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Covering Terrorism: How the News Media construct Reality

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Abstract

This paper uses the framing theory to assess the media coverage of terrorism. A score of factors are determinants of the nature of the coverage notably the communicator's background, media institution policies, social and cultural frameworks, and the recipient's environment, among others. Media coverage of extremism and terrorism is not innocent; it is a complex interplay of professional, ideological, social, and cultural mechanisms that must be well understood to comprehend how media shapes our understanding of reality. The framings come to be institutionalized in the form of anti-terror policies and practices. As an example, the War on Terrorism slogan and the accompanying Orientalist imagery of the Muslim terrorist, was integral to lending legitimacy to international military action. Through the framing theory, this paper explained the mechanisms governing the production of media content during the coverage of terrorist acts. There are several factors determining how communicators, media institutions, environment, and culture perceive what constitutes terrorism and what does not, the extent of the issue, and the focus required in addressing the terrorist act. To illustrate the mechanisms of framing terrorist news, the researcher used case studies such as the attack on the French magazine 'Charlie Hebdo', the war on Gaza, the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in the US, the September 11, 1973, coup in Chile, and the phenomenon of Islamophobia. By examining the coverage of incidents like Charlie Hebdo, Chapel Hill, the wars in Gaza, September 11, 2001, and September 11, 1973, in Chile, as well as the phenomenon of Islamophobia different frames were used by the news organizations.

Key words: *Terrorism, framing theory, war on terrorism, news production process, construction of reality, Islamophobia.*

Introduction

The issue of covering terrorist events raise several questions regarding how the event is presented to the public and, primarily, in defining the concept of terrorism itself. Terrorist events stand out due to their specificity, danger, political, economic, social, and religious dimensions, along with their significant challenges. For the media, covering terrorism becomes a complex process, fraught with numerous challenges, including the right to information, national security protection, and adherence to professional ethics. (Jasperson and El-kikhia 2003, Kirat 2001, Nacos 2007, Schafer 2003, cohen-Almagor 2005) What relationship exists between the media, extremism, and terrorism? How do media institutions and their stakeholders deal with this complex phenomenon, which has multifaceted and serious repercussions across various levels and fields? How do the media handle extremism and terrorism, and does their performance differ from covering other events? Do the media simply

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cover the crisis, or do they attempt to provide solutions for it, or do they politicize it based on the interests of specific entities, whether authorities, opposition, political or financial bodies, and so forth? Do media institutions face pressures when dealing with extremism and terrorism? Are there ethical decisions communicators resort to due to the stakes, repercussions, and diverse outcomes characteristic of each crisis?

Media institutions deal with extremism and terrorism according to specific frameworks that place the terrorist event within a context that aligns with the media outlet's editorial line, its policy, the journalist's background, and beliefs, and finally, the audience and the society's culture. Hence, the way media institutions manage terrorism varies and differs based on the framing system for each media outlet. In other words, the media present to the public what fits with the public's frame of reference, beliefs, and values. (Fairhurst and Sarr 1996, Debatin 2002)

The news production process often undergoes what is termed agenda-setting, where numerous events and news items are selected by several media outlets based on what they perceive as news aligning with their priorities, goals, and economic interests. Furthermore, the news-making process is also subject to framing, which is the process of constructing social reality (Sheufole, 1999: 104).

Framing is about setting specific frameworks to give a particular meaning and context that the journalist and the media institution deem necessary for constructing social reality, not merely portraying it. Media framing is a continuous process aimed at shaping the daily reality for the audience and providing them with necessary information for their daily lives (Gitlin, 1980:7).

Through the framing theory, this paper attempts to explain the mechanisms governing the production of media content during the coverage of terrorist acts. There are several factors determining how communicators, media institutions, environment, and culture perceive what constitutes terrorism and what does not, the extent of the issue, and the focus required in addressing the terrorist act. To illustrate the mechanisms of framing terrorist news, the researcher used case studies such as the 'Charlie Hebdo' incident, the war on Gaza, the September 11, 2001, attacks in America, the September 11, 1973, events in Chile, and finally, the phenomenon of Islamophobia.

Framing Theory and the Construction of Reality

In the 1930s, the media were viewed as powerful tools capable of influencing and convincing the public, while the audience was seen as passive, succumbing to everything presented by the media (Price & Feldman, 2009). However, over time, media researchers discovered this was not entirely accurate. The agenda-setting theory emerged, revealing that media outlets prioritize certain events, and the media were realized to be capable of influencing public opinion to a certain extent.

This article explores the agenda-Setting Theory, which relies on the framing process. This theory asserts that focusing on certain issues while neglecting others means placing these events and issues within a specific context and a defined background. This framing is done according to the frames perceived by the media message creator—the journalist—media institutions, social, political, and economic environments suitable for understanding the event or issue. Framing involves "selecting and highlighting specific aspects of events and issues, emphasizing the connections between them to create and develop interpretations, evaluations, and offer solutions to the presented issues" (Entman, 2004:5). It emphasizes that news is not innocent or merely a commodity; rather, it is an intellectual and moral product presented to the audience

the frames adopted by the media. Therefore, the news framework is shaped by the societal culture, the government's framing of the terrorist event, and the active organizations within the society, even though their impact is often limited. The media's framing of the terrorist event shapes public opinion, alongside individual firsthand experiences, interactions, and real-world indicators.

The framing process for a terrorist event in any society occurs through three main factors: the issues and circumstances surrounding the terrorist event itself, the way these events are presented, interpreted, and analyzed by official sources within the government (press releases, speeches, press conferences by political leaders, official spokespersons for the military, security, intelligence, as well as experts and analysts). Lastly, through data, statements, and interviews with specialists providing analyses and interpretations of terrorists' motives and demands.

Multiple studies affirm that coverage of terrorist events is characterized by media bias, as the media institution tends to align its 'media framing' with the official policies of its country. There exists a relationship of complicity, affinity, and integration between the media institution and the state (Papacharissi and Oliveira: 71). For example, American media institutions, from post-World War II until the 1990s, adopted a specific framing system that emphasized the negatives, deficiencies, and contradictions of the Soviet Union and Eastern countries. With the decline of the socialist system, the agenda shifted towards Islamophobia and the threat of Islam to the West. After the September 11, 2001, attacks, a new framing system emerged, focusing on the war on terror, which defines the criteria for distinguishing between friends and enemies. Former President George W. Bush stated, "Every nation, in every region, now has a decision to make. Either you are with us, or you are with the terrorists." (President Declares "Freedom at War with Fear" (archives.gov))

Media Framing: Charlie Hebdo and the Chapel Hill Incident

The incident that occurred in "North Carolina" went unnoticed by most global and Western media outlets. What if a Muslim had killed three non-Muslims? Would there have been the same disregard? Many observers regretted describing the killer as "mentally unstable" rather than a terrorist, highlighting a clear distinction between Muslims and non-Muslims when it comes to terrorism. Some recalled the case of the Norwegian terrorist "Anders Breivik," who killed more than seventy people despite that.

Out of condemnation for the increased number of Muslims in Norway, he was never labeled as a terrorist. Many question the mechanisms and factors that influence how the media deals with terrorism. The matter is not as straightforward as many imagine. Media outlets are profit-driven institutions that produce influential content contributing significantly to shaping social awareness, collective memory, and public opinion. What the media present to the public carries within it values, culture, history, and ideologies. Media institutions have their own policies and agendas. Just a simple comparison between the international media's handling of the "Charlie Hebdo" incident and the Chapel Hill victims makes one realize that, for the media, events are not innocent, and their importance varies from one place to another. According to media theorists and scholars, there are numerous theories that explain the process of manufacturing, framing, and presenting news to the public.

Media message makers usually engage in "framing" the media product - putting the news within a context - which means what might be news for one specific media institution may not be considered news for another. Framing is the process through which journalistic text is used to connect various meanings in the reader's mind based on the different elements of this text. It

stimulates specific meanings, connotations, patterns, and structures stored in the reader's memory that shape their perception and responses to the media content. Framing is how the media text is presented by journalists from cultural, ideological, and social backgrounds, determining the recipient's understanding and perception of the media text based on the concepts and meanings stored in their mind about a particular topic or subject. (Gofman The journalist presents the text in a "highlighted" manner based on their cultural, political, religious, and moral backgrounds, in a way that the recipient accepts it as the sender wants, not according to the recipient's references that determine their understanding. (Gofman 1974). The framing focuses on certain elements of the news while neglecting others. It is the process of placing an event within a specific framework that aligns with the journalist's convictions in accordance with the media institution's policies, commercial and economic factors, as well as other social, political, cultural, ideological, or religious considerations. It also considers what aligns with the collective memory and prevalent culture in society. Here, the framework does not permit deviation from the societal consensus. For instance, some issues and events might be omitted from the media institution's agenda because they do not resonate with or align with the overall framework of the institution.

Regarding international media, the Charlie Hebdo incident is considered a terrorist act committed by Muslims and should be extensively covered, but within a specific framework. This involves linking the crime to terrorism, in line with Islamophobia, aiming to instill fear and intimidation regarding anything related to Islam. Additionally, there should be no mention of the death of an Arab Muslim police officer of Algerian descent in the same incident, nor the death of a journalist of Algerian origin who is Arab and Muslim and works for the same newspaper.

It is worth noting that international media completely disregarded that those who committed the crime are French citizens raised and educated in the French society, victims of marginalization, unemployment, racism, and discrimination. The international media presented the Charlie Hebdo incident within the prevailing culture in the West, which opposes Islam and the rapid spread of this religion in a country based on secularism and the separation of religion from the state. Here, numerous perspectives and backgrounds were ignored or not integrated into the framing process by Western media because they do not align with the prevailing notions in Western societies about Islam and Muslims. It is crucial to emphasize that news is not presented to the public as it is but rather manufactured, fabricated, and highlighted according to specific standards.

On the other hand, international media completely forgot and overlooked the terrorist groups present in European countries and ignored the 5,000 European youths who joined the ranks of ISIS and Al-Qaeda, including 1,300 French individuals. As for the Chapel Hill incident in North Carolina, the matter does not elicit the same level of response.

For the elements of news according to international media, it is considered a banal incident and thus should be briefly covered. This is because the circumstances of the incident contradict the assertions of this global and Western media, which frames and highlights terrorism as intricately linked to Islam, Muslims, and backward, conservative ideologies. Therefore, it involves manipulation and systematic control over what is presented to the public, how it is presented, and when it is presented. A century ago, Walter Lippman wrote, "The media decides what we see around us, and not what it is happening in reality." (Lippman: 1922)

Gaza Double Terrorism

The least that the observer, viewer, and follower of the Zionist entity's war on Gaza expected was the presentation of reality as it is by the global media, which usually shapes international public opinion. The images were rich in themselves, innocent children killed in front of everyone while playing on the beaches of Gaza. What the Western media unfortunately presented was a violation of objectivity, freedom of expression, values, professionalism, and responsible reporting. Additionally, the Western media lacked professional conscience and was unable to present different views and approaches on what was happening between a people whose land was forcibly seized, a people displaced and expelled from their land, and a people who seized the land of others and expelled its people. It is common for most news in influential Western media channels in the international media sphere not to provide a context and background that puts the news in its correct framework. (Terrel and Ross 1988, McCombs and Ghanem, 2001) Instead, there is a focus on "framing" the news story within a political ideological framework that aligns with the political, economic, and commercial agenda of the media institution. Where is objectivity? Where is professional conscience? And where are the professional ethics and commitment to seeking out the truth and presenting it to the public? All these are empty terms and concepts when it comes to Palestine, the Zionist entity, and the Arab Israeli conflict. (Jakson 1990, Stewart, and Marlin 2004)).

Most European and American media outlets excelled in "fabricating" the reality of the war on Gaza, the racist war imposed on the Palestinian people, consistent with the official stance of their governments. This is not new. The West's treatment of Arabs and Muslims has always been a part of the Arab Israeli conflict, a position that does not deviate from the framework set by the Zionist propaganda machine, nor does it deviate from the foreign policy of the United States of America and the European Union in the Middle East. (Kirat 2001, Ockrent 2006, Stewart and Marlin 2004). This reality, distorted, deceptive, and "fabricated," made the Palestinian side the terrorist, while the Israeli side was portrayed as the victim. As a result of this misleading coverage, the Western public opinion is completely convinced that the Palestinians are the ones who seized Israel's land, and that the victim is the Zionist entity, while the aggressor, and the usurper are the Palestinians. This, therefore, resulted and continues to result in the Western media's coverage of the uprising, hostility, and hatred towards Palestinians, Arabs, and Muslims, where they have turned the truth upside down and portrayed Israelis as victims and Palestinian and Arab resistance as a gang of savages and criminals. The process of misleading and bias towards the Zionist entity is not new, but rather a media practice and intellectual terrorism since the Balfour Declaration in 1917. Unfortunately, history repeats itself. For instance, the pictures of the innocent child, Mohammed al-Durrah, martyred years ago, were read by American media outlets in a specific frame, following what Madeleine Albright, the then-US Secretary of State, declared, when she absurdly and shamelessly stated that the child was killed during a clash and exchange of fire between Palestinians and Israelis, while the reality and the image say something entirely different. Albright and the American media naturally stated that Mohammed al-Durrah's death was an accident and unintended, a result of self-defense. Similarly, German Chancellor Angela Merkel, like Madeleine Albright before her, sees Israel in its war on Gaza as defending itself. It defends itself, the legitimate defense against terrorists, and thereby conducts a just act rather than an assault on innocent and unarmed civilians.

One of the strange paradoxes in Western media coverage of the war on Gaza is the equivalence drawn between the state terrorism and state resistance in terms of weaponry, military gear, and

logistics. They scarcely speak of the victims, who are mostly innocent civilians—children, women, and elderly—in Gaza. Palestinian victims are unarmed civilians, over two thirds of whom are children and women. In contrast, the Israeli victims are armed soldiers, not civilians.

On another note, the biased coverage by Western media of the war on Gaza overlooks the brutal acts committed by Israeli settlers against Palestinian civilians, a recurring trend in the history of American and Western media coverage of the Arab Israeli conflict. The Zionist entity values the presence of American and Western media that support and endorse all the terrorist and brutal acts it perpetrates. Western media deliberately omits highlighting the gross imbalance between a heavily armed army and defenseless civilians. American cameras consistently focus on the anger and disobedience of Palestinian children, depicting them as savage and brutal, while rarely showing the tanks and various weapons used by Israel against children armed with nothing but stones and a steadfast belief in reclaiming their usurped land. Israeli violence is justified here as legitimate self-defense.

Experts and observers have expressed their dismay regarding professional mistakes made by some global media outlets in their coverage of the war on Gaza, leading to a distorted image presented to the global public opinion about Israel's offensive on the Gaza Strip. The significant bias in Western media, across various channels and news agencies, resulted in distorting facts and fabricating events according to a predefined agenda and established frameworks. These mistakes varied from broadcasting incorrect information, such as attributing scenes of destruction inflicted upon innocent civilians in Gaza by Israeli airstrikes to victims of Palestinian resistance rockets aimed at Israelis, to equating victims with aggressors, portraying the events as a war between two equally matched forces. For instance, during a major news bulletin, the American channel ABC aired misleading information, displaying footage of destruction caused by Israeli airstrikes on Gaza and presenting it as a savage assault and aggression by Palestinian resistance.

The news anchor, Diane Sawyer, during a live broadcast of the news, commented on a photo of a Palestinian family attempting to salvage some belongings from the rubble of their destroyed home due to an Israeli airstrike, stating, "This is an Israeli family trying to save what they can." Addressing the viewers, while the channel displayed images of the destruction caused by Israeli bombardment in Gaza, she said, "We take you outside now, where the rockets rain down on Israel today, as Israel tries to defend against them." In an equivalent manner and following the organized framing and politicization of the event, the news anchor mistakenly presented a Palestinian woman standing amidst the debris of a demolished house, stating, "A woman stands speechless amidst the rubble," implying to viewers that the woman was an Israeli victim of Palestinian resistance shelling. The channel later apologized to its viewers for this error after it had circulated on social media platforms among youth and concerned individuals worldwide.

Additionally, various global media outlets titled their reports and news in a way that suggested an equivalence of power between the two parties. For instance, "The Wall Street Journal" used the following headlines: "Gaza Rockets Reach Deep into Israel" and "Israeli Strikes, the airstrikes aim to weaken Hamas' arsenal," disregarding the increasing numbers of civilian casualties, including children, women, elderly, and the vulnerable in the Gaza Strip. Meanwhile, "The New York Times" titled its coverage of the conflict as "Israel and Hamas Exchange Attacks Amid Rising Tensions" and "Israel and Hamas Exchange Gunfire." These practices vividly illustrate the framing and highlighting, whether intentional or incidental, in presenting the Palestinian issue to audiences across the globe. (Terrell and Ross 1988).

Chilean and American September: Double Standards

Half a century ago, on September 11, 1973, the Chilean military, led by General Augusto Pinochet, overthrew the democratically elected President Salvador Allende. The coup was meticulously planned by the CIA, with then-Secretary of State Henry Kissinger playing a direct role in the military conspiracy. Fate had it that America, which had altered the destiny of an entire nation, suffered a blow to its pride and dignity 28 years later for its atrocious actions in Chile on the same date, September 11.

What is more alarming is that while the entire world knows the details of the American September incident by heart, most people across the globe know nothing about the CIA and its role in the coup against Allende. Even more alarming is their unawareness that the casualties from the Chilean coup were ten times more than those in the World Trade Center in New York City. Here, we notice manipulation and control of the international public opinion, measuring matters with different standards, as if the individual American holds more importance and value than others in the world or equals ten times the value of an individual in other parts of the globe, especially in poor and marginalized nations.

When one mentions September 11, people immediately think of the attacks on the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon. However, there is another September, more brutal, bloodier, and causing more damage. It is the September 11 that occurred in Chile in 1973, fifty years ago. It was a coup orchestrated by the United States against the democratically elected President Salvador Allende. This brutal and savage coup resulted in the death and disappearance of over 40,000 people, meaning ten times the casualties of the American September 11. While we notice hundreds of thousands of articles, comments, and analyses worldwide regarding the 9/11 attacks on the United States, the overthrow of the Chilean president did not receive the necessary coverage and went almost unreported.

The repercussions of the Chilean coup were severe for the Chilean people, affecting casualties, the economy, social conditions, and living standards. The new rule imposed by America led to soaring prices of basic commodities, economic deterioration, widespread poverty, unemployment, social epidemics like drugs and crime, as well as a lack of security and social justice. These matters do not fit into the interests of American and Western media because they do not align with framing elements, which encompass the communicator, audience, message, and culture.

The main objective behind the military coup supported by the United States in Chile aimed to enforce a neoliberal economic agenda and eliminate any political or ideological thoughts conflicting with American policy. The change in Chile was not imposed by external creditors directed by the International Monetary Fund or any other international organization. Instead, a "system change" was imposed through a secretive military intelligence operation, laying the groundwork for a military coup that established "a wide-ranging economic reform plan" including privatization, price liberalization, and wage freezes in early October 1973, just a few weeks after the military coup.

Under the military council led by General Augusto Pinochet, the price of bread was increased from 11 to 40 Escudos in a noticeably brief time, a massive increase of 264%. This "economic shock therapy" was designed by a group of economists known as the "Chicago Boys." While food prices skyrocketed, wages were frozen to ensure "economic stability and ward off inflationary pressures," plunging Chile into poverty overnight. In less than a year, the price of bread in Chile rose by thirty-six times, marking a 3700% increase. Due to the American-backed

military coup, 85% of Chileans found themselves living below the poverty line in the name of democracy, freedom, and human rights. Therefore, there are two Septembers 11: one where America assaulted the sovereignty of an independent state (September 11, 1973), and the other where America was attacked (September 11, 2001). However, in the eyes of the media and public opinion makers, the American September receives coverage, attention, and publicity, while Chile's September is forgotten, relegated to obscurity, known by only a few.

The mechanisms of framing and prominence in the coverage of Islamophobia

Every time new terrorist acts and terrorist groups emerge, the attacks on Muslims in Western countries increase, along with a surge in animosity, hatred, misinformation, distortion, and falsification. Since the appearance of "ISIS" and the brutal killing of the French hostage in Algeria, the Western media machinery and racist groups have been targeting Islam, Muslims, and Arab nationals in various Western countries. This often leads to intensified scrutiny, arrests, and harassment of Arabs and Muslims, whether visitors or residents, by various security agencies, with or without justification. Since the events of September 11, 2001, terrorist operations and crimes have been associated with Arabs and Muslims, propagating a culture of fear of Islam.

This religion has been portrayed and presented to the public by global media and cultural industries as a religion of murder, violence, exclusion, intolerance, and lacking belief in others. Deliberate and misleading media and propaganda campaigns have targeted the Islamic faith, promoting fear of Islam and Muslims, inciting against them, urging security agencies to intensify arrests, intervene in the personal lives of Muslims residing in Western countries, monitor their movements, activities, and even their daily behaviors. (Greesberg 2002, Hawat 2002).

The image of Islam and Arabs has trembled significantly in recent years in the international public opinion, contributing numerous times to adopting hostile and negative stances against Arab and Islamic peoples. As a result of these organized campaigns, distortions, and systematic misinformation, public opinion in Western countries has become hostile and apprehensive towards Islam, Muslims, and Arabs. Through the framing presented to them, they believe in clashes between civilizations and their confrontations. What is even more dangerous is that opinion leaders, decision-makers, politicians, and even a massive portion of intellectuals have joined the campaign to attack, target, and distort Islam. Many now view and interpret matters related to Islam, Muslims, and Islamic civilization out of ignorance and a culture of hatred, resentment, and revenge.

Most studies and scientific research have affirmed that Western media, especially American media including journalism, radio, television, cinema, and even academic textbooks, portray a distorted, negative, and inaccurate image of Islam and Arabs across various domains and contents. These stereotypical images often result from preconceived notions, animosity towards the Arab nation, ignorance about Arab history, civilization, and culture, and finally, due to the clash of civilizations between the West and Islam. One of the critical challenges facing media coverage of Arabs and Islam is the cultural disparity between the Arab world and the West. The Western communicators covering the Middle East, or the Arab Maghreb often lack substantial knowledge about Arab history, culture, and society. Moreover, they rely on their preconceived ideas, values, judgments, and traditions rooted in their system when covering Arabs and Arab society. Many of these journalists tasked with covering Arab countries do not speak Arabic, lack knowledge about Islam, Arab history, or Islamic civilization. In such scenarios, the communicator uses stereotyping and

framing mechanisms, presenting the news according to their beliefs, ideas, and values that primarily align with their own convictions, followed by the media institution's beliefs and the prevailing culture in the society. (Schafer 2003).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have explored the framing theory and mechanisms of covering extremism and terrorism, according to determinants imposed by several factors, notably the communicator's background, media institution policies, social and cultural frameworks, and the recipient's environment, among others. Media coverage of extremism and terrorism is not innocent; it is a complex interplay of professional, ideological, social, and cultural mechanisms that must be well understood to comprehend how media shapes our understanding of reality.

By reviewing the coverage of incidents like Charlie Hebdo, Chapel Hill, the wars in Gaza, September 11, 2001, and September 11, 1973, in Chile, as well as the phenomenon of Islamophobia as managed by Western media, different frames used by the media in covering extremism and terrorism were explained.

For instance, in the Charlie Hebdo incident, media focused on the crime committed by terrorists but neglected several aspects, failing to place them in their proper context or answer critical questions. Similarly, American journalist Sally Kohn criticized the continuous coverage by American media of Muslims killing others in France while ignoring similar killings of Muslims in America.

Regarding the war in Gaza, media framing made the Palestinian side appear as the aggressor while portraying the Israeli side as concerned about security, labeling images of destruction caused by Israeli bombardment on Palestinian civilian homes as attacks by Hamas on Israeli victims. Additionally, the media's framing of September 11, 2001, overshadowed the larger death toll of 40,000 in the 1973 Chilean incident, relegating it to oblivion.

As for Islamophobia, Arab and Muslim identities became synonymous with terrorism, ignorance, bigotry, and the exclusion of others, perpetuated by various forms of media constructing stereotypical images and ideological systems that paint Arabs and Muslims as enemies of humanity, morality, and noble values. This phenomenon is growing significantly due to systematic distortion, falsification, and misleading narratives propagated by various media outlets.

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