

Terrorism's Spatiality and Identity through Media Content Analysis

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The impacts of terrorist actions are a function of the spatially defined physical event and the spatially undefined psychological, sociological, and political reactions to the physical event (Hoffman 1998). As the agenda-setting theory in communication research suggests, the mass media have the power to influence public discourse and governmental action with its reaction to terrorist incidents (McCombs and Shaw 1972). This research seeks to answer three broad research questions, including whether terrorism exhibits spatial patterns, whether newspaper coverage of terrorist incidents varies depending on the identity of the responsible party, and whether the discrepancies found in the coverage give rise to any implications when framed under agenda-setting theory of communication.

In order to answer the proposed questions, several methods stemming from the disciplines of geography and communication are used. The geographical methods use a combination of data from the Global Terrorism Database and the MIPT database to geocode domestic and international terrorist incidents during the time period of 1970-2005. A spatial autocorrelation is run on the locations of terrorist incidents to reveal clusters of which the most active organizations are determined. The communications research methods included in the research is a content analysis of three newspapers from the United States: the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and the *Washington Post*. This content analysis, which includes both quantitative and qualitative techniques, focuses on the "watershed" type events from the active organizations. This analysis will reveal any variance in news coverage of terrorist activity based on the perpetrator's identity.

Responding to these questions about terrorism and mass media coverage provides insight into possible spatial patterns of terrorist incidents and into patterns of media coverage. In the field of hazards research, studies using media analysis techniques focus on the reaction of the media after a natural or technological hazard event. In the communication research field, studies involving agenda-setting theory concern mostly political issues such as civil rights or political campaigning. The successful completion of this research will result in an example of the amalgamation of the two fields of study: hazards and communication research.

Currently, this described research is in the data analysis stage. By the end of February 2007, data analysis will be complete and conclusions will be drawn in attempt to address the proposed research questions. The research will be utilized as the master's thesis research of Elizabeth Dunn and the thesis will be defended by April 2007. Future publications are planned but are not currently in press.

References:

Hoffman, B. 1998. *Inside Terrorism*. New York City: Columbia University Press.

McCombs, M. E., and D. L. Shaw. 1972. The agenda-setting function of mass media. *Public Opinion Quarterly* (36):176-187.