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Is Trump right that the media's terror coverage falls short?

Mona Chalabi

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Every sentence Donald Trump says seems to get ruthlessly picked apart to check its veracity with the assumption that he is spreading misinformation. So I tried to keep a very open mind when I looked at his most recent claim about the “crooked” media and I can tell you it’s mostly true.

This Monday, during a visit to the US central command headquarters in Tampa, Trump said that the media doesn’t sufficiently cover terrorism. I decided to look at the data on terrorism deaths.

There were 29,376 deaths from terrorism in 2015, the latest year that the Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP) updated its figures. And guess what? Most of those deaths don’t get much attention from the media. As Trump said on Monday: “It’s gotten to a point where it’s not even being reported, and in many cases, the very, very dishonest press doesn’t want to report it. They have their reasons, and you understand that.”

I tried to find out why the press might pay little attention to such an important topic. I dug into IEP’s figures. It turns out that 57% of all terrorism deaths since 2000 have occurred in just four countries: Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria and Pakistan.

“The vast majority occurs in the non-western world, generally amid civil wars, and those attacks receive far less coverage than ones closer to home,” Benjamin H Friedman, a researcher at the libertarian, nonpartisan Cato Institute, toldPolitifact.

Hmmm. I decided to go back and listen again to what Trump said and, oh! Silly me! I’d missed a bit. He actually said: “Radical Islamic terrorists are determined to strike our homeland as they did on 9/11, as they did from Boston to Orlando, to San Bernardino and all across Europe.”

I see! We’re only talking about deaths in the west. OK. Let’s shelve for now the way that western foreign policy might have contributed to civil wars that fostered terrorism abroad. Let’s

also set aside the fact that none of the attackers in the terrorist incidents Trump mentioned came from any of the seven countries targeted in his recent ban.

Later on Monday, the White House released a list of 78 terrorist attacks (both domestic and international) that the president was really referring to. Aha.

I looked at those New York Times types Trump thinks are so treacherous and, yes, it turns out they've published a list showing how they and other media outlets did cover most of the attacks mentioned on the White House list. The Guardian's own list is here. (Breitbart might have 19 million unique monthly visitors but the New York Times' 70 million still looks more "mainstream", I guess).

Meanwhile, Deadspin looked at broadcast journalism and showed (in a short video) how 75 of the 78 terrorist incidents actually were covered. Of the three incidents which seemed to have been overlooked, none had casualties – one took place in Egypt, the other in Sweden and the last in Chad.

Weird. It's almost like Trump hasn't been reading the journalism sites he was critiquing.