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Media and FAMU Students' Perception of Terrorism

Amanda Jean-Mary

Florida A&M University, jeanmary.amanda8@gmail.com

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by

Amanda Jean-Mary

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Abstract

This study was conducted to examine the influence of the mass media on students' perception of terrorism using the situational theory of publics (Al-Ameri, 2013). With the ease and speed of technology nowadays, it is easy to be influenced by the knowledge provided by the media, even more so for Millennials in the case of the speedy growth of social networks. However, with the ease of providing information in this evolution of technology, it is also easy for terrorist groups to formulate and disseminate their message. This study explores Florida A&M University students and their perception of terrorism based on the influence of mass media. The findings of this study support the hypothesis of the situational theory of publics and contributes to the understanding of the influence of the media on the general population, specifically in regards to terrorism while focusing on a smaller group of the general population, in this case majority African-American as Florida A&M University is a historically black university and therefore hosts a majority population of black students. The findings of this study and future studies on the same subject may be used to better educate students as well as inform communication professionals about better methods of raising awareness on the matter of terrorism.

Chapter One

Introduction

Since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the matter of preemptive movements against terrorism in the United States has become a fixed political issue within the national policy (Al-Ameri, 2013). Due to the attacks of 2001 and with the growth of information technology, the United States has increased in its development of how it monitors terrorist groups, domestically and internationally (Al-Ameri, 2013). Recent terrorist attacks such as the 2015 San Bernardino attack having revived social paranoia of terrorism within the nation (Al-Ameri, 2013). Continuous updates regarding domestic and international attacks have become crucial in developing the perception of the people of the United States about the issue, especially with the upcoming 2016 elections, in regards to how the next presidential candidate will modify government preemptive strategies against violent groups.

Due to the importance of the future of global relations depending largely on how information about terrorism is acquired and perceived by its youth who will determine future policies and courses of action, the media plays a key role in how they report and explain terrorist attacks and the government policies concerning the issues (Al-Ameri, 2013). It is therefore important to understand the role the media plays in shaping the perception of terrorism to millennials. Although researchers and social critics have wondered whether millennials are less interested in news, the American Press Institute shows that 69% of millennials get the news daily, 45% of percent following five or more hard news topics.

In 2016, it is much easier to access the news as there are a variety of outlets for information including television, print, radio, and, the most prevalent and fastest way, the internet. Millennials are a generation of the internet where accessing the news is much easier and

faster through social networks and apps on their phones and tablets. With the evolution in technology, it is so much faster since the time of 9/11 for the media to share information. Within seconds, reports of devastation and disaster are available in hand and with that, attitudes and responses to violence by people in various societies are influenced and shaped by the amount and type of coverage. However, due to the ease and speed at which information can be accessed and the various types of information people, specifically college students, are willing to consume may cause the perception of terrorism to be not quite as vivid and influential in causing social paranoia.

The purpose of this study is to understand the perception of terrorism by students of a historically black university. For communication professionals, it is important to understand the critical role of media influence on youths' perceptions of terrorism. This influence also shapes how a society understands terrorism and their support of policies and strategies related to the issue.

Situational Theory on Place in Understanding Terrorism

According to the situational theory of publics provided by Mamdoh Suleiman Al-Ameri conducting similar research with students of the University of South Florida, "communication behaviors of publics can be best understood by measuring how members of publics perceive situations in which they are affected" (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 148). Therefore, this study attempts to apply the situational theory of publics to better understand how FAMU students perceive terrorism and the media's influence in these perceptions. The study will attempt to gather the data by answering the following question: how does the media influence FAMU students' perceptions of terrorism?

In addition, the study tests the situational theory of publics by positing that recognizing the problem, involvement, and the goal of terrorism and the influence of media are related to how college students seek or understand terrorism. The next chapter reviews the literature of situational theory of publics, media influence and the problem of terrorism.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

How Much News Do College Students Consume?

In attempting to research how the media will affect the perceptions of terrorism in college students, specifically students at FAMU, this chapter explains how much news is consumed by said students. The progression of technology has made it possible for the news to be consumed at your fingertips. Handheld devices and laptops has become one of the avenues in which the news to viewed or read, leading away from traditional print newspaper and magazine as premiere forms of news consumption.

Many college students are considered millennials so it is therefore plausible to research college students in terms of the millennial generation and find out if college students read the news, how, and why. According to research conducted from the St. John Fisher College, millennials will usually read the news when they have a connection or where it may concern them (Rosenberry, 2008). For instance, paying attention to news of crime occurring in the community because it concerns their safety. The news may also appeal to millennials if others are recommending it and contextualizing the information on social networks (American Press Institute, 2015).

This brings up the fact that more millennials are getting their news from social networks instead of actual online news sites. According to a study made by the American Press Institute, 69% of millennials are getting the news daily. However, their exposure to the news may in fact be due to the social networks themselves promoting the news regularly. When speaking more specifically about college students, we can assume and studies have proven that journalism

students are more in tuned to the news than students of other majors, however, we also know that upperclassmen will also be more concerned with the news than underclassmen (Clark, 2010).

Although we know that millennials are getting their news daily, even through social networks, we must also understand that some news may be by incidental exposure as some sites may cause consumers to stumble upon news that they may read based on interest in connection to that site (Yadamsuren and Erdelez, 2010). This concept, which is part of a research theory about incidental exposure to online news, touches on the idea of exposure and how the news is read when sites may provide news either in context with the content or for breaking news that may concern the consumer (Yadamsuren and Erdelez, 2010). This concept can be connected to the situational theory of publics in the next section by explaining how the media gets its message across and how strategic that process may be.

Based on this information, we factor in how much the media affects college students, FAMU students in this case, and we understand the amount of exposure the students have which can affect their perceptions of what is happening in the world and ultimately affect their perceptions of terrorism.

The Situational Theory of Publics

The situational theory of publics, STP, was developed by Professor James E. Grunig, who posited that “publics can be identified and classified in the context to which they are aware of the problem and the extent to which they do something about the problem” (Wikipedia, 2016). The theory is mostly understood and carried out by public relations professionals, where they understand that the theory explains that professionals, when they anticipate the communication behaviors of their stakeholders, can understand how to divide their target publics and be strategic

in how they communicate with them (International Communication Association, 2008).

However, you can also use this concept to explain how the media communicates with their respective audiences, knowing that there are different media outlets who target different audiences.

The theory can further be dissected into two variables that affect how people may get and receive information. The theory is based on active and passive communication in which active communication refers to individuals who go out of their way to find information for themselves in contrast to those who may only process information when it is presented to them by chance (Lester, 2016). Research conducted that supports this information finds that even in different cultural settings, the variables may vary but not change because there are different types of people in regards to how they get their information (Moghan, Lim Kwok wei, and Sriramesh, 2005).

This information helps one to understand how information is disseminated and then how much information people may process. For those who actively seek out information, the way they process that information may be different than someone whose attention must be brought to the same information and formally presented. This helps to understand how and why perceptions of the same information may differ.

Terrorism and the Media, Its Effect on the Public

The concept of terrorism was a relatively new term, especially in America until the events of September 11, therefore, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, FBI, provided a universal, all-encompassing definition: “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” (Lowry, Ph.D., and Lating, Ph.D., 2002). Due to the increased connection of people to other nations through social networks, you must also include international terrorism as the media is also influential in affecting the perceptions of terrorism elsewhere in terms of raising awareness that terrorism may also be possible here for the FAMU students.

The FBI also provides this separate definition for international terrorism: “International terrorism is the unlawful use of force or violence committed by a group or individual, who has some connection to a foreign power or whose activities transcend national boundaries, against persons or property to intimidate or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof, in furtherance of political or social objectives” (Lowry, Ph.D., and Lating, Ph.D., 2002). It is understood that although terrorism may occur in countries other than the United States, the coverage of the events is all part of the perception of terrorism itself. There will always be a fear that terrorism will become rampant in the United States as well (The United States are mentioned since the focus of the research is FAMU students located in Florida).

With these definitions, we understand what terrorism is and how it affects FAMU students and the world at large. The waves of globalization, whereby so much emphasis is placed on intensity and extensity of trans-border activities makes terrorism a global issue, as the whole world becomes transparent and interconnected (Arowolo, 2013). With that, we must understand how terrorism is covered and as a result how that coverage may affect how the world, and in this case FAMU students, perceive terrorism. Are they worried about being on the receiving end of an attack? Is there anyone who is particularly anxious about the implications of terrorism? Do they feel safe partaking in activities of daily living?

The media has a large responsibility as a source of information of what occurs in the world and how it affects daily living. Every major act of terrorism results in news coverage. Continents, countries, policies, movements, religions, and so on, that often get at best spotty international news coverage, will instantly receive a great deal of attention by the news media around the world, whenever terrorists stage a major act of political violence (Nacos, 2006). The Internet especially is essential and in most cases the primary form of mass devastation in broadcasting extravagant terror spectacles due to the easy access for most of the world to view. We do have to realize that in a way the media benefits from acts of terrorism as reports increase newspaper sales and television views for their programs (Frey, 2007).

However, coverage may affect perceptions when the media will allow the broadcast of terrorist events to appear continuously. The terrorist attacks of September 11 were claimed to be “the most documented event in history” in a May 2002 HBO film “In Memoriam” which itself provided a collage of images assembled from professional news crews, documentary filmmakers, and amateur videographers and photographers who in some cases risked their lives to document the event (Kellner, 2003).

And even with continuous coverage, misinformation or facts left out leave misperceptions about terrorism and the reality of its effect on the world. For example, a study found that American media did not explain the Iraq War well enough to the public and therefore lead to the misperception that weapons of mass destruction are found in Iraq, Saddam had significant ties to Al Qaeda, and that world opinion was mostly in support of the war (Dimitrova, Kaid, Williams, and Trammell, 2005). In that case, the public will have different perceptions of who are terrorist groups and what their objectives may be.

The perceptions created by a frenzy of repetitive horrific scenes and war propaganda may have a negative impact, especially on children (Hamblen, Ph.D, 2016). With the media, terrorism can go different ways. One being the resources for terrorist groups to manipulate audiences, creating support for violence and terror throughout the public. Or the constant coverage of terrorism, for lack of news worthy material or to increase television views, can cause panic and anxiety in the public, especially when there is a lack of information and communication of prevention measures and rebuttal strategies to combat and prevent attacks and disband violent groups (Baran, 2008). A study researching the effect of the media coverage of terrorism on the public showed that 44% of the adults reported one or more substantial stress symptoms, 47% were worried about their own safety or the safety of loved ones (Somer, Ruvio, Soref, and Sever, 2005).

In any case, we understand that most media coverage, especially during September 11 were based on television news and newspaper coverage. Millennials are more apt to keep up with terrorist coverage online, social networks may be instrumental in providing instant updates and mapping trends of terrorism. Through social media, with its capacity to share and connect wider audiences, misperceptions are not as rampant because people are able to share information, especially when talking about culture and religion, breaking those barriers and making it possible for people to share ideas (Okolie-Osemene and Okoh, 2015). This could in fact encourage ways of curbing proliferation of terrorist organizations.

FAMU Students' Perception of Terrorism

To understand how terrorism might be perceived and how the media has a hand in how people will perceive it, we must understand what terrorism is, how the situational theory fits into

how the media portrays and shares information and possibly swaying its audiences into a certain point of view and how millennials, who are essentially the FAMU students used in this study, get their news.

The purpose of this study is to learn how terrorism is perceived by students of a historically black university, Florida A&M University. We understand from the introduction that it is important to understand the role the media has in influencing the perception of youth in policies such as terrorism as they are the ones who will shape policies concerning terrorism in the future. From the research, we understand how the media can change attitudes about terrorism but also how social networks, which is the primary way in which millennials get their news, affects their perceptions of terrorism, especially compared to those of the past who may have misperceptions and anxiety concerning terrorism.

While millennials may not be exempt from the anxiety of terrorism created by the media, they may have different ideals and perspectives on violent groups and have access to trends and information concerning terrorist groups. They also now have access to different cultures and religion information so as not to connect terrorist groups to specific cultures and religions but as individual violent groups. Therefore, we can now understand why individual FAMU students may have the responses that they have by learning their primary way of getting news and what they think of terrorism, in terms of education and perceptions.

Note: perceptions of terrorism may have changed as millennials are the generation to grow up with the steady progression of technology and social networks and therefore, a difference in how they got their news from September 11 up until now may have changed their perception of terrorism from then until now.

The next chapter describes the method used to gather data. To answer the research question and test the proposed hypothesis, a random sampled survey of FAMU students was conducted.

Chapter Three

Methodology

This chapter outlines the procedure used to gather data for this study and the methods used to analyze the data collected. This chapter also describes the instrumentation used to collect the data, which will be descriptive and analytical. This study attempts to examine the influence the media has on students from a historically black university on their perception of terrorism and formulating societal issues, relying on the knowledge about terrorism, opinions from experts, and literature on the subject. The analysis of the survey data will provide data derived from the opinion survey of FAMU students. A survey was conducted during the fall semester 2016 at FAMU Tallahassee campus. The purpose of the survey was to test variables of the situational theory of publics, to measure how students get news, specifically regarding terrorism, and to measure respondent perception.

A survey consisting of question aiming to ascertain FAMU students' perception of terrorism and to create a profile of how said students receive the news was given to random participants on the FAMU campus. The survey consisted of an open-ended question about the meaning of terrorism; 19 statements measuring the respondent's perceptions of problem recognition, constraint, recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, media influence, and information seeking; 6 statements measuring the respondents' communication behavioral intention towards using different sources to gather information about terrorism; 7 statements measuring the respondents' communication behavioral intention towards seeking information about terrorism; 8 statements measuring respondents' assessment of source trustworthy; and 7 demographic items (Al-Ameri, 2013). These items were categorized into six different sections.

Chapter Four

Results

The purpose of this study was to understand the perception of terrorism by students of a historically black university. Essentially, the study would: (1) Examine media influence on shaping youths', specifically those attending a Historically Black College or University, perception of terrorism and; (2) Explore the extent to which said youths' perception of terrorism is actively and influentially affected by different types of media. For communication professionals, it is important to understand the critical role of media influence on youths' perceptions of terrorism. This influence also shapes how a society understands terrorism and their support of policies and strategies related to the issue (Al-Ameri, 2013).

The survey was distributed to Florida A&M University students on the Tallahassee campus. The students were assured that the contents were voluntary and would remain confidential. The survey began by asking the students three demographic questions: education level, race, and political position (Table 1). The sample consisted of 50 students; the majority were African-American/Black (92%). The students were asked about what they would label themselves as in terms of political position consisting of Conservative, Conservative/Independent, Independent, Liberal/Independent, and Liberal. Of the 50 students who participated in the survey, two students considered themselves conservative (4%), five students considered themselves conservative/independent (10%), 18 students considered themselves independent (36%), 10 students considered themselves liberal/independent (20%), and 15 students considered themselves liberal (30%).

The level of education of the students was examined by asking the current level of education. Many the students were juniors (38%), followed by sophomores (32%), seniors (16%), and then freshmen (14%).

Table 1: Frequency and Percent of the Sample by Demographic Variables		
Variables	Frequency	Percent
Academic Level		
Freshman	7	14%
Sophomore	16	32%
Junior	19	38%
Senior	8	16%
Graduate		
Other		
Race		
White/Caucasian		
Black/African American	46	92%
Hispanic/Latino		
American Indian		
Asian		
Other	1	2%
White and Latino		
Black and Latino	1	2%
Mixed	2	4%
Political Position		
Conservative	2	4%
Conservative/Independent	5	10%
Independent	18	36%
Independent/Liberal	10	20%
Liberal	15	30%

After the demographic questions were asked, the survey continued to the questions pertaining to a section about the student's personal beliefs about terrorism and then the second section about five different types of media, film, print (newspaper/magazine), the Internet, radio, and television, and the frequency to which the student uses these forms of media to seek

information. To understand how the students perceived terrorism and see which types of media influenced them the most, Table 2 provides percentages of responses into three answers: agreement, disagreement, or neither for the personal belief section. With this you understand what is the majority view on different sections of the beliefs on terrorism. The survey variables of the personal beliefs section include problem recognition, constraint recognition, involvement recognition, goal compatibility, media influence, and information seeking.

Although the media section was a scale on survey, the percentages are measured based on infrequency (1-3) and frequency (4-7). Table 3 contains results based on both sections, providing information on what the students' perception of terrorism is and which media platform influences them the most.

Table 2: Percentage Deviation of the Sample by Terrorism Perception and Information Seeking							
Variables	Agree	Disagree	Neutral	A Perce nt	D Perce nt	N Perce nt	Type of Question
Personal Beliefs About Terrorism							
Q1	38	2	10	76%	4%	20%	Problem Recognition
Q2	2	41	7	4%	82%	14%	Problem Recognition
Q3	25	6	19	50%	12%	38%	Information Seeking
Q4	26	11	13	52%	22%	26%	Constraint Recognition
Q5	13	16	21	26%	32%	42%	Goal Compatibility
Q6	26	14	10	52%	28%	20%	Media Influence
Q7	27	12	11	54%	24%	22%	Problem Recognition
Q8	9	29	12	18%	58%	24%	Information Seeking

Q9	5	34	11	10%	68%	22%	Information Seeking
Q10	17	14	19	34%	28%	38%	Involvement Recognition
Q11	6	15	29	12%	30%	58%	Goal Compatibility
Q12	30	11	9	60%	22%	18%	Media Influence
Q13	10	24	16	20%	48%	32%	Media Influence
Q14	10	24	16	20%	48%	32%	Constraint Recognition
Q15	40	1	9	80%	2%	18%	Involvement Recognition
Percentages							
Frequent Infrequent Forms to Seek Information							
Film	29	21	58%	42%			
Newspaper/Magazine	20	30	40%	60%			
Internet	45	5	90%	10%			
Radio	20	30	40%	60%			
Television	44	6	88%	12%			
	63.20%	36.80%					

Based on Table 3, we can come to some conclusions about the perceptions of terrorism for the students who participated in the different categories. Problem Recognition consisted of three questions and based on the answers of those three questions, it seems that although many FAMU students believe they should pay more attention to terrorism and that it does affect their lives but, it is not a serious problem. Constraint recognition consisted of two questions and based on the responses, FAMU students believe that although they believe their opinions matter about terrorism, they personally cannot do anything to make a difference in solving the problem. Involvement Recognition consisted of two questions and based on responses, FAMU students

have strong beliefs about terrorism and think something must be done to solve the problem. Goal Compatibility consisted of two questions and based on the responses, FAMU students do not agree with the way the government is solving the problem. Media influence consisted of three questions and based on the responses, FAMU students agreed that the media influenced their perception of the problem of terrorism and they gained their knowledge of terrorism from the media but most of them do not believe what the media tells them about the problem. And then in regards to information seeking which consisted of three questions, FAMU students do not actively seek out information about terrorism.

The next section is the discussion chapter, which provides an overview of the research conducted with its significance and limitations as well as the significance of the study on the situational theory of publics. Finally, the conclusion section includes directions for future research on the subject.

Chapter Five

Discussion/Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to understand the perception of terrorism by students of a historically black university. Essentially, the study would: (1) Examine media influence on shaping youths', specifically those attending a Historically Black College or University, perception of terrorism and; (2) Explore the extent to which said youths' perception of terrorism is actively and influentially affected by different types of media. For communication professionals, it is important to understand the critical role of media influence on youths' perceptions of terrorism. This influence also shapes how a society understands terrorism and their support of policies and strategies related to the issue (Al-Ameri, 2013).

In this study, we focused on a small population by concentrating on students from a Historically Black University, Florida A&M University (FAMU) in Tallahassee, Florida. The study found that students at FAMU believe that they should pay more attention to terrorism and that it does affect their lives but, it is not a serious problem. The students believe that their opinions matter about terrorism which would be congruent with the situational theory of publics but according to the answers to the survey most of the students believe they personally cannot do anything to make a difference in solving the problem which goes against the theory which states that an individual's ability to recognize the value of a situation and the desire and ability to remove obstacles in that situation will lead to greater involvement in that situation (Al-Ameri, 2013).

However, this might be a factor in which publics may react differently in the extent in which they participate in active behavior to resolve situations which can be based on how they react when facing similar problems, recognize the problems, and organize to resolve them (Al-

Ameri, 2013). In regards to how student gain their information about terrorism, although they did not believe anything the media reported, the media still influenced their perception about the problem of terrorism. When terrorist attacks become news, students will depend on media sources for more information since it has already been researched for them.

A review of literature before the survey began found various studies on the role and function of the media, specifically when it comes to Millennials, the basis of the study. Studies have shown that the media, including social networks, can change attitudes about terrorism even more so millennials due to social networks which in turn affects their perceptions of terrorism, especially compared to those of the past who may have misperceptions and anxiety concerning terrorism.

Therefore, while millennials may not be exempt from the anxiety of terrorism created by the media, they may have different ideals and perspectives on violent groups, having access to trends and information concerning terrorist groups. They also now have access to different cultures and religion information so as not to connect terrorist groups to specific cultures and religions but as individual violent groups.

Conclusion

The findings of this study support the ideals behind the situational theory of publics proposed by J.E. Grunig. Previous research finds that's the level of involvement will increase information seeking, but has less of an effect on information processing. The results of this study have shown that the level of involvement had more of an effect on how people process information. When it came to the intent to process information, constraint recognition had the strongest effect on the students. Although the students had very strong opinions on the matter of

terrorism, they were not compelled to do anything about it nor did they believe they could personally help to solve the problem.

Overall, the situational theory of public is a powerful tool in predicting communication behavior and should continue to be pursued and studied by scholars for use in strategic communication practices. The results of the survey indicated that the media does influence students, effecting their intention to process information but it does not affect the intention to seek out information. Professional communicators can use these findings to understand how to communicate to this audience about whatever situation they might have, most particularly in situations like terrorism. By using the situational theory of publics, communications practitioners can effectively segment their audiences and determine what kind of messages and mediums would be best to reach them.

Limitations

The sample of this study was only drawn from one area on the campus of FAMU, near the music department. Although the study contained students of different levels of education and different majors, the use of one location could have limited the generalizability of the study. The study was also only conducted on 50 students which could therefore limit the probability for differing mindsets and perspectives among the participants.

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