Praise for
packaging terrorism

“Susan Moeller trains her scholarly eye on the role of the media in our understanding of modern-day terrorism. What she has produced is a valuable, important, and timely study—essential reading for all of us.”

**Marvin Kalb**, Edward R. Murrow Professor Emeritus at Harvard University

“This is a sober and timely analysis of the toxic mix of politics, terrorism, and the media since 9/11. It lays bare the price paid by the West, but also points to a better way forward.”

**Richard Sambrook**, Director, BBC Global News

“Packaging Terrorism is an urgently needed meditation on how journalism has too often failed to ask the hard questions about the ‘War on Terror’ and become instead a weapon of propaganda. Susan Moeller’s timely book is a must-read for all concerned journalists and citizens.”

**John Owen**, Professor of International Journalism, City University, London

“An outstanding in-depth analysis of one of the most difficult and controversial issues in modern journalism. Moeller critically dissects the roles of government and media, laying bare the spin, manipulation of language, and vested interests that all too often distort the true story and deceive the public.”

**Stephen Jukes**, Dean of the Media School at Bournemouth University; former Global Head of News at Reuters

“If you need a thoughtful, thorough, and challenging survey of recent media treatment of terrorism, then this is it. Susan Moeller is a clever and realistic analyst of how journalism treats this vital subject. She has both an insider’s understanding of the media and the intelligence and research to mount a critical attack on those who misrepresent the true nature of political violence.”

**Charlie Beckett**, London School of Economics; Director, POLIS

“Susan Moeller has exploded a bomb, splintering the ‘War on Terror.’ This thoroughly researched book provides an X-ray image of the US and British media as they have grappled with reporting the news of terrorism and war. It is a stinging rebuke of this largely profit-driven profession and also a primer for students of journalism on how to cover war and violence to make us better informed citizens in a democracy.”

**Nayan Chanda**, Yale Center for the Study of Globalization
Communication in the Public Interest

Communication has never been more important than in our current cultural moment. From the growing monopolization of global media, to human rights issues, health campaigns, and issues of free speech and society, communication has real political and ethical consequences. The books in this ICA Wiley-Blackwell Communication in the Public Interest series are accessible and definitive treatments of subjects central to understanding communication and its intersections to the wider world; they will widen understanding, encourage discussion, and illuminate the importance of communicating about issues that affect people’s lives.

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Karen Ross and Stephen Coleman: Them and Us: The Media and the Public
Michael Delli Carpini: Beyond the Ivory Tower: Communication and the Public Interest
packaging terrorism
coopeting the news for politics and profit

susann d. moeller
This book is dedicated to my father
and is for Stephen,
the love of my life, forever and always
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contents</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>viii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduction: A Very Simple Idea</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I    What Is Terrorism?</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II   How Is Terrorism Covered?</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III  What Are the Images of Terror?</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV   Conclusion: Packaging Terrorism</td>
<td>179</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: ICMPA Studies of Media Coverage of Terrorism Incidents</td>
<td>189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>195</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>230</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Abbreviations

ANC  African National Congress
AP   Associated Press
CENTCOM  United States Central Command
CISSM  Center for International and Security Studies at Maryland
DHS   US Department of Homeland Security
DU    depleted uranium
FDNY  New York Fire Department
FEMA  Federal Emergency Management Agency
GSAVE global struggle against violent extremism
GWOT  global war on terror
IAEA  International Atomic Energy Agency
ICMPA International Center for Media and the Public Agenda
LBC   Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation
MSF   Médecins Sans Frontières (also known in English as “Doctors Without Borders”)
NCTC  National Counterterrorism Center
NGO   non-governmental organizations
NPR   National Public Radio
NSA   National Security Agency
PIPA  Program on International Policy
PRI   Public Radio International
VNR   video news release
WMD   weapons of mass destruction
Packaging Terrorism is the account of very simple idea. The idea is this: that it’s not the acts of terrorism that most matter in the post-9/11 world, it’s what we are told to think about the acts of terrorism. Politicians tell us what to think. The media tell us what to think. Even terrorists tell us what to think. They all want to attract our attention. They all have reasons for wanting us to think in a certain way. They all want to tell us why an act of terrorism matters. They all have agendas. They all are packaging terrorism for our consumption. We are the audience for all those disparate actors.
I

what is terrorism?
President George W. Bush’s “War on Terror” publicly began on September 11, 2001. We think of wars beginning with a cataclysmic event—everything up to that moment could have gone either way until “the moment” occurs that makes a war inevitable. It is that clap of thunder, we believe, that coalesces events into something that we recognize as “war.”

The designation that a series of events has become a “war” wonderfully concentrates public and official support behind a situation that had not previously generated unanimity. Henry Cabot Lodge and Congressional Republicans needed the sinking of the Maine, Woodrow Wilson needed the Lusitania, FDR needed Pearl Harbor.

Bush needed 9/11. The astonishing loss of life that single September morning validated his declaration of war against the Al Qaeda terrorists. But his “War on Terror” encompassed more than the fight against Osama bin Laden and his minions and in many ways it began well before 9/11. Bush declared war against disparate enemies; in his estimation the “War on Terror” was not only properly fought in Afghanistan once the Taliban refused to give up Al Qaeda leaders, but included battles of all kinds—most notably against Saddam Hussein.

In quick order, with everyone watching (but few willing to criticize), the September 11-initiated war became a war to create the new moral order articulated by President Bush and his Vulcans, as author James Mann compellingly defined the administration’s foreign policy team of Donald Rumsfeld, Dick Cheney, Colin Powell, Richard Armitage, Condoleezza Rice, and Paul Wolfowitz.

The “War on Terror” was more than a response to the terrorists attacks of September 11. The 9/11 cataclysm gave President Bush the opportunity to realize all the Vulcans’ unilateralist, interventionist foreign policy goals, by uniting them into one comprehensive, Ur-policy that connected the 9/11 terrorists, weapons of mass destruction (WMD), Iraq, and other “Axis of Evil” countries. As Vice President Dick Cheney declared within days of September 11, “the administration intended to work ‘the dark side.’” What that meant, writer Philip Gourevitch chillingly explained in his book Standard Operating Procedure, was that “the vice president’s legal counsel, David Addington, presided over the production of a series of secret memorandums, which argued against several centuries of American executive practice and constitutional jurisprudence by asserting that the president enjoyed essentially absolute power in wartime, including the authority to sanction torture.”1
Three months after the attacks on the World Trade Center, on the sixtieth anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Bush defined his public conception of terrorism before more than 8,000 sailors and Marines and their families assembled on the vast deck of the nuclear-powered aircraft carrier the USS Enterprise. “We’re fighting to protect ourselves and our children from violence and fear. We’re fighting for the security of our people and the success of liberty,” Bush said. “We’re fighting against men without conscience but full of ambition to remake the world in their own brutal images.”

Bush described these men as “a movement, an ideology that respects no boundary of nationality or decency. . . . They celebrate death, making a mission of murder and a sacrament of suicide.” And he compared the 9/11 “terrorists” to the enemies of World War II: “They have the same will to power, the same disdain for the individual, the same mad global ambitions. And they will be dealt with in just the same way. . . . Like all fascists, the terrorists cannot be appeased; they must be defeated.”

By linking terrorism to fascism, the terrorist threat to the one posed by World War II, President Bush was suggesting that this current evil was as heinous and as threatening as those two generations ago. And by naming not just the 9/11 conspirators, but a much larger conception of “the enemy” as “terrorists” and naming America’s cause as a “global war against terrorism,” rather than a more limited effort to eradicate Al Qaeda or to capture Osama bin Laden, President Bush attempted to forestall and even pre-empt media and public criticism. The Bush administration succeeded at labeling its foreign policy objectives as part of his “War on Terror,” thus making it very difficult for political opponents or media commentators to challenge the President without coming off as not only “soft” on defense, but as cavalier about the lost American lives of 9/11.

The media responded as directed—and as they always have at the start of a national crisis. They rallied in support of the President and appropriated his characterization of the situation. At the end of October 2001, the then CNN chairman Walter Isaacson wrote a memo to his staff members that ordered them to balance the broadcast images of civilian devastation in Afghanistan with reminders of the American lives lost at the World Trade Center and the Pentagon. Isaacson suggested language for his anchors, including: “The Pentagon has repeatedly stressed that it is trying to minimize civilian casualties in Afghanistan, even as the Taliban regime continues to harbor terrorists who are connected to the September 11 attacks that claimed thousands of innocent lives in the U.S.” It “seems perverse,” Isaacson said, “to focus too much on the casualties or hardship in Afghanistan.”

Isaacson was wrong. The American public deserved to know more about the casualties and hardship in Afghanistan. The public needed to know more about the meaning and the effect of the President co-opting 9/11 and co-opting the patriotic, broad-based interest in responding through a “War on Terror.” “In the wake of
What Is Terrorism?

9/11,” noted New York Times columnist Paul Krugman, “the Bush administration adopted fear-mongering as a political strategy. Instead of treating the attack as what it was—an atrocity committed by a fundamentally weak, though ruthless adversary—the administration portrayed America as a nation under threat from every direction.”

The reason Americans didn’t understand the politically motivated agenda has a lot to do with how they get their news. Public ignorance of what hid inside Bush’s Trojan horse—his “War on Terror”—had a lot to do with how the US media cover the presidency.

And those problems persist.

Duct tape and plastic. It all came down to that. If you just had enough of each you’d be safe.

In February 2003, before the start of the Iraq war, the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) raised the official national terrorism alert to the Code Orange (high risk) level, citing “recent intelligence reports.” DHS announced that Americans should prepare for another terrorist attack. To get ready, Americans needed to assemble a household disaster supply kit that included duct tape and plastic sheeting to be used to seal a room against radiological, chemical, and/or biological contaminants.

DHS insisted that its new home preparedness tips would increase Americans’ sense of security by giving them ways to keep their families safe.

But the “Duct and Cover” strategy, as it was called on radio talk shows and late-night comedy reports, struck many as the twenty-first-century equivalent of 1960s schoolchildren being asked to shelter from an atomic blast underneath the flimsy protection of their desks. The joke was in the general assessment that Americans could not begin to protect themselves—at least by hardware supplies—against most threats posed by terrorists.

Despite the run on the hardware stores, chemical and bioterrorism researchers noted that plastic sheeting and duct tape were unlikely to help in the case of a biological or chemical attack for two reasons. First, in order for a “safe room” to be effective, one has to be able to get to the room and seal it quickly. “You wouldn’t have time to get that in place,” said Dr. Monica Schoch-Spana, a senior fellow at the Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies, to the New York Times.
“You won’t be tipped off that something’s going to happen.” And second, even if doors, windows, and vents in a room were well sealed by duct tape and plastic before an attack, outside air would completely cycle through the room in a matter of hours.\(^\text{10}\)

Then there were terrorism experts who pointed out that almost all terrorist attacks had occurred outside the United States and were overwhelmingly characterized as conventional bombings.\(^\text{11}\)

A year and a half later those criticisms didn’t stop DHS and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) from relaunching a “revised, updated, and enhanced” version of their Are You Ready? pamphlet. Once again, almost three years after September 11, 2001, and a year after the coalition forces failed to find weapons of mass destruction in Iraq, the Are You Ready? guide instructed its readers what to do in a chemical attack: “Close doors and windows and turn off all ventilation, including furnaces, air conditioners, vents, and fans; Seek shelter in an internal room and take your disaster supplies kit; Seal the room with duct tape and plastic sheeting; Listen to your radio for instructions from authorities.”\(^\text{12}\)

Once again the guide served to remind Americans of the threat of a chemical, biological, or nuclear attack on the United States.\(^\text{13}\) Scientists continued to say that it was uncertain whether individuals could effectively protect themselves from a terror attack. The media noted that even if Americans survived the initial assault, there was no viable local or national policy in place for handling the days and weeks that would follow. And terrorism experts argued that Americans were more likely to be killed driving to the hardware store for duct tape than they were to be killed by a terrorist.

It was not lost on any of these groups that the release of the updated guide came in August 2004, in the midst of a tightly fought re-election campaign for the White House. Four days before the election, on October 29, 2004, the Arab television network Al Jazeera broadcast excerpts from a videotape of Osama bin Laden, and posted transcripts of the speech in Arabic and English on its website: “I am amazed at you,” Al Jazeera quoted bin Laden as saying. “Even though we are in the fourth year after the events of September 11th, Bush is still engaged in distortion, deception and hiding from you the real causes. And thus, the reasons are still there for a repeat of what occurred . . . the wise man doesn’t squander his security, wealth and children for the sake of the liar in the White House.”\(^\text{14}\)

That evening, after details of the speech were broadcast by American TV networks, Newsweek conducted an overnight poll that gave Bush 50 percent of the vote and his Democratic opponent Senator John Kerry 44 percent. A similar poll conducted a week earlier gave the President 48 percent and Kerry 46 percent of the vote.\(^\text{15}\)
What Is Terrorism?

According to Ron Suskind, a Pulitzer Prize-winning former reporter for the Wall Street Journal, CIA analysts determined that “bin Laden’s message was clearly designed to assist the President’s reelection.”

words and trojan horses

Let’s go back and start at the beginning with the word “terrorism.”

It’s one of those words, frequently used, by politicians and people on the street alike, that seem to be transparent in their meaning.


Right?

For most of us, most of the time, precise definitions of words don’t matter. The points that are being made are conversational, not legal. The ramifications of what is being said over coffee or written via email are casual, not cataclysmic.

But that carelessness about language can sometimes spill over into occasions and venues where precision does matter. A lot.

And sometimes others, usually political “others,” take advantage of our careless understanding and hide agendas within the meaning of words, like Trojan horses. They know that certain words have exact legal meanings that can trigger specific consequences. Governments are loath, for example, to employ the word “genocide” to a crisis because under the 1948 UN Convention on the Prevention and Punishment of the Crime of Genocide, nations are obligated to prevent and punish genocide wherever it occurs. So governments try to use phrases, such as “acts of genocide,” that have no legal meaning or obligation, but sound alike to an untrained ear. And governments know that certain other words, such as “terrorism,” for example, are imprecise and legally undefined. Those kinds of words can be used freely—with the only consequence being that they may trigger emotional responses in their audience. Just hearing the word “terrorism,” for instance, can cause listeners to be fearful, to be concerned for their own and others’ safety.

Sometimes speakers want their audiences to be scared.

The powerful set the terms of public debate. Media, including independent, privately owned media, usually confirm the political and social agenda of governments. Even when they challenge politicians’ spin on events, the media usually report on what the government says is important. The level of recognition that politicians give to an issue usually matches the level of coverage given to that issue by the media. When the White House suggests that Americans need to fear terrorists, then there are stories online, in print, and on TV about the terrorist threat.
That’s why we must think more about “terrorism,” the word, before we think about “terrorism,” the act. What do we know, or think we know, about “terrorism”? And is our own understanding of that word generally shared by others?

I used to think that words, like butterflies, could be pinned to a page. Sure, they normally flew around and one rarely stopped to define what a word meant in a passing conversation, but I imagined that important words, words that underlay relations between states, for example, were similarly understood by the players involved.

Then I was asked by a UN-sponsored agency to conduct a study of how three different groups of players—government, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the media—prioritized human rights. Human rights had become a familiar and essential component of both global communications and international diplomacy; it had found its way, for example, into both the media’s assessment of foreign affairs and governments’ justifications for their actions. So the agency that hired me wanted to know just how important different groups considered human rights to be. The agency assumed that I would find something like this: governments prioritize human rights fairly low—they are more concerned with the security and economic well-being of their citizens; NGOs prioritize human rights fairly high—they are most concerned with issues of fairness and equity especially of underclasses; and the media, well, they prioritize human rights somewhere in the middle—they are concerned with the most exciting story, and sometimes that happens to be a story about injustice or abuse.

The UN-sponsored agency’s assumptions, actually, were pretty much on target. But it turned out that that analysis was not the major take-away of the report that I wrote. What turned out to be the major conclusion was this: those who speak of human rights do not all prioritize human rights in the same manner, nor do they even define “human rights” in the same terms. When pressed, people in all the groups I spoke to could reference the last century and a half of international documents on the subject, but for the purposes of their jobs they had an operating definition of human rights often quite different than that found in the formal documents.

I had expected to find political and cultural distinctions. But I found something different. As I traveled to interview UN and NGO officials, government bureaucrats, policy advisors and former military officers, human rights lawyers, print, broadcast, and online journalists, editors and producers, I discovered that I could anticipate their operating definition of human rights by simply looking at their job titles. Here’s what they told me. Let me give you first their job title and then what they said:

- A former wire service reporter in Vietnam and then foreign correspondent for a major newspaper: “Human rights always in my mind means killing—war, torture, and killing.”
What Is Terrorism?

- A professor of international law at an Ivy League school: “Human rights are related to a particular set of political events—there can be systematic human rights violations of the 1980s Latin American type, and there can be mass human rights violations, such as war crimes like genocide.”
- The executive director of a major human rights organization: “Human rights is the language of duty and communitarianism; we have to move from moral outrage to global responsibility.”
- A senior official at the World Bank: “In the World Bank you have the situation where the bank is governed by its members, and many of them, of course, really don’t want the World Bank to dabble in human rights. The bank in theory is only supposed to make decisions based on economic criteria. So then you have a problem—human rights and money don’t mix.”
- The president of a major foundation: “Human rights has become a rhetoric by which people discuss their values—it may be just hypocrisy, but even so it is a discussion of values.”

You can see how each person’s job began to match up with how each one viewed human rights. Ultimately, the study led to two realizations: each of the different “cultures”—NGOs, governments, the media—was unaware that the others had a different professional interpretation of human rights. As a result, they each misunderstood the language and the underlying values used by the others. And even more importantly, the study documented that there were ramifications to “human rights” being variously defined. What one set of actors defined as “human rights” shaped the responses of those actors to a situation—and as those definitions were different, so were the responses different.

Since I conducted that study, the world has become more sophisticated. Michael Moore’s movies and Jon Stewart’s The Daily Show, for example, have made a practice of juxtaposing the comments of multiple speakers on the same subject to expose the various priorities and spin that would otherwise be overlooked. While the technique can be milked for political satire, there is genuine value in the exercise. Even when we think we understand someone else, we may not. We likely will have different reactions to the same issue that may in part be traceable to our different understanding of that issue. We may not understand even though we share a common language, if our definitions are different. We may not understand even though we share a common language, if that other is intentionally trying to deceive us.

“Everyone agrees terrorism is evil—at least when committed by the other side,” noted Professor Ronald Steel. “But it did not pop up yesterday. As a method of warfare it goes back to the dawn of civilization. It is new to Americans because nothing is truly real until it happens to us. To be sure, acts of terrorism against us must be dealt with and, if possible, prevented. But first we have to agree on what
it is and what inspires it. That means recognizing that terrorism is not an enemy in itself, as we thought of the Soviet Union during the cold war. “\textsuperscript{17}

Political Correctness: Can I Use the Word “Terrorist?”

Four days after the London Underground and bus bombings on July 7, 2005 the BBC re-edited its coverage of the attacks “to avoid labeling the perpetrators as ‘terrorists.’” Editors changed the word “terrorists” in archived website stories to the more neutral term “bombers,”\textsuperscript{18} and in ongoing coverage across BBC’s TV, radio, and online news, reporters and presenters began to use the word “bombers” to refer to the attackers.

Opinion exploded around the world. “Only a news organization such as BBC . . . could apply political correctness to terrorist mass murderers,” jeered one audience member from Switzerland. “The term is terrorist, not bomber. If you had a loved one that was killed or injured, you would probably understand,” mocked another from the United States. “Isn’t it time to develop some moral courage and use the word ‘terrorist’ for terrorists?” scorned a third from the UK.

One of the few positive responses was from an Arab man living in France: “Al-Jazeera are discussing your decision to not use ‘terrorist’ about the London bombings. I thank you for your choice, because it shows that you are an objective channel [and] a very civilised people . . .\textsuperscript{19}

Politicians who speak of terrorism rarely hesitate over their words, rarely suggest that there is debate over the terms or admit to any ambiguities about their use: Such-and-such a person is a terrorist. This event is terrorism. Only by comparing different statements by different speakers, by juxtaposing a statement made today with one made a year ago, or by going back in history and evaluating an event with some historical perspective, does it become apparent that political assessments differ and policies change.

But mainstream media have learned to be circumspect in their usage of the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist.”

Before 9/11, a number of media outlets had a policy in place about when their reporters could use the terms “terrorism” and “terrorist.” The Associated Press, according to its spokesman Jack Stokes, used a variety of terms and permitted the use of the word “terrorist” for those in non-governmental groups who carry out attacks on the civilian population.\textsuperscript{20} Other news organizations shunned the words in reference to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, aware of the politicization of the terms, but had no compunctions about using them in other circumstances.
What Is Terrorism?

The assistant managing editor, Roger Buoen, of the Minneapolis Star Tribune, for example, explained in a pre-9/11 statement to his paper’s ombudsman that:

Our practice is to stay away from characterizing the subjects of news articles but instead describe their actions, background and identity as fully as possible, allowing readers to come to their own judgments about individuals and organizations. In the case of the term “terrorist,” other words—“gunman,” “separatist” and “rebel,” for example—may be more precise and less likely to be viewed as judgmental. Because of that we often prefer these more specific words.

Six months after September 11, the Washington Post wrote formal guidelines into its internal style manual to govern the paper’s usage of the words “terrorist” and “terrorism.” The guidelines developed in the context of pressure from watchdog groups concerned about the paper’s coverage of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Post ombudsman Michael Getler cited the manual extensively in a column written a year and a half later. He quoted the guidelines:

The language we use should be chosen for its ability to inform readers. Terrorism and terrorist can be useful words, but they are labels. Like all labels, they do not convey much hard information. We should rely first on specific facts, not characterizations. Why refer to a “terrorist attack in Tel Aviv” when we can be more informative and precise: “The bombing of a disco frequented by teenagers in Tel Aviv,” for example. Our first obligation to readers is to tell them what happened, as precisely as possible.

When we use these labels, we should do so in ways that are not tendentious. For example, we should not resolve the argument over whether Hamas is a terrorist organization, or a political organization that condones violence, or something else, by slapping a label on Hamas. Instead, we should give readers facts and perhaps quotes from disputing parties about how best to characterize the organization.

The guidance also quotes Foreign Editor David Hoffman:

If the Israelis say they have assassinated a terrorist, we should not embrace their labeling automatically. We may say he was a suspected terrorist, or someone the Israelis considered a terrorist, or someone the Israelis say participated in a terrorist act. In other words, we should always look independently at whether the person has committed an act of terrorism, whether we know sufficient facts to say he has or has not and what the facts are. We should always strive to satisfy our own standards and not let others set standards for us.

Getler then noted: “That last sentence is central to the editing process here. The terrorist label is very powerful and the paper takes care in avoiding language that is preferred by one side or another in the Middle East.”
In the years following September 11, news outlets have struggled with how to use the “terrorist” label—some media are leery of using the word “terrorist” to describe the perpetrators of acts most members of the public wouldn’t hesitate to label as such. The 9/11 bombers, for example. A no-brainer for calling “terrorists,” right? Not for some media.

Washington Post media columnist Howard Kurtz reported on an internal memo from the British news agency Reuters written after the 9/11 attack by Stephen Jukes, the agency’s global head of news. “One man’s terrorist is another man’s freedom fighter,” said Jukes. “Reuters upholds the principle that we do not use the word terrorist.” As he told Kurtz, “To be frank, it adds little to call the attack on the World Trade Center a terrorist attack. . . . We’re there to tell the story. We’re not there to evaluate the moral case.”

In September 2001, when Jukes spoke to Kurtz, Jukes was pilloried by many, especially in the United States, for Reuters’ rejection of the term “terrorists” to identify the World Trade Center bombers. Howard Kurtz, for example, chided him for his (and Reuters’) “value-neutral approach.”

But, in hindsight, Reuters’ caution in applying the term was prescient; its caution is now reflected in many newsroom guidelines. Many prominent news outlets have come to agree with Jukes that not only should journalists not take moral positions on the stories they cover, but that using the label “terrorism” or “terrorist” is in effect doing so.

Newsrooms’ hesitation to apply the term “terrorism” across the board remains controversial to audiences, however. There are many who find that judgment too “politically correct” at best and cowardly, perhaps traitorous, at worst. In summer 2007, in response to hostile questions on its editor-in-chief’s blog, Sean Maguire, acting editor for politics and general news, made public the guidelines in Reuters’ internal handbook of standards.

Terrorism—We may refer without attribution to terrorism and counter-terrorism in general but do not refer to specific events as terrorism. Nor do we use the word terrorist without attribution to qualify specific individuals, groups or events. Terrorism and terrorist must be retained when quoting someone in direct speech. When quoting someone in indirect speech, care must be taken with sentence structure to ensure it is entirely clear that they are the source’s words and not a Reuters label. Terrorism and terrorist should not be used as single words in inverted commas (e.g. “terrorist”) or preceded by so-called (e.g. a so-called terrorist attack) since that can be taken to imply that
What Is Terrorism?

Reuters is making a value judgment. Use a fuller quote if necessary. Terror as in terror attack or terror cell should be avoided on stylistic grounds.

This is part of a wider and long-standing policy of avoiding the use of emotive terms. Reuters does not label or characterise the subjects of news stories. We aim to report objectively their actions, identity and background. We aim for a dispassionate use of language so that individuals, organisations and governments can make their own judgment on the basis of facts. Seek to use more specific terms like “bomber” or “bombing,” “hijacker” or “hijacking,” “attacker” or “attacks,” “gunman” or “gunmen” etc. It is particularly important not to make unattributed use of the words terrorism and terrorist in national and territorial conflicts and to avoid using those terms in indirect speech in such a context.24

Reuters, like the BBC, the CBC in Canada, and ABC in Australia, have all emphasized that digital media and satellite television have turned formerly local viewers into global ones—word choices are now scrutinized by a larger and more diverse audience.25 Following the criticism of the BBC’s coverage of the 2005 bombings, the BBC’s governors met that September to review its editorial guidelines on the use of the terms, and revisions were issued that December. Rather than retreat from the moderated use of “terrorism,” the new internal guidelines reinforced the value of using it sparingly:

Careful use of the word “terrorist” is essential if the BBC is to maintain its reputation for standards of accuracy and especially impartiality . . . that does not mean we should emasculate our reporting or otherwise avoid conveying the reality and horror of what has occurred; but we should consider the impact our use of language may have on our reputation for objective journalism amongst our many audiences . . . we must be careful not to give the impression that we have come to some kind of implicit—and unwarranted—value judgment.26

The New York Times, too, has repeatedly admitted that it tiptoes through the language minefield. “Nothing provokes as much rage as what many perceive to be The Times’s policy on the use of ‘terrorist,’ ‘terrorism’ and ‘terror.’ There is no policy, actually, but except in the context of Al Qaeda, or in direct quotations, these words, as explosive as what they describe, show up very rarely,” wrote former public editor Daniel Okrent in the lead to one of his columns. But in his estimation, he wrote, “given the word’s history as a virtual battle flag over the past several years, it would be tendentious for The Times to require constant use of it, as some of the paper’s critics are insisting. But there’s something uncomfortably fearful, and inevitably self-defeating, about struggling so hard to avoid it.”27

Terrorism or not terrorism, that is the question. Almost all of the media debate has been focused on whether journalists should use the term at all, not on the question of what it means when they do use it.
So What Is “Terrorism”? 15

“Where I use a word,” Humpty Dumpty said, in a rather scornful tone, “it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

“The question is,” said Alice, “whether you can make words mean so many different things.”

“The question is,” said Humpty Dumpty, “which is to be master—that’s all.”

To Be Master: Defining “Terrorism” to Support One’s Point of View

The American government has undertaken a public diplomacy effort to educate Americans and the world about its view of terrorism. As part of that effort, the website of the National Counterterrorism Center (NCTC), has put out an annual “Counterterrorism Calendar” in either a handy online interactive form or a downloadable Daily Planner version. Handsomely designed, each calendar marks dates “according to the Gregorian and Islamic calendar, and contains significant dates in terrorism history as well as dates that terrorists may believe are important when planning ‘commemoration-style’ attacks.”

In the Daily Planner version, page-length overviews of major groups on the State Department’s list of terrorist organizations and a page’s-worth of details on major terrorists (“Usama Bin Ladin” has an “Olive” complexion, weighs “160lbs/72kg” and “is left-handed”) are opposite a week’s-worth of dates. Each day has its own “This Day in History” set of facts; for example Monday, February 19, 2007, or 1 Safar, was not just President’s Day in the United States, but was the day in 2001 when the Terrorism Act in the UK was enacted and when Hamas official Mahmoud Madani was shot in the West Bank.

Occasional pages offer readers “technical” information. The page opposite the week of February 19, 2007, for instance, gave “Bomb Threat Stand-Off Distances”—a grid of how far one needs to evacuate in case of a bombing, from a pipe bomb to a semi-trailer bomb. Other pages that same year offered information on “Medical Symptoms of Exposure to Nerve Agents” or about the “Indicators of Suspicious Financial Activity” (the first indicator is “Account transactions that are inconsistent with past deposits or withdrawals”). Another page was on Ramadan: “Muslims are banned from fighting other Muslims during Ramadan, but they may engage
in combat with non-Muslims.” Several dates during Ramadan are mentioned as being “especially auspicious for a terrorist attack.” The CT Calendar, accessible from the Center’s homepage, is “oriented primarily to readers in the United States, but we hope that we have also made it useful for citizens of other countries.”

Despite the authority with which the CT Calendar gives its information on individual terrorists, on terrorist groups, and on the acts they might commit, there is in fact no universally agreed-upon legal definition of “terrorism” and no universally agreed-upon list of terrorist groups. And any listing of what acts “terrorists” might commit with either conventional or unconventional weapons is certain to be incomplete.

As the mere existence of the CT Calendar demonstrates, the word “terrorism” is not always equally understood by those who use it and those who hear it. “Terrorism” actually is a kind of jargon. Lots of institutions, from governments to the military to international organizations, have developed their own gobbledygook, sometimes to simplify their own bureaucratic paper-shuffling, but at times also to obfuscate their actions to an outside audience. In the lexicon of the United Nations, for example, there is something called “bluespeak,” the UN’s in-house term for the careful phrasings of their diplomats. So, over the last several decades or so, we have heard generally about “peacekeeping” missions, and learned specifically about “armed humanitarian interventions” in Somalia and “safe havens” in Bosnia.

Jargon used to be what insiders used to communicate complicated ideas to each other. Jargon has become a way to gloss over the intolerable and unspeakable. We have become familiar with hearing about “collateral damage” when what is meant is that civilians were killed, “surgical strikes” when what is meant is that a target was completely obliterated, and “renditions” when what is meant is that terrorist suspects were captured and clandestinely shipped to another country for interrogation and torture. We’ve come to learn about “sleep management,” which sounds like a way to handle insomnia, but is a form of torture that deprives a prisoner of sleep for a hundred hours or so. Then there’s “water-boarding,” which is not something that one does while wearing a Hawaiian shirt, and “stress positions,” which are not a rigorous form of yoga.

These bits of jargon are euphemisms—a way to speak abstractly about situations that are not at all abstract, and a way to give a certain veneer of disinterestedness and neutrality to what can be a far from neutral policy.

It’s a brave new world of spin. Jargon allows its users to take a word and have it mean something else—something that suits the user of the jargon. Sometimes both the speaker and the listener know the meaning, and the use of jargon is an inside joke of sorts. Sometimes the point of jargon is to confuse the listener.

“Terrorism” is that latter kind of “confusing” jargon. When you hear politicians or journalists use the word “terrorism,” stop and think about what they are really saying.
So What Is “Terrorism”?

“Terrorism” and “terrorist” often have little “real” meaning—they are instead political epithets. When used, they can confuse more than illuminate a political event or environment—especially because politicians and media only rarely explain that “terrorism” is a contested concept and that the language used to make the moral case on terrorism is typically loaded. A month and a half before September 11, 2001, reporter Cameron Barr of the Christian Science Monitor wrote that “perhaps no word in modern political usage is more controversial than ‘terrorism.’ The United Nations spent 17 years trying to come up with a universally accepted definition, and failed.” 31 One study discovered 109 different definitions of the word. 32

What is contested about the definition? The international community has not be able to reach agreement on a common definition of “terrorism” for two main reasons.

First, some governments have had little interest in closely defining it, preferring either to keep the definition vague or to only proscribe certain actions. Is terrorism the act only of “non-state actors”—in other words, the terrorists aren’t part of a government in power? Or can “states” practice terrorism? Some nations have committed acts that have been considered the moral equivalent of terrorism—the American dropping of atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki is often cited as a case where a government deliberately targeted a civilian population. Other states have sponsored terrorism abroad or given safe haven to external groups that commit terrorist acts abroad such as the Taliban Afghan government’s support for Al Qaeda. Many international analysts are loath to lump “state” terrorism, which they believe is generally driven by foreign policy concerns, together with the terrorism conducted by “non-state” groups that have entirely different motivations. This, then, is a point of contention in the definition.

A second issue is that many governments are flatly unwilling to define terrorism at all because they are concerned with how a formal definition would reflect on the legitimacy of self-proclaimed wars of national liberation. 33 “In some countries, the word [terrorist] has become almost synonymous with ‘political opponent,’” William Schulz, executive director of Amnesty International, has said. “The Chinese, for example, consider peaceful Tibetan Buddhists vicious terrorists; Robert Mugabe regards the democratic opposition in Zimbabwe in a similar vein.” 34 In fact when governments claim that an individual or a group has engaged in terrorism it can be an attempt by that government to try and stake out the moral high ground for itself.

The political definition of terrorism directs both government policy on terrorism and how government sells its policy to its citizens. The definition of terrorism leads inexorably to the packaging of it. Three questions loom large:

1. Is terrorism a tactic or an ideology?
2. Is an act of terror a “crime” or an “an act of war”? 