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Biased Coverage of Bias Crime: Examining Differences in Media Coverage of Hate Crimes and Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

News media differentially cover violence based on social identity. How does media bias apply to terrorist attacks—typically “upward crimes” where perpetrators hold less power than targets—that are also hate crimes—typically “downward crimes”? We compare coverage of incidents that are both terrorist attacks and hate crimes to coverage of incidents that are just terrorism in the U.S. from 2006 to 2015. Attacks that are also hate crimes receive less media attention. Articles are more likely to reference *hate crimes* when the perpetrator is unknown and more likely to reference *terrorism* when the perpetrator is non-white in some models.

In the last few decades in the United States, federal, state, and local governments,¹ scholars,² and the public³ have paid a great deal of attention to terrorism and terrorism prevention. At the same time, relatively little attention has been paid to hate crimes—which data show are far more prevalent in the United States.⁴ Both terrorism and hate crimes are real problems in society, but they appear to evoke different responses from both the government and the public.

In part, greater attention to terrorism relative to hate crimes may be a function of the typical perpetrator-offender dynamic in each. Scholars have examined similarities and differences between terrorism—defined by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD)⁵ 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*—and hate crimes—defined by the U.S. Hate Crime Statistics Act (1990, amended 2009)⁶ as *a criminal offense committed against a person or property that is motivated in whole, or in part, by bias or prejudice against race, national or ethnic origin, religion, sexual orientation, or disability*. This work has debated whether terrorism and hate crimes are “close cousins” or “distant relatives.”⁷ As Deloughery and colleagues note, terrorist attacks are typically “upward crimes” where perpetrators have less power than targets whereas hate crimes are typically “downward crimes” where the reverse is

true.⁸ Yet, Mills and colleagues argue that terrorism and hate crimes have a number of similarities. Indeed, a number of terrorist attacks—though certainly not all—are also hate crimes.⁹ A separate body of work focuses on bias in news media coverage of crimes generally¹⁰ and terrorism specifically.¹¹ We draw from these two bodies of scholarship to address the following research question: How—if at all—do media differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not?

This paper is organized as follows: First we review the literature on newsworthiness and media bias in general and discuss how this applies to terrorism and crime specifically. We then summarize extant literature on public perceptions of terrorism and hate crimes and outline the aims of our study. Next, we describe our methodological and analytical approach and present our results. We conclude with a discussion of our findings, their implications, and suggestions for future research directions.

Background

Newsworthiness and Media Bias

News media serve two primary roles: (1) determining *what* gets shared with the public and (2) establishing *how* that information is presented.¹² Thus, news media play a vital role in how we view the world. Yet, news media are not impartial; page space and location have value, so stories *selected* for coverage must be interesting and relevant, or “newsworthy.” In determining what is “newsworthy,” Harcup and O’Neill¹³ found that potential stories must generally satisfy one (and preferably more) of the following requirements: *exclusivity, bad news, conflict, surprise, audio-visual, shareability, entertainment, drama, follow-up, the power elite, relevance, magnitude, celebrity, good news, and news organization agenda*.

Beyond news *selection*, news *treatment* takes into account the intentions of journalists¹⁴ and can never truly be objective.¹⁵ News media coverage often reflect and reinforce dominant ideologies, values, and power structures in a society.¹⁶ By reinforcing dominant narratives over time, these perspectives become “common sense.”¹⁷ Hall suggested that news values themselves are part of an ideologically constructed way of perceiving the world that favors and “naturalizes” the perspectives of powerful elites.¹⁸ This argument is the basis for Herman and Chomsky’s propaganda model¹⁹ in their work “*Manufacturing Consent*,” Herman and Chomsky delineate five filters (*ownership, advertising, sourcing, flak, and anti-Communism/fear*) that news must survive before being published and argue that the propaganda model views corporate media as businesses interested in the sale of a product—readers and audiences—to other businesses (advertisers) rather than the pursuit of quality journalism in service of the public.²⁰ Thus, what becomes “news” is the result of a system that prioritizes

newsworthiness without upsetting the status quo. Westerhahl and Johansson explain that the journalistic selection process is “*probably as important or perhaps more important than what ‘really happens’*” when determining what is newsworthy.²¹ Because of this, news values can be seen less as a reflection of what type of information citizens want or need, and more as a reflection of organizational, sociological, and cultural norms combined with economic factors.²²

Newsworthiness and Media Bias in Coverage of Crime and Terrorism

The adage “if it bleeds, it leads” refers to news media’s tendency to provide coverage to gruesome or violent incidents that is disproportionate to their actual frequency. Of the newsworthiness elements that Harcup and O’Neill identified, two—*bad news* and *surprise*—are most relevant to terrorism and hate crimes, while elements of *conflict*, *audio-visual*, *relevance*, *magnitude*, and *news organization agenda* may also be present.²³ Looking first at crime generally, violent offenses like homicide receive dramatically more news media attention than the actual prevalence of these offenses,²⁴ which may help explain moral panics over crime despite the decreasing crime rate in the United States.²⁵ Drawing from social identity theory and media’s tendency to reinforce narratives of dominant groups in society—news media also tend to cover crime in ways that suggest minorities are more likely to be perpetrators than is truly the case.²⁶ While it is incredibly challenging to measure the aggregate influence of media on public views, there is reason to believe that news media coverage can influence perceptions of crime and justice issues.²⁷

Turning to media coverage of terrorism, there is ample evidence that news media depict this violence in biased ways. Muslim-perpetrated terrorist attacks receive significantly more coverage than attacks perpetrated by non-Muslim actors.²⁸ Further, other factors like target type and fatalities influence the amount of coverage that terrorist attacks receive.²⁹ Additionally, terrorist attacks receive less coverage when they are framed instead as crimes than when they are not.³⁰ Similarly, kidnappings framed as terrorism receive more coverage than kidnappings without this framing.³¹ Looking then at the content of news, coverage of Muslim-perpetrated attacks is more likely to reference *terrorism* than coverage of attacks with non-Muslim perpetrators.³² In contrast, some studies³³ find that coverage of non-Muslim perpetrators is more likely to reference *mental illness* though this connection is not found in the only systematic review of cases.³⁴ Relatedly, Gade and colleagues examined news coverage of mass shooters in the U.S. and found that coverage of white perpetrators was more sympathetic and positive.³⁵ In short, research clearly shows media bias in coverage of both crime and terrorism. What we do not yet know, however, is whether media differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to attacks that

are not. Beyond the potential for identity-based bias in media coverage, the mere existence of fatalities in an attack may influence how the attack is covered. Terror Management Theory posits that humans avoid thoughts of death and the conflict that arises between one's self-preservation instinct and the reality that death is inevitable.³⁶ Yet, some violent events involve death and thus may prime mortality salience which could influence how journalists report on those events. Attacks with higher fatalities might simultaneously be seen as more *newsworthy* and be more likely to break the psychological comforts used to cope with *death anxiety*.

Social Identity, Crime Direction, and Relational Distance

Social identity theory describes the existence of and the process for creating in- and out-groups based on perceived similarities or dissimilarities to others.³⁷ Through this process of *self-categorization*, people form identities that link them to certain social categories or groups (in-groups) while distancing them from others (out-groups).³⁸ As a result of this *self-categorization*, people tend to accentuate their perceived similarities to other in-group members and their perceived differences from out-group members in ways that are self-enhancing. Abrams and Hogg delineate common social categorical splits (rich/poor, white/Black, etc.) and describe the traits with which in- and out-groups are compared (power, prestige, status, etc.).³⁹ Group membership may be formed around—and shaped by—cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral lines. *Social stereotyping*, a cognitive outcome, magnifies perceived differences between groups and homogeneity within groups.

Though social identity is individual and maintained internally, media's role reinforcing dominant viewpoints can bolster public perceptions of group-based differences through bias in reporting. Gans categorized four types of "disorder stories" (natural, technological, social, and moral), two of which are relevant to the discussion at hand on media coverage of terrorism and hate crimes (social and moral).⁴⁰ For example, Husselbee and Elliott analyzed news media coverage of the murders of James Byrd Jr. in Jasper, Texas and Matthew Shepard in Laramie, Wyoming.⁴¹ They found that coverage highlighted community differences (i.e. racial tension and homophobia), but that coverage was more frequently positive (e.g. "the community is healing") rather than negative (e.g. "rednecks who come from broken homes filled with hatred"). Regardless of the tenor, how media framed these incidents highlighted and reinforced in- and out-groups.

Other than the Gans and the Husselbee and Elliott studies, there remains a dearth of research on hate crimes and media.⁴² Instead, we look to Donald Black's behavior of law (BOL) to supplement the expectations we draw from social identity theory.⁴³ We are less interested in Black's overall argument, that "*law is a quantitative variable... the*

quantity of law varies in time and space,” rather we are interested in the *dimensions* he uses as predictors in his model.⁴⁴ The vertical dimension, which corresponds to socioeconomic status (SES) or social class, and the horizontal dimension, which corresponds to race, ethnicity, and native-born versus foreign-born status. Whereas social identity theory describes the processes in which societies create in- and out-groups, and how individuals may self-categorize, Black explains a *directional relationship* for both crime and law, plus a *relational distance* between individuals and the law.

Black argues that the *directional relationship* between a victim and offender will determine the perceived severity of the offense and the level of retribution that will result from the law.⁴⁵ For example, terrorism is typically an “upward crime” where a lower-power perpetrator attacks a higher-power target. In this case, the public should view such an attack as more severe and the punitive response to it should be stronger. Conversely, hate crimes are typically “downward crime” where a higher-power perpetrator attacks a lower-power victim. The public should view this as less severe than terrorism and, likewise, the punitive response to it should be weaker. Though Black limits his discussion to the society, generally, and the law, specifically, we do not believe it is a stretch to include the media as the mechanism which most strongly affects public perception.

Similar to the directional relationship of the vertical dimension, Black also provides a way to view the *relational distance* on the horizontal dimension.⁴⁶ On this horizontal dimension, individuals are located at different positions of radial status: “*The radial location of a person or group is a status that confers privileges and disabilities.*”⁴⁷ If individuals have a higher radial status, they are more integrated into mainstream society and are closer to the “center.” Individuals have a lower radial status when they are less integrated into mainstream society and are closer to the “margin.” This idea of being at the center or the margin is independent of SES or rank⁴⁸: “*A useful person may be wealthy, but not necessarily, and the same applies to the marginal: some are central to social life, even essential, and yet low in rank; others are wealthy and do nothing.*” Employment, marriage, and resident statuses are examples of factors that determine radial location. The public perception of severity and governmental legal response follow a similar pattern: “outward” crimes of the native against foreign-born are seen as less severe than “inward” crimes of the foreign against native-born and are punished less punitively.

The Present Study

Research clearly shows that news media coverage of crime generally and terrorism specifically is often biased both in which attacks are deemed more newsworthy and in

how the newsworthy attacks are portrayed. Drawing from social identity theory, these biases in coverage often reflect dominant perspectives in society about threats and sources of those threats.⁴⁹ Yet, sometimes an attack is both terrorism (an upward crime typically perpetrated against a more powerful target) and a hate crime (a downward crime typically perpetrated against a less powerful target). Our interest here is in understanding how—if at all—media differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not. While we do not specify hypotheses for what factors make an attack more newsworthy, we first explore whether or not differences exist in the *amount* of coverage given to attacks that are both terrorism and a hate crime versus those that are just terrorism before testing hypotheses about how incidents are portrayed of media coverage.

Drawing from social identity theory and media's role to further dominant narratives,⁵⁰ news coverage in the United States—where the majority of the population is white and Christian—should depict members of these in-groups more favorably than members of out-groups. Minorities are often portrayed as criminals⁵¹ and Muslims are often portrayed as terrorists⁵² in both entertainment and news media. In contrast, threats from domestic in-groups are often downplayed.⁵³ From this, we expect that both the perpetrator's race and whether or not the terrorist attack is also a hate crime should influence how media depiction attacks. Specifically:

H1: Articles will be more likely to reference *terrorism* only when the perpetrator is non-white

H2: Articles will be more likely to reference *hate crimes* only when the perpetrator is white

Some incidents meet the definition of both terrorism and a hate crime. Since hate crimes are typically “downward crimes” perpetrated by more powerful actors, when these attacks also meet the definition of terrorism media may be more inclined to downplay the terrorism aspect which has a more negative connotation, by either neglecting to mention it or also mentioning hate crimes. Specifically, when a terrorist attack is also a hate crime:

H3: Articles will be less likely to reference *terrorism* only

H4: Articles will be more likely to reference *hate crimes* only

H5: Articles will be more likely to reference both *terrorism* and *hate crimes*

Drawing from Terror Management Theory, higher-fatality incidents can induce a greater sense of one's own mortality and may influence how journalists cover the attack.⁵⁴ Attacks with a higher number of fatalities receive more media coverage.⁵⁵ Additionally, members of the public are more likely to perceive an incident as *terrorism* when the fatalities rise.⁵⁶ Further, returning to social identity theory as well,

not just how many people are killed but also who is killed should influence how media depict violence. From this, we expect:

H6: Articles will be less likely to reference *terrorism* only as the number of people killed increases and the incident is also a hate crime

H7: Articles will be more likely to reference *terrorism* and *hate crimes* when the number of people killed increases and the incident is also a hate crime

Beyond perpetrator identity and the number of fatalities, prior research on media coverage of terrorism shows that other factors can influence newsworthiness and media bias. For example, attacks receive more coverage when the perpetrator was arrested and when the target was law enforcement or government.⁵⁷ When the perpetrator was connected to a known group that uses terrorism, news coverage was more likely to mention terrorism.⁵⁸ We control for these factors in our analyses. Further, sometimes there is doubt about whether or not an attack clearly meets all of the definitional criteria for terrorism. When there is some doubt among experts about how to classify the attack, there may also be more debate among media on how to depict it. To account for this potential, we estimate models with all cases in the GTD and with only those for which there is no doubt that they are terrorism. Importantly, there is no analogous body of work on newsworthiness and media bias in coverage of hate crimes on which to draw additional control variables.

Method

Data

For this project we examine print media coverage of terrorist attacks—those that are also hate crimes and those that are not—in the United States between 2006 and 2015. We first identified attacks in the Global Terrorism Database (GTD), which lists 170 total attacks though some had the same perpetrator(s) and were thus reported on together in media coverage. We collapse such attacks with the same perpetrator(s) into a single event to avoid over-counting or duplicating articles. In sum, there are 136 terrorism episodes in the U.S. during this ten-year span.

In an ideal world, we would also examine and compare media coverage of incidents that are hate crimes only and not terrorism. Unfortunately, the nature of hate crime data do not allow us to systematically identify cases in a way that would make for sound comparison. Data on reported hate crimes come from the FBI's Unified Crime Report, which are incomplete in ways that are likely biased. Barnett-Ryan and Nolan have measured the effects of UCR policy on successful hate crime data submission by law enforcement.⁵⁹ Though many police departments have improved over time, there remain barriers between the crime act and the production of an official record of that act. First, hate crime enhancements are difficult to prove in court. As a result, many

police officers (and district attorneys) figure it is “better” to submit an attack as “murder” and get a conviction than to record it as “hate crime murder” and risk a non-conviction on the more difficult-to-prove offense. Second, the data that do exist may be skewed by the local departmental and societal views. For example, according to the UCR, California is home to a disproportionate amount of bias crime each year. Part of this is due to California’s higher-than-average minority population as victims need to be present physically to be targeted, but this also may be partially due to the likelihood that victims feel more comfortable reporting their crimes to Californian police than in states with a worse history of institutional racism, including among law enforcement. Due to these barriers, the crimes most likely to be accurate within the UCR are the ones involving the most blatant displays of bigotry before, during, or after the criminal act. Thus, the FBI’s Unified Crime Report hate crimes data are not representative of all hate crimes that actually occur in the U.S. and are likely biased in meaningful ways. In comparison, GTD data on terrorism are collected in a systematic and unbiased way. For this reason, any comparison between the universe of terrorism cases (some of which are also hate crimes) and a biased sample of hate crime cases is not methodologically sound. Further, the UCR data include each incident’s date and location but no identifying information, which makes searching for media coverage of these incidents difficult if not impossible.

After identifying cases, we then collected media coverage of these attacks from LexisNexis Academic and CNN.com. LexisNexis Academic houses the full text of print articles from news outlets around the U.S. and is commonly used in academic research on news coverage.⁶⁰ LexisNexis Academic pulls coverage from both major news sources like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The Washington Post* and local news sources from Bangor, ME to San Gabriel, CA, from Tampa, FL to Seattle, WA, and from well over 100 other newspapers in between. We then searched CNN.com’s archives to supplement the hard copy print coverage with online coverage. While our original aim was to compare coverage across political ideologies, neither Fox News nor Huffington Post have public archives dating back to 2006. Further, the number of sources that LexisNexis pulls from precludes comparison across or controlling for specific sources.

Procedure

To identify articles covering each attack, we searched LexisNexis Academic and CNN.com for U.S.-based coverage from the date of each attack through the end of 2016. For each attack, we searched for the perpetrator(s) if known, the location, and other key words about the attack. To ensure that we did not miss articles, our first aim was to be overly inclusive of potential articles covering each attack. Following this, each potential article was separately reviewed by two researchers to determine whether or

not its primary focus was on the attack, perpetrator(s), or victim(s). Articles that did not meet this criterion were removed—most typically excluded articles were lists of attacks, memorials held at other locations, or articles that used the attack as an anecdote to argue for a policy position. In total, our final dataset contains 3,541 news articles covering 136 terrorism episodes. Of note, however, is that 36 of these attacks did not receive any media coverage from our sources and thus are excluded from analyses of the content of media coverage—but not analyses of the quantity of coverage. [Online Appendix A](#) contains the list of terrorist attacks in our dataset and the number of articles on each.

Variables

We are interested in two outcome variables related to newsworthiness and media bias. First, we are interested whether or not there are differences in the *amount of coverage* between attacks that are both terrorism and hate crimes and those that are just terrorism. To examine this, we use a simple count of the number of articles that each attack receives in the sources that we reviewed, which serves as our first outcome variable. Second, we are interested in how attacks are discussed in coverage. Specifically, we are interested in whether an article references: (1) *terrorism* only, (2) *hate crimes* only, (3) *terrorism* and *hate crimes*, or (4) neither *terrorism* nor *hate crimes*.

Once we identified the 3,541 news articles, two researchers separately searched the entire dataset in Nvivo to determine whether keywords associated with both *terrorism*⁶¹ and *hate crimes* appeared in each article (see [Online Appendix B](#) for keywords). There was no subjectivity in this process as keywords either appear or they do not in each article. Coding discrepancies resulted from Nvivo either not recognizing punctuation marks or coding comments sections or URLs. After the preliminary coding, Krippendorff's alpha was above the common threshold of 0.8 for both mentions of *terrorism* ($\alpha = 0.88$) and *hate crimes* ($\alpha = 0.97$) across all articles.⁶² To increase confidence in our coding, all discrepancies were reviewed and discussed until a final determination was made for each variable across these articles. To create our second outcome variable, we use the binary indicators for *mentions terrorism* and *mentions hate crimes* to create a variable for depictions where an article can reference: (1) *terrorism* only; (2) *hate crimes* only; (3) both *terrorism* and *hate crimes*; or, (4) neither *terrorism* nor *hate crimes*.

Our key predictor variables focus on the number of people killed, the perpetrator's race, and whether or not the incident is also a hate crime. *Fatalities* are measured from the GTD as a count of the number—excluding perpetrator(s)—killed in the attack. Since the GTD does not code perpetrator race or whether or not the attack is also a hate

crime, two researchers separately coded these variables prior to examining any of the news coverage. Perpetrator race was coded categorically: *perpetrator white*, *perpetrator non-white*, or *perpetrator unknown*. Krippendorff's alpha for preliminary coding of perpetrator race ($\alpha = 0.91$) was above the common threshold of 0.8.⁶³ For additional confidence in our coding, we discussed coding discrepancies and agreed on final codes. We then created three mutually exclusive binary variables from the categorical coding for perpetrator race.

To identify which of the 136 terrorism episodes were also hate crimes, we turned first to the FBI's Unified Crime Report data on reported hate crimes. We cross-referenced dates, locations, and targets and code *hate crime* as 1 if the incident was listed in the UCR Hate Crimes data. As discussed in detail above, these data are unfortunately incomplete. To supplement UCR's coding limitations, both authors separately reviewed each of the incident summaries from the GTD and coded incidents as hate crimes if they meet the U.S. Hate Crime Statistics Act definition for it, even if UCR data do not include the case or if the case was not officially charged as a hate crime. Krippendorff's alpha for preliminary coding of *hate crime* ($\alpha = 0.99$) was above the common threshold of 0.8.⁶⁴ We then discussed the single disagreement to determine a final code. Of these 136 terrorism episodes, 49 (36.0%) are also hate crimes.

Using prior research as a guide, we control for three factors found to influence media coverage of terrorism: whether the perpetrator was arrested; whether the target was law enforcement or government; and whether the perpetrator was connected to a known group that uses terrorism. We used GTD codes to identify target type and group affiliation. Since the GTD does not code whether or not at least one of the perpetrators was arrested, two researchers coded this variable and there was no disagreement in preliminary coding. Further, the GTD includes a binary variable indicating whether or not there is any doubt that an attack meets all definitional criteria for terrorism. As a robustness check, we estimate our models to include only attacks where there is no doubt about considering it terrorism. See [Table 1](#) for each variable's descriptive statistics across both incidents and across articles about those incidents.⁶⁵

Results

We are interested in how—if at all—media differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not. To examine this, we first look at the amount of coverage that attacks receive and we then examine differences in how articles discuss attacks. Since our first outcome variable is a count of the number of articles that each attack received, models are estimated with negative binomial regression and bootstrapped standard errors given the small number of observations. We did not specify hypotheses for what factors make an attack more newsworthy,

rather we are interested in whether or not differences exist in the amount of coverage given to attacks that are terrorism and a hate crime versus those that are just terrorism. [Table 2](#) presents these findings where Models 1 and 2 use the full list of attacks in the U.S. from 2006 to 2015 with control variables presented in Model 2.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics. ([Table view](#))

Variable	Frequency	Mean (SD)	Median	Range
<i>Dependent variables</i>				
Number of articles per incident	–	26.0 (62.3)	3.5	0–460
Article mentions <i>terrorism</i> only	36.7%	–	–	–
Article mentions <i>hate crimes</i> only	7.6%	–	–	–
Article mentions <i>terrorism</i> and <i>hate crimes</i>	2.3%	–	–	–
Article neither mentions <i>terrorism</i> nor <i>hate crimes</i>	53.4%	–	–	–
<i>Independent variables by incident (N = 136)</i>				
Perpetrator non-white	20.3%	–	–	–
Perpetrator white	38.4%	–	–	–
Perpetrator unknown	41.4%	–	–	–
Incident also a hate crime	36.0%	–	–	–
Number killed	–	0.7 (2.4)	0	0–15
Perpetrator part of group that uses terrorism	16.2%	–	–	–
Perpetrator arrested	47.1%	–	–	–
Target law enforcement/government	20.6%	–	–	–
Does not meet all criteria for terrorism	16.9%	–	–	–
<i>Independent variables by article (N = 3,541)</i>				
Perpetrator non-white	59.6%	–	–	–
Perpetrator white	35.5%	–	–	–
Perpetrator unknown	4.9%	–	–	–
Incident also a hate crime	19.2%	–	–	–
Number killed	–	4.00 (4.8)	3	0–15
Perpetrator part of group that uses terrorism	11.6%	–	–	–
Perpetrator arrested	73.7%	–	–	–
Target law enforcement/government	38.5%	–	–	–
Does not meet all criteria for terrorism	13.8%	–	–	–

Models 3 and 4 replicate the earlier models with only cases where there is no doubt that the attack is terrorism. In the full sample, terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes have 46–48% fewer news articles on average covering them than attacks that are not. However, there is no significant difference in the amount of coverage when the sample is limited to only cases where there is no doubt that it is terrorism. Across models, both white and non-white perpetrated attacks receive significantly more media coverage than attacks with an unknown perpetrator though the percent increase varies substantially between the two as well as across models.⁶⁶ Across models each additional fatality is linked to a 34–37% increase in the number of articles covering that attack. Somewhat surprisingly given their significance in prior research, none of the control variables—whether the perpetrator was part of a known groups, whether the perpetrator was arrested, and whether the target was law enforcement or government—were related to the amount of coverage that each attack received in these analyses.

Turning now to how media depict attacks, we test our hypotheses about factors that influence whether an article references terrorism only, hate crimes only, both terrorism and hate crimes, or neither terrorism nor hate crimes. Since the outcome variable here takes one of four mutually exclusive values, we estimate models with multinomial logistic regression where neither mentioning terrorism nor hate crimes is the reference category and standard errors are clustered on the incident as show in [Table 3](#). To ease interpretability, we present relative risk ratios instead of coefficients. Relative risk ratios are interpreted similarly to odds ratios for logistic regression where a ratio greater than one indicates a positive relationship and a ratio less than one indicates a negative relationship. As a robustness check, we replicate the models in [Table 3](#) but only include cases where there is no doubt that each is terrorism and present those results in [Table 4](#).

Our first two hypotheses focus on how perpetrator identity influences how media depict attacks. Hypothesis 1 expects that articles will be more likely to reference *terrorism* only when the perpetrator is non-white, which is partially supported. In the full model (Model 6), the odds that an article mentions terrorism only is about four times greater for coverage of non-white perpetrators relative to unknown perpetrators. However, this finding is not supported in the constrained model (Model 5) nor is it supported when only including cases where there is no doubt that they are terrorism (Models 11 and 12). Hypothesis 2 expects that articles will be more likely to reference *hate crimes* only when the perpetrator is white. This was not supported and, in the full model (Model 8), the opposite relationship was found. Relative to where coverage of an attack with an unknown perpetrator, the odds that an article mentions hate crimes only is 88% lower when the perpetrator is white and 87% lower when the perpetrator is non-white. When considering only coverage of attacks where there is no doubt that they are terrorism, these finding hold (Model 14). An important note here is

that the perpetrators responsible for many attacks against mosques, Black churches, and synagogues—all of which are hate crimes—were never found, which likely influences this finding.

Table 2. Number of articles by terrorism episode. ([Table view](#))

	All episodes (<i>N</i> = 136)		Episodes where no doubt it is terrorism (<i>N</i> = 113)	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4
Perpetrator non-white	2.79*** (0.35) [1533%]	2.45*** (0.44) [1058%]	2.71*** (0.44) [1408%]	2.38*** (0.49) [980%]
Perpetrator white	2.01*** (0.36) [643%]	1.54** (0.46) [364%]	1.90*** (0.38) [565%]	1.44** (0.44) [324%]
Incident is also a hatecrime	−0.65* (0.27) [−48%]	−0.62* (0.30) [−46%]	−0.59 [†] (0.32) [−45%]	−0.59 [†] (0.34) [−45%]
Number killed	0.29** (0.09) [34%]	0.29** (0.09) [34%]	0.32** (0.11) [37%]	0.31** (0.11) [37%]
Perpetrator part of known group		−0.19 (0.42) [−18%]		−0.23 (0.42) [−21%]
Perpetrator arrested		0.62 [†] (0.34) [86%]		0.63 [†] (0.37) [88%]
Target law enforcement/government		0.20 (0.36) [22%]		0.10 (0.42) [10%]
AIC	901.33	903.42	746.44	749.02
BIC	918.81	929.63	762.81	773.56

Negative binomial regression models. Constants not reported.

Coefficients are presented with bootstrapped standard errors in parentheses and bolded if significant.

Percent change in expected count reported in brackets.

[†] $p < 0.10$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Table 3. Depicting attacks by article ($N = 3,541$). ([Table view](#))

	Terrorism only		Hate crime only		Terrorism & hate crime	
	Model 5	Model 6	Model 7	Model 8	Model 9	Model 10
Perpetrator non-white	2.18 [†] (0.95)	5.12* (4.25)	0.58 (0.45)	0.12** (0.09)	2.09 (1.25)	2.62 (3.74)
Perpetrator white	0.48 [†] (0.21)	1.53 (1.32)	0.65 (0.52)	0.13** (0.09)	2.26 (2.69)	4.24 (6.20)
Incident is also a hate crime	0.23** (0.11)	0.19** (0.10)	34.73*** (21.11)	32.92*** (21.64)	5.40*** (2.50)	3.79** (1.71)
Number killed	1.01 (0.04)	1.10* (0.04)	1.00 (0.04)	1.03 (0.07)	1.05 (0.06)	1.09 (0.07)
Incident is also a hate crime * number killed	1.13 (0.18)	1.04 (0.16)	1.23** (0.08)	1.20* (0.09)	1.11 (0.09)	1.06 (0.10)
Perpetrator part of known group		4.54*** (1.42)		0.74 (0.63)		0.39 (0.39)
Perpetrator arrested		0.53 [†] (0.19)		7.86*** (4.49)		0.57* (0.16)
Target law enforcement/government		0.35** (0.12)		0.61 (0.51)		0.24** (0.12)

Multinomial logistic regression models. Constants not reported.

Relative risk ratios are presented with clustered standard errors in parentheses and bolded if significant.

[†] $p < 0.10$.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Our next three hypotheses focus on how media depict attacks depending on whether or not they also meet the criteria to be a hate crime. Hypothesis 3 expects that articles will be less likely to reference *terrorism* only when the incident is also a hate crime, which is supported. Across all cases (Models 5 and 6), the odds of an article referencing terrorism only were 77–81% lower when the incident also met the criteria for a hate crime. This finding was substantively the same in cases where there was no doubt they were terrorism (Models 11 and 12). Hypothesis 4 expects that articles will be more likely to reference *hate crimes* only when the incident is also a hate crime. Similarly, this finding is supported in models with all cases (7 and 8) and with only those where there is no doubt that they are terrorism (13 and 14). Hypothesis 5 expects that articles will be more likely to reference both *terrorism* and *hate crimes* when the incident is also a hate crime. As expected, the odds that an article mentions both *terrorism* and *hate crimes* is about two and a half and five and a half times greater when the incident also meets the

criteria to be considered a hate crime—regardless of whether we are looking at the full set of cases (Models 9 and 10) or only those where there is no doubt that they are also terrorism (Models 15 and 16).

Table 4. Depicting attacks by article for cases where there is no doubt it is terrorism. ([Table view](#))

	Terrorism only		Hate crime only		Terrorism & hate crime	
	Model 11	Model 12	Model 13	Model 14	Model 15	Model 16
Perpetrator non-white	2.03 (1.00)	2.47 (1.52)	0.24 (0.25)	0.04* (0.06)	0.78 (0.93)	1.37 (1.83)
Perpetrator white	0.35* (0.15)	0.65 (0.39)	0.42 (0.35)	0.10** (0.08)	1.42 (1.60)	2.02 (2.45)
Incident is also a hate crime	0.30* (0.15)	0.22* (0.14)	20.17*** (12.42)	23.32*** (14.60)	5.16** (2.65)	3.88** (2.00)
Number killed	0.99 (0.05)	1.08* (0.04)	1.02 (0.05)	1.11 (0.19)	1.03 (0.06)	1.09 (0.07)
Incident is also a hate crime * number killed	1.11 (0.16)	1.02 (0.15)	1.21* (0.09)	1.12 (0.20)	1.10 (0.09)	1.04 (0.08)
Perpetrator part of known group		3.86*** (1.22)		1.91 (2.42)		0.32 (0.33)
Perpetrator arrested		0.45* (0.14)		6.52** (3.63)		0.53* (0.13)
Target law enforcement/government		0.42* (0.15)		0.60 (0.64)		0.25** (0.13)

Multinomial logistic regression models. Constants not reported.

Relative risk ratios are presented with clustered standard errors in parentheses and bolded if significant.

* $p < 0.05$.

** $p < 0.01$.

*** $p < 0.001$.

Our final two hypothesis focus on how the number of people killed influences how media depict attacks. Hypothesis 6 expects that articles will be less likely to reference *terrorism* only as the number of people killed increases and the incident is also a hate crime. While the odds that an article references terrorism only increases with more fatalities in the full models (8 and 12), the interaction between fatalities and meeting the criteria to be considered a hate crime is not significant in any of the models (7, 8, 11, or 12). Hypothesis 7 expects that articles will be more likely to reference *terrorism* and *hate crimes* when the number of people killed increases and the incident is also a hate crime, but this was not supported in any of the models (9, 10, 15, or 16). Though, while we did not specify a hypothesis about this, in three models (7, 8,

and 13) the odds of referencing *hate crimes* only was higher when the incident met the criteria to be considered a hate crime and more people were killed.

In the full models, we controlled for three factors that prior research show can influence media coverage of terrorism: whether or not the perpetrator was part of a group, whether or not the perpetrator was arrested, and whether or not the attack targeted law enforcement or government. None of these three factors influence the number of articles covering each case (Table 2) but they do influence what articles mention (Tables 3 and 4). Unsurprisingly, when the perpetrator is associated with a group the odds increase that articles covering the attack mention *terrorism* only. When the perpetrator is arrested, the odds increase that articles covering the attack mention *hate crimes* only and the odds decrease that articles covering the attack mention both *terrorism* and *hate crimes*. Articles covering attacks that target law enforcement or government are less likely to reference *terrorism* only or both *terrorism* and *hate crimes*.

In sum, our results show that media do differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not. From the newsworthiness perspective, attacks that are also hate crimes receive significantly less media attention, which may result in less public awareness that these occur. Additionally, attacks with higher fatalities receive more coverage. Attacks with a non-white perpetrator receive the most coverage, on average, followed by attacks with a white perpetrator and then attacks with an unknown perpetrator. Turning to how media depict attacks in their coverage, coverage of attacks that were also hate crimes was significantly more likely to reference either *hate crimes* only or both *terrorism* and *hate crimes* and significantly less likely to reference *terrorism* only. Further, coverage of attacks with non-white perpetrators were more likely to be mention *terrorism* only and less likely to mention *hate crimes* only, but only in some models and not in others. And, contrary to expectation, coverage of attacks with white perpetrators was less likely to reference *hate crimes* only in some models but not others. Finally, as more people are killed, the odds that an article references *terrorism* only increases. And when more people are killed plus the attack meet criteria for a hate crime as well, media are more likely to mention *hate crimes* only in their coverage.

Discussion

Our motivating question for this paper was how—if at all—do media differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not? To date, research on media coverage of terrorism and media coverage of crime have largely been separate. Further, only a few studies explicitly discuss the overlaps and differences between terrorism and hate crimes. Here we bridge these literatures to

examine how media cover terrorist attack when they are also hate crimes versus when they are not.

We do not have stated hypotheses for the newsworthiness portion of our models; with the lack of research on the portrayal of hate crime in the media, there is no basis for expectations. We find that attacks which are also hate crimes receive significantly less media attention. This finding aligns with a number of earlier studies, each with a corresponding mechanism. First and in line with prior research, we demonstrate that incidents that are *terrorism only* receive more media coverage.⁶⁷ Second, as Gade and colleagues found media coverage of white mass shooters to be more sympathetic and positive, we show a similar relationship between *hate crimes* and media non-coverage, a form of tacit approval.⁶⁸ While what is on the news is important, what *is not* on the news also shapes the public perceptions and (lack of) awareness of issues in society.

We also find that each additional fatality is linked to a 34–37% increase in the number of articles covering that attack. This suggests the adage, *if it bleeds, it leads*, which supports prior research.⁶⁹ Again, what *is not* on the news also matters and, while there is ample evidence that news media coverage of crime favors dominant values and groups by over-covering minorities as perpetrators,⁷⁰ we demonstrate that minority victims of hate crime are less likely to be covered in the media.

Both findings support the processes of social identity theory and the implications of Black's behavior of law.⁷¹ The dominant societal viewpoint is likely to be reproduced and reinforced by the media, including views of in- and out-groups. As hate crimes are definitionally downward (or outward), the views of society, the media, and the perpetrator are likely to align and the result is a lack of news coverage. Terrorism is upward (or inward) and allows the media to represent attacks—particularly those with a high body-count—as existential threats to societal values and interests.

Moving to how media depict attacks, our first two stated hypotheses dealt with the race of the perpetrator; we expected a positive correlation between media coverage mentioning *terrorism* and a non-white perpetrator, plus between media coverage mentioning *hate crimes* and a white perpetrator. The *terrorism*/non-white connection is partially supported, but the *hate crimes*/white connection was not. In fact, the most significant finding here is that media coverage is more likely to reference *hate crimes* for attacks with an unknown perpetrator compared to attacks either committed by a known white or known non-white perpetrator. Given the earlier discussion on the difficulty of proving *bias* in hate crime cases, and the police hesitancy to categorize non-obvious bias crimes as hate crimes as a result, we may be witnessing an opposite effect: in the absence of evidence of non-bias, the media is free to speculate (and possibly appeal to more viewers).

Our next three stated hypotheses test how the media depict attacks as *hate crime* or *terrorism*. While there remains difficulty in convicting offenders of hate crime

enhancements, media are not held to such stringent standards. In our analysis of H2, we found that the media is reluctant to classify attacks by known attackers as hate crimes, but our analysis of H3 through H5 shows that when media do label an attack as a hate crime, it is more often than not correct in their assessment. The found differences could be an indication of accuracy in reporting or of something more complex. It is beyond the scope of this study, but future work should analyze the content of the coverage for evidence of in- and out-group reinforcement. Just as prior research on hate crimes found, it is possible to be both accurate while also bolstering dominant viewpoints and affecting perceptions of group-based differences.⁷²

The final two hypotheses concern how media depict attacks in relation to number of people killed. As more people are killed, articles are more likely to mention *terrorism* only, while as more people are killed and the attack meets the criteria for a hate crime, the more likely to mention *hate crimes* only. These final two findings we find most illuminating and worthy of further study; our evidence suggests more conceptual distance than closeness. While there is considerable overlap in the standard definitions of terrorism and hate crime, our findings suggest there is more to the difference than just degree of violence. Thus, hate crime on a large scale is not necessarily terrorism and terrorism on a small scale is not necessarily hate crime. Conceptually, this makes sense: the motivational sources and end goals of terrorism and hate crimes typically differ, even if the means are similar. This does suggest that, though the media may inject varying levels of bias⁷³ and dominant dogma⁷⁴ into its reporting, there remains an appreciable difference between the two that is impossible to entirely obscure.

Our analysis of control variables also yields some suggested support for these intrinsic differences. We found that articles were more likely to mention *terrorism* only when the perpetrator is associated with a group and that articles were more likely to mention *hate crimes* only when the perpetrator was arrested. The motivational source for an attack is difficult to ascertain, unless explicitly stated; in both of the aforementioned cases, the media is typically provided with additional information about the attack leading to both an increase in accuracy of reporting and a differentiation between the types of attack. Additionally, while a past study has shown attacks receive more coverage when the target is law enforcement or government,⁷⁵ we found that the media depict these attacks as *terrorism* only less often.

Returning to what little we know about the media and hate crime coverage,⁷⁶ our research suggests not only that *terrorism* and *hate crimes* are differentially covered, but that dominant viewpoints are broadcast and minority ones are silenced. Part of this might be explained by body count, as we found increased deaths lead to increased coverage, and terror attacks typically claim more victims than hate crimes, but the *crime direction* and *relational distance* also seem to matter. Black did not cover the

media, only public perception, yet the patterns we uncovered echo his arguments: “*The offense of a marginal person or group against an integrated person or group is more serious than an offense in the opposite direction*”⁷⁷ and “*Deviant behavior by a marginal person or group against an integrated person or group, or centripetal deviance, is the most serious.*”⁷⁸

Conclusion

Limitations and Future Direction

As we see from this paper, media do differentially cover terrorist attacks that are also hate crimes compared to those that are not. Of course, our findings are not without limitation and room for expansion. First, as noted in the methods section, ideally, we would have also examined media coverage of attacks that meet the criteria for hate crimes, but not for terrorism. While the GTD systematically codes terrorist attacks without reliance on law enforcement reporting, no similar database exists for hate crimes. Rather, the FBI’s Unified Crime Report data relies on reporting from local law enforcement which is often incomplete, likely missing for non-random reasons, and often does not include sufficient information to search news coverage. Thus, it is impossible to create a comparable list of all hate crimes in the U.S. over this time period and pull media coverage of them. Any attempt at this would likely be biased in ways that would render findings invalid, which is unfortunately an unavoidable limitation. Second, our project is limited to print media coverage of attacks which—particularly in the digital age—is not constrained by the amount of airtime in a day. It is possible that examining trends in broadcast news media coverage would yield different results or exacerbate present findings. While examining this is beyond the scope of the current project, it is a worthy avenue for future study to expand research on media coverage of crime and terrorism. Third, we focus only on U.S. based attacks and news coverage. Thus, the question remains on the extent to which our findings would generalize to other questions, which also present an opportunity for further exploration. Fourth, our data range from 2006 through 2015 and, since 2016, the world has seen shifts in political discourse, the parties in power, and a spike in bias crimes. The Uniform Crime Report has noted hate crimes have increased for the third consecutive year, beginning in 2016.⁷⁹

Future work should include cases from 2016 onward, look at media beyond print, and go deeper into newsworthiness and bias in media coverage. We have shown that the media treats the two crime types differentially, but have only begun to explain how or why. Studies of media discourse around homosexuality and moral panics,⁸⁰ for example, find that *moral entrepreneurs* manipulate the media for political, societal, and

cultural ends. Only by doing a deeper textual analysis would it be possible to draw similar conclusions about hate crime alone or in relation to terrorism.

Beyond media coverage, our work suggests a real difference between the two attack types other than academic (upward/downward and inward/outward).

While *terrorism* may simply “sell” better than *hate crime* to a media audience, we return to our finding that even high fatality hate crimes receive less coverage than high fatality terrorist attacks. A theoretical study should consider these differences in how *terrorism* and *hate crimes* are conceptualized and where there is conceptual overlap or distinction in addition to the purely quantitative and commonly explored, such as scope.

Implications

Our research has implications for the theoretical debate between terrorism and hate crimes being “close cousins” or “distant relatives.”⁸¹ The *newsworthiness* portion of our study demonstrated a difference in the media attention an attack receives, with *terrorism* receiving more attention than *hate crimes*. When considering media depictions of high-body count attacks, we note both accuracy in reporting and media support for the dominant narrative. This points to inherent differences between the crimes beyond scale that are worthy of more theoretical attention and examination of how the public perceives acts of violence.

We only found partial support for the hypothesis that non-white perpetrators of *terrorism* receive more media coverage, but we also found that non-white perpetrators of *hate crime* receive more media coverage, not white perpetrators as originally hypothesized. We went into this study with a few general assumptions, including “if it bleeds, it leads” and that dominant narratives (“minorities commit terrorism” and “majorities commit hate crimes”) would determine media depictions. Instead, we find partial support that the media covers minorities *more* when they commit terrorism *and* when they commit hate crimes. Likewise, we find full support for the argument that cases with minority victims (hate crimes) receive less media attention and that low fatality count attacks (again, more typical of hate crimes) receive less media attention, too.

Black’s *relational distance* provides one explanation for this.⁸² *Inward* crimes (terrorism) appear more threatening to the general public because most people consider themselves to be at the center of society. *Outward* crimes (hate crimes) by definition are less relatable to the general public. Beyond this, we can imagine crimes not of center versus periphery (or vice versa), but periphery versus periphery. For example, an Amish on Amish attack. We expect attacks like this to receive the least amount of media attention overall.

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See [Online Appendix A](#) for the correlation matrix among independent variables by both incident ([Table A2](#)) and article ([Table A3](#)).

66.

As shown in [Appendix C, Table C1](#), white perpetrated attacks receive significantly less coverage than non-white perpetrated attacks when the reference category is switched from unknown perpetrator to non-white perpetrator. For consistency with the later hypotheses tests on media framing, we report models with the reference category as unknown perpetrator in text.

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