

Use of Twitter as an Alternative Narrative for Alshabab during the 2013 Westgate Mall Terror attack in Nairobi, Kenya

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Abstract: Media is a significant element for communication among groups and organisations in the society. The terror groups such as Alshabab have not succeeded in their use of mainstream media to communicate their narratives and thus, they rely on the alternative media. In the September 21 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya, Alshabab used twitter to counter narratives from the government and mainstream media reporting on the event. The extent of Alshabab's use of twitter triggered the researcher to examine the role of media narratives in the fight against terror. The objective of the study was to examine the alternative media narrative and the reportage on Alshabab during Westgate mall attack in Kenya. The study analysed strategies used by alshabab on twitter and the reporting by two Kenyan newspapers (The Standard and The Nation) during Westgate attack. The study used descriptive research design. The data was analysed qualitatively through thematic coding and interpretation. Data analysis was carried out in stages using content analysis, in which the narratives was analysed for themes and language strategies and frames. The findings of the study reveal that alshabab used various strategies from the first day of the Westgate attack. The findings has that the alshabab and the newspaper reporting was radically opposed immediately the mainstream media realized they were advancing terrorists ideals by reporting breaking the incident as hard news. The researcher recommends more understanding of the terrorists' propaganda so as to counter it in its early stages before their ideals are advanced.

Keywords: Twitter, Alshabab, Alternative Narrative.

INTRODUCTION

Kenya has seen increased Alshabab attacks and radicalization of its youths into the group since the Kenya defense forces went to Somalia to try to eliminate the insurgents. Since then, media has remained the only way for people get updates on the continuing war in Somalia and to communicate and create networks among Alshabab. The terror groups such as Alshabab have succeeded to communicate their narratives through the alternative media amidst the narratives of the mainstream media as was noted during the reportage on Alshabab Wastage Mall attack in Kenya. The 21 September 2013 up-market Westgate mall in Nairobi by Alshabab is a case to study regarding the reporting by the mainstream media and the narratives that shaped the incident from the Alshabab terror group[1] The attack, which lasted for three days, resulted in at least 67 deaths and over 175 wounded people in the mass shooting, with all of the gunmen reportedly killed.

During the Westgate attack, every institution in Kenya, the media and the government security went into a freeze and shock as no one could understand what

was happening. The two leading newspapers (Daily Nation and Standard Daily) reported and traded narratives that were differing and not consistent in their accuracy. One such narrative was the involvement of the white widow, the number of attackers and the nationality of the attackers. Using its twitter handle, the Alshabab countered these narratives and seemed to 'put things straight'. It is from this background that this study examined the Alshabab's alternative media narrative and the narratives reported by the two leading newspapers in Kenya during the Westgate Mall attack In Kenya.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For many years, the mainstream media has provided information and education for the society. With the advent of social media, and twitter in particular, institutions and groups have found a platform where they can compliment, supplement and counter mainstream media narratives. The alternative narrative, provided particularly by twitter has not been fully investigated and studied. Researchers and intelligence agencies have ignored the strategy and yet it is sustaining Al-Shabaab in their communication. The

September, 21st 2013 Westgate Mall attack in Kenya stands as a terror attack where Alshabab used twitter as an alternative narrative to counter the government communication through mainstream media regarding the event. The alternative narrative through twitter provides communication and visibility thus enabling them to remain relevant. If ignored for long, this could further strengthen the terror group and could lead us to making us to adapt dubious approaches in dealing with them.

Kambere[2] argues that Alshabab posted its first tweet on 7 December 2011 in Arabic language that translated to 'in the name of God the Merciful'. Alshabab 's English language output has several aims which according to Awan[3] involves conveying its narrative and ideology to potential western recruits; to present Alshabab as a legitimate and capable arbiter of Allah's will; to show unity within the group and to provide followers with a trusted alternative media source. Alasow[4] posits that the strategy echoes the idea that of al-Qaeda and its affiliates, by attempting to control and manipulate the flow of information about the group's fortunes, also entice the targeted audience into supporting its cause.

According to Arquilla[5], messages must be credible and legitimate to have an influence and set an agenda. The concept of influence warfare is because of drawing attention to the enemy's mistakes and offering a more compelling alternative narrative [6]. Alasow[7] points that the description of the twitter user as 'HarakatAlshabab Al Mujahideen' is an Islamic movement that governs South and Central Somalia and part of the global struggle towards the revival of Islamic Khilaafa. According to Kambere[8], the account has the title HSM Press Office and posts under the handle @HSMpress and as of 20 September 2012, the account had 15,780 followers. Ashley and Abdi[9] argue that Alshabab were the first terrorist group in the world to claim responsibility for an attack via Twitter. They further aver that it was only after the Westgate attack that questions were raised about how much publicity terrorist groups ought to have. Ashley and Abdi[10] argue that it is not clear why anyone is surprised by Alshabab's use of Twitter as an effective weapon of war. Lenhard and Susannah [11] analyses that the key function of terrorism is to grab the attention of an audience wider than the immediate victims, and as Conway [12] argues the use of alternative media by Alshabab is in many ways unsurprising. Whether publicizing the attacks online is motivated by a desire to strike fear into the wider community or it is being used to promote the group to a sympathetic audience, Twitter is one of the more obvious and arguably most suitable platforms for achieving this [13].

As in social media and online media, it is important to authenticate information and source

because of online confidentiality and ability to form non genuine content. It was easier to make sure the twitter handle @HSMPress truly belongs to Alshabab or they had used it for their online communication. HSM are initials for al-Shabaab's formal accounts all with a history of being attached to their twitter handles and Facebook accounts. The initial HSM stands for Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen as claimed by the user themselves [14]. By the time of Westgate attack, @HSMPress had over 6,000 followers. Before then, it was certain that the @HSMPress speaks for Alshabab because it used to update on their escapades and attacks. For example, they had severally published the identification cards of enemies killed in action and an audio clip of a captured Burundian soldier.

Moreover, there is evidence that the U.S government took the terrorist Twitter account seriously. As reported once by the New York Times, America was planning to close down the account. When the account was initiated in Dec. 7 2013, the first post was just as neutral as "In the name of Allah". From then, the twitter account streamed propaganda such as "4 killed as puppet's vehicle blown apart in bombing" [15]. This followed other tweets on successful suicide bombings, with dates and casualty counts, plus a generic call to jihad from the group's military spokesman.

The account was also used to boast that Kenyan troops being sent to Somalia will not succeed. For example, they used the account to link to a BBC article tweeting that the "much-hyped #Kenyan invasion" had "faltered quite prematurely"[16]. An Alshabab official who spoke to Al-Jazeera confirmed the account is genuine and claimed that it was meant to challenge media reports by giving an accurate account of the state of Jihad in Somalia and "countering western state sponsored propaganda machines" that demonize mujahedeen. All these facts are enough to confirm that the twitter handle @HSMPress, from which the data for this research was obtained is a genuine account used by Alshabab for their communication purposes and especially during the Westgate attack in Kenya.

While Alshabab principally uses its media output to justify its actions and give followers updates on the group's progress, Abul[17] argues that it also produces content that specifically targets Western Muslims. Awan[18] posits that since the advent of the printing press, terrorist movements have sought to create their own media in order to provide alternative narratives to its target audiences. For instance, just like a number of Al-Qaeda affiliates, Alshabab has recognized the importance of establishing alternatives to the mainstream media. This tends to attract new recruits and strengthens the resolve of existing members by providing a conduit through which they can interact with more senior and respected individuals within the organization [19]. Awan[20], in support of this

hypothesis argue that Alshabab has adopted alternative media strategy by producing English language videos, presented as news reports and press releases and by building a strong presence on Twitter the micro-blogging site. In the position of Abul[21], this propaganda has given Alshabab a chance to demonstrate their united force for carrying out the will of Allah by implementing Shariah and fighting against the enemies of Islam.

Agenda Setting Theory

According to proponent of the theory media releases a list of topics (issues on which media focuses) similar to the agenda of the meeting. The omission of certain events and issues, and overemphasis of others, establishes a particular way for media users to think about realities. For example, stories about crime, corruption and ethnicity in columns of many Kenyan newspaper, create the image of Kenyan society being nothing else but crime-corruption and ethnicity society and country. The attention given in news coverage to items influences the rank order of public awareness and attribute to the significance of an issue [22] agenda setting thus focuses on what topic the media presents to an audience and secondly, on how the information on the selected topics is presented. It relates to the dynamics of news coverage: The spectrum of viewpoints, symbols and question that are selected to construct the news and how they are ranked or accorded legitimacy and priority. Finally, agenda setting is concerned with how media legitimization of issues and events affect our perception of reality[23].

The Agenda-Setting Theory predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will place importance on the same issues. There are tenets that can be associated with agenda setting theory including:

- i. It has explanatory power because it explains why most people prioritize the same issues as important.
- ii. It has predictive power because it predicts that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel the same issues are important.
- iii. It can be proven because if people are not exposed to the same media, they will not feel the same issues are important.

Framing Theory

The concept of framing bias suggests that how something is presented (the “frame”) influences the choices people make. This idea is important because it is contrary to the central concept of rational choice theory. According to this theory, people always strive to make the most rational choices possible[24]. Thus, rational choosers should always make the same decision when given the same data. [25], however, conducted an experiment with undergraduate students that suggested something else. In the experiment, they gave different students the same decision. For some, however, the

decision was phrased in positive terms as a choice between a sure gain and an uncertain gamble. The majority chose the sure gain option, a tendency called “risk aversion.” For others, the same choices were phrased in negative terms as a choice between a sure-loss option and the risky gamble. Here the majority chose the risky gamble, a tendency called risk seeking. Thus, the way a decision was presented or “framed” affected the choice people made.

Communication itself comes with a frame. The elements of the Communication Frame include a message, an audience, a messenger, a medium, images, a context, and especially, higher-level moral and conceptual frames. The choice of language is, of course, vital, but it is vital because language evokes frames — moral and conceptual frames. Framing is an unavoidable part of human communication. We find it in the media as events are presented in certain ways; we find it in politics as politicians attempt to characterize events as one thing or another; and we find it in negotiating when one side tries to move another towards a desired outcome [26]. As far as media goes, one media thinker makes the following distinction: “mass media deals with two distinct features – priming and framing. The media power is not so much about telling people what to think (framing), but rather to tell people what to think about (priming) [27]. In the end, when a certain issue, such as terrorism, is already confirmed as a top-notch priority, the effects of framing are nevertheless of utmost importance. It is, of course, a directive that cannot be carried out — and that is the point. There are four morals in framing theory:

- i. Moral one: Every word evokes a frame because a frame is a conceptual structure used in thinking.
- ii. Moral two: Words defined within a frame evoke the frame
- iii. Moral three: Negating a frame evokes the frame
- iv. Moral four: Evoking a frame reinforces that frame

Framing is in many ways tied very closely to Agenda setting theory. Both focus on how media draws the public’s eye to specific topics – in this way they set the agenda. The role of mainstream media as an agenda setter and framer is currently being challenged by the wake of the new media narrative [28]. Therefore, the theory was used to understand the way the mainstream media sets the agenda and frames issues and the way alternative media has come into play in the hands of terrorism.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Media Strategies used by Alshabab on Twitter

As per the first objective, which was to explore media strategies used by Alshabab on twitter to contest reportage use by mainstream media during Westgate attack, the researcher found out that during Westgate

attack, the alshabab used various strategies from the first day of the Westgate attack.

Taking Responsibility of the Attack

The terror group took responsibility fast, at a time when Kenya and the world was speculating and this acted for their self-aggrandizement given that they did it on twitter. The terror group was first to answer questions regarding the perpetrators of the attackers at Nairobi city complex less than an hour after the attack was reported. The terror group took to social media (twitter to be specific) where the breaking news was trending regarding the attack. Their first tweet was strategic and timely through their twitter handle @HSMPress. It read:

“The Mujahideen entered #Westgate Mall today at around noon and are still inside the mall, fighting the #Kenyan Kuffar inside their own turf,”

This tweet was meant to provide an update to the world and thump the terror group’s involvement and responsibility in the attack. The engagement on twitter as an alternative media was probably occasioned by the fact that they needed an outlet for communication purposes. The information provided a quick answer to a riddle which was building up regarding the attackers and at the same time be used for propaganda purpose. The name mujahideen in Islam is given to heroes engaged in jihad; their holy war. It is a term which connotes a religious warrior. The derogative term Kuffar is an Arabic term meaning unbelievers, infidels or non-Muslim believers. Against the interpretation of the world, that the terrorists were criminals; killing innocent people, the tweet served to create another perspective that the terrorists were heroes killing infidels. This served as a propagandist frame that was made to cause more harm to the victims and assuage the group supporters and sympathizers.

Binary Opposition as Justification

The terror group seemed to listen to the world and the condemnation of their act. They tweeted again in a kind of retaliatory remarks, justifying their act as a small one compared to the seemingly attack of Muslims by Kenya defense forces. The alshabab group tweeted: “The attack at Westgate mall is just a very tiny fraction of what Muslims in Somalia experience at the hands of Kenya invaders.”

This was taking the debate further from the terror tone. The binary opposition implication created here was that Kenyan defense forces, who are supposedly Christians, were killing Muslim in Somali reducing it to be a religious battle. This came amid claims by the Associated Press, which ran a story from Nairobi quoting a source who reported that the attackers sifted through the shoppers at Westgate asking Muslims identify themselves and leave before reigning terror on

non-Muslims. They later posted that the “Only Kuffar were singled out for this attack. All Muslims inside #Westgate were escorted out by the mujahideen before beginning the attack”

The defense force was termed as invaders thus justifying the heinous act by their mujahideen. This was supposed to ridicule security, provoke revenge and create tension that would have Kenyan government agree to remove their defense forces, which were pursuing the terror group in Somalia.

The terror group was later to realize negotiations were out of question and when the government reacted as such, they justified their need to require no negotiation. It can be seen as a desperate tweet.

“The mujahideen are still firmly in control of the situation inside Westgate mall. Negotiation is out of the question!”

Posing as Organized Media for Updates

The alshabab continued to update online readers on the happenings of Westgate. This raises questions that they must have had good contact with those in the mall and such making it a well organized attack. At one time they reported that:

“HSM press has once again made contact with the mujahideen at #Westgate and obtained voice recording from some of them- they spoke comfortably and praised Allah to have been chosen for such an operation. The recordings will be made public soon Insha-allah”

Another tweet came 14 hours after and celebrated the long engagement of their attackers. It ironically greeted Kenya as: “A 14 hour standoff relayed in 1400 rounds of bullets and 140 characters of vengeance and still ongoing. Good morning Kenya!”

The “good morning Kenya” salutation showed a relaxed group that was orchestrating their act. It was meant to show that Kenyan security was in a desperate situation. This propagandist frame would be used to show off their power and might over a state. The group was later to enumerate and give statistics of the number of Kenyans they had already killed in the mall. The tweet was updating and implying that the group was in constant contact with the attackers at the mall. They posted that:

“Since our last contact, the mujahideen inside the mall confirmed to @HSM_Press that they have killed over 100 KenyanKuffar and battle is ongoing.”

Later, the alshabab updated readers on the prolonged battle at Westgate; defining it as a long time

struggle and terming Kenya as a fragile country without security while they keep their defense forces at Mogadishu. The tweet update read: “It’s slowly approaching the 24-hour mark- the darkest 24 hours in Nairobi- highlighting the sheer fragility of the Kenyan nation.”

Terming it as the darkest 24 hours in Nairobi was a frame to show powerlessness and desperation of Kenyan security forces and the country as whole. It was a celebratory communication meant to assuage the mujahideen, the other terror group supporters and the sympathizers.

Placing the Demand and Self Dialogue

They followed the conditions regarding negotiations. The tweet meant to show their stiff stand, which can be termed as a self dialogue for propaganda purpose appears as a respond to seemingly requests by the government of Kenya for negotiations. The tweet was reading the feelings of many Kenyans that Kenya should negotiate with the terrorists to save innocent lives and if possible to withdraw their military forces from Somalia. Reading this atmosphere, the terror group tweeted:

“We will not negotiate with the Kenyan government as long as its forces are invading our country, so reap the bitter fruits of your harvest”

This could be termed as self dialogue that created the perception that Kenyan government were in a negotiation readiness with the alshabab which was not true. Later they reported that “Kenyan government is pleading with our mujahideen inside the mall for negotiations. There will be no negotiations whatsoever at #Westgate”.

The terror group seemed to follow the media reports keenly and later, they blew out a story regarding the first attempt failure by the Kenyan security forces to storm the building. The group tweeted: “They say Kenyan forces tried to storm the building but failed miserably.” The “they” here probably refers to the media, especially the social media which was turning out to be a desperation station after a prolonged delay in reaching the perpetrators and some reportedly clash of command between the security forces.

The group has also presented itself as an Islamic advocate, speaking the ideals of Islam and taking the war against west as a serious religious call; just like Al-Qaida and other world ranking terror groups. The literature established that the group has been doing this online since 2011. Kambere[29] argues that Alshabab posted its first tweet on 7 December 2011 in Arabic language that translated to ‘in the name of God the Merciful’. Alshabab ’s English language output has several aims which according to Awan[30] involves

conveying its narrative and ideology to potential western recruits; to present Alshabab as a legitimate and capable arbiter of Allah’s will; to show unity within the group and to provide followers with a trusted alternative media source.

In agenda setting theory, this can be proven given that words and frames used by alshabab have predictive power because they foretell that if people are exposed to the same media, they will feel the same issues are important. This is what wins the people from western dissent and also from Islamic orientation who are conservative. It is no wondering that alshabab, as found in the analysis that they target conservative Islam to recruit them by inculcating their ideology.

CONCLUSION

The study found that there were different ways the two reported the incident. The few posts by twitter were able to be analysed and found to have been radically opposed to the reporting by the newspapers in Kenya. The first binary opposition was propaganda traded by alshabab versus truth reported by the newspapers. The second was the group integrity and cohesion versus binary division. There was also justification of act by alshabab versus condemnation of the attack by the Kenyan media and world leaders. It was also found that the alshabab majoring on creating tension while the newspapers were out to encourage Kenyans and bring on board unity between the religious groups and uniting Kenya as one. From the literature review, the researcher pointed some interesting findings and arguments on the functions of narratives among terror groups. The literature established also that even before the Alshabab started using alternative media, their communicative strategy involved disseminating narratives that have various purposes ranging from sympathy, persuasion and propaganda. There are different purposes of the narratives that Alshabab trade on the alternative media.

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