

Ideology or Insanity? Media Portrayals of Ted Kaczynski and Timothy McVeigh

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Objectives/theory

Almost twenty years ago, on the morning of April 19, 1995, a massive explosion sheered off a large chunk of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, killing 168 people, including 19 children, and injuring 500. What motivated the man, Timothy McVeigh, who was eventually convicted of this act? Just five days later, on April 24th, a bomb exploded in a Sacramento, California office, killing timber industry lobbyist Gilbert B. Murray. This was the final explosion in a string of mail bombs dating back to 1978, resulting in three deaths and 23 injuries in what came to be known as the ‘Unabomber’ case. What motivated the ‘Unabomber,’ Ted Kaczynski, who was convicted and sent to prison? The twentieth anniversary of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building presents an interesting opportunity to look back at mainstream media portrayals of these two convicted murderers, paying special attention to their imputed motivation in committing these crimes. Specifically, the portrayals of these two men by *The New York Times* and *Time* are analyzed in order to assess whether McVeigh’s and Kaczynski’s acts were attributed to political motivation or psychological abnormality and mental illness. The mass media shape our consciousness, define reality, explain world events, and most pointedly, serve a social control or ‘propaganda’ function. These cases thus provide an opportunity to wed two distinct lines of inquiry: the mass media research of Herman and Chomsky (2002) and Conrad and Schneider’s (1980) research on ‘medicalization,’ the process whereby conditions, behaviors, and actions come to be attributed to various forms of illness.

Methods

The marriage of these research lines is grounded in a comparative qualitative content analysis of *The New York Times*’ and *Time*’s portrayals of Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kaczynski and their actions. The *New York Times* published 314 articles of 250 words or more on McVeigh and 132 on Kaczynski, while *Time* published 29 articles on McVeigh and 26 articles on Kaczynski. The McVeigh articles were published between May 1, 1995 and June 23, 1997. The Kaczynski articles were published between December 12, 1994 and May 18, 1998.

Findings

Standing at the intersection of mass media and the medicalization of deviance, this research explored mainstream media coverage of two convicted murderers, Timothy McVeigh and Ted Kaczynski. Were their criminal actions explained as emanating from psychological abnormality and mental illness or political and ideological motivation? Qualitative analysis indicates that McVeigh’s crimes were more frequently attributed to political and ideological motivation,

despite compelling reasons to at least raise the possibility that his actions may have been caused by psychological abnormality, if not mental illness. His crimes were not defined as emanating from psychological abnormality and mental illness. Kaczynski's crimes, on the other hand, were more frequently attributed to psychological abnormality and mental illness; he was not portrayed as a politically or ideologically motivated actor, *despite compelling reasons to define him as such.* McVeigh acted 'in the service of ideology' (Goodman, 1997), whereas Kaczynski's actions were the result of individual psychological abnormality: he acted in the service of 'an inner psychological need' (Johnston, 1995). The media served a social control function in defining him as crazy, removing his critique of industrial society from serious intellectual and public consideration.