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Abstract

This report synthesises the findings of three research reports, which explored media responses to three terrorist incidents – the Chibok kidnapping in Nigeria in 2014, al-Shabaab attacks in Nairobi in 2013 and 2019, and the Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka in 2019. These papers – part of an ongoing project led by International Centre for Counter-Terrorism - The Hague (ICCT), and by the European Union – examine how terrorism is reported in non-Western countries, and aim to increase the capacity of journalists, governments and civil society to respond to terrorist threats accurately, responsibly and proportionately. The paper discusses the findings and recommendations of the three studies, and develops some overarching recommendations on how to improve the media's response to terrorist incidents.

Keywords: Terrorism, Strategic Communications, Media, Terrorism Reporting, Journalism

Executive Summary

Challenges for Journalists

- Disproportionate impact: through media reporting, terrorist incidents often have an impact that is wider, longer and more significant than the event itself, presenting an ethical dilemma for journalists who aim to provide a public information service but who may inadvertently amplify the terrorists' messages.

- Political instrumentalisation: a terrorist event, and its representation by the media, may be used or abused by political actors. Journalists and editors often operate in politically contentious environments, which exacerbate the challenges of reporting on terrorism.

- Official pressure: reporting on counter-terrorist responses can expose journalists to official pressure and even criminal liability.

- The public interest balance: for journalists, there are two aspects of the public interest – the need to know, and public safety – and keeping them in balance requires responsible reporting that avoids self-censorship.

- Western framing: by allowing the international media to set the news agenda, terrorist events are often framed by Western preoccupations rather than national and local realities.

Challenges for Governments

- Attention seekers: the space for communications after a terrorist attack will be filled by those with malevolent and/or benevolent intentions competing for attention.

- Shutdowns versus inaction: a binary view of the media landscape – controlled and censored, or threatening and anarchic – has led to ineffective and counter-productive responses. However, there is a broad spectrum of possible responses, some of which may enable an environment for accurate, proportionate reporting.

- Message discipline: this is not the same as message dominance, or censorship. Inaccurate or deceptive communication by governments will undermine the credibility of their messaging and increase public confusion and uncertainty.

- Positive communicators: promoting communicators who can counter extremist messages has become a mainstay of countering violent extremism (CVE). Although evidence of the effectiveness of such approaches is mixed, some groups and individuals, such as victims of terrorism, may have a particularly positive communications impact.

Recommendations

- For governments, journalists, and editors: guidelines, protocols and policies on reporting terrorism should be developed cooperatively for high-threat countries.

- For international donors working in counter-terrorism: look to build the capacity of journalists, editors and government communications officers in managing the information environment before, during and after terrorist incidents.

- For government counter-terrorism officials: plan how to respond to attacks without creating counter-productive outcomes.

Introduction

At around noon on 21 September 2013, four masked gunmen from the al-Shabaab terrorist group commenced an attack on the Westgate shopping mall in Nairobi, leading to a siege situation that lasted for three days that left seventy-one people dead, including the attackers. On 14 April 2014, armed men broke into the Government Girls Secondary School in Chibok, Nigeria, and kidnapped 276 pupils. The perpetrators were quickly identified as Boko Haram, a notorious Islamist militant group that has terrorised Nigeria's northeast since 2009. On 15 January 2019, al-Shabaab attempted a second marauding terrorist attack in downtown Nairobi, selecting the DusitD2 hotel complex. Twenty-one people were killed, including five attackers. On 21 April 2019 (Easter Sunday), a coordinated series of attacks was mounted in Sri Lanka, targeting churches and hotels and killing more than 250. The Islamic State group (ISIS) claimed responsibility for the attacks.

These four incidents caught the world's attention, as was clearly the intention. By striking at high-profile commercial targets in the most prosperous areas of downtown Nairobi, al-Shabaab clearly aimed to create effects that its sustained violent campaign in Mogadishu and southern Somalia could not achieve. By the time of the Chibok kidnapping, Boko Haram was about to become the most lethal terrorist group in the world, surpassing even the Islamic State group in Syria and Iraq.[1] But against the background of its ultra-violent terrorist campaign, the Chibok kidnapping seemed to many observers to be qualitatively different: by targeting such defenceless victims, and on such a scale, Boko Haram was seen to have crossed a line that shocked even seasoned reporters of terrorist atrocities. By Easter Sunday in 2019, ISIS was in marked decline, having lost Baghuz, its last foothold in Syria, the previous month.[2] Days after the attacks, on 29 April 2019, the ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi appeared on video for the first time since his notorious sermon in Mosul in 2015, framing the Sri Lanka attacks as a reprisal for the battle of Baghuz.[3] Al-Baghdadi's intention, clearly, was to rally supporters and disconcert his enemies with a message that his group's territorial defeat was not its end but a transition to a new phase.

The scale and horror of major terrorist attacks presents significant challenges to journalists and editors reporting on terrorism, as well as to governments in calibrating their communication responses. Through their attacks and associated communications, terrorists seek publicity in order to influence supporters and adversaries, and reporters and governments can become unwitting accomplices in the terrorists' battle for attention.[4] For example, research shows that suicide attacks attract disproportionate media coverage – which may explain why such attacks are increasingly favoured by transnational terrorist groups.[5] At the same time, terrorist incidents are topics of legitimate public and, hence, media interest, especially when they cause mass casualties, and although governments occasionally attempt to downplay the significance of terrorist attacks in order to minimise their social impact, populations will often expect their leaders

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1 Dionne Searcey and Marc Santora, "Boko Haram Ranked Ahead of ISIS for Deadliest Terror Group," *New York Times,* 18 November 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/19/world/africa/boko-haram-ranked-ahead-of-isis-for-deadliest-terror-group.html.

2 BBC News, "Islamic State group defeated as final territory lost, US-backed forces say," 23 March 2019, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47678157.

3 "New video message from the Islamic State's Shaykh Abu Bakr al-Hussayni al Qurayshi al-Baghdadi: 'In the Hospitality of the Leader of the Faithful'." Jihadology. 29 April 2019. https://jihadology.net/2019/04/29/new-video-message-from-the-islamic-states-shaykh-abu-bakr-al-%e1%b8%a5ussayni-al-qurayshi-al-baghdadi-in-the-hospitality-of-the-leader-of-the-faithful/.

4 Jonathan Matusitz, *Terrorism and communication* (New York: Sage, 2013)

5 Michael Jetter, "More bang for the buck: Media coverage of suicide attacks." *Terrorism and political violence* 31, no. 4 (2019): 779-799.

to respond both practically and through their communications.[6]

This paper discusses the challenges of media responses to terrorist incidents, by journalists and by governments, and the opportunities for mitigating the impact of terrorism through a more nuanced and agile response than has often been seen in the recent past. It draws on a synthesis of findings from three reports, which examine the communication dimensions of the four terrorist attacks mentioned above, and presents recommendations for journalists and editors, governments and international donors.

The first report by Kayode Adebiyi, a "Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign", examines the impact of the campaign in the wake of the Chibok kidnappings by Boko Haram.[7] The second study by Mathias Muindi, a "Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks", compares the government communications response and media reporting in the aftermath of the two attacks by al-Shabaab in Kenya[8]. The final report by Amarnath Amarasingam and Rukshana Rizwie, "Turning the Tap Off: The Impacts of Social Media Shutdown After Sri Lanka's Easter Attacks", examines the impact of the Sri Lankan government's decision to temporality shut down social media platforms following the Easter Sunday attacks by Islamic State.[9]

This paper is structured thematically, and is divided into three sections. The first addresses the challenges for journalists, examining journalistic practices, capacity and relationships. The second addresses the challenges for government communicators, examining both communications strategy and the tactics available to governments. The paper concludes with some recommendations concerning reporting guidelines, capacity building and planning.

The Challenges for Journalists

The Disproportionate Impact of Terrorism

The impact of terrorism derives not only from terrorist acts but also from how those acts are represented, both by the terrorists themselves (in the form of propaganda) and by more neutral communicators, notably the media. Indeed, terrorism is a distinctively mediated phenomenon: without the leverage provided by mass media, terrorists could not achieve the political and social

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6 David Parker, Julia M. Pearce, Lasse Lindekilde & M. Brooke Rogers, "Challenges for Effective Counterterrorism Communication: Practitioner Insights and Policy Implications for Preventing Radicalization, Disrupting Attack Planning, and Mitigating Terrorist Attacks," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 42, no. 3 (2019), 264-291.

7 Kayode Adebiyi, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism: Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign", Strategic Communications Project Report, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 2020. https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/10/StratComms-Report-Nigeria-FINAL.pdf.

8 Mathias Muindi, "Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism - Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks", Strategic Communications Project Report, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, December 2020.
 https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/12/StratComms-Report-3-Muindi-Final.pdf.

9 Amarnath Amarasingam and Rukshana Rizwie, "Turning the Tap Off: The Impacts of Social Media Shutdown After Sri Lanka's Easter Attacks", Strategic Communications Project Report, *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, October 2020. https://icct.nl/app/uploads/2020/10/StratComms-Report-2.pdf.

effects they seek.[10] Media platforms serve as amplifiers, broadcasting (sometimes literally) the event to a much larger population than those immediately affected. But media can also extend the impact of terrorism in time, keeping violent campaigns in the public eye and thereby ensuring their political salience. The Chibok kidnapping is a notable example of this. It was an extended atrocity that remains unresolved, as over one hundred of the victims are still missing. A terrorist attack is not a momentary event but a process.

In the weeks and months after an attack, its effects may wax and wane. Those effects can be dramatic and far-reaching. Terrorists do not have to create the massive loss of life witnessed on 11 September 2001 to change the political weather, to say nothing of the impact of incidents like Chibok on communities. As Kayode Adebiyi has shown in his paper on the Chibok kidnapping,[11] the kidnapping story became part of Nigeria's contentious politics, and its significance and impact changed during and after Nigeria's 2015 general election. The story, therefore, illustrates with particular starkness that a terrorist attack is often planned to achieve an impact that is greater and more enduring than the event itself. This presents an ethical dilemma for journalists – ignoring or downplaying an incident does not serve the public's need to be informed, but bringing attention to it risks amplifying the terrorists' messages and helps them achieve their aims of communicating through violence. While this dilemma may not be fully resolvable, media representations can potentially mitigate the negative impact of reporting on terrorism through responsible journalistic practices such as high standards of accuracy, the avoidance of sensationalising the story, appropriate background and framing, and careful use of language to avoid stigmatisation or presenting terrorists as heroic figures.[12]

Political Instrumentalisation of Terrorism

The notoriety of the Chibok kidnapping was not solely the result of the act itself. Although Boko Haram was well known to Nigerians and to the world, reporting on its violent campaign in north-eastern Nigeria was surprisingly limited. This was partly a result of the security environment, which made reporting from Borno State so hazardous. In addition, a combination of government control over access to information, Nigeria's contentious party politics, and the business models of the country's media sector creates a peculiarly challenging environment for local journalists. According to one of Adebiyi's respondents, four state-controlled or state-influenced outlets are granted access to information but on an implicit understanding that terrorist events will be reported in a manner consistent with the government's interests, while private media outlets are competing for attention and revenue, and are often subject to partisan political influences. The result is that Boko Haram's campaign is under-reported and subject to a degree of censorship, and the available coverage is often sensationalised or inaccurate.

Adebiyi's paper describes the confusion and uncertainty felt by editors and reporters in the immediate aftermath of the kidnapping. With limited access for journalists and a government apparently denying that the event took place, or that Boko Haram was behind it, how could and should the event be reported? What transformed the situation, and launched the Chibok girls into the centre of the world's attention, was a campaign delivered by neither the government nor the media, but by civil society. The kidnapping prompted the Bring Back Our Girls social media campaign, which was, by any measure, an astonishing success. It led to greater recognition

10 See, for example, Paul Wilkinson, "The media and terrorism: A reassessment," Terrorism and political violence 9, no. 2 (1997): 51-64, and Neville Bolt, The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries (London: Hurst, 2012).
11 Adebiyi, "Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign."
12 See Jessica White, "Terrorism and the Mass Media," RUSI Occasional Paper, 2020, pp. 12, 24-6.

worldwide of the impact of Boko Haram's violence on Nigeria's communities, and to the plight of victims, often overlooked by global media outlets, which have focused on the perpetrators of terrorism. Some of the world's most influential figures, from Malala Yousefzai to First Lady Michelle Obama, joined the campaign. The Nigerian government was shamed into accepting the scale of the terrorist threat and the inadequacy of its response, which in turn contributed to the election of Muhammadu Buhari as president in Nigeria's first ever peaceful transition of power .

The Chibok example underlines the enormous responsibility that lies upon journalists and editors in reporting terrorism. Whether to report an attack and subsequently how to frame it is a decision with significant consequences. As a result, the media's presentation of the incident may be used (and sometimes abused) by those with vested interests. In the Chibok case, the political situation was not simply a context for the media's response. The very existence and nature of the Boko Haram threat was a political issue, with President Jonathan's administration first downplaying the terrorist threat and then seeing the Bring Back Our Girls campaign as a different kind of risk so that some of his allies sought to de-legitimise the campaign. This politicisation, which is starkly demonstrated by the Chibok example but is by no means unique,[13] creates a hazardous landscape which journalists and editors are required to navigate. In their reporting, journalists need to be sensitive not only to terrorist threats and their wider and longer-term impacts, but also to the political context in which those threats are present.

Official Pressure: Reporting on Terrorism and Counter-Terrorism

The Nigerian government's handling of the kidnapping became a major part of the Chibok story. In the Westgate attack in Nairobi in 2013, journalists similarly found themselves covering not just a terrorist incident but also the steps (and miss-steps) taken by the government and its security forces in response. Reporting on counter-terrorism efforts may be even more challenging than reporting on terrorist groups and attacks, as journalists risk becoming seen as critics of the state on the issue of the state's ability to protect itself and its citizens. In counter-terrorism as in other contexts, journalists are often seen by politicians and officials not as neutral conduits of facts and information but as political agents, and they are often expected, or pressured, to perform political roles. As Mathias Muindi shows in his paper, following the Westgate attack Kenyan officials, including the country's president, requested a *patriotic* response to terrorist attacks from the media, while the government also added provisions to its counter-terrorism legislation that limited reporting on terrorism and counter-terrorism activities. The combination of official pressure and appeals to patriotism appeared to bear fruit in the generally admiring tone adopted by the media in its reporting of the security response to the second attack.[14] Journalists have a responsibility to report on government responses to attacks as well as the attacks themselves. But reporting on the response can expose journalists to official pressure, especially where the state sees counter-terrorism as a national duty that requires active support, rather than objective or investigative reporting.[15]

The stakes for journalists reporting on counter-terrorism can be high. As Adebiyi's paper

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13 See, for example, Florence Faucher and Laurie Boussaguet, "The politics of symbols: Reflections on the French government's framing of the 2015 terrorist attacks." *Parliamentary Affairs* 71, no. 1 (2018): 169-195; Teemu Sinkkonen, "Can political leaders make a difference? Norwegian versus Spanish experiences in responding to terrorist attacks." *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 4 (2016): 326-341.
14 Muindi, "Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks."
15 Archetti also notes that journalists can come under official pressure in reporting terrorism. Cristina Archetti, *Understanding terrorism in the age of global media: A communication approach* (Springer, 2012)

demonstrates, perceived criticism of government responses to terrorist attacks can land a journalist in jail. Similarly, successive governments in Nigeria appear to have expected journalists to report patriotically, but with the national interest and political interests sometimes overlapping, this can lead to accusations of political support. Worse consequences may follow for those seen to have breached the expected commitment to patriotism. As Muindi's analysis notes, the Kenyan authorities have used counter-terrorism laws against journalists, including arresting a blogger in 2019 for posting an image of police officers killed in an attack, an act which the police described as *unpatriotic*.[16] Further, Muindi's paper shows that the government continues to monitor reporting of terrorism and to intervene when it sees principles of patriotism being challenged. More pervasively, his paper also suggests that the Kenyan media, despite being mostly run by the private sector and politically independent, operates an implicit policy of self-censorship in reporting on counter-terrorism. For Nigeria, Adebiyi shows that in reporting terrorism the media is often torn between professionalism – undefined but seen to include unbiased, objective, accurate reporting – and patriotism, which can be interpreted differently. For one journalist interviewed for the study, *patriotism* meant bending to political influence, but for another it meant not amplifying terrorist propaganda or instilling fear in the population.[17] However, it is defined, the fact that patriotism may be expected of journalists in two different contexts shows that the pressures on journalists are not confined to security-related issues.

The Public Interest Balance

Discussion of the chaotic response to the Westgate siege often focuses on the government and security forces, but Muindi's paper also shows that journalists did not feel confident in reporting the incident appropriately and proportionately. Analysis of al-Shabaab's aims and tactics was often sourced from international experts, and reporting seems to have been buffeted by attempted government control on one side and al-Shabaab's vigorous and capable campaign on the other. As a result, Muindi diagnoses an over-reliance on official sources, damaging the credibility of outlets that were uncritically recycling statements by senior officials and politicians that asserted that events were under control, even though it was later admitted by President Kenyatta that the operation to resolve the siege was "bungled".[18] Similarly, in the Chibok case, official information was released through vetted media outlets, only for this to decrease trust in those sources and further enhance the reputation of the Bring Back Our Girls campaign as a neutral and alternative source. In the DusitD2 case, the media was again reliant on official messaging which it largely did not challenge, something one editor subsequently defended as being in the public interest. This may be warranted during and immediately after an incident, as we discuss below. However, there is a fine line between responsible reporting of a terrorist incident and self-censorship.[19] The challenge for media organisations is to ensure they have the skills and contextual knowledge to avoid self-censorship as a default when reporting on terrorism, and to balance two aspects of the public interest – public safety, and the public's right to be informed. However, these reports suggest that the required skills and knowledge are in short supply.

This lack of local capacity, as Adebiyi highlights in the case of Nigeria, can be exacerbated by a lack of benchmark editorial policies and codes of ethics in reporting on terrorism for both print and broadcasting. Where local media can report on an incident, the pressures identified here

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16 Muindi, "Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks," p. 15.
17 Adebiyi, "Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign," p. 5.
18 Muindi, "Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks," p. 4.
19 Self-censorship as a strategy in media reporting of terrorism is discussed by Alex P. Schmid, amongst others. See Alex P. Schmid, "The Way Forward on Counter-Terrorism: Global Perspectives," *Strathmore Law Journal* 2 (2016): 49-73.

can lead to distortion, as illustrated by the very different styles of reporting the Chibok incident from the two 'wings' of news outlets in Nigeria – the 'Lagos corridor' and 'Kaduna corridor' media houses, which are themselves aligned with particular regional and confessional perspectives. Even the labelling of Boko Haram – as 'jihadist' or 'insurgent' – is influenced by this orientation. In their report of the aftermath of the Easter Sunday attacks in Sri Lanka, Amarnath Amarasingam and Rukshana Rizwie raise similar concerns that racial and ethnic bias led to polarising media coverage. In its coverage of the Easter attacks and aftermath, the Sinhala-language press often demonstrated anti-Muslim sentiment and might have contributed to the week of violence that followed. The ethnic bias, they noted, reflected a lack of professionalism in Sri Lankan journalism, which also extended to a lack of fact-checking, with rumours that emerged on social media being repeated on mainstream media without any verification of sources.

Western Framing: Local vs International Media

News outlets across the world are struggling to contend with the new technological and business environment in which traditional revenue sources are diminishing, and financial pressures are believed to encourage sensationalised reporting of terrorist incidents.[20] However, for journalists reporting on terrorism in the Global South, the politics of security bring additional and acute pressures. The lack of access to sources, censorship and political influence means that local news outlets are less capable of responding accurately and responsibly to an event, which either creates an information vacuum or, where an incident is major enough to attract international attention, ceding the space to international outlets.

As Adebiyi highlights, the challenges faced by Nigerian media meant that it was often easier to rely on foreign news outlets to cover the story. Further, as Muindi notes, the lack of authoritative local voices on terrorism in Kenya led to a reliance of local media on foreign analysts, some of whom had a limited understanding of the situation in Kenya. By allowing the international media to set the news agenda, there is a risk that terrorist events are framed in terms of Western preoccupations rather than national and local realities. In addition, other research on media reporting of terrorism in Nigeria confirms that Nigerian media tend to adopt Western frames of 'Islamic militancy' and suggests that authentic, local sources of news, such as citizens directly affected by Boko Haram's attacks, tend to be excluded in favour of official sources.[21] The Kenyan and Nigerian case studies, therefore, suggest something of a skills vacuum that has a negative, long-term consequence in terms of accuracy, objectivity and depth of reporting, and may even skew the understanding of local insurgencies by over-emphasising their ideological and transnational aspects.

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20 Hoffman and Jengelley offer a nuanced critique of the assumption that profit and competition for market share drive the tone of terrorism coverage, while acknowledging that more profit-oriented media tends to be more sensationalist. Aaron M. Hoffman and Dwaine HA Jengelley, "Does bottom-line pressure make terrorism coverage more negative? Evidence from a twenty-newspaper panel study," *Media, War & Conflict* (2020).
21 Confidence Uwazuruike, Reporting Boko Haram: Framing the Chibok schoolgirls' abduction in the Nigerian press, *African Journalism Studies* 39, no. 3 (2018): 66-84.

The Challenges for Government Communicators

Attention Seekers: Understanding Competition in the Post-Incident Communication Space

The immediate aftermath of a terrorist attack is a crucial period for sense-making and meaning generation, and competitive framing of the attack may continue for months or years.[22] From a government's perspective, the period immediately after an attack is crucial for managing communications with and through the media. It is during this period that the public wants and needs information the most, and it is often when accurate information is in the shortest supply. It is therefore a moment of vulnerability, which malicious and mischievous actors seek to exploit. A terrorist attack creates a space, which can be filled by competitors for attention who may have malevolent or benevolent intentions, or may simply be trying to secure some advantage. As Amarasingam and Rizwie note in their study of the 2019 Easter Sunday bombings in Sri Lanka, social media channels in Sri Lanka are exploited by malicious actors peddling disinformation and conspiracy theories, sometimes causing or contributing to inter-communal tension and violence.[23] Disinformation in the aftermath of an attack can also be targeted by highly capable state actors, seeking geopolitical advantage through promoting or exacerbating inter-communal tensions.[24]

In the aftermath of a terrorist incident, government communicators will therefore be working in a complex and contested environment, whether they realise it or not. The Kenya and Nigeria case studies suggest that their focus may be on shielding their responses from criticism and ensuring that media coverage does not inadvertently exacerbate the impact of the event. However, they are not just contending with the terrorists' propaganda and the media's interest in getting material for their coverage – there are other forces, some of them sophisticated, capable and covert, that may be seeking to manipulate perceptions for their own ends. Mitigating the impact of terrorist attacks in the communication space therefore requires a thorough analysis of the media ecosystem.

Shutdowns vs Inaction: The Binary View of the Media Landscape

Instead of developing dynamic and targeted responses to terrorist incidents and other emergencies, governments in the Global South increasingly rely on internet shutdowns or social media bans.[25] Leaving aside the impact these can have on fundamental political rights, they are an extremely blunt tool in managing the impact of terrorist threats. The Sri Lanka government's response to the Easter Sunday attacks in 2019 is a case in point. The government rightly anticipated that malicious actors, using disinformation and hate speech, could weaponise the attack to provoke inter-communal violence, but wrongly decided that a social media shutdown

22 Alastair Reed and Haroro J. Ingram. "Towards a Framework for Post-Terrorist Incident Communications Strategies." *Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology Paper* 12 (2019): 4-5.
23 Amarasingam and Rizwie, "Turning the Tap Off."
24 See for example Martin Innes, Diyana Dobreva and Helen Innes, "Disinformation and digital influencing after terrorism: spoofing, truthing and social proofing," *Contemporary Social Science* 16, no. 2 (2019): 241-255.
25 Mohammed Nurul Momen, Freedom of expression in the digital age: Internet censorship. In Scott Romaniuk, Manish Thapa, Péter Marton (eds) *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Global Security Studies* (Palgrave Macmillan, Cham: 2019). doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-74336-3_31-1

was the best instrument to control the flow of information to the country's citizens.[26] In the post-attack period it is common for governments to overlook the harm that can be done by third parties, but the Sri Lanka case also shows that it is possible to over-react, or to act counter-productively. As Amarasingam and Rizwie demonstrate, the Sri Lankan response may have closed off some avenues for disinformation, but they also restricted emergency communications, fact-checking and independent verification, and limited the transparency of the government's response. Moreover, if preventing inter-communal violence was the aim – and some of Amarasingam and Rizwie's respondents were sceptical of this – then it did not succeed. Mob violence broke out in several locations after the attack, and continued in subsequent weeks. The Sri Lanka case study is consistent with the findings of another study, focusing on the response of the Indian authorities in Kashmir, which similarly concluded that a prolonged internet shutdown has been ineffective while leading to other harmful outcomes.[27]

The recourse to internet shutdowns suggest a binary view of the media landscape – controlled and censored, or threatening and anarchic – which leads to ineffective and counter-productive responses.[28] Attempts to control the communication space by shutting down internet services impose major costs on society, silencing allies as well as enemies, and creating informational vacuums. Doing nothing, however, yields up the communication space. Social media platforms are often stereotyped as sources of disinformation, but for a reporter working on a fast-moving news story, such as a terrorist incident, social media responses are also important sources for eyewitness accounts, expert analysis, or claims of responsibility. Indeed, as Amarasingam and Rizwie suggest, social media accounts can, in some circumstances, be more reliable than traditional media and official news sources, especially in contexts where traditional media are politically influenced, or where government censorship is severe. However, they also point out the need to fact-check the information sourced, to avoid amplifying unverified rumours that circulate online.

The negative consequences of this binary perspective affect not only journalists but also citizens. Amarasingam and Rizwie show that barring access to social media meant citizens were not only less informed, but also could not benefit from services such as Facebook's safety check feature. The aggregate effect of social media or internet shutdowns is to reduce the amount of information in circulation, and reduce access to that information, while workarounds such as Virtual Private Networks (VPNs) ensure that misinformation and disinformation still gets through. In other words, shutdowns simply create communications vacuums that could potentially be filled by malevolent actors should a state rely on suppression alone. By shutting down the internet, governments may believe they are controlling the communication space, but in reality they may actually be disrupting it. Their choice is not a binary one between authoritarian control on the one hand and inaction on the other. There is a spectrum of possible responses, which they can employ to enable an environment for accurate, proportionate reporting.

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26 Amarasingam and Rizwie, "Turning the Tap Off."

27 Kabir Taneja and Kriti M. Shah. "The conflict in Jammu and Kashmir and the convergence of technology and terrorism." *Global Research Network on Terrorism and Technology* 11 (2019).

28 For an analysis of internet shutdowns as a counter-productive response to social mobilisation, see Jan Rydzak, Moses Karanja, and Nicholas Opiyo, "Internet Shutdowns in Africal Dissent Does Not Die in Darkness: Network Shutdowns and Collective Action in African Countries," *International Journal of Communication* 14 (2020): 4264-4287.

Message Discipline: Shaping the Communication Space

Message discipline is important in ensuring effective incident response by governments, but message discipline is not the same as message dominance, or censorship. In democracies like Kenya and Nigeria, a free press has a vital role in ensuring democratic freedoms and in holding governments to account. This means reporting beyond what emerges from official channels. Muindi's analysis of the contrasting communications responses to the Westgate and DusitD2 attacks in Nairobi shows, in the case of the latter attack , that disciplined government communication can manage security risks without infringing human and political rights. During and immediately after an attack there is a case for controlling information so as not to weaken the security response, provide a tactical advantage to the terrorists, or do their work for them by increasing levels of anxiety and alarm. However, there is a fine line between this and censorship, and once an incident has been resolved the arguments for limiting the flow of information start to fall away, and more information can safely be released.[29] The distinction implicit here is between operational information management and government censorship. However, whilst managing the information flow is one thing, dominating the information space is another. Government messaging must be accurate and truthful, or it risks being contradicted by social media users on the ground, as was the case with the Kenyan government's response to the attack at Westgate. Manipulation of information for persuasive purposes ('spin') and inaccuracy serve to undermine the credibility of the government's messaging and help fuel the sense of confusion and uncertainty experienced by the public.

Moreover, governments in democratic countries also have political and ethical responsibilities to ensure press freedom, albeit within certain limitations when this comes up against security imperatives. Independent journalists unsurprisingly see government censorship as a direct challenge to their independence, but in counter-terrorism there is an acceptance, at least in some political contexts, that government and the media are open to negotiating mutually acceptable rules for responsible reporting of terrorist incidents.[30] Such rules may include limitations both on the media and on the government. The media, for example, may agree to withhold information that would aid the terrorist group, unnecessarily increase public alarm (e.g. by displaying graphic images), or impede counter-terrorist operations, while a government could provide access to official sources and to the right of journalists to pursue investigative reporting on terrorism-related stories.

Governments do not have to choose between message dominance on the one hand and ceding the information space to their violent adversaries on the other. As Muindi shows, the media handling of the two Nairobi attacks contrasted as starkly as the broader security response by the Kenyan authorities. In the first attack at the Westgate mall, al-Shabaab dominated communications channels, taunting the Kenyan authorities on Twitter while the incident unfolded over several days. The government response was uncoordinated and haphazard. In the second, at the DusitD2 complex, the government managed the flow of information in such a way that public confidence was maintained.

Positive Communicators: Engaging with Stakeholders

The Chibok case shows that it would be a mistake to see managing the communications space after an attack as a purely defensive challenge. Adebiyi argues that the Bring Back Our Girls

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29 Parker et al., "Challenges for Effective Counterterrorism Communication."
30 B. L. Nacos, Y. Bloch-Elkon, Y. and R. Y. Shapiro, *Selling fear: Counterterrorism, the media, and public opinion* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011)

campaign could – and perhaps should – have been seen as a natural ally by a government struggling with a rampant insurgency. Information vacuums can be filled by benevolent communicators, terrorists seeking to maximise their impact, and peddlers of misinformation and disinformation seeking to manipulate public opinion to their own ends. After news broke of the kidnapping, President Jonathan took three weeks to make a public pronouncement. It was that political communications vacuum, as well as the kidnapping itself, that gave rise to the Bring Back Our Girls Campaign – in this case a powerful and positive civil society-led response. However, the campaign was increasingly seen by the government as a competing message, or even as a threat, including after a change of government and a reset of its counter-terrorism and counter-insurgency campaign.[31] This suggests that successive Nigerian governments failed to recognise that shaping the communication space involves working in collaboration with others, including those outside government.

Adebiyi's paper on the response to the Chibok kidnapping shows that, in the aftermath of an attack, governments , terrorist organisations and the media are following different or competing agendas when communicating to the public. There is also a wide variety of stakeholders, observers and others with the potential to influence how terrorist attacks are seen and responded to. As Cristina Archetti notes, it is important for terrorism scholars to examine communication platforms ("both 'new' and 'old' media") in order to understand "how they are used by political actors (terrorists, citizens, NGOs, governments and others) for advancing their own agendas".[32] One of Adebiyi's most important conclusions is that, in the Chibok case, successive governments failed to see the Bring Back Our Girls campaign as both a stakeholder and a potential ally in its counter-terrorism strategic communications efforts. Therefore, governments should manage the communications landscape so that malevolent communicators are suppressed or challenged and benevolent ones enabled and supported.

Partnerships between governments, international donors and civil society has become a mainstay of preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE) approaches, which aim to reduce radicalisation to terrorism by building individual and societal resilience, and countering efforts to recruit and radicalise by violent groups. This has given rise to an expanding field of 'counter-narrative' practice, which seeks to either rebut extremist propaganda, or present more positive communications in a way that will crowd out the extremists' own content.[33] The theoretical basis and evidence for the effectiveness of such approaches is mixed at best, but it is undeniable that counter-terrorism has a very significant communications dimension.[34] The argument is often heard that governments lack credibility as communicators with communities at risk of radicalisation and recruitment, so civil society should take over.[35] The authors have argued elsewhere that governments are, in fact, highly credible and necessary communicators in some situations,[36] but given that national and international donors go to great lengths to identify and partner with civil

31 Adebiyi, "Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign."

32 Cristina Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication and New Media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 9, no. 1, (2015): 49-59.

33 Alex P Schmid, "Al-Qaeda's "single narrative" and attempts to develop counter-narratives: The state of knowledge," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* (2014): 208-225.

34 Andrew Glazzard, "Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague* (2017). Available at: *https://icct. nl/wp-content/ uploads/2017/05/ICCT-Glazzard-Losing-the-Plot-May-2017.pdf*.

35 Henry Tuck and Tanya Silverman, *The counter-narrative handbook*, (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016). For a case study of civil society contributions to CVE practice in Nigeria, see Chikodiri Nwangwu and Christian Ezeibe, "Femininity is not inferiority: women-led civil society organizations and "countering violent extremism" in Nigeria," *International Feminist Journal of Politics* 21, no. 2 (2019): 168-193.

36 Andrew Glazzard and Alastair Reed, "Beyond Prevention: The Role of Strategic Communications Across the Four Pillars of Counterterrorism Strategy," *The RUSI Journal* 165, no. 1 (2020): 74-88.

society organisations working on P/CVE communication, civil society-led campaigns like Bring Back Our Girls would have been an obvious partner for the Nigerian government.

The Chibok story also demonstrates that among the most important groups of stakeholders in counter-terrorism communications are victims of terrorism. As Adebiyi has shown, independent reporters believe that the Nigerian authorities seek to limit contact between journalists and victims in order to manage the information environment politically. But limiting the agency of victims – or at least downplaying their roles – is counter-productive as well as potentially unethical in silencing the voices of those most affected by the phenomenon. Although there are also ethical concerns about instrumentalising victims, counter-terrorism communicators increasingly recognise the value as well as the importance of the victim's voice, in highlighting the impact of terrorism in ways that do not promote the terrorist's objectives.[37] Adebiyi shows that reporting on terrorism has improved in Nigeria, especially in television, by giving less attention to Boko Haram and more space and agency to victims. This is at least partly attributable to the Bring Back Our Girls campaign, which may therefore have a significant legacy in shifting global focus in counter-terrorism communications from perpetrator to victim.[38]

Conclusions

Journalists and editors responding to terrorist incidents in the Global South have to navigate a complex and uncertain media landscape. They are at risk of being unwitting accomplices to terrorist groups by inadvertently amplifying their messages, and they are subject to political influence and, often, official pressure. They have to balance two sides of the public interest – being informed and being safe – but are often at a disadvantage in terms of knowledge, skills and resources. This suggests a need to support the capacity development of local journalists to be able to report effectively and responsibly on terrorist incidents.

Governments in the Global South also have to navigate a complex environment, but they do so with the responsibility to keep their populations safe. They need to be alert to the competition for attention and influence that takes place in the aftermath of a terrorist incident, and some have responded by attempting to control the communications environment through blunt tools such as internet shutdowns. But such responses are potentially ineffective and counter-productive. There are alternative responses, including efforts to shape the communications environment after an incident positively and ethically, and working with natural allies in civil society. Governments, therefore, need to develop the capability to manage information during and after an attack responsibly and effectively and to maintain public confidence, transparently.

37 Alex P. Schmid, "Strengthening the role of victims and incorporating victims in efforts to counter violent extremism and terrorism," *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague*, 2012.
38 Adebiyi, "Case Study of the #BringBackOurGirls Campaign."

Recommendations

Many of the issues diagnosed in this research are structural, and are unlikely to respond to specific interventions in the short-term. In addition to the specific recommendations made in the three studies which this paper synthesises, we recommend three steps to build capacity in both sectors.

First, guidelines, protocols and policies on reporting terrorism should be developed for high-threat countries by governments and journalists/editors, working cooperatively and potentially with support from international donors: ethical codes of practice have been shown to minimise the negative effects of media reporting .[39] Where guidelines for reporting on terrorism exist in the cases studied in the three reports, they seem to have had limited effect. Guidelines might productively go beyond questions of house style – such as the requirement of some news outlets to avoid describing designated individuals or organisations as 'terrorists' as it is such a pejorative and politically charged term – and engage more deeply in the issues raised in these papers, such as how to report official statements, approaches to dealing with terrorist propaganda, and a shift in focus from perpetrator to victim.

Second, international donors working in counter-terrorism should look to build the capacity of journalists, editors and government communications officers in managing the information environment before, during and after terrorist incidents, drawing on case studies of good and poor practices. In addition to material on how to engage most effectively with independent media organisations in the aftermath of an attack, training should also address how to recognise and respond to disinformation in a post-attack context. There may also be scope to include the communications dimension in bilateral and multilateral capacity building and technical assistance programmes.

Third, at the state level, government counter-terrorism officials need to plan for how they are going to respond to attacks without creating counter-productive outcomes. This includes protecting journalistic privileges and coordinating with social media and traditional media platforms. Where governments are reluctant to engage on this issue, perhaps due to domestic political considerations, we believe there is a case for bilateral and multilateral pressure to encourage and incentivise governments to avoid overly reactive measures.

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39 Cristina Archetti, "Terrorism, Communication and the Media," in *Terrorism and Political Violence,* eds. Caroline Kennedy-Pipe, Gordon Cubb and Simon Mabon (London: Sage, 2014).

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