

Correspondence

TV TERRORISM

To the Editors: Martin Green's review of *Televising Terrorism* ("Books," September) not only confuses the subject in general, but blurs one of its most important aspects. I do not know whether the book itself is confused too, since the review provides no clear outline of it.

The critical aspect to which I refer, of course, is whether the media should allow terrorists to use violence directly to secure time or space. The problem is not, as Green pretends, that "acceding to terrorist demands [might] legitimize their activities," but that doing so turns human life into currency for media buys.

I think the media should not let violence motivate publication of messages which normal editorial judgment would lead them to ignore. I think the media should react to terrorist blackmail ("publish this manifesto or we shoot the hostages") or spectacular violence exactly as they would to a bribe offer or an unethical publicity stunt, respectively. Use of such methods can, of course, be newsworthy in itself, but the media should lean over backwards to avoid conveying the transgressors' message or even their "brand name."

What information the media should publish about dissidents' views in the absence of coercion is another matter. This is what Green pompously calls "the dilemma faced by the media in Western democracies of giving access to the airwaves to violent political dissidents," which he relates to governments' fear "that the mere depiction of terrorist activity is enough to gain sympathy for these 'outlaws'" and which, he says, "calls into question the commitment of the media to independence and fairness."

I agree with Green that dissidents' unpopularity with one's own government or the fact that their "threat to the social order is proximate" should not be allowed to discourage coverage.

But Green goes on to suggest not just that "openness to those who are hostile to democratic values" is desirable, but that the media in "the so-called liberal democracies" have some sort of obligation to publicize the views of the violent fringe: "Commercialization may turn out to be a bigger problem than direct political control, since the standard of what is broadcast will be set by what is saleable and popular."

Green, like many others who profess to want "pluralist media," cannot seem to grasp the fact that media with no axes to grind will

always give primary consideration to what is "saleable and popular" in the broadest sense. Obviously, the media should, and do, make some effort to arouse interest in matters of which the public knows too little for its own good. But in the end "saleable and popular" are the right criteria—the alternative is that the government or somebody else decides what we "ought" to see.

In the same vein, he complains that television documentaries, which he thinks have the greatest freedom to present oppositional points of view, "have the lowest ratings of all, watched only by an elite." He apparently blames media bias for this; he hasn't grasped the fact that in a democracy one cannot command people to become well informed.

At present, in the United States at least, people whom the government brands as terrorists readily gain access to major media if they have something interesting to say and employ appropriate public relations techniques. For example, the Khomeini government of Iran and the Sandinista government of Nicaragua are getting into major media—*The New York Times*, "The MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour"—by sending reasonably competent spokespeople here and offering them to the media.

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Martin Green responds:

I am not sure what provokes Levitt's somewhat personalized response. Naturally, I don't believe my review confuses the issues of terrorism on television; on the contrary, several people have commented that they found it a clear and informative outline of the subject. My attempt was to indicate the complexity of the issues and the moral ambiguities that are presented by the fact of terrorism in the media age, which *Televising Terrorism* raises but does not fully explore. If my phrasing is not altogether to Levitt's liking, I am sorry; however, I see no purpose served in Levitt's characterizing it as "pompous." Such polemical language merely diverts attention from the main issues. I am also somewhat baffled by Levitt's criticism that the "review provides no clear outline" of the book when, in fact, the major portion of the review does just that.

As to Levitt's substantive points, I heartily concur that the media's allowing terrorists to use violence to secure coverage does indeed turn "human life into currency for media buys." The authors of *Televising Terrorism*, however, don't grapple with this issue. Levitt claims I "pretend" that the problem of media/terrorist relationships is whether access to the media legitimizes ter-

rorism; I pretend no such thing; the review essay raises any number of questions that are crucial to the issue.

But notwithstanding my agreement with Levitt's point, he fails to follow through the logic of his argument. By what means can the media prevent terrorists from using violence to claim media attention? There is a quantitative and qualitative difference between the tactics of terrorists and those who try to gain coverage by bribery or by unethical publicity stunts. Refusal of coverage may lead to the deaths of innocent people, which serves terrorists' purposes just as much as broadcasting or publishing their polemics. That's why the decisions of media organizations in these circumstances are so agonizing.

I don't suggest, as Levitt claims, that the media have an obligation to publicize the views of the violent fringe; what I do suggest is an obligation to present intelligent coverage and analysis, not just the tired stereotypes of popular fiction and drama. In the U.S. there is a greater openness in media than seems to be the case in Britain, as Levitt notes. But what is disturbing is that some critics of the media find even the balanced coverage of "MacNeil/Lehrer," ABC's "Nightline," and *The New York Times* dangerous and threatening to U.S. interests.

On the question of the commercialism of the media, I am not convinced that "'saleable and popular' are the right criteria" for all media decision-making, as Levitt claims. On the other hand, Levitt seems to believe that decision-making in the media business is totally the product of objective market forces—indeed, one might infer from his argument that decisions could be made by computers, if they aren't doing so already. Such a view strikes me as naive. People make decisions in the media to put on certain programs, and people, willy nilly, are the bearers of biases, ideologies, etc., whether consciously recognized or not. The belief in neutral market forces is one such.

The alternative is *not*, as Levitt states, "that the government or somebody else decides what we 'ought' to watch" but that those who run the media decide, when necessary, to go against "business as usual." That's the basis of the FCC's mandate to broadcasters to program in the public interest. I have certainly grasped the fact that in a democracy one cannot command people to be well informed; I make no claim to the contrary, nor do I "complain" that television documentaries get short shrift from the authors of *Televising Terrorism*. But the public should be given the opportunity to be informed, whether or not they take advantage of it.