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ALJAZEERA CENTRE FOR STUDIES

Report

New challenges facing the media in the coverage of urban terrorism

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The rolling coverage of terrorist attacks irrespective of impact has a propensity of spreading fear and terror [Reuters]

Introduction

This report is the expanded version of an article by the author, "Paris attack raises questions about media coverage of urban terrorism".⁽¹⁾

There is a growing trend of lone-wolf terrorists' attacks in Europe. Other than bombs and guns they are increasingly using common objects like knives, cars, hammers and the like to inflict harm and chaos. The rise of lone-wolf terrorism, as this phenomenon is often called, presents a new challenge in the fight against modern day urban terrorism. Stringent security measures in Europe and the continued bombardment of terrorists' establishments in the Middle East have disturbed most terrorists' operations. Furthermore the coordinated global anti-terrorism efforts aimed at terrorist incubation centres in places like Libya, Syria and Iraq have started to yield results. The involvement of society organisations in awareness campaigns has also played an important role in this regard. Lone-wolf terrorism is a new creative way of circumventing these efforts. France and the United Kingdom (UK) have suffered tremendously the brunt of lone-wolf terrorist attacks over the past months. Naturally, these incidences have attracted huge media attention. Various media pundits have sounded an alarm that major news outlets focused on terrorist attacks in Western Europe, such as the 13 November attacks in Paris and the 22 March attacks in Brussels, with 24/7, wall-to-wall coverage while giving scant attention to equally deadly and destructive terrorism attacks in Turkey, Lebanon and Africa⁽²⁾. The UK bombed Iraq and Syria 69 out of 99 days in 2017 as part of military operations against IS, dropping 216 bombs and missiles on both countries⁽³⁾, and many civilians were killed in those bombings. Furthermore, the war in Syria continues to claim huge casualties on a daily basis, but this attracts less attention from the Western media. According to the Syrian Center for Policy Research, an independent Syrian research organisation, the death toll from the conflict as of February 2016 was 470,000. The

spread and intensification of fighting has led to a dire humanitarian crisis, with 6.1 million internally displaced people and 4.8 million seeking refuge abroad.(4) The manner in which these events are covered by the news media and the discriminate attention they receive polarises global public consensus on the fight against the terrorism. Importantly, it has also raised a very poignant question regarding the extent to which lone-wolf terrorists are exploiting the media, particularly television, to achieve their objectives.

How does speed in the development of news impact good journalism?

The 24-hour news channels are involved in a rat race of trying to keep their audiences informed. The competition between these channels to scoop each other in breaking news provides added pressure. Breaking news is often followed by a rolling continual coverage of events as the story develops. However, this only happens in certain places, and breaking stories in other parts of the world irrespective of their importance go days without attention. What types of news qualify for rolling coverage by the media and what criteria do newsrooms use to determine that criteria? Media operational guidelines in this regard vary from organisation to organisation, and most guiding principles are born from a number of rules of thumb and “editorial gut feel”. Also, most big news media are located in Europe, which makes it easier for them to cover breaking news. Furthermore, there is an enabling working environment in most European countries for journalists to operate. Ordinarily, the rarity, severity and frequency of events play a critical role in the prioritisation of news stories. Frequent events lack traction and most news organisations tend to give less attention to such news. What attracts attention is rare news and those that contain severe impacts such as high number of casualties and injuries. This is the justification used to explain why certain stories make it to the news and receive a rolling live coverage whilst others don't. Acts of terrorism have been – until recently – rare in most European metropolises compared to the Middle East, making terrorism incidences in Europe more attractive.

The live coverage of events reduces pressure within most 24 hour news channels. They can fill hours of airtime which are ordinarily filled by packaged reports involving money and hours of manpower in newsgathering. Secondly, technology has reduced video feeding costs drastically and live news coverage can be broadcasted more easily. Ten years ago, it cost a lot more to stream live. Twenty years ago, only high-end productions were able to broadcast live to the masses.(5) With live coverage, there are no post-production and editing costs or other inconveniences that come with normal packaged news reports. Moreover, live broadcast television breaks the monotony of daily packed news reporting, and attracts new audiences as people tend to be more captivated by live news coverage. Live events foster engagement more than on demand events. When a large group of people is watching a live stream concurrently, it is a far more social experience than when they watch an on demand video on their own time.(6)

A changing game: Are terrorists using it to further their objectives?

Live television news events have been dominated by incidences involving lone-wolf terrorist attacks recently. This has presented new challenges to the broadcast news media. The fast pace in which such stories develop prompts the development of narratives which sometimes contradict subsequent official statements. Journalists rely on leaks and sometimes eyewitness accounts to build their stories. Their investigations often go parallel to those of police or even faster due to less red tape adherence, which puts enormous pressure on police. Once the coverage begins and the narrative is established, it is difficult to change the established narrative in the middle of the story. The police are pressured to give premature answers to the event as they try to look prepared in the midst of a developing story. It is here when television journalism is tested. The verification of sources and exact information is important in order to avoid retractions of stories. It is also important because it adds trust and value in journalism. The myth goes that three words were imprinted prominently on the office walls of the great journalist and newspaper publisher, Joseph Pulitzer: "Verify, verify and verify". Most television journalists have been found wanting when it comes to verifying stories during the live coverage of news, as the speed in which stories develop leads to the neglect of this very important principle. "Trust but verify" applies more to journalism than in politics. Having said that, television has done more in improving the language as stories develop, and there has been great level of care. Most of it has been due to the backlash that has emanated mainly from Muslim communities who have accused the mainstream media of Islamophobia. Organisations such as Council on American Islamic Relations (CAIR) have created dedicated platforms to deal with Islamophobia and the unjustified targeting of Muslims and are active in correcting the media when news involving terrorism unfold. The mislabeling of Timothy McVeigh as a Muslim terrorist in April 1995 forced many news organisations to exercise care when reporting acts of terrorism. The terrorist act in Oklahoma City which killed 168 people and injured over 600 people went on for hours in most media organisations as the act of Islamic terror, only to discover it was an act of a non-Muslim American domestic terrorist.

Lone-wolf terrorists' acts are not only meant to inflict pain and death but also to spread terror and fear. They commit these crimes to catch the attention of the public and indeed of the state. Their expectations are that terrorising nations will create pressure from the public and force states to amend their policies and subsequently meet their demands. The new wave of violent propaganda has prompted much debate about the role of the Islamic State's videos in attracting militants as well as the degree to which the media itself is responsible for providing terrorism with the "oxygen of publicity".⁽⁷⁾ The transnational nature of this new form of terrorism is largely dependent on mass and social media. The readiness of the news media organisation to cover such events facilitates the spread of terror. Furthermore, terrorists use the material from these organisations to recreate videos, train and recruit terrorists for further attacks. The

rolling coverage of terrorist attacks irrespective of impact has a propensity of spreading fear and terror. The traditional media is therefore trapped between the need to inform the audiences about these crimes whilst simultaneously spreading fear and terror by providing a rolling coverage of the incident. Should the media re-think how they cover the terrorist attacks?

Conclusion

The change in staffing in most newsrooms has given rise to uncomfortable questions particularly from those journalists who come from developing worlds. This has led to vibrant discussion in some newsrooms when stories of terrorism break around the world. The fact is that the criticism that is levelled at the news media regarding discrimination is beginning to make sense. The severity of events in Europe does not justify the attention the television news media give. Furthermore, if frequency is still used as the yardstick, that too does not justify the prioritisation of Europe incidences as they are occurring more frequently lately. So, why do television news organisations continue to dedicate time involving minor acts of terrorism in Europe? Technology, proximity of the media to these incidences, empathy from journalists and, to an extent, laziness give unqualified attention to certain news events. The technical know-how and capacity enable most news media organisations based in Europe to reach the story timeously and provide the coverage it deserves. Secondly, most journalists from news media organisations are Europeans, and are personally affected by terrorism. Therefore, if the objective of terrorism is to inflict fear and terror, then the rolling coverage of acts of terrorism facilitates those objectives. The media attention and coverage of terrorist attacks require a rethink particularly as terrorist organisations change their tactics. The lone-wolf attack is a new strategy of inflicting terror and creating turmoil. It is no longer about numbers but about the attention their acts receive in the media. Media has therefore become key in their strategy of furthering their objectives. Finally, according to many terrorism experts, there is a growing trend of idolisation of terrorism on the internet. Raffaello Pantucci, a terrorism expert, argues that there is a deeply troubling phenomenon within the suburban young jihadists to be attracted to what he calls "jihadi cool".⁽⁸⁾ What must the media do? How can it protect itself against this trapping? One suggestion is to deprive terrorists coverage of their heinous crimes. Less coverage of terrorist acts might reduce the stardom that terrorists subsequently enjoy online. The criminal incidence in New York on 15 May 2017 in which a number of people were injured after a car intentionally rammed into crowds was shocking. The aftermath pictures on social media showed how the driver of the car made a sudden turn and drove straight into pedestrians injuring a number of them in the process. He then jumped out of his car and tried to escape before the police apprehended him. The scenes from the CCTV footage were extreme. However, the incident did not dominate the headlines. The incident happened in the beginning of a weekend, indicating that the intention was clearly to spread terror as families were preparing to enjoy their leisure. The lack of

coverage of this incidence demonstrates how discretion in coverage could allow normality amidst havoc and how less coverage of terrorism events could reduce terrorism incidences in future.

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