

STATE, MASS MEDIA AND GLOBAL TERRORISM: CONTEXTUALIZING COMMUNICATION POLICY IN THE LIGHT OF WESTGATE AND OTHER TERROR STRIKES IN KENYA

MURIUKI ROBERT GM

Abstract

This paper examines the trilateral communication relationship between the state, mass media and global terrorism, in light of the Westgate Shopping Mall in Nairobi and other terror attacks in Kenya. The paper looks at the dilemma of the state and the mass media when they unwittingly propagate the terrorists' agenda. Through analyzing newspaper reports, published journals and books, this paper shows how this set of three actors differ in their communication needs. The media looks at terrorism as a source of news while terrorists yearn for the exposure they get from their terror acts in a symbiotic relationship that is difficult to annul. The paper gives a raft of recommendations that would see the state work with the media to curb the impact of terrorism.

Key words: terrorism, symbiotic relationship, mass media, CNN effect

Introduction

The state, the media and terrorists have different and often competing perspectives. According to Perl (1997), terrorists, governments and the media see the function, roles and responsibilities of the media when covering terrorist events, from differing and often competing perspectives.

The government and the media, should be on the same side in the fight against the scourge that is terrorism, but are often embroiled in controversy over coverage of terrorist activities. Perl (1997) says that, the challenge to both the government and press communities is to understand the dynamics of terrorists' enterprise, and to develop policy options designed to serve the interest of government, the media and the society.

Bockslette (2008) asserts that, terrorism has spread beyond the borders of the region in which it had its origins and reached a global dimension. He adds that terrorist conflicts are a worldwide menace.

In the Westgate mall terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya, in the month of September 2013, Al Shabaab, a militant terrorist group from Somalia killed over 70 people and injured hundreds of others. The group has links with Al-Qaeda, another international terror outfit.

This paper looks at the communication interdependence between the terrorists, the media and the government. There is interaction and dependency between the media and terrorism; while government relies on the media for public understanding and loyalty in its efforts to limit terrorism harm to society, or apprehending those responsible for terrorism (Perl, 1997).

Definition of terrorism

According to the United Nations General Assembly, as quoted by Koh (2002:148), terrorism can be seen as criminal acts intended or calculated to provoke a state of terror in the general public, a group of persons or particular persons for political purposes- whatever the political purposes- philosophical, ideological, racial, ethnic, religious or other nature that may be invoked to justify them.

The Research Centre (2002), quotes the FBI as taking terrorism to be the unlawful use of force, or violence against persons or property to intimidate, or coerce a government, the civilian population, or any segment thereof in furtherance of political or social objectives.

In our case in Kenya and the Westgate Mall attack, the latter definitions is appropriate, as the Al Shabaab's stated intentions was to coerce our government to withdraw our soldiers, stationed in Somalia to restore order in the chaotic country.

However, Hocking (1992), urges guardedness in defining terrorism. He argues that defining an act as terrorism needs caution because, “once an action has been given that label, it becomes difficult to treat it in a value-neutral manner”.

A chronology of terrorist attacks in Kenya

Laing (2013) writing in the ‘Telegraph’, gives a chronology of terrorists attacks in Kenya. In 1980, a bomb flattened the Norfolk Hotel in Nairobi on New Year’s Eve, killing 20 people and injuring another 80.

An Arab group claimed responsibility, saying it was in retaliation for Kenya’s co-operation with Israel, during the rescue of 100 Israeli hostages held by pro-Palestinian hijackers at Entebbe Airport, in Uganda. The Norfolk Hotel was then owned and operated by the Block Hotels, an Israeli company.

In 1998, the US Embassy in Nairobi was bombed, leading to a huge loss of life. 250 people were killed and over 5,000 injured. The al Qaeda terrorist group, led by the late Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, claimed responsibility. Their justification for the attack was the American invasion of Afghanistan.

Four years later in 2002, an Israeli owned hotel in Kikambala Mombasa, was destroyed by a bomb and 13 people killed, and 80 others seriously injured in the Paradise Hotel bombing. There was also a missile attack, on an Israel plane shortly after it took off from Mombasa Airport, but the missile missed the target.

In October 2011, Kenyan troops were sent to Somalia alongside American, French, Ethiopian and other African forces, to stabilize the transitional government in Southern Somalia. Since

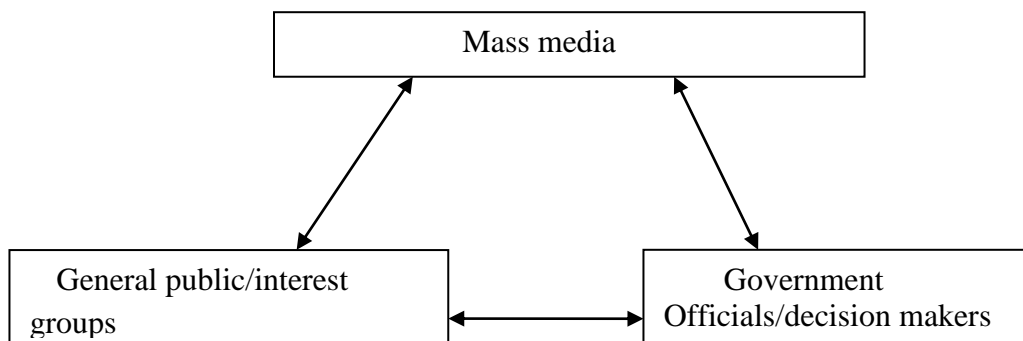
Journal of Applied Science

then, there have been several attacks involving grenades and other explosive devices, leading to several losses of life and many injuries. The attacks were on churches, bars, bus stations, military sites and shopping centres in North Eastern Kenya, Mombasa and in Nairobi. This culminated in the dastardly attack on Westgate Shopping Mall Nairobi that left 70 people dead and other over 200 injured.

What terrorists want from media?

Margaret Thatcher, a onetime Prime Minister of Britain, called the media the “oxygen” of terrorists. She suggested that the media should not pay attention to terrorists’ acts, and should refrain from reporting them, denying them oxygen leading them to die (Muller, Spaaj & Riuternberg, 2003). Going by the sentiments of the Kenyan government, Kenya won’t be averse to adapting this standpoint.

Nacos (2002) argues that, terrorists calculate the consequences of their actions, the likelihood of attracting media, and the probability of entering the triangle of political communication which is the ultimate goal of terrorism.



Adapted from: Nacos- *Mass-Mediated terrorism: The Central Role of the Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (2002)

Perl (1997) reminds us that, terrorists need publicity, usually free publicity, that a group could normally not buy or afford. For news networks, access to a terrorist activity is a hot story and is treated as such. In the Westgate mall attack, the terrorists timed their assault very well in order to gain maximum publicity.

The upscale mall is frequented by foreign diplomats and well to do Kenyans. Saturday is a free day in Kenya, and there would be many shoppers and clients looking for fun and business. The shopping mall is situated in Westlands, barely two or three kilometres from the Nairobi Central Business District. The time was at noon, and immediately all the major national news channels interrupted their scheduled programmes to air and report live, the unfolding events.

The international media also took up the news- the BBC, Reuters, AFP, CNN, Aljazeera and others. The attack on the mall also started trending on social media for the rest of the day. Media houses also took their outside broadcasting vans to the location, for the live streaming of the unfolding spectacle.

The terrorists also want to demonstrate their strength and convey the vulnerability of the authorities (Camphujisen and Vissers, 2012). They want to embarrass their enemies, which include the government, by showing that the opponent is not as powerful as commonly assumed. Paletz and Shcmind, (1992), add that success of their attempt is mostly dependent on the publicity they succeed in gaining for their causes.

In the Westgate Mall case, the terrorists laughed off threats from the government that they would be crushed, saying that the Kenyan government did not have the capacity to deal with them. The

media, unfortunately cheered them on in a round the clock coverage in all the main media outlets.

The other thing terrorist seek from the media, is coverage that causes damage to their enemy (Camhujisen and Vissers, 2012). They want the media to amplify panic, to spread fear and to facilitate economic loss.

In the Nairobi attack, most shopping malls were hastily closed. The whole of the government security machinery was diverted towards the mall under attack, complete with the army and armored personnel. The whole country was gripped in panic and anxiety. A tyre burst near the Fire Station in downtown Nairobi sent everybody nearby prostrate, ducking for cover, as I witnessed one afternoon as the siege at Westgate continued.

Foreign governments also sent out travel advisories to their citizens, advising them against travelling to Kenya, as reported by Augustine Odour in The Standard newspaper dated 29th September 2013- '*Fury as US issues travel advisory*'. This is the economic loss that the terrorists aimed to occasion against Kenya, and pleas by our leaders to the foreign governments against the advisories fell on deaf ears.

The terrorists also aim to cause disaffection towards the government. Campuhujisen and Vissers (2012) explain that, terrorists aim to make populations lose faith in their governments' ability to protect them, and to trigger government over reaction to specific incidents and the overall threats of terrorism.

In the Westgate Mall case, people started questioning their government's preparedness and ability to deal with terrorists, who had on several occasions successfully attacked our country.

The haphazard response by government forces to the situation worsened matters.

The government ordered hoteliers at the Coast, to especially take photographs, and get copies of travel documents and signatures of their clients to help police in their war against terror. Surveillance was heightened at border entry points and at all vital installations.

The terrorists also make use of repression by government. Campuhujisen and Vissers, (2012), say terrorists benefit when authority use repression, since it could motivate others to join their cause. Repression displays the government's dark side, they add, leading to negative perception by authorities on the general public. Paletz and Schmid, (1992), add that the media can be used to portray the supposedly repressive nature of the forces of law and order.

In our case, the government's response was to have the '*Nyumba Kumi*' initiative, which is a community policing concept in an effort to enhance security in villages. Ten households are put under the watch of a government functionary. The Interior Cabinet Secretary, Joseph Ole Lenku, urged security chiefs in Nairobi to ensure the current system of villages under a village elder were restructured into household units, with a clear leadership structure to ensure security for concerned households.

However, the initiative, heavily borrowed from Tanzania, has been criticized as unworkable in Kenya due to the mostly individualistic nature of Kenyans. It is said it works in Tanzania, since their policy of '*Ujamaa*' or Socialism embraces the philosophy of brother hood and being a brother's keeper, unlike Kenya where society is more individualistic.

Terrorists also seek to indirectly gain legitimacy from the media. Perl, (1997), postulates that terrorists want the media to give legitimacy to their ideological cause. Paletz and Schmid, (1992), concur. They say that a terrorist group's legitimacy is directly correlated with public sympathy for, and support of its cause.

For the Westgate Mall case, the terrorists sought to justify the attack by claiming that the Kenyan troops had occupied their territory and caused many atrocities. They wanted to paint themselves, as freedom fighters out to avenge their fellow citizens from the violations they had suffered under the Kenya Defence forces occupying their country.

Odour, writing the Daily Nation newspaper of 31/10/2013, claims terrorism makes sense when its targets are selected for maximum propaganda and publicity value. Terrorists only commit the kind of violent attacks that will attract media attention (Paletz and Schmid, 1992). In other words, terrorists' actions are determined by their newsworthiness.

What the government want from the media

According to Perl (1997) governments seek understanding, co-operation, restraint, and loyalty from the media in efforts to limit terrorists' harm to society, and in efforts to punish or apprehend those responsible for terrorists acts.

The government wants coverage to advance their agenda, and not that of terrorists (Perl, 1997).

The media is supposed to support the government's course of action in operations, and help disseminate government provided information when required. The media should understand policy objectives and give a balanced presentation.

The other goal the government seeks to achieve through the media, is to separate the terrorist from the media so as to deny them a platform to propagate their agenda (Perl, 1997). The government may feel that some of its operational activities may be hampered by the media reports.

Tom Lantos, an American congress man said “focusing on individual tragedies, interviewing the families of people in anguish, in horror, in nightmare, completely debilitates national policy makers from making rational decisions in the national interest (Hoffman 2006). It was therefore quite disturbing, to see media people rush to push their microphones under the noses of hostages who had just been rescued, demanding answers the victims found difficult to comprehend due to the stress and the trauma they had suffered.

The government also wants the media to present terrorists as criminals instead of glamorizing them, that their activities are criminal regardless of their cause (Perl 1997). He continues to say that governments also often prefer to exclude the media from the immediate area. This happened at the Westgate Mall when journalists were driven away by the military as intense gun battle ensued between the soldiers and the terrorists.

However, the government wants news organizations to provide information to the authorities once they have any (Perl 1997). They also seek publicity to help diffuse the tension of a situation by keeping the public reasonably calm.

The government prefers that the media refrains from revealing planned or anti- terrorist actions during incidents, and after incidents not to reveal government secrets or details of how the operation was performed. They also prefer that the media not publicize successes or technological achievements and operational methods used by terrorists so that copy-cat terrorists do not try to emulate them (Perl 1997). In the Westgate case the media seemed to be doing just that.

The government also wants the media to be careful about disinformation from terrorists’ allies, or sympathizers who gain from its broadcasts and publications (Perl 1997). The media should

boost the image of government agencies. The agencies may carefully control leaks to the press favorable to them and avoid criticism of their actions.

As Oduor, (2013), reminds us, even as terrorists seek publicity, the government seeks to down play the consequences of terror activities, often through ill-crafted propaganda. When the Interior Cabinet Secretary, Joseph Olelenku was reading a prepared statement to the press at one time, as seen on KTN television, he was nudged to change what he was reading by Chief of Police Kimaiyo and General Karangi of the military.

An interesting phenomenon to be considered in our discourse is what has been dubbed the “CNN effect”. This is what Livingston (1997) calls the impact of the global real time media -the extent, depth and the speed of the new global media which have created a new species of effects. The “CNN effect” implies the loss of policy making control on the part of the decision makers, because of the power and immediacy of press reports. So the continued live coverage of the Westgate siege must have given our policy-makers sleepless nights.

Livingston, (1997), says we may speak of CNN effect as a policy –agenda setting agent, an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals or as an accelerant to policy decision making. He says that each of these roughly corresponds to various stages of the useful notion of a linear policy process.

The media as “policy agenda –setters” may raise the prominence of an issue, placing it before higher level policy makers (Livingston 1997). The government influenced by media reporting on terrorism- related news on policy could be a dangerous phenomenon.

As an impediment to the achievement of desired policy goals, Livingston, (1997), argues the media coverage of some traumatic events or disclosure of tactically important information may

Journal of Applied Science

impede the development or implementation of policy, meant to address the problem. Some operational activities may also be hindered by the activities of the media.

The accelerant effect to decision making, deals with reduction of reaction time for policy makers. Livingston, (1997), says it may shorten the time those policy makers have to deal with or resolve the issue. He adds that “decisions are made in haste, sometimes dangerously so.” He also adds that policy makers “decry the absence of quiet time to deliberate choices, reach agreements, and mould the public’s understanding.”

Instantaneous reporting of events, demands instant action by governments. There is no time for deliberation or secret agreements since once a story is out, policy makers must react. Livingston, (1997), quoting former Secretary of State James Baker says, “The one thing it does is to drive policy makers to have a policy position”. Our policy makers must have been racking their brains on the policy position to take.

Accelerant	Media shortens decision making time, media also a force multiplier
Impediment	Emotional, grisly, coverage may undermine morale
Agenda-setting Agency	Emotional, compelling coverage of atrocities or humanitarian crises reorder policy priorities

Conceptual framework of the “CNN effect”

Adapted from: Lavingston- *Clarifying the CNN effect: An Examination of Media Effects According to military Intervention*- Research Paper (1997).

Odour, (2013), however warns the government against “killing the messenger”. He says that terrorism happens before the media records the consequences and the journalists only follow their cherished guiding news value: the truth. Nevertheless, Perl, (1997), advises the media to limit or avoid airing live unedited terrorism footage and to tone down information that may cause widespread panic, or amplify events which aid terrorists by stirring emotions sufficiently to exert irrational pressure on decision makers.

How media uses terrorism

According to Perl, (1997), media want to be the first with the story, for the ‘scoop’ is golden. This is because terrorism is news that must be covered and it adds viewer ratings which are directly related to advertising revenue, due to audience size and circulation.

Livingston, (1997), adds that the media wants to make the story as timely and dramatic as possible. (Ockrent, 2006) concurs, since he says the media cherish the bleeding, human interest and drama presented by terrorist acts. The breaking news, the shock, the need to be first with the news, the tragedy and thirst for human interest stories and high drama, lead to over-coverage of terrorist activities.

The unusual, alarming and dramatic events, lead the media to reporting of only the sensational aspects of terrorism, the blood, the gore, the horror of victims (ibid). He adds that terrorism has many aspects that make it “sexy” for media: the drama, danger, blood-it is news that has human

tragedy, miracle stories, heroes, has a clear division between good and evil, shocking footage and action. In other words it gives what media want –many people watching for a long time.

All this played out very well at the Westgate Mall and the local and international media had a field day. There were thousands of shoppers in the mall at the time, and the gunmen were shooting indiscriminately into them. There was blood, death, screaming and chaos. There was no end in sight for the tragedy, as the terrorist looked intent on killing as many people as they possibly could. There was nothing else showing for days on TV screens.

Livingston, (1997), also says the media want to protect the society's right to know. He adds that the media want to consume this liberally, to include popular and dramatic coverage by, for example, airing emotional reaction of victims, family members, witnesses and "people on the street". They also want to reveal the information withheld by law enforcement, security and other organs of government.

This society's right to know is what drove hordes of reporters to the Westgate Mall that Saturday afternoon and on subsequent days. Even with physical debarment by security forces, the media still milled around the mall with their cameras rolling and microphones at the ready. Interviews were gotten from family members, security officers, the government officials and the ordinary groups of onlookers. The media also highlighted what the authorities sought to hide or down play.

The other thing the media want when reporting terrorist incidents, is to protect their ability to operate as securely as possible in society (Livingston, 1997). Their concern goes beyond protecting their legal rights to publish relatively unrestrained, and to include personal security. They want protection from threat, harassment or violent assault during operations, and protection

from subsequent retaliation for providing unfavorable coverage (BBC News, 24th October, 2013).

In Nairobi's Westgate incident, the media was up in arms for being barred from covering some aspects in the mall, what later emerged as a cover up for various misdeeds on the part of security forces. Later, there were also threats of prosecution on some media personalities for exposing the transgressions of the security forces, and law enforcement officers.

Nevertheless, as Shapiro (2002) and Okrent (2006) observe, the media compete fiercely for increased market share of audience and for higher advertising revenue. This leads to 'breaking news' mentality where everyone wants to be the first with the news, to make sure viewers watch their channel and not another one, and keep doing so.

This development of headline news, or breaking news helps terrorism have an immediate impact upon a vast number of people (Okrent, 2006). And as Lieber and Kampf, (2007), observe, there is often little footage available leading to "repeated recycling of bloody images and of the most emotional sound bites."

The media wants to present the news for the public as fast as possible. Shapiro (2002) says a situation may therefore occur, when footage is simply aired, even live, without prescreening, since there is little time to make well-informed decisions, whether the footage is suitable for broadcasting. Horrific pictures are broadcast to the world, amplifying fear among viewers.

Government/media interaction in response to covering terrorist's incidents

There are several options that Perl, (1997), suggests to improve government media interaction when responding to or covering terrorist's incidents. The first are joint government/media

training exercises, to bring together government officials and media representatives to simulate government response and media coverage of mock terrorist incidents.

Next he suggests the establishments of a government terrorist response centre, to have on call a rapid reaction terrorism reporting pool composed of senior government and media representatives. Here coverage of incidents would be to coordinate any information on terrorists' activities and put it in context from the particular terrorist group.

Perl, (1997), also suggests the use of media pools specifically for the coverage of hostage type events. Here, all the media would agree on the news for release at the same. He, however, doubts if a media agreement for such an arrangement would be easy to secure.

The other suggestion given as an option by Perl (1997) is the establishment by the media of a loose code of voluntary behavior, or guidelines that editors and reporters could use when reporting terrorist incidents. He suggests that guidelines include:

- limiting information on hostages which could harm them: wealth, important relatives, nationality etc.;
- limiting information on military, or police movements during operations;
- limiting or agreeing not to air live un-edited interviews with terrorists;
- checking sources of information carefully, when the pressure is high, to report information that may not be accurate as well as limiting unfounded speculation;
- toning down information that may cause widespread panic, or amplify events which aid terrorist by stirring emotions sufficiently to exert irrational pressure on decision makers.

CONCLUSION

Terrorism has been seen by experts as 'a species of psychological warfare waged through the media'. The media responds to these activities with almost unrestrained eagerness, unable to ignore what terrorists have carefully crafted for the furtherance of their nefarious causes.

The governments' responses also play in the hands of terrorists, and are eagerly reported by the media. The government riles against the media accusing them of being on the side of terrorists. This is counterproductive since the media and the government should be on the same side, to deny the terrorists the 'oxygen' of survival to carry out their atrocities against mankind.

Nacos (2000) and Hoffman (2006) observe that terrorists cult would resemble the proverbial tree falling in the forest: if no one learned of the incident, it would be as if it never occurred; and without the media coverage the acts' impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victims of the attack, rather than reaching the wider target audience' at whom terrorists violence is actually aimed.

Nevertheless, this is the age of mass communication, and as Jenkins & Brian (1981) assert, the role of the media cannot be separated from acts of terrorism. What is needed is what Wilkinson (2007) roots for: voluntary self-regulation and self-restraint by the media as the best policy option for a democratic society-measures of self-restraint that are both appropriate and effective.

The other panacea that the state and media ought to be advised to apply is the options suggested by Perl 1997:

- Financing joint state/media training exercises

- Establishing a government terrorist information response centre.
- Promoting voluntary press coverage guidelines.

REFERENCES

Bockstette (2008). Jihadist Terrorist Use of Communication Management Techniques

Garmimisch-Partenkirchen.GernackerstraBe 2

Camphujisen M, Vissers E (2012) Terrorism and the Mass Media: A Symbiotic Relationship

Daily Nation 30/10/13

Oduor Ouma: Don't kill the messenger

Damm C. A (1982) Media and Terrorism

Journal of Security Administration. Vol. 5 Issue 1

Hoffman B (2006) Inside Terrorism

New York. Columbia University

Jenkins and Brian (1981) The Psychological Implications of Media-covered Terrorism

Research Paper

Nacos B.L (2000) Accomplice or Witness? The Media's Role in Terrorism

New York. Columbia University Press

Perl F.R (1997) Terrorism, the media, the government: perspectives, trends, and options for policy makers.

Weinemann & Winn (1994) Theater of Terror: Mass Media and international Terrorism.

New York. Longman Publishing Group

