

Terrorism and Anonymous Sources: The Toronto 18 Case

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Abstract

Canadians are not usually accustomed to waking up in the morning to see a large, front page story that one in the Middle East may regard as normal, but it is not here. This paper deals with the case of the Toronto 18 and the relationship of the group to continued media fascination of the potential of what they regarded as home grown terrorism. This work not only deals with the accused and the media but the official respondents in government.

The Toronto 18 terrorism case began when 400 heavily armed police swooped down on homes across Canada's largest city in June 2006 and rounded up most of the young men who were said to be planning the country's first urban terrorism attacks. Within hours, carefully briefed federal politicians and security officials were stepping forward to put a political spin on the story.

Officials took their cue from Prime Minister Stephen Harper, who said the plot stemmed from a hatred of democracy. "As at other times in our history," he said the day after the arrests, "we are a target because of who we are and how we live, our society, our diversity and our values -- values such as freedom, democracy and the rule of law; the values that make Canada great."¹

Working closely with the Prime Minister's Office, top bureaucrats were putting together briefing notes for politicians and security officials, approving all media requests for interviews, and carefully monitoring whether coverage fell in line with what the government wanted Canadians to believe -- that "homegrown" terrorism inspired by Al-

Qaeda was a real and present threat, that young Muslims were being radicalized in Canadian mosques and on the Internet, and that Canada's security forces and anti-terror laws had narrowly prevented another London or Madrid or Oklahoma City.

It was a classic example of a government attempting to influence the media, since at the time none of the charges had been proven in court and many details of the alleged plot would be subject to a court-ordered publication ban. To demonstrate the seriousness of the threat, security forces put on an unusual show of force when the young suspects, accompanied by their families, were arraigned. Heavily armed sharpshooters patrolled the rooftops, combat helicopters hovered overhead, and the suspects were tightly bound in chains when they appeared in court. Such images in the media reinforced the idea of a country under siege.

It took more than 15 months for the media to learn what was behind this. Federal documents obtained by *The Globe and Mail* in September 2007 spelled out the full extent of the government's behind-the-scenes micromanaging. By that time, charges against seven of the 18 suspects had been dismissed for lack of evidence and media coverage of the case had become more skeptical. The *Globe* wrote:

This detailed picture of the government's reaction to the arrests is contained in more than 1,700 pages of correspondence and other documents obtained by *The Globe and Mail*. The records, obtained through an Access to Information request to Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, reveal scenes of controlled chaos -- a small army of communications officers crafting talking points, hurriedly updating speeches and correcting their bosses' miscues.

They also reveal meticulous government monitoring of virtually every media account of the arrests, as well as a consistent focus on getting all key players in Ottawa to echo the same talking points about the Conservative government's dedication to fighting terror.²

The plot, which consisted of two training camps in Ontario and plans to bomb key buildings in downtown Toronto, was real. Ten men and one youth eventually pleaded guilty or were convicted at trial and were sentenced to prison terms, one of them for life. That said, there was never any evidence of direct ties to Al-Qaeda, no other cases of "homegrown" terrorism directed against Canadian targets have been proven in court in the four years since the arrests, none of the suspects expressed hatred of democracy, and no evidence has surfaced that these Muslim youth or any others had been radicalized at Canadian mosques. The plotters seemed to be motivated by political opposition to Canada's role in Afghanistan. So the government's "spin" on the Toronto 18 case was exaggerated.

By analyzing news coverage during the arrest period, this research project will determine whether the Canadian government's spin was successful or not, and if it was, what media practices contributed to that. A secondary goal of the research is to identify whether professional standards of news coverage need to be reinforced to allow the media to perform their traditional roles of watchdogs and verifiers during a crisis involving terrorism.

Methodology:

The arrest period was set from June 3, 2006 (the day after the initial arrests) to Aug. 5, 2006 (two days after the 18th suspect was arrested). A keyword search was done on three databases, Factiva, Canadian NewsStand and Lexis-Nexis, using the words:

"Toronto" AND "Terror*" (* is wildcard for terror, terrorist, terrorism). Newspapers chosen were the four main Toronto dailies – the *Toronto Star*, *The Globe and Mail*, *National Post* and *Sun*. The *Ottawa Citizen* was added because aspects of the plot touched on the Parliament Buildings. *Maclean's* magazine, as Canada's only news magazine, was also included. All articles mentioning this particular case were selected and categorized as news stories or opinion (editorials, columns or letters to the editor). A verification search was done to look for wire stories carried by the various papers (from Canadian Press and CanWest News Service).

An earlier study of the 225 opinion articles³ concluded that a significant portion of the published commentary raised unreasonable public alarm, cast suspicion on the followers of a major religion and impugned the religion itself, failed to subject the allegations of our government and security officials to rigorous scrutiny, and predicted guilt before the suspects were able to exercise their democratic rights to a fair trial. For this study, we turned our attention to the 295 news stories published during the same period. Our research questions were:

- Who was used as a source?
- How many of the sources were granted anonymity? Was that explained for the reader?

- Did the articles mention details of the suspects' lives, or the impact of the arrests on them and their families?
- Were readers cautioned that the charges had not yet been proven in court?
- How often was the plot linked to actual cases of terror (London, Madrid, Bali, 9/11, Oklahoma City)?
- To what extent was the plot linked to religion or the War on Terror?
- How often was the word "homegrown" (a word specifically attached to this case by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service) used?

There is a precedent for looking at how the government influences newspaper coverage of terrorism charges in Canada. In 2003, the Operation Thread case initially bore a startling resemblance to Toronto 18, except that all 23 South Asian Muslims arrested were released for lack of evidence. Described by police as members of an "Al-Qaeda sleeper cell," the suspects were alleged to be plotting to fly airplanes into a nuclear plant and bomb the CN Tower. None of it was true. A study of media coverage of that case⁴ showed *The Globe and Mail* and *National Post* "acted in concert with the Canadian security apparatus in generating a moral panic in which young Muslims of Arabic descent or hailing from other ethnic minority groups were framed as folk devils."

In the Toronto 18 case, heavy use of security officials, police and politicians as sources for news stories would indicate that the media gave more credence to them than, say, crown attorneys, defence attorneys or suspects' families. Not identifying sources would reflect a lack of due diligence, since journalistic standards discourage the use of

anonymity. Neglecting to find out personal details about the suspects might indicate that reporters saw them not as individuals facing charges but as symbols of some greater threat, like Muslim terrorism. Not cautioning readers that the charges had yet to be proven in court might cause people to believe the suspects were guilty.

There was a political context to the Toronto 18 case, and the federal government certainly had an interest in stressing the success of Canadian security, the need for strong laws against terrorism, and justifying Canada's military role in Afghanistan. The Anti-Terrorism Act, passed into law in 2001 after the attack on the World Trade Center, was undergoing its 5-year review; Canada was involved in sensitive negotiations with the United States on measures the U.S. wished to impose to beef up border security; there was a lingering impression in the United States that Canada's liberal immigration and refugee laws made it a potential haven for terrorists; and public opposition to Canada's prolonged military mission in Afghanistan was mounting as the death toll increased.

The government's script for the Toronto 18 case was conveniently written four days before the arrests when Jack Hooper, Canada's number two spymaster, testified before the Senate Committee on National Security and Defence in Ottawa. A central message of his testimony was that terrorist activities inspired by the "Al-Qaeda ideology and operational doctrine" are the most immediate security threat facing Canada:

We are seeing phenomena in Canada such as the emergence of homegrown, second- and third-generation terrorists. These are people who may have immigrated to Canada at an early age and become radicalized while in Canada. They are virtually indistinguishable from other youth. They blend into our society

well, they speak our language and they appear, for all intents and purposes, well assimilated."⁵

One of the few reporters who covered his testimony characterized this as "Canadian jihad."⁶

Journalistic standards, not only in Canada but in all Western democracies, stress accuracy, independence and the discipline of verification.⁷ Newspapers are thought to fail in their responsibilities to the public if they act as megaphones for government or other vested interests. Information is expected to be put through a rigorous process of corroboration before it is published. Journalists in Canada, like those elsewhere, have devised common ethical principles to guide their work, and some are relevant to this study.

A Statement of Principles adopted by the Canadian Newspaper Association expresses the commitment of Canadian daily newspapers to seek the truth and operate in the public interest⁸. In particular, it says a newspaper "should guard its independence from government, commercial and other interests seeking to subvert content for their own purposes."

Canada's largest journalists' organization, the Canadian Association of Journalists, has an even more extensive set of principles and accompanying ethical guidelines that also stress the discipline of verification.⁹ Its guidelines say journalists have a duty to prevent the public from being misled.

They also say this about identifying sources:

We will identify sources of information, except when there is a clear and pressing reason to protect anonymity. When this happens, we will explain the need for anonymity. We will independently corroborate facts if we get them from a source we do not name. We will not allow anonymous sources to take cheap shots at individuals or organizations.

Newspapers like *The Globe and Mail* have additional standards:

When sources are unnamed, they must be characterized as clearly and accurately as possible without actually identifying them, so as to give the reader an idea of their motivations for speaking. Reasons must be given why they cannot be named.... Official spokesmen are rarely, if ever, entitled to anonymity, and it is better to specify their titles or job functions than to call them spokesmen.

Information should almost never be attributed merely to 'sources' or 'reliable sources'....¹⁰

Using these journalistic standards, we analyzed coverage of the Toronto 18 arrests.

The Findings:

The five newspapers and *Maclean's* magazine published 295 news stories on the Toronto 18 case from June 3-Aug. 5, 2006. A surprisingly large number, 46 percent, contained anonymous sources. This ranged from a high of 63 percent in the *Globe and Mail* to a low of 17 percent in *Maclean's*.

Table 1: Use of Anonymous Sources

	# of stories published	# containing anon sources	% using anon sources
Globe and Mail	71	45	63%
National Post	32	15	47%
Ottawa Citizen	26	12	46%
Toronto Star	109	45	41%
Toronto Sun	51	17	33%
Maclean's	6	1	17%
TOTAL	295	135	46%

This appears to violate guidelines saying that anonymity should only be used in exceptional circumstances, and that information should be corroborated elsewhere.

Industry research shows that use of anonymous sources has continued apace¹¹ despite efforts by some news organizations to outlaw them entirely.¹² Other research shows the use of anonymous sources has a negative effect on readers' perceptions of story credibility.¹³

Some stories in this study used several anonymous sources -- a dozen in one story in *The Globe and Mail* and more than half a dozen in stories in the *Toronto Star*, the *Sun*, and *National Post*. In fact, anonymous sources outnumbered or equalled named sources in 68

of the 295 stories. And, despite journalistic guidelines to "explain the need for anonymity," that was only done in eight of the 135 stories that used unnamed sources. Few other details were given to enable readers to gauge the credibility or motivation of these sources. They were most often described as "sources" or "police sources."

The influence they had on the stories is clearly shown in Table 2, which breaks down the identity of "lead sources." A "lead source" is the first person quoted in a news story and usually amplifies the reporter's angle. Table 2 shows that reporters used many types of "lead sources," but anonymity was most often granted to investigators (CSIS, RCMP, police). No explanation was given for this elevated use of anonymous state sources.

Those who tended to convey the government's spin included "sources", investigators, Canadian federal and American politicians, terror and security experts, Crown sources, government mole, and members of the military. They made up a total of 43 percent of "lead sources," far outstripping any other point of view.

Table 2: Lead Sources

	Named	Anonymous	Total
"Sources"	--	10	10
Investigators (CSIS, RCMP, police)	22	18	40
Politicians Total (22 PM Harper and Conservative MPs, 11 US Republicans, 10	49	0	49

opposition federal MPs, 4 municipal or provincial politicians, 1 British, 1 Dutch)			
Muslim Leaders (religious and secular leaders of Muslim organizations)	33	0	33
Defence Lawyers	22	2	24
Terror/Sec Experts	17	4	21
Muslim Community	11	7	18
Family	12	2	14
Legal/Human Rights Experts	13	0	13
Neighbours	8	3	11
Judge/JoP	8	1	9
Business/Tourism	6	0	6
Military	5	1	6
Crown	3	1	4
Classmates	1	2	3
Suspects	3	0	3
Mole*	3	0	3
Media	3	0	3
Other – 1 or 2 of each	14	3	17
Total	233	54	287 (plus 8 with no sources)

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* The government planted two moles with the Toronto 18 group. Mubin Shaikh, sourced here, participated in the training camps with the suspects and went public late in the arrest period with his story.

Some of the information attributed to anonymous sources was wrong, and there was no sign that reporters tried to corroborate it prior to publication. For example, the following ran in the *Sun*. A day later, police said it was false:

Though unconfirmed, sources have told the *Sun* police arrested a possible homegrown Al-Qaeda terrorist cell operating in Toronto that had planned to bomb the subway as early as Monday..."It is very serious," said a source who asked not to be named. "These people had plans." ¹⁴

Anonymous sources were heavily used by all publications except *Maclean's* magazine. The most obvious explanation is that, as a newsweekly, *Maclean's* was not competing directly with newspapers for news developments. The magazine also took until June 19 to publish anything about the Toronto 18 case, giving it more time to find sources who would speak on the record. But *Maclean's* did some notable investigative work, taking readers inside a Toronto Islamic centre that had been under surveillance for years because of its link to suspected terrorists. The magazine's restraint about using anonymous sources was exemplary, and serves as evidence that terrorism can be covered as a story without masking identity.

When all sources used in the 295 stories were categorized, the reliance on unnamed sources stands out. They were by far the most popular providers of information, making up 28 percent of the total, more than double the number of citations for the second most popular choice, named politicians.

Table 3: Total Sources

June 3 to Aug. 5, 2006

Total unnamed	346
Total named	883
Named by category	
Politicians	148
Muslim leaders	120
Defence lawyers	79
Terror experts	75
Investigators	69
Muslim community	61
Neighbours	40
Legal and Human rights experts	32
Business/tourism	31
Family members	28
British/Euro Sources	23
Crown/documents	23

Mass Media Reps	19
Bureaucrats	17
Military	16
Judge/Justice of Peace	12
Other Academics	12
Suspects	12

Smaller categories (fewer than 10 each) are not listed.

Many of the 346 unnamed sources appear to have been police or members of the Canadian Security and Intelligence Service (CSIS) who had some knowledge of the case against the suspects. Their views were augmented by named investigators and terror experts. David Harris, former chief of strategic planning at CSIS, was featured in a 2,000-word question-and-answer interview in *Maclean's*. He reinforced the line that this was an imported Muslim plot:

One of the things is to deal with our nearly out-of-control immigration and refugee situation. To the extent we're bringing in some people from some regions where liberal, pluralist, democratic, live-and-let-live, Charter-type values are considered anathema, are considered devilish -- we need to be sure that we have the capacity to absorb people properly. It's important to emphasize that absorption includes the absorption of our broader values of tolerance, civility and so on.¹⁵

Harris accused police and some politicians of "political correctness" in downplaying the connection between Islam and terrorism, and blamed Muslim organizations for fabricating Islamophobic incidents.

Harris has a history of writing inflammatory articles, including one in which he suggested that first offenders who are convicted of relatively light terror-related charges (such as possibly the youth in this case, who was found guilty of stealing walkie talkies for the plot) be sentenced to indefinite terms under psychiatric supervision.¹⁶

The largest category of named sources was politicians, who were quoted 148 times. Prime Minister Stephen Harper and Canadian government politicians (58) outnumbered those from the opposition (34). Not that it mattered. Even opposition members tended to accept that "homegrown" terrorism was a real threat and the arrests might only be the tip of the iceberg. A good example was Liberal Senator Colin Kenny, who as chair of the Senate's national security committee was briefed on the raids. "It's not over," he said. "It's very much, 'Stay tuned'."¹⁷ Liberal MP Derek Lee said "we should assume that in terms of risks or threats to Canada that there's more than one (plot) out there."¹⁸ Despite this belief, only one other suspect was later arrested in the plot, and the charges against him were subsequently dropped for lack of evidence.

It was notable how many U.S. Republican politicians were used as sources (34).

Although former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice told the press "Canada is on the job,"¹⁹ and Prime Minister Harper said that "when I spoke with President George W. Bush [about the arrests], I know he was particularly impressed,"²⁰ Canadian newspapers quoted New York Republican Peter King, chairman of the House homeland security committee, who said: "Americans should be very concerned because there's a large Al-Qaeda presence in Canada ... because of their very liberal immigration laws, because of

how political asylum is granted so easily." ²¹ It is worth mentioning that King's committee heard like-minded testimony that week from David Harris.

This research paper has no intention of disputing the guilt of those found culpable in the Toronto 18 case, or minimizing the seriousness of the plot. Our purpose is to examine how journalists exercised their responsibility to verify information: Did they accept the government's case as it was offered, or did they treat it as information that needed verification, amplification or balance? This is an important consideration, since aspects of the government's "spin" had the potential to divert coverage from investigating the crime to stereotypical discourses such as "moral panic" and "good and bad Muslims" that have been identified in the academic literature as problematic. ²² Other studies assert that the media's dominant post-9/11 narrative portrays a benevolent, democratic and peace-loving society attacked by insane, evil terrorists who hate the West because of its freedoms. ²³ Such narratives are often unjustified and have the potential for instigating racial and religious discrimination against Muslims. ²⁴

The pressure on imams and Muslim community leaders to play the "good Muslim" after the arrests was considerable. *Maclean's* reflected the media's belief that the problem of radical Muslim youth was endemic:

Where other Canadian parents lie awake at night worried that their children could succumb to drug addiction or get pregnant, the worry for some Muslim parents has become, could my child be fomenting jihad? ²⁵

The Globe and Mail reported on a meeting the RCMP had with Islamic religious leaders in Toronto, and wrote that "one asked why authorities hadn't told them sooner about the suspects, so the religious leaders could have put a stop to their plot."²⁶ Six Islamic organizations held a press conference to ask for help to prevent the radicalization of Muslim young people in Canada, despite the fact that Karl Nickner, executive director of the Canadian Council on American-Islamic Relations, said "I am working with Muslims from across the country on a daily basis. I can tell you it is very hidden. It is almost impossible to see. I have never experienced any radicalism."²⁷ This tended to leave the impression that Muslim religious leaders were subscribing to "group guilt" and had the power to stop homegrown terrorism. Only a very few articles tried to contextualize the reaction of a very diverse and conflicted community.²⁸

The *Sun* reprinted a *Christian Science Monitor* story advocating that Canadian Muslims should demonstrate their loyalty by supporting the government, sacrificing their freedom to express dissenting opinions about foreign policy:

Such groups [Islamic clerics] must also call for better cooperation with police, support Canada's military role in Afghanistan and apply the same tolerance toward other religions that other faiths in Canada do.²⁹

Table 3 is also notable because it shows how far down in the list of sources the suspects and their family members stood. Even tourism officials, commenting on the impact of this case on Toronto tourism, were quoted more often than family.

Consequently, as Table 4 shows, few stories contained details of the suspects' lives, how their families were impacted³⁰ or information about the conditions of their incarceration (youths placed in solitary confinement, for example). Only one-fifth of the stories offered readers any caution that the charges had yet to be proven in court.

Table 4: Detail on suspects

	Total stories	Contained this detail	% that did
Personal details	295	54	18%
Impact on family	295	29	10%
Conditions in jail	295	21	7%
Caution about charges	295	64	22%

The plot was linked to previous international terror attacks (London, Madrid, Bali, New York) much more often than false alarms like Project Thread (49 mentions to 11). The coverage therefore implies that Canadians are in imminent danger and downplays the presumption of innocence.

The *Sun* and other papers reported, based on an RCMP press conference, that three tons of ammonium nitrate fertilizer were seized, and mentioned it was "three times the amount white supremacists used to shatter a federal building in Oklahoma City in 1995, killing 168."³¹ It emerged the next day that it wasn't ammonium nitrate but a harmless substitute, delivered to the plotters in a police sting operation with the help of a government mole

whose identity was protected. Despite this, there were 19 references to Oklahoma City in the study period, some appearing weeks after the information was corrected.

The plot was specifically linked to Islam twice as often as that link was disputed (90 to 45).³² Reference was also made to the Taliban, Osama bin Laden, Al-Qaeda or the war on terror in Afghanistan, Iraq or the Middle East in 43 percent of the stories (126 of 295). The word "homegrown" appeared in 29 percent of the stories (87 of 295).

Conclusions:

There is no doubt the Toronto 18 case, and the way the media covered it, contributed to a heightened state of public alarm about terrorism and Muslims. A CanWest News Service poll showed a majority of Canadians (58 percent) believed the arrests were just the "tip of the iceberg" and many more extremist groups existed.³³ In another poll, 74 percent of respondents agreed that the Toronto 18 arrests would cause a serious backlash against the Muslim community

This major story was certainly given the breadth of coverage it deserved, and reporters interviewed sources as diverse as imams, comedians and transport experts. But our study found that investigators and politicians received more than their share of attention. Few of their comments were investigated or balanced with context or other voices.

The social responsibility of the media should require them to enforce, not relax, their standards during times of crisis. While it is true that a slight majority of stories in this study avoided the use of anonymous sources, the percentage that did (46 percent) indicates that commonly accepted standards of practice were not followed. Anonymity is

supposed to be granted only in exceptional circumstances, but it appears to have been almost routine when investigators were quoted. When that happened, no reasons for anonymity were explained, what they said was not corroborated by others, it was never clear whether they had first-hand knowledge of the suspects or the case, and the blind attribution of "sources" was used often, despite journalistic cautions against doing that. It's fair to say the media's standards for granting anonymity were violated to an alarming degree.

The misuse of anonymous sources is particularly problematic in this case because investigators were allowed to violate the accused plotters' presumption of innocence without being held accountable. The press even withheld its rote caution, used in many criminal cases, that "the charges have not been proven in court." This served to reinforce the belief that the charges were probably true, and that extreme measures were justified to stop the threat of a "Canadian jihad."

Stymied by a publication ban from using information presented in court, reporters appear to have been deliberately leaked carefully selected evidence and interpretations. But over-reliance on unverified information from anonymous official sources, reinforced by public statements by named authorities, fed into what academic literature identifies as skewed reporting on the War on Terror³⁴ and the media's blind trust in authority.³⁵

Reporters on this story often chose to accept state spin cloaked in anonymity, used descriptors like "homegrown," and routinely compared this case to actual terror attacks causing death in New York, Oklahoma City, London, Bali and Madrid, rather than to exercise skepticism. In fact, many journalists went further, putting Muslim leaders on the

spot to tell Canadians what they were going to do to stop it and encouraging them to pledge allegiance to Canada, as if it were their particular responsibility to do so because they shared a cultural background with the suspects.

Our previous paper on opinion articles raised questions about whether there was any link between the alarmist opinion and news coverage: Who were the sources whose information formed the basis of the opinion? We now know that there were more anonymous sources than any named source and that most of the anonymous sources were CSIS, RCMP, police and other investigators. Had the media been more skeptical, treating this as a criminal case, we might have learned more about what led the young plotters down the path of radicalism and terror, and whether or not the threat from homegrown terrorists is widespread. Distracted by the government's political agenda, the news media never found out. Neither did they subject the Anti-Terrorism Act to a thorough analysis in articles about the Toronto 18 case.

In the end, the courts accepted much of the government's case about the guilt of the suspects and the goals of their plot. But it is not the job of the press to guess the verdict at the time of the arrests. Its role is instead to maintain independence and to shed as much light as possible on what is known at the time, by interviewing a wide range of named sources, providing context to distil real threat from rhetoric, raising questions and acting as a watchdog of government, with the public's interest always foremost.

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