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Keywords: CDA, Double-
Standards, Islamophobia,
London Bridge attack, the
Finsbury Park Mosque attack

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received	13	Oct	2023
Accepted	24	Dec	2023
Available online	1	Jan	2024

Double-Standard Reporting: A Critical Study of the Discourse on London (2017) Attacks in British Press

A B S T R U C T

This research analyzes, in a critical stance, the headlines and leads of the news reports of the attacks that took place in London in June, 2017; namely: the London Bridge attack and the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. It focuses on (4) British newspapers that reported both incidents: *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. It aims to investigate the language used in the reports of both attacks in terms of the lexical items, how they are emphasized/mitigated, and the grammatical structures used therein. It is hypothesized that, though similar in nature, the selected newspapers might have dealt with the two attacks differently by adhering to double-standard discourse strategies in a way that perpetuates the Islamophobic narrative. The research presents a theoretical framework about the field of Critical Discourse Analysis, and analyzes the headlines and lead paragraphs of the reports on the abovementioned attacks via van Dijk's 'Socio-Cognitive Approach' (2015). It concludes that the discourse strategies used to report both attacks are different.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.31185/>

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الملخص:

يحلل البحث، بطريقة ناقدة، عناوين وخلصات التقارير الإخبارية التي تناولت الهجمات التي حدثت في لندن في يونيو عام (2017)؛ وهي: هجوم جسر لندن وهجوم مسجد ساحة فنزبري. يركز البحث على أربعة صحف بريطانية قامت بنشر تقارير حول الحادثتين: ديلي اكسبرس وديلي ستار وذا كارديان وذا تايمز. يهدف البحث لتحليل اللغة المستخدمة في التقارير التي تناولت الهجومين من ناحية الكلمات التي تم استخدامها وكيف تم التركيز عليها او تخفيفها والتراكيب النحوية المستخدمة في هذه التقارير. يفترض البحث بان الصحف المختارة ربما تعاملت مع الهجومين بطريقة مختلفة وذلك بالاستناد الى استراتيجيات خطابية ذات معايير مزدوجة بالرغم من كونهما متشابهين بطبيعتهما، مما أدى لدعم خطاب الخوف من الإسلام (الاسلاموفوبيا). قدم البحث اطار نظري حول حقل تحليل الخطاب الناقد وثم حلل عناوين وخلصات التقارير حول الهجومين المذكورين أعلاه بواسطة "النهج الاجتماعي-الفكري" (2015) لفان دايك. يستنتج البحث بان الخطابات الاستراتيجية المستخدمة في نقل كلا الهجومين مختلفة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: تحليل الخطاب النقدي، المعايير المزدوجة، الاسلاموفوبيا، هجوم جسر لندن وهجوم مسجد ساحة فنزبري

Introduction

On June, 2017 London witnessed two terrorist attacks that resulted in the death of innocent people. The first attack took place on June 3, 2017 by 'three attackers' who drove a vehicle through a group of people on London Bridge, and carried on to commit a 'knife attack iasn Borough Market'. The aftermath of the attack was eight victims (BBC, 2017a: 1). The attackers were non-white and allegedly 'Muslims'. The second terrorist attack happened on June 19 of the same year where a non-Muslim white man drove a vehicle into a group of 'Muslim worshipers' who were heading out of Finsbury Park Mosque in London, after they

had finished evening prayer in Ramadan. The attack caused the death of 'an elderly man who was waiting for the next set of prayers' (BBC, 2017b: 1).

Despite the similarity in nature, it is believed that the two attacks did not receive a similar coverage by the British press. For the first attack, which was carried out by a non-white, was called 'terroristic', 'radical', etc., whereas in the second one, which was committed by a white non-Muslim man, the newspapers talked about 'mental illness' and 'shock' of the attacker's family. This leaves one no option but to assume that the selected British media adopted a double-standard strategy in presenting the facts.

Therefore, the research addresses the question: did the selected newspapers use different linguistic items purposefully in order to perpetuate an Islamophobic ideology? To find an academic answer, the research presents an overview of Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth, CDA), the scientific methodology used for analysis, the logic behind the selection of the data, analyzes the selected data, and eventually comes up with conclusions.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Overview of CDA

Fairclough defines CDA along a scale that ranges between serious political issues such as power relations and struggle to mild matters like the relationships between language and society (Rogers 2005: 36). He states that CDA seeks to analytically determine the frequently vague relations of 'causality and determination between (a) discursive practices, events and texts, and (b) wider social and cultural structures, relations, and processes' as mediated by associations of power and the struggles it consequents (Fairclough, 1995: 134-5).

Wodak (1995: 204) stresses that CDA analyzes opaque relations and 'transparent structural relationships of dominance, discrimination, power and control' that language may contain. As such, Wodak (1997, p. 173) claims that

what makes this way of analysis different from others is its emphasis on (a) the relationship between language and society, and (b) the relationship between analysis and practices analysed'.

Van Dijk (1998) focuses more on the direct effect of discourse on society; therefore, he confines the aim of CDA as to mainly investigate the ways in which inequality, dominance, and social power abuse are enacted and reproduced. He (ibid) also emphasizes that CDA should encounter and resist such discourse. This research adopts van Dijk's definition because its process of discourse analysis leads to what this research aims to address-i.e., the direct manipulation of the public.

2.2 Principles of CDA

According to Fairclough and Wodak (1997), there are some principles that CDA scholars should bear in mind throughout their analysis, as follows:

1. CDA is concerned with social problems.
2. DA interprets and explains the analyzed issues.
3. There are ideological implications in discourse.
4. Discourse is a kind of social behavior.
5. Discourse relates to history.
6. Discourse arranges opinions and communities.
7. Power relations are related to discourse.
8. The relation between society and text is indirect (mediated').

Following Habermas' view on discourse, Wodak and Meyer (2009) accentuate the role played by critical theories in providing the public with knowledge that can

potentially free them from any undesired restrictions. Therefore, they (ibid) claim that CDA is in a position where it ought to perceive and guide the human behavior.

2.3 Major Concepts of CDA

The three major concepts that CDA underlies are *discourse*, *power* and *ideology*. These are tackled by the pioneers of the field, each relating them to the purpose of their designated theory.

The various definitions of discourse set it in a similar various realm of aims, based on who is analyzing. As such, discourse is related to the written text according to the Central European context, but it refers to the written as well as the spoken texts in the English-speaking world (Wodak and Meyer, 2009).

Fairclough (1995) focuses on the idea that power and ideology are what CDA seeks to uncover in the veiled connections between texts and social processes. In this regard, Thomas (2004) defines language as the main tool with which power may be turned into virtue, and obligation into conformity. Holmes (2005, p. 32) considers power as “a systemic characteristic, a transformative and non-static feature of interaction that is both enacted and contested in every interaction” by which he justifies the interrelation between language and power.

CDA, however, does not analyze power as coercive in-and by-itself, but sees it as a means that may be used wrongfully by the people; therefore, it sides with the oppressed by analyzing the language of the elite who aim to impose their ideologies, inequality, and power (Wodak, 2001).

Van Dijk (1995, p. 21) does not see ideology as a system of ideas, but as 'specific basic frameworks of social cognition with specific social structures and specific cognitive and social functions'. Moreover, he argues that ideologies are mainly conveyed in discourse and communication, non-verbal interaction such as

semiotic messages (images, movies, etc.). This puts ideology in a position where they serve in-between cognitive representations and social groups (ibid).

2.4 Previous Studies

Numerous studies have tackled the topic of Islamophobia through varying scopes and perspectives. Shah et al (2022) discussed the Christchurch Mosque the reports that focused terrorist attack in New Zealand, in two channels: CNN and TRT World. Relying on CDA, they came up with the conclusion that each channel deliberately chose certain lexical items and arranged them in ways that represented their ideologies. Moreover, they concluded that the reports of such attacks usually mitigated when the perpetrator is white. The current study is different from this study in that it discusses two terrorist attacks, one committed by a “white” person and a “Muslim” to give the results more credibility.

Bouferrouck and Dendane (2019) more specifically discussed the representation of Muslim women in the British newspapers in their research, aiming to “to unveil the role that ideologies may play in this Representation”. The reached conclusion of this study is that the representation of women in the Daily Telegraph (which is the newspaper selected for analysis) is “problematic”- i.e., the articles that tackled women in the selected corpus presented Muslim women as “passive victims of their religion and culture, submissive and weak social subjects, and a threat to the British values”. It differs from the present study in that the latter is more general in terms of the dissemination of Islamophobic ideologies through media, as well as the double standard discourse that is used with “Muslim” perpetrators rather than others.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Selected Data

This research analyzes the reports made on both attacks on four newspapers, namely: *Daily Express*, *Daily Star*, *The Guardian*, and *The Times*. Those newspapers are selected because, according to Tobitt and Majid (2023), they are amongst the mostly circulated newspapers in the UK. Moreover, the Daily Express, and Daily Star are said to be inflammatory, inaccurate, agitate hostility against Muslims, among others (Mathias, 2017; Waterson, 2019; Mend, 2011). By selecting them as data for analysis, the research aims to investigate whether double standards were applied in reporting the two attacks, and how accurate are the latter claims.

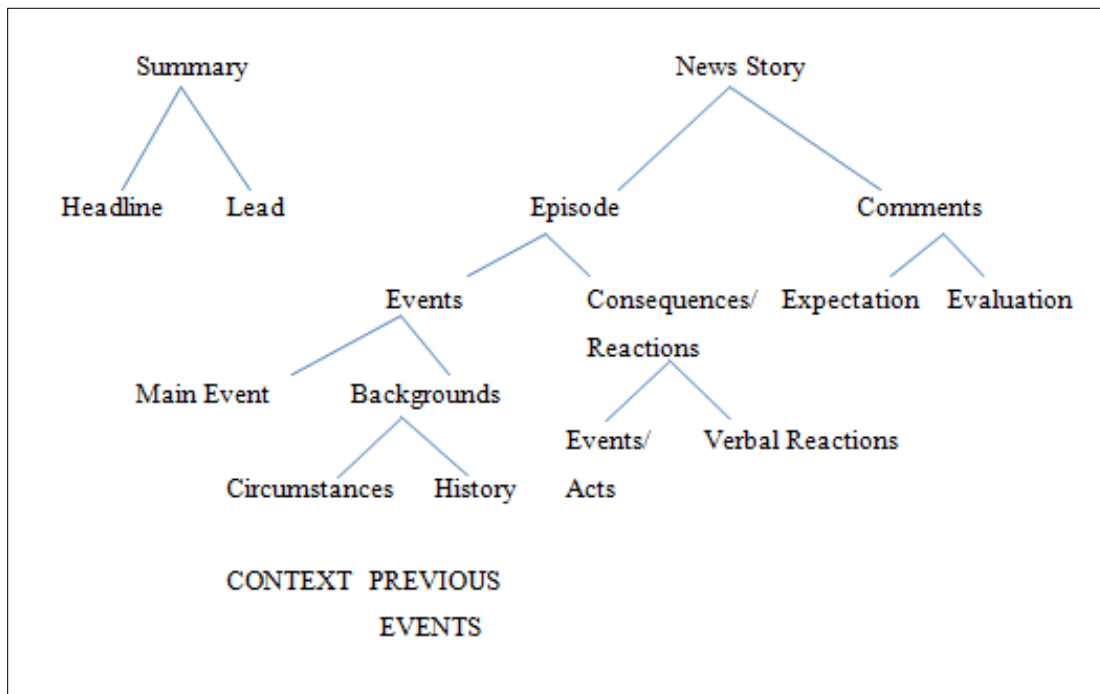
3.2 Model of Analysis

3.2.1 Van Dijk's 'News Schemata' (1986)

Because news is the most frequent type of discourse that people are faced with, it needs to be analyzed thoroughly (Van Dijk, 1986). Therefore, van Dijk (ibid) categorizes news reports according to a specific 'schema' which is based on conventional 'categories' of news discourse as a genre and social practice, namely, Summary (Headline, Lead), New Events, Previous Events, Context, Commentary', as well as connected categories that 'globally organize the (macro-level) topics of news reports in the press' (van Dijk, 2008, p. 193). The following figure illustrates van Dijk's organization of news discourse.

Figure 1:

'Superstructre scheme of news discourse' (van Dijk, 1986: 169).



The Summary has an important strategy as to conveying the intended semantic macrostructure to the reader. Within the Summary The headline should express ‘the intended highest macroproposition’, otherwise it is seen as ‘biased’. This news schema represents embedded knowledge that has become part of the background knowledge as a result of ‘personal experiences’ as well as the ‘socially shared knowledge’. The constraints put forth by the news production elements have a significant part when it comes to the ultimate production of news reports (ibid) (see also: van Dijk, 1986).

3.2.2 The Socio-Cognitive Approach

According to the Socio-Cognitive Approach (henceforth, SCA) cognition is the mediator between discourse and society. Therefore, van Dijk (1995, p. 18) stresses that critical discourse studies (CDS) is a ‘system of social representations and a society’s processes that lead to a shared social cognition and mental representations’. Van Dijk (2002) stresses that the connection that links the three elements is *ideology*, rendering social power as the tool which controls thought and

behavior of the public. The following figure illustrates this relation between discourse, cognition, and society as presented in van Dijk's approach.

Figure 2

The Relation between Discourse and Society (van Dijk, 2009, p. 64)



The persona (episodic) and the social memory are van Dijk's two divisions of cognition. The first is the personal experiences gained throughout a person's life. It is further divided into "mental models" and "context models". The social memory, on the other hand, is what the person acquires from their socio-cultural environment, such as the beliefs, attitudes, and opinions, held and shared by group members of a certain society (van Dijk, 1998, p. 10).

In its analysis, CDS looks at two levels, the micro- and the macro- level of analysis. The first includes verbal interactions, discourse, and communication, whereas the second represents the social organization which includes inequality, dominance, power, etc., hinting towards a connection between the two levels which is missing (van Dijk, 2015; see also: van Dijk, 2002). Therein, comes CDS's effort to analyze inequality, power abuse, and dominance that lead to a polarized view between the ingroup and the outgroup. These are sustained through discourse via contrasting *our* sympathy, tolerance, help etc. against *their* threats, deviance, differences, etc. (van Dijk, 1991).

3. Data Analysis

In this section, the headlines and lead paragraphs of the selected reports that focus on the two attacks are analyzed. Two articles are selected from each newspaper (one for each attack). The analysis focuses on the lexical items used for each attack, the types of structures, emphasis and mitigation, and the level details given to each case. Then a quantitative analysis is presented which gives a frequency count of the negative-connotation words used in each report.

3.1 Daily Express

The following table shows the headlines that the Daily Express published for each attack.

Table 1

The Headlines and Leads of the London Bridge attack and the Finsbury Park Mosque attack by Daily Express.

Newspaper	London Bridge Attack	Finsbury Park Mosque Attack
Daily Express	<p>Two London Bridge attackers identified by police in appeal for information</p> <p>TWO of the terrorists who committed the London Bridge atrocity have been identified by Scotland Yard Counter Terrorism Command as officers</p>	<p>'I'm going to kill Muslims' Extra police at mosques during Ramadan after Finsbury terror</p> <p>AT LEAST one person has been killed and several injured after a vehicle drove through pedestrians near Finsbury Park Mosque in</p>

	launched an appeal for information.	London.
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Regarding the London Bridge attack, the headline is somewhat neutral, as it only provides information about the updates of the attack. However, this is not the case for the lead paragraphs which contain words such as 'terrorists' and 'atrocities'. In terms of capitalization, the word 'two' is capitalized to indicate that there are more 'terrorists' other than those identified. The passive case is used to refer to the 'attackers' and 'terrorists' in the focus of the act.

The Finsbury attack's headline is kind of vague since it uses a quote without indicating the source (*'I'm going to kill Muslims'*) and at the same time it shows that the police are concerned and spread more of its members (*'Extra police at mosques during Ramadan after Finsbury terror'*). The lead mitigates the aftermath of the attack and draws attention to the aftermath -which is also used with mitigative language-rather than the doer himself (*'AT LEAST one person has been killed and several injured after a vehicle drove through pedestrians near Finsbury Park Mosque in London.'*).

3.2 Daily Star

The following table shows the headlines that the Daily Star published for each attack.

Table 2

The Headlines and Leads of the London Bridge attack and the Finsbury Park Mosque attack by Daily Star.

Newspaper	London Bridge Attack	Finsbury Park Mosque Attack
Daily Star	<p>London TERROR: 7 killed in market massacre as PM reveals threat level will NOT change</p> <p>LONDON has again been hit by terror with seven people killed when knife-wielding monsters attacked a restaurant after mowing down crowds with a van</p>	<p>Finsbury Park terror attack suspect's 'shocked' mum and sister speak out</p> <p>THE mum and sister of the man who was arrested over the Finsbury Park Mosque attack has spoken out since the atrocity that unfolded earlier this morning.</p>

In the case of the London Bridge attack, the Daily Star uses a headline which capitalizes the word 'terror'. Even though, the report does not mention the attackers or their religion, the constant media use of this word to refer to attacks done by Muslims rather than other ethnicities, usually presupposes that the attacker is Muslim. The report also uses the word '*massacre*' which means 'the violent killing of many people' in order to bring more attention to deliberate intention and to magnify the casualties.. The lead focalizes the word 'London' by writing in all-caps accompanied by the word 'again' to presuppose that this is not the first time it has been 'hit' but there were previous incidents. To emphasize the attack, the newspaper adds that it is 'terror' that led to the killing of seven people by a 'monster' that wielded a knife. The report adds to the emphasis of the atrocity by indicating that the attacker was 'mowing down crowds with a van'. The word 'mow' means 'to cut grass or grain with a machine or tool with a blade', and the

newspaper’s use of this metaphor aim to create a negative mental model in the minds of the readers.

However, when it comes to the Finsbury Mosque attack, the Daily Star shifts its focus from the main attack to talk about the 'shock' of the attacker's family. The headline does not even mention the word 'mosque' or 'Muslims'. The lead does not go away from that pattern, as it emphasizes what the attacker's mother and sister feel about what happened, referring to the attacker as 'the man' (*'THE mum and sister of the man who was arrested over the Finsbury Park Mosque attack has spoken out since the atrocity that unfolded earlier this morning.'*).

3.3 The Guardian

The following table shows the headlines that The Guardian published for each attack.

Table 3

The Headlines of the London Bridge attack and the Finsbury Park Mosque attack by The Guardian.

Newspaper	London Bridge Attack	Finsbury Park Mosque Attack
The Guardian	<p>London terror attack: what we know so far</p> <p>Seven people have died after a terrorist attack at London Bridge and Borough Market. Here is what we know so far</p>	<p>Finsbury Park attack suspect was probably 'self-radicalised'</p> <p>Officers obtain warrant to extend detention of Darren Osborne, 47, as counter-terror detectives try to establish motives for attack</p>

In terms of the London Bridge attack, the Guardian gives a headline that makes it clear that the attack was of ‘terror’. As found in the Daily Star, the word ‘terror’ is also used here to resemble Muslim connection. The lead adds more information as to the number of people killed, and fortifies the initial claim that it is a ‘terrorist attack’? (*Seven people have died after a terrorist attack at London Bridge and Borough Market. Here is what we know so far*). So, as a professional news press, the reader would expect a similar use of words when The Guardian reports the Finsbury Mosque attack.

Nevertheless, when the newspaper talks about the Finsbury Mosque attack, it makes sure that the headline does not include the word ‘terror’. Worse still, it explains that the attacker was ‘self-radicalized’, in an attempt to clear that this is not a terroristic ideology that a certain group upholds, and to clear the group that the attacker belongs to from the stigma of terror. In the lead, the report continues to keep asking about the ‘motives’ of the attacker (*Officers obtain warrant to extend detention of Darren Osborne, 47, as counter-terror detectives try to establish motives for attack*), which contributes to their desired purpose.

3.4 The Times

The following table shows the headlines that that The Times published for each attack.

Table 4

The headlines of the London Bridge attack and the Finsbury Park Mosque attack by The Times.

Newspaper	London Bridge Attack	Finsbury Park Mosque Attack
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<p>The Times</p>	<p>London Bridge terror attack: ‘There was gunfire and people fled to the kitchens to hide’ Diners and revellers tell of panic as attackers struck</p>	<p>Finsbury Park terror attack: one dead as van ploughs into crowds near London mosque Muslims targeted after prayer</p>
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Regarding the London Bridge attack, The Times gives a headline which contains some details, including the words 'terror', 'gunfire', 'fled', and 'hide' which shows the size of the attack as not a small one. This is magnified in the lead, as it talks about the ‘panic’ moments when the ‘attackers struck’ (*‘Diners and revellers tell of panic as attackers struck’*). Using the verb ‘struck’ which the past of ‘strike’ whose definition is ‘to hit or attack someone or something forcefully or violently’, according to the Cambridge Dictionary, serves the purpose of emphasis well. However, is the same verb (or a similar one at last) used with the Finsbury Mosque attack?

The headline that The Times used for the Finsbury Park Mosque attack is quite contrary to that given to the London Bridge attack. The newspaper mitigates the attacker by focusing on the casualties (*‘one dead’*) and postposing the act (*‘van ploughs’*), assigning the act to an inanimate subject (a van) rather than what it actually is. The lead does not go far from the mitigation process, as it also shifts the attention from the doer of the action to the action itself by relying on the passive (*“Muslims targeted after prayer”*).

The following table represents the quantitative analysis of the headlines lead paragraphs in terms of their negative nature. That is to say, to count the paragraphs that contain negative-connotation lexical items (such as attack, kill, injure, stab,

body(s), confront, terror, etc.), and comes up with a total for the attack that is given more negative words in proportion to the whole number of words given to each report in each newspaper. The criteria according to which negative words are chosen is by consulting a dictionary and relying on the definition of the words.

Table 5.

Frequency and Percentage of Negative-Connotation Words in Headlines and Lead Paragraphs in the Reports of the Selected Reports.

Newspaper	London Bridge Attack			Finsbury Park Mosque Attack		
	Negative Connotation Words	Total No. of Words in Headlines and Leads	Frequency (Percentage) of Negative Connotation Words	Negative Connotation Words	Total No. of Words in Headlines and Leads	Frequency (Percentage) of Negative Connotation Words
Daily Express	Attackers Terrorists Committed Atrocity Counter-Terrorism	37	6 (16.2%)	Kill Terror Killed Injured	36	4 (16.66%)
Daily Star	Terror Killed Threat Hit	39	10 (25.64%)	Terror Attack Shocked Attack	38	5 (13.15%)

	Terror Killed Knife- wielding monsters Attacked Mowing down			Atrocity		
The Guardian	Terror Attack Died Terrorist attack	29	3 (10.34%)	Attack Counter- terror	26	2 (7.69%)
The Times	Terror attack Gunfire Fled Panic Attackers struck	24	5 (25%)	Terror attack Dead Van ploughs Targeted	18	6 (22.22%)

The table above proves that the two attacks were dealt with differently by most of the selected reports. Daily Express used (16.2%) of its words to negative actions in the London Bridge attack, and it allocates a similar rate (16.66%) to the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. The Daily Star designated (25.64%) of its negative connotation words to the London Bridge attack, yet only (13.15%) to Finsbury Mosque attack. The Guardian allocated (10.34%) to talk about the negative acts in the London Bridge attack, but it devoted only (7.69%) to talk about the negative

acts in the Finsbury Park Mosque attack. Similarly, The Times devoted different frequencies of its negative words, as the London Bridge attack (25%) for the negative acts in the London Bridge attack, whereas the Finsbury Park Mosque attack is given (22.22%) to mention the negative happenings.

5. Conclusion

Most of the time, the selected newspapers dealt with the two comparable attacks by obeying two different standards, hence the strategy of positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation by categorizing the participants into in-groups and out-groups. By presenting the Muslims as the bearers of terrorism, the selected press created a negative mental model in the audience's minds which reflects the Islamic culture as a threat to their peace and prosperity. In turn, this leads to an extremely negative sentiment towards the Muslims and indeed adds to the Islamophobic ideology. Although the media is perceived to be unbiased in reporting any event, let alone sensitive ones like these, the British press were not successful in keeping to the standards of correct journalism in the case under scrutiny.

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APPENDIX: Links to the selected newspapers' reports

No.	Press	London Bridge Attack	Finsbury Attack in London
1-	Daily Express	Two London Bridge attackers identified by police in appeal for information By SIMON OSBORNE PUBLISHED: 18:14, Mon, Jun 5, 2017 UPDATED: 22:46, Mon, Jun 5, 2017 https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/813373/London-Bridge-terror-attackers-identified-police	I'm going to kill Muslims' Extra police at mosques during Ramadan after Finsbury terror By NICOLE STINSON, THOMAS HUNT AND KATIE MANSFIELD PUBLISHED: 09:38, Mon, Jun 19, 2017 , Jun 20, 2 https://www.express.co.uk/news/uk/818609/vehicle-pedestrians-london-finsbury-park-mosque-casualties-police-ambulance-emergency
3	Daily Star	London TERROR: 7 killed in market massacre as PM reveals threat level will NOT change By Tom Evans, Regan Okey, Jeremy Culley & Douglas Patient / Published 5th June 2017 https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/london-bridge-terror-attack-car-16955129	Finsbury Park terror attack suspect's 'shocked' mum and sister speak out By Christine Younan / Published 20th June 2017 https://www.dailystar.co.uk/news/latest-news/darren-osbourne-finsbury-park-terror-16960423_amp
4-	The Guardian	London terror attack: what we know so far Guardian staff Monday 5 June 2017 07.49 BST https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/04/london-attacks-what-we-know-so-far-london-bridge-borough-market-vauxhall	Finsbury Park attack suspect was probably 'self-radicalised' Vikram Dodd and Jamie Grierson Wednesday 21 June 2017 17.38 BST https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2017/jun/21/finsbury-park-mosque-attack-two-victims-in-critical-care
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