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Fourth estate follies

Trawling through the dustbins of the UK media

Daily Mail reverts to type as media makes sense of Paris atrocities

November 20, 2015 1.41pm GMT



Most journalists covering the Paris attacks have shown great skill and sensitivity. Reuters/Jacky Naegelen

You can trust the Daily Mail to lead the race to the bottom and its coverage of the Paris terror attacks was no different. On November 17, while the world was still reeling from the atrocity in which 129 people died and hundreds more were injured, the paper carried a cartoon featuring imagery sickeningly evocative of 1930s anti-Jewish Nazi propaganda.

In the cartoon, a headless man in “traditional” Islamic clothing is depicted carrying a prayer mat while a crowd of blackened out figures, including a woman in a hijab and man carrying a rifle, walk en masse past a knee-high sign that reads: “open borders”, “the free movement of people” and “Welcome to Europe”.

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These are unpeople, there are no faces depicted – just exaggerated visages and stock signifiers. It's completely lacking in humanity – surely intended to provoke fear with its potency compounded by the fact that, as the Huffington Post observes: “all the while rats scurry between the immigrants' feet”.



A new low: Daily Mail links terror attacks to refugees. Daily Mail

As Emma Briant pointed out here, it was wearily predictable that some would hijack the tragedy to further anti-immigration agendas and in many ways the Mail is doing what the Mail has always done. You would have thought, given the Mail's history of support for Adolf Hitler and Oswald Mosley's blackshirt movement in pre-war Britain, they'd be a little more careful.

These days, linking terrorism, asylum and immigration is its traditional pastime enjoyed on a frequent basis. I thought a nadir had been reached in 2007, when in the aftermath of London bombings, a series of inflammatory articles seemed to peak with this front page effort:



How the Daily Mail saw the July 7 bombings.
Daily Mail

But the Mail always seems to be able to push things that little bit further into the realms of poor taste and nastiness. It's little wonder that a petition of objection has been raised by online pressure group, 38 degrees. The group advocates submitting a complaint about the cartoon to the Independent Press Standards Organisation (IPSO).

Well, good luck to them – but they ought to note that – as was the case with the “toothless” Press Complaints Commission – the Daily Mail’s editor, Paul Dacre, is chairman of IPSO’s Editors’ Code Committee.

Eager to criticise

Thankfully, such shameless vilification has not been a dominating feature of the media coverage. It's been impressive to note the professionalism and industry of media workers able to respond so rapidly and coherently to horrific events. In times like these we look to our journalists to articulate and describe events which leave us in shock - and it's this ability, I think, in an age where we are ever eager to criticise, which is taken for granted. We want and expect journalists to react and contextualise and broadly speaking we have seen some excellently assembled narratives composed under very difficult conditions.

But if there is one unifying theme to the extensive attention in general it is the way in which the outrage and grief of France has become the outrage and grief of the UK.

What happened in Paris could have so easily happened here. The murders occurred at a concert hall, in cafes and restaurants and at a football stadium. These are familiar locations with which we can identify. We can easily transpose ourselves into the same scenario. Add to this too the UK's history in dealing with terrorism and our geographical and cultural proximity to France, and it might be easier to understand why there has been what some critics refer to as “disproportionate” coverage.

The theme of disproportionate coverage was raised by Jeremy Corbyn in an interview with Lorraine Kelly on ITV's This Morning. While expressing his disgust at what happened in Paris he said that the recent atrocities in Ankara and Beirut unfortunately got little publicity: “I think our media” said Corbyn, “needs to be able to report things that happen outside of Europe as well as inside. A life is a life.”

A valid point to be sure – but to find the reasons why the Paris murders got more attention than comparable terrorist acts elsewhere in the world it's helpful to consider a study into news values produced 50 years ago.

In 1965 Johan Galtung and Marie Holmboe Ruge hypothesised that how much prominence a news story was given was governed by 12 factors. These included frequency, negativity, personalisation and

meaningfulness. If we consider meaningfulness alone, this relates to “cultural proximity” and the extent to which an audience identifies with a news item.



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"Tragedy hipsters" and the #alllivesmatter-ification of grief.
storify.com/JamilesLartey/... via @chanders

41 11:40 PM - Nov 15, 2015

61 people are talking about this

It is a fact that news stories about people who share the same traditions and practices receive more coverage than those involving people who do not. As Roy Greenslade recently wrote, it’s perhaps an unpalatable truth but people everywhere are more interested in “what happens to those who are closest to them”.

Click-driven coverage

An indication of how much people were interested in the events in Paris is provided by Liz Gerard of the excellent **SubScribe** website. Gerard examined the “most read” panels on Saturday’s newspaper websites and found:

Paris claims nine of the top ten slots in the Telegraph, eight in the FT, and seven in the Guardian. All five of the most-read stories on the Mirror site are about Paris ... In the Independent, four of the top five slots are occupied by coverage of the attacks.

According to **Martin Belam**, a journalist who has worked for the BBC, Guardian, Sony and the Daily Mirror, news about terrorism outside of Europe is being covered – but analytics are telling us we are not reading about them in great numbers. He wrote:

Search Google News and you will find pages and pages of reports of the attacks in Beirut. Pages and pages and pages ... To say that the media don’t cover terrorism attacks outside of Europe is a lie ... But as anyone working in the news will tell you, if you look at your analytics, people don’t read them very much.

This is the key issue – these analytics now drive journalism and the likelihood is if we don’t click on foreign stories the less and less we will see them appear. This is the market, this is the political economy of the mass media. What might this mean for our sense of world events is frightening to contemplate but we as an audience must take some responsibility for the news we receive.

Of course none of this will provide any succour at all to those victims of terror who experience violence in the areas of world where we have come to expect it. In the New York Times, **Anne Barnard**

wrote of the Beirut bombings last Thursday and the feeling among Lebanese commentators that “Arab lives mattered” less. She quoted, Elie Fares, a Lebanese doctor, who wrote on his blog:

When my people died, they did not send the world into mourning. Their death was but an irrelevant fleck along the international news cycle, something that happens in those parts of the world.

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