Why Do Some Terrorist Attacks Receive More Media Attention Than Others?[1]

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Abstract

Terrorist attacks often dominate news coverage as reporters seek to provide the public with information about the event, its perpetrators, and the victims. Yet, not all incidents receive equal attention. Why do some terrorist attacks receive more media coverage than others? We argue that social identity is the largest predictor of news coverage, while target type, being arrested, and fatalities will also impact coverage. We examined news coverage from LexisNexis Academic and CNN.com for all terrorist attacks in the United States between 2011 and 2015. Controlling for target type, fatalities, and being arrested, attacks by Muslim perpetrators received, on average, 449% more coverage than other attacks. Given the disproportionate quantity of news coverage for these attacks, it is no wonder that people are afraid of the Muslim terrorist. More representative media coverage could help to bring public perception of terrorism in line with reality.

Keywords: terrorism; media; news coverage

On February 6, 2017, President Trump stated that media neglect to report some terrorist attacks.[2] His administration released a list of terrorist attacks, claiming that they were not adequately covered by the media. While these purportedly underreported attacks occurred in many countries, the perpetrators were overwhelmingly Muslim. Reporters and academics were quick to dismiss President Trump's claim and demonstrate that these attacks were covered, often extensively.[3] Yet, it turns out that President Trump was correct: media do not cover some terrorist attacks at all, while disproportionately covering others. Why do some terrorist attacks receive more media coverage than others?

In the present study, we examined media coverage of terrorist attacks in the United States to ascertain why some receive more coverage than others. Our paper is organized as follows. We engage with the literature on media coverage of violence, crime, and terrorism, and discuss factors that impact why some events receive more coverage than others. Following this, we discuss our methodological approach to examining media coverage of terrorism, our sample, and our analyses. Lastly, we conclude by discussing the results of this study, how they pertain to policy and public perception, and outline avenues for future research.

Media Coverage

Why Media Coverage Matters

The way in which an issue is framed can impact an individual's view of the subject (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). There is clear evidence that media coverage impacts public perception across a host of topics ranging from civic engagement (McCarthy, McPhail & Smith, 1996) to mental health issues (Stack, 2003) and criminal justice issues (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011). When

[2] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/politics/wp/2017/02/06/president-trump-is-now-speculating-that-the-media-is-covering-up-terrorist-attacks/?utm_term=.b23ffe5a9113
[3] https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/02/trump-centcom-media-terror-cover-up/515823/ http://time.com/4489405/americans-fear-of-foreign-terrorists/

news media spends time on an issue, this suggests to the public that the topic is valid and important for understanding the world around them. In the context of conflict, the "CNN effect" suggests that media framing can impact public opinion and potentially sway policy decisions (Gilboa, 2005). Exposure to media coverage of terrorism increases people's perceived risk of being a victim of a terrorist attack (Nellis & Savage, 2012). In short, media coverage influences public opinion and perception of the world.

Why Some Things May Receive More Coverage

There are myriad potential factors that can impact why a particular terrorist attack receives more news coverage than others. We are interested in how the following factors influence the amount of news coverage that a given terrorist attack will receive: who committed the attack, what the target was, how many people were killed, and when the attack occurred.

Who is the Perpetrator?

Events are more newsworthy if they can be typified as reflecting current beliefs and social structure, and can be scripted in ways that reinforce stereotypes (Lundman, 2003). Consistent with the social identity perspective (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), media in the predominantly white, Christian United States may portray members of this in-group in a more favorable way than people who are not members of the majority race or religion. In the context of entertainment media, such as *24* or *Homeland*, we generally see Muslim or Arab actors portraying terrorists while white actors play the hero. In news media, perpetrators are disproportionately non-white (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). In fact, Shaheen (2012) found clear evidence that most Arab characters are portrayed as dangerous stereotypes—as sub-human or villains—in movies, while Arab protagonists often have surprisingly Caucasian features.

In the aftermath of Frazier Glenn Miller's Kansas City attack[4] or Robert Dear's attack[5] on Colorado Springs' Planned Parenthood, few called either of them terrorists. When Dylann Roof perpetrated his attack in Charleston, a debate emerged over whether or not to call him a terrorist. While some argued that it was appropriate,[6] others dispelled this label.[7] Yet, all three acts fit within the understanding of *terrorism* as "the threatened or actual use of illegal force and violence by a non-state actor to attain a political, economic, religious, or social goal through fear, coercion, or intimidation" (Global Terrorism Database, 2016). In contrast, attacks like those on the Pulse Nightclub attack in Orlando or the San Bernadino attack were called terrorism almost immediately. The key difference in these examples is the perpetrator(s) social identity.

In the context of terrorism, media may frame this as a specifically Muslim problem because that is the dominant narrative (Sultan, 2016). Domestic terrorism is often portrayed as a minor threat committed by mentally ill perpetrators, whereas terrorism influenced by radical interpretation of Islam is framed as a hostile outside force (Powell, 2011). When the perpetrator(s) of a terrorist attack are members of an out-group or "other", we should expect to see more media coverage. Since discussions of terrorism and counterterrorism often overly focus on Muslim perpetrators,[8] we expect the following:

H1: Terrorist attacks will receive more media coverage when the perpetrator is Muslim

While we expect that the perpetrator's identity will be the strongest predictor of the degree of media coverage received, we anticipate other factors will have significant influence as well. Perpetrators of terrorist attacks may be apprehended, killed, or escape capture or

[4] http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-34783848
[5] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/david-paul/robert-lewis-dear-is-terr_b_8697202.html
[6] https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/19/us/charleston-shooting-terrorism-or-hate-crime.html
[7] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/06/19/why-we-shouldnt-call-dylann-roof-a-terrorist/?utm_term=.60e7989bc730
[8] https://www.start.umd.edu/pubs/START_ECDB_IslamistFarRightHomicidesUS_Infographic_Feb2017.pdf

identification. Perpetrators who are arrested may provide more opportunities for media coverage as they are charged, stand trial, and, if found guilty, sentenced. Each of these events are likely to generate media coverage. Accordingly, we expect the following:

H2: Terrorist attacks will receive more media coverage when the perpetrator is arrested

What is the Target?

The relative sociological relationship between a victim and offender influence the way in which law is applied for punishment (Black, 1976). Stemming from this dyadic perspective, the target type may influence media coverage of violence. For example, Gruenewald, Chermak and Pizarro (2013) found that victim vulnerability impacted media coverage for homicides. For terrorism, attacks against a politically significant target receive more coverage (Zhang, Shoemaker & Wang, 2013). In so far as terrorism is a tactic to influence a politics, attacks on governmental facilities or employees may generate increased media coverage. From this, we expected that:

H3: Terrorist attacks will receive more media coverage when the target is a governmental facility or employee(s)

How Many People were Killed?

The adage "if it bleeds it leads" suggests that news coverage focuses on violent or gory stories. When more people killed in an attack, this can increase the shock value to viewers and increase fear of terrorism (Zhang et al. 2013). As Chermak and Gruenewald (20060 found in a study of media coverage on domestic terrorism, higher fatalities lead to increased coverage. To draw in readers, media may cover higher fatality count attacks more. Additionally, media also tend to write human-interest stories, such as profiles of the victims killed in terrorist attack or other forms of violence. We expect that:

H4: Terrorist attacks will receive increased media coverage as the number of fatalities caused by the attack increases.

Alternative Explanations

When classifying whether or not a violent incident is terrorism there can be insufficient or contradicting information that makes it difficult to make a definitive determination. If experts question whether or not an incident should be considered terrorism, members of the media may have similar difficulties. It is possible that differences in coverage can be explained by classification differences, potentially resulting in ambiguous cases receiving less media attention. Drawing from the discussion on out-groups and the societal position of the victim(s), it is also possible that attacks against Muslims or Islamic religious sites receive less media coverage. Lastly, symbolism can be important in terrorism. Certain dates, such as Hitler's birthday and the anniversary of 9/11, may attract more violence. When attacks occur within close proximity to these symbolic dates, they may receive more media coverage. We tested our argument on why some attacks received more media coverage than others against these three alternatives.

Methodology

Data

We looked at media coverage for terrorist attacks in the United States between 2011 and 2015, as listed in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD). While the GTD lists 110 terrorist attacks during this five-year span,[9] several of the attacks were perpetrated by the same individual or group of individuals, and thus are reported on together in media. We collapsed multiple attacks with the same perpetrator into a single terrorism episode in order to avoid counting the same articles numerous times. In total, there were 89 terrorism episodes in the United States during this time.

[9] The 2011 Bowling Green Massacre is excluded from these data on account of not existing.

Each of these attacks meets the GTD definition of terrorism and thus should be reported on as such in media.

To measure media coverage, we focused on two sources: LexisNexis Academic and CNN.com. LexisNexis Academic searches through the full text of thousands of news publications. For the purpose of this study, we limited the search results to newspaper coverage from US-based sources between the date of the attack and the end of 2016. LexisNexis pulls from sources such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post,* as well as local newspapers from around the country. To supplement these results, we searched CNN.com's archives to obtain additional news coverage that is solely in digital format. For each incident, we searched for the perpetrator(s) and victim(s) names (if known), the location, and other key words about the attack. In this initial stage, our goal was over-inclusion of potential articles. From this, we culled the final list to only include articles where the attack, perpetrator(s), or victim(s) were the primary focus. We removed the following types of articles most frequently: lists of every attack of a given type, political or policy-focused articles where the attack or perpetrators were an anecdote to a larger debate, such as abortion or gun control, and discussion of vigils held in other locations. In total, we included 2,413 news articles in our dataset. See Appendix for a full list of terrorism episodes and the amount of media coverage that they received.

The outcome variable for all hypotheses was the number of separate news stories about the incident. We added the number of relevant articles from LexisNexis Academic and CNN.com to yield to total number of articles for each terrorism series. The key independent variables fall into four categories: perpetrator-level factors, target type, casualties, and timing. Three binary perpetrator-level variables were coded: being Muslim, being from a foreign country, and being arrested. Information to code these perpetrator-level variables came from news reports.

When there were multiple perpetrators, we coded each of these perpetrator-level variables as 1 if any of the perpetrators in a series fell into a category. When the perpetrator was unknown, we coded these three perpetrator-level variables as a 0.

Target types were measured in two ways: a binary indicator for a law enforcement/governmental target and a binary indicator for a Muslim target.[10] These variables are derived from the GTD's target type coding. We measured fatalities as the number of people killed—excluding the perpetrator(s)—in each terrorism series. These numbers are derived from the GTD's coding. Lastly, we included a binary indicator to denote whether or not the attack occurred near an important event. If an attack occurred within a week of Hitler's birthday (April 20th), Independence Day (July 4th), September 11th, or Christmas (December 25th), this was coded as 1. When there were multiple incidents in a terrorism series, this was coded as 1 if any of the events take place within a week of a significant date. See Table 1 for descriptive information about each variable in the models.

[TABLE 1 HERE]

Results and Discussion

Since the dependent variable is a non-negative count of news articles per attack, negative binomial regression models are most appropriate.[11] In Table 2, we display the results of three models. As expected in hypothesis 1, Model 1 shows that the perpetrator's identity alone is a significant predictor of media coverage in both operationalizations. Of course, other aspects of the attack likely impact media coverage for terrorism as well. As Model 2 shows, all of our

[10] We include the 2012 Sikh temple shooting in Oak Creek, Wisconsin and the 2015 attack on the Sikh bus driver in Los Angeles in this calculation. Evidence suggests that these attacks were Islamaphobia-inspired and the perpetrators were unaware of the difference between Sikhs and Muslims. We also estimate models excluding these attacks from the "Target Muslim" variable and results are unchanged.

[11] A high proportion (N=24, 27%) of the attacks in these data did not receive any news coverage. Thus zero-inflated negative binomial regression models were also estimated. Vuong tests of the zero-inflated negative binomial versus a standard negative binomial indicate that the negative binomial models are preferred.

hypotheses are supported. If the perpetrator is Muslim, expect 449% more news stories about the attack. Model 2 also shows a 212% increase in coverage when the perpetrator is arrested, a 228% increase if the target is governmental, and a 64% increase per fatality, on average.

[TABLE 2 HERE]

We suggested three possible alternative explanations for the amount of news coverage that a terrorist attack receives. First, differences in coverage may be explained by whether or not there is doubt about classifying the attack as terrorism. To test this, we estimated the models reported in Table 2 to include the GTD's "doubt terrorism proper" variable. Results remain unchanged. We also removed the 13 incidents where there was some question about whether or not to classify the event as terrorism. As shown on Table 3, our results hold across incidents where there is no doubt that it should be called terrorism.

It is also possible media coverage is impacted by the target and the timing. When the target is an out-group member—in this case Muslim—the attack may receive less coverage. When an attack occurs in close temporal proximity to a significant date, the attack may receive more coverage. We tested these two alternative explanations in Models 3 on both Table 2 and Table 3. As results show, neither of these predictors has a significant impact on the amount of news coverage across models. From these results, we can dismiss alternative explanations and have greater confidence that our proposed factors have the strongest impact on news coverage.

[TABLE 3 HERE]

The Boston Marathon bombing accounts for nearly 20% of the media coverage on terrorism during this time period. Hyper-salient events like this drive media coverage. When people think about terrorism, this is the kind of event that comes to mind. Yet, so much is missed. Based on fatalities, there are a few attacks in the dataset that received less coverage than we

would expect. Wade Michael Page's attack on the Sikh Temple in Wisconsin killed 6 people and it only received 3.81% of the total coverage. Frazier Glenn Miller's attack on a synagogue in Kansas killed 3 people and it only received 3.27% of the coverage. Dylann Roof killed 9 people in an African-American church in Charleston and received 7.42% of the coverage. These attacks have three things in common: the perpetrator was a white man and the targets were both religious and minority groups. These instances highlight disparity in media coverage of terrorism.

Policy Implications

When President Trump asserted that the media does not cover some terrorist attacks enough, it turns out that he was correct. However, his assertion that attacks by Muslim perpetrators received less coverage is unsubstantiated. All attacks in this study are considered terrorism by experts and should be covered as such. Yet, clearly, media do not cover these events equally. Regardless of other factors, attacks perpetrated by Muslim receive a disproportionate amount of media coverage. In the present data, Muslims perpetrated 12.4% of the attacks yet received 41.4% of the news coverage.

The way in which media frames an issue can impact public perception (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). Whether the disproportionate coverage is a conscious decision on the part of journalists or not, this stereotyping reinforces cultural narratives about what and who should be feared. By covering terrorist attacks by Muslims dramatically more than other incidents, media frame this type of event as more prevalent. Based on these findings, it is no wonder that Americans are so fearful of radical Islamic terrorism.[12] Reality shows, however, that these fears are misplaced. One way to combat this is to change the public narrative on terrorism to cover attacks more evenly.

Future Directions

[12] http://www.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx

From the present study, we see that factors about a terrorist attack impact the amount of coverage that it receives from media. When something is covered more extensively, it is in the public's eye more often. This can connote significance and can skew public perceptions of terrorism overall.

Beyond just the quantity of coverage, it is also important to analyze the content of what is said. Might media be reticent to use the term "terrorist" to describe some attackers? How do casualty rates report the way that media discusses attacks? When is speculation about the perpetrator's mental health more prevalent? In future projects, we will explore questions about the content of what is said in media reports on terrorist attacks.

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Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Variable	**Frequency (N)**	**Mean (SD)**	**Median**	**Range**
Dependent Variable				
Articles Per Incident	—	27.1 (64.71)	4	0 - 474
Independent Variables				
Perpetrator Muslim	12.4% (N=11)	—	—	—
Perpetrator Arrested	42.7% (N=38)	—	—	—
Target LE/Government	19.1% (N=17)	—	—	—
Number Killed	—	0.87 (2.56)	0	0 - 15
Signification Date	12.4% (N=11)	—	—	—
Target Muslim	20.2% (N=18)	—	—	—

Table 2. News Coverage by Terrorism Episode (N=89)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Perpetrator Muslim	1.61** (0.51) [**402%**]	1.70** (0.57) [**449%**]	1.62** (0.61) [**404%**]
Perpetrator Arrested		1.14*** (0.31) [**212%**]	1.14*** (0.31) [**212%**]
Target LE/Government		1.19*** (0.31) [**228%**]	1.14** (0.33) [**213%**]
Number Killed		0.49*** (0.14) [**64%**]	0.49*** (0.14) [**63%**]
Significant Date			0.18 (0.43) [20%]
Target Muslim			-0.11 (0.29) [-11%]

Negative binomial regression models. Constants not reported.
Coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses.
Percent change in expected count reported in brackets.
*p < 0.05. **p <0 .01. ***p< 0.001.

Table 3. News Coverage by Terrorism Episode when all GTD Terrorism Criteria Met (N=76)

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
Perpetrator Muslim	1.76** (0.54) [**484%]**	1.53** (0.54) [**361%]**	1.32* (0.61) [**274%]**
Perpetrator Arrested		0.93* (0.33) [**153%**]	0.86** (0.34) [**145%**]
Target LE/Government		0.77* (0.39) [**116%**]	0.56 (0.40) [**76%**]
Number Killed		0.57*** (0.14) [**77%**]	0.54*** (0.14) [**72%**]
Significant Date			0.48 (0.57) [62%]
Target Muslim			-0.27 (0.32) [-24%]

Negative binomial regression models. Constants not reported.
Coefficients are presented with standard errors in parentheses.
Percent change in expected count reported in brackets and bolded when significant.
*p < 0.05. **p <0 .01. ***p< 0.001.

Appendix

Table A1. News Coverage by Attack

GTD Event ID	Perpetrator(s)	# of Articles	% of Dataset
201101060018	Unknown	15	0.62%
201101170018	Kevin Harpham	31	1.28%
201102220009	Unknown	4	0.17%
201104230010	Unknown	1	0.04%
201105060004	Unknown	0	0.00%
201109260012	Unknown	0	0.00%
201110120003	Unknown	0	0.00%
201111110020	Oscar Ramiro Ortega-Hernandez	62	2.57%
201201010020	Ray Lazier Lengend	8	0.33%
201204010018	Francis Grady	1	0.04%
201205200024	Jean-Claude Bridges	3	0.12%
201205200025	Unknown	0	0.00%
201205230034	Unknown	0	0.00%
201206180029	Anson Chi	3	0.12%
201207040032	Jedediah Stout	4	0.17%
201208050006	Wade Michael Page	92	3.81%
201208060019	Unknown	15	0.62%
201208120012	Unknown	1	0.04%
201208150059	Floyd Lee Corkins II	23	0.95%
201209300041	Randolph Linn	14	0.58%
201211300009	Abdullatif Aldosary	0	0.00%
201301170006	Unknown	0	0.00%
201302030025	Christopher Dorner	148	6.13%
201302260036	Unknown	3	0.12%
201304150001	Tamerlan Tsarnaev, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev	474	19.64%
201304160051	Unknown	7	0.29%
201304170041	Unknown	58	2.40%
201304180010	Unknown	0	0.00%
201305200073	Shannon Guess Richardson	38	1.57%
201307250065	Unknown	0	0.00%
201308220053	Unknown	0	0.00%
201309030050	Unknown	0	0.00%
201311010046	Paul Anthony Ciancia	34	1.41%
201403180089	Unknown	0	0.00%
201403250090	Unknown	0	0.00%
201404130060	Frazier Glenn Cross	79	3.27%
201404270057	Ali Muhammad Brown	6	0.25%
201405050073	David Patterson	1	0.04%
201406060065	Dennis Marx	13	0.54%
201406080071	Jerad and Amanda Miller	26	1.08%
201406110089	Unknown	0	0.00%
201408110060	Douglas Leguin	0	0.00%
201409110001	Eric King	2	0.08%

201409120032	Eric Frein	124	5.14%
201410030065	Unknown	0	0.00%
201410230047	Zale H. Thompson	7	0.29%
201410240071	Unknown	0	0.00%
201411040086	Michael C. Sibley	4	0.17%
201411040087	Unknown	2	0.08%
201411230071	John Hugo Scherzberg	3	0.12%
201411230072	Jeremiah Mauer, Gregory Tinnell, Warren Gerald Browning	1	0.04%
201411280018	Larry Steven McQuilliams	8	0.33%
201412180047	Justin Nojan Sullivan	12	0.50%
201412200060	Ismaaiyl Brinsley	113	4.68%
201501060024	Thaddeus Cheyenne Murphy	7	0.29%
201502100004	Craig Stephen Hicks	70	2.90%
201502170127	Unknown	1	0.04%
201502180067	Dominick T. Johnson, Nathan Deshawn	0	0.00%
201502230104	Unknown	0	0.00%
201503100045	Unknown	0	0.00%
201503200036	Richard White	11	0.46%
201505030003	Nadir Soofi, Elton Simpson	67	2.78%
201506170035	Dylann Roof	179	7.42%
201506220069	Unknown	0	0.00%
201506230056	Unknown	1	0.04%
201506240051	Unknown	1	0.04%
201506260046	Unknown	1	0.04%
201507150077	Unknown	0	0.00%
201507160061	Muhammad Youseff Abdulazeez	118	4.89%
201507190097	Unknown	1	0.04%
201507230080	John Russell Houser	23	0.95%
201508010105	Unknown	0	0.00%
201508020114	Unknown	18	0.75%
201508190040	Unknown	6	0.25%
201509040048	Unknown	7	0.29%
201509130079	Rasheed Abdul Aziz	3	0.12%
201509300082	Unknown	5	0.21%
201511010076	Marshall W. Leonard	1	0.04%
201511040056	Faisal Mohammad	20	0.83%
201511060053	K.C. Tard Jr.	1	0.04%
201511150043	Ted Hakey Jr.	11	0.46%
201511190054	Chester H. Gore	0	0.00%
201511230084	Nathan Gustavsson, Allen Lawrence, Daniel Thomas Macey, Joseph Martin Backman	16	0.66%
201511270001	Robert Dear	204	8.45%
201512020012	Syed Rizwan Farook, Tashfeen Malik	179	7.42%
201512050031	Piro Kolvani	1	0.04%
201512080038	Matthew Gust	7	0.29%
201512110031	Carl James Dial Jr.	10	0.41%
201512260016	Unknown	4	0.17%