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Terrorism: A Cross-Cultural Comparative Study of Seven Newspapers from Around the World

Introduction

"One man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter¹." As this statement suggests, it is nearly impossible to provide a universally acceptable definition of terrorism. The definitions are as varied as cultures, politics, and human thinking around the world.

According to the *Encyclopedia of World Terrorism* (1997), terrorism may be defined as:

An anxiety inspiring method of repeated violent action employed by some clandestine individual, group, or state actors for idiosyncratic, criminal, or political reasons, whereby – in contrast to assassination – the direct targets of violence are generally chosen randomly or selectively from a target population, and serve as message generators

Encyclopedia Britannica defines terrorism as:

The systematic use of violence to create a general climate of fear in a population and thereby to bring about a particular political objective.

The above two definitions are representative of the thinking in the United States and most developed countries. However, in

is considered a by-product of political, cultural, and economic hegemony of the United States and its allies. Many wonder why terrorism is illegal and militarism is legal while the effect of both is collateral damage and loss of innocent human lives.

After the tragic events of September 11th, 2001, and after President George Bush's announcement, in his first Address-to-the-Nation after September 11th 2001, that in the war against terrorism nations are either with the United States or against it, the already uni-polar world has become more uni-polar than ever.

This study explores how the media have used the word terrorism in their coverage of the September 11th tragedy within the first two months after it. The purpose is to understand the phenomenon of terrorism, its roots, causes, and ways to deal with it. Analysis of seven different newspapers, representing various cultures and regions, provides a cross-cultural perspective. This is done to examine the variations in understanding terrorism and the ways to fight against it.

The study does not begin with a hypothesis, however, it answers certain research questions in order to provide a thorough view of a phenomenon that has generated wide spread interest as well as concern among scholars and activists alike.

Literature Review

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica* the history of terrorism goes back to about 400 B. C. The Greek and Roman rulers employed many methods of terrorizing the enemy army and the people of enemy countries. The assassination of Julius Caesar in 44 B. C., by definition, was an act of terrorism². Terrorism was used as a tool during the French Revolution and the period of 1793-94 is commonly known as the "Reign of Terror." During the Civil War in America between 1861 and 1865, several organizations in the South were referred to as terrorist networks. The later half of the 19th century in Europe and U.S.S.R. was dominated by anarchists who wanted to bring about political change through violent means and could now be referred to as terrorists.

Terrorism entered into a new phase in the 20th century. In the beginning terrorism became a way to liberate nations from colonialism. These political movements belonged to both

the extreme right parties as well as extreme left parties. With new technologies and the electronic media, terrorism adopted newer and newer means to achieve its objectives. Terrorism expanded its sphere from individuals, to groups and organizations, and to state terrorism.

After the end of colonial rule from almost all over the world during the later part of the 20th century and with the onslaught of neo-colonialism, terrorism took a new form and shape. With extreme frustration, despair, and disgust, people and groups developed newer ways and means to attain their objectives. September 11th was the darkest day in the history of terrorism in the United States. Its far-reaching impact — materially, psychologically, politically, and economically — could not be ignored even after about 10 months. Usama Bin Laden surpassed all terrorists in striking a deadly blow on the most powerful nation of the world. The complex and prolonged Palestinian-Israeli conflict gave birth to new ways of terrorism on both sides.

Terrorism in the 21st century has become a multifaceted and dynamic phenomenon. Mansoori (2001) explains the complexity of this phenomenon by classifying terrorism into seven major categories.

1. Military terrorism: Stronger military powers terrorizing weaker nations.
2. Political terrorism: Use of violence to bring about a political change.
3. Informational and media-related terrorism. Use of media to spread misinformation and lies in order to malign and punish a people or a nation by causing massive destruction of innocent human lives.
4. Bio-terrorism. Causing large-scale destruction of human life by spreading viruses and destructive bacteria.
5. Chemical, and nuclear terrorism. Using chemical and nuclear weapons to kill large number of people.
6. Economic terrorism. Using extreme economic and trade measures to cause massive imbalance in world economy thereby causing large-scale famine, poverty, and death.
7. Racial terrorism. Ethnic cleansing or genocide

Combs (1997) also confirms that the issue of terrorism is both complex and difficult to deal with. He writes:

Terrorism is a political as well as a legal and military issue, its definition in modern terms has been slow to evolve. Not that there are not numerous definitions available—there are hundreds. But few of them are of sufficient legal scholarship to be useful in international law, and most of those which are legally useful lack the necessary ambiguity for political acceptance (p.5)

Simonsen and Spindlove (2000) provide a behavioral and sociological perspective. According to them, "Terrorism often falls into the range of behaviors that are not only violation of laws, but violation of the politics and practices (*mores*) of a social group or an organization." However, they admit that:

The fact is that members of IRA (Irish Republican Army), PLO (Palestine Liberation Organization, or ETA (Ezukai Ta Azakatasuna) can be seen as "freedom fighters" to a sub-group in a political system. At the same time, to others in the system they remain "terrorists." Clearly, without some reference to established definitional parameters, such labels are purely a matter of value judgment. ... No one definition seems to satisfy the broad interpretation of what terrorism is. (p.16)

Since this study focuses on terrorism in a cross-cultural perspective, it is pertinent to look into the literature from this angle too. Most cross-cultural studies have been dominated by value-based approaches (Leung, 2002). Value dimensions have been the dominant construct used to guide cross-cultural research. In an earlier study, however, Leung, Bond, & Schwartz (1995) state that beliefs, sometimes, are more useful than values in explaining cross-cultural differences.

Hofstede (1980), among others, defines culture as the "collective programming of the mind," of a particular cultural sub-group that gives shared meanings to things, events, and persons around them.

Thus it is obvious to find differences in the meaning and interpretation of events in different cultural frameworks because these frameworks are based on different values and beliefs. The disturbing element, however, is the lack of knowledge and/or appreciation of other culture by one group or the other. More troubling is the desire and attempt of one

people to export, impose, and seek domination of their cultural ethos on another people of different cultural environment.

The third area of literature review concerns the content analysis of newspapers. Being one of the most researched topics, many mass media scholars have focused on the comparison of various newspapers using content analysis method. Allan (1990), Barranco (1988), Ghandour (1985), Herman and Chomsky (1988), Merrill (1994), Peh and Melkote (1991), Said (1981), Shaheen (2001), and Suleiman (1965), among others, have used content analysis method to compare various newspapers, magazines, and television programs. Peh and Melkote's study of "Bias in newspaper reporting: a content analysis of the coverage of Korean Airlines and Iran airbus shooting in the U. S. elite press," is of special relevance to this study. The content analysis, in this case, will focus on the question, "Is there a difference in the way the press in the United States and the rest of the world had reported on terrorism in the aftermath of September 11th tragedy?"

Research questions

The following questions are addressed in this study:

1. How extensively did the selected newspapers cover the issue of terrorism?
2. How did each newspaper treat the events of September 11th, 2001? For example, exclusively focused on these events alone or pointed out other acts of terrorism elsewhere and made a comparative analysis.
3. To what extent the newspapers agree or disagree about the causes of terrorism, and about combating it?
4. What primary national and or international sources did the newspapers rely on?

Questions 1 and 2 deal with the extent and slant of the coverage given to the events of September 11th and its aftermath. Question 3 addresses the issue of perceiving, defining and dealing with terrorism in different cultures. The fourth question answers the issue of source bias. In an international crisis, the reliance on one national source to the exclusion of others, for example, implies the endorsement of that source's facts.

Methodology

Content analysis method was used to analyze five issues of each of the seven newspapers. The selection of newspapers was based primarily on availability and representativeness. Both *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London were available. The former is considered an elite newspaper published from the U. S., and the later, is a well-respected daily published from London, U. K. The *China Daily*, published from Beijing, China, is the only Chinese English daily available to this researcher. *Saudi Gazette*, published from Jeddah, represents Arab, especially the Saudi point of view. *The Straits Times*, published daily from Singapore, is the most authentic voice of Southeast Asia. *Friday Report*, published weekly in Urdu language, is a news magazine of one of the popular dailies, *Jasarat*, published from Karachi, Pakistan. *Dawat* is an Urdu language newspaper published from New Delhi, India every third day. Both the *Dawat* and the *Friday Report* represent the conservative Muslim voices of the Indian subcontinent.

The time frame for the study was three-months period starting from September 12th, 2001 and ending on December 13th 2001. Systematic sampling technique was used. The first issue was that of September 13. Afterwards every Kth issue was selected. K for the daily newspapers was 19 ($K = 93 / 5 = 18.6 = 19$). Five issues of the dailies, included in the study, were the dailies of September 13, October 2, October 21, November 9, and November 28. K for the weekly *Friday Report* was 3 ($K = 13 / 5 = 2.6 = 3$). Five issues included in the study were the issues of September 14-20, October 5-11, October 26-November 1, November 16-22, and December 7-13. K for *Dawat* newspaper, which is published every third day, was 6 ($K = 31 / 5 = 6.16 = 6$). November 28 issue was selected for a random start. Other issues of this newspaper include those of September 13, October 1, October 19, and November 7.

The unit of analysis was each newspaper included in the sample. Unit of observation, however, were those straight news articles and features in which the words "terrorism" "terror" or "terrorist" were used either in the headlines or inside news or feature stories. Editorials and letters to the editor were excluded because they are not supposed to be objective and present the opinion of the editorial writer or that of the letter writer.

Each article was also analyzed in terms of who wrote it. An article with a reporter's byline would mean that it was researched or written by a staff writer. By the same token, an article based on wire service's byline would determine the source as a wire service. If an article were based on a transcript of certain government official's speech or statements, the source would be considered governmental or official.

Content categories

After reading the news stories about September 11th tragic events in the United States in one or two sample issues of each publications, following content categories were developed. These categories are similar to the attitude objects outlined by Peh and Melkote (1991, p. 65). The analyses of attitude objects reflect the position and/or feeling of the writer. Unlike Hayakawa (1972), no further classification was done since the analysis focuses on the entire article part of which may be a "report," part of it may be an "inference," and part of it may be "judgment."

- 1) *Coverage of the September 11th tragic events in the U. S.* How detailed was the coverage of the events?
 - 1.a. Very detailed (1000 plus words); 1.b. Somewhat detailed (500-599 words); 1.c. Not detailed (less than 500 words).
- 2) *Condemnation, expression of grief and solidarity with American people.*
 - 2.a. Strong and unconditional; 2.b. Somewhat strong; 2.c. Somewhat strong but conditional; 2.d. Not strong but conditional.
- 3) *Impact of the events.*
 - 3.a. On U. S. people, businesses, and economy etc.; 3.b. Globally, and on other country's people, businesses, and economy etc.
- 4) *Going beyond the events in the U. S.*
 - 4.a. The presence of discussion about the causes of terrorism and how to deal with the evil of terrorism from the U. S. and its allies' points of view. 4.b. The

presence of discussion about the causes of terrorism and how to deal with it from other people or region's perspective.

- 5) *Counter-terrorism.*
 - 5.a. Counter-terrorism response within the U.S.;
 - 5.b. Counter-terrorism response by the U. S. and its allies in Afghanistan and else where.
 - 5.c. Counter-terrorism response to other terrorist activities elsewhere in the world.

Coding scheme

A detailed coding instruction sheet was developed (see Appendix A) for the purpose of coding articles of the selected samples. It contains instruction for recording the basic information about the publication and the article under examination. All the articles were examined within the framework of the content categories described above.

To check the reliability of coding scheme, one issue of each of the five publications was randomly selected from the sample and a pilot study was conducted. Two colleagues and this researcher separately coded all of the five issues. Reliability coefficient was calculated using Craig's (1981) generalization of Scott's (1955) formula, which is considered, as noted by Holsti (1969), a conceptually straightforward and computationally simple tool to determine the intercoder reliability of two coders. Craig has generalized Scott's formula so that it can be used in cases where more than two coders are involved. Coder one disagreed with this researcher on only one item and Coder Two disagreed on only two items. The percentage of agreement for Coder One was 99 and that for Coder Two was 98. This means that at least two out of the three coders agreed on 98 percent of the coding decisions. The index of intercoder agreement or the reliability coefficient was 0.95. This indicates a high level of intercoder reliability.

Findings

It is clear from the results of the content analysis that immediately following the September 11th, both *The New York Times* and *The Times* of London had devoted almost all of their

newspaper space to cover various aspects of the tragic events. *The New York Times*, in its September 13th issue, had only two ads in Section A (Section A Contained 28 pages). Seventy two percent of all the stories were related to the terrorist attacks in *The New York Times*, whereas *The Times* had 70 percent of its news and feature stories devoted to terrorism (See Table 1). *The New York Times* published almost all of its news and feature based on its own staff writers and columnists, and had no news or feature showing even the slightest disagreement with the positions taken by the U. S. administration on the issue of terrorism. This was not the case with *The Times*. Although most of *The Times* news and feature stories agreed or supported official U. S. position, there were articles suggesting an alternative course of action to combat terrorism. For example, Howard (October 2, 2001, p.16) wrote in *The Times*:

Today we are threatened by a transnational conspiracy, not against any specific national or imperial authority, but against the entire international order. In dealing with it the rhetoric and expectations of "war" are counter-productive, and much military experience irrelevant. With skilful political management and patient police-work, backed up where necessary by armed force "in aid of the civil power," this particular conspiracy can, perhaps, be eradicated.

TABLE 1.
Percent of
News and
Feature
Stories
Devoted to
the Coverage
Of Terrorism

	Sept. 13	Oct. 2	Oct. 2	Nov. 19	Nov. 28
<i>The New York Times</i>	72	54	23	37	32
<i>The Times</i>	70	30	26 (10/22)	29	23
<i>China Daily</i>	40	36	45	40	28
<i>Saudi Gazette</i>	42	47	28	44	21
<i>The Straits Times</i>	35	32	35	30	27
Dawat	42 (10/01)	65 (10/19)	32 (11/7)	37	100 (11/28)
Friday Report	32 (9/14-9/20)	56 (10/5-10/11)	56 (10/26-11/1)	42 (11/16-11/22)	46 (12/7-12/13)

TABLE 2.
Total Number
of News and
Feature
Stories in
Different
Content
Categories

Content Categories	The NYT	The Times	China Daily	Saudi Gazette	The Straits Times	Dawat	Friday Report
1.a.	88*	7	6	6	9	5	2
1.b.	30	14	4	7	10	12	-
1.c.	11	4	2	3	1	5	1
2.a.	2	6	1	3	4	4	-
2.b.	7	5	1	5	-	1	-
2.c.	2	2	-	2	-	2	2
2.d.	2	-	-	1	-	-	2
3.a.	11	14	11	13	27*	3	5
3.b.	9	17	6	15	22	18	9
4.a.	61	61*	8	6	10	7	1
4.b.	42	29	18*	22*	6	32*	15*
5.a.	15	7	3	2	6	7	1
5.b.	42	46	17	19	13	28	14
5.c.	23	25	7	8	4	17	9

* This represents the category with maximum number of news and feature stories.

As is clear from table 1, the coverage declined after the first few weeks. Even though the percentages, in other publications, are not as high as in *The New York Times* and *The Times*, other publications devoted between 32 to 65 percent of stories to terrorism related issues, which is significantly high. *Dawat* devoted its entire issue of November 28, 2001 to the subject of terrorism. Both *Dawat* and the *Friday Report* used their own staff writers and columnists for 80 percent of the stories analyzed. *Saudi Gazette* and the *China Daily* had almost 60 percent of their news and features based on their countries or regions' wire services. *China Daily* published almost all of its features based on Xinhua, the official Chinese wire service. *The Straits Times* published almost 80 percent of its news and features based on Reuter, AP, AFP, and a few regional wire services.

It is clear from the findings of the content analysis that all the sampled publications covered the September 11th events in the U. S in great details. However, *The New York Times*, *The Times*, *Dawat* newspaper, and the *Friday Report* based almost all of their stories exclusively on their own sources, whereas the *China Daily* mostly relied on the official news and wire service. The news and stories in *The Straits Times* were taken from most diverse sources: almost all of the major international and regional wire services. *Saudi Gazette* published almost half of its stories based on its staff writers and half based on the Middle Eastern and international wire services.

Table 2 shows the treatment of various content categories in different publications. It is not surprising to see *The New York Times* giving maximum and extensive coverage to the destruction of property and human life after the 9/11 tragedy. *The Times* focused more on the causes of terrorism and how to deal with it. However, both *The New York Times* and *The Times* dealt with this issue mainly from U. S. and its ally's perspective while the *China Daily*, *Saudi Gazette*, *Dawat*, and the *Friday Report* also gave this category most prominence, they dealt with this issue from their own respective point of views. *Dawat* provided a historical and analytical view of the phenomenon of terrorism and offered its readers a clear definition of terrorism and insisted that, "Terrorism, be it that of a State, individual, or group, has equally devastating effect on the destruction of innocent human lives and property.

Terrorism can only be eliminated if all act of terror are equally condemned.³ "Friday Report takes an even aggressive view of the issue and calls for an end to "American terrorism⁴." Dawat, Saudi Gazette, and Friday Report, call for a careful analysis of the causes of terrorism and suggest that the use of the words such as "Islamic terrorism" are misleading and can only be counter productive. Saudi Gazette, for example, while quoting the Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah, strongly condemns terrorism, and at the same time, urging unity against Israel.⁵ This clearly indicates the tensions that exist in the understanding, interpretation, and usage of this word.

The Straits Times also takes a very strong view against terrorism. However, it does it with caution. It published maximum number of stories under category 3.a which is about the impact of terrorism on the destruction of property and human lives in the United States. However, the main reason, it seems, are economic. Most such stories evaluate and analyze the aftereffect of the 9/11 on global economy and specially the trade and business in Singapore.

General discussion and conclusions

The research answers all the four questions raised in the beginning of this study. The coverage of the September 11th horrific events in the U. S. and that of the issue of terrorism were very detailed and extensive. While *The New York Times* treated the events of September 11th primarily focusing on U. S. losses, other newspapers looked at the effect of terrorism on other people's lives and properties in other parts of the world in addition to analyzing the impact of the 9/11 attacks on the United States. While *The Times*, *The Straits Times*, *Saudi Gazette* and *China Daily* disagreed somewhat with the positions taken by *The New York Times* on the question of causes of terrorism and counter-terrorism efforts, *Dawat* and the *Friday Report* disagreed considerably with the positions taken by *The New York Times*. In their news analyses and feature stories they pointed the dangers of accepting the hegemony of one nation. They, for example, pointed out that, "The culture that the U. S. administration represents is a culture of war, greed and disrespect of human equality and freedom. It only proves that in the "Jungle Raaj" (Chaos and anarchy), the only principle that prevails is that 'might is right.' (*Dawat*, Nov. 28, p.47).

This somewhat coincides with the view, earlier quoted, of Sir Michael Howard that in dealing with the issue of terrorism, the rhetoric and acts of war may be counter productive. *Dawat* (Nov. 28, 2001, p. 67) further argued the universality of human culture and civilization. In the articles it quotes sources from Qur'an, the tradition of Prophet Muhammad, and from many renowned Islamic scholar, that terrorism has no place in Islam no matter what the motives may be. "Muslims should oppose terrorism," argues *Dawat*, "not because they have to defend themselves but solely because it is against the spirit and teachings of Islam."

It is evident that there are significant differences in the way terrorism is defined and understood in various cultures and regions. The meaning of terrorism in the United States, it seems, has been limited to mean any action by a group or individual that threatens the hegemony of the United States, whereas in other countries and cultures, especially in the Middle East and Asia, the emphasis seems to be on a broader definition of terrorism and also on its uniform application to wherever acts of terrorism happen to take place. As Lee (1991), among others, has suggested that western nations, especially the United States live in a culture of war, it is impossible for media to play a role which is constructively critical of the government and which contributes directly to a culture of peace. Dozens of books that were published since September 11, 2001 by American authors also emphasize upon the one sided approach to terrorism: If it hurts the U.S. and its interest, it is terrorism; if it hurts others, especially to those not allied with the U. S. interest, it may not be labeled as terrorism. For example, Gabriel (2002) argues in detail that the rise of 'Islamic' fundamentalism is the direct cause of increase in global terrorism. However, he ignores the reasons from within the U. S. that lead to global unrest and consequently to such acts that can be labeled as terrorism.

It is interesting to note that the newspapers representing the Muslim perspectives, i.e. the *Dawat* and the *Friday Report*, lacked in assessing the reasons for increasing trend of militancy among Muslim population around the world. While the *Friday Report* blamed the U. S. for all ills, it did not take any note of increasing violence in Pakistani and Afghan societies. *Dawat* was some what balanced but it too did not

discuss the causes of increasing militant trends in Muslim countries.

It is a sad account of global journalism that objectivity and fairness have been sacrificed for the sake of false national pride, to establish and support a nation's hegemonic desires, and / or to put forward unnecessary and unwanted defense of Islam. If terrorism is a menace plaguing the 21st century, media have to be bolder and fairer than what they are. If media become the warrior and leave the job of being channels through which information can flow, in all the direction, without obscuring the facts as they happen, then we are certainly heading towards a terrible future.

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Paper presented at 23rd Conference and General Assembly International Association of Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) Barcelona, Spain July 21 - 26, 2002

Notes

- 1 Laura K. Egendorf (ed.) (2000). *Terrorism: Opposing Viewpoints*. San Diego, California: Greenhaven Press. p. 12.
- 2 U. S. Central Intelligence Agency (1997). *World Factbook*.
- 3 Robert Fisk. "Is America endangering itself?" DAWAT, Nov. 28, 2002: 143.
- 4 Khurshid Ahmad. "U. S. declaration of War in Afghanistan is a war on civilization," Friday Report, 5-11 October, 2001:23.
- 5 Saudi Gazette, Nov. 28, 2001:1

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Appendix A

Coding Instructions and Coding Sheet

Coding Instructions

1. Write name of the publication at the top of the coding sheet before the start of coding.
2. Count the total number of news and feature stories and note it down, in the space provided, before coding the articles into content categories.
3. Read only those articles in which the world terrorism, terrorist or terror appear in the headlines, news or feature, and or photo caption.
4. Exclude all editorials, letter to the editor, op-ed page articles, obituaries, book reviews, news briefs and advertising materials.
5. Read definitions of the content categories before the start of each new issue of the publications included in the sample.
6. Count and note the number of news and or feature stories that fit each sub-category.
7. To determine the source of news or feature, write down "S" if a story has a byline and W, if it is attributed to a wire service or a source out side of the publication under study.
8. Write down any important observation, such as a headline, a definition etc. in the comment column.

Coding Sheet

Name of the newspapers _____ Date _____

Total number of news and feature stories _____

Terrorism related news and features _____

Percentage of Terrorism related stories _____

Content Categories	No. of Stories Written by Staff (S)	No. of Stories based on Wire and other Sources (W)	Comments, if any
1.a.			
1.b.			
1.c.			
2.a.			
2.b.			
2.c.			
2.d.			
3.a.			
3.b.			
4.a.			
4.b.			
5.a.			
5.b.			
5.c.			