

REPORTING TERRORISM: HOW THE TERRORISTS EXPLOIT TV AND ITS DYNAMICS

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Abstract

Terrorists seem to be cognizant of the immense power of the media of which TV is the greatest exponent. Actually, the contemporary 24/7 news TV has its own pre-requisites and dynamics which work in tandem with the traditional norms of news. Journalistic demand for news in this setting becomes a weakness which anyone with a message to broadcast to wider audiences can exploit. And terrorists, many believe, are not only aware of these soft media spots but are adept in using them for their benefit. Most of the times their acts are not reflexive, rather their strategies are often meticulously planned and efficiently executed.. Consequently, the spectacle of destruction wrought by them is so imposing that TV with its modern craze for ratings cannot but give prolonged and sustained coverage to not only to the terrorist act but the ideologies behind it. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the nature of the relationship between television and the terrorists in light of modern media dynamics and the terrorists' ability to exploit its need for sensational stories. The methodology consists of analysis of terrorism literature, study of the narratives of the terrorists and the changing dynamics of TV news production.

Key words: Terrorism, Terrorists, TV, Technology, Strategies, Reporting.

Introduction

Arguably, TV is the most powerful means of communication today.¹ In terms of news and its coverage, many argue that 24/7 satellite news channels have outdone all other forms of mass media by a

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¹ B. Hoffman, "Change and Continuity in Terrorism," *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, vol. 24, no.5 (2006).

good margin, especially after the events of 9/11. Despite the remarkable growth of social media which is fast changing the media scene,² the 24/7 TV channels are dominating the news field due to their visual impact and their ability to go live with their instant and transcontinental coverage. Hence, for any information of “news value” that needs to be mass communicated, there is no better tool than 24/7 satellite news TV channels.

On the other side, terrorism scholars agree that communication is a pre-requisite, and the goal in many cases, of any politically motivated terrorist activity. The wider it is communicated the better results it is expected to yield. There has been a long standing debate in both media and political science about the nature, scope and degree of proximity of media-terrorism relationship. Today, though most of the researchers agree that there is a relationship, work is still going on its nature and extent.

Modern technology in mass media has made an exponential growth. TV has used it to improve its presentation in several ways: from news gathering, reporting, editing, visual presentation to broadcasting it to an ever increasing audience pool. Terrorists too want to use it for their own benefit. Sometimes they directly use different technological means to put across their messages while at other occasions they let mass communication channels, especially TV, to help propagate their message to vast and varied audiences. In doing so they use different strategies which show their remarkable understanding of how the media work and how the latter cannot but publicise and bring to attention the formers’ ideals and goals.

The aim of this paper is to evaluate the nature of the relationship between TV and the terrorists through a common technology that serves them both in the realisation of their respective objectives. The methodology involves: the content analysis of the work of modern media and terrorism scholars; the narratives of terrorist groups like al Qaeda as they appear on different communication channels; and a study of the changing dynamics of TV news production particularly since 9/11.

Terrorists and Media

The terrorists’ world has changed since the 9/11 events. The use of advanced technology, sophisticated selection of targets, comprehensive training and planning, unique modus operandi, mass destruction of human life, ruthlessness of approach are the hallmarks of today’s terrorist activity. And al Qaeda and its loosely knit network are at the forefront of this change. One thing, however, has not changed over the years: the understanding of the

² J. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011).

presence of media and its optimum utilization. Terrorists consider mass propagation of their ideas a vital component of their overall strategy not only during “active” operation but also in relatively dull and “inactive” days of planning and training. They realize the immense potential of interacting with the international politics for the realization of their goals and how the media can be a powerful means in the exploitation of this potential.

During their investigations on transnational terrorist organisations Blomberg, et al. found the following similarity in the strategic mindset of the terrorist organisations:

These findings suggest that for major transnational terrorist organizations, the need to engage with free societies is a significant component of their strategy (perhaps for negotiation purposes, for greater international media attention, or for the potential gain in legitimacy among important constituencies at home and abroad).³

It is a fact that al Qaeda has maintained a hostile posture towards the media and held the latter responsible for the failure of the Jihadist communication and even labelled media as the “tool of Western powers to fight against Islam.”⁴ Ironically, al Qaeda is not oblivious of the news media and understands that the TV screens themselves constitute an important theatre of the battle they are fighting. Osama Bin Laden once confessed that most of his war was conducted in the media.⁵ Ayman Al Zawahiri, the second in command after Osama, shares his thoughts about the media and its importance in one of his letters as under:

We are in a battle and that more than half of this battle is taking place in the battle field of media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and minds of the Ummah [sic].⁶

This, on the one hand, indicates that the threat of terrorism is still looming large which the media realises, but on the other hand, throws ample light on the media exploiting the strategies of the terrorists. Bergen has gone to the extent of saying:

The dozens of video and audio files that bin Laden and Zawahiri have released since 9/11 have reached hundreds of millions of people worldwide through television, newspapers, and the

³ S. Blomberg, et al., “On the Duration and Sustainability of Transnational Terrorist Organizations,” *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 54, no. 2 (April 2010): 303-330.

⁴ M. Soriano, “Terrorism and the Mass Media after Al Qaeda: A Change of Course?,” *Athena Intelligence Journal*, vol. 3, no 1 (2008): 7.

⁵ P. Bergen, “Al Qaeda, the Organization: A Five-year Forecast,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 618, no. 1 (2008): 14.

⁶ P. Soriano, “Terrorism and the Mass Media,” 9.

Internet, making them among the most widely distributed political statements in history.⁷

The terrorists need mass communication of their ideas and for this they understand the immense power that today's media possess. Having said that media, especially the TV, has its certain dynamics, values and dispositions which if cleverly manipulated the terrorists can use for their benefit. In the succeeding paragraphs some of the determinants of TV news production are discussed and how these are utilised by the terrorists by adopting different strategies.

TV has its own societal purposes which the terrorists are not averse to using for their own benefits. Therefore, "while the media serve as resources for the majority of the population in their roles as audiences, they have increasingly become a resource, or more aptly, a tool, for powerful actors"⁸. And terrorists are powerful actors.

TV Dynamics and Terrorist Strategies

Visual, Conflict Oriented and Market Driven

Firstly, TV is a visual medium with a high reliance on moving pictures as against the limited use of still pictures in the print media where text dominates the content. The decision to broadcast a news event strongly depends on its audio-visual content. Even an important news event if lacking in audio-visual material may fall down the ladder of priority. And this determinant of decision making by the editor travels right down the hierarchy of news production, to the reporter who is usually the first to come in contact with any event and ultimately affects his decision to cover the event.

Secondly, TV likes conflict and drama that attract immediate attention. Such events are prioritised by TV to attract a wider viewership. War and acts of terrorism have conflict and drama. Griffin argues that the attention given to war related news, documentaries, movies and even video games is confirmation that public is fascinated by war and its presentation on the media. He is of the view that:

Conflict is routinely considered to have maximum "news value" and is, in fact, explicitly recognized in journalism textbooks as a primary criterion for defining news.⁹

Thirdly, today's 24/7 satellite TV is run by a fiercely competitive private market. The goal is to achieve higher audience ratings culminating in ascending

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ B. Axford and R. Huggins, *New media and politics* (London, New York: Sage Publications, 2001), 31.

⁹ M. Griffin, M. "Media Images of War," *Media, War & Conflict*, vol. 3, no. 1 (2010): 7.

revenue graphs. In other words, audiences are a commodity which can be sold in the market to capture increased profits—the ultimate goal of any commercial organisation. Considering the “ratings obsessed” dynamics of TV news production in a highly competitive market, the stories with high visual content, drama and emotional appeal are of more importance than other stories lacking such characteristics. Therefore, on the editor’s desk where all these stories are in competition to make it to the broadcast threshold, only those which are rich in these elements force their way up on the broadcast worthy category. The poignant among them make their way further up in the order of priority even if lacking in some of the established traditional “news values.” In the words of Soriano:

There is competition among the different stories that will finally be omitted; those that are victorious are more dramatic, are more spectacular in a visual sense, are more emotional, and contain other elements that are able to be assimilated by an image-oriented culture.¹⁰

What about today’s terrorists? They are neither illiterate nor technologically backward individuals who are oblivious of the latest technological developments in the field of media. They do not lack sophisticated planning skills, either. The “leaders” sitting at the higher echelons have advanced knowledge of explosives, are highly trained in media techniques, keenly aware of the ideological conflicts, and possess immaculate long term planning skills. Hoffman defines today’s terrorist as:

Rather than the wild eyed fanatics or crazed killers that we have conditioned to expect, many are in fact highly articulate and extremely thoughtful individuals for whom terrorism is (or was) an entirely rational choice.¹¹

He may be exaggerating and oversimplifying the complex phenomenon of news production when he said:

The art of terrorist communication has evolved to a point at which the terrorists themselves can now control the entire production process: determining the content, context, and medium over [which] their message is projected and targeted precisely [at] the audience (or multiple audiences) they seek to reach.¹²

However, being mindful of the news TV dynamics discussed above, terrorists carry out their actions with such sophistication in planning and execution that the former is left with no option but to give such instant live

¹⁰ P. Soriano, “Terrorism and the Mass Media,” 13.

¹¹ B. Hoffman, “Change and Continuity in Terrorism,” xv.

¹² *Ibid.*, 197.

and sustained coverage to them which is massive by default. And it may be argued that they are gradually stepping towards the dangerous situation described by Hoffman, which seems exaggerated at the moment.

Some of the above mentioned traits of modern TV are now discussed to see how the terrorists have used them for their own good. A glance at the execution of terrorist events, especially after and including 9/11, will reveal how the terrorists manipulated their strategies to gain maximum benefits. A careful reading of some of the prominent recent terrorist attacks—September 11th 2001, Bali Attack 2002, Madrid Bombings 2004, London Bombings 2005, Mumbai Attacks 2008, Marriot Hotel attack 2008—shows that terrorists planned them immaculately while strategically considering the TV determinants and their impact on the coverage of these events.

All these attacks and scenes in their aftermath had many visual elements. Terrorists took care of the facts that they should be carried out at prominent places in a manner that they contain exceedingly high visual appeal. Aeroplanes hitting the Twin Towers was a scene never seen by the human eye before, except in the movies. It is so strong an image that it is going to remain in the people's mind for a long time to come. It will perhaps last as the symbol of a terrorist activity at a grand scale. The train bombings in London and Madrid are of a similar character in as much as they target mass transport—another symbol of western civilization. The attack on Marriott hotel Islamabad, Pakistan, which is a favourite destination and abode of the westerners visiting Islamabad, tells the same story. The hotel is situated in the heart of the highly secured green zone and its destruction attracted the immediate attention of the entire Western media. The Mumbai attacks contained all the hallmarks demanding immediate coverage: visually recognisable targets, symbols of freedom and democracy, favourite places of western tourists and business persons, the Jewish quarter. The drama went on live for three days to gain maximum and prolonged media attention.

The visual effect of these events was no less compelling. The TV screens could not ask for more compelling images: blood soaked humans, abandoned corpses, body bags, hearses, the shooters dominating the scene, frightened citizenry running helter skelter for cover, ambulances and their shrieking sirens, burning trains and buildings—all real and just as planned and executed by the terrorists. In Griffin's words:

Dramatically charged images are ... valued by news organizations for their capacity to grab and hold viewer attention.¹³

¹³ M. Griffin, M. "Media Images of War," 10.

What was apparent in all these events was the callous disregard for human life and the scale of destruction. The high number of the casualties both dead and injured and the nature of the targets selected that were supposed to be the symbols of a modern society all combined to emphasize the difference between the conflicting parties bringing to mind such ominous forebodings as the “clash of civilizations,” and the power of the state under attack of evil forces. Round the clock television survives on stuff like this.

The terrorists wanted to make a point about their differences, and forcefully. The issues like decision to go to war in Iraq and Afghanistan, the neglect of the poor countries by the wealthy West, the contentious policies of the US and its allies in the Muslim world in terms of democracy, freedom and justice, and the economic plight of the common man in the deprived countries, were brought to the fore and debated more heatedly than ever before.

Terrorists knew that the more dramatic the event, the greater the coverage it would grab. They fashioned terrorist events in such a dramatic way that TV channels could not but broadcast them at length. Just like a drama with carefully plotted sequences, today’s terrorist events enact a sequence of unfolding tragedy. Jenkins alluded to this dramatic element of terrorism long ago.

Terrorism is a theatre...[and] terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press.¹⁴

In the highly competitive market of TV channels terrorist attacks are “packages,” hot prime time commodity. TV news channels, in a race to win more audiences try to make the most out of them. They cannot afford to remain behind other channels. Rather, in a bid to keep the others behind they prolong the coverage of terrorism related stories, sometimes beyond what is sufficiently required even at the risk of losing other important stories. All these elements which fashion TV news coverage provide an opportunity to the terrorists who exploit them in their favour.

Technology, Going Live and “Breaking News” Syndrome

The ever growing use of information technology in TV news production has changed the very outlook of the latter. The news value system has undergone an almost entire overhaul. Instant live coverage of events has its own fallouts. It has brought down all the barriers of time and space. The work dynamics,

¹⁴ B. Jenkins, *International terrorism: A new mode of conflict* (NY: Crescent Publications, 1975), 16.

news ethics, hierarchy of the system and ethos of news production have all metamorphosed. These are discussed in the following paragraphs:

As an example of change in news values, the definitions of “good news” and “bad news” have changed, perhaps, for good. Irrespective of the news values, now, if news is able to generate good revenue through increased viewership it is “good news” for the network. Its societal impact is hardly a consideration in the market. Commenting on what makes a business successful in this field, Thussu says:

Television news requires visual impact and a dramatic story... Wars and civil conflicts are, therefore, *good news* for 24/7 networks: audiences turn to news channels when there is a natural or man-made crisis. In fact it has been argued that the rolling news networks have to be conflict-driven or else they will cease to operate as successful businesses (emphasis added).¹⁵

Technological developments have made instant live coverage of events possible. Now speed is of essence. In today’s TV “news reporting is driven primarily by the imperative of speed in getting on air”.¹⁶ The critics of this insatiate desire to go live and instantaneously go on air have their own points of consideration. Tuggle says, the broadcasters are “to go ‘live’ even when there is no journalistic reason for doing so.”¹⁷

This imperative of going first on air has made the TV channels captives of what has come to be known as the “Breaking News” syndrome. Many think that in an atmosphere which is already saturating with information, it is only the “first” and “exclusive” report that can win the audience attraction and improved ratings. It leaves the broadcasters in a “now or never” predicament and usually “now” takes the lead. Such a situation, Logan says, “pressures journalists to get the news first and fast, rather than first and right.”¹⁸

In a related perspective, time on TV is short thanks to the imperatives of speed and being “first.” Ironically, the 24/7 news channels are like huge giants who always need their stomachs filled with latest news items. They have an ever growing need for novel news items. It is a predicament of being caught in many fires: need for visually compelling and conflict-oriented stories; need for going live and instantaneously, need for being ahead of others; and need to fill the “black holes” of 24/7 broadcasts where such stories are absent. In an environment where a hit on the remote control can lose the viewer who is very

¹⁵ D. K. Thussu. “Live TV and Bloodless Deaths: War, Infotainment and 24/7 News,” in *War and the media: Reporting conflict 24/7*, eds. D. K. Thussu, D. Freedman (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 123.

¹⁶ B. Hoffman, “Change and Continuity in Terrorism,” 183.

¹⁷ C. Tuggle, “Wagging the Dog: Technology and Local TV News,” *Columbia Journalism Review*, vol. 39, no. 6 (2001): 57.

¹⁸ D. Logan, “All Monica, All of the Time: The 24-hour News Cycle and the Proof of Culpability in Libel Actions,” *UALR L. Review*, vol. 23 (2000): 201.

difficult to win back, TV needs ever new stories. Therefore, when the choices are limited and quick action is the urgent need, Farmanfarmaian thinks:

They (TV channels) look for (more) attention-drawing elements and that search forces them to stretch out a story as much as possible, making less significant events big news flashes with the purpose of slowing down events while waiting for new headlines.¹⁹

The constant search for novelty leaves the audience with painful repetition of dreadful images with shrieking audio accompaniments. Since “violent news can be awesome and its sights addictive,”²⁰ people remain glued to their screens that imprints long lasting negative images on their minds. The story is dragged introducing new angles and perspectives. It usually remains the top story until another sensational item is found to take its place.

Terrorists are smart enough to take advantage of this policy. They want their message communicated and fast. Ironically, the desire to go “live” and give instant coverage is cramped by the economic limitations of a TV organisation. All channels cannot afford satellite coverage. Often speed is compromised. The terrorists understand this handicap and lend a helping hand to the TV network by selecting targets within reach of all or most TV channels. Consider all the recent terrorist targets across the globe: prominent, panoramic, symbolic, mostly in capitals – state or commercial, nearest to TV channel hubs, and easily accessible. Almost none of the terrorist incidents occurred in far flung areas out of the instant reach of TV channels but in New York, London, Madrid, Bali, Mumbai and Islamabad.

TV and terrorists both love the “Breaking News.” In an information saturated environment, it is perhaps the only, fastest and easiest channel to gain immediate and mass attention. Continuous live coverage of the event is icing on the cake for them. For this, the modern day terrorist, especially al Qaeda has almost developed it as their hallmark that they do not give any warning. Many argue that their main purpose is not the communication of their political message or registering their dissent. In a calculated move they go for sudden mass destruction. Complete disregard to human loss and focus on maximum casualties increases the value of “breaking news.” For this purpose they go for high and advanced explosives with additives like nails and sharp objects to multiply the suffering. Hence most of the prominent recent terrorist attacks were sudden and resulted in massive loss of life and property.

¹⁹ R. Farmanfarmaian, “The Media and the War on Terrorism: Where does the Truth Lie?,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2002): 159-63 and 163.

²⁰ J. Seaton. “Understanding not Empathy,” in *War and the media: Reporting conflict 24/7*, eds. D. K. Thussu and D. Freedman (London: Sage Publications, 2003), 45.

Terrorists want long and lasting impact. The practice of continuous prolonged coverage of an event until a new story is available fulfils this objective of the terrorists. Hence they do not waste their energies on minor acts. They plan strategically and plan big. They may not strike every other day, but after careful and detailed planning they usually execute the terrorist event with such expertise that the scale of the tragedy becomes horrendous. Some of the terrorist attacks have shown surprising coordination, others simultaneity in carrying out bombings at different places. These attacks were so massively destructive that it took some time to replace them from the global TV screens with other stories. They may still be alive in the minds of many people.

Terrorists — TV Interaction

As discussed above, experience has shown that the modern terrorists possess sound understanding of the media and its market oriented dynamics. Besides, propaganda of the deed, as outlined in the preceding discussion, they seem to be conversant with some of the subtler complexities of how media works under the surface layers of reporting, editing, production, presentation and broadcasting in a modern and democratic society. For this, their constant and consistent interaction with the media is a fundamental requirement. Butler identified the difference between those who have media visibility and those that do not have which shows the social status and newsworthiness of a person or an organisation. He was referring to classification of society where media representation is skewed.²¹ A careful reading reveals that the terrorist organisations have remarkable “access” to media, especially 24/7 TV. They have managed the things in such a manner through interaction with the leading media organizations that they always remain in the headlines. Their record of mass carnage and destruction may partly be responsible for this but they have some tactical manoeuvres too at the deep underground level. They seem to have a very good idea of the difference between “access” and coverage as given by Ericson as under:

By “access” we mean the news space, time and context to reasonably represent the authority of their office. Such access is distinguished from “coverage,” which may entail some news space and time but not the context of favourable representations.²²

They are not merely interested in “access” but they plan strategically to gain “coverage” from the media and TV is their top target. And they have been largely successful in this in addition to gaining even some “favourable”

²¹ D. Butler, *The trouble with reporting Northern Ireland: The British state, the broadcast media, and nonfictional representation of the conflict* (Asldershot: Avebury, 1995).

²² R. Ericson, et al., *Representing Order* (Toronto, Open University Press, 1990), 5.

representations for them. What these tactics are, and how cleverly employed, let us consider them in some detail.

Firstly, there is no doubt that Islamic terrorist organisations have remained sceptical of the media's role throughout their history and the Western media has been their target. But over the last few years they seem to have changed their paradigm, especially after the emergence of Al Jazeera on the global media scene. Numerous critics have written about its doubtful character and alleged its association with al Qaeda. Some of the individuals connected with the media who were reported to have been arrested were alleged to have membership of/relations with al Qaeda. Bin Laden is also alleged to be using this TV channel for the propagation of his manifesto.²³ From a neutral stand point, this charge about Al Jazeera of taking sides with a certain group is countered by those who severely criticise the Western media's connivance with their respective governments. Still, the coverage given by Al Jazeera to al Qaeda is phenomenal. Almost all their statements come from the "breaking news" of this TV channel. It gives extensive coverage to al Qaeda which is not limited to the statements of its leaders, their detailed interviews; occasional threats given to the world; debates on a range of issues related to it; but at times appears to be playing the role of its spokesperson. This charge which the Channel denies has been an issue which has long been debated. But the point here is that the terrorists not only understand the importance of the media and know how to exploit it for their projection but also have an impressive way to counter their supposed foes in the media.

Secondly, the terrorists know the trick of remaining ever present in prime time morning and evening news bulletins of the leading TV channels in the west. In this matter they are mindful of the time difference between the east and the west and the hour of the prime time news bulletins of the leading Western media. The breaking of news or the statements are so carefully timed that it becomes very difficult for a TV channel not to cover it. Even when their hideouts are attacked by the Western forces, they seem to take the lead in registering their response.

Thirdly, they have come to understand that remaining aloof to the media was not in their interest. In the past they preferred to remain behind the proverbial "seven curtains." For this they even abandoned their traditional covert style of working. Now, they are there right in front of our eyes largely thanks to 24/7 TV channels. They manage to invite leading journalists at secret places for conducting their interviews which are later broadcast. The very notion of impartiality and objectivity and freedom is skilfully exploited by them. Interviews of Osama Bin Laden with Al Jazeera and with Pakistani

²³ P. Soriano, "Terrorism and the Mass Media."

journalist Hamid Mir broadcast in the recent past are prime example of this success.²⁴

Fourthly, they want to have sympathisers in the journalist community. They would not hesitate to buy such support with money. They give donations to smaller media organizations and try to win friends with their workers. In case of large media organizations it is alleged that the terrorists pay the journalists and are not shy to increase their payments to get favourable outcomes.²⁵

Fifthly, since they need that the number of their sympathisers should continue to grow, the terrorist groups seek to use the media to frame agendas and mobilize opinion. They even take natural disasters as an opportunity. During the 2005 earthquake and recent floods in 2010 in Pakistan, where the disaster was too big for any government or state agency to handle, the smaller units of Taliban and other Jihadist organisations like the Jamat ud Dawa and Hizb ul Mujahideen stepped forward to actively take part in the relief and rehabilitation activities. In such a situation the victims regarded them as a blessing in disguise. The media also treated them in a positive manner and they were able to gain sympathisers in the media specifically and new recruits in general.²⁶

Conclusion

It is largely accepted in the media-terrorism debate that there exists a relationship between the two. However, we may not have a consensus on the nature of this relationship. Though the media derive a number of benefits from this relationship in terms of increased viewership and revenues, it may still be considered that they either are obliged to give coverage to terrorist activities under their official obligations or are being used unwittingly. However, it is realised by many that terrorists do understand the working pattern, journalistic obligations, the market driving forces, ethical considerations and underlying dynamics of the media – of which TV is a leading part. They carefully and skilfully plan their strategies and tactics to gain maximum benefits. Many say that they are against the existing world order dominated by the west and try to change that to their liking. And for this they use different communication channels as vital weapons in their armoury. “Although the same channels of communication are available to those

²⁴ Interview is still available on You Tube.

²⁵ J. Burke, *Al-Qaeda: Casting a Shadow of Terror* (London: IB Tauris, 2003).

²⁶ V. Wheeler, “Taliban Flood Misery,” *Sun*, August 31, 2010, http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/campaigns/our_boys/3117957/Pakistan-faces-a-new-terror-peril.html (accessed September 3, 2010).

involved in protecting the existing order, they seldom manipulate them so skilfully as their opponents.”²⁷■

²⁷ F. Kitson, *Low Intensity Operations: Subversion, Insurgency, Peace-keeping* (London: Faber and Faber, 1971), 17.