Chapter 1

Framing Terrorism

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The events of September 11th ricocheted around the world from satellite to satellite. News spread instantly from the New York studios to London, Rome, and Moscow and from Al Jazeera’s airwaves to Islamabad, Riyadh, Baghdad, and Kabul. The al-Qaeda catalyst triggered massive coverage in the Western news media with hundreds of stories highlighting the grief, suffering and shock of the victims and their relatives, condemnation by the Bush administration and public officials, speculation about the underlying causes and possible consequences of the events of 9/11, and expressions of sympathy from world leaders. Months later, the reverberations and aftershocks triggered by these events continue to impact international relations, domestic policy, and public opinion. The specter of al-Qaeda operations bringing a new form of terrorism to the world has sparked a major debate over the definition of terror, its social and political roles, the ethics of counter-terrorism operations, state complicity, the dangers of future terrorist activities, the failure of democracy in Middle Eastern states, and the underlying reasons fuelling religious fundamentalism1.

One important issue arising from these events is the role and effects of mass media coverage of terrorism2. Journalism often attracts controversy, not least where news coverage becomes part of the contest to define the social meaning of events. Reporting terrorism -- whether the destruction of 9/11, suicide bombers in the second Intifada, or violence in Chechnya -- raises significant questions about how far news coverage can meet journalistic standards of ‘balance’, ‘truth’ and ‘objectivity’ in cases of extreme political conflict3. Debate has centered around two questions. First, does media coverage err on the side of group terrorists, lending them legitimacy and credibility, as well as unintentionally encouraging further incidents through a ‘contagion’ effect4? Alternatively, do journalistic conventions err instead on the side of governments, due to over-reliance upon the framework of interpretation offered by public officials, security experts and military commentators, with news functioning ultimately to reinforce support for political leaders and the security policies they implement5?

To understand the news coverage of terrorism, this book theorizes that the events of 9/11 can best be understood as symbolizing a critical culture shift in the predominant ‘news frame’ used by the American mass media for understanding issues of national security, altering perceptions of risk at home and threats abroad. We argue that what changed, and changed decisively with 9/11, were American perceptions of the threat of world terrorism more than the actual reality. Systematic evidence provided by the US State Department indicates that in fact the actual dangers from international terrorism have fallen around the world, and indeed fallen substantially, during the last decade6. Yet post 9/11, American fears of the risks of terrorism have sharply risen7. Understanding this situation is important, not just for its own sake, but also because perceptions of the growing threat of terrorism in America has created widespread public concern, as well as fuelling radical changes in US security and foreign policy. The events of 9/11 moved counter-terrorism to the top of the public policy agenda in America, leading the Bush administration to boost spending on police, firefighters and emergency medical teams, to create the Department of Homeland Security, as well as taking steps designed to improve airport security, intelligence gathering, security at US borders, the prevention of bio-terrorism, and reserves of medicines8. In American foreign policy, the events of 9/11 initiated the war in Afghanistan, as well as shaping President George Bush’s identification of an ‘Axis of Evil’ with ‘state terrorism’ linking Iraq, Iran, and North Korea, while simultaneously thawing relations with leaders in Russia, China and Pakistan9. Discussion of issues that used to be regarded as the province of a few specialized, esoteric and highly-technical security and intelligence experts -- such as the potential risks of biological and chemical warfare, ‘loose nukes’ and ‘dirty’ bombs, and ‘weapons of mass destruction’ -- are now widely debated in public on the American airwaves. Explaining these developments requires an understanding of perceptions of terrorist threats, and, in particular, the role of the news media in this process. The book explores how frames about terrorism are generated and reinforced, compares how far these frames shape patterns of news
coverage in different contexts and cultures, and analyzes how far conventional frames about terrorism have the power to affect public opinion.

The heart of our explanation lies in the idea of ‘news frames’, representing persistent patterns of selection, emphasis, and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events. Decisions and common practices in newsgathering -- determining what and how stories are covered -- contribute towards these frames. Out of the myriad ways of describing events in the world, journalists rely upon familiar news frames, and upon the interpretation of events offered by credible sources, to convey dominant meanings, to make sense of the facts, to focus the headlines, and to structure the story line. Although the specific details surrounding any terrorist occurrence may be unique -- a particular suicide bomber in Tel Aviv, a car bomb in Manila, or a kidnapping in Bogotá -- the way that journalists observe and report each of these occurrences is shaped by how similar events have been covered in the past and by the reporter’s most trusted sources of information. ‘Conventional frames’, which become mainstream in the news media, provide contextual cues, giving meaning and order to complex problems, actions, and events, by slotting the new into familiar categories or storyline ‘ pegs’. Conventional news frames of terrorism are important because they furnish consistent, predictable, simple and powerful narratives that are embedded in the social construction of reality.

This book seeks to understand news frames of terrorism. Part I focuses upon the extent to which different actors in any incident of political violence manage to shape the interpretation of events provided by the mass media and the balance in news coverage, both in ‘one-sided' conflicts within societies where there is a broad consensus about the interpretation of events shared by most leaders, journalists and the public within one particular nation state (such as mainstream views of 9/11 within the United States) and in also in cases of 'two-sided' conflicts within societies where leaders, journalists and the public are deeply divided by long-standing political violence (such as in Northern Ireland or Israel and the West Bank). In Part II, chapters compare and contrast alternative news frames about terrorism, presented within different news media, sub-cultures, and countries around the world, to see how far these provide rival visions of ‘reality’ even when covering the same events, including in the Middle East and United States. Lastly the conventional news frames presented by the mass media are widely expected to influence the public’s understanding of terrorism and its threat. Part III therefore seeks to establish what the American public learnt about terrorism from coverage of 9/11, including the dynamics of ‘rally round the flag’ effects and also widespread perceptions of security and risk. The conclusion considers the main lessons from the analysis and their broader implications for understanding processes of political communications.

No single methodological approach or discipline could hope to do justice to studying all these diverse and complex issues. As a result chapters in this book adopt different research designs, including analysis of the contents of the news in different countries, specially designed panel and cross-sectional public opinion surveys in different countries, experimental designs, rhetorical analysis, and elite interviews, as well as direct experience of journalism, combining communication studies with social psychology, political behavior and comparative politics. We compare cases as diverse as the Belfast peace process, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the battle over Desert Storm, the war in Afghanistan, the US embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salaam, as well as how US news media and the international press framed the story of 9/11. The final chapter summarizes the major findings that flow from this analysis. We begin by outlining the core concepts and theoretical perspective used throughout the study, to set the particular events of 9/11 in a broader context, and then summarize the structure, contents and plan of this volume.

The Concept of Terrorism

Before we can understand the meaning and implications of how terrorist events are framed in the mass media, and before we can distinguish between ‘objective’ indicators monitoring incidents of terrorism and its ‘subjective’ perception, we need to deconstruct and clarify the basic concept of ‘terrorism’. This concept is essentially contested, value-laden, and open to multiple meanings located within broader cultural frames, so that, at least to some extent,
terrorism is in the eye of the beholder\textsuperscript{11}. The decision to label protagonists forms part of the political tussle over meaning. Groups can be regarded as ‘terrorists’ or alternatively as ‘liberation movements’, ‘radical activists’, ‘armed rebels’, ‘urban guerrillas’ or ‘extremist dissidents’, just as nation states can be labeled ‘terrorists’ or seen as ‘repressive regimes’, ‘authoritarian systems’, or ‘dictatorships’. Rather than being identified by their tactics, groups present labels focused upon their grievance or cause, such as Hamas, Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), the Animal Liberation Front, or the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (Tamil Tigers). Since labeling certain actions or actors as ‘terrorist’ carries strong normative overtones, the social construction of reality cannot avoid being an intensely political contest. Since conceptualization is intimately linked with theory, there can be no single ‘correct’ definition; instead concepts should be assessed in terms of the fruitfulness of the theoretical insights that flow from the understanding. Ideal conceptualizations of terrorism avoid maximalist definitions (the inclusion of theoretically irrelevant attributes) or minimalistic definitions (the exclusion of theoretically relevant attributes), and they should have a clear conceptual logic, avoiding problems of redundancy and conflation. Any empirical measures derived from the concept should ideally be valid, reliable, and replicable\textsuperscript{12}. Unfortunately the literature is plagued with partial and incomplete understandings of terrorism that often fit only a few particular cases, as well as the opposite danger, with long and verbose ‘kitchen-sink’ catalogues\textsuperscript{13}.

‘Terrorism’ is understood here as the systematic use of coercive intimidation against civilians for political goals. This concept identifies this phenomenon by the techniques, targets, and goals, and all these attributes are regarded as necessary and sufficient for an act to qualify as terrorism. ‘Terrorists’ are those who employ the methods of terrorism.

**Techniques**

Terrorism is a method or tactic involving systematic coercive intimidation, including the threat or use of violence in the destruction of property or physical harm to persons used as a mechanism of control. This process is exemplified by the use of sabotage, destructive riots, hijackings, assassinations, kidnappings, arson, mass poisonings, torture, rape, bombings, and unlawful imprisonment designed to instill fear, insecurity, and anxiety among its target population. It is systematic, meaning that there is a pattern of such action rather than a single incident. Terrorist acts that coerce others are qualitatively different from peaceful forms of direct protest, even passive techniques such as disruptive demonstrations, sit-in occupations, road-blockages, and unlawful wildcat strikes, and indeed extreme acts of self-immolation\textsuperscript{14}. In democratic societies, the deployment or threat of terrorist violence represents the ultimate failure of conventional channels of political expression and legitimate forms of authority. In non-democratic societies, areas under military occupation or in the international arena, where opportunities for political expression are constrained, groups opposing the status quo may undertake terrorist activities as a primary means of expression and not as a last resort.

**Targets**

The primary targets of terrorist coercion are the civilian population, distinguishing these techniques from conventional acts of war directed primarily against military targets. Members of the public are selected at random, if arbitrarily attacked or harmed, or violence can be directed against specific targets involved in the conflict, such as Israeli settlers living on the West Bank, Catholics who worked for the British government in Ulster, or elected government officials in the Basque region. Terrorism often targets business corporations in the private sector. The often random, unpredictable, and indiscriminate impact of terrorist coercion upon its immediate victims heightens its ability to inspire anxiety, even among members of the public far removed from its immediate vicinity, as well as generating widespread moral repugnance about the use of these techniques. Of course, in conventional acts of war aimed primarily at military targets, ‘collateral damage’ can often occur, where many civilians are accidentally hurt, but this differs from violent acts that are intentionally directed against the general public. States can also use terrorism as a
tactic in wartime, employing torture, assassinations, bombing and other means to terrorize civilian populations in violation of international norms and law relating to human rights.

Terrorism can be classified as domestic if victims and perpetrators are confined within the borders of a single nation-state, or as multinational if involving victims or perpetrators from more than one nation-state. Some official definitions, such as that used by the U.S. State Department, slightly broadens the target population to include all ‘non-combatants’, meaning civilians but also any military personnel who at the time of the incident are unarmed or not on duty. Some chapters in this book adopt this slightly broader understanding and this classification affects how we regard violence used against military personnel, such as the October 2000 bombing of the battleship USS Cole in Aden, Yemen, the 9/11 planes hitting the Pentagon, or snipers shooting soldiers in Belfast or Jerusalem, even in the absence of a legal declaration of war.

 Goals

Lastly terrorism is an instrument adopted to achieve multiple political goals. The motivation is often unclear, nevertheless typically the immediate political goals can include spreading anxiety and alarm among the immediate victims and their families, as well as the wider public; eliminating opponents and destroying symbolic targets such as the Pentagon or Arafat’s Palestinian headquarters; and generating direct damage on society, such as depressing business confidence in Wall Street or discouraging international corporate investors in Lima. The most important long-term or primary goals commonly include publicizing issues, communicating demands, and airing grievances to pressure authorities, influence the public policy agenda and gain concessions; undermining the authority of opponents; reinforcing and mobilizing support among potential sympathizers and coalition partners; all designed with the ultimate objective of gaining political power, status, and legitimacy. Terrorism is sometimes employed, however, simply to shock, demoralize, or otherwise damage a perceived political enemy. The pursuit of politically symbolic rather than instrumental goals may have characterized those who carried out the 9/11 attacks and the Oklahoma bombing.

The definition of terrorism employed here excludes violent crimes motivated purely by private gain, such as blackmail, murder, or physical assault directed against individuals, groups, or companies, without any political objectives. Clearly some cases fall into a gray area, for example the kidnapping of businessmen in Bogotá is a crime whether designed to raise funds for political dissidents or for drug-cartels, but nevertheless the emphasis on a political objective as the long-term goal of terrorist acts remains an important conceptual distinction. This understanding thereby excludes borderline acts that sustain public fear through random violence yet which make no explicit political demands, such as the ‘suburban snipers’ operating in the Maryland/Washington DC area and, arguably, the Anthrax cases where no explicit objective was ever declared. In contrast, sporadic bombings of abortion clinics by Pro-Life groups, designed to damage medical facilities, deter staff, and discourage clients, can legitimately be regarded as terrorist acts under this understanding, as can the use of violent direct action against scientific facilities and personnel by animal liberation activists, the destruction of property and shop-windows by anti-capitalism demonstrators, and violent racist and anti-Semitic vandalism by far-right groups.

Some accounts assume that the function of terrorism is designed to achieve publicity, in and for its own sake, and argue that an effective counter-terrorism policy to fight political violence is refusing recognition. Yet this perspective seems unduly limited; although certain spectacular terrorist acts can generate massive attention in the public eye, the instigators cannot control the type and direction of news coverage, which often relies upon interviews with relatives and with official sources strongly condemning the actions. Moreover routine types of terrorism, such as the kidnapping of businessmen or sniping assassination of security forces, are not necessarily focused upon any publicity per se. Terrorist groups can achieve some specific goals directly by using political violence, for example the destruction of the World Trade Centers damaged a symbol of American wealth and power, as well as generating substantial aftershocks experienced by Wall Street and the broader U.S. economy. Successful assassination attempts, such as that
used by the Red Brigade against the Italian former Prime Minister, Aldo Moro, by Irish Republicans against Lord Louis Mountbatten, or by rebels against the Rwandan Prime Minister, Agathe Uwilingiyimana, can succeed in destroying powerful antagonists, and even destabilizing states, irrespective of media coverage. Many types of state terrorism aiming to repress and control citizens, such as the death squads silencing opponents of military regimes used in Pinochet’s Chile, were designed to operate in the utmost secrecy.

Therefore in this account it is not claimed that the mass media is essential to terrorism: yet many of the more diffuse objectives of terrorism do depend upon the way that events are communicated, framed, and transmitted to the broader general public, largely through the mass media, which becomes the battleground for political conflict and dissent. Terrorists initiate routine or spectacular cases of political violence, but once this catalyst is launched, the communication and framing of the meaning of the events is largely out of their hands. The role of the media is central for the impact of these events upon the general public. As many have long emphasized, journalists function as facilitators in the sense that without the oxygen of publicity, without the airwaves of Al Jazeera or the front-page headlines in the New York Times, group and state terrorists would fail to achieve many of their objectives.

**Group and State Terrorism**

This understanding of terrorism emphasizes that techniques, targets, and ultimate goals define this phenomenon, leaving unspecified the type of actors who adopt these methods. Instigators of terrorism fall into two main categories. In cases of group terrorism, radical insurgents and minority dissidents initiate political violence directed against the state, generating ‘terrorism from below’. This is the common meaning of the contemporary use of the term in established democracies, including the research community, in part because Western governments seeking ways to counter terrorism have sponsored much policy analysis on this topic. In domestic terrorism, the type of groups initiating political violence typically reflect the major societal cleavages in politics, including those of core and periphery with national independence movements and disaffected ethnic minorities seeking local autonomy, the economic cleavages around capitalist markets and social class with extremist parties located on the radical left or right of the political spectrum, and by religious cleavages between faiths. Group terrorism is exemplified in the political violence employed by the Islamic Resistance Movement (Hamas) and the PLO during the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, by the Basque Fatherland and Liberty party (Eta) in Spain, by Kashmiri extremists on the Pakistan-Indian border, and by radical splinter groups in the Provisional Irish Republican Army and the Ulster Unionists in Belfast. Group terrorism can be understood as the breakdown of the conventional channels of mobilization, participation and expression, with violence used as a mechanism of last resort to polarize conflict. At the most extreme, widespread domestic group terrorism turns into open civil war seeking to undermine and overturn the political authorities. Where violence is successfully contained, group dissent can be expressed through more conventional channels, such as the Irish peace process leading the provisional IRA and Ulster Unionists to contest democratic elections in the province. For dissidents, the threat or use of ‘bottom-up’ violence functions to highlight specific issues, grievances, or demands, thereby gaining concessions from the authorities on certain political issues, such as minority rights and regional autonomy. As is all too apparent since 9/11, there are groups operating internationally whose near-term goals are to demoralize civilian populations and destabilize regimes they oppose on broad grounds. The source of the opposition may be economic, environmental, or religious, such as the Al-Qaeda attack on the World Trade Center.

By contrast, state terrorism involves coercive intimidation initiated by government authorities against civilian populations, representing ‘terrorism from above’. This form of control, most common among repressive authoritarian regimes, is exemplified by Stalin’s massive purge directed against Soviet citizens, the death squads used during the 1980s to suppress dissent in El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, and Chile, Saddam Hussein’s gassing of the Iraqi Kurds, or more recently the use of the Fifth Brigade by Robert Mugabe against the Ndebele in Zimbabwe. Although less often labeled as ‘terrorist’ acts per se, violence used the state (whether the militia, intelligence services, police, or partisan thugs) against the civilian population to suppress dissent
and intimidate opponents, shares many similar characteristics to those tactics used by terrorist groups against governments. In extreme cases, state terrorism can also degenerate into outright civil war between competing factions and ultimate state failure. State terrorism can also be directed against civilian targets located in other countries, for example where governments provide safe havens, weapons, paramilitary training, or funds to encourage acts of political violence outside their own borders. The South African government in the 1980’s employed such military action in an effort to destabilize neighboring African states. State terrorism is most commonly deployed by highly repressive regimes, but democratic governments have also adopted these tactics in wartime. For example the Allied carpet-bombing of Hamburg during the Second Word War functioned as an instrument designed to damage enemy morale rather than any conventional military targets.24 State ‘top-down’ terrorism typically serves to maintain the control of the political authorities, by suppressing internal dissident groups, silencing opposition movements, and reducing external threats. Given this understanding, how do the mass media report terrorist events and what consequences does this have?

Theories of Framing

The theoretical perspective developed within this book suggests that terrorist events are commonly understood through news ‘frames’ that simplify, prioritize and structure the narrative flow of events25. Understanding mass communications through the concept of framing has become increasingly common, whether in the fields of social psychology, public opinion, or media studies. The idea of ‘news frames’ refers to interpretive structures that journalists use to set particular events within their broader context. News frames bundle key concepts, stock phrases, and iconic images to reinforce certain common ways of interpreting developments. The essence of framing is selection to prioritize some facts, images, or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events. Where conventional news frames reflect broader norms and values common within a particular society, dissident movements challenging the mainstream news culture are likely to prove most critical of their use, providing rival ways to frame and interpret events26. Frames serve multiple functions for different actors. Political leaders can respond to events and communicate policy priorities simply and effectively by adopting predominant cultural frames to streamline and simplify their message (“I condemn all such acts of terrorism”). Reporters can also ‘tell it like it is’ within 60 seconds, or within brief newspaper headlines, rapidly sorting key events from surrounding trivia, by drawing on reservoirs of familiar stories to cue readers. And the public can use frames to sort out and make sense of complex and unfamiliar events, peoples, and leaders27. Through frames, apparently scattered and diverse events are understood within regular patterns; to pick just a few examples at random that occurred within the last few months (in January 2002), the terrorism frame can be used to explain the nightclub attack in Bali, the Chechen rebels holding hostages in the Moscow theatre, the bombing of Israeli tourists in a Mombassa hotel, the suicide bombers in Tel Aviv, or the capture of communist insurgents in the Philippines. Without knowing much, if anything, about the particular people, groups, issues, or even places involved, the terrorist and anti-terrorist frame allows us to quickly sort out, interpret, categorize, and evaluate these conflicts. Conventional news frames never provide a comprehensive explanation of all aspects of any terrorist act, leaving some important puzzles unresolved, while accounting for those factors which best fit the particular interpretation of events. In international affairs, framing serves several functions by highlighting certain events as international problems that affect American interests (agenda-setting), identifying and explaining the source of any security threats (cognitive priming), and offering recommendations for particular policy solutions designed to overcome these problems (evaluation).

[Figure 1.1 about here]

Although news framing represents an important aspect of political communications, many puzzles remain about the reasons why one frame rather than another becomes adopted and reinforced as the conventional interpretation of a particular event, especially where rival or dissonant interpretations are initially offered by different actors in any political contest. We know still less about what impact news frames have upon public opinion, especially in ‘two-sided’ conflicts where there can be dissonance between the predominant frames offered by leaders and
the news media on different sides of any political conflict, for example whether US news frames about 9/11 are accepted or rejected in the Middle East. Figure 1.1 identifies schematically the key factors expected to contribute towards the creation and reinforcement of conventional news frames of terrorist events, as well as how, in turn, these frames influence public opinion and the policy process.

In this model, the societal culture is understood to operate at the broadest level, meaning the predominant norms, values, and beliefs in any community. In ‘one-sided’ cases, there is a broad consensus about how terrorist events should be interpreted *within* any particular community (although not necessarily outside that community), including among most mainstream leaders, including government officials and political interest groups, journalists and the public, with few voices offering alternative perspectives. Arguably this process was exemplified by coverage of 9/11 presented within the US by the American major mass media, with broadly similar patterns in framing responsibility and interpreting these events offered in the main outlets for the mass media as well as a broad consensus among political leaders. In one-sided cases, the conventional news frame is likely to be so strong and all pervasive that politicians, journalists, and the public within the community will probably be unaware of this process and media coverage will be relatively uncontroversial.

‘One-sided’ coverage is also likely where state terrorists control the major mass media, either through direct ownership or through the power of censorship, excluding minority views. By contrast, there is likely to be greater awareness, contest and dispute about the framing process in ‘two-sided’ cases, where perceptions and evaluations of acts of political violence differ sharply among sub-cultures deeply-affected by the conflict, and where divided communities share access to the mass media, for example among Catholics and Protestants in Belfast, among Muslim and Jewish residents in Jerusalem, or among Russians and Chechens living in Grozny.

Within this broader context, the news frame in each society is expected to be shaped by three factors: the basic facts surrounding the terrorist event itself, and the way that these events are interpreted by official sources in the government (including press releases, speeches, and briefings by political leaders and spokespersons for relevant government agencies, including the military, security, law enforcement, and intelligence services, as well as related expert commentators including representatives of a variety of interest groups and think tanks, and others who offer past experience in these fields), and by communiqués, manifestoes, press statements, or interviews with spokespersons articulating the grievances or demands of dissident groups. Credible sources are expected to shape interpretations of the meaning of the event by providing alternative ways of understanding the ‘who’, ‘what’ and ‘why’ that makes sense of the incident. Some ‘facts’ about any terrorist event may be relatively neutral (such as the specific timing); but many others may remain highly contested (such as the deeper motivation of the actors or the political grievances underlying their actions), including every aspect of coverage in the news media such as the language used to describe events (was it a lynching, a murder, an assassination, or a killing?), the selection, depiction and meaning of iconic images, and the choice of ‘experts’ and ‘authorities’ for commentary.

In evenly divided two-sided conflicts, strong emotional reactions to extreme acts of political violence mean each society may offer different interpretations of events and images, sharing almost nothing in common (Was 9/11 the work of a small group of al-Quada operatives? Or, as some Arab commentators suggested, was it a Zionist conspiracy to blame Muslims?). The news media serving each community may reflect and thereby reinforce these cultural divisions, especially in societies with strong linguistic cleavages, or journalists and broadcasters may attempt to bridge and overcome community differences by carefully ‘balancing’ contrasting viewpoints. The role of the international mass media and international agencies adds another layer of complexity to this process, as this can provide another perspective challenging any ‘one-sided’ consensus operating within a society. The model suggests that, in turn, the news frame will influence public opinion, especially if there are mainly ‘one-sided’ messages, including what people learn about any terrorist event, how they evaluate the main actors and issues under contention, and how far this coverage affects public concerns and perceptions of the risks and threats of further terrorist acts. The news frame is also predicted to shape the public policy
agenda, including the response to events by government officials and the security services, both
directly, and also indirectly via public opinion. The news media frame in any society is only one
factor affecting public opinion, which is also influenced by real world indicators and by personal
experience and interpersonal communications. Nevertheless the conventional news frame in any
society is expected to play a central role in shaping public reactions, especially where there is a
broad consensus creating a shared ‘one-sided’ interpretation among most leaders and who share
a common national culture and identity. 30

Numerous examples of news framing in other contexts can be easily recognized. To take
just a few: within election campaigns the familiar ‘horse race’ frame (who is ahead, who is behind)
often dominates coverage of US primaries, allowing the public to identify the strongest
contenders, even if they know little about their ideological beliefs, policy platforms, or background
and experience 31. Journalists repeatedly employ certain news frames, such as ‘personifying’
political conflicts to make them more comprehensible to their audiences 32. News stories often
employ ‘conflict’ and ‘economic’ frames to simplify the story lines of complex events. 33

Western media organizations have been accused of framing news of developing
countries only in terms of ‘natural disasters’ like earthquakes, famines, and tidal floods, while
neglecting broader political conditions or economic development issues, such as government
corruption or the lack of international investment in public services and economic development,
which may have contributed towards events. 34 Counter-culture social movements have also
commonly challenged the way that they have been framed in the mainstream mass media,
including feminists, environmentalists, anti-capitalists, anti-globalization, peace activists, and anti-
nuclear groups, as have ethnic minorities 35. The adoption of ‘episodic’ frames, focusing upon the
specifics of any particular event, has also been applied to understand typical news coverage of
political issues, including the Gulf War, crime, poverty, and Iran-Contra, along with the neglect of
‘thematic’ frames providing a broader and more contextualized understanding of the background
factors contributing towards these issues. 36

In ‘one-sided’ contexts, conventional frames become so widespread within a society that
they are often regarded as natural and inevitable, almost as common sense, with contradictory
information or interpretations discounted as failing to fit preexisting views. Functioning in a similar
way to scientific paradigms guiding basic research in ‘normal science’ 37, conventional news
frames can be seen as ‘journalism as usual’, explaining and prioritizing some dominant ways of
understanding events while underplaying or neglecting others. Where conventional frames
become pervasive within a particular news culture, journalists may well believe themselves to be
reporting ‘just the facts’ in the tradition of objective and balanced reporting, as they are unaware
of the way that the broader frame shapes their story narratives. Yet just like scientific paradigms,
at times long-established journalistic frames can break down, producing confusing rivalry
between alternative interpretations of the most appropriate news narrative, or the displacement of
one conventional frame by a rival way of understanding events in the world 38. In ‘two-sided’
contexts, awareness of rival news frames means that the process of political communications can
become extremely controversial, as both communities dispute the meaning and interpretation of
similar events.

The War on Terrorism Frame

The book will argue that the events of 9/11 contributed to, but alone were not sufficient to
create, a profound and dramatic shift in perceptions of American foreign and security policy. The
underlying conditions were already ripe for change. The older Cold War frame, used for
understanding international conflict during the post-war era, had been losing its intellectual
coherence and narrative power steadily throughout the 1990s, following the dramatic fall of the
Berlin Wall and the spread of electoral democracies throughout most of Central and Eastern
Europe. But after 9/11, a new ‘war on terrorism’ frame was rapidly adopted in the White House as
the primary standard used to reinterpret and understand ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ around the globe.
This perceptual frame was stretched and used to explain and justify the Bush administration’s
hostility towards the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, towards Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, and Kim
Jong-il’s North Korea, while simultaneously warming relations and creating new international
alliances, notably with Russia, China and Pakistan. After the fall of the Berlin Wall, the replacement of the older Cold War frame with the newer ‘war on terrorism’ frame offered a way for American politicians and journalists to construct a narrative to make sense of a range of diverse stories about international security, civil wars, and global conflict. The war on terrorism frame could be applied to events occurring in the Philippines, Chechnya, Indonesia, Israel, Kenya, Iraq, or North Korea, thereby communicating a simplified narrative to the American public as well conveying US foreign policy priorities to the international community.

The use of the terrorism frame serves several functions, both cognitive by linking together disparate facts, events and leaders, and also evaluative by naming perpetrators, identifying victims, and attributing blame. It allows political leaders to communicate a coherent simple message to the public, while also reshaping perceptions of ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’. In the words of President Bush: “Every nation in every region now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists.” Clearly numerous significant problems around the world failed to fall into this frame post 9/11 -- whether the AIDS/HIV pandemic decimating many African states, the deep economic crisis and government destabilization evident in many Latin American nations, especially Argentina and Venezuela, or broader issues of poverty, hunger, disease, and illiteracy evident in South East Asia. These issues were also affected by the new agenda, since international problems that failed to fit the security frame were often relegated in importance in US foreign policy priorities.

To understand this phenomenon, this book seeks to understand how the process of political communications, particularly the role of the news media, contributed towards the frames used for understanding security issues, political conflict, and international affairs. The first section of the book focuses on the tensions in the relationship between governments and journalists about the framing of terrorism, considering issues of official censorship and curbs on press freedom designed to strengthen national security. The American experience is compared with how journalists have covered long-standing societal conflicts in deeply divided plural societies, including political violence in Israel and the West Bank and in Northern Ireland. Part II focuses upon how journalists construct and frame news of terrorism, including which events receive attention, how much prominence is given to spokespersons from different sides in any conflict, how news of political violence affects the standard norms and routines for journalists, and how coverage of these events varies systematically in different cultural contexts and media systems, in the US and elsewhere. The concluding section analyzes how the public responds psychologically to news coverage of terrorism, including the impact of any ‘rally-round-the-flag’ effects in times of crisis, the American public’s understanding and comprehension of terrorist events, and their perceptions of risk.

Plan of the Book

The first part of the book focuses upon the relationship between governments and journalist in framing terrorist events. In Chapter 2 Doris A. Graber considers the relationship between terrorism, the First Amendment, and censorship. Press freedom is crucial in times of national crisis such as impending terrorism and war. But press freedom is likely to become a casualty at such times because of legitimate concerns about security for civilians and military personnel and because of fears of compromising the confidentiality of important public policies. Although these dilemmas arise frequently, neither the U.S. government nor the American press has developed an adequate policy to deal with them. The same holds true for other Western democracies. This chapter diagnoses the problem as a typical trade-off dilemma and tracks the record of past U.S. policies. Based on lessons drawn from the analysis of political trade-offs, the study identifies feasible guidelines. Governments and the media can use these guidelines to achieve a workable balance between press freedom and security needs. Citizens can use them to judge the fairness of the process and assess the merits of the outcome.

In Chapter 3 Robin Brown examines how far Clausewitz can be applied in the age of Al Jazeera. The theoretical core of the chapter is drawn from Clausewitz’s argument that war is the continuation of politics. His analysis suggested that war must be understood as a process where the political environment within which conflict takes place shapes the dynamics of military action.
and where the consequences of that action affect the political environment. As a consequence, political change reshapes the nature of conflict. In this chapter Brown finds that the expansion of the number of news outlets over the past twenty years ensures that continuous coverage and commentary accompany military action by Western countries. Most analysis of the relationship between war and the media focuses either on the contentious nature of the relationship between journalists and armed forces or on the disruptive impact of news coverage on military operations. This chapter argues that the relationship between developments in the media and the military should be conceptualized as a dynamic interaction along the lines suggested by Clausewitz. Such an approach suggests that the impact of media developments on the conduct of military operations is more radical than is normally suggested.

In Chapter 4 Tamar Liebes considers conflict and the media in Israel. In the days of terrestrial television, national audiences saw a national framing of conflict. In the new global environment, all sides involved in conflicts enter into a contest of images, in the attempt to influence international public opinion. Television reporters search for such images and sound bites that encapsulate their understanding of the conflict – but they can be easily misled. The paper examines two competing case studies occurring at the start of the second intifada -- that of Muhammad Dura, a Palestinian child who died in his father's arms, and the lynching of two Israeli soldiers. It questions the 'reality', the 'representativeness', and the 'effectiveness' of news coverage of these images.

Another well-known case of two-sided internal conflict concerns Northern Ireland. In Chapter 5 Tim Cooke examines how the press in the province covered paramilitaries during the peace process. The reporting of sustained conflict poses particular challenges for news organizations and journalists in the search for truth, objectivity, accuracy, balance, independence and responsibility. For news media most closely linked to the arena of conflict, the challenges are unique. While international or foreign media often go largely unaccountable to the society about which they report, indigenous news organizations must wrestle daily with both the short and longer-term consequences of their judgments and actions. The very proximity of news organizations rooted in and broadcasting or publishing to a society affected by conflict, and in particular by political violence, makes them important players in the battle for hearts and minds in a war of weapons and words, of politics and pictures. Reporting on a society attempting the transition to peace offers fresh challenges. What role does the news media play in such a transition and how do the journalists who frame our daily window on the world assess what we should see when we look through it? This examination of the role of news organizations in Northern Ireland in reporting the paramilitary groups responsible for thirty years of headlines at home and abroad as they have moved into the political arena attempts to offer insight into this interactive process in one divided society.

In Part II of the book we examine the media's framing of incidents of terrorism in different contexts. Chapter 6 by Todd M. Schaefer looks at the case study of US Embassy bombings in Africa to compare national influences on coverage of terrorism, especially how the media in developing countries cover such events. This chapter examines local-versus-foreign coverage by the same media sources in two sets of similar terrorist attacks - the 1998 U.S. Embassy bombings in Kenya and Tanzania, and the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, DC, respectively. The study compares the major national newspapers headquartered in the cities where the attacks took place: the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Nairobi Daily Nation, and the Dar Es Salaam Daily News. The chapter establishes that physical proximity and the 'local angle' influenced media framing, especially in terms of the prominence and amount of coverage, although less in nature of coverage. Cultural influences play a relatively small role in how these events are reported. Most importantly, national worldviews derived from the international system greatly shape the interpretation of terrorist attacks, especially abroad. Just as terrorism may be in part caused by peoples' perceptions of global political-economic structures of power, the message of terrorist attacks appears to be mediated to diverse publics around the globe through lenses crafted by that very same system.

In Chapter 7 Amy Jasperson and Mansour El-Kikhia focus on media coverage of the War in Afghanistan, comparing the framing of the same events by CNN and by Al Jazeera. Typically,
past research on international crises primarily focuses on how American media coverage often reinforces the official administration position and amplifies the natural “rally around the flag” that occurs during an international crisis. This chapter attempts to extend past research by examining how coverage of the ‘War in Afghanistan’ and the military response to the September 11 attacks, differs from past coverage of American wars in the Middle East. Had reporters learnt any lessons from the Persian Gulf War of 1991? Was the coverage different in the War in Afghanistan? Moreover the chapter examines how Western sources of news compare with Al Jazeera, which emerged as an important primary source of news within the Middle East. How did Al Jazeera frame the discourse about the War in Afghanistan? Further, how did American media conceptualize news reports presented by Al Jazeera and what consequences did this have for the range of information available in the information environment? Did this differ from the way that other domestic sources of non-Western news framed the military actions undertaken by Western nations against the Taliban and Al Qaeda in Afghanistan?

Chapter 8 by Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna looks at framing of Muslim-Americans in the news. Popular fiction and Hollywood motion pictures have perpetuated the stereotype of Muslims and Arabs as villains and terrorists for many years. According to some critics, the news in the United States, too, has long displayed anti-Muslim and anti-Arab bias. The chapter explored how the U.S. news media framed Muslim Americans over an 18-month period and whether this reporting reflected negative biases and stereotypes— especially after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The study found that the events of 9-11, as horrific as they were, affected the news about American Muslims in terms of volume, themes, stereotypical references, frames, and viewpoints, but in several positive ways.

In Chapter 9 Frank Rusciano analyzes whether the discourse patterns in discussions of the terrorist acts and their aftermath follow global opinion theory or the ‘clash of civilizations’ theory, by studying the construction, agenda, and content of “world opinion” in newspaper stories. This chapter studied all references to world opinion on the attacks from September 11, 2001 through October 31, 2001 in ten international newspapers. The study concludes that diverse frames were offered to interpret these events in different countries, rather than any clear consensus about the meaning of 9/11.

In Part III the book turns to the public’s response to news framing of events. In Chapter 10 Michael Traugott and Ted Brader examine American news coverage of 9/11 and its consequences. The attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11, 2001 were historic events that tested the ability of the American media to cover and explain to their audience what had happened and why. In particular, the study is interested in whether or not elements of the media framing of September 11 help citizens to explain what happened during these events. The study had two interests: to what extent did the coverage provide information about explanations for the attacks? And would exposure to media content produce more complex answers about why they occurred? The analysis presented in this chapter is based upon a national telephone survey about people’s reactions to the events of September 11, 2001 and a content analysis of the American national news coverage of the events. The chapter concludes that individual factors like education can explain the ability of individuals to form complex views of the world, but attention to the news, and perhaps the volume of coverage, also play a role in the ability to explain the events of 9/11.

Chapter 11 Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart examine some of the first systematic survey evidence for public opinion among Muslim and Western states. In seeking to understand the root causes of the events of 9/11 many accounts have turned to Samuel P. Huntington’s provocative and controversial thesis of a ‘clash of civilizations’, arousing strong debate. Evidence from the 1995-2001 waves of the World Values Survey allows us, for the first time, to examine an extensive body of empirical evidence about public opinion in Muslim nations. Comparative analysis of the beliefs and values of Muslim and non-Muslim publics in 75 societies around the globe, confirms the first claim in Huntington’s thesis: culture does matter, and indeed matters a lot, so that religious legacies leave a distinct imprint on contemporary values. But Huntington is mistaken in assuming that the core clash between the West and Muslim worlds concerns democracy. The evidence suggests striking similarities in the political values held in these
societies. It is true that Islamic publics differ from Western publics concerning the role of religious leadership in society, but this is not a simple dichotomous clash—many non-Islamic societies side with the Islamic ones on this issue. Moreover the Huntington thesis fails to identify the most basic cultural fault line between the West and Islam, which concerns the issues of gender equality and sexual liberalization. The cultural gulf separating Islam from the West involves Eros far more than Demos.

Chapter 12 by Paul Brewer, Sean Aday and Kim Gross draws on data from a two-wave telephone survey of Americans to examine the structure of system support in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks. Past research on trust in government suggests that mutually reinforcing relationships bind various forms of support for the political system. These relationships carried the troubling implication of a vicious circle, wherein a decline in each component of system support fed the downward spiral in political trust we have seen in the United States over the past three decades. Of course, these mutually reinforcing relationships might also have fed a virtuous circle, helping to raise trust in government after September 11th. In particular, this chapter focuses upon whether the relationships among various forms of trust differ in the post-September 11th period from other contexts and whether the structure of system support changed as America moved from the rally phase into a period where trust had returned almost to its pre-September 11th levels.

Chapter 13 by Leonie Huddy, Stanley Feldman, Charles Taber and Gallay Lahav analyzes the politics of threat. Terrorism is a form of psychological warfare. One of its central goals is to frighten people through acts of random brutality and violence that gain broad publicity despite their limited targets. Underlying this objective is a second political goal: to force political elites to negotiate with terrorists and make concessions that will mollify a frightened citizenry. These motives contrast starkly, however, with the objectives of political leaders and governments in countries that have been targeted by terrorists. Political elites in such countries hope to marshal public backing for actions designed to eliminate the threat of terrorism, often through the use of force. Terrorist efforts to incite fear in publics are thus directly at odds with the objectives of political elites who hope to foster pervasive citizen support for retaliation. The focus of this chapter is on American reactions to the attacks of 9/11. The terrorists’ actions undertaken to instill fear in the American public and thus undercut support for retaliatory action is contrasted with the success of the government in amassing support for its war on terrorism. The authors examine whether concerns about future attacks simply hardened American resolve against the perpetrators of 9/11. Lastly in Chapter 14 the conclusion summarizes the major findings throughout the book, and considers their implications for understanding the impact of conventional news frames about terrorism on the process of governance, on international affairs and foreign policy, and on public opinion.
Figure 1.1: Model of the framing process for terrorist events


7 For example, the News Interest Index survey conducted by the Pew Research Center For the People and the Press periodically asks a representative sample of Americans: “How worried are you that there will soon be another terrorist attack in the United States?” In October 2001 three-quarters (73%) of Americans said that they were ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ worried. In December 2002 the proportion expressing concern remained at the same level (73%). The Pew Research Center For the People and the Press. Public more internationalist than in the 1990s. 12 December 2002. www.people-press.org. For trends in levels of public concern about terrorism, see also Figure 1.4, discussed later. For a broader discussion and interpretation of this phenomenon, see David L. Altheide. 2002. Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis. New York: Aldine de Gruyter.

As well as Iran, Iraq and North Korea, the other four nations that the US has identified officially as ‘state terrorists’ include Cuba, Libya, Syria, and Sudan. US State Department. Patterns of Terrorism 2001. Washington DC: US Department of State. Pp.63-68.


There are of course multiple alternative conceptualizations of ‘terrorism’, leading relativists to abandon attempts at any precise definition as meaningless. The concept outlined here shares many similar elements to other common definitions specified by official bodies given elsewhere:


The Federal Bureau of Investigation. “Terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives.”

The U.S. Department of Defense. “Terrorism is the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to inculcate fear; intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals that are generally political, religious or ideological.”

In this regard, we follow the conventional understanding of ‘protest politics’ established by Samuel Barnes and Max Kaase. 1979. Political Action: Mass Participation in Five Western Democracies. Beverley Hills, CA: Sage.

See, for example, the discussion in Martha Crenshaw. 1990. ‘The logic of terrorism: Terrorist behavior as a product of strategic choice.’ In Origins of Terrorism. Ed. W. Reich. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.


The definition also excludes the use of the term ‘eco-terrorism’ to describe companies responsible for environmental destruction although it does cover cases of violent direct action by environmentalists. See D. M. Schwartz. 1998. ‘Environmental terrorism: Analyzing the concept.’ Journal of Peace Research. 35(4): 483-496.


23 In addition, individuals, such as the Unabomber or lone assassins, can also use the techniques of terrorism although such cases are relatively rare.

24 Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky argue that during the 1980s, when supporting regimes in Nicaragua and El Salvador that employed state-organized violence, the United States was associated with these repressive practices. 1988. Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media. New York: Pantheon.


27 The idea of ‘frames’ is analogous to information processing theories in social psychology, suggesting that individuals use ‘cognitive schema’ to organize their thinking, linking substantive beliefs, attitudes, and values.


For example, in Northern Ireland, since at least the early 1970s, the ‘terrorism’ frame had long categorized ‘friends’ and ‘enemies’ of the democratic process, assigning legitimacy to reporting the viewpoints of certain groups, parties, and leaders, while delegitimizing others that resorted to violence. As discussed further in chapter 5, the peace process, culminating in the Good Friday agreement, radically altered the position of the major political actors, bringing the IRA far more firmly within the electoral arena of democratic politics, a process reinforced by their renunciation of political violence.