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# Decoding the media fixation on terrorism

**B**y now, it's a media ritual. Whenever the U.S. government raises the alert level for terrorism – as when officials announced the orange code for "high risk" on May 20 – local, regional and national news stories assess the dangers and report on what's being done to protect us. We're kept well-informed about how worried to be at any particular time. But all that media churning includes remarkably little that has any practical utility.

Presumably, the agencies that are supposed to help safeguard the public don't need to get their directives via network news or the morning paper. As for the rest of us, the publicity is very close to useless – unless we're supposed to believe that feeling anxious makes us safer or looking sideways at strangers will enhance our security.

Americans could be much better protected if journalists found other uses for some of that ink and air time. For instance, a lot of lives would be saved if news outlets did more to encourage people to stop smoking and avoid excessive alcohol intake. For that matter, public health could benefit greatly if media did a better job of confronting politicians who refuse to tighten laws against air pollution.

But the media fixation on terrorism does nothing to step on the toes of the tobacco and alcohol industries (which provide millions of dollars in ad revenues every day). Nor does the news focus on terrorism do anything to challenge polluting corporations and their governmental enablers.

In mid-May, the internationally syndicated columnist Gwynne Dyer wrote a piece noting that the previous week had brought news reports of terrorist attacks in Chechnya, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Morocco and Israel, resulting in a total of 153 deaths. He observed: "Last week was the worst for terrorist attacks since Sept. 11, 2001. ... Yet there were no headlines last weekend saying '750 people dead of gunshot wounds in the U.S. since Monday' or 'Weekly traffic death toll in India tops 2,000,' and only small headlines that several thousand people had been massacred in the eastern Congolese town of Bunia."

The selectivity of U.S. media coverage reflects the political character of "terrorism"

– and the slanted angles of customary reportage. It is not the wanton cruelty or the magnitude of murderous actions that excites media condemnation so much as the political context of such actions.

In a May 19 statement, President Bush denounced “killers who can’t stand peace.” He was referring to those who had engaged in deadly attacks that took the lives of Israeli civilians. But the same description could be applied to Israeli government leaders, who often order attacks that predictably take the lives of Palestinian civilians.

Bush has become fond of denouncing “killers” and “terrorists.” He likes to use those words righteously and interchangeably. But they could be applied to him and other top officials in Washington. We may prefer not to think so, but such a harsh assessment would undoubtedly come from thousands of Iraqi people who lost their loved ones this spring.

What we usually fail to notice – and what mainstream media will be the last to tell us – is that news coverage of terrorism is routinely subjective, even arbitrary. Those with the power to use and not use the “terrorism” label in mass media are glad to do so as they please.

In his recent column endeavoring to put post-9/11 media fixations on terrorism in perspective, Dyer wrote: “There are several agendas running in the Bush administration, and the one on top at the moment is the hyper-ambitious Cheney-Rumsfeld project that uses the terrorist threat as a pretext for creating a global ‘pax Americana’ based on the unilateral use of American military power. But the project of the Islamic terrorists is still running too, and this strategy is playing straight into their hands.”

I would push the analysis a bit further. Both sides are playing into each other’s hands, and this is not mere happenstance. The propaganda necessity is to portray one side’s killing as righteous and the other’s as evil. Right now, it’s fair to say, each side is committed to large-scale killing. Yet their lethal capacities are vastly asymmetrical. The Pentagon has the power to dominate the world, while Al Qaeda can only hope to dominate the headlines.

To exploit the evil of Al Qaeda’s actions for its own purposes, the Bush team is pleased to fuel and stoke the disproportionate coverage by U.S. media outlets. ■