



Agenda-Setting Theory in the U.S. Media: A Comparative Analysis of Terrorist Attacks in France and Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper examines six major terrorist attacks that occurred in France and Nigeria between 2011 and 2016. The sources used were the news websites of The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today. Agenda-Setting Theory postulates that the media has the ability to determine the salience of topics in the public domain. "Salience" is the perceived importance of issues or subjects in the eyes of the public. An important conclusion of this analysis is that the U.S. media has been over-reporting terrorist events in France, while under-reporting terrorist events in Nigeria. The results of this paper substantiate previous studies that found that U.S. news reports on terrorist attacks in the West gain more widespread media coverage and attention. Evidence of over-reporting and under-reporting of these terrorist incidents attests to the power of Agenda-Setting Theory in the U.S. media because, ultimately, this shapes public perception of the threat that international terrorism poses to innocent people in the West.

Keywords: Agenda-setting theory; Bias; France; Media coverage; Nigeria; Public perception; Terrorism

Introduction

Drawing on Agenda-Setting Theory, this paper examines six major terrorist attacks that occurred in France and Nigeria between 2011 and 2016. Developed by McCombs and Shaw, Agenda-Setting Theory rests on the premise that the media has the ability to determine the salience of topics in the public domain [1]. "Salience" is the perceived importance of issues or subjects in the eyes of the public. Two basic assumptions inspire most studies on agenda-setting:

- The press and the media do not strive to obtain objective facts; rather, they filter or tweak them; and
- The media focus on certain issues leads the public to believe those issues are more important than others [2,3].

Six major terrorist attacks were examined: three in France and three in Nigeria. These specific terrorist attacks were selected because they not only killed many innocent people; they also occurred quite recently. The acts of terror in France were the Charlie Hebdo shooting in January 2015, the November 13th, 2015 Paris attacks, and the 2016 Nice truck attack. The acts of terror in Nigeria were the U.N. compound bombing in Abuja in 2011, the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping in 2014, and the Baga massacre in January 2015. The sources used were the news websites of The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today. These three U.S. newspapers were selected because they enjoy a wide circulation (both in print and online). To find articles on terrorist attacks in France and Nigeria, we conducted separate searches on these three search engines.

The countries of France and Nigeria were specifically chosen because the former receives much more widespread attention than the latter. Hence, it is the authors' belief that infusing Agenda-Setting Theory into this analysis exposes the bias in reporting terrorist attacks that have been perpetrated in recent years. No assumption is made in this paper that terrorism in France does not deserve attention, but post-9/11 discourses on terrorism have been mostly centered on Western civilization (i.e., mostly North America and Europe), not Africa [4]. Furthermore, as explained by Wahutu (in press), there is a conventional wisdom in some circles of the U.S. media establishment that, because terrorism in Africa is the norm, it does not deserve significant media coverage.

An important conclusion of this analysis is that the U.S. media has been over-reporting terrorist events in France, while under-reporting terrorist events in Nigeria. The results of this paper substantiate previous studies that found that U.S. news reports on terrorist attacks in the West gain more widespread media coverage and attention. By the same token, terrorist events that occur within Western civilization gain more views because they are more likely to generate more revenue [5]. Evidence of over-reporting and under-reporting of these terrorist incidents attests to the power of Agenda-Setting Theory in the U.S. media because, ultimately, this shapes public perception of the threat that international terrorism poses to innocent people in the West. This is why the authors believe that a better balance of U.S. news coverage of terrorist attacks in the West and Africa should be

achieved so the U.S. public be better informed and form a more even-handed opinion.

This paper begins with a description of Agenda-Setting Theory, including its main tenets and origins. The following section defines terrorism from a general perspective. Then, the authors proceed to compare terrorist attacks in France with those in Nigeria, particularly attacks that occurred between 2011 and 2016. What comes subsequently is the heart of paper: the use of Agenda-Setting Theory to compare terrorist attacks in France and Nigeria. After the conclusions section, this paper ends with a discussion that also offers suggestions for future research.

Description of the Theory

Developed by McCombs and Shaw, Agenda-Setting Theory rests on the premise that the media has the ability to determine the salience of topics in the public domain [1]. "Salience" refers to the perceived importance of issues or subjects in the eyes of the public [6,7]. Agenda-setting, then, is the establishment of public awareness of and attention to salient issues by the mass media. Two basic assumptions inspire most studies on agenda-setting: (1) The press and the media do not strive to obtain objective facts; rather, they filter or tweak them; and (2) the media focus on certain issues leads the public to believe those issues are more important than others [2,3].

As Matusitz explains, "the theory postulates that the more the media cover certain issues, the more salient (i.e., noticeable, accessible, and significant) these issues become for the audience" (p. 113) [8]. News media outlets set an agenda by discussing topics more frequently or less frequently. This, in turn, influences the public into focusing on a certain topic and taking a particular stance on it. In other words, the under-reporting or over-reporting of events or issues in the news can affect public perceptions and behaviors [1]. An example would be the news media's influence of public perception about certain candidates in a presidential election (by over-reporting one candidate to the detriment of others).

Agenda-Setting Theory is not a relatively new premise, but it has achieved prominence in academic research in the last few decades. While the first application of Agenda-Setting Theory by McCombs and Shaw involved politics, the theory can have a non-political application as well [1]. Advertising is a good example of non-political application as the media can show the audience a particular product more often than other similar products. This can be found in the success of Gatorade in relation to other energy drinks. Gatorade saw much more run time on television football games, which led to its success [9].

Origins of the Theory

The founding of this theory can be attributed to multiple scholars throughout history. Although Agenda-Setting Theory was first coined in 1972 by McCombs and Shaw, two other scholars discussed the concept of the theory well before the

1970s [1]. The origins of this theory started in 1922 with newspaper columnist Walter Lippmann. In his book, *Public Opinion*, Lippmann laid the foundation for Agenda-Setting Theory by examining the notion that most people in the world do not understand and do not care about the public affairs of the world [10]. Consequently, the news media was their primary source of information to form an opinion. This led them to only fixate on a view of the world that was in line with the media's view of the world [11].

A core tenant of Lippmann's views proposed that "elites" or media representatives are the ones who protect/control the people by interpreting the intents and opinions of politicians. Over the years, Lippmann became famous for discussing "mass culture" and the "propaganda machine" that is democracy. Decades later, Bernard Cohen would further develop Lippmann's philosophy by arguing that "the press may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling readers what to think about" (p. 13) [12]. The mass media may not be able to influence how the public thinks about an issue, but it certainly can influence the public's salience toward certain issues.

McCombs and Shaw brought this theory into the foreground when they released their study in 1972 [1]. By interviewing registered voters in Chapel Hill, NC, during the 1968 U.S. presidential elections, they examined what the voters thought were the most prominent issues during these times. The medians of media were also observed in this study; they were television, newspapers, news magazines, and editorial page coverage of newspapers and magazines. Based on information on the registered voters, who had not yet voted, McCombs and Shaw quantified the data on numerous issues such as civil rights, foreign policy, and the Vietnam War. The findings were very detailed in their study, but the discussion was the most interesting part. They discovered correlations between voters ordering of issues with media coverage. According to McCombs and Shaw [1]:

The existence of an agenda-setting function of the mass media is not proved by the correlations reported here, of course, but the evidence is in line with the conditions that must exist if the agenda-setting by the mass media does occur (p. 184).

To McCombs and Shaw, this was a satisfactory first test, and it not only indicated the possibility of Agenda-Setting Theory; it also opened up the pathway towards more research in this field.

Definition of Terrorism

To begin, it is important to be acquainted with the definition of terrorism. 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" [8]. Likewise, Fortna defines terrorism as the use of deliberately indiscriminate violence as a strategy to create terror or fear, in order to accomplish a political, religious, or ideological goal

[13]. For Hoffman, terrorism is not only inherently political in aims and motives; it also uses violence so as to have widespread psychological ramifications beyond the immediate victims or targets [14]. There are many more different definitions of terrorism from various organizations such as the UN, FBI, and CIA. Matusitz analyzed most of the available definitions of terrorism and defines terrorism as “the use of violence to create fear (i.e., terror, psychic fear) for political, religious, or ideological reasons”.

While there is no universally agreed-upon definition, this is a most universally accepted one, and it contains themes from many of the other definitions [8].

Terrorist Attacks in France and Nigeria

France and Nigeria are different countries with diverse demographics, cultures, and geographic locations. Both experience terrorist attacks, but the organizations that commit the attacks and the reasons behind them are worth noting. Just like France, Nigeria is a large-sized federal republic in West Africa. It borders countries such as Niger, Chad, and Cameroon, and has a large mass touching the southern Atlantic Ocean. However, the Nigerian population is three times larger than the French one.

Attacks in France

France is a large country in the heart of Western Europe. The main organizations that have claimed responsibility for most of France’s recent terrorist attacks are the Islamic State of Iraq and Shām (ISIS) and Al-Qaeda. The West depicts ISIS as the evil incarnate – meaning that they must be stopped at all costs in order to prevent the collapse of Western civilization. In actuality, ISIS has been increasingly contained in the countries of Iraq and Syria, which present little threat to Western countries at this time [15]. The speed in growth of ISIS is important to note, but the primary victims of ISIS are other Muslims in the Near-Eastern region. ISIS is a Sunni umbrella terrorist organization that seeks to establish a caliphate in the states that they control [16]. Tying this together with France, ISIS sees France as a threat to their caliphate because France enacts policies against radical Islamists and conducts military campaigns against the Islamic State. In retribution, Islamic extremists target France by perpetrating terrorist attacks in large cities like Paris and Nice. In return, France has retaliated by increasing aerial bombings over Syria and Iraq, thus fueling the cycle of global war.

France has always been a target for terrorist attacks, but in past few years, the nation of 66 million people has suffered many incidents. These brutal attacks can range from one or two casualties to hundreds. No matter the number, each attack is blasted on every news channel through sound bites for the public to consume. For example, in January 2015, France was attacked by Al-Qaeda-trained Islamic extremists who targeted Charlie Hebdo’s offices and proceeded to conduct multiple assassinations. The attack was followed by a hostage-taking incident at a Jewish supermarket, and ending with 17 dead and another 22 injured [17]. The attacks on

Charlie Hebdo’s offices were in retaliation for the comical depiction of Muhammad being drawn. Still reeling from the recent attacks, France was not prepared for one of the worst terrorist attacks it would ever face: the November 13th, 2015 attacks. This day of violence was a series of coordinated attacks on Paris, where several mass shootings and suicide bombings occurred throughout the City of Lights. About 130 people were killed and another 300 were injured. Europe had not seen a deadlier attack since the Madrid train bombings in 2004. ISIS immediately claimed responsibility for the November 13th, 2015 attacks in Paris [18].

One final terrorist attack to be discussed in France occurred on one of the most important calendar days in history. On July 14th, 2016, a truck rammed into a crowd of people as they were walking on the streets celebrating Bastille Day in Nice. Crowds were gathered to watch the fireworks when a truck packed with weapons and ammunition started to run over hundreds of people which resulted in 86 dead, plus 202 injured [19]. Before the driver could get out of the truck cabin and unload into the remaining crowds with firearms, as intended, the police were able to shoot him through the front window. The driver was identified as Mohamed Lahouaiej Bouhlel, a resident of Nice at the time. There is much speculation to which terrorist organization orchestrated this attack, but ISIS was the first to claim credit and proclaim that Bouhlel was a “soldier” for ISIS [20].

Attacks in Nigeria

Nigeria has also seen its fair share of attacks from jihadist terrorist organizations. In recent years, the first major act of international terrorism that Boko Haram committed was in August 2011, when they attacked and bombed a UN compound in the city of Abuja, the capital of Nigeria [21]. The tragedy is usually referred to as 2011 Abuja United Nations bombing, whereby 21 important officials lost their lives and an additional 73 people were injured [22]. Boko Haram is an extremist Islamic sect that seeks to “purify” Nigeria from false Muslims who have taken control of it. They wish to create a pure Islamic state ruled by sharia (i.e., Islamic law) [23].

One major difference between Boko Haram and other terrorist organizations such as ISIS is that they tend to focus all of their jihadism on a local scale; that is, the terrorist group has focused its interests inwards, rather than outwards. So far, it has committed all its terrorist attacks in the Western African region: in countries such as Nigeria, Chad, Niger, and Cameroon [24]. Boko Haram is not in the same global category as these other groups and they are not determined to target Western interests only. Nonetheless, Boko Haram has been increasingly attacking “soft targets” such as civilians who are deemed as “insufficiently Muslim” or too Westernized [21].

In April 2014, during the Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, in Northeastern Nigeria, over 250 schoolgirls were kidnapped right out of their schools by Islamic extremists of Boko Haram [25]. Along with the schools, Boko Haram decided that targeting churches and markets full of civilians, in the tribal areas where the schoolgirls were kidnapped, was also necessary. Another brutal method of war that Boko Haram

used was scorched-earth policies in rural areas [26]. Scorched-earth policies refer to destroying anything that can be of use to the enemy after attacking or retreating from an area. This can mean destruction of crops, houses, and water sources. These policies have left hundreds of thousands Nigerians displaced and many more affected [27].

In January 2015, Boko Haram captured the city of Baga, also in Northeastern Nigeria. According to some estimates, the terrorist group killed several thousand people [26]. This terrorist group has seen much expansion over the years, and their recent attacks indicate that they have no intention of stopping. Even though the terrorist attacks in Nigeria can claim hundreds if not thousands of lives, the attacks receive little attention from U.S. media news outlets. It is becoming more and more likely that Boko Haram will establish a caliphate in Nigeria, thus accomplishing the jihadist goal successfully.

Agenda-Setting Theory to Compare Terrorist Attacks in France and Nigeria

Agenda-Setting Theory can easily be applied to how the media either over-reports or under-reports terrorist attacks in countries such as France and Nigeria. To assert the value of this theory, analysis was conducted on the method of reporting done by the media. To be more precise, by examining how mainstream U.S. media outlets present the information in their papers, a comparative analysis on the news reports discussing the terrorist events in France and Nigeria was conducted to determine if they were under-reported or over-reported in the United States. The extent to which a certain attack is covered could, in turn, affect the salience and public opinion of the intended audience. The media filters, shapes, and concentrates on these attacks, thus leading the public into thinking that the issue is more important than it really is. The sources used were the news websites of The New York Times, The Washington Post, and USA Today. To find articles on terrorist attacks in France and Nigeria, we conducted separate searches on these three search engines.

News about terrorist attacks in France

The first case of a major recent terrorist act in France were the brutal coordinated attacks on Charlie Hebdo's office and the surrounding community, which left 17 dead and another 22 injured [17]. This was a well-coordinated terrorist attack intended to kill as many civilians as possible in retaliation for Charlie Hebdo's cartoon depiction of the prophet Muhammed. Al-Qaeda immediately claimed responsibility for the attack. Since the attack occurred, news articles about this tragic story can be found throughout any journalistic site. As such, as of January 2017, The New York Times had over 525 articles, The Washington Post had about 370, and USA Today had more than 400. It is also important to note that these articles may discuss the attacks, but not necessarily be centered on them. One of these reports is just a one-minute video filming the terrorists outside the Charlie Hebdo's offices on the day of the attack [28]. The United States Department of State Secretary,

John Kerry, spoke out against the January 2015 attacks in Paris. In his remarks, John Kerry was quick to show sympathy for France and assured the world that we would "stand in solidarity with them" [29].

The second major terrorist attack that occurred in Paris was the November 13th, 2015 attacks, where 130 innocent people lost their lives and hundreds more were injured [17]. Paris was shaken to its core by a series of meticulously planned and well-coordinated attacks against soft targets of the civilian population. A little over a year later, using keywords such as "November 2015 Paris Attacks," The New York Times had approximately 435 news articles on those very attacks. The Washington Post had about 280, and USA Today had close to 800. All these articles discussed the November 2015 attacks in Paris, but some of them were only short reports about those attacks. The media also reported the speech delivered by Secretary of State, John Kerry, in his press statement about the attacks. He highlighted the fact that these attacks were "heinous, evil, vile acts" [30]; he reaffirmed to the public that America would do everything in its power to join forces with France in fighting back against this "immoral villain." Kerry went on to mention that America and France were united and that these terrorist attacks only made them closer [30].

The most recent major terrorist incident to occur in France was the 2016 Nice attack. This attack involved a truck driving through a crowd of people as they were celebrating Bastille Day in Nice on July 14th, 2016. With 86 dead and 202 more injured [19], this event will go down in history as a serious attack. The New York Times released 130 articles about the attack, The Washington Post had about 200 and USA Today had 140 or so. All of these published pieces range from articles detailing the truck attack to articles discussing speculation on which vile organization was behind this act of terror.

News about terrorist attacks in Nigeria

In recent years, the first major terrorist act to occur in Nigeria was the bombing of a UN compound in the city of Abuja, the capital of Nigeria, usually called 2011 Abuja United Nations bombing. In regards to the car bombing of the UN compound to the hostile takeover of a major city that arguably killed thousands and displaced many more [31], The New York Times only published 26 articles. The Washington Post published 12 articles on that terrorist incident, and USA Today released nine reports on it. Regarding the 2014 Chibok schoolgirls kidnapping, where 250 schoolgirls from Chibok were kidnapped by Boko Haram, took place [25], The New York Times only published 121 articles. The Washington Post only published 70 articles and USA Today only had 74. Those abductions occurred one to two years before the aforementioned terrorist attacks in France. Yet, they have seen much less coverage in the media.

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was quoted saying, during his speech in Nigeria, that "the terrorist group Boko Haram has killed more than 20,000 people, displaced more than two million, and flung some seven million Nigerians into hunger, thirst, and desperate need" (p. 7). It is safe to presume that the large killing of innocents would attract the media into

reporting on the incident, but it is just not happening. In regards to the Baga massacre in January 2015, The New York Times only published six whole articles. The Washington Post did slightly better, with 26 articles on the Baga Massacre. Lastly, USA Today only did 16 articles on the Baga Massacre. These articles are also framed in such a way that they only state the a few hard facts. There was no deeper interpretation to them.

Conclusions

Given these circumstances, several conclusions can be drawn. Agenda-Setting Theory postulates that “the more the media cover certain issues, the more salient (i.e., noticeable, accessible, and significant) these issues become for the audience” [8]. In this case, the U.S. media has been over-reporting terrorist events in France, while under-reporting terrorist events in Nigeria. While both countries face multiple threats, France receives more publicity than Nigeria on a daily basis. Just a simple article search on the three U.S. news websites has revealed that keywords such as “ISIS” and “France” supply thousands of results, while keywords such as “Boko Haram” and “Nigeria” receive a couple hundred, if not a few dozens. The results of this study also corroborate previous studies that found that U.S. news reports on terrorist attacks in the West gain more widespread media coverage and attention [32,33].

Evidence of over-reporting and under-reporting of these terrorist incidents speaks volumes about the power of Agenda-Setting Theory in the U.S. media because, ultimately, this shapes public perception of the threat that international terrorism poses to innocent people in the West. One hypothesis about this “over-reporting vs. under-reporting” of news is that most newspapers, television stations, and websites are profit-oriented [34]. Indeed, terrorist events that occur within Western civilization gain more views because they are more likely to generate more revenue [5]. On the other hand, attacks in Nigeria have a stigma that they cannot affect the average American’s way of life, so media coverage of such incidents would not generate much profit.

Although this analysis has revealed that U.S. media sources run articles on terrorist attacks in France more often than in Nigeria, can it be demonstrated that this affects public perceptions of the public at large? There seems to be one other way of observing the over-reporting or under-reporting of certain terror attacks. This method would consist of examining the immigration policies that the U.S. takes after the attack. After the multiple terrorist attacks in France, support for refugees, specifically Arabs and Muslims, began to fade. This can be seen in many of the Western countries around the globe.

Discussion and Future Directions

After identifying the quantity of coverage from the news sites of *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today* of those six terrorist attacks that took place between 2011 and 2016, it is safe to assume that Agenda-Setting Theory

is still relevant in the U.S. media today. A significant portion of the U.S. media establishment has an agenda that affects the perceptions and beliefs of the American public at large. Post-9/11 discourses on terrorism have been mostly centered on Western civilization (i.e., mostly North America and Europe), not Africa [4]. Furthermore, as explained by Wahutu (in press), there is a conventional wisdom in some circles of the U.S. media establishment that, because terrorism in Africa is the norm, it does not deserve significant media coverage [35]. This is why the authors of this analysis believe that a better balance of U.S. news coverage of terrorist attacks in the West and Africa should be achieved so the U.S. public is better informed and form a more even-handed opinion.

For future research, it might be useful to examine the effects of Agenda-Setting Theory on terrorism-related news in the U.S. media during the Trump presidency. As such, it can be assumed that the election of Donald Trump in the U.S. will affect public opinion and increase attention shifted towards Middle-Eastern terrorist attacks on both U.S. and European soil. According to Das, Bushman, et al. “news reports about terrorism would remind people of their own mortality, which in turn, would increase prejudiced attitude” (p. 458) [36]. In relation to Agenda-Setting Theory, Das et al. also found that news is an important assessment benchmark that shapes public reality [36-38]. People shape their world perception around what the news tells them.

In regards to the terrorist attacks in Nigeria by Boko Haram, there is little to no discussion about these attacks. This, in turn, creates lower salience in the public. With the election of Donald Trump in 2016, one of Trump’s first proposed Executive Orders was to ban immigration and travel of citizens from seven Muslim-majority countries for at least ninety days. The countries were Iraq, Syria, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, and Yemen. ISIS holds large portions of land in Iraq and Syria. Hence, this ban is understandable in that aspect, but what about Nigeria and Boko Haram? Boko Haram has gained large amounts of territories in the recent years, especially with the massacre at Baga. Therefore, why was Nigeria left out of the ban?

There are many answers to this question, but one of them may possibly be that a large segment of the U.S. population does not sufficiently see Boko Haram and Nigeria in the news, thereby not recognizing them as a threat to their own livelihoods. The three newspaper outlets examined in this paper displayed an agenda when it came to reporting news stories in France as opposed to Nigeria. It is the authors’ beliefs that they are representative of the mainstream U.S. media establishment. This could lead the U.S. public to push for both hard intervention and soft intervention, respectively, in these two countries.

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