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## Commentary

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# ‘Māori terror threat’: The dangers of the post-9/11 narrative

### ABSTRACT

The dominant narrative surrounding terrorism across the globe is a post-9/11 one. Whether explicitly or not, reporting on terrorism is at the very least strongly informed by the 11 September 2001 attacks and the response to them. And this is so even when, as in New Zealand’s case, the facts on the ground do not fit those of 9/11. In this commentary, I use American reporting on terrorism after September 11 to pick a path through the emerging story of the 15 October 2007 police raids in New Zealand. I argue that not only does the American experience offer important insights into some of the risks associated with reporting on terrorism, it helps explain the narratives at work in New Zealand media coverage. Our own story has already adopted some of the more potent and insidious features of the post-9/11 pattern. Here I will focus on three: (1) terrorism as super-news, (2) terrorism as good vs evil (and ‘us vs them’), and (3) the dangers of ‘the political-media complex’.

Keywords: anti-terror legislation, foreign news, news values, terrorism, war on terror

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**J**UST over two weeks after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States, the United Nations Security Council unanimously adopted Resolution 1373, which, in the words of the UN, ‘obliges all states to criminalise assistance for terrorist activities, deny financial support and safe haven to terrorists and share information about groups planning terrorist attacks’ (para. 1., Security Council, n.d.). A little more than a year later, on

19 October 2002, New Zealand's *Terrorism Suppression Act* came into force. (It has been tightened twice since then.) Almost five years to the day after that, on 15 October 2007, warrants citing the act were executed in several locations throughout New Zealand—the first time that piece of legislation had been so invoked.

This trail is one clear and direct link between what happened in New Zealand over the latter months of 2007 and what took place in the United States on 11 September.

But perhaps the more interesting and important links are those that are less clearly defined or easily traced, the kind that are shaping the story that is unfolding before us.

New Zealand has had little reason to use the term 'terrorism' in its recent history. The 'state terrorism' of the 1985 *Rainbow Warrior* bombing springs first to mind, along with the Trades Hall bombing in 1984 and, in the 1970s, at least four arson attacks on abortion facilities (the clinics in Auckland and Christchurch, and on the Auckland offices of the Sisters Overseas Service, which helped send women to Australia for abortions). As Smith (2003) points out, repressive measures have been invoked over the years to quell Māori as well as to crack down on strikers and protesters. These activities, though, were not considered 'terrorism', raising the intractable problem of how terrorism is to be defined. To some extent, that question has been lost in the post-9/11 turmoil, which turned terrorism into whatever we happen to call 'terrorism'. Indeed, Norris, Kern and Just (2003a, p. 6) argue that the concept is so 'contested, value-laden and open to multiple meanings' as to be at least in part 'in the eye of the beholder'. I will touch on the issue of defining terrorism later. For now, it is enough to point out that mainstream usage of 'terrorism' in a domestic context had been largely absent from our national story, as most certainly has the post-9/11 conception of it, which is the conception I am discussing here.

Kellner (2004, p. 59) argues, perhaps tautologically, that complicated events are over determined 'and require multicausal analyses'. That is undeniably the case with respect to both 9/11 and its aftermath, which grow ever more complex as the conflicts that followed the attacks have widened and more attacks have taken place, among them the bombings in Bali (2002), Madrid (2004), London (2005), and Mumbai (2006). I certainly do not intend to wade into the swamp of theories about 'why' 9/11. Instead, I want to focus

on three important parts of the news narrative that emerged from post-9/11 coverage in the United States. The analysis that follows is drawn primarily from journalistic and academic sources, but also from my own (obviously subjective) experience as a staff editor at *The New York Times* for 5½ years beginning a month after the attacks, where I worked mainly on the foreign desk.

The three topics I will focus on are: (1) terrorism as super-news, (2) terrorism as good vs evil (incorporating an 'us vs them' element), and (3) 'the political-media complex'. These topics, the first two of which might be classified as news media 'frames', were selected first for their ubiquity in the literature and in mainstream discussion forums like newspapers, journals, blogs and so on, and second for their influence on the situation in New Zealand. For, while the specific circumstances of alleged terrorist events might differ, the way that journalists report them 'is shaped by how similar events have been covered in the past and by the reporter's most trusted sources of information' (Norris et al., 2003a, p. 4). I hold that the influence of these frames and forces is evident in the evolving narrative surrounding the 15 October 2007 raids in New Zealand, and that that influence is likely to become more apparent as events unfold.

At the end of this commentary, I hope to have shown the significance of the 9/11 narrative with respect to New Zealand's situation, and the danger that comes with its unconscious adoption in our own reportage.

### **1. Terrorism as super news**

It is obvious but nevertheless necessary to point out that 9/11 imbued the term 'terror' and its variations with a terrible power. The media frenzy and Bush administration rhetoric of an epic struggle—a 'crusade' the president called it at one point—effectively ensured this new post-9/11 conception of terrorism became a kind of uber news value, one that fast-tracked virtually any terrorism story into the paper if not onto the front page. In the United States, coverage of terrorism jumped sevenfold after 9/11 and remained high relative to coverage before the attacks (Norris et al., 2003b, p. 290).

A local example of the super newsworthiness of terrorism is foreign news coverage of our own 'terror' story. As most of us know, New Zealand makes it into world news relatively rarely, especially if sport and travel stories are removed from the mix. But the 15 October raids were heavily reported across the globe, including in *The International Herald Tribune*, (Arrests force

New Zealand to confront an old issue); *The Times of London* (Arms cache discovered in secret Maori 'terror camps'); *Today* in Singapore (Anti-terror raids in NZ); *The National Post* in Canada (New Zealand police raid Maori terrorist training camp—17 arrested); the BBC (NZ Terror Raids; 17 Held); and so on. The coverage was so unprecedented that both NZPA ('Terrorists' make world headlines) and *The Press* (World media latch on to dawn raids) reported on the reporting. Interestingly, but also perhaps predictably, searches via the Factiva database and web pages of foreign news outlets cited above revealed no coverage of the 8 November 2007 rejection of terrorism prosecutions by New Zealand's Solicitor-General.

In the United States, the terrorism story became the *only* story for Americans and, because of America's global media dominance, for the world. At *The New York Times*, 'terror' raids or attacks taking place almost anywhere on the globe would make it into the newspaper and would almost always beat out things like drug raids (a previous US favourite in coverage of Latin America) or deaths by other means involving the same countries or numbers of suspects or victims, and that was even after the 'terror' events had become virtually commonplace. It is important to note here, though, that not all 'terrorism' snugly fits the new American paradigm. As Norris et al. argue (2003b, p. 288) certain factors help predict which terrorist events among all such events are considered most newsworthy, among them the number of deaths, the location, the type of event and whether or not the perpetrators were known. At *The New York Times*, location, (and with it, race or citizenship) seemed the factor most likely to trump the others. A comparison of two days' worth of *New York Times* coverage of the Mumbai train bombings on 11 July 2006, in which more than 200 people died, and the London underground bombings on 7 July 2005, which killed 52 people and four bombers, shows nearly 40 stories about or directly referring to the London attacks and five about the bombings in Mumbai.

'Terrorism' then, even if it is in Mumbai or New Zealand, is a guaranteed story—probably a sensational one—which in turn makes it a dangerous story. In their analysis of how the choice of words shapes perceptions of terrorism, Dunn, Moore and Nosek (2005) show that although there is widespread disagreement about how terrorism should be defined, nearly everyone agrees on its 'abhorrent moral character' (2005, p. 84). This coupled with their conclusions about the potent effect on attitude and

memory of attaching the label of terrorism to a nation or group reinforces the case that this is no ordinary word and no ordinary accusation, but one that has a life all its own: 'If news stories use words that activate the terrorism schema, then the action is more likely to receive moral condemnation, and moderate responses such as engaging in negotiation with the perpetrators may be seen as less acceptable' (Crenshaw, 1995, as cited in Dunn et al., 2005, p. 83).

One of the effects evident in the United States of attaching the label 'terrorist' to a person, a group, (even if you add the virtually useless caveats of 'suspected' or 'alleged') is that the old rules and protocols covering important matters like reliable sourcing and innocence until guilt is proven are at the very least pushed to the breaking point. This is perhaps most clear in the US government's voiding of legal protections for prisoners at the Guantánamo Bay camp; the allowance of renditions and of torture; the approval of increased state surveillance of civilians through wire tapping and so on. In the news media, which is my focus here, this has led to credulous and sensationalised reporting, dubious sourcing as well as an increased willingness to conduct trial by media. There was a lot of what journalists and editors call 'fudging' going on in post-9/11 coverage, especially with respect to stories that touched on whether or not a person or group had 'links' or 'ties' to Al Qaeda or on what constitutes a 'plot' (vis à vis 'terror plot')—even on just what 'Al Qaeda' is—a unified group, a loose affiliation of militants, growing, shrinking, reeling, reviving?

In New York in July 2006, wide coverage was given to what *The New York Daily News* headlined 'Tunnel bomb plot', of which *The Dominion Post's* giant 'Napalm blast' headline (Watt, 2007, p. A1) is rather reminiscent. In the New York plot, Jihadists apparently planned to flood lower Manhattan by blowing up the Holland Tunnel, which runs under the Hudson River. As Brian Montopoli, editor of the CBS News blog *Public Eye*, wrote at the time, the 'plot never went beyond emails, there was no credible link to Al Qaeda, and there was no specific mention of the Holland Tunnel' (Montopoli, 2006). But even setting all that aside, the 'plot' was clearly absurd: 'How does one flood Lower Manhattan via the Holland Tunnel, seeing as the island is above the level of the river,' Montopoli asked, adding: 'When people speak of bias in the press, they tend to talk about political bias, but the more serious bias is towards sensationalism, which tends to sell better.'

We have certainly seen comparable sensationalism here: just consider some of the local coverage. Besides 'Napalm blast', headlines included 'IRA-style war plan' (*The Dominion Post*, 17 October), 'Guerrillas in the mist test terror laws' (*The Dominion Post*, 17 October), 'Terrorist camps alleged, Weapons seized, Police arrest 17 in dawn raids' (*The Southland Times*, 16 October 2007), 'Arrest in city as part of terror sweep' (*Manawatu Standard*, 16 October 2007).

We have also seen the power of the narrative to scuttle usual practices. Perhaps the best example of this is the decision by *The Dominion Post*, *The Press* and *The Waikato Times* to publish excerpts from evidence police gathered during their investigation, even though that publication might well jeopardise the rights of those accused to a fair trial. *The Dominion Post* acknowledged that risk in justifying its decision, writing that 'those still facing firearms charges are entitled to a fair trial, but those trials are a year or more away', and going on to assert that revealing 'what police found relating to the terrorism charges they wished to lay ... will not influence those firearms cases. To help ensure that we removed the names from the material'. (More than empty talk, 2007). And all this under the headline 'The terrorism files' (Kitchin, 2007, p. A1).

As for sourcing, a look back at the coverage in the early days speaks for itself: '*It is understood police believed* [my emphasis] that each faction of those connected to the camps planned to hit targets specific to their own interests in coordinated attacks aimed at causing maximum chaos' (Watt, 2007); '*There were reports that a specific threat was made recently against Prime Minister Helen Clark*' (Watt, 2007); '*It is understood a top secret "O Desk" group met at the Beehive earlier this month to hear what was planned for today*' (Maori activists, 2007); '*It is understood police have video of military-style training*' (Maori activists, 2007); '"These guys are serious. They are talking of killing people," a source said.' (Maori activists, 2007); *The Sunday Star Times understands up to a dozen of the 17 arrested during Monday's raids ... attended a training camp in the Urewera region last weekend*' (Laugesen, 2007); '*The Star-Times ... understands the police have seized more than 20 guns, including AK-47s and other military-style semi-automatic rifles*' (Laugesen, 2007); and last, but not least, what appears to be a shift from first-hand sources of information in the intro, to anonymously sourced second hand information immediately thereafter: 'Tame Iti was preparing to declare an IRA-style war on

New Zealand in a bid to establish his long-standing dream of an independent Tuhoe nation, according to police documents. *A source close to The Dominion Post said the documents* disclosed by police to legal parties for the accused showed police had been monitoring Iti's movements for 18 months' (IRA-style, 2007). (The dubious sourcing from the Watt article and others was repeated across the Fairfax stable of papers; all emphases my own.)

In summary, what we have seen emerge when the uber-news value of post-9/11 terrorism is invoked, as it was during these raids, is a divisive and dangerous sensationalism that has more to do with an American story than with our own. When mapped on to the New Zealand experience—particularly with respect to race relations—that US-driven narrative has the power to wreak its own peculiar havoc.

## 2. Us vs Them

The primary post 9/11 terrorism narrative that emerged from the United States was, at least initially, a relatively simplistic one of good vs evil mapping onto an us vs them account (Kellner, 2004, p. 47; Eliot, 2004, p. 42). This narrative relies in large part on fear—a ubiquitous news value in its own right that is manifest in the media's well-documented penchant for reporting on crime (a trend detailed by McGregor, 2002; and Australian Press Council, 2006, ch. 4).

Terrorism is the new Communism (Thussu, 2006, p. 6), a shadowy unpredictable almost overwhelming threat that offers 'a new framing device for the media' (Hess & Kalb, 2003, p. 2). In post-9/11 America, that fear was almost palpable. But how real was it? Norris et al argue that post-9/11, it was the perceptions of the threat of world terrorism that changed more than the reality of actual terrorism. 'Systematic evidence provided by the US State Department indicates that in fact the actual dangers from international terrorism have fallen around the world, and indeed fallen substantially, during the last decade. Yet post 9/11, American fears of the risks of terrorism have sharply risen' (2003a, p. 4). They acknowledge this sense of fear in the United States is understandable (and they note that it is also not surprising 'given the general difficulty the public has in calculating risk'), but the fact of the matter is nevertheless important. It is also crucial to note that while not asserting a particular causal direction, the authors track a correlation between media coverage of terrorism and fear of it as expressed in opinion surveys (2003b,

p. 290). That this fear continues to be directed at 'the other' in the form of Muslims and the Arab world has also been widely canvassed in the literature (for example, Thussu, 2006; Kellner, 2004; Ismael and Measor, 2003).

Although Islamic terrorism was not a factor in the 15 October 2007 raids in New Zealand, I hold that Māori have clearly been cast as a kind of Arab 'other', giving our narrative its own *us vs them* twist.

Compared with foreign coverage, which frequently focused quite directly on the Māori-as-terrorist angle, (and often getting it completely wrong, as the *Guardian* did in a feature on November 6 when it reported that '17 Maori rights activists had been arrested on weapons and terrorism offences') the New Zealand media initially took a more cautious approach, clearly cognizant of the risks involved in turning the raids into a racial issue.

A survey of New Zealand newspaper headlines via Factiva of the first day's coverage of the raids shows that of 27 headlines resulting from a search of local sources for the keywords 'terror' or 'terrorism' or 'terrorist', nine included references to a group or identifiable race. Of those nine headlines, eight included identifiably Māori references, for example headlines that mentioned Tame Iti, Guerrillas in the mist, Tuhoe or, as the *Waikato Times* did, asserted a racial link outright (Maori activists targeted in police raids). One referred to Māori protesting against the anti-terror raids.

An image survey of *The Dominion Post* and *The New Zealand Herald* on the first and second days of coverage showed a fairly even-handed approach with respect to race. The preferred images in those first days were of threatening-looking armed police officers clad in black, their faces covered. But most of the location shots were of the raids in Tuhoe country, and like Television One, *The Dominion Post* could not resist the file image of Tame Iti shooting at a flag. Maori appeared in all the photographs of protesters and supporters of suspects in their court appearances in those first days. Since then Māori anger over their treatment during the raids, coverage of things like the Hiko in early November, statements by Māori Party leaders and supportive activists have continued to raise the profile of Māori with respect to the 15 October raids.

Part of the reason the American terrorism narrative of us vs them and good vs evil so quickly found its local counterpart in Māori was that it had a foundation in an already resident good vs evil, us vs them story. In 'Māori news is bad news', Ranginui Walker documents media treatment of Māori



from the early years of British colonial rule through to coverage of the Māori Loans Affairs and treatment of MP Tariana Turia, asserting that there is an 'ingrained opposition discourse toward Māori in the media' (Walker, 2002, p. 227). In a telling study that illustrates such anti-Māori framing, Tilley (2005) unpacks a *Dominion Post* article headlined 'Māori fish scams', showing how the article cast a particular incident as one that was indicative of widespread Māori wrong-doing.

Despite the best, or less than best, efforts by the mainstream media, Māori as New Zealand's resident 'other' are now firmly linked with New Zealand's first post-9/11 'terrorist'-related events, something that was quickly apparent in letters to the editor pages. Indeed, once the establishment media starts asserting that this *is not* and *should not* be a race issue, as *The Press* did in an editorial on October 20, one can be fairly sure that it *is* about race, and that it *should* be acknowledged as such.

### **3. 'The political-media complex'**

My final point is less one about the post-9/11 terrorism narrative itself, and more a cautionary tale that emerges from considering whose interests it might serve. (There is a body of literature investigating the symbiosis between media and terrorist—for example Frey and Rohner, 2003; Klopfenstein, 2006—but that is not a topic I will investigate here.) The title of this section, evoking as it does Eisenhower's warning against the military-industrial complex, is borrowed from a subheading in a paper by Matsaganis and Payne (2005) about the effects of 11 September on politics and journalism in the United States. Looking at the 2004 presidential campaign, the authors argue that the administration made use of the persuasive power of fear of terrorism to ensure that 'media and individuals would remain dependent on what seemed to be the most credible source of information, the government' (p. 389). This media dependency was fuelled in part by the hungry 24/7 cable news beast that dominates the American media landscape. On my account, that media dependency on (usually anonymous) administration sources is one of at least three aspects of the 'political-media complex'.

A second, related aspect is the extent to which the fear generated by the 9/11 attacks helped strengthen the apparatus of the state by, in part, hugely increasing the popularity of the incumbent president (see 'President Bush's approval ratings', 2007) and so paving the way for subsequent changes in legislation, foreign policy, government agencies and so on.

A third strand is the extent to which that same dynamic also strengthened the hand of the media, boosting the circulations of newspapers in the United States, albeit temporarily (Sutel, 2002), and strongly increasing television news viewership (Poindexter & Conway, 2003). In Britain, sales of *The Guardian* the day after the 7 July attacks were up 18 percent on the year before (Marriner, 2005), while in Australia most newspapers posted 'modest circulation growth' in the year after the attacks (Lawson & Gotting, 2002). This last strand is perhaps the weakest, since mainstream print media continue to suffer declines across the board that even terrorism seems unable to alleviate.

Together, these three parts of the political-media complex reveal a social space where the interests of the Fourth Estate and the state coincide. In our own case, the extent to which New Zealand has expanded its force of security and anti-terror personnel as well as its intelligence gathering hardware in response to 9/11 has been well documented by Nicky Hager (2007). He has suggested, as have others, that the very existence of such specialised forces is a driver behind police action against 'terrorist' targets. Unless safeguards are in place to ensure the methods and targets of extra forces are narrowly circumscribed, if you put more cops on the street you will find more crime.

As for media dependence on government for information, this seems less apparent in the New Zealand case than in the American one, perhaps because of the absence of a home-grown 24/7 cable news culture. Nevertheless, that hunger for information that terrorism stories provoke can certainly be seen in the leaking of the police evidence to news outlets in November and the examples of dubious sourcing outlined above. (The identity and motivation of the leaker or leakers was unknown at the time of writing, although the anonymous police officers were reported praising the newspapers' decision to publish (Cummings, 2007).)

As for how terrorism might have bolstered the media, *The Dominion Post's* letters to the editor page was running 3 to 1 in favour of its actions in the three days after publication of the leaked police evidence—and when asked, the newspaper said the incoming correspondence was even more strongly in favour of the its actions than was reflected in the letters page. It also reported boosts in sales.

## **Conclusion**

In the end, we cannot know that the balance of opinion would be different if

the authorities had not invoked the T-word, if the media had not made such good use of its sensational power, abetting in the telling of what has become our own fear-filled us vs them story, but it is hard to believe that different framing would not have resulted in a very different response. The *Taranaki Daily News* warned in an editorial two days after the raids (NZ not removed from terror threat, 17 October 2007) that those who thought our isolation could protect us from terrorism would now have to think again. 'The terror threat,' the newspaper warned, 'might already be here.' I will go a step further than *The Daily News* and assert that the 'terror threat' is already here—but not the one *The Daily News* was referring to. Rather, it is the threat that comes with the unleashing of a post 9/11-terrorism story in all its divisive, destructive, sensational glory.

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