

Media at war on terror: special report

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After the Glasgow airport carbomb attack the media has now gone on to a war footing. The relatively restrained coverage of the double attempt in London has now changed in to Sunday scare mode. There is an old journalistic adage to describe this. One event is an incident, two is a trend and three is a spate. And there is a bulletin grabbing, front-page holding visual quality about car bombs. This is resonant of the Middle East rather than Northern Ireland, for example. It has added a whole new dimension. It's taken the threat out of London and, literally, across the nation. One connection is that this was also an assault upon people trying to have a good time, as the Scottish school holidays began.

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The Sunday newspapers have now adopted a martial tone. The Sunday Mirror has the most amazing picture on its front of a terrorist being doused by a policeman under the heading "Britain Under Attack". The News of the World calls it 'Britain Under Siege' and declares "This is War". A side story describes "Monster In Allah Screams", while Gordon Brown's new security advisor and NOTW columnist Sir John Stevens, "The Chief", tells us that:

Al Qaeda has imported the tactics of Baghdad and Bali to the streets of the UK. And it will get worse before it gets better...but make no mistake we will defeat them in the long run.

This Churchillian rhetoric gets a echo from political writer Fraser Nelson's 'insider view of Glasgow's Asian issues'. Fraser, now based in London but among the first on the scene yesterday, tells us that "This sick poison is spreading" even to Scotland and he knows why:

the main guiding principle for the jihadis is psychotic bloodlust. The tragedy is that Muslims have integrated very well in Glasgow. There are shops that sell halal haggis.

As well as that kind of commentary the reporting in the newspapers is superb with lots of detail. And thanks to the mobile phone there is a lot of very dramatic fuzzy pictures of the incident as it unfolded. Although I don't know why the Observer chose to use the hackneyed device of a screen grab from Sky News. All this citizen journalism certainly adds colour and genuine information to the narrative as witnesses turn into cameramen.

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There isn't much in the way of journalistic scoops regarding information about the attacks. And the lines coming out of various MI5, police and Whitehall 'sources' are diverse and sometimes contradictory. The Mail's Jason Lewis is typical of those briefed. He suggests that so soon after the incidents any information is still vague, although he has plenty of interesting speculative lines. Jason's source tell him that these bombers were 'cleanskins' but I don't understand how they can know that so early. One thing we have learnt from past incidents is that the small group of Islamist fanatics in the UK do tend to have links among themselves, even if they are casual or historic. The Sunday Times also has a go at stirring controversy around intelligence foreknowledge and draws the opposite conclusion to the Mail:

They are most likely to be homegrown extremists linked to an overlapping network of terrorist cells implicated in previous plots against British targets.

The Sunday Telegraph, which tends to have good MI5 sources, says that security forces had no warning about the Haymarket bombs and that if the terrorists were 'unknowns' then:

It would be evident that Britain's multi-billion pound intelligence network had failed to keep pace with the threat posed by Islamist terrorists.

You pay your money and take your spin. It is still early days. It will take police days to clean up the CCTV images for example, but arrests have been made today, so inevitably the newspapers fall behind reality on a story like this.

It's important to remember that these attacks failed to injure anyone except the terrorists themselves. They were not high tech and they were not successful. But that is mainly about luck, it seems. However, they did achieve the kind of publicity that goes some way to satisfy the extremists' desire for glory and to make everyone think again about our safety and our politics.

POLIS is holding a seminar with senior public figures for journalists this week on an issue related to these events – contact us at Polis@lse.ac.uk if you wish to take part.

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