

The TV-Terrorism Relationship: Investigating the Symbiosis Notion

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Abstract

There have been extensive debates on the so-called nexus between the media and terrorism. Scholars agree¹ that the medium of television has a greater role to play in propagating terrorism as far as the traditional media are concerned. Having said that, the nature, scope, and intensity of relationship between TV and terrorism needs further exploration. One key dimension is the connection between the place where the terrorist incident is happening and the base of the TV media covering the event. This article is a qualitative analysis of British TV channels when it comes to the coverage of terrorism. It focuses on the reporting of the 2005 London attacks and highlights the key features of coverage, while identifying the differences between the coverage of a terrorist attack happening on home soil and in a foreign country.

Keywords: Terrorism; media; British; TV; home factor; symbiotic

Introduction

Terrorism is a worldwide phenomenon. Many nations have either been directly attacked by terrorists or have been indirectly suffering from the devastating impact of terrorism. According to an old Chinese proverb, the main aim of a terrorist activity is to “kill one and frighten ten thousand.” The putative relationship between terrorism and the media has always remained a focus of attention in academic circles; also, investigations in this regard have made some leaps in the last decade. Now, “the problem does not lie in *why* the media covers [sic] terrorism but lies in *how* the media covers [sic] terrorism (original emphasis).”²

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The Media-Terrorism Symbiosis

An important segment of these investigations suggest that there exists a symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism. Symbiosis “is a relationship between people, companies, etc. that is to the advantage of both.”³ Hoffman explains the symbiosis in terms of the media coverage of terrorist attacks: “without the media’s coverage, the act’s impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack, rather than reaching the wider target audience at whom the terrorists’ violence is actually aimed.”⁴ According to Rohner and Frey, the “recent history... has provided plenty of examples of the mutually beneficial relationship between terrorist organisations and the media.”⁵

Broadly speaking, the symbiotic relationship phenomenon has two sides. For Tuman, the media are “naturally drawn to stories that suggest conflict and the potential for what is shocking and sensational,”⁶ with an inherent quest for increased audiences. For Lewis and Green, “violence is a central and defining quality in contemporary television culture and is critical to the semiotic and financial momentum of contemporary media organisations.”⁷ On the other hand, terrorists achieve mass proliferation of their messages through extensive and prolonged media coverage, as “terrorism has to be [mass] communicated to have effect.”⁸ By implication, it means that whenever there is a terrorist event, the media will provide it robust coverage for longer hours.

However, this may not be true at all occasions and all places. Despite the afore-mentioned correlation, we cannot safely say that there exists a symbiotic relationship in all cases of coverage of terrorism by the media. According to Livingstone, “it is no longer plausible to study one phenomenon in one country without asking, at a minimum, whether it is common across the globe or distinctive to that country or part of the world”.⁹ There may be certain distinct features of the coverage of an event depending on the media organisation, the cultural environment, media regulations, bureaucratic structure of the organisation, and the overall political situation. Therefore, along similar lines, I hypothesise that while investigating the media coverage of terrorism two factors

should be considered: location of the terrorist incident, and the country where the media organisations, whose coverage is under study, are based.

In a similar study, it has been suggested that the notion of media-terrorism symbiosis strengthened as British TV channels overtly focused on the theme of awe and terror while covering the Mumbai attacks of 2008.¹⁰ The study maintains that the TV channels give disproportionate coverage to the terrorist events with the prime motive to increase their viewership. On the other hand, consciously or unconsciously, they extend a helping hand to the terrorists by spreading their message across a large swath of audiences. In the present study, however, an effort is made to look at the situation from a different perspective to test the above-mentioned hypothesis: the nature of media coverage of terrorism shows significant variations when the event is happening in the base country of the media organisation as against any foreign country.

The findings have been considerably different in the case of coverage of the 2005 London bombings by British TV channels, in comparison with the findings of above-mentioned study. Not only did the coverage refrain from focusing on the theme of awe and terror, the emphasis largely remained on the perpetrators, national harmony, and the efforts of emergency control organisations. To understand how one aspect of an event is selected and prioritised against the others, we need to understand how a particular pattern of news coverage emerges through careful and considerable actions that are generally referred to as news framing.

News Framing

It is almost an established notion that terrorism cannot achieve its desired goals without the media. Therefore, many eminent media scholars describe the media-terrorism nexus through phrases like “mass mediated terrorism”¹¹ and “mediatised terrorism.”¹² Therefore, the primary focus has been shifted from *what* to *how* the media covers terrorist incidents, “the way that information is organised and presented.”¹³ The selection, organisation, prioritisation, and presentation of news stories through a conscious process is collectively called as news framing. For Altheide, a news frame is a “very broad thematic emphasis or definition of a report...similar to the border around a picture that separates it from the

wall and other possibilities.”¹⁴ In other words, Norris et al. opine that, “it is the prioritisation of some aspects of a development over the others to promote one particular interpretation of the event.”¹⁵ In contrast to this general interpretation of a news frame, Papacharissi and Oliveira define frame in more elaborate terms. For them a news frame is “selecting some aspects of a perceived reality and making them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described.”¹⁶

A close illustration of media framing can be seen in the pre-9/11 presentation of Arabs as the suppliers of oil. However, in the post 9/11 scenario, they are generally dubbed as either potential (sometimes actual) terrorists and/or perpetrators of terrorism. Powell puts it this way:

An analysis of episodic news frames of terrorist events since 9/11 demonstrates how thematic coverage of terrorism has developed through frames composed of labels, common themes, and rhetorical associations, which portrayed terrorism as an international threat organized by Muslims /Arabs / Islam.¹⁷

News Themes and Patterns

Media researchers tend to look for certain patterns in the coverage of an event, as a tool for empirical research (Philo and Berry, for example).¹⁸ These tools are called themes of coverage, which help to identify and place the agenda of a news organisation. A theme, broadly speaking, is used to describe an integrated and relational idea.¹⁹ In any news coverage, there are different angles, frames, and layers of interpretations that are dealt with by a news organisation in accordance with its values, editorial policy, target audience, economic and logistical constraints, and technological limitations/growth. Therefore, it may be stated that the themes are “general messages that are grouped together in a certain way and are reiterated in specific scenarios.”²⁰ It may also be noted that terms like concept, category, and theme have also been utilised interchangeably in the media literature to describe a coherent idea presented over a period of time.²¹ In other words, a theme is a construct

that represents a certain pattern emerging in a recurring and/or regular fashion in the given data.

2008 Mumbai Attacks and the British TV Channels

The Mumbai event was itself distinctive and unique in its nature in many ways. It was not a single event carried out at one place and at one time. It did not happen in a closely followed time sequence. It was a series of events, extended over no less than ten places and spread over a span of more than seventy-two hours, dealing with different groups of militants adopting various terrorist strategies.

In a similar study, as suggested earlier, the British TV news outlets play an important role in relaying terrorist messages and focus primarily on images of terror and violence during the coverage of Mumbai attacks. While there are key differences between public and commercial TV news in the style and presentation of coverage, with the former being more careful in approach, the news channels concentrate on televising death and injury and the propagation of chaos and confusion in the affected city.

From a thematic perspective, the British media extensively covered the event and presented the theme of 'awe and terror' in a prominent and dramatic fashion presenting all the horrific details of the event spanning over more than seventy-two hours. While there is no denying the fact that the event itself was unique in its nature and scope, the TV channels gave a skewed coverage to the other possible themes. In the coverage of a terrorist activity, other themes can also be presented, such as responsibility for the attacks, emergency responses of the affected environment, defiance and solidarity of the victims, and their mourning and suffering. However, the importance given to the instant themes and the manner they were presented and developed in the coverage indicates that the TV media preferred dramatic coverage for a longer period of time in an effort to gain and retain increased audiences.

Research Methodology

On July 07, 2005, London became the victim of a deadly terrorist attack. Three underground trains and a bus were targeted in Central London in a series of well-planned bomb blasts. According to the media reports, more than 55 people were killed and over 700 people were injured. This study is primarily a thematic qualitative analysis of the British TV channels' coverage of the 2005 London Attacks.

The main idea of this study is to identify a particular frame of the news coverage. However, eventually the focus is on the selection and presentation of different themes within that frame to have a detailed analysis. The coverage of three successive days of the 2005 London Attacks by British TV channels is taken as population. Within this population, the main focus of investigation is prime time news bulletins and current affairs programmes of BBC News, ITV News, and Channel 4 News. In this regard, the news bulletins of 2200 hours and 2230 hours of BBC News and ITV News respectively are the samples representing news bulletin coverage. On the other hand, BBC Newsnight is selected under the current affairs programme category. Since there is no parallel current affairs programmes on ITV News, its sister organisation Channel 4's 1900 hours news programme has been selected, which is considered to be a current affairs programme due to its nature and style of presentation. All these programmes were taken from the televised coverage for three successive days, 07 July to 09 July 2005.

In this regard, the following research questions have been formulated:

- Q1: How does the theme of awe and terror arise from the coverage of 2005 London attacks by the British TV channels?
- Q2: What key relationship indicators between TV news reporting and terrorist activity arise while the event is happening on the home soil?
- Q3: Does the reporting of a terrorist event by the British TV channels become more careful and responsible when terrorism is unfolding on British soil?

Q4: How far was the reporting of the 2005 London Attacks different from the 2008 Mumbai Attacks by the British TV Channels?

Analysis of the Coverage

Looking at the news coverage of 2005 London attacks from a thematic perspective, it did not overtly focus on the theme of awe and terror. In terms of news value, a terrorist event has immense appeal. A TV channel cannot avoid reporting it. The scale of destruction, the number of dead and injured, and the prevailing atmosphere in the affected area are usually the necessary ingredients of the reporting of such an event. The presentation of these aspects of an event, when collectively structured, may also be referred to as the theme of awe and terror. However, variables like the choice of words, the images shown and their frequency, and the overall treatment of the theme make us understand the choices made at an editorial level on how to cover a terrorist event. The following discussion will showcase the themes that were chosen and the way they were presented in a particular frame during the sample period.

The Awe and Terror Theme

Awe and terror was one of the prominent themes of the 2005 London attacks coverage, but not the leading theme, during the sample period. However, it was difficult to ignore the fact that the coverage remained careful and less sensational. It was observed, particularly on the second and third day of coverage, that a conscious effort was made at an editorial level to minimise drama, which is an unavoidable corollary to the coverage of an event of such nature. Overall, the level and intensity and the exercise of editorial discretion regarding the prominence given to the theme remained very low, particularly after initial reporting on the first day and on the second and third days of coverage.

Generally, the theme was given more space and generated more sensationalism in ITV News and Channel 4 News, as compared to BBC News and Newsnight. On ITV News, on the second day of coverage, there was a special programme on London Bombings with a return to

normal schedule on the third day. On the whole, the theme was least visible on BBC Newsnight.

The TV channels gave considerable coverage to this theme on the first day of reporting. The theme was invariably the first headline in all the programmes – in some cases the only headline, booked its place as the top story, and remained the heading of most of the reports. It was also evident in the titles and opening lines of stories, semantics, witness accounts, and some gory images. Following are the instances taken from actual coverage that highlight such treatment of the theme (emphasis added).

Headlines

- Newscaster: *Terror in the rush hour, four explosions as Londoners travel to work. A bus is ripped to pieces, bomb blasts hit the tubes. At least 37 people are dead hundreds more are seriously injured.* (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Anchor: Thirty seven dead and 170 injured in the worst terrorist attack on a British city. (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Anchor: *Thirty seven dead, seven hundred injured in four bombings across central London.*
- Witness: *Within seconds..... it was just pandemonium down there. It's like being in hell.* (Channel 4 News / 1900 / 07-07-05)

Introduction of the Story / Opening Lines of News Reports

- Newscaster: Today's terrorist attacks in Central London have claimed the lives of at least 38 people. Hundreds have been injured, dozens are critically ill tonight. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)
- Newscaster: *The people of our city were today given the horrifying reminder of the stark reality of terror. Thirty-seven lost their lives in attacks by terrorists.* (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

Reporter: *Today, the chilling sounds of hundreds of emergency vehicles announced that dreaded day had come and the lives of totally innocent people were being shattered. (Channel 4 News / 2230 / 07-07-05)*

Witness Accounts

Dr. Dearden: *I am here working in the casualty for six months but this is like six months casualty in three hours. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)*

Man: *There was just blood, burns, people with burnt hair. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)*

Witness: *Human debris all over the place. Bodies, people were wailing and a few people were trying to help. (BBC News / 2200 / 08-07-05)*

Words and phrases like dead, number of deaths, blood, destruction, trauma, dreaded day, horror, fearful, frightening experience, truly terrible, and horrible event were used randomly during the first day of coverage. On BBC News, the newscaster labelled the bombings as “the deadliest ever peace time attack on London.” The choice of words in the phrase was interesting given the fact that Britain had already been involved in two wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The phrase seems even starker when we consider that just like BBC News, Channel 4 too described the event as “the deadliest ever peace time attack on London.”

Similarly, the images shown also accentuated the theme. The pictures of the bombed bus, underground rail track, the injured, ambulances, and the relatives of the victims were shown regularly. However, it was largely observed that a conscious effort was made in the selection of images of gory scenes, with some exceptions.

Now the question may arise that if the theme of awe and terror was not the main focus of the coverage, then what other themes were presented? Actually, the main frame of the coverage hinges on three themes: responsibility for the attacks; defiance, solidarity and anger; and efficient emergency response. I shall discuss how each of the themes was

prioritised and presented during the sample period in the following section.

Responsibility for the Attacks

Questions of who was responsible for the bombings ran through the entire coverage. Each programme gave it importance as the main theme in its own manner. However, it received detailed analysis in BBC News bulletins and Newsnight. The theme was not very prominent in the first half of the first day's coverage when the competing theme of awe and terror was receiving maximum attention, as discussed above.

On the whole, two patterns kept surging during the entire coverage: the official insistence that it was too early to say anything in definite terms and everyone should avoid unnecessary speculation, and possible involvement of al-Qaeda in the bombing. In the latter mould, three aspects were worth noticing: a) the impact of British involvement in the ongoing wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, b) possibility of home-grown (British) extremist outfits in the instant attacks and c) possible IRA connections with attacks given its history.

Let us take up the first dimension: reporting of official response of the bombings in terms of the on-going investigation process. On BBC News, on the first day of coverage it was reported that the police said that the attackers, "believed to be al-Qaeda", gave no warning. However, the police commissioner visiting the bus blast site categorically refrained from pointing a finger towards anyone at this early stage. Therefore, the attackers, "believed to be al-Qaeda", was an interesting choice of words. Some excerpts of the coverage related to the themes are reproduced below (emphasis added).

Gardner: One of the other areas that they (the investigators) are looking at is: were these people directly linked to the core of al-Qaeda; what is left of it in Afghanistan and Pakistan or were they acting on their own? (BBC News / 2200 / 08-07-05)

Newscaster: *And tonight the unanswered question, who did it?* (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

- Reporter: *At the moment the investigators hypothesise that the attacks were a work of handful of extremists who either grew up in this country or had spent many years here.* (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Reporter: One agency [possibly a news agency] reported that the Israeli Embassy in London claimed to have been warned by police only minutes before the first bomb went off: a claim strongly denied by the Metropolitan Police. (Channel 4 News / 1900 / 07-07-05)
- DAC Padick: The police received no warning about these attacks. And police received no claims of responsibility from any group in connection with these attacks. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

The second dimension of the coverage of the theme was blaming al-Qaeda and/or groups having linkages of affiliations with it. Although, as observed earlier, the police were saying repeatedly that during the initial investigation process and unless having any definitive clues, the programs kept on challenging their stance. Actually, the programs did not shy away from persisting with their approach of blaming al-Qaeda, which was the unanimous first choice among a very limited number of possibilities that were explored. Here are some examples (emphasis added).

- Gardner: *There was no warning. These were soft civilian unprotected targets, multiple synchronised bombings. There are signs of meticulous planning of al-Qaeda.* (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)
- Power: Quite different, here we have a bunch of people (al-Qaeda) who are really different in terms of they don't have real agendas. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Anchor: Who was responsible and *is there any way Western societies can be protected?* (Channel 4 News / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Newscaster: A little known al-Qaeda group claimed it carried out today's attacks. Police say they couldn't verify those claims. But the Foreign Secretary *Jack Straw said the*

attacks has [sic], as he put it, 'all the hallmarks of al-Qaeda'. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

Following the same pattern, there was a report describing the history of past terrorist attacks of a similar nature in Madrid and Istanbul that were alleged to have been carried out by al-Qaeda or its sympathisers. No such report was shown about IRA, and its history of attacks of terrorist nature in the UK, which could have been one of the suspects on the first day of attacks. Northern Ireland was mentioned only when a newscaster asked one of the reporters to assess the long time impact of bombings on the Londoners. Here, too, the IRA was not a suspect. The reporter, who was talking about the plight of the people, said the following:

Eastern: But on the other hand I think we have to remember we have seen terrorism in this country before we have seen it here in London. We have seen it in Northern Ireland of course and other cities throughout the UK. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)

Similarly, one of the participants in BBC's Newsnight on the first day of coverage, Peter Power, drew a comparison between al-Qaeda and the Irish Republican Group. However, he did not call the latter suspects in this case. He said that the former were different in terms of planning, coordination, warnings, and the agenda.

Power: Quite different, here we have a bunch of people (al-Qaeda) who are really different in terms of they don't have real agendas, as far as we are concerned, but their impact and their net effect is somehow quite different in the way they are driven by fear much more. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

The element of speculation about the origin of the perpetrators became an important part of the discourse, whether they were British nationals or any foreigners or a combination of both. On BBC News, a reporter noted that there was a debate going on in the police and intelligence circles about two questions: whether they were suicide

attacks or planted bombs; and whether they were home-grown terrorists or foreigners?

Reporter: *A key question, were they foreign or were they homegrown British?* (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)

Reporter: They could be young British Muslims radicalised by the September the 11th attacks. (ITV News / 2230 / 09-07-05)

Fox: Some disaffected [British] young men have been travelling the world, getting themselves trained to commit the crimes like these. (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)

Defiance, Solidarity and Anger

“Defiance, solidarity and anger” was another leading theme of the coverage, though not as prominent as the previous one. It found ample converge in both the news and current affairs programmes; and punctuated the entire coverage with intermittent appearance, particularly during the first two days of the sample period.

The theme largely focused on the defiance of the British public, especially the Londoners. It highlighted the solidarity of the people and their leaders against terrorism. They showed anger and displeasure, which only strengthened their resolve in the fight against terrorists. TV channels used phrases like “Blair Defiant,” “Defeat This Terrorism,” and “United London” as the titles of their stories. It was also reported that “defiance was in the DNA” of British public.

The resolve of the British people was showcased through the public statements of the Prime Minister Tony Blair. The statements given by the leaders of the ruling and opposition parties endorsed his statements. Actually they were talking in unison in condemning the attacks and encouraging their people to stand against terrorism except for a lone voice of MP George Galloway. The statements of prominent British and international leaders, along with those of the common people, were also used for the purpose (emphasis added).

- Queen: “That those who perpetrated brutal acts against innocent people should know that they will not change our way of life.” (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)
- Blair: *When they try to intimidate us we will not be intimidated. When they seek to change our way of life by these methods, we will not be changed. We will not be divided and our resolve will hold firm.* (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)
- Davies (MP): *The British people will not be cowed and the terrorists will not win.* (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)
- Bush: I was most impressed by the resolve of all the leaders in the room. *Their resolve is as strong as my resolve and that is: we will not yield to these people; we will not yield to the terrorists.* (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Reporter: Here in Central London if the purpose of terrorism is to terrorise. It simply hasn’t happened. (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)
- Straw: *One of revulsion and determination to maintain our way of life.* (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)

One of the participants in BBC’s Newsnight, Mr. Giuliani, ex-mayor of New York, drew an analogy of the attacks with 9/11 and London Blitz during the Second World War. He extolled the Londoners for their bravery and defiance against the act of terrorism.

- Giuliani: People of London to me have always been remarkable. They were our inspiration on September the 11th *when we thought about how they reacted to the Blitz in 1940.* (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)

A possible backlash against Muslims in Britain was feared. Considering such a possibility and a fear of communal rifts in the aftermath of the bombings, it was reported that both Muslim and Christian leaders had called for solidarity to preserve inter-community unity. Here again came a statement from Prime Minister Blair saying ‘*we will not be divided and our resolve will hold firm.*’ On ITV News, it formed a prominent part of the headlines as the Prime Minister said:

We will show by our spirit and our dignity and by our quiet but true strength, that there is in the British people, that our values will long out-last theirs. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

The element of communal unity was a part of coverage on BBC News. It indicated that there were still some fears in the air that Muslims could be targeted and there was a need to calm down the nerves on all sides. There was a report specifically focused on this and related issues. It was reported that all the communities were ‘standing shoulder-to-shoulder in prayer’ for the victims. The report carried a statement of an Imam of a London mosque who advocated inter-faith harmony and condemned the attacks. The theme was absent on the third day of coverage.

The overall situation prevailing in the city was also factored in, though it was painted in positive colours. Somewhere in the middle of the programme, a report titled *A City in Shock* was included, which presented the statements of courage given by the public substantiating that ‘life goes on’ in London. Later in the programme, Home Secretary Charles Clarke expressed similar feelings while having an exclusive talk with the BBC. On Channel 4 News, statements from government officials were also telecast. Defence Secretary John Reid, while praising the Londoners going on with their lives, said the “the only response” to such an atrocity should be that the people stand against it. He was confident that the people were doing exactly that and, therefore, he was sure that “they (the terrorists) will not break our spirit or our will.”

Efficient Emergency Response

Last but not the least was the recurrence of the theme: efficient emergency response. It was one of the leading themes in the coverage, especially on the first day of coverage, though with varying degrees of intensity. BBC News was the largest proponent of the theme. There was a conscious effort on the part of other TV channels as well to focus on the theme and highlight the efforts of the government, emergency services, and related organisations and individuals. TV channels praised the efforts of the emergency services and did not find any fault with their work.

The later investigations into the case, however, pointed out many such weak areas. The reason, it seems, was to keep the morale of the nation high in distressing times. The theme highlighted immaculate planning, efficient execution of these plans, excellent coordination among police, rescue workers, ambulances, and hospitals, as well as the large-heartedness of the common public who came forward to donate blood and to assist in emergency activities. Interestingly, in the recently concluded inquiry into the London Bombings, it has been observed that there were some structural problems marring the efficiency and efficacy of emergency response.

On BBC News, it was reported repeatedly that all the emergency response agencies including the police, rescue workers, ambulances, and hospitals, were already prepared as they were planning and rehearsing for this type of atrocity for months. And when it occurred they simply put their plans into action efficiently. Reporters praised the emergency response quoting the injured and the victims' relatives.

On BBC's Newsnight too, it was a main theme that dominated the coverage on the first day. The first day's headline claimed that the casualties could have been higher "but for good fortune and good planning." At such an early stage, the statement sounded sweeping. The day's first report was all about the blasts and the casualties and how the emergency services responded to the incident. It was again praised, this time by a passenger:

Witness: We were guided all the way by the London underground staff. We were told that we were standing at a strategic point. (BBC Newsnight / 2230 / 07-07-05)

At ITV News, on various occasions, the response of different London emergency units was lauded for acting in accordance with a well-rehearsed plan. One reporter said that the emergency services had "practised for this day and they coped." A report said that at all major hospitals across London, these plans made for such an emergency were immediately put to action.

Reporter: Every large hospital in London went into a full major incident alert cancelling routine operation to free up theatres, beds, and staff. The scenario has often been rehearsed. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

Even the foreigners praised this effort. Mr. Giuliani, the mayor of New York at the time of 9/11, said that when he looked at the response of London's emergency services, he felt that "the people of London were prepared for this."

On Channel 4 too, this was a leading theme on the first day. Emergency response was projected in favourable terms stating that everyone was well prepared and they all acted in accordance with a well-rehearsed and coordinated plan. The theme was prominent in the headlines and reports like BBC Newsnight, Channel 4 reported that the efficiency and the scale of the emergency response "may itself have saved many lives."

Anchor: Hospitals across London have been on their highest possible alerts... Some of the injured were ferried ... on a fleet of double-decker buses. Emergency helicopters were also dispatched along with mobile response teams. (Channel 4 News / 1900 / 07-07-05)

Here are some other examples (emphasis added).

Reporter: The police put into act their long-rehearsed plan for dealing with a terrorist attack. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)

Reporter: *Years of planning ...produced a remarkable sense of professionalism and control from the emergency services.* Their assured calm seemed to suck the terror out of terrorism. (BBC News / 2200 / 07-07-05)

Newscaster: Plus the emergency response, London's rescue teams are tested to the limits. (ITV News / 2230 / 07-07-05)

Dobson: I think it is immensely to the credit of the people who did the emergency planning and their planning worked.... (BBC Newsnight/2230/07-07-05)

Discussion

As I have outlined in the preceding sections, the theme of awe and terror was not the most prominent theme of coverage of London attacks. The theme had its major presence on the first day of coverage, partly due to the fact that the news teams of the respective TV channels were taken by surprise and they were presenting the news along with their accompanying images without the considerable thought process that was visible in coverage during the following two days. However, this was largely in conformity with the news frame that was chosen by the British TV channels. In terms of news value they had to show the horrific details of the event. However, they soon started concentrating on other aspects of the story. This is not what they did during the coverage of Mumbai attacks, three years later.

Importantly, three themes formed the news frame: responsibility for the attacks; defiance, solidarity and anger; and efficient emergency response. With reference to the responsibility for the attacks, as established above, in the immediate aftermath of a terrorist event, there are limited explanations available about the possible attackers. And in most cases, journalists rely on what the official sources are saying. It is also their established right to question what the authorities are saying and to examine other versions.

When the London attacks occurred, there was a general understanding in the West that al-Qaeda was the “only” culprits, an impression reinforced by the media, and that a “War on Terror” was being waged against it. Therefore, the TV programmes started their speculative reporting augmented by the indicators given by government sources about possible al-Qaeda involvement. Hence, there was almost a predetermined framework – “War on Terror.” There is no denying the fact that journalists do not work in a vacuum and they need a context to frame the story. But a singular absence of any alternative poses some serious questions about objectivity and impartiality.

This type of treatment in the coverage of London attacks can be explained by the peculiar media ‘impartiality’ practices as explained by

Schlesinger (1983) when he was talking about the conflict in Northern Ireland. According to him, the impartiality is defined in practice in terms of positions taken in relation to the British political system and its underlying social and economic order. Since terrorism, particularly domestic terrorism, is seen as threatening the social order, this is one area where broadcast journalism cannot remain totally impartial and it has to follow the dynamics and demands of the politico-economic system. In this regard, the position taken by the British media in reporting the possible perpetrators of the London attacks can be aptly described in the words of Chomsky:

The mainstream media not only allows the agendas of the news to be bent in accordance with state demands and criteria of utility, they also accept the presuppositions of the state without question.²²

Regarding the solidarity, defiance and anger theme, it may be stated that it was an effort to feature the determination of the British people not to be scared by the sheer scale of horror and destruction. This resilience was mainly showcased by the appearances and statements given by the government officials, particularly Prime Minister Tony Blair. He appeared to be an iconic figure of defiance and anger against the terrorists. In this apparent vein of nationalism the comparison of these attacks with London Blitz during the Second World War sounded like an exaggeration. However, this type of treatment may arguably be desirable to promote the sense of unity and integrity and to discourage panic.

In the apparent euphoria it was reported that it was in the DNA of the British people to stand tall and resilient against all odds. The British Muslim community, however, was not seen to be part of this DNA. The British Muslims were singled out as seemingly not sharing the sense of unity with their other countrymen. Apparently, when it was reported that the whole British nation was showing resolve against the terrorists, Muslims were only shown to be either defending themselves in an apologetic manner or as the targets of hate attacks. They were not shown as a part of larger British community. True, the communal coverage was there, but only in terms of being the possible and actual targets of a backlash, giving their response to the attacks, expressing their solidarity

with the victims, highlighting the importance of inter-communal harmony, and participating in communal meetings. There was also reporting about efforts being made to encourage and establish inter-communal dialogue and showing Muslims condemning these attacks. But no reference was made indicating that Muslims were part of the larger unified community and that they too were standing defiant side-by-side with their fellow countrymen. This treatment raises quite a few questions of objectivity.

As far as the presentation of efficient emergency response theme is concerned, the efficiency of the work of emergency teams was over-emphasised. Many aspects of their negligence and lack of efficiency were unearthed and reported by the media during the proceedings of the inquiry commission constituted to examine preparedness and emergency response. Spencer²³ has called for more focus on non-dramatic but socially more desirable aspects during conflict reporting. The treatment of the themes during the London attacks was on similar lines. According to Miller, after the floods in 2000, the Civil Contingencies Secretariat (CCS), overseen by Mark Granatt, was established “to improve the UK’s ‘resilience’ to ‘disruptive challenge.’”²⁴ Miller quotes Granatt that the CCS adopted a sophisticated approach. Instead of enforcing censor through state control, they opted for “voluntary” agreements with the media which were proving “more effective.”²⁵ Miller calls this mechanism “so productive that it has occasioned little attention in media.”²⁶ Miller quoted Garnatt who said that the system was still in place in 2004, so it can be conjectured that the system was still in place and working in 2005 when this terrorist incident occurred.

Conclusion

Apparently, there is a common perception that the media and terrorists during prolonged crises may have a symbiotic relationship in terms of dissemination of information. While looking at the coverage of Mumbai attacks, it seems that the media overly focused on the presentation of awe and terror in a dramatic fashion. This appears to confirm the media-terrorism symbiosis notion. However, there can be other variables that are working behind the coverage of terrorist attacks in a dynamic way to fashion the final output.

After reviewing the coverage of London attacks we can say that, understandably, the TV channels gave prominence to the theme of awe and terror, albeit along with some other themes. But the question is: did TV news have any other option but to give prominence to the horrifying aspects of the story? Had they not chosen to do so, they would not have been doing justice to their viewers and their professional responsibilities. In all fairness, they had no choice but to give prominence to the theme of awe and terror, at least in the initial stages of coverage.

Secondly, the development and presentation of the story had a lot to do with the news frame they had adopted. Moreover, there are several objective and subjective factors that determine TV news production, though the distinction between the objective and the subjective is not absolute, even it is desirable. The objective determinants include the intra-organisation editorial guidelines, the bureaucratic structure of TV organisations, the dynamics of TV broadcasting, technological and logistic limitations, financial and administrative constraints, external regulation, and internal editorial guidelines, and social and cultural considerations of the society where the event has occurred. The situation has been summarised by Klaus Bruhn-Jensen as follows:

The social factors make themselves known in news organisations in the form of economic, bureaucratic, and normative pressures, which shape journalistic work.²⁷

On the other hand, the subjective considerations are the perceived values of news gathering and news production, public expectations, understanding of contextual framework of the journalists, interpretation of sources, their legitimacy, position and their apparent ability to define or influence a news story, perceived biases and preferences of reporters, news editors and editors on the desk, which are largely determined by a sense of belonging to the land and the people of UK, and corporate market demands.

In the end it can be concluded that the British TV news channels remained more responsible and careful owing to various objective and subjective considerations, as discussed above. Perhaps, this can also be

explained with the help of CCS (Civil Contingencies Secretariat) apparatus described by Miller (2004), where a “voluntary” agreement course with the media was adopted by the British government, instead of the traditional way to “press a button to pre-empt every transmitter in this country.” Actually, the media were in voluntary agreement with the government as well as the society - as the attacks were unfolding on the British soil - to remain careful and to not to spread panic.

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