Media rush to judgment in Boston Marathon bombing

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The explosion of two bombs Monday afternoon at the Boston Marathon has been accompanied by a rush to judgment by the media, in which claims of a broad new terror attack are being made without any factual substantiation.

The bombs exploded near the finish line of the marathon in the heart of the city's downtown area. According to media reports, at least three people were killed and 144 wounded, including 15 with critical injuries. Witnesses on the scene and at hospitals have reported that the injuries include amputated lower limbs.

The explosions took place within about 20 seconds of one another and 50-100 yards apart, while thousands of marathoners were still running and many thousands of spectators were lined up along the route. The blasts shattered storefront windows, sending shards of glass and other debris into the crowd.

No individual or organization has as yet claimed responsibility for this brutal and criminal act.

Copley Square was evacuated and will reportedly remain closed off for 24 hours. Parts of the city's public transit system were shut down and aircraft grounded for several hours at Logan International Airport, but service resumed in the early evening.

The federal government increased security around the White House, and New York City announced it had elevated its security operations.

In a press conference several hours after the blasts, Boston Police Commissioner Edward Davis said there was a third explosion several miles away at the John F. Kennedy Library, which authorities were treating as related to the bombings at the marathon. However, officials subsequently said the incident at the JFK Library was "fire-related" and not connected to the marathon bombings.

There were also multiple press reports of a third bomb deliberately detonated by authorities following the initial blasts, and the Associated Press cited an unnamed intelligence official as saying at least one other device was found in the area of the race.

In the absence of clear facts or forensic evidence, many of the statements made by the media amounted to pure speculation, aimed at promoting an unstated political agenda and encouraging a mood of panic. Many assertions contradicted one another. For example, some commentators claimed the explosive devices were small and primitive, while others said they were sophisticated and indicated the work of a terrorist organization.

Some media outlets in particular seemed bent on steering the public toward the view that the Boston events were a terror attack along the lines of 9/11. CNN's Wolf Blitzer directed the network's reportage along these lines, encouraging his "expert" commentators to make wide-ranging claims within minutes of the explosions and while the mayhem on the streets of Boston was still unfolding. Jane Harman, the former Democratic chair of the House Intelligence Committee, appearing as a CNN commentator, claimed the bombings pointed in the direction of Al Qaeda.

The Murdoch press' *New York Post* ran a banner headline, "Clearly an Act of Terror," and featured a second article headlined "Authorities ID suspect as Saudi national in marathon bombings, under guard at Boston hospital."

NBC Evening News featured as its terrorism expert Michael Leitner, former director of the US National Counterterrorism Center under both the Bush and Obama administrations. Without any factual substantiation, Leitner declared that the bombings were the act of a "terrorist organization."

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However, President Obama, in a brief statement from the White House delivered at about 6 PM, pointedly refrained from labeling the incident as an act of terror. He said the “full resources of the federal government” and the “full weight of justice” would be deployed against those responsible, while admitting that the government did not know “who did this or why.”

There appeared to be an element of confusion or conflict within the state over the response to the bombings. The media widely reported that the Federal Bureau of Investigation had declared the bombings to be a terrorist act. And only minutes after Obama’s White House statement, a “senior administration official” told Fox News, “When multiple devices go off, that’s an act of terrorism.”

It is necessary to treat all of the initial reports by the media with extreme skepticism. Whether the Boston bombing was a terror attack by Al Qaeda or by a home-grown right-wing organization, or an act carried out with state involvement, remains unknown.

In maintaining a critical attitude and avoiding falling prey to media manipulation, it is useful to recall the role of the media in previous cases of alleged terrorist attacks. In the anthrax incidents that occurred shortly after 9/11, for example, the media made sweeping claims of Al Qaeda and Islamist involvement, none of which proved to be true.

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