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Disruptive Media Events: Balancing Editorial Control and Open Dissent in the Aftermath of Terror

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KEYWORDS Deviance; editorial control; key events; mediated debates; reader comments; right-wing actors; terror

Terror attacks force democratic societies to mobilize, reinforce and rethink core values, including media freedom and freedom of speech. This study documents how one major traumatic event—the 2011 Oslo terror attacks—challenged the practices and principles of editorial control in Norwegian legacy news organizations. It finds that major terror attacks and crisis profoundly challenges editorial practices, routines and norms in contemporary multi-platform media organizations. A main takeout from the study is that during a period of deep societal crisis, like the immediate time after terror, professional media seek to balance the professional ideal of an open and critical debate with the societal need for recovery and security. The latter concern made editors and journalists downplay the professional urge to expose conflict, to the advantage of a type of news and debate formats that sustained societal stability and resilience. New and stricter organizing principles were introduced to control online debates. As for the selection an editing of traditional op-ed pieces, new and more extreme voices were introduced to the debate, but only when flanked by authoritative expert voices that could counter or debunk their messages.

For news organisations, the aim was to enhance a deeper knowledge of how extremist movements could occur, while keeping in mind an editorial responsibility to provide a bulwark against the normalization of extremism and violence (Nossek 2008). The study argues that the perceived need for media professionals to respect the primacy of recovery and resilience after a terror attack, increases with the proximity of the crisis. Journalists who are also fellow citizens and members of the society under attack, will engage in a type of “socially responsible journalism” to a larger degree than media and reporters coming from the outside. These conclusions thus largely concur with studies of journalistic responses to other major terror attacks (Zelizer and Allan 2011; Cottle 2014), but at the same time underline the challenges of post-crisis journalism in the contemporary hybrid media landscape (Mortensen 2015). The study is relevant for all media professionals working in the times of multiplatform, online media, and in a time where terror attacks recurrently strike in a range of different countries around the world.

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Method and Data

The study is based on in-depth interviews with debate editors in the main national and regional news media in Norway. The interviews were conducted, sometime after the terror attacks, providing the opportunity for the interviewees to critically reflect on the role they took on and the choices they made in the immediate aftermath of the terror. The editors could take into account the continuing meta-debate about how society in general and the media, in particular, should respond to the brutal effects of terror. At the same time the memories and feelings from those very special first weeks after the attacks were still highly vivid for most of the editors interviewed. The images of the bombed and totally destroyed government headquarters, where many media houses were located in the immediate proximity, forcing central newspapers to find provisional shelter to keep up their work, were still palpable. As was the gruesome images of the ensuing attacks on the labour youth camp, where teenagers and kids were shot and killed. In total 69 people were assassinated in the name of the right-wing, extreme anti-Islamic ideology by a native Norwegian perpetrator.

From Open Public Debates to ...

In the period before the attacks, the media landscape had gone through a rapid and profound transformation: Digitalization and a range of user-generated platforms, most notably social media and comment sections, provided unprecedented opportunities for user-participation (Chadwick 2013). Consequently, the legacy media lost their position as *de facto* gatekeepers of the public debate, and as a reaction they created their own spaces for online debate, open for audiences to engage directly in commentary sections and different types of user-generated and user-controlled fora (Singer 2014). In hindsight, the editorial control was remarkably scant, and the opportunity to participate anonymously was largely accepted as necessary to keep the threshold for participation as low as possible. News organizations emphasized recruiting a wide range of new voices, to boost engagement and inviting people to make themselves heard. Warnings and concerns related to the influx of defamatory messages, hate speech and an insulting language were present, but the editorial emphasis was on facilitating open, vibrant and engaging debates (Papacharissi 2015). Hence, to a large degree, newspapers had a liberal *laissez-faire* policy towards their responsibility as editors hosting online debates. In the aftermath of the Oslo terror attack, however, two parallel editorial processes were initiated as a response to the crisis.

(I) Tighter Control: Closure, Moderation and New Editorial Awareness

First, immediately following the attacks all media organizations moved towards a more interventionist policy introducing multiple new control measures in their online comment sections and participatory platforms. For many of the editors, the initial panic after the attack exposed a general lack of editorial control of their online debate forums, which they had been aware of for some time, but had not prioritized before the attacks. The fact that the terrorist could have been active on their debate platforms (and that others “extremists” could still be active) fundamentally scared the major media organizations and exposed their shortcomings, as illustrated in this statement:

You realize that your routines are insufficient: We do not monitor closely enough! We are not present enough! And it was a major wake-up call! Regarding where we are good enough, what are we poor at, and what short-term and longer-term changes we must make ... All media organizations have better moderation routines now than before the attacks. (Editor, interviewed by authors 2014)

Whereas the bulk of the media organizations gradually reopened the online debate sections in the months after the attacks, some changes were permanent, demonstrating how the editors' awareness of their responsibility to facilitate civil and appropriate debate, increased in the post-terror atmosphere of heightened political sensitivity:

- Open, user-driven participatory debate forums were terminated and never reopened after the attacks, as editors did not have the resources for proper moderation.
- Comment sections were moderated more strictly, leading to a professionalization of moderation practices in many of the news organizations studied.
- All the media organizations studied placed a stronger emphasis on the rules and ethics of participatory online debates, and most hired external moderators to professionalize and systematize the implementation of these guidelines.
- Editors made a stricter evaluation of which topics they would open up for reader comments, shying away from topics related to the attacks and by notifying the moderators in advance if/when they planned to open contested or sensitive stories for online comments.
- The majority of the news organizations introduced new rules in which participants had to write under their own full name, in line with the broader trend towards tighter editorial control after the Oslo attacks.

This increased editorial awareness was further accentuated by the fact that the culture, tone and civility in online debate became a continuous issue on the public agenda. Among the editors we interviewed, many stress the intensification of the meta-debate as one of the major, lasting changes in current mediated debates, as both media professionals and other stakeholders turned their critical attention to the debate climate.

(II) Expansion of Elite Deviance: Exposure and Contextualization of Far-right Actors

At the same time as the editorial control with online debate sections became stricter, the news organizations felt that there was a need to understand the terrorist's radical-right, anti-Islamic ideas and inspiration. This fuelled the meta-debate among researchers and experts about which viewpoints and actors should be deemed legitimate in mediated debates. The majority of the editors interviewed, aimed to widen the range of opinions allowed on op-ed pages and in broadcast debates following the terror attack. As a result, actors positioned on the far-right, who had previously been deemed "deviant" were invited into the legacy media more often after the attacks as a result of changes in editorial policy (see also Figenschou and Beyer 2014). Acknowledging the challenges involved widening the range of opinions and inviting in deviant ideas and actors, the editors express divergent opinions:

- A vocal minority among the interviewed editors underlined the risk of normalizing deviant, extreme viewpoints.
- Although a majority of the editors, argued for more exposure and debate about radical-right opinions, they were ambiguous, sceptical and hesitant in how to give these “deviant” actors a voice. This scepticism and distrust is mutual, and radical-right actors are vocal critics of the legacy media.
- Consequently, deviant actors were only invited onto debate platforms where editorial staff had efficient control measures, such as in op-ed articles and studio debates, and not onto the participatory debate platforms discussed above. Most editors, only invited deviant radical-right voices into their debates when they could be contextualized, countered and exposed. Signalling that they did not trust the audience to make up their own mind.
- One recurrent strategy was to publish extreme op-eds or letters-to-the-editor flanked by counter arguments from authoritative experts who provided (what was presented as) factual description of reality

Conclusion

The reflexive accounts of how Norwegian mainstream media organizations balanced openness and control after the Oslo terror demonstrate the wide-ranging implications that traumatic events have on key societal institutions such as the professional, legacy media. Sudden, dramatic crisis challenges editorial practices, routines and norms, and such editorial challenges are intensified in current media organizations offering debates on multiple platforms. Altogether, the editorial decisions and strategies were multifaceted, adapted to the different platforms. This illustrates how legacy news organizations both have larger, more complex responsibilities managing multiple publication platforms, but also illuminates how multiple platforms enable more fine-tuned editorial strategies when necessary.

In the years after the Oslo terror attacks, the emerging awareness and meta-debate concerning what is perceived as legitimate topics, opinions and actors, addressed in this study has become more vocal and explicit in increasingly polarized discussions playing out across media platforms. Where to draw the line between productive dissent and intolerable deviance continues to be contested and without straightforward answers in standard professional editorial principles. Contemporary recurrent terror attacks carried out by violent extremists worldwide, continue to shake media organizations and raise similar ethical dilemmas concerning deviance, freedom of speech and debate culture.

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