

TV NEWS COVERAGE OF TERRORISM PHENOMENON FROM THE ARAB AND WESTERN PERSPECTIVES FROM 2011 TO 2016

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism is a major global threat to free societies. Thus, many TV news channels have competed against each other to report terrorist attacks that occur in different parts of the world. The researchers applied the secondary data analysis technique to assess studies that cover the terrorism phenomenon in both Arab and Western TV news channels from 2011 to 2016. Results indicated that terrorism was one of the most prominent topics in both Arab and Western TV news channels; however, the news treatment of terrorism incidents differed across Arab and Western TV channels.

Keywords: Terrorism, TV News, Arab, Western.

INTRODUCTION

Media influences attitudes and "shapes opinions, and presents a particular version as reality that goes beyond presenting and depicting information and images" (Yusof, Hassan, Hassan, & Osman, 2013, p.107). Television plays a pivotal role in reporting arguable issues. Specifically, TV news has "a format of presentation that integrates visual images, tempo, and rhythm in the unfolding of a news story, depictions of personalities, and dramatisation of human emotions to make television news qualitatively different from print-based journalism" (Abdullah, 2014, pp.5–6).

Problem Significance

"Throughout the beginning of the 21st century, it is no surprise that terrorism has come to be a major concern worldwide" (Rausch, 2015, p.28), causing many deaths and injuries among innocent people. According to Zhang and Hellmueller (2016), "more than 40 countries have become involved in the conflict, participating in military actions or providing humanitarian aid to civilians" (p.766).

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TV news stations successfully reported terrorism incidents because of technological advancements that have helped news stations gather information on terrorist attacks quickly, regardless of any frontiers or borders. This study explored the differences between Arab and Western TV news coverage of terrorism phenomenon, especially with the rise of Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), which "began to grab international news attention in June 2014 for its military conquest of Iraqi and Syrian territories, brutal beheadings and torture of hostages, ruthless treatment of local minorities, and flagrant capacity of recruiting foreign fighters" (Zhang & Hellmueller, 2016, p.766).

Research Questions

This study aimed to answer following main questions:

1. To what extent did the Arab and Western TV news channels focus on terrorism-related news?
2. How did the Arab and Western TV news channels frame terrorism issues?
3. What were the types of news sources the Arab and Western TV news channels relied on while reporting terrorism incidents?

Methodology

The researchers analysed a sample of nine studies conducted between 2011 and 2016 using secondary data analysis to identify the major differences between Arab and Western TV news coverage of terrorism. We examined studies conducted after 2011 because, after that year, many extremist groups emerged, especially after the Arab revolutions in the Middle East. Further, because there is no consensus on the definition of terrorism, we selected only studies that clearly identified terrorist groups or terrorism issues in their titles.

Terrorism: A Historical Overview

There is a clear difference between extremism/fundamentalism and terrorism. "In regard to fundamentalism, groups wishing to have their religion practiced purely are called fundamentalist, as are groups pushing for an overhaul of the national or global political system with a cultural connection to a religion" (Rausch, 2015, p.29).

"The extremist actions do often precede the terrorist actions; the future terrorists are quite often enlisted from the number of extremely inclined citizens. The extremism in that context can be considered as some forerunner of terrorism" (Korobeev & Kuznetsov, 2014, p.981).

"The word terror comes from the Latin word *terrere*, which means to frighten or scare" (Bockstette, 2009, p.3). "It is dominantly directed at civilian targets and the operation is timed and conducted in the absence of conventional warfare" (Adora, 2010, p.104), However, there are many definitions of terrorism.

According to the United Nations (UN), terrorism is "any act intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to a civilian, or to any other person not taking an active part in the hostilities in a situation of armed conflict, when the purpose of such act, by its nature or context, is to intimidate a population, or to compel a government or an international organization to do or to abstain from doing any act" (General Assembly of the United Nations in resolution, 1999, p.40).

However, the US Department of Defense has defined terrorism as “The unlawful use of violence or threat of violence, often motivated by religious, political, or other ideological beliefs, to instill fear and coerce governments or societies in pursuit of goals that are usually political” (US Department Defense, 2016, p.241).

On the other hand, the European Union (EU) stated that terrorist acts are aimed at “seriously intimidating a population; unduly compelling a government or international organisation to perform or abstain from performing any act; seriously destabilising or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organisation” (Council Framework Decision of 13 June 2002 on Combating Terrorism).

Noam Chomsky defined terrorism as “the calculated use of violence or threat of violence to attain goals that are political, religious, or ideological in nature. This is done through intimidation, coercion, or instilling fear” (Chomsky, 2001, p.89).

There are four major waves of international terrorism. The first (‘anarchist’) wave of modern terrorism began in Russia in the 1880s and lasted until the 1920s, The second (‘anticolonial’) wave began in the 1920s and ended in the 1960s, the third (‘new left’) wave began in the 1960s and continued through to the 1980s, and the fourth (‘religious’) wave emerged in 1979 and continues until today” (Rapoport, 2004, p.47). Nacos (2016) stated, “Terrorists’ ultimate objectives are political, even if promoted as religiously motivated” (p.4).

Consequences and Effects of the Terrorist Attacks

Terrorist attacks have a devastating impact on people and societies. They cause “persistent, harrowing, acute hardships, sorrow and anxiety in the world” (Adora, 2010, p.104) and have “a worldwide impact regardless of where the acts were committed” (Milosevska & Taneski, 2014, p.142).

According to the Global Terrorism Index (2015), “Deaths from terrorism have increased dramatically over the last 15 years. The number of people who have died from terrorist activity has increased ninefold since the year 2000” (p.14).

“The deadliest event described as terrorism is the September 11, 2001 attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon in the USA. Since this incident, many terrorist events have been recorded worldwide to date” (Adora, 2010, p.105).

Developing countries have suffered the most from terrorist attacks. “Pakistan reports 10,116 victims from terrorism between the years 2007 and 2012. Yemen and the DR Congo combine for 4,339. Adding casualties in Somalia increases that number to 6,944” (GTD report 2015, p.1).

Additionally, “More than 15,000 people are estimated to have been killed in Boko Haram violence—including more than 6,500 in 2015 alone—and the conflict has caused a humanitarian emergency around Lake Chad, displacing more than 2.8 million people and cutting off humanitarian access to roughly three million others” (Blanchard, 2016, p.1).

The Middle East as well “has witnessed the longest war on terrorism in history, and more terrorism victims as compared to other parts of the world” (Zeng & Tahat, 2012, p.443).

Moreover, “The indirect costs of terrorism can be significant and have the potential to affect the economy in the medium term by undermining consumer and investor confidence” (Abdullah, 2014, p.39).

Terrorist attacks as an act of political communication

Terrorism is a problematic issue that "occurs suddenly and unexpectedly, involves conflict, often selects prominent or symbolically important targets, can often be attributed to specific terrorist groups, and provokes strong feelings of fear and dread in media audiences" (Walsh, 2010, p.5).

It "is frequently associated with political violence and refers to strategies of using coordinated attacks that typically fall outside the bounds of conventional warfare" (Adora, 2010, p.104).

Predominantly, terrorist groups use violence to attract people's attention to their cause. "Terrorist action is more than an act of violence. It also has to be understood as a communication strategy in which messages are sent in a spectacular way" (Munkler, 2005, p.177).

"A terrorist organization may hope that attacks will convince potential supporters or sympathizers that the organization is capable of inflicting substantial harm or demonstrate that the organization is more effective than rival groups in challenging the authorities" (Walsh, 2010, p.9).

According to Mannik (2009), terrorists use violence to achieve regime change, territorial change, policy change, social control, and status quo maintenance (p.161).

Terrorism and Mass Media: A Symbiotic Relationship

Terrorists' goals

"Long before Gutenberg invented the printing press, terrorists assured themselves the greatest amount of publicity by striking in crowded places so that a large number of eyewitnesses spread the news among their families, friends, and acquaintance" (Nacos, 2006, p.1).

"Through propaganda, terrorists seek to communicate a particular message to a particular target audience" (Lumbaca & Gray, 2011, p.46).

Terrorists recognise the importance of communication in reaching a broad audience. Marshall McLuhan clarified this point by stating that "without communication terrorism would not exist" (McLuhan, 1978).

Terrorists rely heavily on "mass media to explain and discuss their rationale for resorting to violence" (Nacos, 2006, p.7), either by "instilling fear within a community, winning the hearts and minds of the populace" (Lumbaca & Gray, 2011, p.45), or "recruiting new members" (Protopapas, 2012, p.3).

Thus, terrorists "exploit the media in order to achieve maximum attainable publicity as a force multiplier in order to influence the targeted audience(s) in pursuit of short- and mid-term political goals and/ or desired long-term end states" (Bockstette, 2009, p.3).

Timing is also a critical factor for terrorist groups. By selecting the right time to perpetuate their attacks, they can maximise media attention. For example, "terrorists tend to attack before or during big media events, such as elections, and international summits like the G8-summit or the Olympic Games" (Rohner & Frey, 2007, p.130).

Often, "terror attacks take place in big cities with a high density of press agencies" (Rohner & Frey, 2007, p.130). For example, those who executed the 9/11 attacks in the

US knew the “media would report such attacks and this would have a huge psychological impact on the world” (Lumbaca & Gray, 2011, p.50).

Terrorists are also smart in organising and planning their attacks. “The 9/11 terrorist attacks appeared to be timed so that television cameras would capture the second plane hitting the World Trade Center towers” (Ross, 2007, p.216).

Media goals

The “media select events that are newsworthy (based on its own set of values that give priority to violence and conflict in any form” (Milosevska & Taneski, 2014, p.56). On the other hand, “terrorist attacks have much motional coverage as they include drama, danger, blood, human tragedy, miracle stories, heroes, shocking footage and action” (Protopapas, 2012, p.4).

Reporting terrorism “could significantly raise reader and viewer ratings, and thus media companies’ profit as well” (Anita, 2007, p.7), especially “news media that are owned and controlled by large corporations largely motivated by market share and profit” (Milosevska, & Taneski, 2014, p.56).

Generally, “mass media use terrorist attacks as a topic that attracts public attention in order to boost ratings and circulation” (Protopapas, 2012, p.3) and, thus, become, “from the terrorists’ perspective, a fickle friend” (Soriano, M. R. T. 2008, p.4).

However, numerous authors support that media reports on terrorism can increase stress levels. Slone (2000) concluded the visual presentation of terrorist atrocities raised people’s level of anxiety, especially among women, while Schuster et al. (2001) argued that media reporting of the 9/11 terrorist attacks increased symptoms of stress among people.

Besides, “media coverage of terrorism increases fear” (Milosevska & Taneski, 2014, p.58). Asogwa, Iyere, and Attah (2012) argued that terrorism causes “some panic among the immediate target audience” (p.178). They further stated, “the media’s dysfunction with regards to crime and terrorism make people think that the world is unsafe to live in” (p.177).

On the other hand, Rohner and Frey (2007) linked repeated media coverage of terrorism with the increase of terrorist attacks in the future. This contradicts Nelson and Scott (1992), who found that media reporting of terrorist incidents did not increase further attacks.

Findings

Many studies argue that both Arab and Western TV news channels devote considerable time to terrorism-related news. According to Al-Majdhoub and Hamzha (2016), CNN allocated more time to reporting ISIL attacks (83.05%) than Al Jazeera English did (16.95%). Additionally, Gerhards and Schäfer (2014) found that CNN, Al Jazeera Arabic, BBC, and German ARD focused on terrorist attacks.

Similarly, all the news on the Al Iraqiya Channel primarily concerned terrorism (Snoussi & Sa`id, 2014). However, the style and tone of terrorism news coverage across Arab and Western TV news channels are contradictory. Abdullah and Elareshi (2015) indicated that both Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya news channels did not stress on the humanitarian side while reporting terrorism. Similarly, Zeng and Tahat (2012) argued that the humanitarian sufferings from terrorism were seldom brought to the attention of the public in Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya news.

On the other hand, Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya reported that all victims of terrorist attacks perpetrated by Al Qaeda were from Middle-Eastern countries (Abdullah, 2014).

Likewise, Al-Majdhoub and Hamzha (2016) argued that Al Jazeera Arabic and CNN TV news coverage of ISIL attacks revealed the brutality of such organisations to mass audiences.

However, Asogwa and Attah (2012) suggested that exaggerated news reporting of terrorism can make audiences feel the world is unsafe because of the untrue image about the alleged power of terrorist organisations. This was the case with the Boko Haram group in Nigeria.

Regarding a framing analysis, both Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya used episodic framing in reporting terrorist attacks (Abdullah, 2014) while CNN provided detailed information about ISIL terrorist activities (Al-Majdhoub & Hamzha, 2016).

Zhang and Hellmueller (2016) pointed out that both CNN and Al Jazeera English used the "strategic game frame", which focuses on measures taken by countries to face ISIS threats. Additionally, Al Jazeera English used the "existential threat" as a prominent frame in reporting ISIS terrorism.

Gerhards and Schäfer (2014) stated that CNN and Al Jazeera Arabic framed terrorist attacks from the perspective of "war on terror", whereas BBC and German ARD interpreted the attacks as a "crimes against humanity".

Studies found that differences existed between Arab and Western TV news channels in selecting news sources while reporting terrorist attacks. Zhang and Hellmueller (2016) found that CNN adopted officials' points of view, unlike Al Jazeera English, which used primarily different and varied news sources.

Abdullah (2014) explained this point by concluding that Al Jazeera relied more on experts in reporting terrorist attacks (24.2%), compared to Al Arabiya (5.2%). Furthermore, Al Jazeera used other different news sources, such as witnesses, victims, and those who committed terrorist activities, in contrast to Al Arabiya and Al Iraqiya, which adopted governmental sources in covering such stories (Abdullah, & Elareshi, 2015; Snoussi & Sa`id, 2014).

Conversely, Zeng, and Tahat (2012) argued that too much media focus was placed on disseminating and supporting official positions and decisions in Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya news channels, as well as the Greek media (Protopapas, 2012).

Conclusion

Although Arab and Western TV news channels focus on terrorism as a global threat facing the modern world, Western news channels provide audiences with more detailed information about terrorism than Arab TV news channels do.

Thus, Western channels look forward to satisfying the needs of their audiences to keeping them informed about terrorism issues and clarify the distinction between Islam as a religion and terrorism.

There were contradicting findings regarding the style and tone of reporting the terrorism phenomenon. While some Arab TV news channels, such as Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya did not focus on the humanitarian side while reporting the stories of terrorist attacks. Other Arab and Western TV news channels condemned the cruelty of terrorism. This is because some major attacks caused thousands of casualties and

injuries, which created global sympathy worldwide, similar to what happened in the 9/11 Attacks.

Most TV news channels depended on officials as their main source of information in covering terrorist attacks. This is probably because terrorism is a critical issue that needs sensitive treatment that can be attained by relying on reliable and trustworthy sources. Nonetheless, Al Jazeera uses different and varied news sources that reflect its editorial policy, which is derived from its slogan “the opinion and the other opinion”.

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