

The US media and the London terror scare

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Since August 10, when British authorities arrested two dozen individuals in connection with an alleged plot to blow up a number of airplanes over the Atlantic Ocean, the American mass media has worked ceaselessly to create a climate of fear.

For the first several days after the news of the alleged plot broke, American news programs were virtually unwatchable. The lurid logos and wild, unsubstantiated allegations made a mockery of claims that the networks and cable channels are in the business of “news-gathering.”

The responses of the cable news channels to events like the August 10 arrests are predictable. One knows ahead of time that each of the channels will have its own sensationalist logo and catch-phrase. However, the combination of limited imaginations and shared political goals—centered on keeping the US population in a state of constant panic—often results in a certain overlap. CNN, for example, chose “Target: USA” as its phrase, Fox News opted for “Terror in the Sky,” and MSNBC neatly combined the two with “Target America: Terror in the Sky.”

On the morning of August 10, CNN anchors Soledad O’Brien and Tony Harris did their best to terrify their viewers. O’Brien began: “You’re watching a special edition of ‘American Morning,’ as we bring you breaking news that has begun really in Great Britain, but has rippled its way right here to the United States. We’re talking about terror.

“British officials are saying that they have disrupted a plot to commit mass murder. That’s a quote, ‘a plot to commit mass murder.’ They said mass murder on an unimaginable scale. They believe, in fact, that they have foiled the plot. Twenty one people are now under arrest.”

O’Brien introduced a later segment this way: “A sophisticated terror plot has been foiled. Now worldwide aviation has been thrown into chaos as unprecedented security measures are now being put into place...

“Lots of unknowns, of course, at this point as the investigation is just getting under way. How many planes, for example? Was there a specific date planned? We do not know.”

The CNN anchor neglected to place the very existence of the plot in the category of “unknowns.” That she and her colleagues accepted without questioning. She made no use of the word “alleged.” Her phrase, a “terror plot has been foiled,” would be repeated by commentators dozens and dozens of times over the next several days, as though this were an established fact.

Inadvertently acknowledging the public’s growing skepticism about terror scares organized by the Bush administration, CNN reporters recurrently referred to this new terror scenario as “the real deal.”

O’Brien couldn’t help herself over the course of the morning: “A source close to the investigation says this is the real deal,” “People close to the investigation say this is the real deal,” “A source close to the investigation says, ‘this is the real deal.’”

Nor could her co-anchor, Harris, who first asked a CNN reporter: “You travel all over the world, does this feel like the real deal to you?” and then assumed ownership of the phrase himself, “And a source close to the investigation says this is the real deal.”

CNN correspondent John King also got in on the act, “This senior administration official moments ago saying that this is very much the real deal, in his view.” Jeanne Meserve, CNN homeland security

correspondent, carried the torch throughout the morning and afternoon, repeating the phrase on several different CNN programs: “Just talked to a US government official, who, when I asked about the seriousness of this threat, called it the real deal,” “According to one official I talked to, this was, quote, ‘the real deal,’” “A US official telling me this morning this was the real deal in his opinion” and “Officials call this the real deal.”

And if the plot turns out, in the end, not to be the ‘real deal,’ will there be any consequences for these individuals? Of course not. The entire affair will simply be allowed to die away.

The shift into terror mode is less immediately noticeable on Fox News Channel, since this Rupert Murdoch-owned propaganda arm of the Bush administration is perpetually on a ‘war footing.’ On Fox, no one even bothered with the word “alleged” in reporting the British airplane conspiracy.

On a typical Fox afternoon program last week, “In the wake of the London bomb plot...” one of their stupid female announcers begins, over the logo “Terror in the Sky.” Scotland Yard is conducting “70 anti-terror investigations,” we are informed. One of the suspects in the airplane plot planned to “use his infant as a decoy” while carrying out the dastardly deed. The British government has “stopped four bomb plots” since last July.

No evidence, no proof for any of this.

At one point a list of spectacular “Plot Details” appears on the screen:

- * Blow up planes in midair
- * Up to 50 terrorists involved
- * 21 arrested so far
- * Use liquid explosions to blow up planes
- * Target American planes

Chris Wallace of Fox begins an interview, with yet another “terrorism analyst,” in the following manner: “When British authorities broke up that terror plot to blow up several aircraft heading for the US, they prevented a massacre over the Atlantic.” No reason to bother with the formality of an investigation, much less a trial.

On August 11, Fox’s John Gibson, a vicious proponent of police-state measures, questioned Attorney General Alberto Gonzales. Gibson asked: “What is the role that either the Patriot Act or the NSA surveillance program or any of those kinds of things where American authorities listen in on people, what role did that play in this investigation?” Gonzales more or less sidestepped the question, on the grounds that “We don’t want to jeopardize the subsequent prosecution.”

Gibson wasn’t to be put off so easily: “Let me put it this way, Mr. Attorney General. Apparently the Brits did use ‘sneak and peek’ as well as telephone taps. Does that illustrate, or should that illustrate to the American public, why those are necessary tools here?”

Gonzales replied by providing the justification offered by every dictatorial regime for spying on the population: “We have had a very dangerous and very determined enemy, and they’re very smart. And they’re very wise in the ways that they communicate with each other. And I think we have a responsibility in government to ensure that we’re taking advantage of changing technology ourselves. We shouldn’t handicap ourselves.”

The alleged airline bomb plot has caused massive disruption to international air traffic. As always, the Bush administration would like to have it both ways: terrify the public yet not cut into the profits of giant corporations. On Fox's "Your World with Neil Cavuto" August 10, the host of the program raised this vexing matter with Frances Townsend, White House homeland security adviser.

Cavuto worried that many members of the flying public "might be canceling reservations. In a way, then, do the terrorists succeed by not succeeding?" Townsend provided this rather shaky assurance: "Well, you know, they—if people begin to cancel their reservations and not travel, the—the terrorists do, in some measure, succeed. You know, this is about fear. It's about instilling that fear in the flying public, both British and American.

"And you heard, today, the president, and you heard [Homeland Security] Secretary [Michael] Chertoff say, the measures we are taking, while they will create an inconvenience for the flying public, is the—are the very same measures that ought to give them the reassurance that it is safe to continue flying."

Should one laugh or cry?

On MSNBC, with certain notable exceptions, the same general tone was struck. On August 10, Tucker Carlson, something of an idiot, introduced his afternoon program as follows: "The news today, absolutely chilling. What could well have been the most spectacular terror attack since 9/11, a murderous plot involving jumbo jets and targeting thousands of unsuspecting American travelers. But unlike the deadly attacks on New York and Washington almost five years ago, this plot was thwarted, possibly at the very last minute."

At 7 p.m., Chris Matthews chimed in, beginning his "Hardball" program, "coming to you tonight from outside the headquarters of the Department of Homeland Security in Washington," with: "A terror plot of unimaginable scope was thwarted today. British authorities arrested 24 British subjects, suspected in a plot to blow up nine airplanes on their way from London to the US. President Bush and US officials worked with their British counterparts in the days leading up to today's arrests."

Later in the evening, right-wing former congressman Joe Scarborough started off "Scarborough Country" as follows: "Tonight, governments in America, England and across the world are working feverishly to unfold that terror plot to blow up those flights from Great Britain to the United States. Thank God the plot was foiled by Scotland Yard, with the help of US authorities, who picked up an unusually high amount of chatter over the past month."

On his August 14 program, Carlson interrogated Dr. Azzam Tamimi, director of the Institute of Islamic Political Thought and a senior member of the Muslim Association of Britain, who raised doubts about the terror plot, noting that "we have been told that this entire alleged plot was uncovered by the Pakistanis.... And I don't have any confidence in the Pakistani intelligence or in any intelligence in that part of the world because they function as contractors. They do things in order to appease certain circles, and we've been there before."

This was too much for Carlson, who interjected indignantly, "So, wait, you are basing your claim that this is likely a hoax simply on the fact that you don't like the ISI, the Pakistani Intelligence Service, and that they've been wrong before? I mean, do you have evidence that this was a hoax? Because it's an awfully poisonous thing to say otherwise."

The application of the adjective "poisonous" to the defense of individuals who have been jailed and branded would-be mass murderers by two of the most powerful governments on earth, but not charged or found guilty of any crime: Does this not sum up the contemptuous attitude of the American media toward democracy?

Tamimi proceeded to point out the obvious: "I don't have evidence that it is a hoax, but there is no evidence that it was real."

Keith Olbermann of MSNBC's "Countdown" program represented

something of an exception to the uncritical transmission of government claims as facts. He began his program August 10, remarking, "The hysteria stops here," and later, "The source is the British, the same people who missed both subway bombings in London last year, then shot a purported terrorist wearing a suicide-bomb vest and running from police, only it turned out he was a 27-year-old electrician wearing an ordinary shirt and walking."

Olbermann asked, "How much of the plot was actually operational, how much of it feasible, how much of the reaction political?"

On August 14, Olbermann returned to the alleged bomb plot, in a segment called "The nexus of politics and terror." He noted that "the plot, while real, might not have been quite as real as it was being advertised." Among the revelations he mentioned: "Now we know, from senior members of British intelligence, that no attack was imminent, that those suspected had yet to buy airline tickets, and some of them didn't even have passports.... Our government insisted on immediate arrests, and proceeded, both before and after them, to make every imaginable piece of political [hay] out of them."

Olbermann even raised a thoroughly taboo question in the American media, "whether a government would really exaggerate or manipulate terror developments, not to allay the fears of the citizenry, but rather to inflame them."

A special note must be added about the presence on CNN's Headline News channel of Glenn Beck, a reactionary radio talk show host, who has been given his own evening program. Pretending to provide "straight talk," Beck, an obviously unstable individual, carries on in the manner of a homegrown American fascist.

Lest we be accused of exaggerating, here are a few samples. From his August 10 program: "Does your gut tell you that this [the alleged bomb plot] is the start of something much bigger? We're at red alert for the very first time in our nation's history, and I for one don't think it should be just because of what happened in London."

Beck then referred to the case of two Muslim men from Dearborn, Michigan, arrested on terrorism charges for purchasing hundreds of cell phones. The claims have subsequently been exposed as fraudulent, the men released and the terrorism charges dropped.

Beck ranted on: "Also bodies of Iran's Revolutionary Guard have reportedly been found among the Hezbollah fighters slain in Lebanon. [Another entirely unsubstantiated assertion.] I have been saying this the whole time. And now we have proof positive. We are at world war with Iran. They are assembling forces and mobilizing our enemies on a global level. Iran is the head of the snake."

And later on the same program: "The story out of London is huge. But it is part of something much bigger, and much more dangerous. This is why I've been saying we're in World War III. It's just—we're at the beginning, and we're just now beginning to see how everything is really tied together."

On August 14, Beck returned to the Iranian threat and its apocalyptic character. [Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad] "is a force for evil who is more dangerous than Hitler. Hitler really didn't want to die to fulfill his sick vision. This guy does and will.

"I also know that I am no longer going to call this a war on terror. Mainly because that implies that it's kind of like the war on drugs. You know, something that will always be around, we just need to contain it. Just saying no doesn't really work with crazy people.

"We have to wipe this threat out completely, not contain it. We need to kill them before they kill us."

This is the type of filth to which the American public is subjected on a daily basis.



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