aware of these dangers. The network coverage of the Achille Lauro incident was much more restrained. Some say it was only because it was difficult to cover and the crisis ended quickly. But the networks got better notices from the critics and the public.

Another pitfall is the problem of interviewing the families of hostages. There is a natural curiosity about how those near and dear to the captured are reacting to the life-or-death event. And the hostage families themselves often are anxious to receive media attention and present their views to the public.

But there is a fine line between legitimate inquiry and exploitation of human sentiment. The media can go too far.

Tasteless invasion of privacy can result. The ultimate horror is the camera that awaits in ambush to record the family's reaction to the news of some personal tragedy.

More to the point, there is a real danger that public opinion can be unjustifiably influenced by exposure to the hostage relatives and their views.

The nationwide television audience becomes, in a sense, an extended family. We get to know these people intimately. Our natural sympathies go out to them. We often come to share their understandable desire to have their loved ones back at any cost.

This can force a government's hand. Last May, Israel released more than 1,000 Arab prisoners in exchange for three Israelis being held in Lebanon. It was an action that ran counter to Israeli policy. However, I heard that the appearances of the families of the Israeli prisoners on television made the Israeli government think it was a necessity.

I believe the media must be exceedingly careful with the questions they ask the relatives and, of course, the hostages themselves. When we ask if they agree with the government's policy or its handling of the incident, what they would do if they were in charge, or if they have messages for the President, we are setting up a predictable tension: Hostages and their families are, understandably, the most biased of witnesses. The media must exercise the same standards with them as they would with any other news source.

A final pitfall for the media is becoming, even inadvertently, a negotiator during a crisis. But it's tough to avoid. Simply by asking legitimate questions -- such as "What are your demands?" -- the media can become part of the negotiating

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process. Questions that ask "What would you do if..." are particularly dangerous.

And the question put to Nabih Berri, the Amal Shiite leader, during the TWA crisis by the host of one of our morning news shows was completely out of line and is so acknowledged. He asked: "Do you have a message for the President?"

In fact, as much as we abhor terrorism, the media cannot be diplomats, negotiators or agents for the government. If terrorists or urban rioters believe we are -- if they believe, for example, that we will turn over our unused tapes, or pictures, or notes to the police -- they will not give us information. They may even attack us. And this has occurred in Great Britain.

All of these issues are made even more complex by the individual nature of each crisis.

If every terrorist incident were the same, perhaps some useful media guidelines could be developed and we'd have effective standard operating procedures. One news executive, who directed the Hanafi Muslim coverage, said to me: "The next time a Muslim group attacks three buildings in Washington on the day the Israeli Prime Minister comes to visit the President, I'll know just what to do."

His wry comment speaks volumes about what the media are up against. Covering terrorism is an art, not a science. We can only thread our way through each incident and learn from what has gone before.

Technology intensifies the problems. Before the advent of satellites, there was a 24-hour delay between the moment news was gathered and the moment it was broadcast. Indeed, what

appeared on the nightly news often had been in the morning paper.

This meant that television news executives had at least some amount of time in which to reflect, discuss and decide on whether a story should be broadcast and how it should be presented.

Today our networks have the technological capability to present events live -- any time, any place. As a result, the decisions about what to cover and how to cover are tougher. And they must be made faster, sometimes on the spot. The risks of making a mistake rise accordingly.

Intense competition in the news business raises the stakes even more. The electronic media in the United States live or die by their ratings, the number of viewers they attract. As a result, each network wants to be the first with the most on any big story. It's hard to stay cool in the face of this pressure.

This has created some unseemly spectacles and poor news decisions. During the TWA crisis, for example, the U.S. networks ran promotion campaigns on the air and in print touting the scoops and exclusives that each had obtained. This commercialized and trivialized a dangerous and important event.

The most dangerous potential result of unbridled competition is what we have come to call the lowest-common-denominator factor.

I believe that all of the serious, professional media -- print and electronic, in our country and in yours and indeed around the world -- are anxious to be as responsible as possible.

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We want to do nothing that would endanger human life or national security. We are willing to cooperate with the authorities in withholding information that could have those consequences.

But, unfortunately, high standards of professionalism do not guide every media organization nor every reporter. And I regret to say that once one of these less scrupulous or less careful people reports some piece of information, all the media feel compelled to follow. Thus it is true: the least responsible person involved in the process could determine the level of coverage.

In conclusion, I believe these problems are serious. But in spite of them, I believe the benefits of full disclosure far outweigh any possible adverse consequences.

I believe the harm of restricting coverage far surpasses the evils of broadcasting even erroneous or damaging information. I believe freedom itself is at stake, the freedom Churchill defended with such memorable eloquence and heroic resolve.

Both of our democracies rest of the belief, which the centuries have proven true, that people can and do make intelligent decisions about great issues if they have the facts.

But to hear some politicians talk, you wouldn't think they believed it. They appear to be afraid that people will believe the terrorist's message and agree, not only to his demands, but to his beliefs. And so they seek to muzzle the media or enlist their support in the government's cause.

I think this is a fatal mistake. It is a slippery slope when the media start to act on behalf of any interest, no matter how worthy -- when editors decide what to print on the basis

of what they believe is good for people to know. It's dangerous if we are asked to become a kind of super-political agency. Thus I was very sorry to see the BBC give in to government pressure to censor "Real Lives," even though it may or may not have been poorly edited.

Ultimately, I believe a terrorist attack is a self-defeating platform from which to present a case. Terrorists, in effect, hang themselves whenever they act. They convey hatred, violence, terror itself. There was no clearer image of what a terrorist really is than the unforgettable picture of that crazed man holding a gun to the head of the pilot aboard the TWA jet. That said it all to me -- and, I believe, to the world.

Suppressing or rationing the news provides no solution for the long term. If a government cannot make its case through democratic means in the face of violence, then I do believe its policies must be misguided.

Witness the current events taking place in South Africa. The government has banned television cameras from areas of unrest and made it difficult for print journalists to report what is happening. The government may have succeeded in limiting the news coverage and moving it off the screen and the front page, but the killing is worse than ever. Censorship won't work in the long run.

As a former managing editor of The Washington Post recently said, "Whenever any government attempts to hide its actions, the assumption will be made that it has something to hide and what is being hidden is more often than not sinister. Deception always is dangerous, always found out, and always boomerangs to cripple the deceivers."

In short, I believe the media serve the interests of democracy best by gathering the news and reporting facts as best they can. When it comes to covering terrorism, the challenges are great, the responsibilities heavy and the answers elusive. Everyone searches for clear-cut solutions to the problems, but there are none. As someone remarked, there are no easy answers or even complex ones. There are only complex choices.

I believe having experienced people at the helm, exercising sound judgement on the basis of high professional standards is the best we can ask for. But I also believe it is all we should ask for.

With information freely provided, decision-making can rest in the hands of the people, where it ultimately belongs. Without the facts, we inevitably surrender our decision-making power to others. We surrender our ability to control our own fates.

The blessings of freedom and the contributions our democratic societies have made for hundreds of years make me believe this is too great a price to pay.

Publicity may be the oxygen of terrorists. But I say this: News is the lifeblood of liberty. If the terrorists succeed in depriving us of freedom, their victory will be far greater than they ever hoped and far worse than we ever feared. Let it never come to pass.

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