

MAIN FINDINGS

The research has led to three main findings: the first is about politicians' framing of the terrorist threat having an effect on media coverage's contents. The second concerns the nature of the media, while the third challenges the myths about the role of politicians, the media and their relationship.

1. POLITICIANS' FRAMING AND ITS EFFECT ON MEDIA COVERAGE

A comparison between statements by political sources and the content of media coverage reveals that the way politicians define the problem of terrorism and describe it has a substantial impact on media performance. This refers, above all, to the contents of the coverage and the amount as well as depth of criticism expressed against the Government's messages. The comparison between official rhetoric's changes over time and corresponding media coverage throughout the case studies highlights how the political context created by politicians' rhetoric shapes the overall understanding of the media and the way they convey official messages to the wider public.

2. THE NATURE OF THE MEDIA

2.a. Which media?

Observations of the case studies highlight the heterogeneous nature of the media. The content analysis of the press and TV coverage revealed that each single channel or newspaper offers a completely different performance in terms of length/depth of coverage of the events in question and their interpretation. Since all performances are different it is very difficult to generalize.

2.b. The international nature of the media

The media are a far "wider" dimension than politicians would normally expect when they plan their activities in order to "manage" them. The analysis reveals that the media is not just domestic, but has a truly international nature. This is, in some way, already known: everybody has a general idea that the media is a global network and that it is possible to report instantaneously from anywhere in the world. This, however, does not only have an effect on the journalists' newsgathering routines and the increasing speed of reporting, but also on the coverage contents. Media keep an eye on what is reported on foreign media, spot possible similarities and differences and interpret what happens domestically in the light of their knowledge of foreign events.

2.c. Not just the media

Communication in the public sphere is commonly understood as fundamentally involving the Government, the media and the public. But the information space is getting more

complex. The development of communications technologies has led to an increase in the number of actors contributing to shaping the information space, including intelligence sources that cannot be named and experts. As the increasing reporting of leaks and the fact that many news items are based on the surfacing of information that was not meant to be released to the public prove, they are very significant and could account for a large slice of the information space being shaped by unknown, uncontrollable and possibly unreliable actors.

The fact that the Government does not want or cannot talk about ongoing operations encourages the media to look for information elsewhere. Apart from the already mentioned intelligence sources, experts, when they manage to make really valuable contributions to the understanding of the terrorist threat (which is not always the case...) do not know how to deal responsibly with the public. Most of the time they show no consideration for the possible consequences of their statements on public psychology and perceptions of risk/threat. The “colonization” of the information space by third party sources can be dangerous in the sense that it eludes the control necessary in presenting the public with sensitive issues and avoiding scares or panic. Third sources could also be lateral ways of anonymously twisting public opinion without anyone talking responsibility or facing the consequences.

3. DISMANTLING THE MYTHS

3.a. The government/media interaction: who is really alarmist?

The general claim that media create hype, sensationalism and could encourage public panic is not supported by evidence. On the contrary, the analysis suggests that the media are generally responsible and almost not at all alarmist. By looking at the interaction between politicians and media it is actually possible to track the routes followed by information within the information space. The research reveals that the great majority of alarmist statements reported by the media originally come from officials. The media, especially newspapers, by encouraging issues’ discussion, help most of the times help placing officials’ irresponsible statements into perspective.

3.b. The media & the public

The analysis suggests that the media understand public concerns, sometimes better than the Government does. Such understanding, far from the view that sees the media as always opposing the Government and harshly criticising it, also takes the form of constructive feedback, even valuable suggestions on how to deal with the terrorist threat.

Apart from the summary of results, you may find this useful. It is a summary of possible “lessons” to be learned and challenges for the future. For further examples or elaboration about the points raised, please refer to the Final Report (parts 4 and 5).

INTERPRETING THE DATA: WHAT CAN WE LEARN?

1. The role of the media actually

The research suggests that the media are a different kind of actor than is normally regarded by politicians. The Government should start looking differently at the media. Blaming the media for misreporting or distorting the Government’s messages is an easy scapegoat. The very action of referring to the media as a catch-all label means creating a fictional actor that in reality does not exist. As the analysis reveals, there are different media and as many different media performances. The media are more a stage than an actor. This does not mean ignoring media responsibilities. The different media do contribute to shape their slice of information space by applying selection criteria. The final result, or the sum of all the perspectives by the different media, is not, however, a choice by “the media” as a conscious entity. While the media are not just a showcase of information flowing out of control, they should be better conceived as, at least, a heterogeneous actor. Focusing on a supposed adversarial relationship with the media distracts the Government from addressing its own responsibility and from really understanding the dynamics of the information space, which should be better conceived as a place of interaction among different sources.

2. The importance of framing: more effective communication and control of the information space

If not adequately framed the terrorist threat simply cannot be handled: when referred to a “faceless” and “nameless” enemy that can strike randomly anywhere at any time (which was basically the first formulation of the terrorist threat by the UK Government) any policy is going to look useless and incredible. Officials cannot try to solve the problem through anti-terrorist measures on the one hand and contributing to making it worse by keeping on referring to an elusive definition of it on the other hand.

In addition to this, if framing is poor even traditional “good communications techniques” do not work. In fact the Heathrow alert, as seen, witnessed the endless repetition of very precise and consistent messages. Within the vague frame provided by the Government, however, they failed to inform the public about what was actually occurring. A broader framing of the threat, as the observations about the coverage following the Istanbul bombings’ speech confirm, offers a background for an improved media/public understanding.

When framing is coherent media speculate less. Framing, from this point of view, is a good way of managing the information space. The speculation and alarmism raised by third sources could be avoided altogether through a more precise portrayal of the terrorist threat and the WOT by the Government. Considering the increasing amount of third sources evading any control it would be too difficult for the government to rebut the inaccurate, if not completely unfounded, statements. Appropriately framing the issues would therefore be a cost-effective way to restrict the range of associations made by the media and other sources as well as avoiding altogether a great deal of speculation.

A better clarification of what is meant by the terrorist threat would also help against the creation of dangerous assumptions such as the link among terrorism, asylum and Muslim culture. Such assumptions are not as explicit and visible as panic, but represent perhaps a greater danger, having the potential of destabilizing society from within in a more subtle way. After the Istanbul bombing for example the Sun, while positively (and carefully) distinguishing terrorism from Islam, dangerously portrayed asylum seekers as potential terrorists who could represent “the enemy within”.¹

3. Bad communication undermines public trust

As pointed out by the scepticism surrounding the Heathrow alert, trust is vital for supporting Government’s anti-terrorist policies, especially when dealing with an abstract threat and when the terrorists’ aims consist precisely in weakening our institutions and disrupting everyday life. The U.K. Government keeps on referring to its own “dilemma” of “informing, but not alarming”. “Informing but not alarming” is indeed a dilemma, not because there is any contrast between informing and alarming. As several decades of managing the threat from IRA terrorism can confirm, there seems to be no evidence that an informed public would panic. The problem arises when the public is left in an information vacuum.

CONCLUSIONS: THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

1. Defining the problem is part of the solution

The way politicians frame the threat affects the way the media and, at the other end of the communication spectrum, the public perceive the terrorist threat. Framing the threat has far reaching consequences in the real world, including the way we practically deal with it and our sense of vulnerability as a society.

Defining the problem is part of the solution. In fact focusing more on causes of terrorism that can be addressed could make the problem look more “manageable”. Instead of being motivated by ‘evil’, terrorism could, be motivated by the misunderstanding of our culture

¹ Examples are: The Sun, Europeans soft on terror, November 21 2003 and The Sun, Tough new laws to protect us from terrorism, November 24 2003.

(a communication problem) or by desperation rooted in poverty (an economic problem). This would, at least, convey the idea that the problem can be solved and we are not harmless victims of it. Of course defining the problem could become a trap. The very rhetoric of “war” when referring to the “war against terrorism” does not seem to be appropriate as it suggests that success is going to be measured in visible victories. Because of the largely secret dimension of the WOT we know that this is not always the case. The very rhetoric of the WOT may bind us to loose. This is particularly true in the U.S. Government’s frame: the WOT is, in essence, a global and total war against evil. Maybe this is just too much too handle, even for a hyper-power like the U.S. The WOT seems to be designed so as to never reach an end. In the words of the secretary of State C. Powell the global campaign against terrorism will last as long “as anyone can imagine”.² There is also a potential conflict between the rhetoric of the war on terror and the ‘values of freedom, justice and tolerance’.³

Appropriately framing the terrorist threat is not a way of better spinning the information or lying to the public. What the Government already tells the public is largely true: it cannot protect the public 100% against the terrorist threat. But the danger posed by a new kind of terrorism than represented by IRA, for example, should be more effectively placed into perspective and made less threatening by focusing on its more manageable aspects.

2. The media are part of the strategy, of course

The idea that the media need to be involved in Government’s information campaign is really nothing new. The dilemma, in the struggle for shaping the information space, does not consist in attracting media’ attention. The Government, because of its “monopoly” of intelligence, will always have a “comparative advantage” over other actors within the information space by being perceived (at least until the Hutton enquiry and the Butler Report...) as the most reliable source. The real problem becomes managing potentially uncontrollable third sources. This requires the development of a strategy that extends deeper into the information space.

3. It’s not just domestic strategy

Governments need to co-ordinate their communication efforts about the threat of terrorism internationally. It cannot be just a domestic strategy. The Euro-Atlantic link should further develop from the point of view of a co-ordination of messages on the information front. The U.S.-U.K. relationship has just been touched upon, but it is possible to see how the managing of the imagined threat is far behind when compared to the co-ordination of less abstract anti-terrorist measures. This creates problems that affect

² C. Powell, ‘We’re probably going to be in the counterterrorism business to a very high level of intensity for as long as anyone can imagine, as long as there are people out there who are willing to do the kinds of things those terrorists did this week’ U.S. Department of State, Interview on CNN’s Late Edition, September 16 2001, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/4924.htm>. This is emphasized again on Sept 21st, 2001: ‘it is a campaign that will go on for as long as it takes to be successful’, ‘for as long as I can imagine’, U.S. Department of State, Interview with BBC, September 21 2001, <http://www.state.gov/secretary/rm/2001/5004.htm>.

³ Press Conference: PM Tony Blair and President George Bush, November 20 2003, <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page5004.asp>.

authorities' credibility. In crude terms when American authorities issue recommendations about stockpiling food against imminent chemical or biological attacks while the UK Government tells its own domestic audience that there is nothing to worry about, they are undermining our efforts at countering terrorism. This may happen accidentally and may of course be the result of deeply different domestic circumstances. The fact that the international environment has become more transparent because of the development of communications technologies, however, underlines the need to prevent these inconsistencies to arise if Governments do not want to do "the terrorists' job for them".

5. Co-ordination, framing & ...political interests

The main challenge in co-ordinating messages internationally, however, is represented by the fact that the language used to describe the terrorist threat is not neutral ground. The whole analysis has started from the idea that political statements are not just words: they constitute political actions. As such they reflect political interests. At the moment neither President G. Bush, nor PM T. Blair are addressing the causes of terrorism in their rhetoric. Terrorists, in their view, are irrational and motivated by hate for human life. As G. Bush puts it they are 'flat evil'. This portrayal could be motivated by political interests. G. Bush talks more often of a 'war on terror rather' than a 'war on terrorism'. Does this make a difference? It can be argued that they are not exactly the same thing.

So if the language used to describe the threat serves political interests, and a Government's interests could well be different from those of even its closest "allies", how is it possible to establish a co-ordination of communications?

6. Final questions & can we really win?

Dealing with the imagined threat is a totally underdeveloped aspect of managing terrorism despite the fact that this explains why, as it is often claimed, we are currently losing the propaganda war. We can have practical measures, but if we create more enemies while we go along fighting the real threat, how successful can we be? How can the problem be faced when the Government itself may be contributing to its creation? So, how are the invisible threats undermining society from inside our minds under the shape of prejudices, for example against Muslims, people of Arab origin or asylum seekers going to be addressed? How is the Government going to encourage more trust in its institutions? These issues, rather than how to deal with the physical threats, seem to be the hardest riddles to be solved in the WOT and they fundamentally raise another important question: can we win a WOT at all?