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The Role of Journalist in Global Sporting Events: A Case Study of Boston Marathon Explosion

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Abstract

The study was justified on the basis that not sufficient research studies had been done with respect to the role of journalists during perceived or actual terrorist activities targeting world sports events, which was a significantly large research gap that most researchers had not dealt with. The study was important to all the stakeholders who would be interested in knowing the role played by journalists concerning the terrorist attacks during world sports events. The data from telephone interview of journalists were taken through a discourse analysis. The results of the discourse analysis showed that the journalists competed in being the first to give breaking news, a notion that might have explained the reason why the journalists did not consider verifying the authenticity of whether the attacks amounted to terrorism. Moreover, results of the study indicated that the misinformation about the Boston Marathon attacks could have been due to the influence of interest groups, who might have been interested in destroying the reputation of the government with respect to security. To achieve this, the results showed that a respondent believed that some journalists might have been influenced to provide inaccurate information about the Boston attacks.

Introduction

Background of the study

With the increasing rate of politically motivated terrorism, big international events like sports were increasingly becoming some of the main targets of terrorist activities that had been a global risk, especially since the 9/11 attacks on the US soil [1]. Many terrorists had targeted world sporting events, the most recent one being an attack during the Boston marathon, with their terrorist activities. This had attracted many security measures during global sporting events. Nonetheless, the way the rest of the world perceived the actual or perceived attacks greatly depended on journalists who were involved in the global media sports. Millions of people were not able to be at the sporting events; instead, they depended on the media to get information [1]. This was what brought to question the role of sports journalism during sporting events as to the perception of the public about explosions at sporting events, like Boston Marathon.

Statement of the problem

Journalists had been known to play a very significant role in linking the world with sports events, especially those who, instead of traveling to watch live sports events, decided to watch through televisions and get information through other media outlets, such as the social media [2]. When there was an explosion that killed some few people and injured many others, journalists were quick to report on the happenings at the time, and the public received the information from different sources, including the social media. In many cases, the public would be made to perceive such explosions are being because of terrorism. A number of studies had explored this area. However, not enough studies had been conducted to reveal the reason journalists misinformed the public about the Boston Marathon explosions. This was what motivated this study.

The purpose and objectives

The purpose of this study was to establish the reason journalists misinformed the public to believe that the Boston Marathon explosions were due to terrorist activities.

Below are the objectives of the study.

1. To conduct a literature review with a view to establishing how much research had been done with respect to the role of journalists in informing the public about breaking news.
2. To evaluate how media industry experts perceived the reaction of journalists after the explosions at the Boston Marathon sporting event.
3. To investigate the role played by journalists during preliminary stages of sporting events.

Research questions

1. Was the misinformation about the Boston Marathon explosions deliberate?
2. Why did journalists promptly report the attacks as acts of terrorism before verifying the information?
3. How did journalists shape the public perception of terrorism during sports events?
4. Hypothesis
5. Journalists deliberately misinformed the public about the Boston Marathon explosions.
6. Journalists only reported what they wanted the public to know.
7. Failure to follow verification procedures was the reason journalists misinformed the public about the explosions at the Boston Marathon.

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Significance and justification of the study

The study was justified on the basis that not sufficient research studies had been done with respect to the role of journalists during perceived or actual terrorist activities targeting world sports events, which was a significantly large research gap that most researchers had not dealt with. The study was important to all the stakeholders who would be interested in knowing the role played by journalists concerning the terrorist attacks during world sports events. Besides, this study would form a basis for future studies to build on.

Literature Review

There are sufficient publications about the risks facing world sports events. In this regard, Allen [3] has contended that the provision of a safe and secure environment has been a priority for all stakeholders involved in the delivery of special or sporting events. This remains true as a number of previous studies shows that the increasing profile of sports and property of sporting events has led to increased exposure to risks that directly affect sports participants, spectators and other stakeholders.

According to Hoffman [4] , the risks that are linked to sporting events have included hooliganism, adverse weather, vandalism, fraud, assault, failed logistics and, most importantly, terrorism. Terrorism has been mentioned Hoffman [4] as being among the most common risks linked to world sports events and venues.

According to studies that were done by McGee [5] , the world sports organizers spend between $2 billion and $6 billion on an annual basis in making the sports events successful. With respect to security, a substantial amount of money is spent on protective measures, which include a system of physical protective systems, access control, crowd management, traffic control and staffing.

While contributing to the discourse, Fischer and Halibozek [6] argue that the terrorist attacks that took place in the United States in 2001 had a major impact on the financial commitment to safety and security at major world and local sporting events. The foregoing researchers have further postulated that with the increasing threats of terrorism, the costs of ensuring security at major world sports events are bound to increase tremendously in the future.

Research studies that have been done by White have revealed that modern terrorism comes in many forms and shapes, which range from organized groups to single individuals acting on his or her individual agenda. In other studies, the motivations for terrorism include the desire of terrorists to harm and defeat superior forces, assert identity, command attention and to achieve future order by defeating the current one.

Maclntosh and Bravo [7] have studied the link between sports and the media. According to the scholars, the effect of media upon sports is significant; the effects vary from changes made to sports equipment, match schedule, financial changes and sports venues. Other scholars note that the media and sports are two entities that have coexisted since the initiation of televisions, newspapers, radios and, now, the internet or Web 2.0.

Maclntosh and Bravo [7] have also noted that the growth of television as a media outlet has managed to put the link between sports and the media in the public agenda. They further content that the media shapes how the public perceives the world in relation to the information they get through the mass media, which is picked and formulated by journalist who supply the information to the media. However, not so much has been done with respect to the way in which journalists pick information about terrorism during sporting events, package and transmit it to the media from where the members of the public get it. It is for this reason that this study will be grounded on the Agenda Setting Theory the media.

Journalists play a crucial role in informing the public. However, the authenticity of the information they provide to the public has always been questioned. Harris [8] has argued that the members of the public are often concerned about the misinformation arising from poor journalistic practices. Harris [8] further contends that misinformation is prevent in the context of politics. However, there is not sufficient information to establish that the same problem is experienced with respect to reporting terrorist actions during sporting events. As noted earlier, journalists play a significant role in agenda-setting through the media, especially the social media. In this respect, Everitt [9] has claimed that journalists may be telling the members of the public only what they want them to believe.

According to Everitt [9], a significant number of the members of the public believe that journalists generally misinform the public at the behest of very influential people, who objective is to achieve certain personal ends. In this respect, not sufficient confirmatory research studies seem to have been done to strengthen such a claim.

While contributing to the debate, Campana [10] has contended that the members of the public, in many cases, have inaccurate information regarding what goes on in the country, especially with regard to issues that are related to security. Unfortunately, it has not yet been scientifically proven that the members of the public were misinformed about the attacks that were witnessed during the Boston marathon. Nonetheless, Campana has argued further that there are often risks of disinformation during disaster, especially where the cause of a disaster cannot be properly established.

In addition, Campana [10] has explained that journalists who do not verify the information they obtain before publishing it often run the high risk of misinforming the members of the public. This argument insinuates that the misinformation is normally due to the lack of a proper verification mechanism. However, Henry [11] holds a contrary opinion that some journalists know the truth, but end up twisting information and only give their own versions of stories to the public. In this regard, such journalists deliberately misinform the public with a view to driving certain agenda. Unfortunately, it cannot be established with precision whether this was the case with the information regarding the terrorist activities that were carried out during the Boston marathon.

Theoretical framework

This research study will be grounded on the Agenda Setting Theory. The agenda setting theory describes a significantly powerful influence of the media on the public agenda [12]. The core of agenda setting is the establishment of public awareness and concern of significant public issues by the news media [12]. Many scholars contend that agenda setting has progressed from the idea that the mass media play the role of determining the topics for the public. This implies that the media influence the behavior of the audience.

It is further argued that the stream of agenda setting research emanated from many inquiries into the communication factors that entail an agenda setting effect; this includes how certain variables influence the process, and so on.

The proponents of the agenda setting theory of the mass media propose that the primary assumption of the theory is that, whether consciously or unconsciously, the mass media create a certain image of reality [12]. Therefore, the agenda setting process lends its focus to the topics the media presents to the audience and on how selected information is presented to the public. Moreover, this theory is concerned with how the media's legitimization of matters and events affects the public's perception of reality.

However, the Agenda Setting Theory has been criticized on a number of grounds. One of the criticisms is that the theory does not deal with the question of how consumers utilize the information; instead, it deals with what the media does to the consumers of information [13]. In this case, the theory is seen to be one-sided and does not take into account all stakeholders in the generation and consumption of the public agenda. Some critics also argue that the theory only affects some people during specific times. For instance, it is argued that when the media decides to concentrate on political issues, then the rest who do not have an interest in politics are neglected by the media [13].

Research Method

Research design

Even though scientists had hailed a quantitative research as an objective approach to research, this study utilized a qualitative research design [14]. One of the advantages of a qualitative research design is that it is relatively cheaper than a quantitative research design [14]. Besides, it is more relevant than its quantitative counterpart is when studying subtle nuances in the attitudes and behaviors of the phenomena under study. Therefore, its primary strength is in the depth of understanding that it allows a researcher to have during a research study [14]; all these are the reasons why a qualitative research design was chosen for the study.

Case study

The study was conducted in the context of the Boston Marathon sports events that took place in the US recently. Like some of the sports events that had taken place around the world in the past, the Boston also became a victim of terrorist attacks. As usual, the media were also involved during the marathon events. Therefore, this research studied how the journalists who reported the attacks in the media shaped the perception of the public in relation to the attacks that left a number of people dead and several others injured and maimed.

Target population

The study targeted journalists whose main tasks involved reporting sports information during world sports events. Since this study was investigating the roles played by journalists during terrorist attacks at sporting events, it was only appropriate to involve sports journalists as the respondents.

Sampling technique

The process of selecting individuals to participate in the study utilized a purposive sampling technique. This sampling technique is also known as selective, subjective or judgmental sampling [15]. One of the advantages of this sampling method is that it allows a researcher to select the sources of data he or she seeks [15]. It is especially most appropriate where the researcher needs specific information from specific people; in the case of this study, journalists were the most relevant people in the study since they were the once concerned with the reporting to the world the happenings at sports events [15]. The sample population was constituted by 3 individual journalists who were picked from amongst those who participated in covering and reporting the events of the Boston Marathon and the media experts who were aware of the happenings at the Boston Marathon.

Methods of data collection

Telephone interviews were used as an instrument of data collection during the process of the research study. The interview took place in the form of a conversation. The researcher obtained the telephone contact of each of the journalist who was selected to participate in the study. In this respect, the process utilized unstructured interviews during the telephone conversations.

In order to use interviews successfully to achieve the objectives of the study, the interview process was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, the researcher determined the kind of information that was required to achieve the objectives of the study and to answer the research questions. In this case, interview questions were designed in a manner that directly answered the research questions. Then, in the second stage, the researcher asked specifically relevant questions to ensure that such questions did not generate irrelevant information.

During the telephone interviews, appropriate sound recorders were used to capture the voices of the interviewees and that of the researcher. The reason for recording of the voices was that there would be a need to analyze the conversations. The sounds were recorded in a way that allowed for easy transcription. The interviewees were informed in time that the interviews would be recorded for later use in analysis.

Research ethical issues

Since this study involved the collection of primary data from human beings, it was anticipated that there would be some ethical issues. In this case, it was important to point out that the study would observe some specific ethical requirements to avoid possible conflicts following its completion. First, the research participants were informed about the reason for the study. After this, their consent was sought in a verbal form. Coercion or deception was not used to lure anybody to either participate or provide information during the study.

In addition, the identities of the participants were concealed, especially where a participant made a request to that effect, or in cases where participants might provide sensitive information that might victimize them.

The participants were allowed to participate in the study at will. In this case, they were allowed to decide whether they would want to stay in the study until the end or stop their participation without the fear of repression. The data collected were kept away from third parties and would be disposed of after three months. More importantly, the study only began after obtaining permission from the relevant college authority.

Data analysis process

The data from telephone interview data were taken through a discourse analysis. A discourse analysis is a general term used to refer to the methods of analyzing written, vocal or sign languages [16].

With the process of a discourse analysis, the focus of a researcher is on the coherent sequence of speeches, propositions, and sentences [16]. In this regard, a discourse analyst often goes beyond the language use; he or she is more concerned with the socio-psychological traits of an individual under study than he or she is with the structure of texts.

It is important to note that a discourse is a system of meanings that are linked to the interactional socio-cultural context; such a context often operates regardless of the intention of a speaker [16]. During the analysis process, a discourse analyst focuses on language in terms of function and construction, in which case the researcher considers language as a means of constructing reality rather than mirroring it. In addition, the researcher is also concerned with language as a form of social process. In this respect, individuals are viewed to be concerned with the language in use, as opposed to the psychological phenomenon, such as emotions, attitude or memory [17].

The analysis process was divided into different stages. In the first, the audio data were transcribed. The transcription process was meant to convert the audio data into textual data for easy coding and analysis [17]. Thereafter, the data were coded according to emerging themes [18]. Before that, the researcher first passed through the data and, in the process, looking out for anything that could be interesting in terms of the objectives and the research questions. It is important to note that, since this was a discourse analysis, the coding process was not intended as a way of quantifying the data, as the codes were just provisional in the analysis process. The coding process was undertaken only to help in the identification of interesting points regarding the research questions [18].

The next stage was the analysis of the coded data. The analysis part was the crux of a research study. During the analysis, the researcher specifically looked for forms of variability and consistencies within the various themes from the texts. After this stage, the next stage involved the researcher going through the data again in order to find out more discourses that might still be relevant to the needs of the study. During this stage, the researcher further identified consistencies and variations within the data [18]. In the final stage, the researcher validated the results of the study. In the process, the researcher mainly checked how the discourses that were identified assisted in understanding of the coherence of the data. Besides, the researcher evaluated how the interviewees oriented themselves to the discourses. In addition, the stage included the identification of any new problem or something that might have remained unexplained after the end of the analysis process. Importantly, the researcher was also able to determine whether the study was successful, in light of the results that had been obtained. Finally, the findings of the discourse analysis were compiled and written in the form of a report [18].

Epistemological and ontological foundation

Epistemology is defined as a branch of philosophy that investigates the origin, nature, approaches, and the limits of human knowledge. It is the study of knowledge [19]. There are two main concerns of epistemology as a branch of philosophy: the nature of knowledge and the extent of human knowledge. With respect to the nature of knowledge, the focus is on the understanding of what knowledge entails [19]. Regarding the extent of human knowledge, the concern is with respect to extent to which a human being is knowledgeable about some phenomena. Overall, epistemology can he referred to as a theory of knowledge.

Therefore, the epistemological foundation of this research study was constructivism. The epistemological underpinning in constructivism is that a researcher and participants are linked together during the process of constructing knowledge, which implies that both the researcher and participants collaborate during the generation of knowledge [19]. In the context of constructivism, the ontological underpinning is relativism in nature, because all the truth is constructed by human beings and placed within a historical moment and social context. In this regard, it is important to note that multiple meanings may exist within the same set of data [19].

Results of the Study

As noted in the methodology chapter, the data were collected through telephone interviews and subjected through a discourse analysis [20]. The audio data that were obtained from two journalists and one communications expert were transcribed before being analyzed. During the analysis, attention was paid to the way the respondents used language in their responses to the questions that they were asked. The first question that was put to them was what they understood by the term "terrorism." The question was meant to gauge whether the respondents knew what would amount to an act of terrorism, especially in the context of the United States' legal definition of it.

Noun phrases were used the subject of the analysis of their responses. One of the respondents stated that, "a terrorist is a killer whose objective is to ensure that as many people as possible are dead and are injured by the use of bombs." Therefore, according to the respondent, any activity involving the use of bombs and explosives to kill or injure people is the work of a terrorism. This could explain the reason journalists were quick to report that the Boston bombing was a terrorist act. The second respondent said, "Terrorism is an act that involves causing of fear, deaths and injuries among innocent civilians." In the second response, the respondents used noun phrases such as fear, death and civilians as the ultimate objectives of terrorism. Interpreted differently, terrorism would be nothing else but activities that results in creating fear, death and injuries to civilians. Looking at the definition, and comparing it with what happened during the Boston Marathon, the respondent would be led to believe that it was an act of terrorism. However, the understanding of the third respondents of terrorism was distinctly different from that of the first two. According to him, religious, political, and ideological reasons were central to acts of terrorism. In this respect, he defined terrorism as "violent activities that are meant to achieve religious, political and ideological ends." This definition comes close to the one given under Chapter 113B of the U.S Code. These results can be interpreted to mean that the journalists who misled the public into believing that the Boston Marathon blast was because of terrorism did not have a proper understanding of what would constitute terrorism.

The first two respondents confirmed that they were led to believe that the Boston Marathon attack was a terrorist act based on their understanding of what would constitute such an act. One of them said, "There was no one who would use explosives in a crowd, if not a terrorist." The other respondent added that, "The only enemies who would use a bomb to kill and maim people are terrorists." The construction of these statements indicates that the respondents believed that only terrorists would use explosives to kill and maim. They tended not to consider what the attackers sought to achieve before concluding that the attacks were of terrorism nature. The lack

of the use of phrasal nouns such as religious, political and ideology in their statement constructions clearly indicated that the nouns did not matter to the respondents in terms of their understanding of what constitutes terrorism. A discourse analysis of the responses revealed that the journalist did not verify whether the attacks were by terrorists before reporting, choosing to rely on their understandings, instead.

The third respondent was interviewed with regard to his perception on the Boston Marathon attacks and on how journalists handled the issue. The respondent stated that, "Every journalist wanted to be the first to give breaking news and. Each one of them thought he understood terrorism and, therefore, did not need to waste time confirming the truth of the attacks." The respondent used such expressions as "to be the first to give breaking news" and "each of them understood terrorism", and "did not need to waste time." These expressions allude to the possibility that misleading the public about the Boston Marathon attacks was due to personal interests of the journalists and their failure to consult widely to gain an understanding of the likely causes of the attacks before reporting.

The tone and expression in the responses of the respondent indicated that most journalists believed they owed a duty to the public, who always believed they had the accurate information. This was demonstrated when he said that, "Most journalists believe they always know the truth about events and, sadly, the public always trust what they say. That is how they get misled." The sentiments of the respondents implied that he did not believe that journalists always told the truth and that the public were gullible. The respondent added that, "In many cases, some journalists are used by political interest groups to incite the public against the government." According to the respondent, anti-government agencies may use journalists to report inaccurate events to make the government appear as a failure in the eye of the public. Again, the responses showed that some of the misinformation about the Boston Marathon attacks by journalists might have been deliberate.

In summary, the results of the discourse analysis showed that the two of the respondents did not understand what constituted terrorism. Besides, the results further showed that the journalists competed in being the first to give breaking news, a notion that might have explained the reason why the journalists did not consider verifying the authenticity of whether the attacks amounted to terrorism. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that the misinformation about the Boston Marathon attacks could have been due to the influence of interest groups, who might have been interested in destroying the reputation of the government with respect to security. To achieve this, the results showed that a respondent believed that some journalists might have been influenced to provide inaccurate information about the Boston attacks.

Competing Interests

The authors have no conflict of interest to disclose.

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