

# Lessons Learnt

## Terrorism and the Media



Alexander Spencer

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Arts & Humanities  
Research Council

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**Alexander Spencer**



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Research Council

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# Background

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The 'Lessons Learnt' project was originally funded by a grant from King's College London. In May and June 2010 Robert Dover and Michael Goodman, with AHRC funding, ran a series of 5 policy seminars on *Lessons Learnt from the History of British Intelligence and Security*. These were held in partnership with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO), the Cabinet Office, King's College London and The Royal United Services Institute (RUSI). Just under 180 people attended the seminar series in total, from both academia and government. The output from these has subsequently been published in a book called *Learning from the Secret Past: Cases in British Intelligence History* (Georgetown University Press, 2011). The rationale for this initiative and the current one have come from the 2004 Butler Report into the Iraq war (and the intelligence situation that contributed to it), which concluded that the historical lessons had been forgotten, and that a regular review process should be instigated.

## The Current Project

This current project aims to build upon the 2010 seminars, improving and developing the relationship between researchers and government via the production of research and briefing papers, and seminars held in Whitehall. The primary impact is on improving national security, achieved via academics contributing to the development of the government's analytical capability.

The project is split into two halves:

- Highlighting historical examples of good analysis.
- Improving understanding of regions of current interest.

Leading academics have been specially commissioned to produce research and briefing papers for a Whitehall audience. This publication series reproduces the reports.

### *Commissioned Research on the History of British Intelligence and Security*

#### Project Reports

1. *Post-Mubarak Developments Within the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood* (October 2011) – Dr Lorenzo Vidino, Center for Security Studies, ETH Zurich.

2. *“Islamic, Independent, Perfect and Strong”: Parsing the Taliban’s Strategic Intentions, 2001-2011*  
(November 2011) – Alex Strick van Linschoten & Felix Kuehn
3. *Terrorism and the Media*  
(March 2012) – Alexander Spencer

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## Executive Summary

This paper aims to answer two questions: What role does western media play in carrying the terrorist message?; and What would happen if the media made no reference to terrorism? The media is, of course, vital for a terrorist group as they provide the means of attracting attention and spreading its message. Considering terrorism as a communications strategy, the media have often been seen as the terrorist's 'accomplices' or even their 'best friend' as they appear to provide the 'oxygen of publicity'. Yet it has also been noted that terrorists provide the media with emotional, exciting and bloody news which helps them sell their product. There are, therefore, mutual benefits for both and the relationship could be described as 'symbiotic'. At the same time though, the media can also play an important part in countering terrorism. This paper examines the role of western media and illustrates how this news media, as the general public's dominant source of information about terrorism, is central to the whole idea of what makes terrorism terrorism. The second part of the paper investigates the possibility that reduced media attention might actually increase terrorism.

## Series Editors' Notes

In many respects the act of terrorism has always been a psychological one – a strategy designed to induce fear. Without the 'oxygen of publicity' it could be argued that terrorism would have no outlet and, therefore, no utility. The defining memories of the attacks of 9/11 and 7/7 are visual, characterised by the image of the planes hitting the Twin Towers and a red London bus torn asunder. The larger and more violent the act of terrorism is, the more it will be reported on in the media. Furthermore, as this paper demonstrates there is a strong correlation between the prominence of an issue in media coverage and the importance attached to it by the general public. Most of the general public gain their knowledge about current affairs and issues in the wider world from the media. The media is therefore the most important channel for influencing mass public opinion and agenda setting. Although full control over the media in a democracy is not possible or desirable, public announcements by government officials or politicians can frame terrorism in certain ways and thereby aid in the construction of 'terrorism'. These statements can and often are picked up by the media and communicated to the public. Therefore they have the potential of addressing the key notion of terrorism: the spread of fear among the general public.

This has direct relevance to contemporary controversies. The discussions about 'lone wolf' terrorists is symptomatic of this in the way that the metaphor used – 'wolf' – conveys certain images and constructs. These metaphors are especially important for the framing

of terrorism. In the media metaphors structure the way people define a phenomenon and thereby influence how they react to it: they limit and bias our perceived policy choices as they determine basic assumptions and attitudes on which the public acceptance of decisions and policies depends. We sought out Dr Alexander Spencer, an academic based in Germany, on the strength of his book *The Tabloid Terrorist: The Predicative Construction of "New Terrorism" in the Media* (Palgrave, 2010). Spencer is an expert in the study of the media and its relevance to terrorism, as well as more theoretical issues to do with the construction and utility of metaphors. We commissioned him to look at the role of the western media in reporting terrorism, and the hypothetical and impossible situation of the media stopping reporting terrorism. The resulting paper, which follows here, offers some fascinating conclusions, based on statistical and empirical analysis, and helps us understand how the media's framing of terrorism can radically affect, and even misconstrue, its construction and interpretation in the public's eyes.

**Robert Dover & Michael S. Goodman**

# Introduction

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The relationship between terrorism and the media is well researched and has been one of the central questions terrorism research has struggled with (Paletz and Schmid 1992; Weimann and Winn 1994; Nacos 1994). It has become widely accepted that there is an almost symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media as terrorism provides for exciting and violent stories which help sell the news product and the media provides terrorist groups with a means of spreading their message and creating fear among the general public. This paper will address two interrelated questions:

- 1) What role does western media play in carrying the terrorist message?
- 2) What would happen if the media made no reference to terrorism?

The first part of the paper will examine the role of western media and illustrate how this news media, as the general public's dominant source of information about terrorism, is central to the whole idea of what makes terrorism terrorism, i.e. the spread of terror and the public perception of insecurity. By indicating a correlation between the salience of terrorism in the media and public concern, the argument will be made that acts of terrorism without the media's attention lose one of the central components of terrorism as a communication strategy. If terrorism does not reach a wider target audience such as the British general public and 'only' affects the immediate victims of the attack, then the attack's supposed effect of gaining public attention and spreading fear in order to gain leverage for political change is greatly reduced.

The second part of the paper will briefly reflect on the possibility of not reporting terrorism in the media by contemplating both normative and practical difficulties of such a media blackout. The normative side will show the incompatibilities of media censorship with the democratic principles of British society while the practical side will illustrate the impossibility of stopping western media and in particular new internet media channels of reporting on terrorist acts.

The final part of the paper will re-read the last question and rather than reflecting on the idea of not reporting terrorism at all, it will consider the possibilities of framing the terrorist act. Starting from ideas taken from PR and media framing theory the paper will illustrate how cognitive linguistics can be helpful for understanding how particular words and references in media reporting influence public opinion. For illustrative purposes

the paper will articulate the vital importance of metaphors for the cognitive thought process and indicate how metaphors shape public opinion on terrorism. Thereby the paper will indicate how the use of particular metaphors could alleviate one of the central components of terrorism: the public's feeling of terror and insecurity.

### 1) *The role of the media in portraying terrorism*

The relationship between terrorism and the media depends very much on what one considers terrorism to mean. While some definitions focus on the physical act of violence others stress the centrality of the innocent or civilian target, the political nature of the act or the sub-state status of the terrorist actor. Alex Schmid and Albert Jongmann (1988) compiled one of the most famous studies using 109 different definitions of terrorism and came up with a list of possible definitional elements which could be used to forge some sort of consensus definition.

*Table 1: Frequency of definitional elements in 109 definitions*

Elements	Frequency (%)
1. Violence, force	83.5
2. Political	65
3. Fear, terror emphasised	51
4. Threat	47
5. (Psych.) effects and (anticipated) reactions	41.5
6. Victim-target differentiation	37.5
7. Purposive, planned, systematic, organised crime	32
8. Method of combat, strategy, tactic	30.5
9. Extranormality, in breach of accepted rules, without humanitarian constraints	30
10. Coercion, extortion, induction of compliance	28
11. Publicity aspect	21.5
12. Arbitrariness; impersonal, random character; Indiscrimination	21
13. Civilians, non-combatants, neutrals, outsiders as victims	17.5
14. Intimidation	17
15. Innocence of victims emphasised	15.5
16. Group, movement, organisation as perpetrator	14
17. Symbolic aspects, demonstration to others	13.5
18. Incalculability, unpredictability, unexpectedness of occurrence of violence	9
19. Clandestine, covert nature	9
20. Repetitiveness; serial or campaign character violence	7
21. Criminal	6
22. Demand made on third parties	4

Source: Schmid and Jongman (1988:5)

One aspect which was not explicitly named, but plays an important role in many of the elements mentioned in table 1 is the idea of terrorism as a communication strategy. If one considers terrorism to involve more than simple violence against civilians by sub-state groups for political purposes and includes some sort of communicational element in order to spread a message, then the media are central to the understanding of what makes violence terrorism. Traditionally terrorism research considered the media to be vital for a terrorist group as they not only spread the fear or terror to a far larger audience than the relatively small group of immediate victims but the media provide the means of attracting attention and spreading the message of the group. So the central aim of terrorism is not so much the act of violence or the killing of a target, but rather the dissemination of terror and uncertainty among a population as well as the spread of the group's message through the newsworthiness of the violent act. Here one may consider the media to be the terrorist's 'accomplices' (Schmid 1989: 540) or even their 'best friend' (Hoffman 2006: 183) as it appears to provide the 'oxygen of publicity' (Thatcher cited in Wilkinson 2000: 175).<sup>1</sup> As one of the leading terrorism scholars Bruce Hoffman points out:

*The modern news media, as the principal conduit of information about such acts, thus play a vital part in the terrorists' calculus. Indeed, without the media's coverage the act's impact is arguably wasted, remaining narrowly confined to the immediate victim(s) of the attack rather than reaching the wider "target audience" at whom the terrorists' violence is actually aimed. Only by spreading the terror and outrage to a much larger audience can the terrorists gain the maximum potential leverage that they need to effect fundamental political change (Hoffman 2006: 174).*

Terrorism tries to use the media in three ways: firstly terrorism attempts to gain the public's attention, secondly, it thereby, tries to gain sympathy for its cause and, thirdly, terrorism aims to spread concern and terror in the general public and thereby effect political change. Out of these three strategies only two are generally successful. As Bruce Hoffman (2006: 184) points out, there is no evidence that the portrayal of terrorism in the media actually leads to the public's increase in sympathy towards those perpetrating the terrorist act or their cause. For example in a study conducted in the 1980s the RAND Corporation found out that despite the media's prolonged coverage of terrorist hijackings at the time the public approval was almost nonexistent (Downes-Le Guin and Hoffman 1993).

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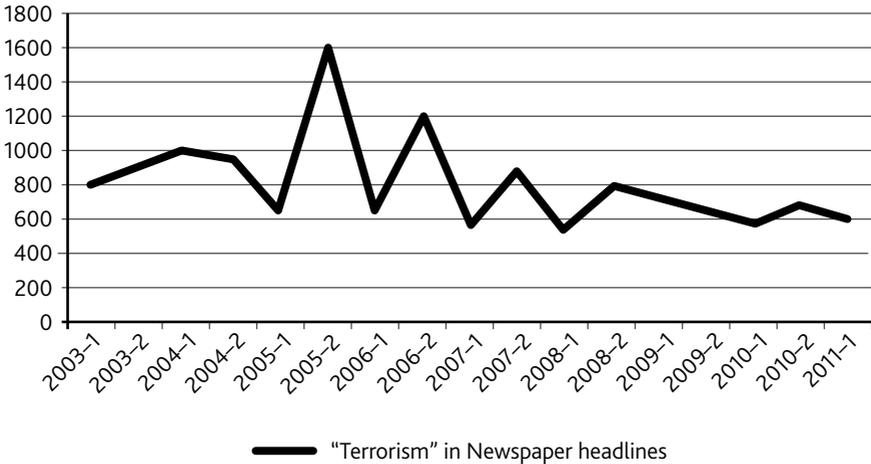
<sup>1</sup> At the same time it has been noted that terrorists provide the media with emotional, exciting and bloody news which helps them sell their product (Ganor 2005: 231). Therefore there are mutual benefits for both and the relationship could be described as 'symbiotic' (Schmid 1989).

In comparison the other two strategies, the gaining of public attention and the spreading of fear seem far more effective. While terrorism in the past was concerned predominantly with the former (the spread of their particular message through for example TV interviews with terrorists during hijackings or hostage situations), many claim that the latter (the spread of fear among a civilian population through maximum violence) has become the central component of Islamist terrorism today (Nacos 2006: 213). Scholars such as Brian Jenkins (1977: 8) point out that 'old terrorists' wanted many people watching not many people dead. 'New terrorist' in contrast are said to want to kill as many people as possible (Laqueur 1999; Simon and Benjamin 2000; Kurtulus 2011). The logic of and relationship between terrorism and the media, however, seems to stay the same if one considers that the number of casualties is proportional to the salience of a terrorist act in the media (Spencer 2006a). In other words one can expect that increasingly violent attacks lead to more public attention. As visible from figure 1 the salience of terrorism in the media in Britain was highest in the six months following the London bombings in July 2005. Considering, for example, the media savvy public messages of Osama bin Laden and the "perfectly" choreographed events of 9/11 on live TV one may metaphorise terrorism as theatre (Jenkins 1975).

In this regard the role of issue salience is important for the analysis of both the strategies of gaining attention and spreading fear and the overall relationship between terrorism, the media, public opinion and counterterrorism. Here salience analysis can be particularly helpful, as it looks into how prominent different issues are in the public sphere (Edwards et al. 1995; Franklin and Wlezien 1997; Oppermann and Viehrig 2011). The central idea is that if terrorism can be shown to be a salient concern for the general public, decision-makers are likely to come under pressure to act on these concerns and their decisions on the respective issues will be under particular public scrutiny. The higher the public salience of terrorism the less leeway governments have to formulate their policies without taking public opinion into account and the more efforts they can be expected to take in order to bring the public on their side (Oppermann and Spencer, forthcoming).

Methodologically, the salience of phenomena such as terrorism to general publics can be measured either by public opinion polls or by media content analyses. With regard to media content analyses, assessing the amount of an issue's coverage in the media offers indirect insights into that issue's public salience, which can be expected to rise with the amount of media reporting on it (Epstein and Segal 2000: 66-67): there is a strong correlation between the prominence of an issue in media coverage and the importance attached to it by general publics (McCombs and Shaw 1972; Miller and Krosnick 2000).

Figure 1: Salience of terrorism in leading British newspapers<sup>2</sup>



With regards to opinion polls, the most valid indicator of issue salience is aggregate data on the respondents’ denomination of the ‘most important issues’ on the political agenda. Looking at the public attention to international terrorism in Britain, for example, the evidence clearly shows that the issue was highly salient in the post-9/11 years. For one, the semi-annual Standard Eurobarometers have investigated the most important issues to European publics from 2003 onwards (see table 2). The data show that the issue of international terrorism has – with one exception – always been among the top-five concerns of the British public between 2003 and 2007 and that it has on average been ranked as one of the two most important political issues by 24% of respondents during this time. It is only since 2008 that public attention to the issue in Britain has decreased significantly.

<sup>2</sup> The graph is based on data taken from database of Lexis Nexis, searching for the concept of “terrorism” or “terror” in newspaper headlines and “terrorism” in the text body. The newspapers selected include: *The Guardian, The Independent, The Financial Times, The Times, The Daily Mail, The Mirror and The Sun*. The searches (conducted 8.11.2011) covered a time period between the 1st January – 15th June and 16th June – 31st December each year in order to roughly correspond to the data of the *Eurobarometer* survey in table 2.

*Table 2: Terrorism as the most important issue in British public opinion<sup>3</sup>*

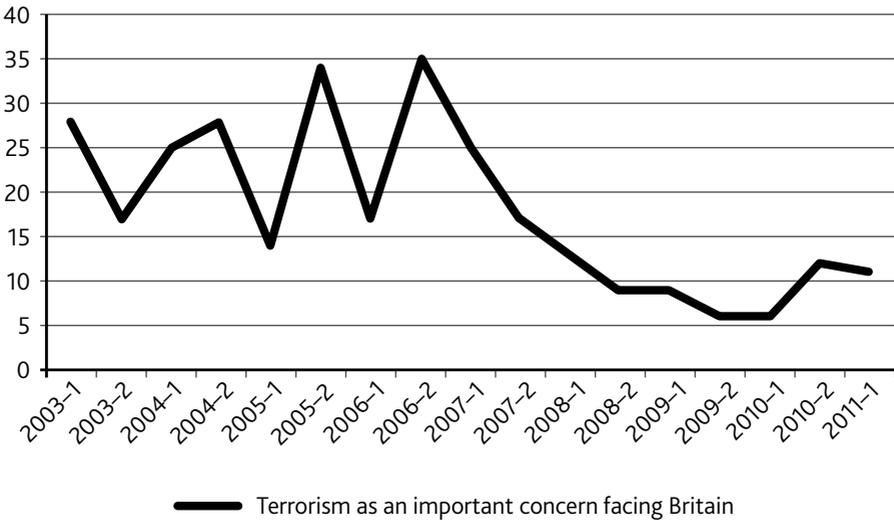
Standard Eurobarometer	Percentage	Rank
2003-1	28%	3
2003-2	17%	4
2004-1	25%	3
2004-2	28%	2
2005-1	14%	6
2005-2	34%	2
2006-1	17%	5
2006-2	35%	2
2007-1	25%	3
2007-2	17%	4
2008-1	13%	6
2008-2	9%	8
2009-1	9%	8
2009-2	6%	8
2010-1	6%	9
2010-2	12%	7
2011-1	11%	8

Converting the data from table 2 into a flowchart (figure 2) and comparing it to the salience of terrorism in the media (figure 1), it becomes apparent, that there is a correlation between the salience of terrorism in the news media and the importance of terrorism in public opinion. Obviously both are directly related to actual incidents of terrorism such as the London bombings in July 2005 where there is a peak in both media reporting and the level of importance people attribute to the phenomena. However, the relationship between the physical act of terrorism, media reporting and the public concern is not necessarily always a chronological or causal one where a terror act leads to increased media reporting and then to public concern. If one considers for example the end of 2006, the relatively high number of headlines mentioning "terrorism" and the even slightly higher level of concern of terrorism in the British public does not correspond to any large-scale physical attack in the UK or on other western targets. Similarly the terrorist attack at Glasgow Airport on the 30th of June 2007 seems to have a fairly small

<sup>3</sup> Source: Standard Eurobarometer No. 59-74, Q: What do you think are the two most important issues facing Britain at the moment? Percentage of respondents naming terrorism as one of the two most important issues facing Britain. Rank of the issue of terrorism on the list of the most important issues to the British public. Table adapted from Oppermann and Spencer (forthcoming).

impact on the reporting or the public concern. This seems to indicate and support the idea that public perception and concern of terrorism is not necessarily directly related to real world events but rather a result of media attention. As a number of scholars have pointed out the public concern about terrorism and their estimated personal risk of falling victim to a terrorist attack stand in no relation to the statistical probability of actually being directly affected by such an attack (Schneier 2003; Jackson 2005). A phenomenon often referred to as the “probability neglect” leads people to worry far more about remote personal risks such as shark attacks or terrorism than statistically more likely dangers such as cancer or traffic accidents (Sunstein 2003; Spencer 2006b).

*Figure 2: Percentage of respondents naming terrorism as one of the two most important issues facing Britain<sup>4</sup>*



<sup>4</sup> Source: Data taken from Standard Eurobarometer No. 59-74, available at: [http://ec.europa.eu/public\\_opinion/archives/eb\\_arch\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/public_opinion/archives/eb_arch_en.htm) [11.11.2011].

## 2) Preventing media reporting on terrorism?

If the news media is so central to the terrorist strategy of gaining public attention and spreading fear in the population, what possibilities are there of preventing the media reporting on terrorism? Any kind of media blackout of terrorist attacks faces two grave problems, one normative and one practical. Starting with the normative problem of censoring and restricting media reporting on terrorism one has to point out that free media, although itself not always a bastion of liberal democratic values, is nevertheless a key characteristic of a British democratic society. As Paul Wilkinson, one of the leading experts on terrorism in the UK, pointed out:

*It is widely recognized that it is important to avoid the mass media being hijacked and manipulated by terrorists, but if the freedom of the media is sacrificed in the name of combatting terrorism one has allowed small groups of terrorists to destroy one of the key foundations of a democratic society. It is also an insult to the intelligence of the general public, and would totally undermine confidence in the veracity of the media if censorship was to be introduced (Wilkinson 2000: 185).*

Although the media is always censored to some extent as there are limits to what one can publicly say (for example inciting racial hatred), a specific ban on the reporting of terrorist attacks is not compatible with basic democratic values on which Britain is based. This, however, does not mean that media channels should not be encouraged to think about voluntary guidelines for reporting on terrorism. For example, as will be illustrated in more detail below, this could include more reflection on the use of particular phrases, concepts or metaphors. It is however important that these rules retain their voluntary “best-practice” character and do not become hard law.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from the normative problem of media censorship, the practicability of such a policy is questionable if one considers the vast range of new media channels available to the general public over satellite and now more importantly over the Internet. Not only does the public now have access to a large number of different satellite and freeview TV news media channels from all over the world including highly professional English speaking non-western channels such as Aljazeera, but with an internet coverage of nearly 80% of all households and the rise of mobile internet usage on smartphones<sup>6</sup>, the public now have access to millions of different news channels on the world wide web, some of which

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<sup>5</sup> For more information on the issue of media censorship with regard to terrorism see Nacos (2002).

<sup>6</sup> See the Office for National Statistics (2011) Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2011, available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2011/stb-internet-access-2011.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/rdit2/internet-access---households-and-individuals/2011/stb-internet-access-2011.html) [10.11.2011].

do necessary involve any kind of news agency or organisation but are the result of peoples own experiences and reporting via email, blogs, Facebook or Twitter. As the Revolutions in the Arab world have again indicated, control over these channels is extremely difficult for an authoritarian regime and surely impossible for a democracy such as Britain where such measures would produce a public outcry and the close proximity and easy access to other democracies in Europe would make an information ban difficult to uphold.<sup>7</sup>

So preventing media reporting on terrorism altogether is not only normatively problematic in a democracy such as Britain, the vast range of new media outlets and channels of communication via the Internet make it impossible to stop the reporting of terrorist acts.<sup>8</sup> Therefore one cannot prevent terrorist groups from gaining public attention. However, considering the communicative strategy by terrorist groups of spreading fear in the general public, one may be able to at least alleviate this psychological effect of the terrorist acts on the public by officially framing "terrorism" in a particular kind of way.

### **3) The framing of terrorism in the media and the role of metaphors**

Having briefly illustrated the impossibility of preventing the media, and especially the new internet based media channels from making references and reporting acts of terrorism, the paper will now turn to the idea of media framing (Norris et al 2003; Craft and Wanta 2004; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira 2008). It is widely accepted not only in academia but also in policy circles that the media greatly influence public opinion (Woods 2007; Herron and Jenkins-Smith 2006). So rather than reading the second question posed in the introduction as an enquiry into the possible results of preventing the spread of knowledge about acts of terrorism, the paper will consider the implications of how knowledge about terrorism is presented in the media and how the choice of language influences public perceptions and may ultimately influence the spread of terror as one of the key components of terrorism. Although it is impossible to fully control the media, public announcements by politicians and press briefings by government officials can attempt to frame terrorism in certain ways and thereby aid a particular kind of construction of "terrorism" which is then picked up by the media by quotes or paraphrasing of statements and communicated to the public, thereby lessening the public's feeling of concern.

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<sup>7</sup> For more information on how terrorist organisations use the internet see Tsfati and Weimann (2002).

<sup>8</sup> One may even go as far as arguing that if media channels do not report on act of terrorism, the terrorist group may resort to increasingly.

One particularly important figure of speech which influences the public perception of political phenomena such as terrorism is the linguistic device commonly referred to as metaphor (Hülse and Spencer 2008). The general idea of what a metaphor is has more recently been discussed by a vast range of different scholars from very different disciplines using a varying degree of complexity to express their understandings. For example, Kenneth Burke (1945: 503) quite simply believes metaphors to be 'a device for seeing something in terms of something else' and Susan Sontag (1989: 93) describes metaphors as 'saying a thing is or is like something-it-is not'. Paul Ricoeur (1978: 80) argues that 'metaphor holds together within one simple meaning two different missing parts of different contexts of this meaning' and most recently Jonathan Charteris-Black (2004: 21) has defined a metaphor as 'a linguistic representation that results from the shift in the use of a word or phrase from the context or domain in which it is expected to occur to another context or domain where it is not expected to occur, thereby causing semantic tension'. So metaphors do not simply substitute one term for another, but create a strong perceptual link between two things (Bates 2004).

While some may consider metaphors to be unimportant rhetorical devices to illustrate factual statements, others have stressed their vital importance for the human cognitive system (Chilton and Lakoff 1999: 56; Chilton 1996: 359; Charteris-Black 2004: 25; Gozzi 1999: 9; Beer and De Landtsheer 2004: 5). In particular, Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are among the most influential scholars in this respect as they have managed to export the study of metaphor from linguistics into other disciplines such as psychology, sociology and political science. For them, the 'essence of metaphor is understanding and experiencing one kind of thing in terms of another' (Ibid: 5). In their book 'Metaphors We Live By' they argue that metaphors structure the way people think and that the human conceptual system as such is fundamentally metaphorical. '[T]he way we think, what we experience and what we do everyday is very much a matter of metaphor' (Ibid: 297). They believe that metaphors make humans understand one conceptual domain of experience in terms of another by projecting knowledge about the first familiar domain onto the second more abstract domain. 'Metaphors [...] are devices for simplifying and giving meaning to complex and bewildering sets of observations that evoke concern' (Edelman 1971: 65). The central idea here is that metaphors map a source domain, for example war, onto a target domain, for example terrorism, and thereby make the target domain appear in a new light.

Here we have to distinguish between two kinds of metaphors: the *metaphoric expression* and the *conceptual metaphor*. The conceptual metaphor, for example terrorism is war, involves the abstract connection between one 'conceptual domain' to another by

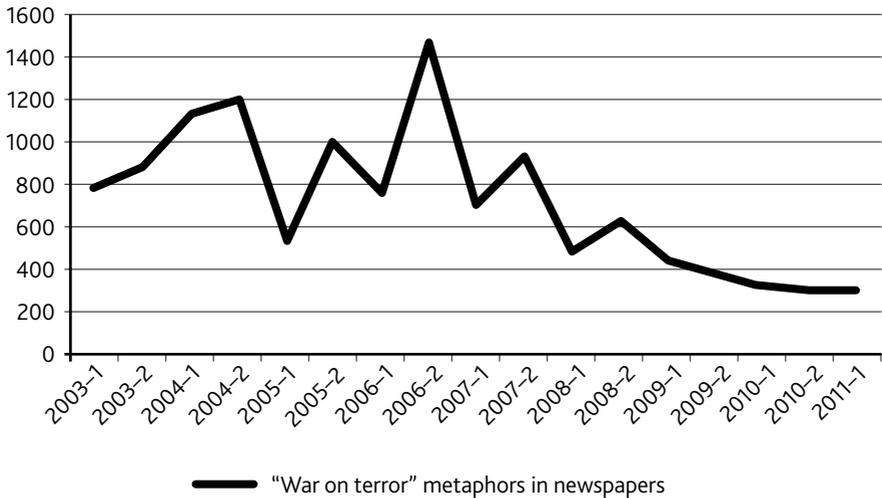
mapping a source domain (war) and a target domain (terrorism) (Lakoff 1993: 208-209). Mapping here refers to 'a set of systematic correspondences between the source and the target in the sense that constituent conceptual elements of B correspond to constituent elements of A' (Kövecses 2002: 6). 'Thus, the conceptual metaphor makes us apply what we know about one area of our experience (source domain) to another area of our experience (target domain)' (Drulák 2005: 3). Conceptual metaphors do not have to be explicitly visible in discourse. However, metaphorical expressions are directly visible and represent the specific statements found in the text which the conceptual metaphor draws on. 'The conceptual metaphor represents the conceptual basis, idea or image' that underlies a set of metaphorical expressions (Charteris-Black 2004: 9).

As Chilton and Lakoff point out, metaphors 'are concepts that can be and often are acted upon. As such, they define in significant part, what one takes as 'reality', and thus form the basis and the justification for the formulation of policy and its potential execution' (Chilton and Lakoff 1999: 57). Metaphors in the media structure the way people define a phenomenon and thereby influence how they react to it: they limit and bias our perceived policy choices as they determine basic assumptions and attitudes on which the public acceptance of decisions and policies depends (c.f. Milliken 1999; Chilton 1996; Mio 1997). One has to be careful when talking about the idea that metaphors shape or 'cause' the public acceptance of certain counter terrorism policies as metaphors are only one among many linguistic devices and other practices which play a role in the framing of public opinion. 'The nature of metaphor does not lend itself easily to rigorous demonstrations of causality. Metaphorical power may exist, but it is hard to nail down' (Beer and Landtsheer 2004: 7). Metaphors do not entail a clear set of policies, but open up space for policy possibilities. Metaphors offer a discursive construct which frames the situation in a certain way. Metaphors in the media shape the public's general approach to an issue as they inform and reflect the conceptual foundation of a political phenomenon such as terrorism and thereby make certain policies acceptable while other remain outside of the options considered appropriate (Shimko 1994: 665).

Considering, for example, the metaphors found in the media after 9/11 constituting terrorism as a war. Apart from the most obvious metaphorical expressions such as 'war on terror' or 'war against terrorism' (see figure 3) the attacks were commonly metaphorised as 'acts of war'. One frequently encounters metaphorical expressions which draw comparisons to the Second World War by involving metaphors such as 'Pearl Harbor' and the 'blitz' and comparing the threat of terrorism to the Nazis and fascism. Apart from these, one encounters a whole range of other metaphors in the media mapping the concept of war onto the concept of terrorism. For example, the conflict is said to include

'battles', 'sieges' and 'warzones' demarcated by 'frontlines'. Here Osama bin Laden is predicated to be a 'terror war lord' who, together with his 'second in command', has 'declared war' and is now 'mobilising' his 'troops' on the 'battlefield' from the safety of his 'command centre'. Terrorists after 9/11 were often metaphorised as 'suicide squads' or 'units' in a terror 'army' made up of 'brigades'. These Al-Qaeda 'forces', similarly to any normal military, are hierarchically organised and included 'footsoldiers', 'lieutenants' and 'commanders'. They used their 'military training' and their 'military arsenal' to conduct 'operations' and 'missions' as part of a large Al-Qaeda 'campaign' supervised by a 'council of war' from 'bases' and 'fortresses' in Afghanistan paid for by a 'warchest' (for more detail see Spencer 2010).

Figure 3: The salience of the “war on terror” metaphor in newspapers<sup>9</sup>



The question now remains, of what these metaphors in the media do. How do they influence public perceptions of terrorism? Above all, the metaphorisation of terrorism as a war makes a military response seem appropriate (Simon 1987; Shimko 1995; Sarbin

<sup>9</sup> The graph is based on data taken from database of Lexis Nexis, searching for the concept of “war on terror” or “war against terrorism” in the text body. The newspapers selected include: *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Financial Times*, *The Times*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Mirror* and *The Sun*. The searches [conducted 8.11.2011] covered a time period between the 1st January – 15th June and 16th June – 31st December each year in order to roughly correspond to the data of the *Eurobarometer* survey in table 2

2003). And overall, the general public also seems to share this kind of understanding of terrorism as a number of opinion polls indicate that the United Kingdom's active participation in the 'war on terrorism' fits into the general public's understanding of what terrorism is and therefore how it should be fought. A survey in October 2001 found that between 67 and 74 percent of those questioned supported or approved of the military action by the United States and Britain against Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, 57 per cent approved of sending British troops into Afghanistan to take part in the fighting on the ground.<sup>11</sup> In 2002 between 76 and 78 percent of those questioned in Great Britain supported air strikes and attacks by ground troops against terrorist 'bases' and other facilities and 84 percent even 'supported the use of one's own troops to destroy terrorist camps'.<sup>12</sup> Even in 2004 56 percent in Britain still agreed that military action was the most appropriate way of fighting terrorism.<sup>13</sup> Interestingly together with a downturn in the number of war metaphors in the media at the end of 2006 there also seems to be a recession in the public support for the war on terror and the military response to terrorism indicating a correlation between the use of war-like metaphors in the media and the public understanding of it considered appropriate against terrorism. For example in 2007 only around 25 per cent believed that British troops should remain in Afghanistan<sup>14</sup> and in 2011 a majority of 57 per cent of those questioned wanted all troops brought home immediately.<sup>15</sup>

Another kind of metaphor commonly found in connection to terrorism is the conceptual metaphor of "evilness". This is indicated through metaphorical expressions which constitute terrorists are 'possessed', 'evil' 'hydras' who perform 'monstrous' acts and those aiding them as an 'Axis of Evil', thereby, interestingly, combining both the metaphor of war and evilness into one expression. Furthermore, the terrorist is described as an 'inhuman' 'monster' with 'tentacles' spread around the globe. These 'subhuman' 'evil beasts' 'without a soul' are said to have spun a 'web of evil'. They are unrivalled in

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<sup>10</sup> 'The Guardian Poll October 2001', *ICM Research*, 10-11.10.2001, available at: [www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001\\_october\\_guardian\\_afghanistan\\_poll\\_1.pdf](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001_october_guardian_afghanistan_poll_1.pdf), [14.4.2009] or 'Evening Standard London Poll October 2001/ War in Afghanistan', *ICM Research*, 10-11.10.2001, available at: [www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001\\_october\\_evening\\_standard\\_war\\_in\\_afghanistan.pdf](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001_october_evening_standard_war_in_afghanistan.pdf), [14.4.2009].

<sup>11</sup> 'The Guardian Afghan Poll- October 2001', *ICM Research*, 26-28.10.2001, available at: [www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001\\_october\\_guardian\\_afghanistan\\_poll\\_2.pdf](http://www.icmresearch.co.uk/pdfs/2001_october_guardian_afghanistan_poll_2.pdf), [14.4.2009].

<sup>12</sup> Worldviews 2002, European Public Opinion & Foreign Policy, The Chicago Council on Foreign Relations and the German Marshall Fund of the United States, pp. 20-21, available at: [www.worldviews.org](http://www.worldviews.org) [21.4.2009].

<sup>13</sup> Transatlantic Trends 2004, The German Marshall Fund of the United States and the Compagnia di San Paolo, p. 18, available at: [www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/2004\\_english\\_key.pdf](http://www.transatlantictrends.org/trends/doc/2004_english_key.pdf) [22.4.2009].

<sup>14</sup> See: [www.angus-reid.com/polls/507/britons\\_upset\\_with\\_afghanistan\\_mission](http://www.angus-reid.com/polls/507/britons_upset_with_afghanistan_mission) [15.11.2011].

<sup>15</sup> See: [www.comres.co.uk/polls/The\\_Index\\_%28Afghanistan%29\\_2\\_Oct11.pdf](http://www.comres.co.uk/polls/The_Index_%28Afghanistan%29_2_Oct11.pdf) [15.11.2011].

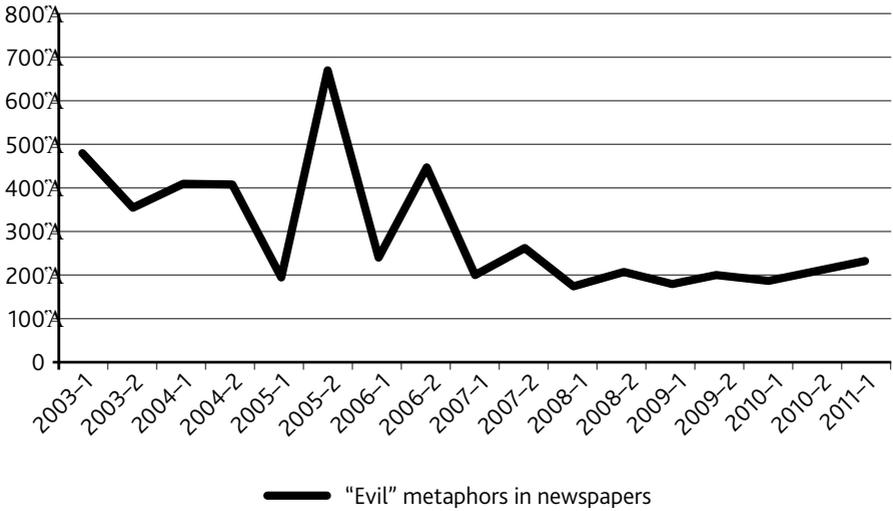
'wickedness' and their 'doomsday attacks' created an 'inferno' and 'hell' on earth likened to 'Armageddon' or the 'Apocalypse'.<sup>16</sup>

Above all these kinds of metaphor cause a clear cut polarisation and thereby heightens the level of public fear as it outcasts the actor and his/her actions and dichotomises and antagonises them (the out-group) and us (the in-group) (Lazar and Lazar 2004). As there are only two sides to the conflict, good and evil, the construction of the 'evil' other automatically constitutes the self as the binary opposite 'good'. 'Here the dichotomy between the in- and the out-group is a religious and spiritual one, the "good" outcasting the "evil" from the moral order that is instituted by the good itself' (Bhatia 2009: 282). So the construction of terrorism as 'evil' creates only two camps. This polarisation leads to the situation where 'people and countries must choose which side they are on' (Rediehs 2002: 71). While the conceptual metaphor war mentioned above implied the possibility of neutrality the predication of terrorism as evil eliminates this option. The dichotomy of good versus evil leaves no space for anything in-between. Overall, this extreme kind of othering and demonisation increases the apprehension and fear of the unknown evil other. As visible in figure 4 the salience of "evil" metaphors in the media again correlates with level of concern of terrorism in the public.

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<sup>16</sup> For more detail on these metaphorical expressions see Spencer (2010: 124-128).

Figure 4: Salience of “Evil” metaphors in newspapers<sup>17</sup>



<sup>17</sup> The graph is based on data taken from database of Lexis Nexis, searching for the concept of “terrorism” and “evil” in the text body. The newspapers selected include: *The Express Newspapers; The Express; The Guardian; The Mirror; The Daily Mail; The Daily Telegraph; The Independent; The Observer; Morning Star; The Sunday Express; The Sunday Telegraph; The People*. The searches (conducted 15.11.2011) covered a time period between the 1st January – 15th June and 16th June – 31st December each year in order to roughly correspond to the data of the *Eurobarometer* survey in table 2.

## Conclusion

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This paper hopes to have given an insight into the connection between terrorism and the media by indicating the central importance of communication for the strategy of terrorism. It has illustrated that terrorism needs the media. On the one hand the media is vital for a terrorist group as they provide the means of attracting attention and spreading the message of the group. At the same time it has been noted that terrorists provide the media with emotional, exciting and bloody news which help them sell their product. On the other hand, the media can also play an important part in countering terrorism by framing the phenomena in a less fear provoking manner. While, the paper was skeptical of whether a media censorship is the answer to this 'symbiotic' relationship between the two for both normative and pragmatic reasons, it hopes to have shown how the framing of terrorism through linguistic devices such as metaphors can help construct terrorism in a particular kind of way by highlighting certain characteristics and downplaying others. Government officials can actively take part in this construction of terrorism. As for example Ken McDonald, Director of Public Prosecutions, attempted after the July bombings in 2005 when he explicitly criticised the use of war metaphors and instead, for example, pleaded for the use of criminal metaphors:

*London is not a battlefield. Those innocents who were murdered on July 7 2005 were not victims of war. And the men who killed them were not, as in their vanity they claimed on their ludicrous videos, 'soldiers'. [...] We need to be very clear about this. On the streets of London, there is no such thing as a 'war on terror', just as there can be no such things as 'war on drugs'. [...] The fight against terrorism on the streets of Britain is not a war. It is the prevention of crime, the enforcement of our laws and the winning of justice for those damaged by their infringement.<sup>18</sup>*

Although the statements by officials will not always succeed in projecting a complete desired construction of terrorism to the public as only some aspect and snippets will be taken up by the media, the importance of small seemingly trivial linguistic devices such as

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<sup>18</sup> See: [www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1540399/There-is-no-war-on-terror-says-DPP.html](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1540399/There-is-no-war-on-terror-says-DPP.html) [15.11.2011].

metaphors can be used to cognitively transfer at least some understandings to the public. This particular kind of framing can for example help reduce the fear generated by the media's constitution of terrorism.

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