NEWS MEDIA AND THE POLITICS OF FEAR:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF NEWS REPORTING ON TERRORIST ATTACKS
IN SWEDEN AND THE UK

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The politics of fear: Three related elements

(1) Framing in terms of threat and fear in news reports and opinion articles (op-eds)

(2) Involves the scapegoating of collectives, stereotypical views on 'immigrants', 'refugees', 'Muslims' as criminal, danger, threat (or victims)

(3) The propagation of radical measures to secure 'the people' and restore social order

A political rhetoric mobilized in authoritarian right-wing populism (Altheide, 2019; Béland, 2020; Wodak, 2017; Wojczewski, 2020)

A challenge for news journalism

How can journalists report on terrorism without – intentionally or unintentionally – constructing & reproducing narratives that propagate a politics of fear?

❑ A formally neutral news reporting may well contribute to narratives of threat and fear, including scapegoating and calling for the radical measures advocated by authoritarian populism.

❑ Ultimately, validation of a politics of fear is in conflict with the liberal democratic order that journalism relies on and acts as a watchdog for (Ekström, Patrona & Thornborrow 2020; Krämer and Langmann, 2020).

A comparative case study

- News reporting on two terrorist attacks, one in Stockholm (April 7, 2017) and one in London (June 3, 2017).
- In both cases, the perpetrators deliberately drove into pedestrians in a crowded area in the centre of the capitals, killing several people and injuring many more
- Data sources
  - SW: *Aftonbladet* & *Dagens Nyheter (225 articles)*
  - UK: *Guardian* & *Telegraph (277 articles)*
- Analytic Focus
  - reporting practices, narratives, discursive constructions of identity

Findings: contrastive political discourses

- Contrastive discourses across countries and newspapers: Differences in framing and foregrounding that either amplify or downplay the threat narrative.

- **A political discourse that propagates the politics of fear:**

(i)   Episodic drama of horror, shock, panic (eyewitness accounts, event descriptions)

(ii) Narratives of a generalized war on terror

(iii) Narratives of collective normality juxtaposed to constructions of 'otherness' in the representation of terrorists/extremists (as the source of threat)

(iv) Collectivization, stereotyping of asylum seekers and Muslims (as looming threat but also victims of [anti-British] narratives, indoctrination)

- **A political counter-discourse that works in opposition to a politics of fear:**

(i)   An inclusive 'we' (all citizens of different cultural backgrounds) vs. criminal terrorists

(ii) Criticism of (the legitimation of) exclusive, anti-immigration views and radical new policies

(iii) Reporting on Muslims as victims of racist attacks

i) Episodic drama in the framing & foregrounding of online live news updates (UK)

- Proliferation and repetition of eyewitness' narratives of events

- Both the Telegraph & the Guardian websites embed quotes from eyewitness accounts in headlines:
  - 11:16 *Van "swerved into crowd"*
  - 01:05 *London eyewitness: Attacker stabbed girl and said 'this is for Allah'*
  - 01:47 *'I saw a man in red with a large blade stabbing a man'*

- Both sites use evaluations in eyewitness accounts in amplification of threat/terror:
  - 3:44AM *'All they wanted to do was kill people*'
  - 4:14AM *'They could be anywhere, this is out of control*'
  - 4:23AM *Australian senator describes 'panic and dread'*

ii) Construction of normality and difference in neighbours' accounts of attacker identity (UK)

- Indicators of 'collective normality' – identity as a good neighbour in local community

    - *very nice guy, polite and normal, married father of two young children, attended two local mosques, played with the children in the park, invited neighbours to barbecues, wore Arsenal football shirt, went to the local gym, worked for London Underground*

    - *"his car had a child seat in the back with two pairs of adult trainers and a receipt from Asda in the boot"*

- Indicators of 'potential threat' – identity as radicalised, police already informed

    - *wife wore a burka, had an arranged marriage, had extremist opinions, was radicalising children in a local park, got thrown out of a local mosque,*

    - *"I did my bit, I know a lot of other people did their bit, but the authorities did not do their bit," the friend said.*

Constructing 'otherness' & threat by citing numbers

Example:

Headline: **12,000 are wanted**. *Subheading:* **Rakhmat, 39, one of thousands who have disappeared after being deported** (AB 10/04/17)

- The reference to numbers in the construction of a collective of potential terrorists signals a state of emergency.

- Stereotyping of "hidden" and "illegal" immigrants: the various reasons why people stay in Sweden are not discussed.

Building the narrative of threat: The Telegraph Op-ed - 1

Op-ed title (05-06-2021): **The attack that came too close to home... by an evil enemy that must be destroyed; London Bridge terror attack; No more platitudes, please. Politicians must now turn their tough talk into tough action against extremists**

- Emotionalized arguments; war vocabulary with religious overtones:

"*an **evil enemy** that must be destroyed*".

- Lead paragraph: an emotionally-laden account of the whereabouts of the author's children on the day of the attacks:

"*My daughter lives in Borough Market, a few feet from the place where people were enjoying a balmy summer evening when three **marauding barbarians** came to kill them*"

- Juxtaposition of the familiar with the horrific, the morbid and unexpected: The contrast between the two amplifies the narrative of threat & fear.

"*Pictures on the TV showed **our favourite family haunts** transformed into **a place of execution.***"

- A shared community ('us') is constructed right from the lead paragraph:

"*How the heart soars at the sensation of being right there at the centre of **our capital city**.*"

The Telegraph Op-ed - 2

- Contrasts alongside the war metaphor:

*"Borough Market makes you glad to be alive. The sheer abundance […] is an earthly delight. And now that place which teems with life has become **a battlefield littered with corpses** in a **war** we hardly know we're fighting, a **war** that our leaders don't want to name because, if they give **the enemy** a name, they may unleash forces they have no idea how to control."*

- Narrative of threat is punctuated with biblical overtones:

*"When is it OK to be angry that **evil seeds** have been allowed to germinate in closed communities which now present **a lethal threat to our society**?"*

- Nominalization (see van Dijk 2008) used to construct the dangerous 'other'; critique of mainstream parties & politicians (Labour leader)

*"Furthermore, Mrs May has shocked Tory voters by her failure, so far, to clamp down on sharia courts and other examples of **creeping Islamisation**. As for Jeremy Corbyn, he probably thinks the right thing to do with a jihadist is invite him down the allotment for a nice chat."*

- Us' [the Britons] vs. 'Them' dichotomy:

*"Try explaining to a furious 17-year-old why the civil liberties of Islamic extremists trump the right of **Britons like him** to not be hacked to death. I sure as hell couldn't."*

The Telegraph Op-ed – 3

- a "Manicheism" with "strong messianic intonation"(Ferrari 2007: 607; cf. also Tuman 2010)
- ' "the Islamists" as the enemy:

*"The young and the foodies will flock there to savour its pleasures, those earthly delights that **the Islamists** despise and wish to extinguish."*

- Urgent call to the government to implement radical measures:

*"He [my son] demanded to know why something wasn't done to clamp down on these **murderous bastards** ".*

Chief constable of Great Manchester's response to the attacks (he "urged people to have a "proportionate response" to the events at London Bridge") is criticized as "The hopeless complacency of the Establishment":

*"Innocent people are butchered on a lovely summer evening by men who hate them just for being who they are. **What, pray, constitutes a "proportionate response" to that abomination**?"*

- Closing sentence: emotionalized call for openly naming the source of 'evil' and destroying it (Islam?):

*"The **evil** that ran at people with knives on Saturday night has a name. **For the sake of all our children, and generations to come, we should not be scared to say it out loud, and destroy it before it destroys us**."*

Mobilizing a counter-discourse to the politics of fear: the Swedish op-eds

- Criticism of scapegoating and racist opinions (albeit not attributed to a specific actor):

"[…] there was a parallel hunt for long-sought scapegoats. **Some** shouted in the usual order that the government 'should have done more' … **The racists** accused the entire immigration as such." (AB 13/04/17).

"The **xenophobes** go straight into the IS trap." (AB 11/04/17).

- An inclusive, all-encompassing 'we', united against the terrorists:

Headline: "The city where **we** help each other" (AB 08/04717)

Final paragraph: Stockholm, the day after the attack, is described as:

"cosmopolitan" with "Conversations everywhere … in Swedish, English, Polish, Russian, Arabic and African languages that I could not identify". A city where "no terrorist can create chaos".

- In-house journalists critically discuss the call for new political measures, recurrently reproduced in the news media:

Headline: "Take it easy - fear does not create good laws." (AB 11/04/17).

- Call for new political action described as a "play to the xenophobic gallery" (AB 20/04/17).

Conclusion

- **Journalistic practices & the politics of fear:**

Extreme-right discourses of authoritarian populism are reproduced in narratives that amplify threat and call for radical new policies, including restrictive anti-immigration policies, in response to that threat.

- **Journalistic counter-narratives & the liberal reflexes of journalism**:

Counter-narratives to the politics of fear are also effectively mobilized, most visibly in the Swedish press, but also in the Guardian in the UK: an optimistic sign of the sensitivity and reflexes of journalism as a watchdog for liberal, humanitarian and inclusive values.

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