Media hysteria grows over Boston bombing

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On Wednesday, two days after two bombs exploded near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, killing three people and wounding 178, the media coverage of the tragedy reached new heights of sensationalism and outright hysteria.

The cable news networks, led by CNN, churned out one rumor after another, most of which quickly proved to be false. They set the tone for the rest of the corporate media, which at one point reported that a suspect had been taken into custody, only to have the report denied by Boston police and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Despite repeated media claims that a suspect had been identified in video recordings of the bomb scene and promises of a joint press conference of federal, state and local officials to announce a major breakthrough in the case, the day ended as it began, with no suspects identified, no one having claimed responsibility, and no public information as to who planted the bombs or why. The press conference, which was supposed to include Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick, Boston Mayor Thomas Menino and FBI investigators, never materialized.

It remains unknown whether the terrible crime was the work of one person or an organization, homegrown or foreign, although even some congressmen have acknowledged that several factors point to a rightwing domestic terrorist. These include the relatively crude character of the bombs, the lack of any prior threat alert or claim of responsibility, and the timing—on Boston's Patriot's Day and federal tax day and the same week as the 1995 bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City.

Senator Saxby Chambliss (Republican of Georgia) said Wednesday, "There are a lot of things that are surrounding this that build an indication that it may have been a domestic terrorist."

Of the 178 people wounded in the blasts, over twenty remain in critical condition and thirteen have had limbs amputated.

But while the nation, including the people of Boston, deeply saddened and shocked by the event as they are, have remained calm, the media and their leading personnel present a picture of disorientation and panic. There is an element of calculation in this, as the media establishment attempts to sow fear and confusion to justify past police state measures at home and wars abroad carried out in the name of the "war on terror," and prepare the way for a further militarization of American society. But there is as well a genuine mood of hysteria within this affluent and self-contained social layer.

CNN's coverage Wednesday morning was dominated by endless speculation over reports that letters apparently laced with the deadly poison ricin and addressed to a Mississippi Republican senator and President Obama had been intercepted by postal authorities in Washington DC. CNN commentators repeatedly raised the possibility of a connection to the Boston bombing, even though federal authorities had announced that there was no indication of any such connection. Moreover, the conclusion that the letters contained the poison was only preliminary, pending the results of further tests.

There were lurid reports of Senate offices being cleared and rumors of other ricin letters. At a White House press briefing, reporters peppered Press Secretary Jay Carney with questions about the letters and their possible connection to the Boston bombing.

The obsessive focus on the letters was broken later in the morning when CNN reporter John King told news anchor Wolf Blitzer that he had been told by authoritative sources that a suspect had been identified from a surveillance video of the site of the second of the two blasts. King said the video was from a camera perched atop the Lord & Taylor department store across

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the street from the site, and that it showed a “dark-skinned male” placing a black package or backpack on the ground and walking away.

This was the reason, King and Blitzer said, that a joint federal-state-local press conference scheduled for 1 PM had been moved back to 5 PM.

Speculation over this alleged suspect was interspersed with reports that the federal courthouse in Boston had been cleared due to a bomb scare and further unsubstantiated claims about the suspicious letters.

Then came the reports, picked up by virtually the entire media, that the authorities already had a suspect in custody. This sparked waves of speculation over whether the suspect would be named at the 5 PM press conference.

As the afternoon wore on, CNN’s claims of a “breakthrough” in the investigation and a video portrait of the suspected bomber grew more conditional. When 5 PM arrived, an unnamed official took to the podium to inform the assembled press that the news conference would be delayed for an indefinite period.

Shortly before 6 PM, Blitzer interviewed Governor Patrick, who denied having seen any video of a suspect and in general poured cold water over talk of an imminent breakthrough in the probe. Asked by Blitzer whether the press conference would be held that night, Patrick said he did not think so.

Events such as the Boston Marathon bombing ultimately reflect the immense social crisis and increasingly toxic contradictions of America. What happened on Monday was a horrific event that has left hundreds of families scarred for life. But it is the case that mass killings, more frequently with automatic weapons than with bombs, are a regular occurrence in the United States.

It is also the case that the kind of death and destruction that hit downtown Boston on Monday, and far worse, is inflicted by the United States government virtually on a daily basis in the form of drone strikes on towns and villages in either Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen or Somalia. This cannot but have a dehumanizing and demoralizing effect on sections of the US population.

In its own way, the hysterical response of the corporate-controlled media to the Boston bombing is another reflection of the crisis and impasse of American society.

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