

Content of media attention influences VEOs.

69; 70; 71

General Description of the Literature:

There is substantial evidence that the media has influence on VEO activity (see Hypothesis 67). A further point of research would be to determine whether the specific content of the media coverage has an impact on VEO activity. In other words, can the media content deter or trigger further violent acts? Perl (1997) observes that VEOs appreciate certain media content: 1) they want favorable stories that contain information about their cause and give legitimacy; 2) they appreciate content that undermines their enemy and causes panic and unrest by implying that future terror events will be coming. The implication is that in the absence of these types of content, VEO activity—to the extent it is driven by media attention—will diminish. Coleman (2004, 147) claims that media coverage of certain events leads to similar events carried out by other VEOs. This is called the copycat effect. Coleman suggests that when the actions of violent groups are portrayed in the media, it triggers other terrorist groups to commit to violent acts. She notes that “potential terrorists often need only see that terrorism has worked for others in order to become aggressively aroused.”

Ross (2007) argues that sometimes journalist must practice selective reporting, if they want to maintain contact with a terrorist organization that they are interviewing. Terrorist groups will often place a restriction on what parts of the interview the journalist can make public, which could affect content. Although this is not a direct example of media content influencing VEOs, it could indicate if these journalists were to deviate from the agreement made with the VEO, it may cause the VEO to act a certain way. If the journalist chose to publicize content against the VEO's will, it could cause the VEO to act violently. Ross (2007) also states that there have been journalists that were harmed because of information they made public about the VEOs. Walsh (2010) claims that the mode and tone of reporting can influence the reception of the message but that research in this area is still in the early stages.

Perhaps the most relevant empirical research on media content and VEO activity has been carried out by Iyengar and Montan (2008), whose findings show media content does impact VEO activities.

Detailed Analyses

69: *Content of media attention influences VEOs.*

Summary of Relevant Empirical Evidence: Jenkins (1981) argued that, “heavy media coverage of hijackings, kidnappings and other hostile seizures carried out by terrorists increases the likelihood that similar incidents will occur in the period immediately following.” He notes that a RAND analysis from 1970, covering embassy seizures, showed terrorist activities “occurring in clusters,” which adds more support to the contagion effect. Similarly, Weimann and Winn (1994, 277) found evidence of a contagion effect in that “television coverage was associated with a shortened lag time to emulation in the case of kidnapping, attack on installations, hijackings, bombings, and assassinations.” Additionally, Nacos (2009) gives several anecdotes of media-related contagion violence leading to copycat hijackings. These studies listed suggest that media content influences VEOs through contagion and copycat effects.

Iyengar and Monten (2008) analyze VEO attacks and international access to data from Iraq. They describe an "emboldenment" effect made apparent by differences in VEO attack rates across areas of higher and lower access to U.S. news reports critical of the war. Specifically, they report that attacks increase in the short-term as a response to critical reports. This is a clear indication of content influencing activity. They also report that U.S. interests are more likely to be targeted in the wake of news reports that convey 'sensitivity to costs'. They conclude, "there is a small but measurable cost to open public debate in the form of higher attacks in the short-term, and that Iraqi insurgent organizations - even those motivated by religious or ideological goals - are strategic actors that respond rationally to the expected probability of US withdrawal".

Empirical Support Score: 8 = Multiple quantitative analyses supporting the hypothesis.

Applicability to Influencing VEOs: These studies were performed on VEOs and the findings are, therefore, directly applicable to government efforts to influence VEOs.

Applicability Score: Direct: At least some of the empirical results directly concern the context of influencing VEOs.

70: Media shaming of VEO activity can reduce VEO activity.

Summary of Relevant Empirical Evidence: There is a lack of empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis. However, Perl (1997) implies that depicting VEOs as criminals could be effective.

Empirical Support Score: 0

Applicability to Influencing VEOs: N/A

Applicability Score: Not Applicable – There is no empirical support in any context.

71: Media reports countering discrimination or demonization of VEO and/or its constituency can reduce VEO activity.

Summary of Relevant Empirical Evidence: There is a lack of empirical evidence supporting this hypothesis. However, Perl (1997) implies that depicting VEOs as criminals could be effective, which suggests that the hypothesis might be invalid.

Empirical Support Score: 0

Applicability to Influencing VEOs: N/A.

Applicability Score: Not Applicable – There is no empirical support in any context.

General Comments

Picard (1986) mentions that The Task Force on Terrorism and Disorders concluded that "if media coverage avoids glamorizing the perpetrators of violence, provides reliable information, and gives appropriate emphasis to the consequences of violence, it will increase public understanding, reduce public fear, and assist in reducing violence." This suggests that the media, to an extent, glamorizes the VEOs involved in the violence, and if the media were to portray them in a different light, perhaps shaming them, then there may be a chance that violent activity would be reduced. Perl (1997) notes that the potential benefits that VEOs get from media coverage could be reduced by following these guidelines: 1) withholding media content on hostage details; limiting details on security or rescue

operations; 3) be very circumspect when considering live interviews with terrorists; 4) verify sources; and 5) deliver news in an even tone that does not lead to panic or emotional overreactions that could lead to unreasonable or short-sighted demands on politicians. Perl (1997) also notes specific content-related points that can help weaken the terror-media linkage. This list includes, among others: 1) avoid emotional stories of loss, as these lead to pressure on governments to make concessions; 2) present a positive image of government; 3) do not depict terrorists as anything other than criminals; 4) avoid content that could lead to panic; and 5) do not reveal tactical information. Media content could be adjusted to minimize these effects, perhaps by avoiding the glamorization of terror.

As noted, anonymous terror acts might not be influenced by media content.

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