



**INTERSECTIONS OF MASS MEDIA,  
TERRORISM, AND POLICY RESPONSE:  
HOW MASS MEDIATED  
REPRESENTATIONS OF TERRORISM  
MAY INFLUENCE COUNTERTERRORIST  
POLICIES**

**Date:** November 22, 2022

*Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.*

**KEY EVENTS**

On November 22, 2022, Dr. Brigitte Nacos, Adjunct Professor of Political Science at Columbia University, presented *Intersections of Mass Media, Terrorism, and Policy Response: How Mass Mediated Representations of Terrorism May Influence Counterterrorist Policies*. The presentation was followed by a question-and-answer period with questions from the audience and CASIS Vancouver executives. The key points discussed were how the representation of terrorist attacks in mass media can influence public opinion and policy decisions. Several case studies were presented to illustrate this intersection.

**NATURE OF DISCUSSION**

**Presentation**

The central theme throughout Dr. Nacos's presentation was the importance of the media in shaping public opinion and influencing policy decisions. Three case studies of transnational terrorism and one example of domestic terrorism were provided to illustrate the intersection between mass media, terrorism, public opinion, and policy response.

## Question & Answer Period

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Nacos discussed the competition between mainstream media and newer forms of media, as well as the issue of censoring hate-speech on social media platforms.

## BACKGROUND

### Presentation

Dr. Nacos began her presentation by discussing the intersection between terrorism, mass media, public opinion, and policy decisions. She asserted that mass media and alternative media have allowed terrorists to access sectors of the government and influence public opinion. Terrorists want the public to be aware of their existence and to have recognition of their motives, grievances, causes, and justifications. They seek respect and sympathy from those in whose name they claim to act and, most importantly, they want to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their followers.

The advance of the internet has only further facilitated terrorists' reach and influence. Dr. Nacos outlined several ways in which terrorists use the internet:

- Mining the internet for valuable information
- Planning and coordinating terrorist operations
- Radicalizing and recruiting
- Waging psychological warfare
- Taking group rivalries public
- Raising funds to finance their operations
- Providing instructions for lone actors or cells
- Publicize their own violence and leave mainstream media to report what terrorists themselves report

At this point in the presentation, Dr. Nacos presented four case studies illustrating how terrorism in the media influences public opinion and public policies. She first presented the Oklahoma City Bombing by Timothy McVeigh in 1995. This was the first event where Dr. Nacos identified the triangle of communications and how it applied to terrorists and the decisions that were made.

Before 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing was the most lethal attack in the West and received an excessive amount of coverage in the media. The high level of news coverage led public opinion to become more critical of the state, which

ultimately resulted in legislative changes. The Oklahoma City bombing took place on the second anniversary of the raid at Waco, the latter of which triggered several public opinion polls to ensue. The first poll took place soon after the bombing and the other took place two months later. In that two-month period, public opinion shifted dramatically and became more critical of how the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) handled the situation at Waco. These polls led to congress revisiting the Waco hearings and changing the FBI rules of engagement, which was exactly what McVeigh was hoping for—public disapproval of the government and stricter regulations to prevent law enforcement from acting with impunity. This case shows a clear connection between an act of terrorism and very particular media coverage, as well as the effects on public opinion and decision makers.

Dr. Nacos provided 9/11 as another demonstration of this relationship. From the outset, this attack was described in the media as an “act of war” and a gross intelligence failure, which is exactly what Bin Laden wanted: being treated as a quasi-state leader with a potent military force. This news coverage foreshadowed the restructuring of Homeland Security and influenced the decision of Congress to give the president *carte blanche* to wage war in the name of counter-terrorism.

Another case showing the importance of media for terrorist groups was the beheading of James Foley by the Islamic State (ISIS) in 2014. In the months after the video was leaked on social media, there was a significant increase in the amount of coverage given to ISIS, which shifted public opinion regarding the role of Islam and violence committed by Muslims. Prior to this video, the majority of Americans did not feel that religion incited people to violence; however, after the Foley beheading was covered in the media, ISIS was seen as a much bigger threat.

To end her presentation, Dr. Nacos discussed the January 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Contrary to the previous examples, the January 6th attack was not described as a terrorist attack in the media, despite it being, in part, a politically driven assault on the State. Dr. Nacos pointed out that violence perpetrated by Muslims is immediately seen as terrorism, whereas political violence conducted by non-Muslims is more often described as a hate crime.

Following the insurrection there were no serious debates about policy changes and the extensive media coverage of the attack appeared to shift public opinion in the opposite direction. Nearly a year following the insurrection, 34% of American respondents felt that political violence against the government was justified. Dr. Nacos concluded by pointing out that what the media does not

publicize is equally as important as what they do publicize, and it has an impact on the views of both the public and decision makers.

### **Question & Answer Period**

During the question-and-answer period, Dr. Nacos explained that the competition between traditional mainstream media and newer forms of social media is one of the primary reasons why negative, shocking, and sensationalized content is so prevalent—shocking stories are what attracts followers and makes a profit, and it is unrealistic to think this will change.

When asked whether social media will take over and supplant traditional mainstream media, Dr. Nacos expressed that the mainstream media seems to amplify the content being presented on social media. To illustrate her point was the beheading of hostages by ISIS. Even though the beheadings were posted on social media, the majority of people learned about the beheadings after mainstream media picked up the stories.

Dr. Nacos also discussed the extent to which we want incitement and hate speech to be purged from platforms. In Germany and many parts of Europe, hate speech is criminalized and strict rules are enforced on media platforms; however, that is not the case in the US. Conversely, those working in intelligence and law enforcement find social media platforms to be great resources to prevent attacks and find connections between recruiters and their targets. However, Dr. Nacos noted that there needs to be much greater cooperation between the intelligence community and social media providers.

## **KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION**

### **Presentation**

- There is a clear relationship between terrorism, mass media, public opinion, and policy decisions.
- Mass media and alternative media have allowed terrorists to access sectors of the government and influence public opinion.
- The internet and social media have furthered terrorists' reach and influence by making it easier to plan attacks, recruit members, spread propaganda, take rivalries public, raise funds, provide instructions, and publicize their attacks.

- As seen in the aftermath of the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11, and the beheading of James Foley, media coverage can significantly alter public opinion, leading to legislative changes, and even war.
- What is omitted from mass media is equally as important as what is openly presented and can still have an impact on public opinion and policy decisions.

### Question & Answer Period

- The competition between traditional news media and social media is what drives the media to publish sensational or violent content.
- While some people feel that social media will take over and supplant traditional media, Dr. Nacos feels that traditional media actually amplifies content being produced on social media.
- The laws on hate-speech vary from country to country, and there appears to be a divide on whether purging hateful content from platforms is effective.



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Non-Commercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License.

© (BRIGITTE NACOS, 2023)

Published by the Journal of Intelligence, Conflict, and Warfare and Simon Fraser University

Available from: <https://jicw.org/>