

ESRC SEMINAR SERIES: The Role of Civil Society in the Management of National Security in a Democracy

Seminar Two: The Role of the Media 5 July 2005

The current national and even global environment of fear has given rise to serious concerns about national security within the United Kingdom. These anxieties create tension points between democracy, civil rights, human rights and the rule of law. As various sectors of civil society have responded to the issues raised, it has become clear that each sector is speaking with different interests and from particular perspectives. These sectors, whether they be government, the legal profession or NGOs, are not sufficiently seeking to understand other perspectives. It is with this in mind that a six part ESRC funded series on The Role of Civil Society in the Management of National Security in a Democracy has been established. The goal of these seminars is to facilitate a dialogue between government and civil society. The second seminar, held on 5 July 2005, focused on the role of the media, just two days before the attacks on London that occurred on the morning of the following Thursday. More than two dozen individuals from journalism, academe, government and other public services considered such issues as: writing and reporting on terrorism matters; state secrecy; and the impact of terrorism on community relations.

Writing and Reporting on Terrorism Matters

As various elements of the media are directly responsible for much of the information disseminated to the public, the role of the media in terrorism related matters is pivotal. Where terrorist actions or security alerts are concerned, the way in which the media present the issue can either be an appropriate response to the nature of the story or can cause “undue alarm.” Thus questions arise as to how the media can get the balance right in reporting about terrorism. Should the media go as far as to avoid certain words like “terrorist”? The response of panellists was decidedly mixed. Some argued that as a word derived from the Jacobin reign of terror, “terrorist” refers to violent methods to coerce. This description is accurate in many circumstances to this day; its use, therefore, is not completely inappropriate. For example, a leading and very experienced journalist stated that, “if someone is arrested, it is legitimate to call [him or her] a suspected terrorist if [he or she is] charged under terrorism laws.” Even then, the question is raised as to when a “terrorist” becomes a terrorist – at the point of conviction under such laws? After the Ricin trial, the individuals in question were still being called suspected terrorists even after being acquitted. Several panellists added caveats, stating that the word is not accurate enough and does not make sense in every situation. It was stated that one media outlet no longer uses the label for individuals,

instead preferring to say “terrorist acts” and then explaining who the perpetrators were and reporting further on both sides of the situation.

This discussion raised the issue of labelling individuals as “Islamic terrorists.” It was agreed by all parties that such a label is problematic. However, the issue is more complex. It was argued by one participant that the label “conveys the idea that all acts of terrorism are carried out by Muslims.” This was mostly rejected by the rest of the panellists; however, there was general agreement that more balance and accuracy in describing perpetrators was needed. One journalist commented that since the September 11th attacks, “we have been developing an approach to this problem of language because it’s a very complicated, [a] very complex situation yet we have to find a language that is simple enough for people to understand what’s going on. Truth is, as far as the threat of al Qaeda is concerned, we are dealing with people who use Quranic interpretation to threaten us. We have to reflect Islamic nature without using words that oversimplify and result in prejudice.” He stated that his outlet has looked at many different words, but all of them present other problems. “We must find a language,” he said, “[and] ultimately [we] must try and produce understanding rather than misunderstanding.”

Another journalist pointed out that while the term should generally be rejected, the literal interpretation is “very accurate in most cases.” Ultimately, while there was considerable discomfort in the use of certain labels, many seemed to feel that other options were non-existent or just as problematic. It may indeed be that, “No one objects to the word terrorism as long as it is not applied to them.” Further, it was stressed that on a positive note, the media has become more of an expert on the Muslim community and on ways to produce understanding. The media is not sitting back – journalists do “sit around and have these conversations.” A prominent former government official said that it was apparent that words like “terrorism” are a fixture in political discourse – particularly in the UK where it was stated that terrorism and the IRA “carry baggage with 90% of the audience.” The question for the future, he stated, is whether this discourse can be tempered. It is difficult to deal with complexity in political discourse but understanding such complexities will go a long way in helping the public to understand labels. Thus whatever labels or words are used, understanding is key amongst both the media and the public.

Politics, Politicians and Terrorism

Given that the media are responsible for disseminating information oftentimes coming from government sources, the media’s relationship with officials becomes key. Panellists addressed issues of how the media should report claims of threats to national security from government officials, how the authorities should address issues of terrorism in the media, and the all-important question of trust between the two entities.

Panellists agreed that the current state of affairs made it very difficult to function as responsible journalists. They are being asked to report threats to national security by government officials who “can’t reveal things, may act in puzzling ways or may be dishonest.” Journalists among the group tended to be of the belief that actors in the political arena had acted in untrustworthy ways in the past, citing intelligence about Iraq, deploying tanks around Heathrow and cancelling British Airways flights without explanation. This lack of information leads to an inability on the part of the journalism profession critically to analyse the system. Furthermore, question of bad faith and mistrust arise. One panellist pointed out that the deployment of tanks came one day before the biggest march against the war on Iraq leading many to suggest a link. A journalist pointed out that the emergence of this question of trust is a reflection that “the media is in competition with government about who is more trustworthy”. The government was further indicted by a panellist who stated that it “has trouble treating us like adults and explaining complexities.”

Whilst the voice of the media was strong in questioning the trustworthiness of the government, one official responded saying that the media itself is to be questioned for its sensationalism on certain stories as well. He cited the case of Maxine Carr as an instance where media outlets were responsible for sensationalising the situation without any government involvement. Government officials also responded quite adamantly that conspiracy theories about their roles in certain events were unfounded. In particular, the deployment of tanks at Heathrow was in response to what was considered a credible threat at the time coming from intelligence “that could not be dismissed.” A senior official commented that the action was meant as a “conspicuous warning” for potential terrorists. Ultimately, the government’s response to allegations of cover-ups was, as a participant from the Home Office stated, “If trust to that degree has disappeared, we’re all in trouble.” However, he also said that, “Once the public is in a state of mind that everything is a conspiracy, it is difficult to get out of it.”

The discussion then focused on how to ensure that the public will listen when necessary amidst a flurry of seemingly unsubstantiated security alerts. It was stated that the two things that make people listen are the source and context of the information. Officials present suggested that the best source of information in terms of credibility are the police – who are trusted more than politicians. Through the situation with the IRA in the past decades, the functions of police and politicians developed over time to the degree that police took responsibility for events threatening national security. Thus, police are often used to present information about security threats to the public.

The danger of this however is that over time, even the police can be seen as crying wolf. While the threat is very real, actual terrorist events on British soil had not taken place at the time of this discussion. Thus, some journalists felt that the use of police often “dramatises” the situation. Further, a Home Office official pointed out that often the

media “gets bored and doesn’t want to keep reporting” alerts no matter who the source. This may be because journalists are forced to report in a vacuum – they are not given all the relevant information surrounding a security alert and are thus unable to judge the relative importance of one threat compared to another.

In looking to solutions, some academics present suggested that more information should be placed in the public domain. Politicians should not be allowed to speak for intelligence agencies – rather the head of MI-5, for example, should be asked to discuss threats. Essentially a structured effort was needed in which actual experts are brought in to inform the public. Several journalists agreed, stating that while reporting risk will always be difficult, “all journalists can do is give two sides that are more sophisticated and make a judgement call. If a grown-up discussion is going to happen, we have to do it from a position of truth, not from denial.” Another stated that if journalists are going to report alerts, they have to understand the situation and relationships between agencies: “Coverage of terrorism is about politicians.” A government official present also agreed, saying that “suggestions of more public information can be squared away with security concerns.”

State Secrecy and Terrorism

Even as panellists debated the lack of information given by government, there was concession by most that some sort of censorship does come into play. Generally, there is an element of self-censorship when it comes to certain security issues like names and activities of MI-5. One journalist sated that, “There are circumstances where we would refrain from publicising things that could lead to mass fear and anything that puts people in danger.” However, this restraint does not stop the media from reporting incidents or situations that the government does not want publicised. Most censorship, it was stated, is simply based on common sense. Yet, at the point where information is not released that perhaps should be, the trust factor breaks down. A government official stated that there are indeed times when journalists are asked to embargo information for the public good. He used the example of the threat to poison water supplies where embargos were successful in giving authorities enough time to take proper action before informing the public.

It was pointed out that the government cannot always release certain intelligence because of ongoing threats. This was not an easy decision; instead officials have to make judgement calls about each threat and the amount of information to be released. However, a participant from the Home Office cautioned that “It is not accurate to think that the truth is always hidden. Truth has a comfortable habit of arriving.”

One difficulty that the members of the media were adamant must be overcome is the inability to report more details of trials and jury decisions. Reporting becomes difficult in

terrorism related cases because of pending litigation, leading to an inability to follow-up on arrests and threats. A journalist said that the media must be allowed to research how jury's make decisions, citing the Ricin Trial where at least three jurors stated that the truth of the situation was far more complicated than the media reported. This inability to research led to bad reporting of an important trial.

The discussion of state secrecy and terrorism closed with a brief discussion of how to address the various dilemmas that had been identified. It was stated that what is needed is a rigorous examination of what information can be placed in the public domain. Authorities will always have their own agendas and journalists may often neglect the importance of politics. Thus, it is vital that the two discuss what kind of information properly belongs in the public domain.

Media and Community Relations in Terrorism Related Matters

The answer to the question of what information is in the public domain can directly affect community relations. The media's reporting of terrorism related matters has inevitably put certain communities in the forefront. A member of the Muslim community pointed out that since the September 11th attacks, community relations have worsened to an extent that there is now a climate of fear amongst Muslims and a feeling of powerlessness. The media's reporting of terrorist events and arrests have given rise to Islamophobia. The problem, he stated, is that the media reports arrests but gives no explanation when most of these arrest result in release without charge. There is, in general, sloppy reporting when it comes to terrorism related matters. A member of the media rebutted that arrests under terrorism law are important stories, however, he conceded that explaining releases has been problematic.

Throughout the discussion, many panellists discussed the analogy of the Irish during the IRA terrorist actions and the Muslims today. A combination of the events themselves, laws and reporting have created a suspect community. A very senior official from the Home Office stated that the government is fully aware of the "Muslim problem", having gone through the "Irish problem" for several decades. He stated that while the government doesn't know as much right now, "we are trying to learn and be more sensitive."

When asked whether a law banning religious incitement would be beneficial, the representative from the Muslim community said that it indeed would: "It would send a message to the community and give protection in a time of marginalisation." However, media personnel were less optimistic, saying that since criticism would still be allowed, problems would necessarily arise.

Conclusion

The discussion came to an end with a return to the question of trust between the media and government officials. While both play vital roles in the management of national security in a democracy, it was stated that the media will always be at a disadvantage because its various outlets do not and cannot know as much as the government. As one panellist stated, "Media and government, to some extent, never trust each other and shouldn't. There should always be some scepticism."

However, even if this is the case, discussions about how the two should interact in terrorism related matters is vital for the public good and for national security. Media reporting can cause widespread, undue fear and panic or harness due fear and appropriate responses to security alert. It can further affect community relations and the marginalisation or integration of entire groups of people. One of the most positive outcomes of the past few years, it was agreed, has been the media's self-evaluation and criticism enabling a better understanding of different communities and contexts. This, it is hoped, is translating into more accurate and effective reporting of terrorism related matters.