

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK, METHOD AND CASE STUDIES

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research's understanding of the role of language reflects one of the recent developments in International Relations theory. This is the attempt at integrating the growing role and impact of communications technology on international politics into traditional studies. Here I refer to the approach of the Copenhagen School, mainly represented by Barry Buzan, Ole Waever, Jaap de Wilde and to their concept of 'securitization' and 'societal threat'.¹

The theorists of the Copenhagen school regard the very issue of security as constructed through speech-acts. Which issues belong to the 'security' box cannot be determined a priori, but it is the result of rhetorical choices. In other words how issues are constructed and perceived is the result of a process involving a selection of language, which is not just seen as describing reality but as creating it. This can be applied, as an example, to the WOT. We all talk about a WOT, politicians refer to it, media mention it. The WOT, however, before the 9/11 attacks, did not exist. It came about because someone, the U.S. Government, started to talk about it. This also applies to the shift in foreign policy priorities after 9/11 and terrorism becoming the number one security issue on the global political agenda.²

The Copenhagen School theorists also talk about the concept of "societal threat". Differently from traditional Realist or Neo-realist approaches this is a threat to security, interestingly an 'existential threat', that is not conceived in exclusive military terms, just aiming at undermining the territorial integrity of the state. In this concept the very identity of a group is undermined 'by dynamics as diverse as cultural flows, economic integration, or population movements'.³ The concept can again be applied to the WOT, especially the idea that terrorism is far more than a physical threat to life. It is a threat, as PM T. Blair or President G. Bush put it, 'to our civilization' and 'our way of life', to the very stability and 'survival' of our societies. T. Blair actually referred to it using the very word 'existential'.⁴

This is the broader theoretical framework for the analysis of a range of case studies in the UK.

¹ Buzan, B., O. Waever, et al., Eds. (1998). *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. London, Lynne Rienner Publishers.

² Williams, M. C. (2003). "Words, Images, Enemies: Securitization and International Politics." *International Studies Quarterly* (47): 511-531.

³ 'Even further from an exclusively military-territorial focus is the concept of "societal" security, in which the identity of a group is presented as threatened by dynamics as diverse as cultural flows, economic integration, or population movements', Ibid. p. 513.

⁴ 'the nature of the global threat we face in Britain and round the world is real and existential', PM Warns of Continuing Global Terror Threat, March 5 2004, <http://www.number-10.gov.uk/output/Page5461.asp>.

CASE STUDIES

Heathrow airport alert (February 11-13 2003): 450 troops, 1000 extra police and light armoured vehicles are dispatched to Heathrow airport following intelligence warnings about a possible terrorist attack on the occasion of the end of the Muslim festival of Eid (February 15th). Heightened security measures are adopted in other airports around the country and in the proximity of government buildings in London.

Istanbul bombing (November 20 2003): 2 bombs directed at British targets, the British Consulate and a branch of the HSBC bank, explode in Istanbul killing 28 people, 3 of which British.

Flight delays (December 2003 to February 2004): a series of delays involving transatlantic flights to the U.S. over the Christmas period and the beginning of 2004. The case study includes the media coverage of, among the rest, the grounding of Air France flight 68 from Paris to Los Angeles on Christmas Eve, BA flight 223 from Heathrow to Washington (cancelled several times at beginning of January), BA flight 263 from Heathrow to Riyadh (Saudi Arabia) on December 31 2003.

Madrid bombing (March 11 2004): short after 7.30 local time four bombs explode on a train approaching Atocha station, the main train station in Madrid. Minutes later two more bombs detonate at El Pozo and one at Eugenia stations. The attacks left 192 people dead and more than 1,200 injured. The Spanish Government first blamed the Basque separatist terrorist group ETA for the attacks. Another lead in the investigation about who was behind the bombing started to develop when, a few hours after the attacks, a van containing detonators and tapes with verses of the Koran was found in the outskirts of Madrid. A letter purporting to come from al-Qaida and addressed to the London-based Arabic newspaper al-Quds also claimed responsibility for the train bombing.

The range of cases studies selected gives the opportunity of analysing how both officials and the media dealt with events of a different nature. The case studies include simple alerts and actual attacks, both in the run up to the war in Iraq and afterwards. The Istanbul bombing throws light on the coverage of an attack on British interests on foreign soil, while the Madrid bombing provides some information about the way both the British press and authorities reacted to an attack abroad.

METHOD

The research is based on a multidisciplinary approach combining a tool of political communication, framing, with discourse analysis within a comparative research design.

Framing essentially refers to the construction of issues through language by means of selection and saliency. According to R. Entman "To frame is to *select some aspects of a*

perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described'.⁵

Taking Entman's definition as a starting point I have explored the frames related to the terrorist threat through qualitative content analysis of both politicians' and media discourses. The analysis has been carried out through the methodological tools of discourse analysis.

I have essentially compared the political and media discourses in order to identify the interactions between media and politicians and find out which source is effectively shaping the perceptions of the terrorist threat and where media contents actually come from. This procedure allows capturing the information exchanges among social actors to identify the mechanisms that operate within the information space.

Sample

Governmental/officials' statements constitute the "political discourse": speeches given by the Prime Minister, official briefings and press conferences, parliamentary debates, information available on governmental web sites.⁶

The "media discourse" is represented by both text and video sources:

1. The Press coverage by 6 national newspapers: The Guardian/The Observer, The Times/The Sunday Times, The Independent/The Independent on Sunday, The Daily Mirror/Sunday Mirror, The Daily Mail/Mail on Sunday, The Sun/News of the World.⁷
2. TV coverage on 4 channels' evening news programmes: News at Ten (BBC1), Newsnight (BBC2), ITV News (ITV), Channel 4 News (CHANNEL 4) and weekend political programmes such as Breakfast with Frost (Saturday morning BBC1) and Jonathan Dimbleby (Sunday morning? ITV).⁸

⁵ Entman, R. M. (1993). "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm." *Journal of Communication* 43(4), p. 52.

⁶ The material has been retrieved from a variety of sources: 10 Downing Street - <http://www.number-10.gov.uk>, The United Kingdom Parliament - <http://www.parliament.uk/>, The Home Office Website - <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/terrorism/index.html>, The MET Police Website - <http://www.met.police.uk/>

⁷ **Newspapers' sources - Sample:**

The sample for the content analysis is made up by articles retrieved from the Lexis-Nexis database through the search-words "terrorist OR terrorism OR terror". This allows retrieving all articles dealing with the topic of terrorism, the "war on terrorism" (also called "war on terror") and related issues. All articles mentioning the keywords have been considered. The time span of the analysis covers every day from the first mention of the events considered in each case study (for example the dispatch of troops to Heathrow airport on February 11th is first mentioned on February 12th's newspapers) until no more references are made to it (but no longer than 14 days afterwards).

⁸ **Video footage - Sample:**

The TV coverage sample is made up of the daily evening news (BBC's 1 News at Ten, BBC2's Newsnight, ITV's ITV News, Channel 4's Channel 4 News) and weekend political programmes such as BBC1's Breakfast with Frost and ITV's Jonathan Dimbleby. The time span considered extends from the day the events considered by each case occurred (the Heathrow airport alert, for example, is reported on the same day it occurred, February 11th) to the following 3 days.

Objectives of the Analysis

The analysis aimed at:

1. Identifying the extent to which the way political authorities framed the problem of terrorism and the war against it (i.e. the language they used to describe these aspects) had an impact on the media and on public perceptions of the threat
2. Defining the role of the media as a mediator between the Government and the public. This last question particularly refers to testing the widespread claim that the media tend to sensationalise, create hype and, possibly, encourage panic/alarmism.