

A Critical Analysis of Media Representations of Terrorism: A Case Study of the Madrid 2004 Train Bombings

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Setting the Scene

If the darkness that arrives after absence was measured, the Cathedral would have been a pavilion for the blind, [...] again that grandmother wiping away her tears with a handkerchief. If hugs were needed, there were arms coming from everywhere as if to stop a train, all trains, those trains. (*El Mundo* 14)

This quote is a translated excerpt from an article published by the Spanish newspaper *El Mundo* on the State Funeral for the victims of the 2004 Madrid Train Bombings. In the days following the attacks, many similarly sensationalised descriptions were used

to report on the consequences of the attacks by the newspapers *El Mundo* and *El País*. Undoubtedly, terrorist events will be tragic and any description of them will carry some dramatic elements. However, as many critics and academics have noted (Cooper 1976; Nacos 2007, among others), sensationalising events in such ways may be inappropriate, unethical and dangerous.

Terrorists aim to *communicate* a message to the world – to make their intended public know that they exist and that they can harm them. The media, in *communicating* with the public on terrorism in dramatized ways, can inadvertently help fulfil this goal (Wilkinson 1997; Weimann and Brosius 1991: 333-335). Wilkinson (1997) describes four main aims of terrorists; to instil fear among the wider population; make known their reasons and cause; to disrupt security agencies' activities; and to recruit committed newcomers to their cause (p.56). Indeed, as Nacos (2007) observes, we live in an era of 'mass-mediated terrorism', where the media often regrettably plays into the hands of terrorists by helping them meet their four aims, albeit unintentionally. It is fitting then, that the relationship between terrorism and the media has been described as 'symbiotic' (Wilkinson 1997: 52; Cooper 1976: 231).

Importantly, the landslide of reporting on terrorism that occurs after certain attacks is not always proportional to the actual threat. For example, in the one year and fifty days following 9-11, the *Washington Post* printed over 10,700 articles regarding terrorism (Rothe and Bower 2002, discussed in Rothe and Muzzatti 2004: 338). However, a database of world-wide terrorist incidents held by the US State Department clarifies that fewer attacks occurred between 2002 and 2003 than during the previous twenty years (Lewis 2012). Nonetheless, "the notion that the attacks on 11 September 2001 signalled the start of a new era of terrorist attacks became conventional in the blink of an eye, bypassing any sober

analysis” (*ibid*: 259). The thought is that events of terrorism have come to be over-reported, and so the public will consider them to be of the highest urgency even when this evaluation is inaccurate (Nacos 2007; Lewis 2012).

Over-reporting occurs because media workers want to report on events that are newsworthy and interesting to the public, thereby growing their audience. Reporters simply cannot report on everything that happens and must select what becomes ‘news’ among a wide range of options (MacDougall 1968, discussed in Hall *et al* 2010: 240). As Chibnall (2010, *originally* 1977) discovered in observing and interviewing crime reporters, eight ‘professional news imperatives of journalism’ increase an event’s likelihood of being portrayed in the media, helping media outlets further attract audiences; immediacy, dramatization, personalization, novelty, conventionalism, simplification, structured access and titillation (p.205). In a more recent account, Jewkes (2010: 215-225, *originally* 2004) has added to Chibnall’s list violence, proximity, perceived risk and visual imagery, among others.

In this context, it is easy to see why terrorism against Westerners is so widely and vigorously reported. It allows for the satisfaction of many of the imperatives above, including drama, visual images and violence, and can therefore be exploited by the media (Lewis 2012: 257). In this sense, the events on September 11, 2001 were extraordinarily newsworthy; “hijacked planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon – a devastating attack on the centre of Western military, economic and cultural power – was such an excessive moment in terms of news value that it almost stretched credulity” (Lewis 2012: 258).

A vast amount of research has explored the negative social and political effects of such coverage and over-reporting of terrorism by the mass media. The first of these consequences is the

spread of fear among the target public of a terrorist group. In the years following September 11 2001 for example, “levels of public concern [about terrorism] roughly reflected the volume of terrorism coverage in the major TV networks” (Kern, Just and Norris 2003, discussed in Nacos 2007: 180). Fear of terrorism following a recent event is natural. However, it is dangerous for the media to *over-report* on the issue in sensationalist ways, as this may lead to *disproportionate* levels of fear among the public (Nacos 2007; Pozas and Toral 2004). Deciding whether fear is disproportionate can seem controversial, but there are some clear signs. For instance, throughout more than four years after 9-11, over 60 per cent of Americans persistently feared another terrorist attack in the United States ‘a great deal’ or ‘somewhat’ (Nacos 2007: 182). However, as I mentioned above, in the early 21st Century terrorism is in fact *not* as much of a threat as many believe it to be (Lewis 2012). It is unfortunate that the mass media’s over-reporting contributed to such elevated and disproportionate concern.

Relatedly, frightened people are more easily manipulated into supporting certain political ends (Signorielli 1990: 102, discussed in Reiner 2007: 321). Rothe and Muzzatti (2004: 337-340) note that the growth in public anxieties after the reports of heightened terror alerts following 9-11 made it easier for the Bush administration to pursue an ‘imperialist’ political agenda, gathering support for a ‘war on terror’ (*ibid*: 339). Arguably, this course of action by the government was disproportionate to its impetus, but it received relatively little public criticism (Nacos 2007: 143-159).

However it would be remiss to ignore what the mass media can do to help combat terrorism. Appropriate reporting of a terrorist act can sensitize people and heighten vigilance, making it more difficult for terrorism to be carried out successfully. People can even be encouraged to cooperate with the authorities in

investigations (Wilkinson 1997: 60), as was seen recently in 2013 after the Boston Bombings, where many people who heard of the events helped the victims by donating blood and aiding with the police investigation (*The Guardian Online* 2013). Such extremely beneficial effects are brought about by a mass media that we are often quick to criticise. Thus, the ideal solution would be to provide proper safeguards for the reporting of terrorism, while still upholding freedom of the press and capitalizing on benefits the mass media can provide (Wilkinson 1997: 50-52).

Though by no means exhaustive, this overview has shed light on some of the main issues regarding the controversial relationship between terrorism and the mass media. We shall now focus on a specific case study of the news representation of the 2004 Madrid Train Bombings to give context to the issues highlighted – noting meanwhile how the Spanish press differed from traditional terrorism reporting.

The Madrid Train Bombings

On the morning of 11 March 2004, three days before the Spanish General Elections, ten bombs exploded on four commuter trains that were heading to Madrid's Atocha Station, killing 191 people and injuring over 1800. The Madrid Bombings, which have been described by the media as “the worst terrorist attack in mainland Europe since World War II” (Valdeón 2009: 67) were attributed to Islamic fundamentalist terrorists. No *direct* Al Qaeda link has been demonstrated through legal proceedings. The attacks had a variety of unexpected social and political consequences – including the ousting of the governing party, the centre-right-wing Partido Popular (PP), in favour of the centre-left-wing opposition party Partido Socialista Obrero Español (PSOE) during the elections, contrary to the polls' predictions (Pozas and Toral 2004).

11-M, as the day has come to be known, received widespread media attention across Spain and internationally (Casero 2005: 22). Given its effects, it serves as an interesting subject for a case study delving into the relationship between the media and terrorism.

To carry out the case study, I conducted a qualitative discourse and image analysis on 28 lead stories relating to 11-M published in two of the main broadsheet newspapers in Spain, *El País* (centre-left) and *El Mundo* (centre-right), during the two weeks after the attacks. I analysed the 14 images related to the attacks printed on the front page of either newspaper during the two-week period.

Newsworthiness

“By its very nature, a terroristic act is meant to be impressive” (Cooper 1976: 226). It is essentially a dramatic event, and ‘dramatization’ is one of the key factors news reports rely on to make their portrayals of events interesting and attractive. Chibnall (2010) argues that news workers aim to make an “impact” when presenting a report (p.206). By its very nature, an account of the 11-M Madrid Bombings achieves this. The risk is that the dramatic element of an event is over-emphasised in news portrayals. On Friday 12 March 2004, headlines such as “Terrorist Inferno in Madrid” (*El País* 2004) and “The Day of Infamy” (*El Mundo* 2004) were powerful and emotive. Reports that day were filled with phrases such as “the mortal sequence” (*El País* 1) of the train bombings – bombings that left a “trail of death on the railway line” (*ibid*) – which helped to increase the news hype around an already tragic situation. Sensationalist accounts of the attacks continued throughout the following two weeks. The articles focused on the human tragedy and the broken families (*El Mundo*

12; *El País* 8, among others), and many of them used similarly dramatized language.

Related to ‘dramatization’ is the news value of ‘spectacle and graphic imagery’ (Jewkes 2010: 222). Carrabine (2012) notes that in a recent ‘visual turn’ in criminology (p.463) it is now vital to analyse not only what crime is like, but also how it is represented (p.463-487). The photographs *El País* and *El Mundo* published of the 11-M bombings and their aftermath caused widespread critique, and rightly so. Vara (2006) complained that the images of the attacks were not selected with prudence, and they sensationalised the events in unethical ways that even violated the privacy of the victims and their families by, for example, showing recognisable wounded faces (p. 11-12). Notably, out of the fourteen images analysed here, seven contained images of dead (or injured) people or recognisable people who were visibly upset.

The dangers of such reporting have already been described, and include the possibility of enhanced and disproportionate fear and anxiety among the public (Cooper 1976), as well as a vulnerability to be manipulated for certain political ends (Signorielli 1990: 102, discussed in Reiner 2007: 321). Vivid and visual reports may sell, but the risks associated with this style of reporting must also be considered.

Consequences of Media Terrorism Reporting and How Spain Differed

Disproportionate Concern

Previous literature shows that levels of concern, and to an extent fear of terrorism, are related to the amount and form of media reports on terrorist acts (Nacos 2007: 180). The reports on 11-M, their abundance and their dramatic characteristics helped

spread panic and distress across the Spanish population (Vara 2006; Casero 2005). It is normal for alarm to spread after a terrorist act. The point is that the media can inadvertently help spread *disproportionate* concern, and this can have various undesirable effects. Three months before 11-M, 35.7 per cent of Spaniards believed terrorism was the greatest threat against Spain. This number increased to 60.9 per cent following the bombings (Instituto Opina 2004, discussed in Canel and Sanders 2010: 449). Terrorism may have been something to be worried about to an extent – but as Lewis (2012: 259-260) has argued, it is not actually the largest international threat in the early 21st Century. Although the increased levels of fear may not have been solely caused by the media's reporting on the events of 11 March 2004, the reports did contribute to the spread of alarm across the population. To reiterate, the consequences of these disproportionate levels of fear can be harmful to the appropriate functioning of society.

Political Consequences

We saw above how media reports can engender a “climate of public support, apathy or anger” (Cohen-Almagor 2000: 252), depending on how they are portrayed. Sometimes after a terrorist attack, governments can utilize the media to influence public sentiment and engender support for specific political goals (Rothe and Muzzatti 2004). Government administrations are able to leverage their role of valuable ‘information-holders’ and ‘primary sources’ in times of national crisis (Miller and Sabir 2012: 77; Chibnall 2010, *originally* 1977). This privileged role creates conditions in which news reporters and the public in general will pay particular attention to information they reveal and will be more likely to accept it unquestioningly than under normal circumstances (Nacos 2007). In the case of 11-M, the Aznar Administration was

very aware of the upcoming general election. The sitting conservative government (led by the *Partido Popular*) engaged in a media strategy that has been criticised by many, where it initially claimed that ETA, the Basque separatist terrorist organisation, was behind the attacks, even though the evidence was far from conclusive (Valdeón 2009: 67; Canel and Sanders 2010). This led *El Mundo*'s online articles to report on 'ETA's most bloody attacks' a few hours after the bombings (*ibid.*: 71-72); information which was later found to be incorrect.

Why would the sitting government want to highlight ETA's, and not Islamic fundamentalists', involvement? One of the reasons could be that Islamic terrorism would likely relate, at least in part, to Spain's support for the Iraq war, which the PP sitting government had supported and the PSOE left-wing opposition party wanted to opt out of (Canel and Sanders 2010: 449). Three days before the election, terrorist attacks by Islamic jihadists could put the PP's lead in the polls (*ibid.*: 449) in serious jeopardy by enhancing fear about a new attack for similar reasons. So, the government made an effort to portray its staunch belief that ETA was behind the events (*El País* 1, 2, 3, 6, 13; *El Mundo* 1, 2, 3, 8), and "government actions continued to hold ETA as responsible even after [...] the discovery of a van with a videotape with verses from the Koran" (Canel and Sanders 2010: 455).

However the Spanish newspapers, particularly *El País*, were not fooled. When the controversy over who was actually behind the attacks escalated, *El País* was quick to highlight the dispute and say evidence pointed to Islamic terrorism, and even *El Mundo* denounced the issue (*El Mundo* 3), even if in more subdued ways (*El Mundo* 1; *El Mundo* 8). Notably, the government's media strategy was not succeeding. In total, 14 of the 28 articles discussed the polemic over the presumed authorship of the bombings. This

contrasts greatly with the mostly-supportive accounts of government initiatives given after 9-11 (Rothe and Muzzatti 2004: 338-340) and 7-7 (Canel and Sanders 2010) by the US and UK press respectively, which hints at some particularities of the Spanish Press (Canel and Sanders 2010).

If the dramatized articles and images were not enough to influence voters, the critiques of the sitting government influenced the public even more. Pozas and Toral (2004) have argued that the PSOE party won the elections as a result of the emotions attached to the 11-M bombings and the fear they created about possible future attacks (p.13). Furthermore, the Spanish Press did not support the government's views, implying instead that the government was manipulating information (*El País* 10, 13). Consequently, "the issue [among the public] shifted from the question of who had killed to the question of who had lied" (Canel and Sanders 2010: 458), and "the government became the enemy (not the terrorists); and the remedy, a new government" (*ibid*: 458). It was thus that the left-wing PSOE, on March 14 2004, won the elections with nearly 11 million votes (*El País* 4; *El Mundo* 4). This electoral result was not solely the product of the media's reports on the bombings, but the reports did play a role in the formation of public opinion.

Having established this political consequence, it is important we now look back and examine whether the terrorists achieved what they wanted. The government changed as a direct result of the bombings. This is no place for deep political debates about the virtues of the left-wing or the promises of the right-wing, and I will take no stance regarding the particular political and social values the two main parties in Spain advocated throughout their campaigns. What is paramount to the discussion here, however, is that the PSOE party ended up withdrawing the Spanish troops

from Iraq. In fact Spain was criticized by various international officials for being a “nation that has succumbed to the threats of terrorism [...]” (*El Mundo* 7). While the withdrawal from Iraq was likely not all the terrorists aimed for (Dannenbaum 2011: 323), it was certainly a significant aim. Thus, the terrorists did achieve at least *part* of their objectives. It appears then that sometimes terrorism does to an extent work (Rose, Murphy and Abrahms 2007). If terrorism is achieving any of its desired effects, and if any of these effects are being encouraged inadvertently by the media, then media outlets must be doing something wrong, even if this is done unintentionally.

Positive Consequences

The articles analysed depicted the terrorists as assassins and awoke in people a sense of not only concern but also unity. They highlighted a form of what Durkheim called ‘collective conscience’ (Erikson 1966: 4), where the law-abiding ‘us’ was pitted against the murdering, boundary-crossing ‘other’. Partly due to the widespread reports of the bombings and their consequences, and the calls for help by authorities, thousands of citizens in Madrid took to the streets to help the victims and their families (*El País* 1), and many were willing to cooperate with the police investigation as much as possible (*El Mundo* 6).

It cannot be ignored then that the two newspapers’ and other media outlets’ reporting of the 11-M bombings had some deep benefits we would be careless to ignore.

Conclusion

In light of what has been said, what can be done to ensure that societies reap the benefits of media reporting while preventing the media from playing into the hands of terrorists? Scholars like

Wilkinson (1997), among others, largely agree that appropriate safeguards and self-regulation by the media are necessary so that that the media does not sensationalise terrorism and so that neither the government nor the terrorists manipulate the press (Wilkinson 1997: 51).

In contemporary democracies, media censorship and excessive statutory regulation would inevitably raise complaints regarding the violation of two of the main ideological pillars of democracy: freedom of the press and freedom from undue regulation (Wilkinson 1997: 60-61). Nonetheless, the risks posed by the effects of unrestrained media reporting of terrorism must be addressed. In this context, theorists have argued for “voluntary self-restraint” by the mass media (Wilkinson 1997: 51). Certainly, news-workers in all media outlets need to balance the desire to report and inform the public about newsworthy events, with the prudence not to sensationalise situations that already cause heightened emotions in themselves, and with the care not to play into the hands of terrorists by giving them too much publicity (Paletz and Tawney 1992: 110). Essentially, what we need is a variant of Green’s (2012) ‘public journalism’ (p.281), where information in the press is provided in a rational, cool-headed manner, avoiding the “shallow, sensationalised, overly simplified presentations found in some segments of the press [that] serve only to tap into inchoate insecurities, inflaming them, without providing the informational tools necessary for the public to assess and to face them” (p. 282). In the case of the Madrid Bombings, as has been evidenced in this article, this form of professional self-restraint by the press would have been extremely beneficial.

In a world where the reach of the ‘global mediasphere’ (Ferrell and Greer 2009: 5) is expanding, and where terrorism

becomes more and more of a social preoccupation, we must find ways for the media not to be used in ways that benefit terrorists.

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Appendix A: Articles Analysed

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