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Terrorism as Opiniotainment: Perceptions Warriors and the Public Battlefield

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Abstract

Terrorism continues to have a significant impact on the lives of Australians. Whilst Australian cities remain untargeted during this present wave of terrorism, many Australians perceive the threat to be significant. Terrorism is offered for consumption daily in the news media and many Australians have seen the images of terrorism. In addition to television images, media consumers have been inundated with terrorism reporting on talkback radio, in feature films, and in newspapers. What impact does the perceptions wars on terrorism have on Australian society? Are the public more or less knowledgeable because of public debate? These are questions that need to be answered is Australia is to remain a safe and free country in which to live. In this paper, a content analysis is conducted on the Herald Sun newspaper in the week following the second Bali bombing on October 1, 2005. In particular the opinion editorials are examined. Australians have a right to know and understand the threat that terrorism poses in our cities. Public debate is not always a way that this can be achieved.

Keywords

Terrorism, perception, perception wars, media, *Herald Sun*.

INTRODUCTION

The impact of terrorism on Australia is a topic of popular debate. This is especially so in the media. Television news examines terrorism and the threat it poses frequently. Talkback radio too examines it from many perspectives and callers can phone in to have their views heard. Newspapers publish all manner of terrorism related story through journalism, opinion editorials, and letters to the editor. And why should there not be this level of coverage? Many Australians watched as hijacked aircraft were ploughed into the World Trade Towers, we watched the towers fall, and we watched as events continued to unfold on September 11, and then in Bali, Madrid, London, Bali again, and most recently in Mumbai. It seems to some that no one is safe and the threat of terrorism is expected to remain for some time (Michaelsen, 2005). These occurrences, however, do not amount to a terrorist act on the Australia homeland. Yet a *Sydney Morning Herald* poll in 2005 reported that 68% think that it will inevitably occur (Michaelsen, 2005: 330). The reasons for this are puzzling to some. Some Australians were closely connected to the two terror attacks in Bali in 2003 and 2005. Some were there, some were injured, and others have friends and family that were maimed or killed. Others were similarly connected to the London '7/7' bombings, and others to September 11. Witnessing terrorism on the streets of New York, knowing someone killed or injured, or watching terrorist events unfold in the media are all ways that terrorism is 'witnessed'. The modern wave of terrorism has been beamed live and direct into the televisions and computers, and onto the pages of major newspapers, often in graphic detail, for anyone who cares to look. Few newspapers can claim to have the influence in Australia as our most read daily, the *Herald Sun*. In particular, the perceptions warriors, the opinion editorial writers, spark sometimes fierce debate about terrorism. In this paper a content analysis of opinion editorials in the *Herald Sun* is conducted for the week of October 3 – 8; the week following the second Bali bombings. The methodology is outlined and a day-by-day analysis is presentation of opinion reporting if offered. Any actual or implied reference to terrorism in these editorials is examined in a week where terrorism was overwhelmingly the lead story. The editorials are an interesting example of the form of some terrorism reporting following a terrorist act.

CONTENT ANALYSIS METHODOLOGY

A content analysis is conducted on the opinion editorials in the *Herald Sun* from October 3 to October 8, 2005. October 2 was skipped as it was a Sunday and many news outlets, including on television, chose not to fully

break the story until the following morning. The bombings occurred at around 10.15pm Australian Eastern Standard Time on Saturday, October 1 (Meade, 2005: 17). It was the Monday when debate and reporting commenced with intensity. In conducting the analysis the procedures for conducting content analysis as outlined by Carley (1993) were followed. Carley's (1993) eight steps in content analysis were designed primarily for computer aided and quantitative content analysis. It has been developed here as a mechanism for conducting qualitative content analysis. Table 1 depicts the eight steps and how they were used in this research.

•Table 3: Operationalising a content analysis of the Herald Sun (October 3-8, 2005)

Step	Carly's explanation	My adaptation
1.Decide the level of analysis	Often words or phrases Related to the phenomenon being analysed	Analysis or actual or implied references to terrorism in editorials
2.Decide how many concepts to code for	The definition of criteria for coding. Develop predefined criteria for concepts to be analysed. Can be pre-defined or interactive	Interactive coding was chosen. Issues identified include threat of terrorism to Melbourne, the benefit of the terrorism laws, and Bali
3.Decide whether to code for existence or frequency of a Concept	If coding for existence, the terms appearance is counted only once regardless of its frequency. If counting for frequency, the appearances are quantified and Analysed	Existence is coded. Qualitative analysis is conducted on concepts as they appear
4.Decide how you will distinguish among concepts	This is the level of generalisation. What decisions does a analyser make when coding concepts?	I have grouped issues by date. All implied and actual references to terrorism in the editorials are considered.
5.Develop rules for coding your Text	The rules for generalising in Coding	The rules relate to the meta concepts of the editorials (ie: Bali, threat to Melbourne, terror laws)
6.Decide what to do with irrelevant information	The decision whether to ignore or include irrelevant information	No information is treated as irrelevant. Carly's criteria relates to individual words. For this study, words, phrases and entire articles are equally important. Only editorials are analysed
7.Code the texts	Either through reading and maintaining working notes or through computer aided Computations	Reading and maintaining working notes.
8.Analyse your results	Drawing generalisations and Conclusions	Qualitative analysis is conducted to understand the nature of Op-ed reporting of terrorism

Adapted from Carly, 1993: 81-87

The first step as set out in the above table is determining the level of analysis. Carly (1993) argues that this will often be an individual word. For this analysis all actual or implied references to terrorism in opinion editorials are 'coded'. In reality, this virtually always includes the word 'terrorism'. However, there was the possibility that general discussions of Bali, civil liberties, war and security in Melbourne could take place within the context of terrorism. To not include these implied references unnecessarily excludes relevant terrorism issues.

This relates to the second step; deciding the number of concepts to code for. Interactive coding is used in this research. In beginning the analysis it was unclear how many issues would be of significance. Broad analysis was desired to allow a full range of issues to become apparent. The third step is deciding whether to code for frequency or existence. As a qualitative content analysis, existence is the most appropriate coding strategy. The fourth step, distinguishing among concepts, is a difficult task when analysing terrorism; a term with no universally acceptable meaning. In coding for existence grouping like terms is not necessary. Rather, the analysis is categorised by the date it appears in the *Herald Sun*. This allows for clarity in temporal progression as terrorism opinion reporting fluctuated in intensity and content as time progressed through the week. The fifth step is developing rules for coding. Much like in step four, the coding rules are action based and not reliant on quantitative frequency. Links are, nonetheless, made between like concepts as they appear in the editorials during the week. The focus of each issue of the *Herald Sun* varied predominantly between Bali, the threat to Melbourne, and the anti-terror laws. Step six is deciding how to treat irrelevant information. In this analysis all references to terrorism are considered equally relevant and to dismiss something may lead to a failure in the analysis. Of course, non terrorism-related opinion editorials are excluded. Step seven is the coding process which is conducted with reading and note taking. *Factiva* or another newspaper database is not used, but rather physical editions. This is important as it allowed for the analysis to include considerations of physical layout, and the use of photography, cartoons, or colour. Finally, step eight is the analysis. The content analysis is designed to present the opinion editorials in the week following the second Bali bombings. When taken together they demonstrate an evolution and progression in thinking over a six-day period when terrorism was likely fresh in the memory of Melburnians.

Before the content analysis is presented a few clarifications are necessary. The first is the use of the word 'coding'. Whilst Carly (1993) is referring particularly to the physical numerical coding that is often part of a content analysis it has been interpreted here to include more metaphorical 'coding'. This can be restated as qualitative accounting of terrorism related issues and concepts reported in the *Herald Sun* for the week following the second Bali bombings. No physical coding takes place, but issues are distinguished and analysed through a similar process of identification as explained above. Also, Carly's (1993) argues that this method is a guide rather than a set of rules. As such, the method was flexibly applied within the parameters provided. This is particular so with the reporting of the analysis where the writer attempts to show the nature of the information being reported to the public; no particular claim of generalisability or of truthfulness is forwarded. It is a presentation of what was reported following a terrorist act. The media reality of the *Herald Sun* is as it appears. It is opinion that many people read and may be influenced by. This paper is intended to demonstrate that this 'reality' is detailed and diverse. The editorials are not presented in isolation. Where relevant some detail about the lead news story of the day is provided. This is an important contextual issue as an editorial about terrorism in an edition that does not have terrorism as the lead story may result in a differing community impact.

CONTENT ANALYSIS OF THE HERALD SUN: OCTOBER 3-8, 2005

Monday, October 3

The perception wars begin in earnest in the pages of the *Herald Sun* on the first business day after the second Bali bombing. The first fifteen pages of this edition examine the bombings from a number of angles. The cover displays colour pictures of the moment the blast occurred and of a victim badly injured and recovering in hospital. Page four features a map of Bali and where the blasts occurred. It also directs the reader to the editorials and opinion on pages 20 and 21. Pages eight and nine provide a context to the most recent terrorism. It is a timeline headlined 'Trail of Destruction' (Herald Sun, 2005a: 8-9). It begins with the September 11 attacks. This is followed by the October 12 2002 attacks in Bali, the August 6 2003 attacks against the Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, the March 11 2004 attacks in Madrid, the September 9 2004 attacks out the front of the Australian Embassy in Jakarta, the July 7 2005 attacks in London, the failed attack in London two weeks later, and the timeline ends with the second Bali bombings of October 1. Early in this week of terrorism opinion the readers are familiarised with the trend of terrorist violence and are ready to consider many issues involving terrorism.

The editorials on this day are provided by Ian Shaw from the University of New South Wales, and Paul Gray, a *Herald Sun* columnist. Shaw (2005: 21) discusses the Jemaah Islamiya choice of 'soft targets'. Whilst he makes no specific comment on the threat of terrorism in Australia, he does offer the warning that venues such as 'open-fronted restaurants and bars, and alfresco eateries' are attractive targets for terrorists (Shaw, 2005: 21). Paul Gray (2005: 21) offers a critical editorial on the need for the anti-terror laws in Australia. He writes;

Increasingly hysterical moves to tighten up on non-existent terrorism activity at home by curbing Australians' civil liberties is distracting attention from the politicians' failures. Terrorism is a foreign policy problem that comes from overseas. Through clumsy anti-Islamic gestures at home and disastrous adventures such as the Iraq war abroad. Australian politicians have succeeded only in making the problem worse.

This is a very interesting and important contribution to the debate. Through the horror of the violence it would be easy to assume the worst. Gray (2005: 21) continues;

It is significant that despite all the frenetic anti-terrorist activity and rhetoric in Australia since the first Bali bombing three years ago, nothing nearly so terrible has happened here. This shows that terrorism is still fundamentally a problem that afflicts foreign countries – not Australians at home.

Gray (2005) implies that there has been a great deal of discussion of the terrorist threat to Australia following the Bali bombing yet he is not clear of where this 'rhetoric' originates. Certainly it was a matter of public discussion but what constitutes public discussion? Is it around the 'water-coolers' or over 'smoko' in the various workplaces around the country?

Tuesday, October 4

The editorials on Tuesday both discuss the proposed anti-terror laws and represent significantly opposing views. The top half of page 21 is titled 'Laws That Light a Fuse' (Howie, 2005: 21). It is argued that 'Australia's geographical isolation and strategic insignificance means terrorism will likely remain a source of anxiety rather than physical harm'. Whilst terrorism is not a likely scenario in an Australian city it is a source of fear that can manifest in a number of ways in Melbourne including alienation of Muslims. This editorial argues that the new laws will have this effect and can only make terrorism more likely in Melbourne (Howie, 2005: 21). Mirko Bagaric is the other op-ed provider on this day in the *Herald Sun*. He begins 'The latest Bali bombings, so close to Australian shores, highlight the catastrophic consequences that stem from a terrorist attack' (Bagaric, 2005: 21). Bagaric (2005) argues that the attacks should put the new anti-terror laws into perspective and affirm their necessity.

But perhaps the final say should belong to the editor on this day since their decisions about content are perhaps equally as important as their input. The editor reminds the readers that terrorists are set to target Western interests in general, 'and Australia and Melbourne in particular' (Editor, 2005a: 20). The editor reiterates the comments made by the police Assistant Commissioner, Simon Overland, that an attack in Australia is inevitable and that 'common sense dictates' that the Melbourne Commonwealth Games could be the likely target (Editor, 2005a: 20). In this environment Liberty Victoria believes that the new anti-terror laws are a greater threat to our way of life to which the editor responds; 'Dangerous, deluded stuff!' (Editor, 2005a: 20).

Wednesday, October 5

On Wednesday the mood in the *Herald Sun* changes. The 'information' section at the beginning is shorter whilst the 'Your Say' and opinion columns continue their opiniotainment bombardment of the readership. Two editorials appear in this edition although one is pushed to the previous page to accommodate the perception warrior, Andrew Bolt's, first editorial on the topic of the Bali bombings. In the first Paul Mullett, secretary of the Police Association, argues 'The tragic events of Bali have again underlined the fragile nature of *our* safety and security' (emphasis added) (Mullett, 2005: 22). This piece is not about terrorism. Rather it is about gaining fair and equitable industrial agreements for first responder professionals. It is a worthy cause that invokes the image of terrorism as justification; perhaps to help sell it to the public.

Andrew Bolt's article is decisively larger than the previous editorials of the week and looking at the large heading, 'No Deal With Death', and a rather large picture of Bolt one gets the feeling that his opinion is being given special status. He begins 'There's one reason we can't negotiate with Islamist terrorists – the only outcome they'll accept is our total and utter destruction' (Bolt, 2005a: 23). Bolt (2005a: 23) believes that it is a 'curse' of thinking people that they believe they can negotiate and come to an agreement with vicious criminals. Bolt (2005a: 23) places the blame for this with the 'Left' and 'its ABC'. ABC talk-back hosts had suggested that violence was the not the best way to combat violence and that perhaps a peaceful solution would be possible. Suggestions ranged from the involvement of the United Nations to the appointment of a mediator, and maybe the coalition nations should withdraw from the countries they occupy. All of which was outrageous to Bolt (2005a: 23).

Dear God, how strange it was, to hear so many callers assume that terrorists happy to blow up children and behead civilians are as reasonable as they are themselves, in a manner of speaking... All right. If we really must "understand the anger" of such terrorists and find the "starting point" of any negotiations with them, let us at least listen to what they say they really want. That should sober up even a fool

Bolt (2005a) speaks in generality about terrorism and he uses quotes from terrorists to support his arguments. Indeed, he is persuasive and carefully selects only information that is most supportive of his beliefs and most detrimental to his perception war opponents; the ones he deems the 'Left' (Bolt, 2005a: 23).

Thursday, October 6

On Thursday articles about the Bali bombing are pushed from the front page. A small banner across the bottom of the page states 'World Police Team Up To Hunt Bali Bombers' (Herald Sun, 2005b: 1). The *Herald Sun* editors may have assessed that the readership will not be as attentive for a fourth day after an event that caused so much fear and anxiety in its immediate aftermath. On page four the coverage is continued. The focus has shifted from the victims to the perpetrators and the debate about its possible occurrence in Melbourne heats up with another perception warrior of the highest rank, Neil Mitchell, taking up arms for an editorial. Neil Mitchell hosts a talk back radio program on radio station 3AW on weekday mornings; he is an icon of Melbourne media.

Mitchell's (2005: 23) article is indeed alarming. He argues that 'The unthinkable is now considered inevitable' and that Melburnians should start planning for the day that terrorism rocks our city. Mitchell (2005) argues that there are several problems with Melbourne's preparedness for worst-case terrorist scenario such as September 11. The hospitals are under prepared, there may be a lack of coordination between doctors and nurses, and a lack of readiness in current and former police and fire-fighters; the first responders.

Mitchell (2005: 23) asks;

Has the kid in the divvy van in Fitzroy been told what to do if the MCG is attacked? Has he been trained in how to cope with massive casualties and mass hysteria? He'll try, of course, but is he ready? How many retired police or firefighters would be sitting at home counting flowers on the wallpaper while this unfolded? They would want to help and could be used in traffic control or on the phones. Has anybody asked them?

This is not just a problem for emergency workers. Tow truck drivers will also want to help clear debris and damaged or destroyed vehicles, bus drivers, who are trained to watch out for suspicious packages, would be particularly on edge during a terrorist scare; would their training in identifying suspicion extend to acting on their observations? Similarly, would train drivers know not to pull into a station if they believed there was a bomb on board? Would they be willing to risk their own safety to preserve the lives on many others? These are important questions which Mitchell (2005) grounds in a specific example of the 1991 Coode Island fire in an outer suburb of Melbourne. A fire broke out at a chemical treatment plant near Melbourne and radio and television reports warned people to stay in doors until further notice. Mitchell (2005: 23) notes, however, 'After reporting the fire I drove cautiously into the city. Life was normal. People were shopping, chatting and commuting as the smoke threatened. The warnings had been unheard or ignored'.

It would be very easy during this week of intense coverage of terrorism and the threat it poses to over generalise terrorism and its perpetrators. Especially after Bolt's (2005a) op-ed of the previous day, someone may need to remind the public that Muslim's are not responsible for terrorism nor are they a shady other with archaic or bizarre beliefs. Perhaps out of concern for the perceptions that may have been created in the public earlier in this week, the *Herald Sun* of this day has an editorial from Sherene Hassan (2005: 22), an executive committee member of the Islamic Council of Australia. Hassan (2005: 22) describes a holiday to Victoria where she proudly wore her West Coast Eagles scarf. She also notes that after her holiday it dawned on her that 'no one seemed to care about the fact that I was a Muslim woman who wore a head scarf'. All that mattered to people in Victoria was that she was an Eagles fan. This immediately changed after the October 1 Bali bombings. She writes 'Trying to deal with my own grief and sorrow for the innocent victims of these horrific crimes is hard enough. Being made feel by some ignorant people I am somehow responsible is gut-wrenching' (Hassan, 2005: 22). Hassan (2005: 22) is a Perth born Muslim who has lived in Australia her whole life and not surprisingly she considers herself 'dinky-di'. Yet, shopkeepers talk slowly so she can understand, hospitals have arranged interpreters, and she is damming of commentators who describe Islam as an oppressive religion. Such commentators criticise Islam because some Muslims are abusive to women yet do not acknowledge their religions teachings of equality of the sexes.

Friday, October 7

It is six days after the second Bali bombing that targeted a popular restaurant district and only five months before the city will host the *Commonwealth Games*. This day's edition breaks the story on page three 'High Flyers Can Go Jump' (Kelly, 2005: 3). A subheading explains 'Former police chief Kel Glare wants parachutes for people who work or live above the 13th floor' (Kelly, 2005: 3). Reactions to the story were mixed in people interviewed who live or work above the thirteenth floor and amongst experts. One person who worked a kilometre from the World Trade Center has no lingering fears and definitely will not be buying a parachute. Another who lives in a city high-rise believes the suggestion is 'absolutely laughable'. Others, however, thought it was a great idea despite the \$250 price tag being a barrier (Herald Sun, 2005c: 3). Experts felt the suggestion was impractical. Assistant Chief Fire Officer, Greg Bawden, said 'You couldn't do it in Melbourne. Where would you land?' (Bawden in Kelly, 2005: 3). Not surprisingly, a parachute manufacturer thought it was a good idea.

Andrew Bolt contributes an editorial on this day and argues that in combating terrorism we must remember that the terrorists are better educated than the average Australian. Whilst criticising the 'Left' throughout his article he argues terrorists are cold and calculated actors that cannot be bargained or negotiated with. Bolt (2005b: 23) argues;

How often do we now hear, especially on ABC talkback, that the terrorists hunting us are just ignorant? Poor? Desperate? That all they need is our help?...But lets face a sobering fact. Most of the worse Islamist terrorists were in fact trained not in madrassas but in universities – including ours

It would seem that there are very few places that Australians can go to be safe from terrorism. Page 22 holds an editorial comment on the 'medium' terror rating in the lead up to the Commonwealth Games. This editorial (Editor, 2005b: 22) emphasises the public's right to know.

It is not enough for governments to use the convenient excuse of "operational security". Tell people what to expect. Keeping the public informed will ensure -community co-operation. Some of the anti-terror laws in place by next year will allow police to stop and search people, virtually at will, as well as detaining people without charge for up to 14 days if they are suspected of being involved in terror. There are checks and balances on these necessary laws, but keeping the public informed is as important as the security arrangements themselves

This theme is to continue in the coming weeks in the *Herald Sun* and indeed throughout the many perception creators in Melbourne on radio, television and in newspapers.

Saturday, October 8

The Bali bombings are relegated to page thirteen. Barely seven days after the disaster and a week-long media tirade of fear and spectacle the perception wars fall mostly silent. It is a ceasefire of sorts in what is an ongoing battle that will continue to flare in hot spots and flashpoints for the indefinite future. On this Saturday there is evidence of a calm. Page thirteen tells of a Geelong Anglican Archdeacon who called for prayers not just for victims but for terrorists too (Houlihan, 2005: 13). Close by on the same page is the story of little 'Victory' whose father had died in the first Bali bombing before he was born. He will always be a testament of what terrorism can never destroy (Whinnett, 2005: 13). Page nineteen has two news items that demonstrate the potential reach and scope of terrorism. A Rolling Stones concert was stopped for ten minutes to allow bomb sniffer dogs access to the stage (Herald Sun, 2005d: 19) and United States' soldiers in Iraq discovered what they believed to be plans to blow up the New York subway (Associated Press et al., 2005: 19). In response, a 'security blanket' was thrown over New York's subway system with police searching 'bags, briefcases, strollers and other luggage' (Associated Press et al., 2005: 19). No editorials are devoted to terrorism on this day.

CONCLUSION

The Age on July 21 2006 prints an article entitled 'Threat of Terror Keeps Us Tuned In' (Ziffer, 2006: 8) It examines the popularity of border protection and anti-terror programming on commercial television. Ziffer (2006: 8) begins; 'Welcome to Fear TV'. Indeed, welcome. Although perhaps you were already there. 'In an uncertain time, Channel Seven's *Border Security* is Australia's most popular show' (Ziffer, 2006: 8). This 'reality' television focusing on issues of homeland security is keeping Australian's fascinated. This show is in its fourth season and a fifth is planned. It is often viewed by more than two million people nationally and it is the most viewed program in Melbourne over the past five weeks (Ziffer, 2006). It is argued that the shows popularity stems from a 'national security obsession. Australian's continually wonder if they'll be the next target. It fulfills a real fascination, but it also has a sickly attraction, like pornography' (Howie in Ziffer, 2006: 8). Media analyst Steve Allen comments in the same article that shows concerned with national security, 'reality' or otherwise, resonate 'with viewers shell-shocked by violence and terrorism in far-off lands – and the threat of it arriving here' (Ziffer, 2006: 8). The *Herald Sun* can certainly be forgiven for a heavy reporting emphasis on terrorism. It is an issue with a pornographic like attraction; a sickly can't-look-away effect. But does opiniotainment assist or detriment debate? In a week when a significant amount of opinion is devoted to terrorism we heard many arguments. It was argued on Monday that our soft targets are vulnerable to attack, but also that terrorism poses a very small threat to Australia. On Tuesday we read that the proposed terror laws are too strict, and that they strike the right balance. Wednesday is most notable for inflammatory comments from Andrew Bolt that terrorism is a monumental threat. Neil Mitchell told us on Thursday that terrorism is inevitable and that Melbournians are unprepared, and a leader in the Muslim community spoke of the racism she is subjected to. Friday sees Bolt return for more fear-mongering and more flames for the debate. The *Herald Sun* has a reputation for cashing in on fear and colloquially known to be right wing. During this week, however, this writer concludes that their opiniotainment coverage of terrorism in the week following the second Bali bombing incorporated opposing views. It is questionable, however, whether there needed to be an emotive Bolt twice talking about an emotive issue in the same week. His importance to the revenue of the *Herald Sun* should not be underestimated. Similarly, comments from the editor reinforced terrorism as a high risk. In the perception wars opposing sides firing at each other often from long range. As such, collateral damage is inevitable. Attacks against perception war opponents rarely hit their mark falling instead into the sea of public perception. This is where their impact is most felt. To over-perceive terrorism is to hand terrorists an unnecessary victory.

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