

# ATTITUDES AND REACTIONS TO MEDIA COVERAGE OF TERRORIST ACTS

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*The present study examined attitudes and reactions of individuals towards media coverage of terrorist acts. Shortly after a series of severe terrorist attacks had taken place in Israel, 534 people were asked to fill out a questionnaire that assessed their attitudes and reactions to the media's coverage of these acts as well as a questionnaire that examined their information-seeking style. The results suggested that although a considerable proportion of media consumers preferred detailed coverage of terrorist acts, when the coverage included horrifying details, the readiness for receiving detailed information declined. In addition, the results indicated that exposure to such coverage was associated with the development of symptoms similar to those of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. Finally, individual differences in both attitudes and reactions towards media coverage were found as a function of participants' gender, political orientation, and information-seeking style. The theoretical and empirical implications of these findings are discussed. © 2003 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.*

Over the last three decades, international terrorism has come to occupy a prominent position on the public agenda of many countries. According to data from the U.S. State Department, a total of approximately 10,000 terrorist acts transpired worldwide in the period between 1977 and 1996, with an average of about 480 acts annually, and never dropping below 300 per year (U.S. Department of State, 1997). The Middle East has been a center stage of terrorist activity and statistics show large numbers of

We would like to thank the Canadian Beth Tsedec Congregation for supporting this project.  
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casualties in this region compared to other regions in the world. For example, of 553 people killed in the years 1996–1997, 43% were from the Middle East (U.S. Department of State, 1998). Data for the same period, taken from Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, show that 121 Israelis were killed in terrorist attacks—a figure that represents about 52% of the casualties in the Middle East, and about 23% of the total number worldwide (Israel Foreign Ministry, 1998).

The world has come to witness a new type of terrorism characterized by a blatant orientation towards the media and designed to attract its attention. The ultimate target of this terrorism is the media consumer rather than the victim, as aptly described by Schmid and de Graaf: "The victim is the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience" (1982, p.14). This development has prompted the term, *theater of terror*, which underscores the fact that the terrorists choreograph a "show of terrorism" whose objective is to be as spectacular and dramatic as possible to capture the media's attention (e.g., Jenkins, 1975; Rubin & Friedland, 1986; Weimann, 1990).

## THE TWO-WAY RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE MEDIA AND TERRORISM

Many authors have pointed out at the interdependence, or even symbiotic relations, between the media and terrorism (e.g., Alali & Eke, 1991; Farnen, 1990; Jackson, 1990; Kingston, 1995; Nacos, 1994). Such mutuality was keenly conveyed by Ted Koppel, a well-known broadcast news anchorman:

Without television, terrorism becomes rather like the philosopher's hypothetical tree falling in the forest: no one hears it fall and therefore it has no reason for being. And television, without terrorism, while not deprived of all interesting things in the world, is nonetheless deprived of one of the most interesting. (S. Anzovin, 1986, p.97)

Each side, it would seem, uses the other to achieve its objectives. Terrorists exploit the media to achieve political recognition, present their cause, transmit messages and demands to the government, and induce fear in the general public (cf. Hacker, 1980; Kramer, 1990; Paletz & Boiney, 1992). Sometimes terrorists use the media to manipulate anti-terrorist fighters, to communicate with other terrorists, or as a way of getting critical information (e.g., movement of security forces or details about hostages) in real-time.

The media exploits terrorism for attaining one of its major objectives of providing the public with up-to-date news. Since terrorist acts are by their very nature unexpected, dramatic, exceptionally violent, and extremely distressing, they are perceived by the media as sought-after news items deserving of extensive coverage (see also Galtung & Ruge, 1970; Hoge, 1982; Schmid, 1992a).

Inspection of terrorist acts and their associated media coverage in different countries reveals many examples of the high motivation of each side in this dyad to achieve its objectives by exploiting the other side. Thus, terrorists often pose an unconditional demand for the presence of news reporters or for immediate access to broadcasting time; indeed, in 1981, this escalated into the execution of a hostage by the Italian Red Brigades when their demand for airtime was refused. By the same token, reporters

make a “mad rush” to the site of a terrorist act and persistently attempt to obtain interviews with terrorists or their victims and to provide a maximum number of close-ups or video recordings of terrifying and violent scenes.

### *The Coverage Dilemma*

One of the dilemmas that preoccupies the public and professionals alike concerns the extent to which the public should be exposed to details of terrorist acts. More specifically, there is a question whether the media should uncover all the details of a terrorist act including extremely violent and frightening ones, or whether it should provide selective coverage or even ignore the terrorist act (such a public debate had taken place in Israel after a series of fatal bus explosions in 1996, during which the public was exposed to extremely cruel visual materials by the media).

The central argument in favor of detailed coverage is that of the public’s *right to know*—in a democracy, neither the government nor the media have the right to prevent public access to news material. Defenders of selective coverage retort that horrifying scenes are bound to sow panic and distress, cause demoralization, and even harm mental health (see Schmid, 1992b).

Only a number of surveys have assessed the public’s attitude to this dilemma and its preferences with regard to the type of media coverage. In a survey conducted in 1977 by the American Institute for Public Opinion (in de Boer, 1979), participants were asked to indicate to which of the following two attitudes they felt closer: “The news media place too much emphasis on reporting of terrorism” or “Such reporting is necessary to keep people fully informed.” The survey outcomes suggested that about 50% of the respondents felt that the public should be fully informed, 47% believed that terrorism was overemphasized, and 3% had no opinion on the subject.

In another survey, conducted by Times Mirror in 1986, a considerable part of the respondents felt that newspaper coverage of terror acts benefits the public more than it causes harm. More specifically, almost two thirds of the respondents felt that the media coverage of terrorism aids “the public interest,” while only 23% held that it harms the public interest. The remaining 12% had no opinion on the issue. Finally, in another relevant survey, Grossman (1986) found that public support for the U.S. news media was stronger during the very massive and sensational coverage of the hijacking of TWA Flight 847 in 1985, than during a much quieter period 2 months later. Schmid (1992b) commented that “Apparently, the gripping social drama co-produced by the terrorists and the networks has a high appeal for an overwhelming majority of the public” (p.109).

The picture sketched by these surveys is, in our opinion, a partial one only. Although these surveys take into consideration the public’s *attitudes* toward the type of preferred coverage, they lack information about its *behavior* during media coverage. For example, they do not provide information on the frequency of watching TV during and/or after the act, or about the proportion of people preferring to receive information via a communication channel that transmits vivid and rich material (e.g., TV) compared to a channel which offers less vivid and varied information (e.g., radio). Moreover, the cited surveys did not examine the impact of the media coverage of terrorist acts on the public’s mental health. Finally, these surveys did not investigate the possibility that people who have different attitudes and different coping styles may react differently to threatening information.

### *The Present Study*

The present study was conducted in Israel in early 1998, after a long period during which the Israeli public had been exposed to an extremely severe series of terrorist attacks (for a list of terrorist incidents in which Israeli citizens were killed or injured from January 1, 1996 to January 1, 1998, see the Appendix). These acts received full media coverage, which often included horrifying scenes. This situation allowed us to examine the above-raised questions that previous surveys had omitted.

First, in addition to investigating the public's attitudes and opinions concerning the media's treatment of the acts, we evaluated the participants' behavior during media coverage of the act as reported by them (since the study was conducted shortly after the above-mentioned series of terrorist attacks, people's memory of how they had behaved was still vivid). Second, we examined the influence of extensive reporting of terrorist acts on the reported stress reactions of the public. More specifically, we examined a number of symptoms in our participants typical of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), e.g., recurrent recollections of the terrorist act, or nightmares associated with it. Finally, we assessed the effects of three variables that we believed were likely to affect the degree to which individuals would seek threatening information and the mode of their response following exposure to it, namely, gender, political attitude (leftist vs. rightist), and information-seeking style (monitoring vs. blunting). The latter terms were introduced by Miller (1979), who defined high monitors (or low blunners) as those individuals who tend to scan for threatening cues when confronted with threat, and low monitors (or high blunners) as those who tend to avoid or be distracted from threat-relevant information.

Our first hypothesis was that people would prefer relatively detailed and immediate coverage of a terrorist act rather than limited or delayed information. We further predicted that such preference would be manifested both in the public's attitudes toward this subject and in their reported behavior. This hypothesis was based on theoretical work indicating that in many cases people seek information about threatening issues to reduce uncertainty and to increase their sense of control (e.g., Berlyne, 1960; Keinan & Friedland, 1996; Thompson, 1981), as well as on the empirical finding that even in situations in which people face an uncontrollable threat, two thirds prefer to receive information about the threat and only one third opt for complete distraction (Miller, 1979; 1987).

Our second hypothesis was that extensive media exposure to terrorist acts would exert an adverse effect on the public's stress reactions. This hypothesis was based on the notion that people exposed to media reportage of terrorism, often become "secondary victims" of violence through identification with its original victims (Schmid, 1992b). These secondary victims accordingly experience fear and frustration and are likely to develop PTSD-like symptoms. In addition to possibly causing increased anxiety among media viewers via identification with the victims, recurrent exposure to extreme manifestations of violence per se is likely to promote the development of intense stress reactions. Accordingly, the mere sight of blood or dismembered bodies could possibly bring on PTSD-like symptoms.

Our third hypothesis was that there would be specific differences in the extent to which individuals chose to be exposed to threatening information as well as in their reactions to this type of information. More specifically, we predicted that compared to men, women would prefer less exposure to threatening coverage and would react more extremely. This prediction was based on findings indicating that women who

experienced threat reported higher levels of tension and anxiety than men (e.g., Ben-Zur & Zeidner, 1991; Shore, Tatum, & Vollmer, 1986; Wilkinson, 1983).

As to the political attitude variable, we predicted that people with a rightist orientation would prefer more extensive coverage than leftists. This prediction was based on the selective exposure theory which holds that people prefer to seek, or to pay attention to, information that supports their political attitudes (Klapper, 1960; Sweeney & Gruber, 1984). Since a terrorist attack carried out by Arabs is not congruent with the attitudes and perceptions of leftists in Israel but confirms and reinforces those of rightists, we expected that the latter would tend to seek more information about the act.<sup>1</sup>

Finally, with regard to the information-seeking style variable, we predicted that in comparison to blunters, monitors would opt for more extensive coverage due to their need to seek threatening information under stress conditions. We further expected that due to their greater exposure to threatening information, monitors would report more PTSD symptoms than blunters.

## METHOD

### *Participants*

Five hundred thirty four Israeli residents (51% men and 49% women) participated in the study. The mean age was 30.1 years (range: 16–91), and the mean years of education was 13.9 ( $SD = 2.67$ ). Seventy-two percent of the respondents were born in Israel, while the rest had immigrated to Israel from various countries. Nine percent of the participants defined themselves as orthodox Jews, 17% as observant, and 74% as secular. About 6% of the sample reported that they had been involved in or had witnessed a terrorist incident in the past. The sample did not include Israeli Arabs, or individuals whose proficiency in the Hebrew language was low.

### *Instruments*

*Attitudes and Reactions Questionnaire (ARQ).* This questionnaire was specifically constructed for the present study, and included three types of items:

1. Items requiring the participant to report on his/her *attitudes* towards the media coverage of a terrorist act, e.g., “In your opinion, which of the two following positions should carry more weight in relation to media coverage of a terrorist act?: (a) the argument stressing the public’s right to know (including painful and difficult details), or (b) the argument stressing the importance of protecting public’s mental health and their morale (by restricting the coverage of especially difficult and painful details).”
2. Items requiring the participant to report on his/her media related *behavior* following a terrorist act, e.g., “After a terrorist attack, do you usually: (a) watch

<sup>1</sup>War and peace issues related to the Israeli–Arab conflict divide the Israeli nation into leftists (doves) and rightists (hawks). Leftists believe that a prerequisite for security is peace, to be achieved through partial or full withdrawal from the territories occupied after the 1967 war. This view assumes that Arabs are serious partners for peaceful coexistence and should be trusted. The right objects to the withdrawal from any of the occupied territories since it has little faith in the Arabs’ readiness to live in coexistence (Raviv, Raviv, Sadeh, & Silberstein, 1998).

as much TV as you can; (b) watch occasionally; (c) avoid watching TV as much as possible."

3. Items that examined the influence of TV coverage of terrorist acts on respondents or their children, e.g., "After watching TV coverage of a terrorist attack have you experienced any of the following phenomena: (a) recurrent recollections of the terrorist act; (b) nightmares associated with the event; (c) attempts to stop thoughts or feelings about the event; (d) difficulty falling asleep or disturbed sleep; (e) irritability and outbreaks of anger; (f) concentration problems."

At the end of the questionnaire, respondents were asked to provide personal data on their age, gender, years of education, and political attitude. (In regard to the latter variable, the participants were asked to indicate whether they incline towards the left or the right in their political outlook).

*Miller Behavioral Style Scale (MBSS).* The MBSS was developed by Miller (1987) to investigate the information-seeking style of individuals who had been exposed to threat, and was translated into Hebrew by Shiloh, Ben-Sinai, and Keinan (1999). The questionnaire measures self-reported preferences for information and distraction in four hypothetical stress situations (e.g., the threat of being fired from work). Each question is followed by eight "Yes" or "No" items, four reflecting monitoring style (e.g., "I would talk to my fellow workers to see if they knew anything about the supervisor's evaluation of me") and four reflecting blunting style ("I would push all thoughts of being laid off out of my mind"). Monitoring and blunting scores are obtained by summing up the number of relevant items.

There is evidence from both laboratory and field studies that the MBSS has high validity (e.g., Miller, 1987; 1991; Miller, Brody & Summerton, 1988; Shiloh et al., 1999). Thus, for example, it was found that when individuals were exposed to a physical aversive event, high monitors and low blunners chose to seek out information about its nature and onset, while low monitors and high blunners chose to distract themselves (Miller, 1987). Test-retest reliabilities are reported in the 0.8 range, and internal consistency coefficients (Cronbach's  $\alpha$ ) are in the 0.7 range (Miller, 1987; 1991). In the present study, Cronbach's  $\alpha$  was 0.66 and 0.61 for the monitoring and blunting scales, respectively. Pearson's correlation between the two scales was found to be  $-.10$ .

### ***Procedure***

Surveyors were sent to various localities in different parts of the country. To increase the extent to which the sample was representative, the different localities had been chosen a priori according to two criteria that had been used in previous national surveys (e.g., Hobfoll, Lomerman, Eyal, Bridges, & Tsemach, 1989): (a) kind of settlements (large cities, county central cities, villages, etc.); and (b) geographic area (northern, central, and southern Israel). The surveyors randomly addressed people in public places, at work, and at institutions of higher education, asking them to participate in a survey conducted by Tel Aviv University on the subject of "People's opinions and reactions towards the media's coverage of terrorist acts." They were also informed that the survey was anonymous and that their answers would be used for research purposes only. Those who agreed to participate (more than 70% of those approached), were

asked to fill out two questionnaires as honestly and as precisely as they could. While the questionnaire was being filled out, the surveyor stood close by to answer any questions and to ensure that the respondent filled out the questionnaire alone.

## RESULTS

### *The Public's Attitude Toward Coverage of Terrorist Acts*

To test our first hypothesis regarding the participants' positions on coverage of terror acts, we examined the responses to three questions relevant to this subject. Table 1 presents the percentage of the respondents to each question.

As shown in Table 1, the majority of the respondents believed that a terrorist act should receive extended and immediate coverage, while only a minority felt that occasional periodic news flashes or postponement of news reportage to the next day would be preferable. Chi Square test for goodness of fit showed that the distribution of the participants' responses was significantly different from a random distribution,  $\chi^2(3) = 324.9$ ,  $p < .0001$ , and that the percentage of respondents in the two categories who expressed preference for extensive and immediate coverage was higher than the percentage of respondents who expressed preference for a relatively limited or delayed coverage,  $\chi^2(1) = 169.8$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Moreover, most of the respondents believed that in this context "the public's right to know" is more important than "protecting public mental health," even when the information includes painful and difficult material,  $\chi^2(1) = 15.03$ ;  $p < .001$ . Finally, in comparison to the number of people who feel that TV coverage of terror acts was too detailed, a slightly larger number of respondents claimed that television coverage of terror acts in Israel was reasonable and not exag-

**Table 1. Distribution of Responses to Questions Related to Attitudes Towards Media Coverage of Terror Acts**

Question	% Respondents
1. In your opinion, how should TV cover terrorist acts?	
(a) Interrupt all the scheduled broadcasting and report continuously on the incident.	23%
(b) Provide extended broadcasts but otherwise continue according to the regular programming schedule.	55.3%
(c) Broadcast a special short news bulletin about the incident and repeat it every few hours.	21.2%
(d) Avoid any description of the act on the day of the incident itself and report it briefly the next day.	0.6%
2. In your opinion, which of the two following positions should carry more weight in relation to media coverage of a terrorist act?	
(a) The argument stressing the public's right to know (including painful and difficult details).	58.4%
(b) The argument stressing the importance of protecting public's mental health and their morale (by restricting the coverage of especially difficult and painful details).	41.6%
3. In your opinion, following terrorist acts, the Israeli TV broadcasts:	
(a) included too many details and pictures of the act and its outcomes.	46.8%
(b) offered a fairly reasonable and balanced portrayal of the situation.	49.8%
(c) included too few details and pictures of the act and its outcomes.	3.4%



gerated or lacking details related to the incident. However, the difference between the latter two categories did not attain a statistical significance,  $\chi^2(1) = 2.17$ , n.s.

*The Public's Behavior During Media Coverage of a Terrorist Act*

To further test our first hypothesis, we also examined participants' reports about their media-related behavior following a terrorist act. Table 2 shows the distribution of responses to two questions related to the behavior of viewers and listeners.

With regard to the first question concerning the frequency of watching TV after a terrorist attack, it was found that the frequency of responses was significantly different from a random distribution,  $\chi^2(2) = 179.9$ ,  $p < .0001$ . Likewise, it was found that the percentage of respondents who reported that they watched TV after a terrorist attack was significantly higher than the percentage of respondents who reported that they avoided watching TV,  $\chi^2(1) = 393.3$ ,  $p < .0001$ . The frequency of respondents' answers to the second question was also significantly different from a random distribution,  $\chi^2(3) = 605.8$ ,  $p < .0001$ . More specifically, it was found that the majority preferred receiving information related to incidents to which they have been exposed via communication channels that transmit vivid and rich material (TV), rather than channels offering less vivid and varied information, such as radio or newspaper,  $\chi^2(1) = 93.24$ ,  $p < .01$ .

*The Impact of Media Coverage on the Public's Mental Health*

To test our second hypothesis regarding the influence of media coverage of terror incidents on the stress reactions of the public, we examined the distribution of responses to two questions. Table 3 shows the distribution of these respondents as related to the reactions of young and mature viewers.

As shown in the table, a considerable portion of the respondents reported experiencing PTSD-like symptoms. Particularly frequent were recurrent recollections of the terrorist act, attempts to avoid thoughts or feelings associated with it, and angry outbursts. Further reflected in the table is the fact that parents reported that their children also showed adverse reactions to TV coverage. These included preoccupation

*Table 2. Distribution of Responses to Questions Related to the Behavior of the Viewing Public*

Question	% Respondents
1. After a terrorist attack, do you usually:	
(a) Watch as much TV as you can.	53.1%
(b) Watch occasionally.	39.9%
(c) Avoid watching TV as much as possible.	7.0%
2. After a terrorist act, did you prefer to receive information by:	
(a) Watching TV.	71.5%
(b) Listening to the radio.	18.2%
(c) Reading the newspaper.	6.5%
(d) None of the above.	3.8%



**Table 3. Distribution of Responses to Questions Related to Stress Reactions Following the Viewing of Media Coverage of Terrorist Incidents**

<i>Question</i>	<i>% Respondents</i>
1. After watching TV coverage of a terrorist attack, have you experienced any of the following phenomena:	
(a) Recurrent recollections concerning the terrorist act.	43.1%
(b) Nightmares associated with the event.	7.5%
(c) Attempts to block out thoughts and/or feelings associated with the event.	31.4%
(d) Difficulties in falling asleep or other sleep disturbances.	10.9%
(e) Irritability and outbursts of anger.	26.3%
(f) Concentration problems.	23.4%
2. For parents only: After watching TV coverage of a terrorist attack, did your children show any of the following phenomena?	
(a) Difficulty falling asleep or other sleep disturbances.	20.5%
(b) Nightmares associated with the event.	9.8%
(c) Preoccupation with the event in speech, play, drawings, etc.	52.4%
(d) Concentration problems.	15.0%
(e) Irritability, anger outbreaks, signs of violence.	12.1%

with the act as manifested in speech, play or drawings, sleep disturbances, and difficulties in concentration.

### ***Individual Differences in Attitudes and Reactions Towards Media Coverage***

To test our third hypothesis, we examined responses on the ARQ in relation to participants' gender, political orientation, and information-seeking style. Significant gender differences were found with regard to the attitudes toward media coverage of terror incidents. A higher percentage of women than men responded that they thought that Israeli TV coverage of terrorist attacks included too many details and pictures of the incident and its outcome,  $\chi^2(2) = 8.82, p < .05$ . Furthermore, women preferred, more than men, to receive information about terrorist acts via the radio, while men preferred, more than women, to watch news reports about terrorist acts on TV,  $\chi^2(3) = 18.84, p < .01$ . Significant gender differences were also found on the scales assessing PTSD-like experiences. Table 4 presents these differences.

As shown in Table 4, women, more than men, reported experiencing PTSD-related symptoms, including recurrent recollections concerning the terrorist act, attempts

**Table 4. Gender Differences in Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder Symptoms**

	<i>Women</i>	<i>Men</i>	$\chi^2$	<i>P</i> <
Recurrent recollections concerning the terrorist act	51.4%	34.3%	16.2	.001
Attempts to block out thoughts and/or feelings associated with the event	40.5%	22.3%	21.89	.001
Difficulties in falling asleep or other sleep disturbances	18.1%	4.5%	24.12	.001
Concentration problems	30.2%	12.1%	13.47	.01

to block out thoughts and/or feelings associated with the events, sleep disturbances, and concentration problems. Significant gender difference was also found when we added up all the reported symptoms to a total score (henceforth total symptoms score),  $t(517) = 4.94, p < .001$ .

In addition to gender differences found with respect to self-reported symptoms, women reported more frequently than men that their children experienced various symptoms. These gender differences were found in participants' responses regarding their children's sleep disturbances,  $\chi^2(1) = 5.15, p < .05$ ; preoccupation with the act in talk, play, drawing, etc.,  $\chi^2(1) = 10.68, p < .001$ ; and irritability and angry outbursts,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.65, p < .01$ .

To examine our prediction regarding the role of political orientation, we compared the responses of left- and right-wingers on the ARQ. As compared to left-wingers, right-wingers tended to watch more TV subsequent to a terrorist incident,  $\chi^2(2) = 8.01, p < .05$ , and they were less likely to think that TV reportage following a terrorist attack included "too many details and pictures of the event,"  $\chi^2(2) = 15.77, p < .001$ . With regard to self-reported responses to media coverage of the terrorist act, right-wingers were more likely to report on irritability and angry outbursts than left-wingers (44% vs. 16%),  $\chi^2(1) = 43.5, p < .001$ . In addition, among the rightists, there were more reports on children's sleep disturbances than among leftists (29% vs. 14%),  $\chi^2(1) = 5.22, p < .05$ , and on children's nightmares (17% vs. 7%),  $\chi^2(1) = 3.82, p < .05$ .

To examine the role of individual information-seeking styles, we first assessed the correlation between the monitoring and blunting scores. The low correlation found between these two scores ( $r = -.10$ ), suggests that the two styles represent two orthogonal continuums, each ranging from low to high, rather than one continuum with each of the styles located at opposite poles. Accordingly, we analyzed the results separately for each style.

It was found that the higher the respondents' scores on monitoring, the more they tended to watch terrorist act coverage on TV, ( $r = -.15, p < .001$ ), the more they preferred extended and continuous TV coverage of the event ( $r = -.18, p < .001$ ), and the more they preferred to watch TV rather than rely on other media ( $r = -.17, p < .001$ ).

In addition, we found significant correlation between the level of monitoring and the number of reports of recurrent recollection of the terrorist act ( $r = .16, p < .001$ ), sleep disturbances ( $r = .15, p < .001$ ), irritability and angry outbursts ( $r = .13, p < .01$ ), and the total symptoms score ( $r = .19, p < .001$ ).

Regarding the blunting scale, it was found that the higher the respondents' scores on blunting, the more they preferred not being exposed to media coverage following a terrorist incident ( $r = .14, p < .01$ ). In addition, higher scores on the blunting scale were associated with such post-exposure symptoms as nightmares ( $r = .14, p < .05$ ) and recurrent recollection of the event ( $r = .11, p < .05$ ), as well as with the total symptoms scores ( $r = .16, p < .001$ ).

## DISCUSSION

Prior to discussing our results, it should be pointed out that certain constraints of the present research, such as the need to fill out complex questionnaires in Hebrew, had influenced the composition of the sample so that it did not represent relatively recent immigrants who were not fluent in Hebrew, and Israeli Arabs. However, we believe

that the results of the research reflect attitudes and reactions of a large and pivotal portion of the Israeli public that includes Hebrew-speaking Jews who have not recently immigrated to the country.

Our first hypothesis was that respondents would demonstrate a preference for immediate and detailed coverage of terrorist acts over limited or delayed coverage. Most of the results were consistent with this hypothesis. However, the results obtained with regard to one of the questions did not support the hypothesis. Thus, almost half of the participants thought that the Israeli TV broadcasts too many details and pictures of the terrorist act and its outcomes while only 3% of the respondents thought that the broadcasts included too few details and pictures of the act and its outcomes. These findings suggest that the extent to which media consumers are interested in receiving information on terrorist acts depends on the dosage of the horrifying details appearing in the media coverage. Coverage characterized by extensive exposure of the public to horrifying details, as was the case during the wave of attacks that took place while the present study was conducted, is likely to reduce the public's willingness to receive detailed information on terrorist acts. It is possible that the horrifying details arouse stress that, in turn, reduces individuals' motivation to seek more information on the act.

Our findings about participants' attitudes to media coverage during and/or after terrorist acts agree with those of earlier research on similar attitudes (de Boer, 1979; Times Mirror, 1986). However, the present study is the first to provide empirical evidence related to individuals' behavior following terrorist acts, although it should be emphasized that we did not assess actual behavior but rather behavior as reported by the participants.

Several explanations may clarify why a considerable proportion of the participants prefers to seek detailed and rich information about terrorist acts, even if this information is threatening and painful. The first explanation is based on the information seeking theory (Berlyne, 1960), which states that people seek information because they strive for certainty. Uncertainty causes conflict and increases arousal, which information helps to reduce. Another explanation can be derived from the safety signal theory (Seligman, 1968; Weiss, 1970), which holds that people seek information about aversive events because such information helps them to discriminate between dangerous and safe periods, thus producing a relaxing effect. The last explanation rests on the notion of personal control (Folkman, 1984; Keinan, 1994), according to which individuals tend to seek information to achieve a sense of control over the situation (cf. Taylor, 1983; Thompson, 1981).

Our second hypothesis predicted that extensive exposure to media coverage of terrorist acts would have adverse effects on respondents' mental health. This hypothesis was confirmed: A considerable portion of the respondents reported experiencing PTSD-like symptoms. These results are congruent with the findings of other studies in which it was demonstrated that media documentation of violence and brutality endangers feelings of fear and anxiety even among individuals who have not been directly exposed to such violence (Bandura, 1986; Slone, 2000).

Parents reported that their children also showed adverse reactions to TV coverage. Similar findings emerged when parents were asked about their children's reactions to TV coverage of the Gulf War (e.g., Cantor, Mares, & Oliver, 1993; Hoffner & Haefner, 1993). Cantor et al., for example, found that 45% of all the parents reported that TV coverage of the war frightened their children. Among the parents who had noticed distress in their children, 18% reported that their children experienced sleep disturbances and difficulties while 8% reported that their children had

nightmares. It is, of course, difficult to assess the accuracy and objectivity of parents' reports. The extent to which parents observed anxiety symptoms in their children could possibly be related to the level of anxiety they themselves experienced. The latter possibility receives some empirical support in our study from the significant correlation found between total symptoms scores of parents and those of their children ( $r = .39$ ,  $p < .001$ ). An alternative interpretation would be that parents' responses serve as a cue for children how to appraise stressful situations, and therefore children who witness stress reactions in their parents are more likely to show negative reactions themselves.

Since we did not collect data about the severity of the symptoms and their duration, it is difficult to make a clinical diagnosis of PTSD according to DSM-IV criteria. However, our results suggest that a considerable proportion of the participants experienced some stress responses characteristic of this disorder. In our opinion, such reactions stem mainly from identification with the victims of violence. It seems that identification of this kind is directly related to the degree of similarity between the media consumer and the victim (see also Schmid, 1992b). The greater the number of shared characteristics (i.e., nationality, religion, age, gender, or region inhabited), the greater the chances of media consumers identifying with the victim, and the greater their stress reactions. The fact that Israel is a small, densely populated country, with a Jewish majority where people are likely to know one another, increases, in our opinion, the prospects of identification with the victim and development of stress reactions. It is worth noting though, that even in the absence of identification with the victim(s), TV viewers are likely to develop significant stress reactions merely as a result of exposure to media reports of brutal and violent events.

Our third hypothesis was that there would be individual differences in the extent to which people chose to expose themselves to threatening information in the media, and in their responses to this information. Conspicuous differences emerged upon examination of the gender variable. Women exhibited higher sensitivity to the presented information than men and complained that it included too much threatening material. Women also had a greater tendency to choose communication channels whose coverage is less varied and rich. Finally, women reported experiencing more stress reactions and PTSD-related symptoms after exposure to a terrorist act coverage. These findings are consistent with those of a substantial number of studies suggesting that women report more intense anxiety responses than men when exposed to threatening situations (e.g., Ben-Zur & Zeidner, 1988; Wilkinson, 1983; Zuckerman-Bareli, 1982). Thus, for example, Ben-Zur and Zeidner (1991) found that women reported more stress and physical symptoms (e.g., headaches and breathing difficulties) during missile attacks in the Gulf War.

One possible reason for gender differences in anxiety levels and coping with stressors may stem from the different socialization processes of the two genders (cf. Ptacek, Ronald, & Zanas, 1992). In particular, different processes of imitation and identification, as well as different social expectations, cause women to respond with more emotionality than men. However, it is possible that many of the research findings on gender differences in reported anxiety levels may be due to women's greater openness and readiness to admit weakness, rather than reflect real gender differences in anxiety level (Tavris, 1993).

Our hypothesis regarding the role of an individual's political attitude was also confirmed. We found that compared to left-wingers, right-wingers tended to watch

more TV following terrorist attacks, and to complain more about too little information being broadcast concerning these acts. We believe that this finding is related to the extent of congruence between the essence of the news being reported and people's political orientation: While the opinions and attitudes of the right-wingers in Israel are confirmed by the occurrence of terrorist acts, those of leftists are undermined. This may explain why right-wingers tend to seek extensive exposure to the information about terrorist acts. These results are consistent with those of Sweeney and Gruber (1984) who reported that U.S. voters preferred attitude-congruent information and avoided incongruent information.

It could be expected that since rightists are more exposed to the coverage of terrorist acts, they would also report experiencing more stress reactions than leftists. However, the only outcome pointing in this direction was that rightists reported more angry outbursts than leftists. It is possible that for rightists, watching broadcast information congruent with their political orientation had the effect of lowering the stress caused by watching the difficult pictures.

Finally, our hypothesis was also substantially confirmed when we examined the respondents' information-seeking style. We found that the higher individuals scored on monitoring, the more they watched TV, and the more they preferred rich and varied information. Conversely, the higher individuals scored on blunting, the more they preferred to limit their exposure to the coverage of terrorist acts. Interestingly, we found that the higher the respondents scored on either of these two variables, the more they reported having PTSD-related symptoms. While the results regarding monitors can be explained by the notion that increasing exposure to terrorist act coverage is likely to be related to more PTSD-like symptoms, the findings regarding blunterners are difficult to explain, and there may be different underlying mechanisms at play. Whatever the mechanisms involved, the fact that both high monitors and high blunterners reported more PTSD-like symptoms, indicates that the two styles are not opposite poles of a single continuum, which is in line with the low correlation we obtained between the two scales.

In summary, the present results suggest that although a considerable proportion of media consumers prefer an extensive coverage of terrorist acts, when the coverage includes horrifying and threatening details, the readiness to receive detailed information declines. In addition, our findings indicate that exposure to such coverage might take its toll in terms of adverse effects on consumers' mental health. We believe that these findings have important implications for the manner in which the media should cover terrorist acts. Thus, while it is important that the media provide factual information to fulfill the needs and wishes of a considerable part of its audience, it is also important that it make an effort to provide a discreet and restrained coverage devoid of extremely violent details (see also Alexander & Latter, 1990; Delli Carpini & Williams, 1984; Ferguson, 1999).

Repeated broadcasting of distressing reports, close-ups of bodies or body parts, interviews with victims in extreme states of despair, or allotting air time to terrorists who threaten the audience, are only examples of what the media includes in its coverage of terrorist acts. To limit these phenomena, which have a potential of harming the public's mental health, the media should formulate a set of ethical codes or clearly defined guidelines to ensure restrained and cautious coverage of terrorist incidents. (see Czerniejewski, 1977; Gallimore, 1991 for various alternative code formulations and guidelines). Furthermore, it would be appropriate to drill reporters and

photographers on how to report incidents of this sort while keeping to the spirit of these formulated codes or guidelines.

To discern the generality of the findings of the present study, future research should also be carried out in other countries plagued by terrorism. Furthermore, it would be interesting to examine whether repeated exposure to media depiction of terror acts increases the stress reaction of the viewing public, or whether it causes desensitization or habituation.

## Appendix

### *Terrorist Incidents in Which Israeli Citizens Were Killed or Injured: January 1, 1996 to January 1, 1998*

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>	<i>Incident</i>	<i>Casualties</i>
January 11, 1996	Road block near Kibbutz Sufa	Explosive device	2 injured
January 20, 1996	Hebron	Stabbing	1 injured
February 1, 1996	Haifa	Murder	1 dead
February 25, 1996	Ashkelon Junction	Suicide bomber	1 dead, 32 injured
February 25, 1996	Jerusalem	Suicide bomber on a bus	25 dead, 56 injured
February 26, 1996	Jerusalem	Car bomb	1 dead, 22 injured
March 3, 1996	Jerusalem	Suicide bomber on a bus	19 dead
March 4, 1996	Tel Aviv	Suicide bomber	13 dead, 163 injured
April 7, 1996	Hebron-Jerusalem road	Molotov cocktail thrown at a bus	5 injured
June 12, 1996	Upper Galilee	Mortar attack	5 injured
May 1, 1996	Hebron	Stabbing	1 injured
May 13, 1996	Beit El junction	Drive-by shooting	1 dead, 3 injured
June 9, 1996	Kiryat Malachi	Drive-by shooting	2 dead, 1 injured
June 16, 1996	Kfar Bidiya	Shooting attack	1 dead
June 26, 1996	Kibbutz Na'aran	Ambush shooting	3 dead, 2 injured
July 26, 1996	Kiryat Gat-Beit Shemesh road	Drive-by shooting	2 dead, 1 injured
September 9, 1996	Tz'rifin junction	Kidnap and murder	1 dead
December 11, 1996	Dolev-Beit El road	Drive-by shooting	2 dead, 5 injured
January 9, 1997	Tel Aviv	Pipe bomb	15 injured
January 14, 1997	Jerusalem	Murder	1 dead
March 11, 1997	Southern Hebron	Stabbing	1 injured
March 21, 1997	Tel Aviv cafe	Suicide bomber	3 dead, 48 injured
April 2, 1997	Road near Jilazun	Molotov cocktail thrown at a bus	12 injured
April 13, 1997	Allenby Bridge	Shooting attack	3 injured
April 25, 1997	Wadi Kelt	Murder	2 dead
July 1, 1997	Rishon Lezion	Murder	1 dead
July 9, 1997	Nablus	Explosive device	2 injured
July 22, 1997	Old Jaffa	Stabbing	10 injured
July 30, 1997	Jerusalem, Mahane Yehuda market	2 suicide bombers	14 dead, 172 injured
August 14, 1997	Jerusalem	Kidnapping and murder	1 dead
September 4, 1997	Jerusalem	3 suicide bombers	5 dead, 191 injured
November 20, 1997	Jerusalem, The Old City	Shooting attack	1 dead, 1 injured
January 1, 1998	Alei Zahav	Drive-by shooting	1 injured



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