

Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism Case Study of Government Communication during Westgate and DusitD2 Attacks

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Strategic Communications Project Report

December 2020

This report is part of a wider project, led by the International Centre for Counter- Terrorism (ICCT) – the Hague, and funded by the EU Devco on “Mitigating the Impact of Media Reporting of Terrorism”. This project aims to produce evidence-based guidance and capacity building outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents. The role of media reporting on terrorism has been under investigated and is an underutilised dimension of a holistic counter-terrorism strategy. How the media reports on terrorism has the potential to impact counter-terrorism (CT) perspective positively or negatively.



Funded by
the European Union



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Key Findings

- During the Westgate attack, the government appeared unprepared to handle the twenty-four-hour cycles of social media platforms. This was evidenced by delays in updating the numerous social media accounts that the government officials operated during the incident. The accounts at times also issued conflicting information, which undermined the overall messaging. However, there was a simplified communication structure during the DusitD2 attack. This helped with the dissemination of consistent information by government officials on the attack.
- There is a clear disconnect of government communication response to terrorist incidents in Nairobi and in the rest of the country. Attacks in the capital get instant and wide engagement. This signals a clear editorial narrative within the Kenyan reporters on terrorism – most of the editors and reporters appear to have a limited understanding of the subject. The local media also appears to rely on official positions to advance their news coverage. There was little challenge of official comments.
- Patriotic sentiment remains prominent in local media reporting on terrorism, which appears to be encouraged by government officials.

Introduction

The purpose of this research was to find out how the Kenyan media and the government communication reacted to two major terrorist attacks carried out by the Somali militant group al-Shabaab in the country's capital Nairobi. The two attacks in question are: the Westgate incident of September 2013, and the DusitD2 complex attack of January 2019. The research takes an analytical look at how events unfolded, how the state communication teams responded and the local media coverage of the attacks. The research is based on previously published and broadcast material on the two incidents and on interviews with journalists and government officials. The research is an analysis of government communication and media reporting during the two events, and makes recommendations for future reference. Lastly, with the results of this study we are able to draw conclusions on how they pertain to public perception.

The data for this study derived from coverage by the key national newspapers, TV and radio stations from the time of the attacks up to three months after the incidents. We limited the search of the Westgate attack to the period between 22 September and 21 December 2013 and the DusitD2 attack to 15 January and 14 April 2019.

Methodology

The primary research question was: "What is the impact - positive and negative – of media reporting of terrorism in Kenya in particular around Westgate and DusitD2 terrorist attacks?" The findings and analysis aim to produce evidence-based guidance and outputs based on original, context-sensitive research into the risks and opportunities in media reporting of terrorism and terrorist incidents.

The sources used in this report included published reports and archived articles on the two bombings. We examined eighty-eight reports spread across Kenya's four main national daily newspapers: *Daily Nation*, *The Standard*, *The Star*, and the *People Daily*.

Newspapers often set the news agenda in Kenya, with their output is largely replicated by the country's broadcast media. Sixty-one reports were analysed on content from the country's five key TV channels and two radio stations: Citizen, NTV, KTN TV, K24, KBC TV, and KBC Radio and Radio Citizen, respectively. These media outlets were chosen because of their extensive editorial output on the subject and their reach and influence across Kenya.

This was supplemented by interviews with nine editors, media regulators, media researchers, and political analysts. Most of the interviews were conducted face-to-face, while some were also conducted by phone. The respondents approached during this study were those who had, at one point or another, been involved in the media coverage, response management, or government communication of terrorist and counter-terrorism activities.

The Context

Terrorism in Kenya

Kenya has, since the late 1990s, experienced threats from violent extremism associated with Islamist militancy. Initially, the threat was mainly linked to sympathisers of al-Qaeda. The threat rose again following the formation of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen – or more commonly referred to as al-Shabaab – in 2006 in Somalia.

Largely comprising ethnic Somalis, the group has exploited clan differences among Somalis spread across the Horn of Africa. This enabled it to expand its operations to countries outside Somalia. A string of attacks in Kenya claimed by the group in 2011 created the justification for Kenya to deploy troops in Somalia in October of that year, with the intention to curtail the scope of al-Shabaab. However, since then hundreds of Kenyans have been killed, thousands injured, and property destroyed in multiple attacks mainly in the country's north-eastern and coastal regions, due to their close proximity to Somalia. The capital Nairobi has also suffered attacks. The north-eastern and coastal regions, which have large Muslim

populations and are nearer to Somalia, remain the main recruitment pool for the group.

Media in Kenya

In Kenya, private media ownership is aligned to political and business interests. The most prominent media houses are either owned by or linked to politicians. Some businesspeople who own these outlets are also associated with certain political parties or individuals. Kenya's modern state is rooted on a Western liberal political system, which encourages the spirit of private entrepreneurship, including in the country's media. The private sector dominates the Kenyan media, often outshining its state-owned rivals. The private media is largely conservative, making it natural allies of the state in the suppression of radical activities, including by groups like al-Shabaab.¹ By conservative, it means the media takes an extremely measured approach towards social and political topics.

With the state being a key source of advertising revenue and private sector media is generally commercially-driven, the latter is fairly uncritical of the government on major issues and tends to avoid engaging in editorial conduct that contradicts official narratives. Consequently, a combination of pressure from the state and the media's own hostility towards terrorism sustain media output that is hostile towards terrorism.

Westgate Attack

Introduction

On 21 September 2013, around noon East Africa Time (09:00 GMT), Somali militant group

al-Shabaab commenced an attack on the up-market Westgate Mall in the Westlands suburb in Kenya's capital city Nairobi. The raid was one of the most high-profile terrorist attacks in the country, but not with the highest casualty figures.

The attack by four masked gunmen, which police at first presented as an armed robbery incident, quickly developed into a hostage situation that lasted until 24 September when Kenyan security forces (military, paramilitary units and police) finally secured the building. The attack left seventy-one people dead, including sixty-two civilians, five Kenyan soldiers, and the four attackers. Another 200 people were wounded, during the worst terrorist attack on Kenyan soil since the August 1998 bombing of the US embassy in central Nairobi by al-Qaeda. The four-day siege left large parts of the shopping centre destroyed. The Somali militant group al-Shabaab said its members staged the attack in response to Kenya's army carrying out operations on Somali territory.

Numerous factors make the Westgate attack stand out. First, it was the first major attack in Kenya since the 1998 bombing of the US embassy. The execution of the attack, particularly the use of social media by the perpetrators, attracted widespread media coverage. Second, Westgate was the most serious terrorist incident inside Kenya since the country deployed troops in Somalia in October 2011 to fight al-Shabaab.² Third, the attack came at a time when the use of social media was on the rise among Kenyans, including government officials. There were an estimated four million Kenyans on Facebook and 700,000 on Twitter³ by 2014.⁴ Fourth, the attack was the first major security challenge to the new administration

1 Ogenga, F. "Is Peace Journalism possible in the 'war' against terror in Somalia? How the Kenyan Daily Nation and the Standard represented Operation Linda Nchi" *Conflict and Communication Online*, Vol. 11, No.2 (2012), p.6. Available at: http://www.cco.regener-online.de/2012_2/pdf/ogenga.pdf, accessed: 27 November 2020.

2 The deployment, and the following two years, had witnessed a surge of government-orchestrated nationalistic campaigns among Kenyans, especially the local media. Journalists frequently infused strong patriotic elements in their reporting on the Somalia mission.

3 The phenomenon of using social media in Kenya has continued to pose a serious challenge to the creation and dissemination of content by both the government and the country's traditional media, including on topics like terrorism. During Westgate, the government was confronted by real-time citizen-embedded media activism, a situation that senior state communication officials struggled with.

4 Mola, E. "The number of social media users in Kenya" *Hapakenya*, (13 October 2014). Available at: <https://hapakenya.com/2014/10/13/number-of-social-media-users-in-kenya/>, accessed: 13 March 2020.

of President Uhuru Kenyatta and his deputy, William Ruto, inaugurated in April 2013.⁵

Government messaging

The siege lasted eighty hours, during which it attracted extensive coverage by ordinary Kenyans, and local and foreign media.

Messaging by the Kenyan government was uncoordinated and confused and demonstrated poor crisis communication.⁶ Not surprising, on 10 October 2013 President Kenyatta admitted that the operation to secure the mall was “bungled”.⁷ As shown in the communication matrix below, there were many outlets from the government that provided information on the same event, thereby creating confusion. At least four state entities were tasked with providing information to the media and public. These were the Ministry of Interior (including Police), an official government spokesperson, the Kenya Defence Forces, and the Presidential Press.

The Ministry of Interior was the most prominent. It commenced by misrepresenting the attack as an armed robbery inside the mall. Kenya has a high crime rate and citizens rarely question such explanations by the police. Despite claiming it was a robbery, the Ministry offered little evidence. Less than an hour into the incident, the Ministry of Interior tweeted on its handle account (@InteriorKE) that “We’ve managed to evacuate some people to safety as @PoliceKE pursues the thugs”. Information later posted on the Ministry’s Twitter account changed from robbery to a hostage situation.

Citizens in or around the mall however hinted via social media that the incident was far more serious. This appeared to have forced the presidential media unit (PSCU Digital Kenya) to warn journalists to “tweet what you are absolutely sure about #Westgate”.

A day later, the Kenyan Disaster Operation Centre demanded a prominent privately-owned station, Capital FM, to take down a “misleading” story, which alluded to terrorism. This rigidity of the robbery-hostage narrative persisted even as al-Shabaab started claiming on its official Twitter handles that it was perpetrating a terrorist attack. However, most Kenyan media houses clung to the government narrative. A former senior editor with one of Kenya’s top newspapers, who was involved in the coverage, observed that:

Government officials were basically lying throughout the Westgate, giving contradictory and often making unsubstantiated information. This was making Al-Shabab look more believable. The government also benefited from the fact that most of the reporters deployed at the scene were unskilled in covering terrorism.⁸

Despite the limited reach of the platform across the country, the Ministry of Interior preferred to use Twitter as its primary communication tool. Further, the messages were written in English, a language that has limited use across the country. Only 25 percent of the population of 38 million in 2013 was estimated to be able to communicate with ease in English – the main medium of instruction at school.⁹

Content posted on state Twitter handles

5 The two leaders were then facing trial at the International Criminal Court (ICC) over the violence that followed the country’s 2007 presidential elections. They had campaigned on a strong nationalistic platform, taking a critical view of the West, which they blamed for their tribulations. Even as Kenya faced this serious security challenges, the local media remained also focused on the ICC, a sign that the press understood the government’s main pressing issue. Predictably, in under a month after the end of the Westgate siege, the Kenyan media plunged into the ICC trials. Reports on the terrorist attack were brief and few.

6 Muriuki, F. “Crisis communication lessons from terrorist attack on DusitD2 hotel” *The Standard*, 28 January 2019. Available at:

<https://test.standardmedia.co.ke/adbloc?u=https://test.standardmedia.co.ke/commentary/article/2001311029/crisis-communication-lessons-from-terrorist-attack-on-dusitd2-hotel>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

7 Ilado, P. “Westgate Operation Was Bungled – Uhuru” *The Star*, (10 September 2013). Link unavailable.

8 Interview, former editor and now regional analyst

9 Cottrell Ghai, J. “Pluralism, Language and the Constitution” Katiba Institute, 15 December 2017. Available at: <https://katibainstitute.org/pluralism-language-and-the-constitution-jill-cottrell-ghai/>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

was also amplified by Kenya's expansive national broadcaster, the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation, facilitating its reach to consumers of traditional media in the country.

The use of social media by government officials had been popularised by President Kenyatta during his campaigns, a trend he continued after winning the presidency. While such preferences appealed to a large part of the country's youth, they also posed problems to messaging by the government to the wider population. By 2013, there were an estimated 17 million users of the Internet in Kenya, according to Internet Live Stats.¹⁰ However, only 123,000 were active on Twitter in Nairobi in the last quarter of 2013.¹¹

Citizen messaging

Simon et al. (2014)¹² assert that Kenyans were active on Twitter throughout the Westgate crisis. This activity can be classified into six main categories: 1) producing information concerning the event; 2) sharing and consolidating information; 3) expressing emotional and social support for individuals, communities or responders affected by the crisis; 4) sharing concerns about privacy and security issues regarding social media; 5) requesting or offering to volunteer; and 6) criticizing the government and its security services.

Most of the Kenyans on social media appeared to believe at the time that the attack was a terrorist attack. The view was later shared by sections of the mainstream media. An editorial published on 22 September by *The Standard* newspaper accused the government of “[being reluctant]” to acknowledge it is a terrorist attack, despite “all indications...pointing to a possible terrorist attack”.¹³ The perception among Kenyans was based on historical knowledge created by the persistent attacks

in the country by al-Shabaab, especially in Kenya's north-eastern regions that border Somalia. Looking back at the media reporting on the Westgate attack, a former senior editor with observed that:

“Most of the reporters deployed during Westgate were a bit naïve. The US attack of 1998 was a distant memory and few of them told the story within the right political context. Reporting by local media ahead of the attack on the implications of the Kenya's military deployment had also been limited. If the pre-Westgate reporting had been in-depth, maybe the media conduct could have been different.”¹⁴

Ordinary Kenyans attributed the incident to al-Shabaab, viewed themselves as victims, and expected the government to explain why it had happened, and how it would be dealt with. The immediate claim of responsibility by al-Shabaab reinforced this perception, especially after the group linked the attack to Kenya's military presence in Somalia.

With fears confirmed, some Kenyans viewed their government as negligent, arguing that the security forces should have taken mitigating measures in case of a blowback related to the Somalia deployment. Some Kenyans posted online messages critical of the security services, accusing them of incompetence and corruption. The criticism was also extended to the wider Ministry of Interior, which has a reputation as being particularly affected by corruption and incompetence.

The hostile reaction by the citizens signals that government officials underestimated the real-time impact of social media. Their content was often challenged instantly by other users, including ordinary Kenyans as well as the perpetrators of the attack. For example, the then Minister of Interior Joseph Ole Lenku

¹⁰ <https://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/kenya/> ; Accessed at: 06 December 2020

¹¹ Report, “How Africa Tweets 2014”, Portland Communications, Available at: <https://portland-communications.com/publications/how-africa-tweets-2014/> ; Accessed: 08 December 2020.

¹² Simon T. , Goldberg A., Aharonson-Daniel L., Leykin D. and Adini B. “Twitter in the Cross Fire—The Use of Social Media in the Westgate Mall Terror Attack in Kenya”, PLoS One 25 August 2014, Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4143241/> ; accessed at: 1 September 2020

¹³ Editorial, ‘Bring perpetrators of brazen attack to book’, *The Standard*, 22 September 2013 (hardcopy accessed: 5 Dec 2020)

¹⁴ Interview, former Editor now Regional Analyst

was frequently accused by Kenyans on Twitter of “cooking up lies” over the progress of the security operation, safety of business assets in the mall and overall conduct of the security personnel. Some of the lies that he was accused of was that fierce sporadic shooting erupted again on the same day – hours after the Minister had claimed the special forces were “in control” of the mall. As the Minister insisted the government was in control, sporadic bursts could be heard again.

There were conflicting reports about the true identity of the attackers – six of whom are reported to have been killed by Kenyan Special Forces during the siege, – and the number of those who were allegedly in custody. No details had been given on the number of hostages freed, or those still being held, but sixty-three people were earlier recorded missing by the Kenya Red Cross. This figure was thought to include hostages, as well as those possibly killed by the captors. Another issue raised was the identity of the woman suspected to be the commander of the attackers. Witnesses said they saw a woman leading the militants, but the Minister of Interior said there was no woman, even as President Kenyatta acknowledged the presence of a woman.

There were also delays in updating some of the government social media accounts or posting of content deemed inappropriate, for example asking Kenyans to unite when the fate of hostages was still unclear.¹⁵

The public was not convinced that the government was in control of the situation.¹⁶ A classic example was about who started the

fire that caused thick plumes of black smoke from the building. Initially, authorities claimed security forces had done it as a tactic, but they later blamed it on the attackers.

There were at least five Twitter accounts operated by the government authorities during Westgate. The most active was the account ran by the Ministry of Interior, which was the lead agency in the security operation.¹⁷

This large number of accounts created the environment for a confused communication and the dissemination of a large volume of information, which at times was not synchronised or standardised. On 24 September, Twitter contacted the Kenyan government over the verification of the official’s accounts in a bid to ensure the circulation of official and credible information from the authenticated accounts.¹⁸

Figure 1 below indicates direct messaging from four government agencies and little collaboration between them.

The mixed messaging created the environment for contradictions and creeping doubts within the public about the credibility of the state’s narratives. An upsurge of information from independent sources at times forced the government to backtrack on some of its earlier explanations. During one of his numerous press conferences, then Minister of Interior Joseph Ole Lenku quickly retracted an earlier admission that the military was responsible for an incident that led to the collapse of part of the mall. He instead blamed the terrorists.¹⁹ Subsequent investigations confirmed the military was responsible.²⁰

15 Were D. “How Kenya turned to social media after mall attack.” CNN, 25 September 2013. Available at: <https://edition.cnn.com/2013/09/25/opinion/kenya-social-media-attack/index.html>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

16 Momanyi, S., *The Impact of Al-Shabab Terrorist Attacks in Kenya*. Master’s Programme for Peace and Conflict Transformation, The Arctic University of Norway, 2015. Available at: <https://munin.uit.no/bitstream/handle/10037/9848/thesis.pdf?sequence=1>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

17 Other accounts were those of then Minister for Interior, Joseph Ole Lenku, then Inspector-General of Police, David Kimaiyo, the Kenya Defence Forces (KDF), the KDF spokesperson, and that of the National Disaster Operations Centre. There were also the accounts for State House, the president’s office, and the head of Kenya civil service.

18 Tomer S., Avishay G., Limor D., Dmitry L., Bruria A. “Twitter in the Cross Fire—The Use of Social Media in the Westgate Mall Terror Attack in Kenya” *PLoS ONE* (25 August 2014). Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0104136> accessed: 1 September 2020.

19 Mbaka, J. “Westgate attack: Kenyan authorities on the spot over slip-ups”, *The Standard*, 26 September 2013. Available at:

<https://test.standardmedia.co.ke/adblock?u=https://test.standardmedia.co.ke/kenya/article/2000094308/kenyan-authorities-on-the-spot-over-slip-ups>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

20 News, “Too many questions left unanswered” *Daily Nation*, 20 September 2014. Available at:

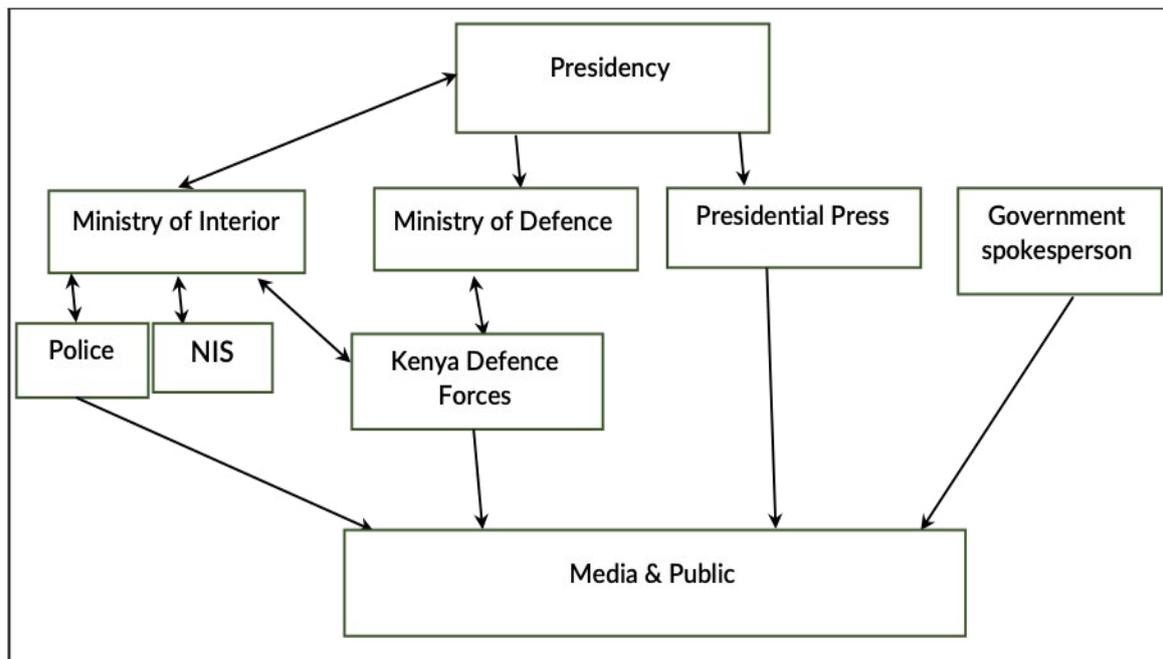


Figure 1. Westgate attack – government communication matrix

A key part of the government’s strategy involved invoking passions of national unity, patriotism and mobilisation among Kenyans. In a national address, President Kenyatta said national unity “represents our victory over all those who wish us ill”.²¹ The Ministry of Interior was meanwhile circulating images and messaging, aimed at fuelling and strengthening the spirit of patriotism among Kenyans. There was repeated messaging by the Ministry and president invoking words or phrases taken from Kenya’s national anthem. For example, on 22 September 2013, President Kenyatta, in a national address, said “I salute your conscientious and selfless acts of solidarity in response to the terrorist attack.”²²

Besides appealing to patriotism, the Ministry of Interior also urged Kenyans and local media to refrain from posting “graphic” or “false” content

online, as a way of expressing “solidarity with the affected families”.²³ The appeal made the government appear empathetic. The Media Council of Kenya - the government body that regulates the media and journalism in the country - also urged the media to be “careful” in its reporting, so as not “compromise the hostages’ safety”.²⁴

In the eyes of the Ministry, the attack was not unique, but one in a multitude of similar incidents being carried out across the world by groups similar to al-Shabaab. Indeed, on 27 September, President Kenyatta was quoted saying that “terrorism is a global problem that requires global solutions”.²⁵

Al-Shabaab messaging

Westgate was a watershed moment for

<https://nation.africa/kenya/news/too-many-questions-left-unanswered-1026090>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

21 PCSU “Full statement of President Uhuru Kenyatta on terror attack”, *The Standard*, 22 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/adblock?u=https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/nairobi/article/2000094033/full-statement-of-president-uhuru-kenyatta-on-terror-attack> accessed: 02 December 2020.

22 Ibid.

23 Matinde, V. “#WeAreOne and #WestGate Echoe Throughout The Globe Showing Kenya’s Resolve”, *Techmoran*, 23 September 2013. Available at: <https://techmoran.com/2013/09/23/weareone-and-westgate-echoe-throughout-the-globe-showing-kenyas-resolve/>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

24 Makabila, S. “Leaders use social media to appeal for calm”, *The Standard* 22 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/adblock?u=https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/lifestyle/article/2000094014/leaders-use-social-media-to-appeal-for-calm>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

25 Blair, E and Pascal Fletcher. “Analysis: Mall raid rallies foreign support for ICC-indictee Kenyatta”, *Reuters*, 26 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-attack-kenyatta-analysis-idUSBRE98P0HY20130926>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

al-Shabaab in regard to showcasing its propaganda capabilities. The attack was the first major international incident where the group was providing clear and near live media coverage.

Al-Shabaab appeared ahead of Kenyan security forces on Twitter (Mair, 2016). The group had been using Twitter since 2011 and was adept at the technology. Al-Shabaab's first objective of using Twitter in Westgate was to register a real-time claim responsibility. Afterwards the group engaged in constant communication on the attack in what appears to have been a quest to retain control of the narrative on the siege. This was done through debunking the counter-propaganda emerging from Kenyan government, and providing updates to its supporters. Tweets in English were aimed at international audiences, while those in Somali targeted members of this community. The messaging was constant, offering rebuttals of counter-tweets coming from the Kenyan government.

The group was prolific, tweeting more than 250 times between 21 September and 25

September. As the Kenyan operation intensified and foreign focus escalated, al-Shabaab was forced to switch its Twitter accounts. Twitter often suspended the new accounts, but the group created new ones and continued to tweet. Three different accounts were active on different dates during the attack: @hsmprress (21–22 September), @HSM_PRESOFFICE2 (22–23 September), and @HSM_PR (24–25 September) (See Simon et al. 2014).

The group used the hashtag #Westgate to attract as many readers as possible to their propaganda. They wrote: 'Westgate a 14-hour standoff relayed in 1,400 rounds of bullets and 140 characters of vengeance and still ongoing. Good morning Kenya!'. As the violence entered a second night, the siege played out over Twitter as the group posted the names of their gunmen, claiming they came from the UK, the US, Finland and Somalia. They compared the Kenyan troops to "rabbits caught in the headlights,"²⁶ and further added: "[t]he Kenyan government is pleading with our Mujahideen inside the mall for negotiations. There will be no negotiations whatsoever."²⁷

- **BREAKING: Kenyan forces who have just attempted a roof landing must know that they are jeopardizing the lives of all the hostages at Westgate**
- **More than 30 hours have now passed and, like rabbits caught in the headlights, Kenyans are still shell-shocked**
- **We'll not negotiate with the government as long as its forces are invading our country, so reap the bitter fruits of your harvest**
- **The Kenyan government has renewed calls for negotiation with the Mujahideen, this time offering incentives for dialogue.**
- **When Kenyan forces kill innocent Muslims in Somalia, it's tolerated, even praised, but when few injuries touch them they cry foul**
- **The Mujahideen are still firmly in control of the situation inside. Negotiation is out of the question!**
- **Westgate a 14-hour standoff relayed in 1,400 rounds of bullets and 140 characters of vengeance and still ongoing. Good morning Kenya!**
- **HSM has on numerous occasions warned the Kenyan government failure to remove its forces from Somalia would have severe consequences.**
- **The attack at Westgate mall is just a very tiny fraction of what Muslims in Somalia experience at the hands of Kenyan invaders.**
- **The Mujahideen entered the mall today at around noon and are still inside, fighting the Kenyan kuffar inside their own turf.**
- **Since our last contact, the Mujahideen inside the mall confirmed to @HSM_Press that they killed over 100 Kenyan kuffar.**
- **HSM Press has just made contact with the Mujahideen inside Westgate mall. They are still fighting and still strong. Stay tuned!**

Figure 2: Key Tweets by Al-Shabaab during the Westgate attack

26 Greenwood, C. "The Twitter terrorists: How killers boasted of Kenyan mall carnage with live commentary as they murdered dozens of people" *Daily Mail*, 23 September 2013. Available at: <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2429660/Kenya-attack-How-killers-boasted-Nairobi-Westgate-shopping-mall-carnage-Twitter.html>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

27 Ibid.

Media coverage of Westgate incident

Coverage of the attack by the local private media almost mirrored the communication by state agencies, with very little independent reporting. According to one respondent, both Kenyan the Security Forces and the media were “very green in their approach” to Westgate, with journalists “struggling between telling the story and the subsequent propaganda wars.”²⁸

Seasoned reporters however argue that there has been an agenda of patriotism pushed by the government that is reflected in the media coverage of terrorist events. For example, a chief executive of a national newspaper apologised to the government and public for “poor judgment” after the publication used a bloodied picture of a victim of the attack in the front pages a day after the attack.²⁹ The paper later suspended senior editors, with the newspaper’s board of directors accusing them of “glorifying terrorism” by publishing the photo.³⁰ The board questioned the editorial decisions made in covering the attack and sought a retraction of the images and softening of the stories, a demand which most of the editors rejected.

A year later, most of these editors had left their positions.³¹ Reflecting on the initial coverage, an investigations editor involved in the coverage of the attack with a national newspaper argued that:

An hour into the attack, it was clear that this was not an ordinary robbery. However, the media didn’t change the personnel deployed on ground. There was also lot of confusion in the editorial room over the story’s angle and substance. There was a big fear of calling the incident a terrorist

attack, since few of the editors even understood what constituted a terrorism incident.³²

Analysis of output by the private media points to a near absence of consistent editorial narratives on the attack. According to a former investigations editor: “most of the reporters appeared to have a limited understanding of terrorism”³³, including the ideology that motivates groups like al-Shabaab. The few reports on ideology were sourced from foreign publications. Some of the reporters also mixed descriptors, for example treating all terrorists as Islamists³⁴. Nearly all the reports also appeared to assume ordinary Kenyans are well-informed on terrorism and al-Shabaab. For example, there was little editorial explanation on the meaning of terms like ‘militant’, ‘Islamist’ and ‘terrorist’, which was likely to confuse ordinary people that all Muslims were Islamists, and therefore terrorists. A former security correspondent with an international broadcaster based in Nairobi argued that the “Media should know its role in regards to reporting about terrorism.”³⁵ The reporter added:

It is not just about the immediate incident, but the wider context, since terrorism is not a regular occurrence but one that has historical causes. Understanding of the terms and ideologies of terrorist networks is imperative for reporters covering crime, since one slip could inflame the whole situation.³⁶

The media appeared not to rely on independent analysts for balance and accorded overwhelming coverage to then military spokesman, Major Emmanuel Chirchir, and the Ministry of Interior, who were active on Twitter. This left the government officials at a unique position to engage in the transmission

28 Interview, former editor and now regional analyst

29 A tweet from Linus Gitahi, “Kenyans, we made a poor judgement on our front page photo today. We sincerely apologize for the hurt caused.” @LinusGitahi, Twitter, 10:46 AM, 22 September 2013. Available at: <https://twitter.com/LinusGitahi/status/381701041001332736>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

30 Interview with Investigations Editor

31 Ibid.

32 Interview, News Editor

33 Interview, Former Investigations Editor

34 Ibid.

35 Interview, Former Security Correspondent

36 Ibid.

of unverified information about the siege. These included tweets by Kenyan security on progress of offensive and state of the hostages and militants. No attempt was made to verify independently some of these claims by Kenyan forces. According to the former Security Correspondent:

Most reporters opted to talk to middle-level security personnel, since these are most likely to be honest, rather their seniors who were pushing specific official narratives. The trouble was that, even if you got credible information from these junior officers, the editors at times rejected these in preference of that by senior security officials, even if the later was not credible.³⁷

There appeared to be fear by the media of facing official reprimand if it did such or gave prominence to messaging by al-Shabaab. Government officials dismissed in-depth investigative media pieces as incorrect.³⁸

Post-attack media conduct

By the second week of October 2013, stories on the Westgate attack had been relegated to the periphery by the mainstream media, with the focus drifting to the then upcoming trials of President Kenyatta and his deputy William Ruto at the International Criminal Court. This was a welcome development for the government, since it shifted focus from Westgate to what was presented as the political survival of the country's senior political leadership at a foreign court.

A few critical reports appeared in subsequent months, questioning the intelligence lapses preceding the attack, the overall security strategy, the whereabouts of some of the missing people and terrorists.³⁹ There was also

condemnation of the military after it emerged that soldiers looted a supermarket in the mall during the operation.

Despite a lack of in-depth reporting on the attack, some of the media houses acknowledged shortcomings in their output. According to the former Investigations Editor, they instituted a number of policy changes, but which have their own challenges:

Some media houses have since Westgate attempted to come up with internal controls on coverage of terrorism. But these are only applied selectively. The media have also embraced guidelines by the Media Council of Kenya. However, enforcement is not that simple. The MCK controls have created a climate of self-censorship among some editors, who now either give objective, but limited coverage to terrorism or chose to go with official versions out of fear of reprisals if they highlight something the government does not want.⁴⁰

DusitD2 Attack

On 15 January 2019, al-Shabaab carried out another high-profile attack on a foreign-owned hotel in Nairobi. The attack at the Thai-owned DusitD2 Hotel, also located in the Westlands neighbourhood, started in the afternoon of 15 January at around midday.

The attack was the first major terrorist attack in Kenya in four years, following a deadly raid by al-Shabaab on Kenya's Garissa University on 2 April 2015. The choice of DusitD2, an exclusive facility that often attracts elite and international clientele and also located in an area that hosts high-profile foreign businesses and embassies,

³⁷ Interview, News Editor

³⁸ Kenya National Assembly, "Report of The Joint Committee on Administration and National Security; and Defence and Foreign Relations on The Inquiry Into The Westgate Terrorist Attack, and Other Terror Attacks In Mandera in North-Eastern and Kilifi In the Coastal Region" (December 2013). Available at: https://info.mzalendo.com/media_root/file_archive/REPORT_OF_THE_COMMITTEE_ON_WESTGATE_ATTACK_-_4.pdf, accessed: 5 December 2020

³⁹ Nation Team, "Many-unanswered-questions-about-Westgate-attack" *Daily Nation*, 25 September 2013. Available at: <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/many-unanswered-questions-about-westgate-attack--897888>, accessed: 05 December 2020. See also: Citizen Digital, "Questions Still Unanswered Over Westgate Attack" Citizen TV, 16 September 2014. Available at: <https://citizentv.co.ke/news/questions-still-unanswered-over-westgate-attack-72962/>.

⁴⁰ Interview, Former Investigations Editor.

was not an accident. Perpetrating an attack in such a location would generate propaganda for al-Shabaab.

Around 14:00 GMT into the siege, al-Shabaab claimed responsibility, in a statement that was released during the attack. They claimed that the attack was “a response to US President Donald Trump’s decision to recognise Jerusalem as the capital of Israel”.⁴¹ Kenyan security forces finally secured the hotel complex the following day at around 20:00 GMT. At least twenty-one people died, including the five gunmen.

A centralised command centre under the paramilitary General Service Unit (GSU) ensured tight and smooth coordination of the response and minimised civilian casualties. President Kenyatta was reportedly briefed on the “need to conduct the operation from a central command.”⁴² Unlike Westgate, all the teams “were collapsed into a multi-agency unit”.⁴³ Also simplified was the communication approach, with government officials engaged in sparse press briefings. These briefings were mainly left to Minister of Interior Fred Matiang’i, and then Inspector General of the National Police Service, Joseph Boinett. A former security correspondent commented:

Securing of the scene was both quick and tight, boosting the government’s control of the security operation and flow of information. Cameramen were not allowed to venture into sensitive sections of the scene, where the first responders were. However, the government balanced

this [with] what appeared to be balanced, transparent media conduct.⁴⁴

Government messaging

The Minister of Interior and the then-Police Chief were the main sources of official communication. In the government communication matrix below, there were only two sources of information on the event, compared to four in Westgate: The Ministry of Interior (including Police) and the Presidency.

They deployed two main channels: periodic press briefings and regular social media posts. The briefings were often short and their messages lacked details. However, most of the content was consistent and “measured”, enabling “many Nairobians to carry on with business as usual.”⁴⁵

Initial government statements “sought to assuage possible panic from the public”, with security agencies “merely acknowledging that there was an attack, and assuring citizens that the security forces were on top of the situation.”⁴⁶ Previous attacks were marked by “farfical media briefings”, which “provided a lot of information that many found barely credible.”⁴⁷ Briefings on DusitD2 “were the opposite direction, giving barest minimum information and fielding no questions.”⁴⁸

Inspector General Joseph Boinett, gave the first media briefing at noon on 15 January 2019 and a copy of the statement was posted shortly after on the Twitter handle of the Ministry.⁴⁹

41 BBC News. 16 January 2019.

42 Odhiambo, M. “Westgate lessons inform quick response to Dusit hotel attack” *The Star*, 17 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2019-01-17-westgate-lessons-inform-quick-response-to-dusit-hotel-attack/>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

43 Kamau, J. “How security forces outwitted terrorists in rescue mission” *Daily Nation*, 18 January 2019. Link unavailable.

44 Interview, Former Security Correspondent

45 Mugwanga, M. “Inevitable lessons Kenya must learn from latest terror assault” *Daily Nation*, 19 January 2019. Link unavailable, but original item still available at: <https://www.garoweonline.com/en/news/world/africa/lessons-kenya-must-learn-> Hanitzsch, T. “Situating Peace Journalism in Journalism Studies: A Critical Appraisal.” *Conflict and Communication Online*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2007), pp. 1-9. Available at: http://www.cco.regener-online.de/2007_2/pdf/hanitzsch.pdf, accessed 27 Nov. 2020.

from-dusit-terror-attack. Accessed: 06 December 2020. See also: Odhiambo M. (17 January 2019).

46 Gaitho, M. “Media caught between rock and hard place in reporting conflict” *Daily Nation*, 19 January 2019. Available at: <https://nation.africa/kenya/news/media-caught-between-rock-and-hard-place-in-reporting-conflict-129262>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid.

49 Ministry of Interior, Twitter Post, January 2019, 06:59p.m. Available at:

The police chief did not issue parallel tweets or statements. This centralised the information channels, creating a reliable and authoritative source. It also ensured complete clarity on the status of the operation. Five hours later, Boinett announced that “we suspect [the incident] could be a terror attack.”⁵⁰ A former Security Correspondent, who has covered terrorism in Mali and Nigeria, supported the centralising of information by the authorities during attacks:

Centralising communication is essential for government during major security operations. This ensures consistent narratives, boosts credibility of the information and also limits room for speculation. Government media practitioners appeared to have stayed ahead of the news curve, releasing timely briefings, which attracted almost no criticism.⁵¹

Once the counter-operation was in its final stages, Minister of Interior Matiang’i gained more prominence, addressing the media at 20:00 GMT on 15 January. Copies of the statement were shared on the official Twitter accounts of the Ministry and Minister.⁵²

For the first time the authorities referred to the incident as “terrorism”. The Minister vowed that “terrorism will never defeat us”, a vow he repeated the following day. The Minister’s statements were also captured in a Twitter thread shared by the Ministry of Interior and National Police Service.⁵³

On 16 January, President Kenyatta gave a live media briefing, marking the end of the operation. The president had been largely restrained during the attack, rarely making

any public comment. During his address, President Kenyatta made repetitive warnings to al-Shabaab, comments which received widespread coverage by the local media vowing Kenya will “pursue the attackers to the bitter end.”⁵⁴

Government officials were careful not to link the success to the lessons learned from Westgate. They instead attributed this to preparedness. In its reporting of the attack, local media however was observed to connect the success to lessons learned from past failures.⁵⁵ The government messaging was also helped by the media conduct by al-Shabaab in the post-Westgate period. There had been a marked decline of social media messaging by the group.

Public impact

There was overwhelming admiration by the local media and ordinary Kenyans of the overall conduct of the security operation. This admiration took a patriotic tone, with positive commentaries and editorials published by the national media. Some of these reports also urged Kenyans “not to publish photos that might assist the terrorists.”⁵⁶

Media conduct was, according to one respondent, “extremely measured”⁵⁷ due to a number of factors, including fear of being accused of promoting al-Shabaab. Most media houses also introduced internal controls to help improve their coverage of terrorism and other major security incidents. However, these rigorous policies have also helped enforce a climate of self-censorship in regard to local coverage of terrorism, with some journalists avoiding in-depth reporting on this security-

<https://twitter.com/InteriorKE/status/1085235092082053120>.

50 The Star Team, “Nairobi terror attack,” *The Star*, 15 January 2015. Link unavailable.

51 Interview, Former Security Correspondent.

52 Ministry of Interior, Twitter Post, January 2019, 01:19a.m. Available at:

<https://twitter.com/InteriorKE/status/1085335739154468864>.

53 Ministry of Interior, Twitter Post, January 2019, 09:16p.m., Available at:

<https://twitter.com/InteriorKE/status/1085269637590368257>.

54 Mwangi, M. “Uhuru: we’ll pursue attackers to bitter end,” *People Daily*, 17 January 2019. Link unavailable.

55 Akoth S. “How lessons from 2013 attack saved many” *The Standard*, 31 January 2019. Available at:

<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/opinion/article/2001311435/learning-from-the-past-to-save-lives>.

56 Editorial, “We cannot avoid photos of terror” *The Star*, 18 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.the-star.co.ke/opinion/leader/2019-01-18-editorial-we-cannot-avoid-photos-of-terror/>, accessed: 6 December 2020.

57 Interview, former editor and regional analyst.

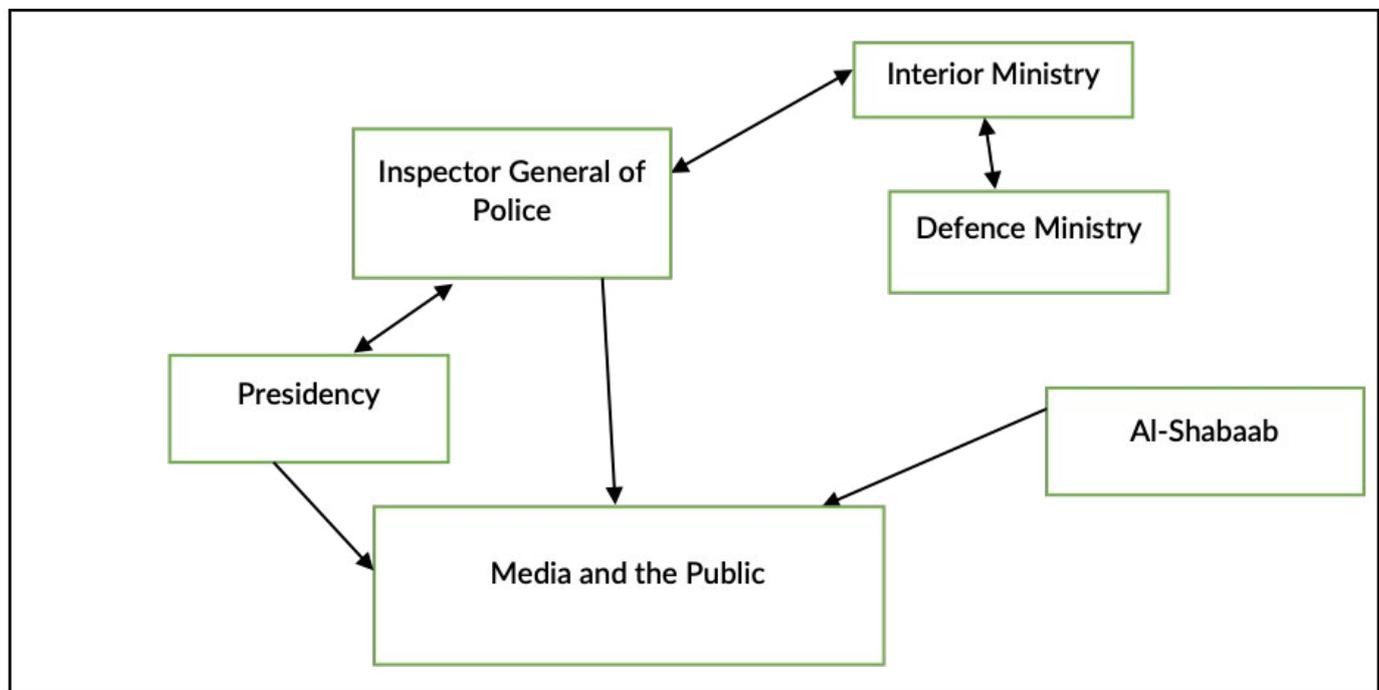


Figure 3. DusitD2 attack - government communication matrix

sensitive topic.⁵⁸ According to the former Investigations Editor:

Messaging by all parties during DusitD2 was superior compared to Westgate. Comments by government security personnel were measured, there was evident restraint by the local media and social media. Mainly out of fear of appearing to undermine a government that appeared organised, commentators on social media did not attempt to challenge the official narratives.⁵⁹

One national newspaper, *The Standard*, defended the strong pro-government line, arguing in an editorial article that “the actions of this newspaper are persuaded by public interest.”⁶⁰ The largely critical social media content posted by civilians during Westgate was also absent and replaced by glowing tributes to the security forces and pledges of national solidarity. These hinted of the success of the government communication strategy during the DusitD2 attack.

Al-Shabaab messaging

In the aftermath of the attack, al-Shabaab issued a statement claiming that it had staged the operation in accordance with an al-Qaeda edict demanding retaliation for the relocation of the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. After claiming responsibility, the group said it was in control of most parts of the building complex.

There was not much information on Twitter from al-Shabaab compared to the Westgate attack. Al-Shabaab instead used traditional media forms to target ethnic Somalis and international audiences. The group claimed the attack by issuing a statement on 15 January in Somali and published in a Somali website supportive of the group.⁶¹ The statement never mentioned Kenya’s military presence in Somalia and instead focused on the Palestinian connection. Linking the attack to the Palestinian issue appeared aimed at wooing the wider Muslim population and also putting the group on the global terrorist networks.⁶²

58 Interview with Investigations Editor.

59 Interview, former editor and now regional analyst

60 Editorial, “Security agencies deserve plaudits for swift response” *The Standard*, 17 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/editorial/article/2001309707/security-agencies-deserve-plaudits-for-swift-response>, accessed: 06 December 2020.

61 Report, “Listen: Nairobi attack continues and Al Shabaab speaks”, 15 January 2019. Available at: shorturl.at/gslM5, accessed (in Somali): 20 July 2020.

62 al-Lami, M. “Analysis: Reading between the lines of al-Shabab statement on Kenya attack” *BBC Monitoring*, 17 January

However, the group later issued an audio recording on 15 July in Somali featuring its spokesman, Sheikh Ali Mahmud Rage, praising the attack. The recording, which was posted on the website of the Somali pro-al-Shabaab site - Calamada, appears directed at Somali audiences inside and outside Somalia.⁶³ Besides linking the attack to the Palestinian cause, the recording also attributed the incident to Kenya's continued military presence in Somalia.

Later, on 15 January, the group's mouthpiece, Radio Andalus, broadcast an extensive report on the Kenya attack. The content was later published on the pro-al-Shabaab website Somali Memo. A reporter was quoted saying the attack was "revenge against the oppressions subjected to Muslims" living in Kenya's north-eastern and coastal regions.

Post-DusitD2 media attack

Analysis of media coverage signals that similar to the Westgate incident, coverage of the DusitD2 attack by the local media fizzled out in under a month. By mid-February 2019, reporting on the DusitD2 attack waned considerably. The media published ad-hoc lists of wanted terrorism suspects, information that appeared to have been deliberately leaked.

One of the reasons behind the reduced coverage were changes to the domestic political environment, which had changed a lot since Westgate. After the divisive general elections held in August 2017, President Kenyatta had reconciled with his main rival, Raila Odinga, easing the domestic political anxieties. The reconciliation in March 2018 subsequently dominated the domestic news agenda, with the focus being the presidential succession in 2022. Focus on succession was sustained despite continued attacks, albeit

low-key and in remote rural locations in coastal and north-eastern Kenya by the militants. Attacks in these rural areas signalled that al-Shabaab's "capacity to stage regular attacks in [major] urban areas had been degraded."⁶⁴

Al-Shabaab's media operations had also reduced since 2013 and much of its propaganda appeared focused to audiences inside Somalia. The group's mouthpiece, Radio Andalus, and a handful of sympathetic websites, in Somali, continued to publish claims of attacks or issue threats of new attacks. Not many of these attacks were reported by Kenya's mainstream media.

Meanwhile, the enactment of restrictive clauses in the various media and security laws helped the government keep the mainstream and social media in check (Kimutai, 2014).⁶⁵ One interviewee noted that:

... the conservative tone on reporting around terrorism-related events remained. According to a media researcher and academic, this conduct is "akin to self-preservation". The academic observes that: Some of the media houses have resources that can be used to engage in extensive reporting on terrorism. However, commercial and political considerations appear to have discouraged them from pursuing such and instead chose to follow official narratives. Otherwise, how come the local media has never seriously carried major reporting on these two terrorist incidences?⁶⁶

Most of the media houses since DusitD2 have enforced guidelines issued by the Media Council of Kenya. According to the Media Council of Kenya, the guidelines were conceptualised to provide a framework for the media "on how to cover such horrific [terrorist] events effectively and ethically, timely and

2019. Available at: <https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c200k18r>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

63 Report, "Listen; Sheikh Ali Dheere: The Nairobi attack was in response to Trump's move to recognise Jerusalem as the Jewish capital' 15 January 2019. Available at: shorturl.at/qE478 accessed (in Somali): 20 July 2020.

64 International Crisis Group "Al-Shabaab Five Years after Westgate: Still a Menace in East Africa" (21 September 2018). Available at: <https://www.crisisgroup.org/africa/horn-africa/kenya/265-al-shabaab-five-years-after-westgate-still-menace-east-africa>; Accessed: 16 December 2020

65 Kimutai, J. (2014). Social Media and National Security Threats: A Case Study of Kenya. (Unpublished Masters Thesis). University of Nairobi, Kenya.

66 Interview with media researcher and lecturer.

sensitively.”⁶⁷ The key issues addressed by the guidelines are: covering terror groups during live broadcasts; laws on national security and freedom of expression; ethical considerations such as accuracy and fairness; striking a balance between objective coverage and sensationalism; sources; national security versus media freedom; and effective media and security relations.⁶⁸

This enforcement has “created a climate of self-censorship”, tightening the grip on media by the government and media owners. It has also entrenched the feeling of “forced patriotism” among journalists, whereby journalists avoid critical treatment of topics that could be construed as undermining the government.⁶⁹

Discussion

Both the government communication departments and the private sector media have a role to play on how they communicate this threat and its impact or handle propaganda generated by al-Shabaab targeting the Kenyan public. Despite changes to its messaging platforms between the two attacks, al-Shabaab demonstrated that it has skilled personnel and resources to carry out consistent and sophisticated messaging on the group’s activities, including in Kenya.

It is evident that there have been positive improvements in communication conduct by government personnel between the two incidents. This signals that government communication personnel have adopted lessons learned since the attack in Westgate Mall. A leaner communication structure adopted during DusitD2 attack eased public anxieties and also made media coverage of the incident easier, since there was a consistent narrative coming from the state officials. DusitD2 set a benchmark for future conduct by government. According to a senior manager at the Media Council of Kenya, public communication “improved tremendously in post-Westgate

period, but more should be done.”⁷⁰

However, there is still room for improvement. Kenya’s private media was a key player in reporting the two incidents, including from the government perspective. The survey demonstrated that the private media in Kenya still has some way to go in providing independent and consistent reporting on terrorism in Kenya. For example, in the wake of the Westgate attack, the Media Owners Association issued a strong statement that condemned the “heinous and cowardly show of aggression” by al-Shabaab and hailed Kenyan security forces for their “resilience”.⁷¹ This was understandable, since the media operated, and continues to operate, within a political environment in which the state is keen to control coverage of terrorism.

Since 2013, the government has used new media laws or amended versions of existing ones to force the media to be less critical of the state. Various journalists have been arrested for contradicting official versions in regard to the war against al-Shabaab or the effectiveness of the Prevention of Terrorism Act (2012) to prevent further attacks.

Journalists have also faced state repression on content posted on their personal social media accounts in relation to terrorism. On 18 June 2019, one prominent blogger was arrested for sharing pictures of Kenyan police officers killed in a terror attack. The arrest followed a warning issued by the police spokesperson that posting such content was “not only unpatriotic, but equally uncouth and unacceptable”.

The nature of journalistic training and orientation also exercises influence on reportage on security themes. There is largely no specialisation in the training or in the practice in most of the media houses. Apart from financial journalism, most of the other forms of reporting are grouped under general news coverage, creating the environment for the existence of journalists largely uninformed

67 Media Council of Kenya & International Media Support “A Handbook on Reporting Terrorism” (November 2016).

68 Ibid.

69 Interview with Editor.

70 Interview, Senior Manager, Media Council of Kenya

71 Standard Reporter, “Media owners condemn attack” *The Standard*, 24 September 2013. Link unavailable.

on most of the topics they cover, including on terrorism.⁷² Kenyan national media, including prominent editors and reporters appear to have a limited understanding of the subject and ideologies that motivate groups like al-Shabaab. This limits their ability to carry out regular, in-depth reporting on the topic.

Some Kenyan journalists “have deviated from the normative role of journalistic principles” in their coverage of terrorism.⁷³ Although “they report both sides intelligently, their stories portray weakness of one side.”⁷⁴ During terrorist attacks, the lines often get blurred and most reports appear to be pushing the official government position. This position could also stem from a concern that independent coverage would play into the propaganda of militant groups. According to a Senior Manager with the Media Council of Kenya, the media remains afraid of the state in regards to terrorism:

For example, after Kenyan authorities declared al-Shabaab an “enemy” of the country, the local media adopted that line without interrogating the criteria used by the state to make such classification. Since then, the tone, language and imagery employed by the Kenyan media towards al-Shabaab have become one that adopts the standpoint of a defender of national interests. The Media Council of Kenya (MCK) blames this on “a lack of professionalism by some journalists.”⁷⁵

According to a senior manager with MCK, “in-house training by media houses on security

issues is also inadequate.”⁷⁶ The Media Council of Kenya admits of the inadequacies and “advocates for specialised training and closer interaction between journalists and security personnel.”⁷⁷ The respondent also notes that the high turnover in most media outlets due to poor working conditions also undermines specialisation.

Normally, users of social media in Kenya and the country’s mainstream media are not allies. However, during terrorist attacks they are sensitive of any critical reporting of the country by foreign media, especially from the West. They often accuse these outlets of being condescending and at times racist. Both The New York Times and CNN have since 2015 been forced to issue formal apologies after getting combined criticism from Kenyan media practitioners, state officials and ordinary citizens over their coverage of specific terrorist incidents.⁷⁸

Since the Westgate attack, the Media Council of Kenya has produced a handbook to guide media reporting, including on terrorism.⁷⁹ According to a senior manager with the Media Council of Kenya:

There is need for training – by both internal and external experts – to improve the reporting skills on terrorism. This can also be improved by the forging of closer interaction between journalists and security services, so as to enhance the sharing of information and insight.⁸⁰

However, the training and passage of relevant

72 Interview, Senior Editor

73 Hanitzsch, T. “Situating Peace Journalism in Journalism Studies: A Critical Appraisal.” *Conflict and Communication Online*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (2007), pp. 1-9. Available at: http://www.cco.regener-online.de/2007_2/pdf/hanitzsch.pdf, accessed 27 November 2020.

74 Interview, Media Researcher & Lecturer

75 Interview, Senior Manager, Media Council of Kenya

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid.

78 Nsehe M. “CNN Boss apologises to Kenya over terrorism slur” *Forbes Magazine Online*, 13 August 2015. Available at: <https://www.forbes.com/sites/mfonobongnsehe/2015/08/13/cnn-boss-apologizes-to-kenya-over-terrorism-slur/>, accessed: 02 December 2020. See also: Titus W. “New York Times apologises for posting photos of dead people at 14 Riverside” *The Standard*, 15 January 2019. Available at: <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/mobile/amp/article/2001309565/new-york-times-apologises-for-posting-photos-of-dead-people-at-14-riverside>, accessed: 02 December 2020.

79 Media Council of Kenya & International Media Support “A Handbook on Reporting Terrorism” (November 2016).. Available at: <https://www.mediasupport.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Kenya-Media-Council-Guide-on-Reporting-Terror-Oct.-2016-final.pdf>.

80 Interview, Senior Manager, Media Council of Kenya.

legislation has done little to improve the general coverage of terrorism by local media. A report published by the Kenyan parliament in the wake of the Westgate attack termed some of the media reports “fiction”.⁸¹

General Findings and Conclusions

- **The private sector media dominates in Kenya and media and the state often share a similar worldview towards terrorism.** This has narrowed the space for critical journalism by Kenyan media on the subject. As a result, the media rarely engages in in-depth reporting on the government’s counter-terrorism strategy, including the Somalia deployment.
- **Terrorism-related incidents only become a point of focus for Kenyan media when major attacks occur, especially in the capital Nairobi.** There is extremely limited reporting of terrorism during the periods when there is no major attack. Such reports are few and sporadic, and rarely highlight that parts of Kenya still face persistent terrorism attack. Security reporting is at such times limited to armed robbery, trafficking, and violations by security agencies.
- **Reporting on terrorism requires dedicated resources and expertise built over time. In the majority of Kenyan media organisations, such resources were lacking.** During the two attacks, most national media deployed normal crime reporters. Kenya’s influential media outlets are based in Nairobi, with few reporters based in regions bordering Somalia. This has limited coverage of terrorist incidents in the border regions, which are insecure, remote, and underdeveloped.
- **Patriotic sentiment remains prominent in local media reporting on terrorism.** It is conduct pushed by government officials, and appears fuelled by the sentiment of some journalists that engaging in uncritical reporting of the government advances the national cause. Such reporting has discouraged robust reporting on terrorism. This conduct has been evident since October 2011 after Kenya deployed its military in Somalia. The deployment received widespread and positive coverage by Kenyan media, which has persisted to date. In both attacks, there was widespread reliance by the local media on official positions to advance their news coverage.
- **Local coverage lacked authoritative domestic voices on terrorism.** In the absence of such experts, the Kenyan media used foreign analysts, some with limited understanding of Kenya.
- **The multiplicity of government social media accounts during Westgate added to the reporting challenges faced by Kenya’s private media.** The latter struggled with creating a balance between reporting what was coming from the government officials and information from other sources, including citizens operating through the social media. Multiple accounts were lacking during DusitD2, a situation that helped boost communication by the government.
- **A simplified and minimalist communication structure, with tight control on the message and messaging platform was evident during the handling of the DusitD2 attack.** This enabled the Kenyan media to provide a consistent narrative while reporting on the developments of the attack. Such model could be the future for the Kenya government, since it would help avoid an environment whereby government officials issue contradictory information on the same topic. It would also boost public faith in official communication and help media reporting on similar incidents.

⁸¹ Kenya National Assembly, “Report of The Joint Committee on Administration and National Security; and Defence and Foreign Relations on The Inquiry Into The Westgate Terrorist Attack, and Other Terror Attacks In Mandera in North-Eastern and Kilifi In the Coastal Region” (December 2013). Available at: <https://www.scribd.com/doc/201766369/REPORT-OF-THE-JOINT-COMMITTEE-ON-ADMINISTRATION-AND-NATIONAL-SECURITY-AND-DEFENCE-AND-FOREIGN-RELATIONS-ON-THE-INQUIRY-INTO-THE-WESTGATE-TERRORIST>.

Recommendations

1. Kenya is unlikely to defeat the threat of terrorism from al-Shabaab soon. This means that the local media and government communication teams will remain busy for the foreseeable future. The government must build on the good performance during the DusitD2 incident to ensure a consistent public messaging during terrorist attacks or other disasters. On its part, the media must invest in adequate training and resources to ensure appropriate coverage of terrorist incidents in the country.
2. There is an urgent need for different Kenyan stakeholders such as institutions of higher learning to train news reporters and editors on issues of terrorism. This could involve development of specific training modules on reporting terrorism and other forms of insecurity for media practitioners. Media houses could also ensure content on terrorism is handled by journalists well-versed with the topic. This will help with formulating various story angles and enhance reporting on terrorism issues.
3. There is also the need to redress the persistently reactive stance taken by journalists. A balance between patriotism and unbiased coverage is almost impossible to attain, but it could be mitigated through constant retraining of journalists, including senior editors, to ask government officials critical questions even during security operations.

Appendix: Table of Interviews

Interviewee	Designation	Nature of Interview	Place of Interview
Journalist			
	Senior editor, national newspaper	In person	Nairobi
	News editor, national newspaper	In person	Nairobi
	Investigations editor	In person	Nairobi
	Former Investigations editor	In person	Nairobi
Researcher			
	Media researcher and lecturer	Telephone	Nairobi
	Former senior editor	In person	Nairobi
Analyst			
	Former editor and now regional analyst	In person	Nairobi
	Former security correspondent	Telephone	Nairobi
Regulatory Body			
	Senior manager, Media Council of Kenya	Telephone	Nairobi

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About the Author

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