

Jihad and cross-cultural media: Osama bin Laden as reported in the Asian press

ABSTRACT

In southeast and east Asia, terrorism is not new. A number of the region's nations have had to deal with full scale insurgencies of their own. The region contains a heady mix of core US allies, fledgling democracies and an emerging superpower. Many of these countries were themselves being challenged by militant Islamists. To what extent have regional journalists been influenced by American ideas and definitions in its 'war on terror'? This article considers how Osama bin Laden's media event was reported in the English language press of five Asian states: China (an authoritarian non-sectarian state with a flickering Muslim insurgency); Malaysia (a democratic multicultural society with an Islamic majority); the Philippines (a democratic former US protectorate with a Muslim insurgency); Singapore (a one-party city state, which has been targeted by al Qaeda offshoots); and Thailand (a never colonised democracy with a restive Muslim majority).

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No-one except a dumb thief plays with the security of others and then believes he will be secure. Whereas thinking people, when disaster strikes, make their priority to look for its causes, in order to prevent it happening again.—*Osama bin Laden, speaking on the eve of the US elections (2004)*

Introduction

Osama bin Laden has been a lightning rod for what some call Jihad and others decry as terrorism. He uses the media as a battleground, pitching his small, multimodal, international organisation against

hierarchical, conventionally armed, capital centred nation states. In this way, al Qaeda's Twin Towers attack in New York was more effective as a globalised media spectacle, than as a military action with any strategic impact. Hidden from US special forces, Cruise missiles and Hellfire armed pilot-less air-craft, bin Laden seeks to make continuing political strikes by releasing televised speeches.

On 20 January 2006, al Jazeera broadcast a speech believed to have been recorded by bin Laden late the previous year. The broadcast created global news. But to what extent were journalists who wrote about bin Laden or reported reaction to him, impartial observers? Had they taken sides in the war of conflicting cultures and ideas?

In southeast and east Asia, terrorism is not new. A number of the region's nations have had to deal with full scale insurgencies of their own. The region contains a heady mix of core US allies, fledgling democracies and an emerging super power. Many of these countries were themselves being challenged by militant Islamists.

To what extent have regional journalists been influenced by American ideas and definitions in its 'war on terror'? This article considers how Osama bin Laden's media event was reported in the English language press of:

- *China*, an authoritarian non-sectarian state, with a flickering Muslim insurgency in its western provinces;
- *Malaysia*, a democratic multicultural society with an Islamic majority;
- *Philippines*, a democratic former US protectorate, with a Muslim insurgency;
- *Thailand*, a never colonised democracy with a restive Muslim minority; and
- *Singapore*, a one-party parliamentary city state, which has been targeted by al Qaeda offshoots.

Terrorism?

In the post Cold War period, Islam and in particular fundamentalist Islam, has been seen as a primary threat to US cultural and political dominance. (Huntington, 1996) Since no other state has the conventional military power to challenge the United States, asymmetrical warfare, frequently described as terrorism, has been adopted as the preferred mode of attack by violently anti-US groups such as al Qaeda.

Defeating such ‘terrorism’ was one of the Western intelligence community’s core objectives, according to the Director of the US Central Intelligence, Porter J. Goss. Goss told the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence that ‘widely dispersed terrorist networks will present one of the most serious challenges to US national security interests at home and abroad’ (Goss, 2005).

But what defines terrorism, so that it might be identified and presumably defeated?

The European Union considered that terrorist acts usually damaged the physical or psychological integrity of individuals or groups, their property or their freedom, in the same way that ordinary offences did. However, in a discussion paper, EU officials considered terrorist offences went further; by undermining the very structures, which might underpin individuals’ rights.

Terrorist offences can be defined as offences intentionally committed by an individual or a group against one or more countries, their institutions or people, with the aim of intimidating them and seriously altering or destroying the political, economic, or social structures of a country. The implication is that legal rights affected by this kind of offence are not the same as legal rights affected by common offences. The reasoning here is that the motivation of the offender is different, even though terrorist offences can usually be equated in terms of their practical effect with ordinary criminal offences and, consequently, other legal rights are also affected. (EC, 2001)

While such a definition might include bin Laden’s activities, it might also implicate the Coalition of the Willing, whose invasion of Iraq destroyed political, economic and social structures in the name of the ‘war against terrorism’. Terrorism might be broadly construed as the unconventional use of violence against civilians for political gain. But the pejorative and selective identification of ‘terrorists’ in the press could be seen to be politically charged. The very use of the term ‘terrorist’ may indicate pro-Western assumptions by reporters. Indeed in the United States, journalists attempts to describe ‘terrorism’ as acts of violence rather than stereotype people as ‘terrorists’ was seen by some Americans as unpatriotic. Minnesotans against Terrorism, a lobby group, which included the state governor, condemned the Minneapolis *Star Tribune* for avoiding the term ‘terrorism’ because it believed other terms might be less judgmental and less precise. (Schlechter, 2003, p. 118)

At the risk of insulting the Sultans of the so-called fourth estate, let us dispassionately try to zero in on what could safely be called the four maladies evident in the [US] mass media's coverage of the slugfest between 'patriotic, freedom loving and determined' Texan George Bush and an 'evil, barbaric, and fanatic' Arab Osama bin Laden. The four maladies are as follows: hysteria, paranoia, amnesia and myopia—and there have been many honourable exceptions. (Schlechter, 2003, p. 113)

In *Beyond the Front Lines*, Philip Seib cited research, which indicated the US public wanted patriotism, laced with objectivity. US press coverage of the war of terrorism should be pro-American but strangely also should be reported from a neutral viewpoint. Seib (2004, p. 78) argued that the public deserved to be able to examine such issues from varied perspectives. They should do more than conform to 'the dominant political position of the moment':

The word 'terrorism' signifies evil. But words matter and so does the way in which the news media describe acts of terrorism and those who commit them. Terrorism needs explaining; it means more than the mindless fury that has no comprehensible rationale behind it. For some, it is a legitimate tool of war, just as a battalion of tanks is, to be used when it appears to be the best weapon available. The troops of terrorism, suicidal or not, may be deployed as part of a larger strategy with defined goals. To dismiss all acts as and perpetrators of terrorism as irrational is to underestimate them, and when this characterisation, it may mislead the public. (Seib, 2004, pp. 32-33)

Media as a battleground

Were journalists active, if unwitting participants in the war for hearts and minds? In *War and the Media*, Thussu and Friedman argue 'the media constitute the spaces in which wars are fought and are the main ways in which populations (or audiences) experience the war. The argument here is not whether media promote or oppose particular conflicts but that they are the means by which contemporary conflicts are literally played out. This idea of media as battleground is related to two somewhat disconnected developments; the postmodernist critique of reality that foregrounds the impor-

tance of spectacle; and technological developments in which war has been increasingly technologised, informatised and mediated (Thussu & Friedman, 2003, p. 7):

Three key narratives concerning the role of the mainstream media in communicating conflict can be identified: as critical observer, publicist, and most recently, as battle ground, the surface upon which war is imagined and executed. The idea that journalists are impartial and independent monitors is cherished by many media professionals and liberal commentators. It assumes that correspondents are able and willing to shrug off ideological and organisational restrictions to keep a watchful eye on the activities of military combatants. It also implies that journalists are prepared to confront the arguments of powerful voices in government and the military that are responsible for both strategic and tactical decisions in a time of war. (Thussu & Friedman, 2003. p. 5)

They dismissed the notion that most journalists were ‘adversarial’ watchdogs on government policies, rather suggesting that correspondents were more likely to publicise and reinforce official sources upon which reporters depended. Certainly, this view coincides with the experience of the author who has noted this behaviour in a series of incidents, journal articles and papers (Knight, Nakano, 1999). Thussu and Friedman cited Chomsky’s propaganda theory, which said that journalists were drawn into a symbiotic relationship with powerful sources of information by economic necessity and a reciprocity of interests (Chomsky & Hermann, 1988, p. 18)

[Journalists]... say, quite correctly, ‘Nobody ever tells me what to write. I write anything I like. All this business about pressures and constraints is nonsense because I have never been under any pressure.’ Which is completely true, but the point is that they wouldn’t be there unless they had already demonstrated that nobody has to tell them what to write because they are going to say the right thing. If they had started at the metro desk.... and had pursued the wrong kind of stories, they would never have made it to the position where they can now say anything they like. (Chomsky, 2004, pp. 5-6)

Constructing Islam

In the case of international news, Edward Said’s arguments in *Orientalism*,

suggested that Western journalists' "truth" about Asia might merely be representations founded in someone else's fact, fiction and ultimately fantasy:

Every writer on the Orient (and this is true even of Homer) assumes some Oriental precedent, some previous knowledge of the Orient, to which he refers and on which he relies. Additionally, each work on the Orient affiliates itself with other works, with audiences, with institutions, with the Orient itself. (Said, 1978, p. 20)

Said examined the work of those who wrote, taught or researched the 'Orient', 'whether the person was an anthropologist, historian or philologist'.¹ The 'Orient', according to Said, was both a geographical and cultural entity. It was almost a European invention, and had since antiquity been a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. The 'Orient' derived from a confrontation of politics, economics, cultures and ultimately ideas that dated back beyond the fall of the Eastern Roman Empire and the sack of Christian Constantinople by Islamic armies in 1452. It had its genesis in the struggle between European and Asian powers and helped define notions of the 'West'.

As European peoples engaged in colonialism, the 'West' transcended mere geographic locations, transforming into an intellectual tradition as well as an expression of power. Orientalism, in Said's view, was intertwined with notions of Western superiority, which were used to justify colonial regimes in the 'Middle East', Africa and Asia.

Islam became the 'other'; mysterious, dangerous and anti-rational. In his doctoral dissertation, Nabil Oumais argued that the complex relationship between the media and the society and between the media and the state, played an important role in deciding what news to select, how Arabs and Muslims were presented, what themes were pursued and what language was deployed. There were three factors, which were largely responsible for the way in which Islam was constructed in the press:

The source-journalist interaction or the way in which journalists legitimised particular sources or 'authorised knowers' to be quoted, dominant Western cultural values, shaped in part by Christian and democratic notions which help construct and Islamic 'other' journalists' professional and personal ideologies, which include access, news

criteria, time, space, expertise and language skills—or lack of them. (Oumais, 2001, pp. 5-13)

It may be useful to examine these factors in relation to the way Western and southeast Asian journalists report ‘terrorism’. Do the reporters rely on ‘authorised’ knowers who reflect their national political and cultural assumptions? Do they construct Islam differently? What impact might their professional requirements frame their stories?

Reporting Osama

After a year-long silence, Osama bin Laden was heard again on the Qatar-based Arab network, al Jazeera, in January 2006. Al Jazeera broadcast a televised speech, which was said to have been recorded the previous December (al Jazeera, 2006).

The voice, attributed to Bin Laden and apparently addressing Americans, said: ‘The new operations of al Qaeda has not happened, not because we could not penetrate the security measures. It is being prepared and you’ll see it in your homeland very soon.’ But the voice on the tape, which appeared to be aimed at the American public, also offered a truce: ‘We do not mind establishing a long-term truce between us and you.’ (al Jazeera, 2006)

He said the war was raging in Iraq, and operations in Afghanistan were increasing. ‘The war is definitely going our way’, he was translated as saying. Bin Laden was said to be giving Americans the opportunity to achieve peace, stability and reconciliation.

‘We are a nation that Allah banned from lying and stabbing others in the back, hence both parties of the truce will enjoy stability and security to rebuild Iraq and Afghanistan, which were destroyed by war. ‘There is no problem in this solution, but it will prevent hundreds of billions from going to influential people and war lords in America— those who supported Bush’s electoral campaign—and from this, we can understand Bush and his gang’s insistence on continuing the war.’ (al Jazeera, 2006)

Methodology

To consider reportage of the speech, this study used the Dow Jones fulltext database, Factiva, which includes more than 10,000 publications worldwide. The search used the key words 'Osama' or 'bin Laden' for three months after and one month before the announcement. The use of the database allowed the study to screen and eliminate thousands of articles printed during the period. It focused on Factiva databases covering China, Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Hong Kong and the Philippines. In doing so, the study was mostly restricted to English-language press coverage, which served Asian elite and expatriate communities. The influence of this press varied from high in Singapore, where the New Straits Times group dominated to greater China where *People's Daily/China Daily* reflected central communist party thinking.

Clearly such a survey could not represent all Asian journalists' opinions or reportage. However, it can provide insights to press reportage in the region. Reaction to bin Laden's speech was swift. If he had really expected the United States to accept a truce, he would have been sadly disappointed.

CNN International reported a 'CIA official' who believed the tape was genuine. (CNN, 2006). Since the CIA was leading the hunt to eliminate bin Laden, it might be hard to imagine a more partisan commentator in this instance. CNN reported bin Laden as saying, 'plans for terror attacks are under way', while also offering a 'long-term truce' (CNN, 2006). Clearly bin Laden did not use the politically charged term 'terror' to describe his operations.

'The war against America and its allies will not be confined to Iraq,' the voice on the tape said, adding, 'Iraq has become a magnet for attracting and training talented fighters.' 'It's only a matter of time,' the voice said, referring to attacks. 'They are in the planning stages, and you will see them in the heart of your land as soon as the planning is complete.' (CNN, 2006)

However, CNN's quotes did not appear to be exactly what bin Laden said, which according to the BBC transcript was 'reality testifies that the war against America and its allies has not remained confined to Iraq, as he [George Bush] claims' (BBC, 2006). CNN's use of the word 'will' would seem to incorrectly refer to a further threat. CNN referred to 'talented fighters'. A BBC transcript of the speech said 'in fact, Iraq has become a point of

attraction and recruitment of qualified resources”. CNN referred to ‘attacks’, while the BBC transcript quoted ‘operations’.

While the CNN report appeared to be related to what bin Laden actually said, large sections of his speech were ignored. These included:

- Claims about the psychological breakdowns among American troops
- References to the torture of prisoners at Abu Graib and Guantanamo Bay prisons
- Description of George Bush as ‘the butcher of freedom’
- Claims that there were ‘no significant differences’ between Saddam and the US in Iraq
- Description of November 11 as ‘revenge’ for previous attacks on Muslims.

CNN International could be seen to operating well within a frame of American interests. The network privileged an unnamed US intelligence source as its best choice ‘authorised knower’. Quotes were presented which emphasised threats to America and its allies. The restricted length of television news reports resulted in a tight focus on these approaches, while much of the information, which underpinned bin Laden’s arguments were deleted.

Rupert Murdoch’s US-based Fox News seemed to ignore the arguments altogether. It claimed without apparent evidence that bin Laden had been quoting the US ‘far left’ telling them they were on the same side. Fox news’ John Gibson linked US domestic critics of the war in Iraq with al Qaeda. ‘That is why these sort of people don’t run the US government and never will,’ he said.

Gibson said: ‘No truce, Usama [sic].’

Bin Laden told us Thursday that our far left has been working for him. It’s their poll results he quotes. Bin Laden told us that our secret wire-tapping program is something we should keep up. He’s got people here already and he’s got more coming and they are planning to blow us up. In the War on Terror, a bin Laden tape is the far left’s worst nightmare because it reminds Americans the war is real. (Gibson, 2006)

Bin Laden made no reference to American political factions in the full transcript of his speech. (BBC, 2006) He did however refer to American opinion polls, which ‘which reveal that the majority of your people are willing to

withdraw US forces from Iraq'. The speech quoted on al Jazeera made no reference to wiretapping. Al Jazeera did not refer to bombs, rather indicating that further unspecified 'new operations' were planned (al Jazeera, 2006). A BBC transcript however quoted references to 'bombings' in European cities, with the added warning that 'similar operations' would occur in America (BBC, 2006).

Gibson's comments indicating that he personally could be a target (blow us up) appeared to be rooted in fantasy rather than analysis. Fox TV style, which featured commentators demeaning and hectoring perceived opponents of conservative American interests, may have contributed to the hysterical nature of the report. Nevertheless, he was explicitly proclaiming Western cultural and political values. (That is if one assumed that US and Western interests and values were identical).

China

China deployed a 'one country; two systems' policy which permitted a Western style 'free press' in Hong Kong while retaining strict controls on the mainland. This resulted in two different approaches to reporting bin Laden.

China Daily referred to 'counter-terrorism' in a report on a meeting between US Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick and Premier Wen Jiabao. Zoellick '...told reporters he had touched on a broad range of bilateral and international issues with Chinese officials, including economy, security and international counter-terrorism'. (Tian, 2006) However, there appeared to be no reference to the bin Laden speech in *China Daily's* Beijing edition. The Hong Kong edition of the official *China Daily*, reported on 24 January that bin Laden's mention of a US book during his speech had turned the book *Rogue State* by William Blum into a best seller (*China Daily*, 2006). Bin Laden was not quoted directly and the original speech was not reported.

The Taiwanese *Chinese Central News Agency* carried a two-sentence report on the bin Laden tape, warning of attacks on the US as well as a long-term truce. The story was sourced to the *Washington Post* (Chang, 2006). In a slightly longer report, the agency acknowledged that the bin Laden tape had been initially broadcast on al Jazeera. This story was however sourced to the *New York Times* (Lin, 2006). The agency did not refer to Chinese sources nor did it carry official Chinese reaction. It should be noted that it relied on American sources in this instance, even though it had 35 overseas offices from

which to file stories. Free speech, practised in China's Special Administrative Region of Hong Kong, allowed journalists to adopt open support for the US response to the speech.

The independent broadsheet daily *South China Morning Post* carried a more comprehensive review of Blum's books (Ramsay, 2006). It also failed to report the original speech. Further, it used the term 'terrorist' in a report, which unambiguously sided with the US and its allies. The report dismissed the bin Laden speech as 'audacious as it was insincere and deluded'. The SCMP opined that bin Laden had 'not lost his flair for delivering the political and media coup that thumbs a nose at his pursuers' (SCMP 22 January 2006). In a subsequent article, Hagai Segal, wrote that al Qaeda had been in decline since it lost its Afghan bases and Taliban support:

This latest tape is thus part of a strategy to create an alternate perception—al Qaeda's latest psychological ploy. In recent years it has adeptly manipulated our mass media to ensure that, despite its operational limitations, it remains a constant in our thoughts. Al Qaeda now understands that if it kills ten people in Iraq it will likely receive little or no coverage, but that if it records the attack, the video will lead the TV news that night. And when there are no al Qaeda attacks, another tape appears on al Jazeera to return them to our front pages and ensure hours of over-analysis on 24-hour news television. (Segal, 2006)

The *Post* described Segal as a 'terrorism and Middle East specialist...[lecturing at] New York University in London'. It did not acknowledge Segal's work as UK coordinator of the World Zionist Organisation (Hagshama, 2001), a partisan position that would seem likely to shape his perspectives on Middle East issues.

Malaysia

Malaysia espouses development journalism, investing its government with strong powers over the press. According to the US-based press freedom monitor, Freedom House, the Malaysian 'constitution permits limitations on freedom of expression, and the government imposes them in practice, ostensibly to protect national security and public order' (Freedom House, 2005a).

A search of *Bernama Daily Malaysia News*, *New Straits Times*, the *New*

Sunday Times, the *Sunday Mail*, the *Edge Financial Daily*, the *Sun* and the *Malay*, revealed no reports of bin Laden's speech.

Clues to why this occurred may be found in another speech, delivered by the Malaysian Prime Minister, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, at the international conference 'Who speaks for Islam? Who speaks for the West?' in Kuala Lumpur. Echoing Edward Said, Badawi said that Muslims were seen as 'congenital' terrorists by many in the West who thought that bin Laden spoke for the religion and its followers. Adopting a more even-handed approach than often seen elsewhere, he said that there were 'certain voices' which did no justice to Islam of the West:

...in the case of Islam, those who deliberately kill non-combatants and the innocent; those who oppress and exploit others; those who are corrupt and greedy; those who are chauvinistic and communal, do not speak on behalf of Islam. In the case of the West, I do not regard as defenders of Western civilisation those who invade and occupy someone else's land; those who systematically cause innocent children, women and men to be killed; those who oppress other people and exploit their resources for their own selfish ends; or those who are racist in outlook and bigoted in their religious beliefs. Anyone who seeks to dominate and control, who attempts to establish global hegemony, cannot claim to be spreading freedom and equality at the same time. (*Straits Times*, 2006)

Badawi was proselytizing Islam Hadhari, which he said was a modern way of practising Islam, which was 'firmly rooted in the noble values and injunctions of Islam'. Malaysia had observed inter-faith co-existence for decades, he said. It was a multiracial country, which treated diversity as an asset.

There are many in the West ... who realise that the exercise of hegemonic power and the demonisation of Islam are not conducive to inter-civilisational peace. It is these voices that the world should listen to. Likewise, there are numerous groups and individuals in the Muslim world who are deeply distressed by the violence and terror perpetrated by certain fringe groups within the ummah, just as they are equally uncomfortable with the sweeping denunciations of Christians, Jews and the West. They do oppose hegemony and occupation but their words are authentic voices of Islam. (*Straits Times*, 2006)

It was clear that Prime Minister Badawi thought bin Laden did not speak for Malaysia. The Malaysian press appeared to reflect this view.

The Philippines

Philippines press freedom, exercised by a diverse and active press, was enshrined in the nation's constitution (Freedom House, 2005 b) However, such freedoms have been qualified by presidential interventions and individual assassinations of journalists.

Four major Philippines newspapers, the *Manila Bulletin*, the *Manila Times*, the *Manila Standard* and *Business World* were surveyed for their coverage of the bin Laden speech. None were found to have directly reported the speech. Those that did report the speech's impact saw it as a business story.

The *Bulletin*, one of the Philippines leading daily newspapers reported the speech in passing, in a story on oil price rises. It referred to 'al Qaeda filled jitters' among investors. 'The United States rejected a truce offer purportedly from al Qaeda chief Osama bin Laden, made in an audiotape broadcast Thursday over al Jazeera television, despite a threat of more attacks on its soil (*Manila Bulletin*, 2006a) In a second story on international markets, the *Bulletin* quoted an equity trader, Evan Olsen, who commented on oil prices rising 'with bin Laden acting up' (*Manila Bulletin*, 2006b).

Singapore

The Singaporean Press reacted very cautiously and in a limited way to the bin Laden speech. Terrorism was a sensitive issue in the city-state, which itself had been subject to attacks by al Qaeda affiliated groups. Singapore, like Malaysia, practised development journalism, which was said to 'play a central role in disseminating governmental or national policies to inform and educate the masses as well as mobilise them for the concerted effort at bringing about economic development' (Wong, 2004, p. 2).

The Singapore-based TV channel, News Asia, reported the White House dismissed the bin Laden speech as 'just another piece of propaganda'. The channel led with comments by White House spokesman, Scott McClennan, followed by remarks by US Vice-President, Dick Cheney. Bin Laden was relegated to the third source quoted, and then only indirectly quoted:

In the tape, Osama offered what he called a truce directly to the American people. But at the same time he warned of new terrorist plots now underway. Whether those threats are true is impossible to predict. But many analysts believe the real reason Osama bin Laden has released this tape is not to show the continued power of al Qaeda but rather to convince his followers that he's still in charge. (Channel News Asia, 2006)

Part of the Singaporean broadcasting and publishing group, Mediacorp, Channel News Asia, described itself as providing 'news and information on global developments with Asian perspectives'. Viewers were overloaded with information, its mission statement said:

Often, what they need is not just news, but understanding. Not just events of the moment, but issues, which affect their lives. Not just headlines, but bottom lines. Not just another perspective from a distance, but insights from the inside. With correspondents based in major cities throughout the region, Channel News Asia is created for Asians by Asians. (Mediacorp, 2006)

However, in this instance, the Asian-based news service adopted American terminology (terrorist plots) and American perspectives (the American people). The anonymous 'analysts' quoted in the report may be showing an Asian perspective, but one which privileged the views of the White House. The report lacked detail and was not contextualised. Under the circumstances, any insights provided, might be seen as limited.

Meanwhile, Mediacorp's free newspaper *Today* reported that al Qaeda was 'preparing new attacks against the USA'. The Singapore newspaper used a direct quote, attributed to bin Laden, high up in the article. However, it also quoted anonymous sources within the CIA, US anti-terrorism officials, and US spokesman, Scott Mc McLennan and US Vice President, Dick Cheney. The *Today* article was sourced to *The Guardian* and *Agence France-Presse* (*Today*, 2006).

Agence France-Presse reported on 21 January, that the Singaporean government saw fighting terrorism as a long-term challenge. Singapore was a 'staunch US ally in the global effort against terrorism' and was regarded as 'prime target', AFP said:

‘The audio tape reminds us that although much has been done in counter-terrorism, the threat of terrorism continues to be a significant challenge, which needs to be addressed for likely a long time still,’ the Ministry for Home Affairs said in a statement late Friday. The statement was in response to an AFP query. (AFP, 2006)

The city state’s leading newspaper, the *Straits Times* did not appear to cover the bin Laden speech or the response to it by the Singaporean Home Affairs Ministry. Instead the *Straits Times* quoted the Home Affairs Minister, Wong Kan Seng, on 22 January, on how Singaporean police were learning to strike a balance between ‘law and order’ and ‘society changes’. The minister admitted that police ‘may have overreacted’ when they cautioned students against wearing fund raising T-shirts at a railway station opening. The police had warned that wearing T-shirts en masse may have been misconstrued by some as an offence (*Straits Times*, 2006)

Thailand

Thailand exercises qualified free speech. Strong constitutional protections for freedom of expression were balanced by laws that enabled the government to restrict this right in order to preserve national security, maintain public order, or prevent insults to the royal family or Buddhism (Freedom House, 2005b).

Bangkok’s *Nation*, carried a more comprehensive report of the speech, contained in an editorial which used direct quotes and which considered bin Laden’s words. Describing bin Laden as ‘America’s, and probably the world’s, most wanted man’, the *Nation* said that he appeared to be ‘making his argument in a more measured and reasoned tone rather than relying on his usual radical rhetoric’ (*Nation*, 2006). It conceded that some of bin Laden’s assertions, about the unequal division of oil riches, on Israel’s influence on Washington and about ‘corrupt and brutal’ Arab rulers could not easily be brushed aside.

But the *Nation* asked whether peace could result from bin Laden’s call:

The short answer is no. Not because the al Qaeda leader is a ‘mad mullah’, or an ‘evil monster’ as he is portrayed by the White House. It is because he stands for nothing but struggle against Western interference and ultimately death for all, including himself. He has no vision

for the Muslim world except for the construction of another medieval Taliban-style society of oppression. (*Nation*, 2006)

The *Nation* described bin Laden as little more than ‘an image’. ‘He is at one and the same time a devil and a saviour, a bringer of destruction and just retribution, depending on where you live and how you view the world,’ the *Nation* said.

He is also an eloquent preacher, a teacher of literature and a cunning, well-informed politician. The one thing he is not is a nation-builder. Crucially, he also has nothing to offer his foes. His followers take inspiration from him but little else. He is little more than a symbol of anger and destruction. (*Nation*, 2006)

The *Bangkok Post* appeared to ignore the speech, while referring to bin Laden in the context of Muslim unrest in southern Thailand. The *Post* noted that, ‘militants set fires at 26 locations ... and launched attacks that killed a policeman and injured two teachers and three soldiers’. It was said that security forces found a sticker of Osama bin Laden’s terror network’ in front of a house in one of the troubled areas (*Bangkok Post*, 2006a). The Thai News Service relayed the story (TNS, 2006).

The *Post* further reported that it was only a matter of time before al Qaeda used ‘weapons of mass destruction’. Its source was Henry Crumpton, the US State Department coordinator for counter-terrorism, as reported by Britain’s *Daily Telegraph* newspaper. ‘Fears terror groups could acquire WMD from so-called rogue states like Iran or Syria were behind Washington’s determination to face down Teheran over its nuclear programme,’ the US official was quoted as saying (*Bangkok Post*, 2006b)

The Thai News Service reported a spike in Thai oil prices resulting from ‘terrorism concerns, after bin Laden came out threatening the US’ (TNS, 2006b).

Discussion

Osama bin Laden seemed to be as hard to find on the Factiva database as he has proved to be in real life. Where he was located, bin Laden was more reported upon than quoted. This should not be surprising. A study I conducted

of reportage of the similarly unpopular Khmer Rouge in Cambodia in 1993 showed that they were frequently written about but rarely if ever used as a source. It was true that the Khmer Rouge, like bin Laden, were not frequently holding news conferences, issuing media releases or offering confidential briefings to favoured reporters. But their unreported views were freely available in translations of their radio broadcasts. These views were not used by the Australian correspondents I studied at that time.

However, what journalists and their publications choose not to report can reveal a little about their assumptions and influences. Much of the surveyed Asian press ignored the bin Laden speech, or distorted or severely edited it when they chose to do so.

Were they responding to a White House call made in 2001, urging journalists not to promulgate bin Laden's speeches? White House spokesman, Ari Fleischer, was quoted then as saying, 'At best, Osama bin Laden's messages are propaganda calling on people to kill Americans. At worst, he could be issuing orders to his followers to initiate such attacks' (CNN, 2001). The White House call related to replaying his televised speeches. But why should Asian print journalists try to stop the spread of coded messages, if only because a full transcript was available on the BBC website, courtesy of the former intelligence translation centre at Caversham? (BBC 2006)

Perhaps one might expect the US media to act in a partisan way, irrespective of Seib's hope that they should not merely present 'the dominant political position of the moment'. As News Corporation's Rupert Murdoch said in his response to the White House demands to censor bin Laden 'we'll do whatever is our patriotic duty' (CNN, 2001). It could be seen that Fox News and CNN reports were created with Washington's perspectives in clear view.

However, much of the press examined in Singapore, Hong Kong, and the Philippines used 'terrorist' in the pejorative sense and also identified with US responses. They frequently used American sources, particularly US intelligence sources, which were *the* front line combatants in America's media war on terror. Other sources, including transcripts were available on the world wide web. These were neglected.

Perhaps some journalists, by privileging partisan American sources, were acting on behalf of Washington, without, as Chomsky suggested, having to be told what to do. In doing so, they ceased being balanced reporters and became minor participants in the media war described by Thussu and Friedman.

In the newspapers surveyed:

Mainland China took a minimalist approach to reporting bin Laden's speech. The Taiwanese *China Central News Agency* quoted American papers while the *South China Morning Post* quoted a Zionist activist as an 'authorised knower' without acknowledging his relevant connections.

In Malaysia, the government seemed more interested in redefining contemporary Islam and thereby diminishing bin Laden's influence. Prime Minister Badawi was attempting to overcome Western media, which Edward Said believed often distorted relations with Islamic countries. Badawi's balanced view was promulgated with only passing reference to bin Laden's extremism which otherwise seemed to go unreported.

Perhaps the most thoughtful report was that produced by Thailand's *Nation* newspaper. The *Nation* quoted bin Laden directly, but did not endorse him. It argued that stereotyping bin Laden as a 'mad mullah' was not the answer to al Qaeda. As Seib observed, to call the perpetrators 'irrational' was to underestimate them. The *Nation* used logic and arguments to dissect bin Laden's speech and then dismissed it.

It was clear that many journalists throughout the region had implicitly endorsed 'dominant' Western values or had been influenced by American ideas and definitions in its 'war of terror'. Many newspapers sought to neutralise bin Laden's media sally by not reporting on it all. In doing so, they failed to give their readers the right to judge the causes of the disaster called 'terrorism'.

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