



Articles

Media Discourse on Jihadist Terrorism in Europe

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Abstract

This article analyses the manner in which European print media discuss jihadist terrorism in Europe. It presents key results from a qualitative analysis of media discourse following three selected attacks in seven European countries in 2010: the attack on the cartoonist Westergaard, the Yemen cargo plane plot, and the Stockholm suicide attack. The article finds that attack type is a factor shaping media discourse across different media in Europe.

Introduction

The article aims to shed light on how European print media discuss jihadist terrorist attacks in Europe. Using a qualitative media analysis, it finds that attack type shapes discourse across different media in Europe: the Westergaard case led to a value-oriented discourse, the Yemen cargo plane plot to a discourse of control, and the Stockholm attack to a broader and less defined discourse. Analysing media reflection of terrorist acts is significant due to media generating attention to these acts (Combs 2013) and news frames impacting interpretation (Entman, 2010, 1993; Goffman, 1974).

Terrorist attacks receive notable media attention, and media have considerable influence in shaping interpretation of such acts and the reactions to them. The media role can be seen in terms of an active and a passive quality, although both also mingle. In a more passive role media reflect respective societal and political views on terrorism. These views are shaped by norms and values and become concrete in the interpretations, reactions and proposed policies. In this light, media discourse illustrates a society's national self-image (see also Boulding, 1996; Scott, 1965). The mingling of the passive and active qualities materializes in the national image providing historical frames for the interpretation and framing of current events (see also Le, 2006: 10-12). Actively then, media communicate about terrorism with the intention to inform, and to sell. Here, we also find media competition, a resulting tendency to sensationalize and a need for resonance (Sutter, 2010: 17).

A constructivist perspective of the creation of social reality via communication and interaction (see also Berger and Luckmann, 1968; Katzenstein, Keohane and Krasner, 1998; Wiener, 2006) allows to further consider language's contribution to our understanding of an issue and the remedies we



find appropriate and necessary. Via a particular coverage of events media contribute to social reality, public opinion and partly policy. The impact of language on interpretation of information in media is found in news frames. Frames refer to the definition of an issue or situation, a process that is shaped by our organizational principles (Goffman, 1974: 10 ff.). Something is thus framed in a specific manner and linked with certain values. News frames in media discourse then facilitate certain interpretations (Entman, 2010, 1993; Goffman, 1974: 21). This framing process is complex (de Vreese, 2005), but also effective due to humans processing information with the least effort possible, by using mental short-cuts and filters (see also Fiske and Taylor, 1991). Framing explains the link of media, public opinion and policy, also shown in numerous studies (for example Entman, 2010; Glaab, 2007a; Linsky, 1986; Lomax Cook et al., 1983; Nacos, Boch-Elkon and Shapiro, 2011; Pritchard, 1992; Puglisi, 2004). Thus, as writers and editors interpret the world as they see it and thereby contribute to public discourse, media become an active player (Sutter: 34, 44). An example of this is media discourse on left-wing terrorism in Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. Regarding the RAF, German media highlighted either the group's political demands or their criminal nature, depending on own political leaning and temporal development (Glaab, 2007b). Media discourse then often exaggerated the ability of left-wing terrorist groups in Germany as well as in Italy to affect the state (Hess, 2006, 1988).

Scope of Article

This article is based on results of a research project in Germany in cooperation with research institutes in France, Italy, Netherlands, Spain, Turkey and the UK (see also author footnote). For the media analysis, three jihadist attacks were selected – all in 2010 for a comparable context. They differ in targets, means and damage: the attack on Danish cartoonist Kurt Westergaard on January 1, 2010, the Yemen cargo plane plot on October 29, 2010, and the Stockholm suicide attack on December 11, 2010. In the Westergaard case, a 28-year old Somali Muslim with a Danish staying permit forcibly entered Westergaard's house and tried to kill him with an axe in revenge for the Muhammad cartoons. Westergaard was already under police protection due to earlier threats and could flee to his 'panic room' and alert police. The attacker was brought into custody. In the Yemen cargo plane plot, printers with pentaerythritol tetranitrate explosives were discovered in U.S.-bound planes during stop-overs in the UK and Dubai. While no explosion occurred, the plot raised great alarm in Europe and beyond; the likely target was an explosion over American soil. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula took responsibility. In the Stockholm case, the 28-year old Iraqi offender who had lived in Sweden and then moved to the UK ignited a car bomb and then tried to ignite his explosives belt. It went off early, killed himself and hurt two bystanders. He likely planned to target a large crowd in central Stockholm.

These attacks were analysed in two major national newspapers of each of the seven countries for a period of three weeks after the attack: Germany: Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung & Süddeutsche Zeitung; France: Le Monde & Le Parisien; Italy: Corriere della Sera & La Repubblica; Netherlands: Volkskrant & NRC Handelsblad; Spain: El País & El Mundo; Turkey: Hürriyet & Sabah; and UK: Financial Times & The Guardian. Their circulation and standing make the selected papers

representative of and a trendsetter for national print media. The inclusion of seven countries allows a broad comparison and, with Turkey, goes beyond a purely Western European discourse.

The media analysis was conducted as qualitative content analysis. Previous research on terrorist communication and media discourse on terrorist acts led to thematic categories, or news frames, which were sufficiently broad to capture all relevant content and sufficiently specific to allow for nuances. They are: coverage (number of articles overall and front pages); offender motives,[1] messages and causes of jihadist terrorism; evaluation of topics of jihadist interest such as Western troop presence in predominantly Muslim countries (e.g. Afghanistan, Iraq),[2] symbolic offences (e.g. Muhammad cartoons), and relations between Europe/the West and the Muslim world/Islam; and major policy reactions reported (legislation, surveillance, technical measures, social measures and foreign policy).

Due to space limitations, only key results are presented. As national media discourse shows a frequent convergence, the article often gives results at national media level (referring to national media or cooperation partners' reports, e.g. French media, UK Report). Results from specific news sources are presented for illustration or to show minority opinions. For better understanding, the article refers to the term of jihadist terrorist for specific meaning and the term of terrorist for general meaning. This is also grounded in the analysed media discourse not distinguishing between terrorists and jihadist terrorists. Further, the article speaks of attacks and not attempted attacks because of the significant impact on media discourse and partly policy.

Coverage

Regarding the coverage of the attacks in media, the *Westergaard* case received the least attention. The *Yemen* case received the greatest attention, both in the number of articles and cover pages, with the *Stockholm* case a close second. Only in Turkish media, Stockholm clearly came before Yemen. Regarding the use of photographs, all cases were reported with photos, although not all of the direct attack scene. The distribution of articles in the period of analysis was very similar for the attacks: few and short articles in the first two days, as facts are still gathered; then longer and more detailed articles for about two weeks, as facts and policy measures are discussed; finally, subsiding but also reflective coverage that includes a wider context. However, among national newspapers, German newspapers showed the greatest coverage; only regarding Yemen, amount of national coverage was more similar.

What does coverage tell us? The *Westergaard* case received the least attention, possibly because there had been much coverage of Westergaard already for the publication of his and other cartoonists' cartoons, the topic of Westergaard not being entirely new. The *Yemen* case received the most attention, since here we had a terrorist group exploiting security gaps in air cargo transport, the incident both having international impact and calling on international cooperation. Media attention could further be explained by the U.S. having been the target and the UK role in the plot's discovery. In the *Stockholm* case the material damage and human casualties would have been much larger, had the offender succeeded as likely planned. Such damage potential obviously raises much alarm.



The Impact of Attack Type on Discourse in European Print Media

The Westergaard Case

All national media report on the offender motivation and message of revenge for Westergaard's cartoons, which were seen as blasphemous and offensive by many Muslims. Also mentioned is Al Qaeda having called for the killing of such cartoonists. An apparent link between the offender and a terrorist network such as Al Qaeda in East Africa or the Somali terrorist group Al-Shabaab is generally debated though – most media focus on the lone offender (France Report; Germany Report; Netherlands Report; Spain Report). The label that national media give to the offender is mostly that of terrorist, while the label of Islamic extremism also figures in the background. The offender's biographical factors such as upbringing or education are not discussed.

While most national media express some awareness that cartoons portraying the Prophet Muhammad, in particular Westergaard's, are offending to Muslims, the freedom of expression as Western value to be defended clearly comes first. A UK newspaper even sees the offender having attacked both free speech and Western values in general: in "an attack on our open society and our democracy" (Financial Times, 4 January 2010). The offender's aims are enlarged to an attempt to change Western values, and most national media clearly call for their defence. Additionally, Dutch media compare it to other attacks, such as the ones on Dutch politician Hirschi Ali or the film maker Theo Van Gogh, clearly defending freedom of expression. While Turkish media recognize the cartoon's offensive nature, even they speak of freedom of expression by referring to Westergaard's statement on the cartoons being linked to free press. Thus, the dominant frame here is freedom of expression.

A minority is more cautious and raises possible boundaries of freedom of speech, especially when it comes to religion and the question of who can really decide what is insulting to others and what not (Netherlands Report; in particular Trouw, 6 January 2010). A German newspaper argues against unnecessary provocations, as an open debate is only possible with respect and tolerance (Herrmann, 12 January 2010). Some point to the lacking Western understanding of how much Islam influences Muslims, also in Western societies (Die Wertedebatte, 4 January 2010; Hannemann, 4 January 2010). And while Dutch media highlight a Danish survey of 84 per cent of the Danish agreeing with the Danish media's decision not to re-publish the Westergaard cartoons for security concerns, German media also warn against retreating simply for fear of attacks.

Media discourse is framed as a clash of values. For example, UK media see a clash between Islamic law and Western values of freedom and democracy, stating that Western values are right. Italian media see lacking respect for Western values by some immigrants. Also the aspect of rationality/irrationality, only raised in UK media, points to values: while the offender is said to possibly have had a rational motive of anger for a felt offence, he acted irrationally, as in European societies differences are settled non-violently. The relationship between the West/Europe and the Muslim world/Islam finds attention in two ways: the larger focus lies on the Western-Islam divide and the cultural and value contrast. Highlighted is the opposition of free societies and Islamist terrorists, the latter being implicitly linked with Islam. A German newspaper speaks of irreconcilable values: "Freedom and democracy are by no means ways of life that are considered as highest level of



human development in the Islamic world. The separation of church and state is not provided for. Even more emotional is the relationship to freedom of expression” (Die Wertedebatte: 9, translated by author). The smaller focus lies on the value of an open debate and how to best lead it. For example, a German newspaper sees a danger of the West becoming intolerant, when insisting too much on its own values. This source warns that those who criticize Islam can become themselves fundamentalist and that such thinking undermines Western values of democracy and debate (Steinfeld, 14 January 2010). The existence of misinterpretations and antipathies in Western-Muslim relations is mentioned, and some call to differentiate among Muslims, as not all Muslims would act like the offender (Germany Report). Turkish media do not take either side, but simply mention the on-going struggle between the West and religiously-inspired terrorism.

Reactions in this case mostly regard social and some legislative measures. Thus, all national media speak of the need to improve integration of immigrants, via programs and adjusted policy. Additionally, an Italian newspaper argues for fostering ways to counter the spread of salafism in Western societies (Kepel, 3 January 2010). UK media also call to counter attempts by Islamic political parties to influence Western law with Islamic values. Media here call for action, but do not further elaborate.

Overall, the Westergaard case has raised a *value debate* – discourse is framed from the view of Western values of freedom, democracy, openness and, especially, freedom of expression. While also possible limits of these values are discussed, the value of freedom overall was dominant.

The Yemen Cargo Plane Plot

Here, we find an overall frame of control. Media focus on terrorists aiming for ever greater material damage or human casualties. French, German, Italian and Turkish media see the attackers as having tested airport security to find gaps in order to then conduct larger attacks and achieve maximum damage. The offenders and terrorists in general are portrayed as learning damage maximisers. However, German media disagree with the possibility of timing an explosion in terms of a specific time and place, due to the impossibility of exactly tracking packages. Furthermore, Italian media see the offenders as wanting to terrorize the West at large via continuous low-cost attacks. In fact, this case shows that large-scale disturbances can be created at low cost.[3]

French, Spanish and Turkish media report on Al Qaeda’s increased threat-making against the West and on Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s presence in Yemen. Additionally, UK media discuss again offender rationality/irrationality, seeing the goal-oriented proceeding as quite rational. One newspaper though also describes the offenders as irrational when aiming to send a message to the U.S. and its allies in this manner (UK Report; Financial Times, 1 November 2010). National media mostly apply the label of terrorist to offenders here and at times that of jihadist terrorist, but without any systematic differentiation.

Media discourse is marked by measures of control and surveillance as well as respective legislative adjustments. There is no explicit debate on values. Key in all national media is that security gaps in air cargo must be closed and cargo flights more controlled. Also reported are the measures taken immediately after the plot’s discovery, with all cargo from Yemen being checked, while normally



most cargo is not checked. Other points refer to new working groups to devise new security measures, meetings of security experts on air cargo handling, and U.S. technicians training airport security staff in Yemen. Linked is the need for increased international cooperation, especially within the EU and with the U.S. Also the possibility of expanded passenger profiling is mentioned, such as no-fly lists for suspected terrorists. However, Dutch media raise the U.S.-EU disagreement on passenger privacy legislation. Furthermore, German media discuss the security officials' dilemma that it is hardly possible to know where and from whom to expect the next attack and thus how to prepare, as well as the existence of different security standards in different cargo companies, all resulting in gaps that can be exploited. More tailored approaches are called for, where strictness of controls could depend on the safety classification of the country of origin. A specific idea refers to controlling packages already at postal stations and focusing on the "unknown small-parcel senders" (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 9 November 2010, translated by author. National media also discuss the difficulty of balancing security provision with civil rights, on the one side, and with costs, on the other side. Air cargo is essentially seen as vulnerable and its complete control as too costly (Germany Report; Netherlands Report; UK Report).

This plot has thus resulted in a *discourse of control*. Media clearly emphasize surveillance and control in air cargo transport and, by extension, passenger air travel, as well as needed legislation for stronger control. Difficulties in security provision are also discussed.

The Stockholm Attack

Here, media discourse differs from the others in that it is both more uniformly reported and broader in the range of issues discussed. The former is likely due to the offender having sent a threat letter and email before the attack, which all national media refer to, and the latter is due to contextual factors playing a larger role in this attack. Thus, there is no dominant frame in discourse, but possibly sub-frames relating to various social issues.

Based on the offender's pre-attack communication, national media mention the war in Afghanistan with Swedish participation and the Swedish support for the Muhammad cartoon by the Swede Lars Vilks, as well as the offender aiming to terrorize the West. Dutch news mention Al Qaeda having warned the Swedish government of attacks, and French media see the offender having acted out of instigation by Al Qaeda's Iraqi branch, the leader of which has placed a price on Vilks' head. The attack not being successful, German and Spanish media argue that the set-up indicates the goal of high casualties, with the offender having planned to detonate his explosives belt at a central location into the crowd. National media use variably the labels of Islamist, terrorist or jihadist for the offender, without a discernible systematic differentiation. A UK paper also admits that lone jihadists are difficult to track, but because they are not very tech-savvy, they may more often fail. This source further argues that while radicalized views and political violence would always exist, there are also social and economic facilitators of violence, and governments should work for including everyone in society (Guardian, 14 December 2010). UK media do not specifically highlight the offender living in the UK at the time, unlike some national media following below, but without a larger study it would be speculative to argue that they downplay the threat of lone jihadists here due to the offender's UK link.

German, Spanish and Turkish media also call on not blaming all Muslims for the act of one, pointing out that not all Muslims support terrorism and that the Luton mosque in England attended by the offender publicly denounced him for his abnormal views about Islam (Germany Report; Spain Report; Turkey Report). German news report on failed attempts by Sweden's political right to use the attack for their agenda (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 16 December 2010). Italian media also speak of a clash between violence and a free society such as Sweden, and that Sweden has shown its willingness to live with people from various backgrounds.

Regarding reactions, national media focus on social measures. The need to maintain an open society figures highly. For example, German media report on a proposed Swedish wiretap law for internet and telephone connections, but warn against too much state control. While media debate the needed monitoring of Islamist centres and of Al Qaeda communication and internet propaganda, most national media highlight the impossibility of total control or preventing all attacks (Germany Report; France Report; Italy Report; UK Report). Turkish media also report on Swedish politicians reacting cautiously. Furthermore, all national media uniformly mention the need to improve integration. Some specifically speak of many immigrants being unemployed or not good at school and living in immigrant quarters, while the frequent violence there leads to fear among other Swedes. Sweden's open society is seen as value to be further promoted (Germany Report; France Report; Italy Report; UK Report). While Dutch media judge Sweden's immigration policy as too mild, UK media add the need for education about Islam by Muslims to reduce Western Islamophobia. German and French media also see benefit in school and youth campaigns to prevent radicalization as well as in programs for terrorist defectors.

This attack has thus led to a *broader discourse* without a dominant frame. We can possibly speak of various sub-frames, such as an open society, tolerance, the need to improve integration of immigrants, and the importance of differentiation among Muslims.

Conclusions and Implications

Different attack types lead to different media discourses across Europe: the Westergaard case to a value debate, the Yemen cargo plane plot to a discourse of control and the Stockholm case to a more general and less defined discourse.

In the *Westergaard* case media discourse is framed by Western values and the need to defend them. Although possible limits to these freedoms as well as symbolic offences against Muslims are considered, media clearly give priority to Western values, especially freedom of expression. But the discussion of possible limits to these values points to a struggle of ideas, and one on principles, something that can also divide. The analysis thus exposed a possible starting point for initiating a more fundamental debate within the West on values and rights and how far their defence can go.

On the *Yemen* plot, the analysis discovered a tendency of falling into the frame of control. While the balancing with civil liberties and security provision costs also finds attention, emphasis lies on various aspects of control and surveillance in air cargo transport, passenger air travel and needed legislative adjustments. Here, media discourse shows the strong effect of framing. What is problematic about this is that a dominant frame can easily override other aspects of an attack. Thus,



attack types at locations or with means already involving surveillance, such as airports or air cargo, could sooner lead to a discourse that loses sight of civil liberties.

Regarding the *Stockholm* case, a dominant frame was lacking. Rather, discourse was broad and focused on tolerance and the value of an open society, the need to better integrate immigrants, and the importance of differentiating among Muslims. The greater breadth of discourse may be explained by the possible ‘reasons’ or offender motivations being broader and more abstract, thereby giving media less to engage with.

Each of the three cases is discussed remarkably similar in different national media. Also the phenomenon of jihadism is discussed similarly, although jihadism varies in form in different areas, as shown by the analysed cases’ perpetrators. One may be tempted to offer the Western frame of mind as explanation, if it was not for Turkish media. Perhaps it is a common media culture then, driven by freedom of expression being in media’s interest. Additional aspects are media’s aim of public attention (see also Combs, 2013) and the media-terrorism nexus, with media needing events to cover (Martin, 1985; Nacos, 2002). However, the impact of national myths and values should result in different reporting and framing (Entman, 2010, 1993; Goffman, 1974; Glaab 2007a; Le, 2006). To harden findings and generate more nuanced explanations on discourse convergence and the link of attack type and discourse, further research could consider additional cases and attack types.

Finally, media play an important role in our societies. By covering and thereby selecting particular aspects of a terrorist attack and connecting it with a particular context, they frame our interpretation of events and needed countermeasures. This highlights the need for responsible media coverage. Journalists should focus on comprehensive and inclusive reporting and avoid simplified and inflammatory us-versus-them divisions along cultural, religious or ethnic lines. Coverage should clearly differentiate between perpetrators and a societal group sharing a religious or other background. For example, when statements on terrorists’ Muslim background are placed in close context with statements on lacking integration of Muslim immigrants, a dangerous false link may be created and all Muslims may be seen as *potential* terrorists. This can lead to resentment of Muslims and the view of Muslims not making enough efforts to integrate, but rather strengthening their Islamic identity (see for example Pew Research Center, 2005; USA Today, 8 August 2006). Useful may be a journalistic training for appropriately dealing with cultural and religious sensitivities.

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Notes

[1] Nesser (2006) sees ideological and social issues among jihadist terrorists' motivations; see also Nesser (2008, 2010).

[2] Western troops' presence in predominantly Muslim countries appeared to present a key issue for jihadist terrorists, for example the Iraq War (Nesser, 2006: 324) or the war in Afghanistan (Bakker, 2006).

[3] Only 4,200 \$ were spent, advertised by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula on the cover page of its internet magazine *Inspire*.

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