FRAMING EFFECTS OF FEAR

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This study is a frame analysis of the portrayal of fear associated with terrorism, in the textual content of English language Canadian newspapers. I drew the data from 726 news items on domestic and international terrorist incidents, published in Canada between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2012. The findings support the idea that fear, perceived or otherwise, is strategically important because of its influence on conflict outcomes, public opinion, and policy making.

Fear is natural and unavoidable. There are all kinds of fears that we may face at some point in our lives: fear of rejection, fear of unemployment, fear of medical illness. Or we may be anxious that fast food may harm our well-being. I thought I knew how it felt to be scared but I had never spent time to think what fear really meant until one day in May 2012, when I was held at gunpoint in a conflict zone in Africa. Since then, I have tried to understand fear by reading everything I could find on the topic, from medical and psychological studies, to theatre plays and novels. Eventually, as a former journalist, I was inevitably drawn to media studies.

Even if people do not agree with what they read in newspapers or watch on the news, the way in which journalists "spin" or frame news stories, drawing attention to specific parts of the issue and de-emphasizing other elements, undoubtedly exerts influence over people's topics of discussion, attitudes and behaviour. As I found out from personal experience, fear and violent conflict are highly correlated; in fact, there are fear-based cultures around the world. While I was reading a variety of studies on fear, I wondered about the connection between conflict, media framing, and the spread of fear among a population. There is a close relationship between anxiety and increased media consumption and, in cognitive psychology, high stress and anxiety are associated with biased information processing. In other words, people who are frightened will seek information that is relevant to the source of the threat more often than less anxious citizens, but they may pay close attention to only those pieces of information that are threatening, and this may have implications for attitude formation and behaviour. The objective of this study was to document the framing of fear associated with terrorism and security, in Canadian newspapers, in the past five years.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF FEAR

Most scholarly literature on the subject of fear has been traditionally dominated by discourses that view fear from a psychological or medical framework, with very few studies

situating it in a social, cultural or political context (Fisher, 2012; Kagan, 2012; Lemke, Larsen, & Hvidbak, 2011). My contention is that the epistemology of fear, or how we come to experience or learn about fear, is important if we want to enhance our knowledge and understanding of fear and how to manage it. Fear was described by Freud (1920) as fright, in which a person faces an unexpected dangerous situation, fear, which is focused on a definite object, and anxiety, which is the state of mind in anticipation of danger. Researchers, such as Keating-Biltucci (2011), indicated that fears are a learned response from observing family and society, as well as a part of the human experience, and that fear evolved as a mechanism to protect humans from life-threatening situations. Moreover, many fears are constructed to protect against other fears and sometimes against fear itself (Glassner, 1999). Further, other scholars identified the function of media as the grapevine through which fear is circulated in society and thus media become a tool for social control (Matusitz, 2013; Walsh, 2009).

In the context of terrorism or of violent conflict in general, emotions are intense, directed at some external stimuli, and may influence future perceptions and behaviour (Nabi, 2003). For example, Lerner and Keltner (2000, 2001) indicated that fear affects risk perceptions with fearful people making more pessimistic judgments about future events. Matusitz (2013) posited that fear and terrorism are highly correlated and this association fostered a "*discourse of fear, or the ubiquitous communication, symbolic familiarity, and expectation that danger and risk are a central theme of daily life*" (p. 142). Further, Matusitz (2013) argued that discourses of fear may lead to a "*collective fear orientation*" which is "*a major foundation of violence*" (p. 143). Contemporary literature is also concerned with the ways in which the mediatization of fear operates as a strategy of power. According to Jeffries (2012), documenting fear in the public sphere has proved effective at unveiling dynamics of power formation in society.

METHOD

When discussing frames, scholars usually refer either to a media frame, which is a frame in communication playing an important role in presenting, shaping or destroying a picture of an event or story (Herman & Chomsky, 2000), or a personal frame, which is a frame in thought (Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 2004). For this article I used media framing analysis, an approach defined by Shaw and Giles (2009) as "*an adaptation for psychologists of existing methods used in communication and other social sciences to study the manner, in which media "frame" topics in ways that direct the audience's attention to certain features of the stories, or certain interpretations, and away from other alternative interpretations*" (p. 223). My procedure for studying media framing builds on the work of Entmann (1993), but it draws on other techniques as well, including an adapted method for analyzing media content created by Shaw and Giles (2009). I completed a macroanalysis of the data set as well as a microanalysis of selected materials to illustrate broader framing processes identified in the macroanalysis. I completed the microanalysis, as follows:

- **Identifying the story:** this began with a search for the triggering event. For opinion columns, the news may be simply other news.

- **Identifying character:** I took a narrative approach by identifying the key characters in the stories (who is doing what to whom?).

- **Narrative form and reader identification:** which characters of the story is the reader invited to identify with.

- **Analysis of language categories:** this stage involves a detailed examination of the language used to describe key characters and events in the story.

- **Generalisation:** this final stage attempts to place the story in a wider social and cultural context by examining references to previous media coverage.

I used the keywords "fear" and "terrorism" on LexisNexis to generate a list of news reports that provided an insight into the framing of fear associated with terrorism, in Canadian newspapers. I explored the media coverage of fear and terrorism in 29 English language newspapers in the past five years, that is, between January 1, 2008, and December 31, 2012. I collected two types of stories: *1)* articles that described specific terrorist incidents, that is, articles that focused on the who, what, when, and why of the incident; and *2)* articles where an incident was referenced by a reporter for a variety of purposes, such as the introduction of a new piece of legislature or to highlight a particular threat. The initial search yielded 978 media articles that were longer than 100 words of text. I examined the news items manually to eliminate the duplicates and the stories in which the presence of 'fear' and 'terrorism' in the report referred to issues unrelated to terrorism (e. g., movie and book reviews, sex scandals, and stories and opinion articles about the economic recession). I eliminated a total of 49 duplicates and 203 articles on topics that were not relevant for my research. Thus, the sample was reduced to 726 news items.

RESULTS

I made the distinction between incidents that involved domestic groups or individuals and incidents of international

origin. I grouped the research findings by other variables, such as region of coverage and the tactics used by the terrorists, e.g., bombs, sabotage, hijackings, hostage situations, incidents that involved fire arms, and attacks against institutions. I also grouped the findings by the dominant frame that is, episodic, thematic, or mixed.

The peaks in domestic incident reporting in 2010 and 2011 can be explained by the security-related concerns associated with big events such as the Winter Olympics in Vancouver and the G20 Toronto summit that saw violent clashes between protesters and the police. During the months leading to the Games, a large number of Canadian newspapers reported on fears that a terrorist group might try to hide a nuclear device in a shipping container at the port of Vancouver. In 2011, newspapers all over the country published the results of a national survey that revealed that the majority of Canadians feared that the conflict between Western nations and the Muslim world was "irreconcilable" and another survey that showed that the number one thing Canadians fear most are terrorists. In the same year, the newspapers in Ontario published a number of stories about the Somali community in Toronto and about Al Shabaab, an Islamist youth militia which is on the Canadian list of terrorist organizations and was allegedly trying to recruit young Somali men from Toronto.

Out of the 726 articles analyzed in my research, 376 covered domestic incidents and 350 reported on incidents of international origin, including opinion articles that referred to Canadian policies but placed them in an international context. For example, in December 2009, The *Calgary Herald* published an opinion article on CCTV surveillance and civil rights in Canada, but placed it in a "post-9/11 hysteria" international context. In November 2010, Guelph Mercury in Ontario reported about a speech given by the head of the Canadian Security Intelligence Service who said that he was worried about North Korea and Iran trying to procure nuclear materials from Canada. Such articles were counted within the international, and not the domestic category.

Examples of domestic terrorist incidents covered by the national newspapers and those in Western Canada include stories about a series of bombings aimed at oilpatch sites in Tomslake, northeastern BC, near the Alberta border, in 2009. The previous year, *The Edmonton Journal* published on its first page a story under the title "Terrorists target U.S.A. via Alberta" that stirred much controversy and strong reactions from readers. In Ontario, a large number of news articles were dedicated to the G20 summit that took place in June 2010, in Toronto and to the security-related concerns that the local population had.

In looking for frame types, I grouped the research findings by the dominant frame: episodic, thematic, or mixed. According to Iyengar (1991), the episodic frame "*takes the form of a case study or event-oriented report and depicts public issues in terms of concrete instances*," and the thematic frame "*places public issues in some more general or abstract context and... presents collective or general evidence*" (p. 14). An example of an episodic dominant frame is an article published by several newspapers in Ontario in 2010 that reported on a story about a farmer who paid cash for a large quantity of fertilizer, rather than put the purchase on the farmer's account. The supply store officials in southern Ontario were concerned about potential fertilizer-bomb threats and called the authorities. After an investigation, the fertilizer purchase turned out to be legitimate. The newspapers that initially reported the story made little reference to previous incidents that relate farming to terrorism. Articles that have a thematic dominant frame include the stories that covered the Taser use in Canada. For example, in January 2012, *The Vancouver Province* published a news item about the use of Tasers by Canada's police forces that, according to the author of the article, represents "new urban terrorism." The article mentions the total number of fatalities across the country in which a Taser was involved and cites Canadian and American experts on the issue, but without mentioning any current event. An example of a mixed dominant frame is a story published by *The Vancouver Sun* in April 2008, under the title "Neo-Nazis in the 21st century; Communities worry about Aryan Guard's plans and what they may mean for Calgary." This article refers to an upcoming meeting of the Aryan Guard youth, a Calgary-based neo-Nazi group, and then gives an overview of the history of the group.

Overall, I identified four framing functions in the articles that associated fear with terrorism:

- definition of the problem, or what causal agent is doing with what costs: "*When it comes to terrorism at the Olympics, most people think about the 1972 Munich Massacre or the 1996 Atlanta bombing. But in Canada now, there is a growing group of security planners who are thinking about far scarier possibilities: the deliberate release of chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear compounds at the Vancouver 2010 Winter Games.*" (*Vancouver Sun*, October 30, 2008, p. A6)

- diagnosis of the causes, or who is creating the problem: "*Last year, they celebrated with a frosted swastika cake, homemade by a member fresh out of culinary school. Today, the Aryan Guard youth will again meet in a corner of the city to celebrate Adolf Hitler's birthday... White supremacy has spilled onto Calgary streets, and many wonder what clashes are ahead and how serious they might become.*" (*Vancouver Sun*, April 21, 2008, p. B2)

- moral judgements, or an evaluation of causal agents and their effects: "*Iranians to move here and we'll*

end up like Europe, living in fear of their extremists. Nanaimo is a nice quiet place and we don't need sleepers in our midst. Please don't bring your problems to us. Go home. Please go invest in your home land." (February 3, 2010, p. A3)

• suggestions for remedies: *"Over the course of two days, about 100 firefighters, paramedics, police officers and members of the military received a crash course in the kind of threats that may exist during the Games, and the equipment that is available to combat them."* (*Vancouver Sun*, October 30, 2008, p. A6)

For this study I analyzed the data grouped into three themes: fear, government criticism, and power. The first theme groups all the articles on the bombings aimed at oilpatch sites in British Columbia; the attacks took place in 2008-2009 and were considered as domestic terrorism acts by the RCMP. The government criticism theme groups the news items on the Taser use in Canada that was labelled by the media as "new urban terrorism," caused a strong public opinion reaction and eventually led to policy changes. The power theme includes the media articles on potential terrorist threats and violent incidents before and during the Winter Olympics, in Vancouver, and the G20 summit, in Toronto.

CONCLUSIONS

This study provides an understanding of the frames adopted by the media to cover crisis situations and such an understanding may serve as a strategy with which to identify main causes and responsible agents, and to suggest policy responses to violent incidents. Understanding the choices the media make, including the framing of violent incidents, has significant consequences for how the public thinks about terrorism and, at the same time, about terrorist attempts to use the media to reach their own goals. This research could be further expanded by reflecting on similarities and differences between cultures regarding the role of fear in violent conflict and during peace negotiations because people from different cultures express, experience, and perceive emotions differently. Polls conducted among representatives of different cultures in Canada may reveal additional information on how people perceive and process media frames and how cultural meanings about fear and violent conflict are constructed.

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