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The Toronto - 18 Terror Case: Trial by Media? How Newspaper Opinion Framed Canada's Biggest Terrorism Case

John Miller, Ryerson University, Ontario, Canada
Cybele Sack, Ryerson University, Ontario, Canada

Abstract: Toronto newspapers were quick to deliver opinions when 18 suspects were arrested on terrorism charges in 2006. An analysis of 225 columns, editorials and letters to the editor shows that a significant portion of the published commentary raised unreasonable public alarm, cast suspicion on the followers of a major religion and impugned Islam itself, failed to subject the allegations of the Canadian government and security officials to rigorous scrutiny, and predicted guilt before the suspects were able to exercise their democratic rights to a fair trial.

Keywords: Muslim, Terrorism Suspects, War on Terrorism, Media Coverage, Opinion Columns, Trial by Media

By John Miller and Cybele Sack

WHEN 400 HEAVILY armed police raided homes in the greater Toronto area in June, 2006, and arrested 13 men and four teenagers said to be planning terrorist attacks in Canada's largest city, the news media treated them as much more than just suspected criminals. Declaring "homegrown" terrorism to be a fact, opinion columnists and editorial writers rushed into print with dire warnings. Some headlines during the first four days said things like "The jihadis among us" (National Post), "Your neighbour, the terrorist" (Ottawa Citizen), "Generation Jihad: Angry, young, born-again believers" (The Globe and Mail), and "Immigration, diversity under the microscope" (Toronto Star).

Newspapers published almost as many opinion articles as they carried news reports in the first two weeks – an unusually high proportion considering that opinion usually reacts to news developments and reporting was restricted by a publication ban.¹ The young suspects were all Muslim, some of them recent converts, and were alleged to have attended two terrorist training camps or plotted to bomb public buildings in Toronto. The most sensational allegation, leaked to the media by an incredulous defence lawyer, was that at least one of the suspects was planning to attack the Parliament Buildings in Ottawa and behead the Prime Minister.

By August, when an 18th suspect was arrested, it became popularly known as the "Toronto 18" terrorism case, and many writers were saying that only clever police work had prevented another London, or Madrid, or Oklahoma City. The temperature of public opinion ran high. There were a few incidents of backlash against Muslims, including the vandalism of a mosque and anti-Muslim graffiti. Politicians and commentators raised questions about wider issues,

¹ The first arrests occurred on June 2, 2006. A judge imposed a publication ban on June 12.

like Canada's "too-lax" immigration policy and official multiculturalism. Community leaders and imams were questioned about why they weren't doing more to stop the radical politicization of Muslim youth in Canada.

Only a few writers counselled caution or skepticism about the Toronto 18 case, under headlines like "If these are terrorists, they are second-rate" (Toronto Star column) and "Terror in Canada: Perspective, please" (Globe and Mail editorial).

Nearly two years later, as the case dragged on, charges against seven of the alleged conspirators were stayed for lack of evidence, including all those against three of the four teenagers and a man who had been portrayed earlier as the plot's ringleader (the only evidence against him seemed to be that he once criticized Canada's military involvement in Afghanistan at his mosque). The arrests, initially heralded as a blow against an al-Qaeda-inspired cell of radicalized youth, became steeped in controversy. The roles of two informants were made public, amid speculation that they may have provoked or encouraged suspects to make militant statements and try to purchase materials to make bombs.

At this writing (June 2010), it is clear enough that the bomb plot was real. Seven men pleaded guilty before trial and were sentenced to prison terms. One of them -- the 25-year-old ringleader of the plot to plant bombs at a military base, the Toronto Stock Exchange and the Toronto headquarters of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) -- received a life sentence. Two others were found guilty at trial, one of them a minor player who was 15 when he was recruited and was convicted of participating in and contributing to a terrorist group (for attending two training camps and shoplifting some items from a Canadian Tire store). The remaining two suspects are still facing trial.

What is far less clear is whether the plot had any prospect of succeeding. The group had only one handgun and no chemicals to make bombs (a plan to buy ammonium nitrate fertilizer was foiled by police informants). The first adult to face trial didn't get to court until January 2010 -- three and a half years after the arrests, during which time key evidence about the bomb plot, and the role of a police mole who was paid \$4.1 million for his assistance, was shielded by the publication ban. The trials are providing the first, and so far only, public look at the evidence.

The purpose of this research, then, is to look at the opinion published immediately after the arrests to see how the case was initially contextualized, or "framed," by the media, including the extent to which it was treated as a criminal investigation, with many facts still in dispute, or as something much more sinister and widespread, an actual threat to our society linked to religion or international terrorism and therefore justifying an alarmist response.

Methodology

The literature asserts that media play a significant role in influencing public opinion with regard to various Canadian social groups, especially minorities (Henry and Tator 2002; Fleras and Kunz 2001; Mahtani 2001). Recent immigrants and religious minorities tend to be racialized in the print media; they are often portrayed as introducing "unCanadian" behaviour such as criminality; in other words, they are not considered "real Canadians" (Jiwani 2006; Hier and Greenberg 2002). This is particularly true with Muslims (Karim 2002; Perigoe 2007), especially after 9/11.

Studies of media reports about the so-called war on terror show that Muslims and Arabs tend to be associated with terrorism, often without foundation (Razack 2008). Reporters'

standards of verification are frequently relaxed. Research on the Canadian media suggests that reporters and commentators are heavily influenced by state agents like police and politicians who are “authorized knowers,” sources whose information can automatically be given weight due to their social status (Ericson, Baraneh and Chan 1991).

How stories are “framed” in the media is key to this portrayal. “Framing,” or choosing to highlight certain information about a story, is the conceptual shorthand journalists use to make clear to readers what is really happening (Entman 1993). It has been described as “consistent patterns of selection, emphasis and exclusion that furnish a coherent interpretation and evaluation of events.” (Norris and Kern 2003) Analyzing those frames requires researchers to examine what facts are included, what facts are left out, how the problem is defined, how the key players are portrayed, and what solutions are proposed (Kitzinger 2007).

A recurrent theme in how racialized groups, including Muslims, are framed in the media is called “moral panic” (Henry and Tator 2002; Cohen 2002). It was found in coverage of Operation Thread in 2003, a case that initially bore a startling resemblance to the Toronto 18 case, except that all 23 South Asian Muslims arrested were released for lack of evidence. Described by police as members of an “Al-Qaeda sleeper cell,” the suspects were alleged to be plotting to fly airplanes into nuclear plants and bomb the CN Tower in Toronto. None of it was true. A study of media coverage of that case (Odartey-Wellington 2009) showed the *Globe and Mail* and *National Post* “acted in concert with the Canadian security apparatus in generating a moral panic in which young Muslims of Arabic descent or hailing from other ethnic minority groups were framed as folk devils.”

This paper examines the Toronto 18 case for similar tendencies. An initial keyword search was done on three databases, Factiva, Canadian NewsStand and Lexis-Nexis, using the words: “Toronto” AND “Terror*” (* is wildcard for terror, terrorist, terrorism). Newspapers chosen were the four main Toronto dailies – the *Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Toronto Sun*. The *Ottawa Citizen* was added because aspects of the plot touched on the Parliament Buildings. *Maclean’s* magazine, as Canada’s only news magazine, was also included. We selected all articles mentioning this particular case during what we defined as the arrest period – June 3, 2006, to August 5, 2006, which was two days after the 18th suspect was arrested.

Opinion articles were isolated by adding keywords “opinion” or “letter” or “letters” or “editorial” or “column” or “analysis.” Then, because of the number and importance of opinion columns, some written by freelancers and not available on the newspapers’ websites, we rechecked the database for all the names which had already appeared in previous searches. This was a search verification tool, as the original parameters didn’t always find everything.

Opinion was listed under three types, editorials, columns and letters. The totals per publication were as follows:

Table 1: Total Number of Opinion Articles

Publication	Editorials	Columns	Letters	Total opinion
Toronto Star	12*	36	41	89
Toronto Sun	4*	18	21	43
Globe and Mail	2	13	27	42
National Post	4*	12	11	27
Ottawa Citizen	1	8	4	13
Macleans	1	3	7	11
Total	24	90	111	225
*Four of the Star's editorials were reprints from other papers; so were one each in the Post and Sun				

Page placement in the publication was noted, as were word length and the name of the author. Each article was scanned for the following information:

- Did the article link the plot to religion (did it reference either this case or terrorism as being rooted in Islam)?
- Did the article say the opposite (that there was no known link, or that terrorism was not sanctioned by Islam, or the majority of Muslims were law-abiding, or some other statement that the accused were not acting in the name of their religion)?
- Did the article associate the case with the war on terror (by mentioning al-Qaeda, Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, Afghanistan, Iraq or the Middle East).
- Did the article indicate to readers that the charges had yet to be proven in court?

Articles also were carefully read to determine how they were “framed,” and a framing model was designed to give the researchers ways of determining how much opinion fit the four recurring themes.

Moral Panic: Call for some wider action to defend our way of life (question multiculturalism, clamp down on immigration, change foreign policy, etc.). We are under threat, and this is a wake-up call to re-evaluate ideas about authority, control, policy and race. Plot tied directly to religion. Islam depicted as monolithic, violent, irrational, unpatriotic, sexist, undemocratic. Toronto 18 linked to actual terrorism cases abroad. Uses extreme language and descriptors (beheading PM). This was the position of certain Canadian experts and U.S. politicians.

Homegrown terror: This plot is proof that Canada is not immune from the war on terror. Our role in Afghanistan brought this on. Lack of assimilation and Islamist radicalism are the realities here, especially among young men. Reference to other cases, but Project Thread, Arar and other failed cases of RCMP/CSIS are *not* raised. Questions raised about the responsibilities of Muslim community to speak out against terrorism, curb hate in mosques and prevent radicalization of youth. Fits discourses of “otherness” and “national unity” (actions are outside the boundaries of Canadian values and beha-

viour). Tends to treat allegations as fact and presumes homegrown terror is a reality here. This was the position of CSIS, the police and the Canadian government.

Crime suspect: Always couched as a suspected criminal conspiracy to commit terror, not a plot against Canadian values. Treats this as a crime, with no specific link to Islam, or jihad, or fundamentalism. Raises questions about alleged al-Qaeda connections. Stresses due process, and examines facts of case and terror laws skeptically. Suspects are real people (details of their lives described) not just faceless symbols of something broader. This was the position of lawyers and some readers who questioned the facts or wanted more.

Tolerance: Generally, a reaction against the “moral panic” discourse. Reaffirms Canadian values of multiculturalism, fair trial, defends our foreign policy and our levels of immigration. Cautions against “group guilt” and excesses of media coverage. Message is respect for each other and questions how harshly the suspects are treated in custody. Includes Muslims pledging to uphold Canadian values. This was the position of some Muslims and others who questioned the extremist line of “moral panic.”

Adapting Van Gorp’s framing model (2005), a grid was developed to help categorize the various shades of opinion reflected in the sample:

	Moral Panic	Homegrown Terror	Crime Suspect	Tolerance
Motivation	Muslims hate the West, this is driven by Islam and imported	Suspects are rebellious, disloyal and/or stupid	Under suspicion: Time to question/verify	Reaction and treatment too harsh. Rush to judgment
Problem	This is real. Linked to proven religious terror abroad, now threatening our way of life	Youth radicalized by our role in Afghan war and other world events	We lack facts. Still lots of questions.	Over reaction. Cool it. Reaction is ignorant, racist. Charges have failed in past. Media at fault
Responsibility	Everyone must do something to stop this. We’re too politically correct	Lax parental supervision; radical imams preach hate	Rule of law must prevail	Politicians, columnists, public can’t resort to moral panic

Role of Islam	Monolithic, violent religion is sole motivator	Islamism (political offshoot of Islam) radicalizes youth	Police tie it to al-Qaeda style camps but we don't know yet	Role of religion is disputed. Islam defended. Stereotypes assailed
Solution	Change or question our institutions now (multiculturalism, immigration, etc.). Beef up security	Muslims must take responsibility (Group guilt)	Wait. Let's find out	Don't blame all Muslims. Bad guys are everywhere.
Emotional Connotation	Xenophobia, "the other," imported terror	Undetectable, inevitable and hidden. Be vigilant. Concerns about treatment of suspects minimized	Debate over whether they are inept fools or serious plotters. Police praised	Some may be innocent. Are laws too harsh? Role of moles questioned
Metaphor/Stereotype	They're all same, barbaric (ref. to beheading PM), unpatriotic, sexist	Danger from within from unruly youth. They don't realize how lucky they are in Canada	Innocent until proven guilty. Jail conditions, publication ban questioned	Possible victims of misunderstanding
Descriptors	EXTREME Islamic fundamentalists, mention of Jihad, al-Qaeda	UNFLATTERING Young rebels who don't appreciate life here	EVEN Seen as individuals with real lives, not symbols	SKEPTICAL Held too long. Case may be weak. Media challenged.
Depiction	Menacing, strange, bound by their religion, extreme.	Look just like us – who can know?	Suspected of a crime, their lives disrupted	Possible victims of overzealous police, terror laws. Takes a stand against this

The “moral panic” and “homegrown” frames contain what the literature calls discourses of democratic racism (Henry and Tator 2002). “Moral panic” – the most extreme frame – casts this unproven case of apprehended violence as a profound crisis that imperils Canadians’ way of life. It’s seen as a wake-up call, forcing Canadians to re-evaluate larger issues such as our policies on immigration and multiculturalism. The “homegrown” frame, on the other hand, contains elements of the discourse of national unity (Muslims are ungrateful immigrants who do not identify with Canadian values) and the discourse of otherness (they prefer their own alien cultural values and make unreasonable demands for accommodation from white

society). Both these frames imply that Canadians have something to fear and that Muslim terrorists are in our midst. Both can be termed “alarmist” because they have the potential of causing attitudinal or legislative changes that penalize the target group.

The problem is that those frames represent an unquestioning belief in the government/CSIS version of what happened. Neither one seems to be based on a true reading of the known facts of the Toronto 18 case. Several of the suspects were born abroad and so were not exactly “homegrown;” the evidence suggests they were motivated more by political opposition to Canada’s military role in Afghanistan than by their religion; the Muslim community in Canada is far from monolithic; and multiculturalism, in the sense that it supposedly encourages Muslims to isolate themselves from Canadian society, did not seem to be a factor, given that the suspects were fairly well assimilated (they had jobs or were attending school).

Opinion that fit the “crime victim” or “tolerance” frames, on the other hand, was more likely to delve into the individual backgrounds of the suspects and give details of their lives, much like any other criminal suspects are treated before their trials. Possible connections to foreign terrorist organizations like al-Qaeda are investigated, not accepted blindly. Islam is not depicted as monolithic, and secular Muslims are sought out for comment as well as religious leaders. More important, society’s institutions -- the government, the police investigators and the press itself -- are put under scrutiny too.

The Findings

During the arrest period, the five newspapers and Maclean’s magazine published 225 opinion articles (See Table 1). This compares to 295 news stories published during that nine-week period.² The great majority of opinion ran in the first two weeks after the first arrests, when details of the plot were sketchy and most of the suspects had not even appeared for their bail hearings. Not counting Maclean’s, which because of deadline considerations ran no articles until Week 3, the five newspapers carried 84 percent of their opinion for the whole arrest period in the first two weeks.³ The Globe and Mail, for instance, ran 37 opinion articles the first week, two the second week, and only three during weeks three through nine. So the press was decidedly quick to pass judgment, and it defined the issues of the case in an alarmist way; 71 percent of the editorials hammered home a “moral panic” or “homegrown terror” theme.

When all types of opinion for the 9-week arrest period were analyzed according to frames, here is what they looked like:

² Even when letters to the editor are excluded, opinion articles made up 28 percent of all stories published (news, editorials and columns). This is still a significant proportion.

³ Opinion articles published during the first two weeks (182) almost matched the number of news articles (207).

Table 2: How the Opinion was Framed

	Editorials	Columns	Letters
225 Total number	24	90	111
Moral panic	4.2% (1)	33.3% (30)	29.7% (33)
Homegrown terror	66.7% (16)	24.4% (22)	19.8% (22)
Crime suspects	4.2% (1)	20% (18)	17.1% (19)
Tolerance	25% (6)	22.2% (20)	33.3% (37)
(Figure in brackets is the actual number of articles in each frame)			

What stands out is the small percentage of opinion that treated the suspects simply as what they were, accused criminals (“crime suspects” frame). Only one of the 24 editorials did so, and fewer than 20 percent of columns and letters. Two-thirds of editorials fit the “homegrown” frame, and one-third of columns advocated various forms of “moral panic.” There were important differences among the various publications, as we shall see below, but the staff writers paid by the publishers to express their opinions generally did so using alarmist frames. Members of the public who wrote letters that were published, on the other hand, tended to be more measured and skeptical.

A good example of this disconnect is a front-page column by Christie Blatchford that the *Globe and Mail* published on June 5, the day it first carried news of the arrests. The column began: “I drove back from yesterday’s news conference at the Islamic Foundation of Toronto in the northeastern part of the city, but honestly, I could have just as easily floated home in the sea of horse manure emanating from the building.” She sarcastically ridiculed the notion that faith and religion had nothing to do with the terror plot:

“The accused men are mostly young and mostly bearded in the Taliban fashion. They have first names like Mohamed, middle names like Mohamed and last names like Mohamed. Some of their female relatives at the Brampton courthouse who were there in their support wore black head-to-toe burkas (now there’s a sight to gladden the Canadian female heart: homegrown burka-wearers darting about just as they do in Afghanistan), which is not a getup I have ever seen on anyone but Muslim women.”⁴

That column prompted an outpouring of letters from readers who objected to her extreme tone. The paper published 11 the next day, eight of which criticized her for insinuating that Islam was the root cause of the plot. But another letter writer reflected the racist hatred that such opinions can spark:

“Kudos to Christie Blatchford for having the courage to state the obvious, and congratulations to the *Globe* for putting her article on the front page. If one of your children were bitten by a spider, would you not be suspicious of spiders?”⁵

⁴ Blatchford, Christie, “Ignoring the biggest elephant in the room,” *The Globe and Mail*, June 5, 2006, page A1.

⁵ Letter, “Insightful or inciteful?” Paul Kennedy, *The Globe and Mail*, June 6, 2006, page A16.

In fact, there was a significant tendency for writers of all types of opinion in every publication except the Citizen and Globe and Mail to link the plot to Islam more often than not, and a large number in all publications linked the case to the international war on terror:

Table 3: What the Case was Linked to

	Star	Sun	Globe	Post	Citizen	Maclean's
Case linked to Islam	45% (40)	38% (17)	40% (17)	52% (14)	42% (5)	27% (3)
Case not linked to Islam	21% (19)	18% (8)	40% (17)	22% (6)	58% (7)	9% (1)
Linked to war on terror	35% (31)	44% (20)	45% (19)	48% (13)	75% (9)	27% (3)

However, important differences emerge when we look at each type of opinion separately.

Opinion Columns

Columns are key drivers of public opinion because their length and placement in the newspapers generally give them more impact with readers than editorials (which usually appear on the editorial page well inside the paper) or letters to the editor (which are shorter and appear on or near the editorial page). Four of the 90 columns, for example, ran on page one (two each in the Globe and Star). Furthermore, the average column in this study period contained 920 words, whereas the average editorial contained 527, and the average letter to the editor only 176. Also, columnists often speak to an audience that is predisposed to agree with them, unlike editorials or letters. Regular readers who think a columnist is astute are more likely to be influenced by that writer's point of view on issues that they know less about.

In terms of numbers of columns published, the Star ran twice as many as the Sun (36 to 18) during the 9-week arrest period. Those two papers together accounted for more than half of all columns.

Table 4: Frames of Opinion Columns

	Total	Star	Sun	Globe	Post	Citizen	Maclean's
	90	36	18	13	12	8	3
Moral panic	33.3% (30)	19.4%	44.4%	15.4%	75.0%	25.0%	66.7%
Homegrown terror	24.4% (22)	25.0%	27.8%	38.5%	8.3%	25.0%	0.0%
Crime suspects	20.0% (18)	22.2%	22.2%	23.1%	0.0%	25.0%	33.3%
Tolerance	22.2% (20)	33.3%	5.6%	23.1%	16.7%	25%	0.0%
(Number in brackets is how many articles fit each frame)							

As we see in Table 4, the highest percentage of alarmist opinion columns appeared in the National Post and Maclean's. In the Post's case, it published absolutely no columns that fit the "crime suspects" frame, and so the accused tended to be treated overwhelmingly not as individual suspects but as symbols of some greater threat. To cite one example of that, columnist Robert Fulford mocked what he saw as the Toronto Star's refusal to admit that this plot was conceived in the name of Islam:

"Among religions practised in Canada in the 21st century, Islam is unique in containing an element that goes forth to kill in its name...Pretending that religion doesn't matter in a case such as this is a kind of self-imposed blindness. Many events around the world, 9/11 most notably, should have cured us of it long ago."⁶

His colleague Lorne Gunter, writing the day after the first arrests were reported, went even further and invoked a picture of Muslims as intractable enemies of Canadian values:

"We could let Muslims practise sharia law within their own community and guarantee Muslim students and employees set aside space at schools and work for their 5 times daily prayers and still the jihadis among us would conspire to buy explosives and plot to blow up Canadian targets until we agreed to live under sharia law and worship Allah at dawn, mid morning, noon, mid afternoon and dusk."⁷

Appearing in the same paper 10 days later, columnist George Jonas went the full "moral panic" route:

"To illustrate that the road to hell is paved with good intentions, the example of multiculturalism will do. As a social policy in this country, it has not so much backfired as led to its predictable consequences: it awarded citizenship to aliens, alienated citizens and turned two grand solitudes into several petty ones...Multiculturalism hasn't been the sole cause of the spate of suicide bombings and assassinations since the 21st century began, but it's proving to be a potent ingredient in causation's baneful brew...The recent disruption of an alleged homegrown Islamist terror plot has caused many Canadians to ask: how can multiculturalism -- which preaches tolerance above all else -- be squared with a militant, intolerant creed that demonizes non-believers?"⁸

In Maclean's, Mark Steyn actually questioned the loyalty of Muslims in Canada, as did a few columnists in other publications:

"One can simultaneously be Canadian and Jamaican and gay and Anglican and all these identities can exist within your corporeal form in perfect harmony. But for most Western Muslims, Islam is their primary identity, and for a significant number thereof, it's a primary identity that exists in opposition to all others That's how nations die -- not by war or conquest, but by a thousand trivial concessions, until one day you wake up

⁶ Fulford, Robert, "The Toronto Star's self-imposed blindness," National Post, June 8, 2006, page A20.

⁷ Gunter, Lorne, "It was only a matter of time," National Post, June 5, 2006, page A17.

⁸ Jonas, George, "Good intentions, gone awry," National Post, June 15, 2006, page A25.

and you don't need to sign a formal instrument of surrender because you did it piecemeal. How many Muslims in Toronto sympathize with the aims of those arrested last week?"⁹

By no means were extreme opinions and the stereotyping of Muslims by "group guilt" confined to the Post and Maclean's, however. Robert Sibley in the Ottawa Citizen invoked the image of "the other" bringing alien values to Canada:

"So how do you respond to people who regard concepts of freedom, democracy, liberalism and tolerance as anathema? What do you do with those who cynically exploit principles of free expression and human rights to undermine the political order that sustains those principles? Well maybe it is time to stop being so accommodating."¹⁰

Columnists are paid to have strong opinions. It is fair to surmise that most would find it unsatisfying to depict the Toronto 18 suspects as mere accused criminals, entitled to the presumption of innocence until proven guilty, when there were so many other ways to go. Religion and the war on terror were relevant to this case, but columnists had many choices about how to contextualize that.

One way, as Rosie DiManno did in the Toronto Star, is to use inflammatory language and images to make the point that, as she put it, "here is your war":

"Be sickened. Be frightened. Be angry. But don't you dare be shocked These accused wanted, if intelligence experts are correct (and they've been wrong before), to kill you. Your children, your parents, your lovers, your neighbours ... The Jihad Generation – nothing alleged about it – makes no distinctions. Come such a day, Toronto will look like London ... Madrid ... Bali ... New York City. Blood streaming, mangled metal, severed limbs, inchoate rage and immeasurable grief."¹¹

That column is a classic example of the "moral panic" frame, implying that unless we stop it now, Islamic terrorism will kill our families. The use of emotions and metaphor are powerful tools for columnists to use in "framing" issues in the war on terror (Bhatia 2008); they allow the subjective conceptualization of reality to be more convincing. The trouble with resorting to such alarmist stereotypes, however, is that they can take our attention away from more important issues.

Other columnists managed to point readers in different directions. Two days after the first arrests were reported, the Star republished a Washington Post column by Andrew Mitrovica, who ironically is a journalist based in Toronto. In it, he referred not to New York and Bali but to the unfounded Project Thread case in 2003. Mitrovica stressed the dangers of stamping "terrorist" on the foreheads of suspects, as he saw the media doing in this case, before any facts have been proven in court.

"My career as an investigative reporter has trained me to be wary of the official story. I have found -- whether I am reporting on a murder case or terrorism -- that the essential

⁹ Steyn, Mark, "You can't believe your lyin' eyes; the Islamoschmoozing has gone into full gear. What's the harm? This is how nations die," Maclean's, June 19, 2006, page 50.

¹⁰ Sibley, Robert, "Rethinking multiculturalism," Ottawa Citizen, June 10, 2006, page A4.

¹¹ DiManno, Rosie, "Take a good, hard look at what's going on here," Toronto Star, June 4, 2009, page A10.

truth about a story is a complex and sometimes messy endeavour that demands a relentless challenge of the official story. It is not surprising that police and intelligence agencies want to paint their picture of events. It is not the role of journalists to act as a megaphone for the authorities, particularly when lives and reputations are in jeopardy.”¹²

This refrain was taken up by Star columnist Antonia Zerbisias the same day. She said the temptation on such a big story is for journalists to rely too closely on police sources:

“There’s a fine line between collusion and co-operation and maintaining close contacts. The media must now move into an entirely different mode -- the innocent until proven guilty mode. A little more skepticism -- and more important, some moderation -- is in order, please. Problem is, the story is in danger of running out of control.”¹³

These cautions frequently fell on deaf ears. There were exceptions. One was the Star’s Tom Walkom, who chose to examine the evidence critically -- “if these guys are terrorists, they aren’t very good ones.”¹⁴ Another was the Star’s Haroon Siddiqui, who analyzed factors in nations which had been targeted by terrorism, and found little in common.

“There are no easy answers. Blaming all Muslims, or Islam or multiculturalism, is just a McCarthyesque witch hunt against a rather powerless minority community in Canada.”¹⁵

Editorials

Since so many editorials (66.7 percent, in Table 2) took a similar line -- that homegrown terrorism is a reality in Canada -- we will quote from only three, all of which appeared within two days of the first arrests. One, in the Toronto Sun, refers to an “eerily prophetic” appearance by Canada’s number two spymaster, Jack Hooper, before a Senate committee just four days before those arrests. The gist of Hooper’s testimony was that terrorist activities inspired by the “al-Qaeda ideology and operational doctrine” are the most immediate terrorist security threat that we face. “We are seeing phenomena in Canada such as the emergence of homegrown, second- and third-generation terrorists,” he said. “These are people who may have immigrated to Canada at an early age and become radicalized while in Canada. They are virtually indistinguishable from other youth.” A growing number of white Anglo-Saxons are converting to radical Islam and thus becoming prime assets for al-Qaeda recruiters because of their ability to blend in with Canadian society, he added. The Sun agreed, dismissing police statements that the Toronto 18 case should not reflect negatively on any ethnocultural group:

“Even so, the very fact of these arrests suggests that radical Islamism -- with its preachings of hate -- has infiltrated our borders and threatens the safety of all Canadians, including the vast majority of law-abiding Muslims. If what police say is true, the enemy is now within. We should not be surprised.”¹⁶

¹² Mitrovica, Andrew, “Media need to ask tough questions,” Toronto Star, June 6, 2006, page A21.

¹³ Zerbisias, Antonia, “Time is right for skepticism,” Toronto Star, June 6, 2006, page C7.

¹⁴ Walkom, Thomas, “If these are terrorists, they are second-rate,” Toronto Star, June 7, 2006, page A1.

¹⁵ Siddiqui, Haroon, “Homegrown terror: No easy answers,” Toronto Star, June 8, 2006, page A23.

¹⁶ Editorial, “Fighting the enemy inside the gates,” Toronto Sun, June 4, 2006, page C1.

The prospect of a global Muslim conspiracy to destroy western civilization was taken up even more directly the next day by the Ottawa Citizen:

“They brought their war against the West to two great American cities in 2001. Next were Spain and England. In Holland, they butchered a filmmaker on the street. Australians got theirs in Bali. It’s surprising it took them so long to turn to Canada.”¹⁷

This seemed to put the onus on Canadian Muslims to curb extremism in their ranks – the concept of “group guilt” that many editorials endorsed using the “homegrown terror” frame, including this one in the Star:

“It is the responsibility of the Muslim community itself to act to stop the incitement of hatred by some members of its own families, educational and religious institutions.”¹⁸

Letters to the Editor

We see a very different pattern of framing emerge in letters to the editor. Whereas 70.9 percent of all editorials and 57.7 percent of all columns fit the more alarmist frames (“moral panic” and “homegrown terror”), a majority of letters to the editor (50.4 percent) were more measured and skeptical (fitting “crime suspects” or “tolerance” frames). Of those, the largest number seemed to directly challenge the heated rhetoric and stereotypical assumptions that they were finding in editorials and columns. This was particularly true in the Star and Globe and Mail, which published the most letters. More than four in every 10 letters in the two papers fit the “tolerance” frame.

Table 5: Frames of Letters to the Editor

	Total	Star	Sun	Globe	Post	Citizen	Maclean’s
Total	111	41	21	27	11	4	7
Moral panic	29.7% (33)	22.0%	28.6%	29.6%	45.5%	50.0%	42.9%
Homegrown terror	19.8% (22)	17.1%	28.6%	18.5%	18.2%	0.0%	28.6%
Crime suspects	17.1% (19)	19.5%	19.1%	11.1%	9.1%	50.0%	14.3%
Tolerance	33.3% (37)	41.5%	23.8%	40.7%	27.3%	0.0%	14.3%

This letter, published by the Star five days after the arrests, is a good example:

“The recent uproar and overreaction by the media and, sadly, so many of the public, worries me as much or more than any plans these individuals arrested may have been bent on carrying out ... They will have their day in court and I have every confidence

¹⁷ Editorial, “Jihad in Canada,” Ottawa Citizen, June 5, 2006, page A12.

¹⁸ Editorial, “Time to challenge Muslim extremists,” Toronto Star, June 6, 2006, page A22.

they will be afforded all the rights a Canadian court system allows. If the government case is proven, they should receive the maximum sentences allowed and only then should they be considered guilty. Until then, calm down and let the system do its work.”¹⁹

Despite what some columnists claimed was a disturbing silence from the mainstream Muslim community, many letter writers identified themselves as followers of Islam, and instead of trying to defend their religion, urged the media to reflect a better understanding of it:

“I have yet to see any journalist apply the rigours of his or her profession -- skepticism, verification and seeking different viewpoints Something very dangerous is happening in the understanding of Islam. While some people paint as extremist everyone who does not agree with them, the most immediate victims are devout Muslims who see how easily they can be tarred as dangerous by a name (Wahhabism) they have not given themselves.”²⁰

Of course, the extreme opinion they were reading, particularly in the National Post and Maclean’s, inspired some other readers to respond in kind. More than 63 percent of the letters published in the Post and 70 percent of those in Maclean’s fit the two alarmist frames:

“While the allegations against the 17 Canadians in custody have not been proven in court, there seems to be a pattern emerging in Canada that is familiar to that in Germany: Wahhabist imams recruiting young Muslim men, radicalizing them, and brainwashing them into embracing murder in the name of some twisted vision of Islam.”²¹

Conclusions

Since opinion is what people believe, and not necessarily what they can back up with facts, this analysis casts a revealing mirror on the fragile state of Canadian public opinion in the immediate wake of arrests in the country’s only (so far) plot resulting in charges of domestic terrorism. It is quite clear that, in the publications we examined, many traditions of innocent-until-proven-guilty and media skepticism went out the window.

Table 6: How Many Showed Skepticism

	Star	Sun	Globe	Post	Citizen	Maclean’s
Article cautioned that facts not proven yet	28% (25)	24% (11)	19% (8)	15% (9)	0% (0)	18% (2)

The tendency, particularly by editorial writers and columnists, to frame the plot in alarmist terms so quickly raises concerns about how well Canada’s mass media served the public at a time of crisis.

¹⁹ Letter, “We should all just calm down,” Betty Gorven, Toronto Star, June 8, 2006.

²⁰ Letter, “Devout Muslims tarred by name,” Sumayyah Hussein, Toronto Star, June 7, 2006.

²¹ Letter, “Multiculturalism has its limits: The view from Germany,” John Turley-Ewart, National Post, June 8, 2006, page A22.

One concern is that much of this opinion writing did not include original reporting. Most columnists, and many editorial writers, based their views on information gathered by others in their newsrooms. As a result, columnists seldom cited sources so readers could properly assess where the information was coming from. Researchers looking for clues to why opinion was “framed” a certain way would need to examine news stories to determine which sources were used most, including how often anonymous sources were used -- a task we plan to do in a subsequent paper.

Another concern is that editorials and columns tended, in this case at least, to simply adopt the official line put out by government politicians, police and security officials -- that “homegrown” terrorism is a reality in Canada. That exact descriptor was found in more than one-quarter of all letters, columns and editorials published on the case. It raises questions about whether, when a crisis occurs, our media act as independent watchdogs of power or are they instead “guard dogs,” deferring to authority during threatening times (Bishop 2000). The danger of repeating alarmist allegations from government and security officials is a lesson the media should have learned from the bogus “weapons of mass destruction” spin that was used to justify the invasion of Iraq.

A third concern is a more basic one, that a disturbing number of journalist-commentators, the day after the arrests, leapt to alarmist conclusions, some that verged on Islamophobia. In doing so, they failed to exercise their journalistic responsibilities for due diligence and their duties as citizens to respect the rights that all Canadians supposedly enjoy, like fair trial and the freedom to dissent and practice a religion.

The fact is that Canada has not yet experienced an actual case of homegrown terrorism - - a fear that the media whipped up within a few hours of the Toronto 18 arrests. Nor have any other suspected cases of homegrown terrorism surfaced in the four years since.

This case reinforces what other researchers have noted about the performance of the press when covering terrorism -- its willingness to embrace Muslim stereotypes (Perigoe 2007), its failure to verify key information (Finnegan 2007) and its propensity to accept the government’s line (Hutcheson et al 2004).

In the Toronto 18 case, seven adult suspects have pleaded guilty to terrorism charges, two others are still waiting for their cases to be decided in court, and one adult and one youth were found guilty after a trial. By examining how the media covered this case when the conclusion was not yet mapped out, we were able to determine that a significant portion of the published commentary raised unreasonable public alarm, cast suspicion on the followers of a major religion and impugned the religion itself, failed to subject the allegations of our government and security officials to rigorous scrutiny, and predicted guilt before the suspects were able to exercise their democratic rights to a fair trial.

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About the Authors

Prof. John Miller

Professor emeritus of journalism at Ryerson University and author of *Yesterday's News*, a critique about Canada's daily newspaper journalism. He is one of Canada's leading researchers on media and minorities, having published a 10-year diversity census of daily newsrooms (1994-2004) and several content analyses. His research and innovative teaching won him the 2009 Career Achievement Award at Ryerson. He is an award-winning reporter and a former senior news executive with the *Toronto Star*, Canada's largest daily newspaper. He came to Ryerson in 1986 as chairman of the School of Journalism.

Cybele Sack

Cybele Sack completed another research project with John Miller that was published in this journal as “Ippeewash and the Media: Case Study of How an Aboriginal Confrontation was Covered” (Volume 8, Issue 3, pp.1-10). She has also worked as a researcher for CBC News and the New York Times, as a chase producer and field producer for CTV News (producing live interviews for Newsnet), as a freelance journalist for the Globe and Mail and other publications, and as a documentary and current affairs intern for TVOntario. She has a journalism degree for university graduates from Ryerson University, a diploma in television broadcasting from Algonquin College and a Bachelor of Science from Trent University. Before focusing on journalism, Cybele worked in television and video production for various companies, including CTV Ottawa, Global News, Rogers Television and Stonehaven Productions. She also worked in policy and communications for Parks Canada.



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Mililani Trask, Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues for the Economic Council of the UN Assembly, Hawai'i, USA.

Marij Urlings, Inholland University, Amsterdam-Diemen, The Netherlands.

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