

Mediatized Terror: Terror in the Age of Media Explosion

SAHANA UDUPA

The media coverage of the Mumbai terror incidents (between 26 and 28 November 2008) and their aftermath has been widely criticised for various reasons. Yet it is necessary not to frame these criticisms without understanding the structural models that drive news production – which is subsumed largely to capital and is not free of political content.

The journalistic class is perhaps next only to the political class in drawing severe criticism about its role and conduct in the Mumbai terror strikes. Well before the dust had settled, Chief of Naval Staff Admiral Sureesh Mehta squarely blamed the media as a “disabling instrument”.¹ Some commentators have accused the media of closing the strategic choices available for India and have gone so far as to describe the “mediatized” terror experience as “slow haemorrhage of public confidence” (Muralidharan 2008: 15). This short article argues that impetuous media bashing is not only unnecessary but detrimental to any future plans of integrating media management with the disaster management apparatus. It is important to move beyond knee-jerk criticisms and offer instead a dispassionate analysis of the media “construction” of terrorism experience – to ask why it is the way it is.

What was striking in the Mumbai terror attacks, as tens of commentators have noted, was the 60-hour live saga that unfolded on millions of television screens across the country and elsewhere, with all the elements of a gripping narrative – fear, frustration, panic and anger. This can be characterised as “narrativised terror”, and in this crucial sense it was undoubtedly a media construction. By “construction” I do not mean a concoction or imagining but a set of media practices accompanied, aided and often resulting from a host of external factors that together created the narrative of a beleaguered and shocked nation. The continuous flow of images constructed a vision of a country under siege, panic as its only state of mind and aggression as the only remedy. Equally important were the emotive aspects of the media spectacle that created a hypervisible universe of grieving, panicking, fidgeting and fuming. Another significant aspect of media coverage was the circulation of speculation – a combination of speculative comments and

conjecture as a media-induced and media-enabled public indulgence. The viewers and readers were inundated with opinion polls. As hard information, televised emotions, speculations and images competed, criss-crossed and multiplied one to create a sense of panic and shock, the terrorists’ strategy of “propaganda by deed” was perhaps coming true.

This cannot be simply interpreted as the media’s willing complicity in terrorism. Although critics do not accuse the media of such an unpardonable connivance, they often indulge in the same rhetoric that they accuse the journalists of. A far more productive critique would be possible only by comprehending the sociology of news production and conceiving of journalism as a “...field endowed with its own laws, its own nomos, its own law of functioning, without being completely independent of the external laws” (Bourdieu 2005: 33). What exists in this field is a set of actors competing to gain reader/viewer attention by being the first or by being distinct, and ironically, in the very process, referring to each other for both what counts as news and how it should be treated. Therefore it is not sufficient to refer to the external economic and political pressures alone, but also to interrogate the struggles for dominance among the actors within the field – the news organisations, owners of these organisations, and the audience. The shifting position of the state, vis-a-vis this field, is another significant point for consideration. Equally important is to consider this field as historically emerging, indicating that the laws and principles of news that apply to the west might not necessarily be helpful in understanding Indian journalism.

Objectivity

The foremost of these principles of news production is the notion of “objectivity”. Several media commentators, in their free-wheeling media bashing, have mourned the death of objectivity, dispassion, distance and balance. The notion of objectivity is peculiar in that it is invoked only when it is perceived to be severely maligned. It is more a tool in the hands of critics than an ideal that is proactively followed in news practices. Objectivity as a professionalising discourse and a news

Sahana Udupa (sahanaudupa@hotmail.com) is with the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.

value is fraught with more contradictions in Indian journalism, partly owing to its multilinguality (Rajagopal 2001). Even in the west, media scholars have shown how objectivity is a “strategic ritual” (Tuchman 1972) protecting news-makers from the risks of their trade – a bulwark between journalists and their critics. However, in actual news practices today in India, journalists do not readily invoke the notion of objectivity except as an obligation they feel compelled to fulfil in times when the media legitimacy is at stake. Often the notion is appropriated in ways that empties the notion of its original intent and premise. A journalist in a Kannada evening, half apologetically, claimed that he is only being “objective” and providing space for all points of view when he published a sponsored, self-congratulatory story of a candidate during the recent state elections in Karnataka. Irrespective of whether the report was sponsored or not, the candidate had to be given “voice” in his paper, however biased or concocted. This was his plea in the name of “objectivity”.²

Some journalists perceptively note that the shift has already occurred from the phase of objective journalism to that of “experiential journalism” – often a weak clone of the “new journalism” movement that started in the US in the 1970s. The shift is also characterised by what I call “staggered objectivity”, in which sources are cited at spaced intervals to create enough shock among other sources or “stakeholders” in the story that they are compelled to respond. Thus, the story gets unfolded over several news bulletins or newspaper issues. As an expressive journalist candidly admits:

They (reporters) should explore an angle and do a good job of it. Just for the sake of objectivity, they are not required to access different sources or points of view. They are not under the compulsion to introduce an element or an angle to give a false balance. We don't need to pretend that we are naturally objective. It is like crashing it to a wall. It is to provoke people, not in the crude sense, but to do stories in a way that it elicits response...The point is to explore one angle exhaustively and see how the responses come by.

This is the predicament that journalism has been pushed into, the journalists say,

because of the information explosion. When there are innumerable ways to communicate information – ranging from mobile phones to internet – how would television and newspapers survive without adding opinions or embellishing information with appropriate emotions? In the case of terror attacks and other such protracted events, there is also a more mundane factor of having to fill the news hours or print space – a condition that unregulated media capitalism has drawn upon itself. Proliferation of 24/7 news channels has led to insatiable hunger for news and information, as the pressure for filling the news hours can be met only with the availability of content.

It is also important to view journalism as a historically emerged field, because only with such an approach can the nationalist tenour of most media reports become comprehensible. The social body that was invoked in the media narrative was certainly the nation or national community, although Mumbai as the highest tax-paying city emerged as another level of social imagining in the discussions. The notion of the national community is the longest serving ideological edifice of the Indian media, predating the pedagogical role of the developmentalist media that further strengthened it. The nationalist imagining – as both “internally limited and sovereign” (Anderson 1991: 6) – is sustained within the Indian media, among other ways, by the reality of Pakistan and the military/political contingencies it unleashes at regular intervals. Despite the overwhelming claims about the post-nationalist, global media, the nation as a social imagination thrives, and thrives

very well. For, media capitalism survives within diverse ideological conditions, or as Jing Wang puts it, “capital is ideologically blind” (2004: 14).

Within the news discourse, there is also a narrative constraint of conceiving a coherent “us” or “we” in the process of “closing multi-accental potential for meaning of the chosen signs” (Hartley 1982: 63). For historical reasons and for reasons prompted by the current contingencies, the “coherent us” was conceived overwhelmingly as the Indian nation. Another narrative constraint in news, as John Hartley notes, is to reduce the intrinsic polysemic nature of both events and accounts of them, unlike literary discourse that celebrates the potential of events to generate many meanings (ibid 77). This is one reason why the tale of terror took only two sides – India and Pakistan – and the connotations associated with each of the two signs framing the narrative. I suggest therefore that it is not enough to invoke an empty ahistorical notion of objectivity but there is a need to comprehend the varying influences on the news field.

Structurally Condemned?

Some media critics impute intentionality to much of media reporting, accusing it of being insensitive, prejudiced and partisan. Thus a common question was to ask why the Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus (CST) station killings were not as extensively covered as the Taj or Oberoi sieges. The class prejudice is ferreted out as an explanation for this outrageous imbalance. Before jumping to these conclusions, it is worthwhile to take note of the internal structural logic of the cultural form that is

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news. Continuity and drama at the two other locations and also at Nariman House provided perfect media spectacles, in contrast to the shootings at CSR which were over by the time the media arrived.

Having said that, I would not deny class homologies in the news media. As Bourdieu insightfully argues, there exists a homology between the class of producers and consumers in the field of cultural production. With multiple actors in the news field, there is intense market segmentation, and the choice of audience is often backed with the choice of appropriate news producers who could cater to them. Moreover, "...part of what determines the discourse of the news is the way the news-makers themselves act within the constraints, pressures, structures and norms that bring the larger world of social relations to bear on their work" (Hartley 1982: 47). Homology between the news anchors and the immediate reference group and also the victims of terror became evident when a television news anchor and journalist, in defence of herself in the face of mounting criticism, said she received a lot of appreciation (also) from "the better known ones" like Narayana Murthy, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor and Sunil Khilnani – inadvertently revealing her reference group, those people who shape her idea of journalistic excellence.

The speculative opinion poll, on the other hand, is another structural constraint imposed on the television and the print media by the news media. The new media is perceived to be more interactive and this perception has pushed the television and print media to actively enlist their readers/viewers in news production. Business houses that simultaneously run a news channel, a web site and also a newspaper try to attract readers/viewers through multiple channels of audience participation. The media scenario in the post-liberalisation era in India is marked by large-scale proliferation of media players, diminishing state control, increasing competition, expanding reach, unbridled technological innovation and extensive financial restructuring.

In short, the media appears to be structurally condemned to produce what it does. This should not be misunderstood as

offering an alibi for media excesses. Far from it, I only suggest that a more effective critique would emerge only when the structural, practical and narrative constraints of the news media are noted, analysed and held accountable. Equally importantly, media criticism should not be reduced to sheer blame games about media houses, or worse still, individual journalists. There should be some voices to take up the cause of journalists who risk their lives under peer pressure, management dictates or simply as a matter of routine and livelihood. It is important to emphasise that the larger subsumption of media under capital has signalled significant shifts in the political and developmental roles of the earlier media. Unless this larger picture is accounted, media criticisms would hit dead ends.

Anti-Political Class Rhetoric

Another vein of criticism is about the anti-political class rhetoric stoked by the media. This is reasoned as a triumph of terrorists' original plan to destabilise Indian democracy. This argument is far-fetched, to say the least. There is no doubt that the media indulged in the anti-political class rhetoric. The scrolls on the television monitor incessantly rolled out abusive comments on the political class, questioning their credibility, efficiency and openly doubting their humaneness. Equally true is the fact that there were several lapses on the part of the administrative machinery.

However, the anti-political class rhetoric has a longer trajectory. The English media in India has been pandering to middle class disenchantment with the political class for several years now. This is a chicken and egg situation: it is hard to know if the middle classes started suspecting the political class first, or whether the media started the trend by offering this suspicion as an accurate middle class sentiment. In any case, it is a circular logic that feeds into disillusionment with the political class among urbanised, mostly English reading upper middle class. This is often peddled by positioning the political class in contradistinction to corporate excellence. The terrorist attack was a conjuncture that precipitated and heightened this logic by making it look particularly relevant.

The first issue that appears in current discussions about averting such a situation in future is about stringent media regulation, or an effective self-regulatory system. Unfortunately both failed to work in the recent terror coverage. The News Broadcasters Association (NBA), set up to ensure ethical reporting, did not issue any advisory or guidelines nor did it impose rules of self-restraint. The circulars sent out by the information and broadcasting ministry were ignored.

This is unfortunate and damaging because terrorism is a triangular tactic involving a perpetrator, a victim and an audience. The media is logically integrated with terrorism in the sense that without the media, terrorism as a form of violence cannot exist. Of course, the new media logistics available to the terrorists, such as Google maps, is a more straightforward instance of unintended support. Heated arguments on social network sites such as Orkut and Facebook on the media reports of terror attacks, incessant blogging by eyewitnesses and others, text messages and calls on mobile phones, have added to the information density of terrorism. Any regulatory mechanism should pay equal attention to this information density as well as to the affective aspects of media coverage, to prevent a situation of inadvertent collusion between the media and terrorists. A central information delivery system, controlled by the state, is perhaps the most important and an obvious step. This system should hand out simple facts about the operations especially during the course of terror strikes. The media can and would debate these claims and facts after the completion of the operations. Banning live coverage of terror attacks, if not a complete media blackout, is certainly a viable option. Complete media blackout is both impossible and

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disastrous as it would lead to rumour mongering as well as curtailing media freedom. What is needed then is something like a media disaster management plan, which could be a part of the proposed Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill.³ The NBA, on the other hand, has already come up with a code to be followed during crisis situations.

However, to formulate a viable state-led media management plan, it is important to recognise journalists as political actors and journalism as a political institution (Cook 1998, 2005). Pakistan's influential English paper *Dawn*, Britain's *Observer* newspaper and the British Broadcasting Corporation had earlier reported that Ajmal Qasab belonged to Faridkot after hunting down his father Amir Qasab. This is a simple instance of providing crucial information that could profoundly influence political decisions. On the other

hand, panel discussions on television channels kept debating the options that India should exercise, whether diplomatic or military, often goading the government to take a hard line. It is only by acknowledging journalists as political actors and not accepting journalistic claims of being impartial observers at their face value, that the media institution could be included in serious discussions of disaster management.

NOTES

- 1 The navy chief held a press conference on 2 December 2008 in which he attacked the electronic media for irresponsible coverage of the terror strikes. Sourced from <http://www.indianexpress.com/news/Navy-Chief-fumes-at-media-gets-facts-wrong/393869>, viewed on 24 December 2008.
- 2 These quotes are sourced from the interviews that I conducted for my ongoing doctoral research on the news media in Bangalore at National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore.
- 3 The Broadcasting Services Regulation Bill (2007) has been criticised by the journalistic community and media commentators for possibilities of

excessive state control and lack of public involvement. The bill is yet to be passed by the Parliament. It is important to scrutinise the bill for its potential to curb journalistic autonomy.

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