

Applying Agenda-Setting Theory to Saudi Media Coverage: Comparing Terrorist Attacks in Egypt and France

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Abstract: This research focuses on four notable terrorist acts which happened in Egypt and France in 2015 and 2016. Geographically diverse sources were used, representing Eastern, Western, Southern and Central regions of Saudi Arabia. Agenda-setting theory assumes that the media are capable of shaping and directing public opinion by focusing on intensive coverage of specific news. This paper demonstrates that Saudi newspapers over-reported the terrorist attacks in France, while they under-reported the terrorist attacks in Egypt. The over-reporting and under-reporting of the terrorist attacks authenticate the explanatory influence of Agenda-setting Theory in the Saudi media. That is because they unequivocally show how Saudi newspaperstry to be consistent with the political direction of the Saudi government.

Keywords: *Agendasetting, Egypt, France, Terrorism, Saudi media coverage*

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper will examine Saudi media coverage of four major terrorist attacks which occurred between 2015 and 2016 in Egypt and France, using agenda-setting theory. This approach, created by Shaw and McCombs, depends on the notion that the media can shape the relevance or the importance of topics in the audience's opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to McCombs and Reynolds (2005 & 2002), there are two basic assumptions which are agreed upon by most media studies that use agenda-setting theory: first, the media and press do not seek to publish objective facts, instead altering or tweaking them; second, the focus of the media on specific issues leads to audience belief that these issues are more important than others.

This research will examine four notable terrorist acts which occurred between 2015 and 2016 in Egypt and France. Egypt and France were chosen because they are the country's most vulnerable to terrorist attacks in Africa and Europe, respectively. Four major terrorist attacks will be examined: two of them happened in Egypt, and the others were in France. These terrorist attacks are described in the following paragraphs.

Egypt: On 10/31/2015, one of the deadliest terrorist attacks in Egypt occurred. An Airbus A 321 was on route from Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt, destined for Saint Petersburg, Russia. As a result of a terrorist act, the plane was shot down, and all 224 passengers were killed. This incident was described as the most severe crash of the Airbus in its history (Al-Atrush, 2015). The second terrorist attack was on 12/11/2016, when an attack occurred against St. Mark's Cathedral in Cairo. Twenty-nine were killed and 49 were injured after a suicide bomber blew himself up in a church prayer hall.

France: On 10/13/2015, there occurred one of the most violent series of terrorist attacks on France. They were sporadic terrorist acts that killed 130 people and injured 300 others. The other terrorist attack occurred on 07/14/2016: a crowd of people who were celebrating Bastille Day in Nice were surprised and run over by a

truck; this attack killed 86 and injured 202.

All news articles dealing with terrorist acts which were published during the second day after the terrorist attacks were selected. The sources used were four Saudi newspapers which were selected to represent four different regions in Saudi Arabia, as follows: Okaz newspaper, representing the Western region. Al-Riyadh Newspaper, representing the Central and Northern regions. Al Watan newspaper, representing the Southern region. Al Yaum newspaper, representing the Western region.

Egypt and France were specifically selected for examination in this paper with regard to whether or not Saudi newspapers pay more attention to covering news in European countries than Arab countries.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Agendasetting

Agenda-setting theory was developed by McCombs and Shaw; it focuses on the notion that the media can shape the relevance or the importance of a subject in the audience's opinion (McCombs & Shaw, 1972). According to McCombs and Reynolds (2002 & 2005), there are two basic assumptions which are agreed upon by most media studies that use agenda-setting theory: first, the media and press do not seek to publish objective facts, instead altering or tweaking them; second, the focus of the media on specific issues leads to audience belief that these issues are more important than others.

According to Matusitz (2012, p.113), agenda-setting theory assumes that the more media cover an issue, the more salient it becomes for the audience. Thus, the media focus on intensifying the coverage of certain topics rather than others for many purposes, most importantly for political reasons, which seems clear especially if we consider that the media in the Middle East are owned by governments. This certainly affects the audience's understanding, the way they respond to the news around them, and the emphasis on the importance of certain events rather than others.

However, a study conducted by Al-Haqeel (1993) concluded that the media in Saudi Arabia do not affect the society's agenda. Moreover, the researcher confirmed that media's picture of reality did not correspond to that held by the respondents. He explained,

This result (the lack of positive agenda-setting effects) might be explained by the fact that while Saudi Arabian media tended to follow the official policy and avoid covering and emphasizing potentially controversial issues such as cost of living and civil rights, people had to be concerned with and did talk about these issues which deeply affect their lives. Naturally, people are strongly attached to issues that have tangible and strong influence on their lives regardless of what they watch on television or read in the newspapers that are handed to them daily and free of charge. Therefore, the absence of agenda-setting effects appears to be the consequences of the media's de-emphasis and non-coverage of conflict. (Al-Haqeel, 1993, pp. 211-212)

This study by Al-Haqeel (1993) also showed that there is a negative correlation when the media agenda is not compatible with the audience agenda. The researcher explained this by saying,

Another plausible explanation is that respondents depended more on other sources of information—most notably interpersonal communication—to learn about issues that concerned them. Interpersonal communication appeared not to complement, but rather to compete with, the news media in influencing respondents' intrapersonal, perceived community, and interpersonal agendas. Interpersonal communication may have caused respondents to be aware of and informed about important issues and, consequently, to have substituted it for the media's content for setting their agendas (p. 212).

Moreover, Al-Harithi (1983) confirmed that even directors of the Saudi media (50%) admitted that the Saudi public did not trust the news from the Saudi media.

Many studies confirm that the Middle East has lived through two periods of press freedom. Until the mid-1990s, all Arab governments controlled the content of the media strictly because they believed that the aim of the media was to serve the government in the first place and to promote national goals (Johnson & Fahmy, 2010; Rugh, 2004). Many observers believe that the emergence of the new media has led many traditional media to have a higher freedom in press in order to continue competing with traditional media and mass

media technologies (e.g., the Internet, satellite news networks, social media, and smartphones) (Seib, 2005).

Terrorism Definition

The U.S. Department of Defense defines terrorism as "the calculated use of unlawful violence or threat of unlawful violence to inculcate fear intended to coerce or to intimidate governments or societies in the pursuit of goals generally political, religious, or ideological" (Matusitz, 2012). Similarly, Fortna defines terrorism as the use of the strategy of deliberate random violence to cause fear in order to achieve political, ideological, or religious goals (2015). However, Hoffman points out that the motives of terrorism are not limited to politics but include a wide variety of psychological goals (1998). In fact, the definitions of terrorism, both from international institutions and from researchers specializing in terrorism, are various and different. According to Matusitz, although the term terrorism does not have one definition that has been agreed upon, the most widely conventional definition states that it is "the use of violence to create fear (i.e., terror, psychic fear) for political, religious, or ideological reasons" (2012).

Attacks in Egypt

Egypt is one of the world's longest-civilized countries. It still has a heritage dating back to the Pharaonic era, which began in 3150 BC.

According to Strachan, in Egypt, there are 3 religious' categories, which are Salafist, Extremist, and Jihadi violent; each category is comprised of different groups with different ideas, goals, and pathways (2017). These three categories correspond in specific details such as opposing the presence of international tourists in Egypt. According to Wahab (1996) and Tarlow (2005), Egypt's religious militant groups are hostile to tourism because they consider it a form of colonialism that threatens their influence, traditions, and religious beliefs.

Consequently, these groups have adopted a strategy of carrying out many terrorist attacks against tourists, one of which was the targeting of the Airbus A 321 which had departed Sharm El Sheikh, Egypt for Saint Petersburg, Russia. In the terrorist attack, the airplane was shot down, and all 224 passengers were killed. This incident was described as the most severe crash of the Airbus in its history (Russian News Agency, 2015).

On December 11, 2016, a bloody terrorist attack at St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Cairo, the capital of the country, killed 29 people and wounded 49 others. ISIS claimed responsibility for the attack (Walsh & Youssef, 2016).

Attacks in France

France is the home of one of the most

important and largest European civilizations, with one of the longest histories. Thus, it has become an important target of terrorist groups, including ISIS.

On November 13, 2015, France witnessed one of the worst terrorist crimes in history. Several terrorist operations were carried out simultaneously and in different places in the country, killing about 10 people and injuring more than 300 people. Immediately, ISIS declared their responsibility for this terrorist attack (Richards, 2016).

In 2016, France experienced the second-most deadly attack in its history. On July 14, 2016, a truck hit a group of pedestrians who came from across the country to the French city of Nice to witness Bastille Day celebrations. While they were watching the fireworks, they were rammed into by a truckload of weapons and bombs, which killed 86 people and injured 22 others (Rokach, Ahmed & Patel, 2017). A French police officer managed to escape from the terrorist before entirely emptying his ammunition into him, shooting him through the front window. ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for the terrorist attack and attributed credit to Bouhlel, an ISIS soldier (Brady, 2017).

These two terrorist attacks were the bloodiest terrorist attacks in modern French history. ISIS is also one of the most dangerous terrorist groups targeting France.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Although some research and scientific articles have addressed agenda-setting theory and Saudi media, there is a scientific gap in the study of how the Saudi media has dealt with political news, in particular

terrorist attacks, and the impact of agenda-setting theory on them. The current study focuses on the following questions:

RQ 1: Did the Saudi media exaggerate its coverage of terrorist attacks in France more than that in Egypt?

RQ 2: What were the ideas discussed by Saudi journalists following these terrorist attacks?

RQ 3: What were the most commonly used patterns of persuasion in these news articles?

METHODS

This study is a qualitative content analysis of Saudi newspapers. It will examine four major terrorist attacks which occurred between 2015 and 2016 in Egypt and France. Agenda-setting theory will be used here. All the news articles about the terrorist incidents mentioned above from the four sources shown below were selected for study.

Sources

Four newspapers were selected, representing four different regions in Saudi Arabia as follows: Okaz newspaper, representing the Western region.

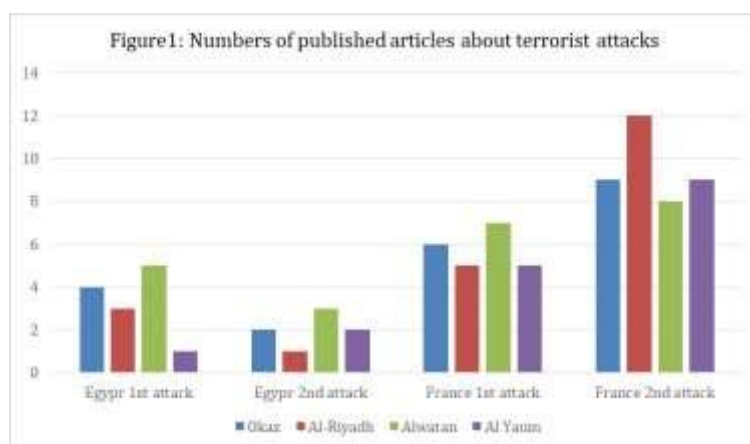
Al-Riyadh Newspaper, representing the Central and Northern regions.

AlWatan newspaper, representing the Southern region. Al Yaum newspaper, representing the Eastern region.

DATA

Saudi newspapers published several news articles covering the terrorist attacks that occurred in Egypt and France.

Twenty-one news articles covering the terrorist attacks that happened in Egypt were published in Saudi newspapers on the following day. However, the number of published news articles about the France terrorist attacks was 61.



Ideas discussed by Saudi journalists during these terrorist attacks

Type of Ideas	Frequency	
	Egypt	France
Ideas supporting the government or president	39	21
Ideas blaming extremist groups	24	59
Ideas showcasing Saudi Arabia's experience in countering terrorism	21	47

Patterns of Persuasion

Patterns of persuasion	Frequency	
	Egypt	France
Logical	19	52
Emotional	28	43
Religious	35	12

RESULTS

Agenda setting (RQ1)

Agenda-setting theory assumes that when the media cover a particular case more, the issue will be more important to the audience (Matusitz, 2012). Based on the number of news articles which were published in Saudi newspapers about Egypt and France, it is clear that the Saudi newspapers were overreporting terrorist attacks in France, while underreporting terrorist attacks in Egypt.

Ideas discussed by Saudi journalists during these terrorist attacks (RQ2)

When discussing terrorist attacks in Egypt, Saudi journalists tended to support Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi and his government and show how hard they were working to fight against terrorism and that they could overcome these conditions. They used words like "The Egyptian government can overcome these difficulties," and "Terrorists will not escape the grip of the heroic Egyptian president." However, when Saudi journalists covered the terrorist attacks in France, they tended not to mention the positions of the French government or president. This may be due to the difference in political positions between Saudi Arabia and France, as well as the opposition of the French government to some initiatives of the Saudi government, such as the war in Yemen.

In relation to another category of ideas, Saudi journalists were criticizing the extremist groups in France more strongly than those in Egypt. Following these news articles, one can see that the reason for this criticism is that Saudi journalists were trying to distance the charge of terrorism from Islam, so they sought to link the acts to extremist groups that have no relation to Islam.

The last category of ideas related to showcasing Saudi Arabia's experience in countering terrorism. This idea appears clearly in all the news articles covering the terrorist attacks in Egypt and those in France as well. Saudi journalists were trying to link terrorist incidents to extremist groups that Saudi Arabia had also suffered from. They then explained Saudi Arabia's suffering from terrorism and pointed out that it was no less important than what was happening outside Saudi Arabia in sporadic terrorist attacks.

The most commonly used patterns of persuasion (RQ3)

Patterns of logic and emotion prevailed in the

news articles covering the terrorist attacks in both Egypt and France. However, the religious pattern was also used extensively in covering the terrorist incidents in Egypt. This is because the bombing took place in a church. According to *alarabiya.net*, it was the first time in the history of Egypt that a church was bombed (2016).

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Based on this examination of the number of news articles covering the terrorist attacks in Egypt and France between 2015 and 2016, agenda-setting theory can be seen to be applicable to the Saudi media at the present time. As a parallel example, the international media do not see great importance in the terrorist operations taking place in Africa because the source of the threat is Al Qaeda (Wahutu, 2018). ISIS expansion in Africa is not as interesting as that in Europe. Journalists, whether Saudis or others, must strive to be fair in news coverage to help communities create a fairer and more realistic picture of events.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The limitations of this study are as follows:

- This study focused on an analysis of newspaper articles, while there are many types of data, and there might be a change in the results if we were to study, for example, how these terrorist attacks are covered on Twitter.
- The news articles contain images that have meanings. For future research, study and analysis of these images may produce significant results.
- Some Saudi newspapers, such as *Asharq Al-Awsat*, issue an English version. In future studies, it may be useful to study and compare news coverage between the Arabic version and the English version.

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