Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

Can a non-Muslim Mass Shooter be a "Terrorist"?: A Comparative Content Analysis of the Las Vegas and Orlando Shootings

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ABSTRACT

This study used the 2017 Las Vegas and 2016 Orlando mass shootings as case studies to explore alleged double standards in reporting of events featuring Muslim and non-Muslim mass perpetrators of violence. The study used framing theory and content analysis to examine *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* coverage of the shootings during the one week immediately following each event. Findings are consistent with previous literature and the researchers' expectations. The Orlando shooting, carried out by a Muslim, was allotted more coverage despite the fact that it produced nine fewer fatalities than the Las Vegas shooting, perpetrated by a white non-Muslim. The analysis also showed that the examined newspapers were more likely to employ a "terrorism" frame in their coverage of the Orlando shooting than in their coverage of the Las Vegas shooting; link the Orlando mass shooting with the global war on terrorism; and to humanize Stephen Paddock, the white perpetrator of the Las Vegas shooting. Framing differences found in this study may contribute to downplaying the threat of white male gun violence, and to reinforcing fears of Islam and Muslims.

Introduction

In recent years, media scholars and analysts have explored alleged double standards in American news media treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators and victims of violence. One strand of research suggests that Muslim perpetrators of violence and terrorism are more likely to be highlighted and emphasized by media than non-Muslim perpetrators of violence and terrorism (see Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux 2018; Powell 2011, 2018), and that Muslim victims of violence are overlooked and ignored in comparison to non-Muslim victims (El-Nawawy and Elmasry 2017; Griffen and Lee 1995; Youssef 2009). These studies dovetail with another line of research suggesting, more broadly, that Muslims are stereo-typed and covered more negatively than other groups (Bleich and van der Veen 2018;

Dixon and Williams 2015; Ibrahim 2010; Mertens and de Smaele 2016; and others). Another perspective, however, suggests that alleged double standards are overstated, and that American news coverage patterns can be explained by factors other than religious identity (see Phillips 2015). This study uses the 2017 Las Vegas mass shooting and 2016 Orlando mass shooting as case studies to explore differences and similarities in reportage of events featuring Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators of violence.

The 2016 Orlando and 2017 Las Vegas shootings are the two deadliest mass shootings in modern American history (Rosenblatt 2017). Stephen Paddock killed 59 concert goers in Las Vegas on 1 October 2017 (Rosenblatt 2017), and Omar Mateen killed 50 people at a gay nightclub in Orlando on 1 June 2016 (Ellis et al. 2016). Initial news coverage of the shootings provides for useful comparison, in particular because Paddock, a white non-Muslim American, and Mateen, an American Muslim of Afghani descent, represent different social groups; and also because the shootings were perpetrated in back-to-back years and featured similar casualty figures. Additionally, and importantly, motives for both shootings weren't immediately known. In the days following the Las Vegas shooting, debates centered around motivations for the violence and whether or not it should be classified as terrorism (see Berman 2018; Moore 2017). Ultimately, investigations into that shooting concluded that motivations were unclear (Berman 2018). There were similar public debates regarding the Orlando shooting (Brinkmann 2017). Although many concluded that the shooting should be classified as terrorism, final determinations were ultimately inconclusive (Brinkmann 2017). More importantly for the purposes of this research, which focuses on news coverage in the period immediately following the shooting, initial reports painted a very murky picture. For instance, early reports suggested that Mateen's sexuality and past sexual relationships may have been an underlying motive (Ackerman and Siddiqui 2016).

This research uses framing theory and quantitative content analysis to examine *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* coverage of the Orlando and Las Vegas mass shootings during the one week immediately following each event. These two newspapers were selected for analysis because they are large, elite, agenda-setting papers. Although this research builds on prior work done in the broad area of news coverage of Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators of violence, the study's focus fills important gaps in a still-growing body of literature. A study by Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux (2018) looked at the sheer quantity of articles published about different terrorist attacks committed by Muslims and non-Muslims, but did not include a broader examination of framing mechanisms. Powell's (2011, 2018) work also focused on violence perpetrated by Muslims and non-Muslims, but was qualitative and concentrated mostly on events characterized by relatively low casualty figures. Research by El-Nawawy and Elmasry (2017), meanwhile, was also qualitative, and focused on victims, rather than perpetrators, of acts of international terrorism. The current study's focus on two comparatively equal mass shootings carried out, respectively, by Muslim and non-Muslim shooters within the borders of the United States, as well as its incorporation of both quantitative content analysis and framing theory, are unique.

Background on the Orlando Shooting

On 12 June 2016, 29-year-old Omar Mateen opened fire inside a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, killing at least 50 people and injuring 53. The incident, which started at approximately 2am, was described by the *New York Times* as "the worst mass shooting in

United States history … [and] the worst act of terrorism on American soil since Sept. 11, 2001" (Alvarez and Perez-Pena 2016).

Mateen was a U.S. citizen who was born in New York to a Muslim family. Armed with a pistol and rifle, he called 911 to declare his loyalty to the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) before he started shooting. Hundreds of terrified patrons were held hostage in a three-hour standoff and witnessed piles of dead and injured bodies. A few patrons were able to escape the scene and seek refuge in dark streets close to the club. Eventually, police were able to storm the club with the help of explosives and armored vehicles. An exchange of fire with Mateen led to his death (Alvarez and Perez-Pena 2016).

Mateen had no criminal record, but was investigated twice by the FBI in 2013 and 2014 over allegations of having connections with terrorist groups. These investigations were triggered by Mateen's remarks to his coworkers that he had ties to extremists. The authorities could not find evidence to substantiate these claims. Shortly after the shooting, ISIS issued a statement through social media asserting that Mateen was one of its members; however, the group presented no proof to authenticate its assertion (Domonoske, Kennedy, and Bowman 2016).

Background on the Las Vegas Shooting

On 1 October 2017, 64-year-old Nevada resident Stephen Paddock opened fire from his 32nd floor hotel window onto thousands of people attending a music festival on the Las Vegas Strip. The shooting, which killed at least 59 and injured more than 500, was described by the *Washington Post* as "the deadliest mass shooting in modern American history" (Bui, Zapotosky, and Berman 2017).

Paddock killed himself before police stormed his hotel room. The shooting lasted for approximately 15 min before police arrived at the scene, where 22,000 people were attending a performance by country music singer Jason Aldean (CNN Staff 2017).

Police found a large collection of guns and rifles stacked inside Paddock's hotel room. A search of Paddock's house in Mesquite, Nev., revealed he had compiled firearms, explosives and ammunition inside his home. Investigations showed no connections between Paddock and any terrorist organizations, despite ISIS's claim it was behind the shooting. Investigations also showed that Paddock had no criminal history, but that his father was a well-known bank burglar (Bui, Zapotosky, and Berman 2017).

About ten months after the shooting, Las Vegas police issued a 181-page report that showed no clear motive for the shooting, but pointed to an "intent" on the part of Paddock. According to the report, Paddock "spent considerable time preparing for the attack, amassing weapons and ammunition, and sought to thwart the eventual law enforcement investigation that would follow" (Berman 2018). In his comment on the investigation's outcome, Las Vegas Sheriff Joe Lombardo said that while he understood that whether the shooting is a terrorist act depends on how terrorism is defined, he "would personally call it a terrorist act" (Berman 2018).

Literature Review: Terrorism and Islam in Western Media

Historically, Western news media have often vilified Islam and framed it as an exotic and feared "Other" (Said 2001). Negative coverage of Islam in Western media has revolved

around a consistent pattern of alarming the public about the threats – real or imaginary – posed by Muslims (Semati 2011).

The pattern of associating Islam with terror has been driven home as part of a "War on Terror" frame amplified in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. The "War on Terror" has become a "media war" and has lent credence to the overly simplistic and all-encompassing narrative that "liberal western values [are] under attack from extremist, usually Islamic, and usually terrorist forces" (Franks and Shaw 2012, 8–9).

The demarcation between "Orient and Occident" (Said 1985, 90) has been reinforced by the "War on Terror," in a way that has created a Western "us" versus an Islamic "them" frame (See Reese and Lewis 2009; Said 2001). U.S. media outlets, in particular, have framed the "War on Terror" along socio-cultural lines, using Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" thesis as an overriding organizing mechanism (Abrahamian 2003). Abrahamian (2003) has argued that "framing the crisis within the context of Islam … made all Muslims suspect – unless they could prove themselves innocent" (Abrahamian 2003, 538).

Several studies have looked into how Western news media frame Islam and Muslims, particularly in the context of their coverage of terrorist attacks. Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux (2018) analyzed coverage of terrorist attacks on U.S. soil between 2006 and 2015 in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, CNN and several local American newspapers. Their study, which looked into whether a perpetrator's religion affected the amount of coverage, revealed that there were 357 percent more news articles about attacks committed by Muslims than attacks committed by non-Muslims (Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux 2018).

Powell (2011) analyzed the coverage of 11 terrorist attacks on U.S. soil between 2001 and 2010 in several American newspapers. Her study pointed to differences in news media framing of Muslim versus non-Muslim perpetrators of terrorist attacks. Non-Muslim perpetrators were framed as mentally ill persons who committed isolated acts of violence, whereas Muslim perpetrators were framed as radical, fanatic, infuriated and belonging to international terrorist organizations. These disparities in coverage contribute to framing Muslims in America as the "evil other" (Powell 2011, 107).

In a later study, Powell (2018) looked into the framing of 11 terrorist attacks taking place on U.S. soil between 2011 and 2016 in several American newspapers and cable channels. Similar to her earlier study, results showed that non-Muslim U.S. citizens who committed terrorist attacks were

> in some way 'excused' for their behavior due to mental illness and access to guns, or in cases of hate crimes, seen as fueled by irrational anger; whereas Muslims committing terrorist acts were connected with a larger network of terrorist groups with a goal of attacking America. (Powell 2018, 8)

A study by Morin (2016) examined how three American newspapers – *The Wall Street Journal*, *T. New York Times* and *USA Today* – framed the Fort Hood, Texas shooting committed by Nidal Hasan, a Muslim American Army psychiatrist, in 2009 and the Washington, D.C. Navy Yard shooting committed by Aaron Alexis, a non-Muslim Navy contractor in 2013. Both shootings were aimed at American soldiers on U.S. military bases, and both caused 13 deaths. In their coverage of the Ft. Hood shooting, the newspapers adopted a "terror frame" that focused mostly on Hasan's religious identity and socio-cultural

background as the son of an immigrant, Muslim family. Reports framed the shooting as "an act of war" committed by a perpetrator who had potential ties to terrorist organizations. Conversely, the newspapers adopted a "crime frame" in their coverage of the Navy Yard shooting. They framed the shooting as an irrational and "isolated act" of violence committed by a "mentally unstable individual" (Morin 2016, 1000).

A study by Bleich and van der Veen (2018) examined how 17 regional and national U.S. newspapers framed Muslims between 1996 and 2015. For comparison purposes, the authors coded articles that referred to Jews, Catholics, Hindus and Muslims. Findings showed that articles mentioning Muslims had a more negative slant compared to articles that mentioned Catholics, Hindus and Jews. In addition, there was a strong correlation between extremism and Islam (Bleich and van der Veen 2018).

Dixon and Williams (2015) carried out an analysis of American cable news programs aired on ABC World News Tonight, the CBS Evening News and NBC Nightly News between 2008 and 2012. The study compared television portrayals of Muslims and terrorism with real-world statistics on terrorism. The study found a significant overrepresentation of Muslims as terrorists on studied television news programs (Dixon and Williams 2015, 32).

Douai and Lauricella (2014) examined framing of the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Islam in the news sections of the Canadian *Globe and Mail* and *The Washington Post* between 2001 and 2011. Findings pointed to negative framing of both Islamic sects in the two papers, both of which adopted a "terrorism frame" that associated the sectarian divide with the "War on Terror." This framing came at the expense of providing a historical background on the roots of tensions and reduced the divide between Sunnis and Shias to a violent confrontation with no rational foundation (Douai and Lauricella 2014).

Steuter and Wills (2009) analyzed the framing of the 2001 Afghanistan war and the 2003 Iraq war in major Canadian newspapers. Their study showed that the newspapers repeatedly used demeaning and dehumanizing terms to describe "enemy leaders as well as Arab and Muslim citizens at large" (Steuter and Wills 2009, 7).

An analysis of the framing of Muslims in several U.S., British and Dutch newspapers following major terrorist attacks on the United States, Britain and Spain pointed to a strong association between Muslims and terrorism, particularly after the 9/11 attacks on the United States (Ruigrok and van Atteveldt 2007).

Two more studies of framing of Muslims in the British press reached similar conclusions. A study by Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole (2010) found that four major British newspapers reflected an implicit blame against British Muslims after the July 2005 London bombings for "their blindness and naivety to what had been going on in their own communities" (Featherstone, Holohan, and Poole 2010, 178). Frost (2008) found that the British press adopted a campaign of "moral panic" that normalized hatred against British Muslims after the July 2005 bombings (Frost 2008, 574).

Framing Theory

Framing is a pervasive concept in the study of news. It refers to the unique packaging, ordering, and highlighting of information in communicated messages in general, and news reports in particular. The highlighting of distinct parts of an issue, situation, event,

or problem, and the deemphasis of other parts, can suggest specific meanings and restrict the range of interpretive possibilities (Entman 1993).

Frames exist both as part of texts and the mental schema of message receivers. Framing a message in a particular way can create mental images among receivers and eventually affect their understandings of meaning (Entman 2007).

According to Entman (1993), framing fulfills the following functions: shedding light on an issue; identifying its roots; and possibly proposing ways of dealing with it. Additionally, framing contributes to reducing the complexity of noteworthy topics by bringing them to light, analyzing and dissecting their components (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007).

Framing does not refer to an intentional or conspiratorial process. Rather, it is an inevitability based on the nature of communication – all communication messages must be framed in one way or another (Tankard 2001). Importantly, the way journalists frame issues – based either on conscious or unconscious decisions – can shape public perceptions and discourses on these issues. Despite journalists' claims that they deal with rival frames objectively, news frames often elevate one position or view over another (Entman 2007). There are several factors that affect journalists' production of news frames. Important among these factors are the socio-cultural backgrounds of individual journalists, as well as the professional and editorial policies of the media organizations that they work for (Pan and Kosicki 1993). Specific drivers of frames include keywords, expressions and phrases, lead paragraphs, images and sources (de Vreese 2005). These frame drivers can produce "issue-specific frames" that focus narrowly on a given event and "generic frames" that take a more holistic approach to broad themes (de Vreese 2005, 55).

A frame's ability to persuade its receivers is associated both with how often it is repeated and how effective it is. The credibility of a frame's source(s) also affects its persuasive abilities. The more plausible a frame's source, the higher the likelihood that the frame will have a resounding effect (Chong and Druckman 2007).

News frames of a given topic are not consistent; rather, they change over time depending on the circumstances surrounding the topic and the level of public interest in it (Houston, Pfefferbaum, and Rosenholtz 2012). The process of dealing with news frames on the part of media consumers has three scopes: (1) "Active processing," which points to individuals who are skeptical of the news media and who question journalists' objectivity; hence those individuals are often on the lookout for non-media sources to complement, or even replace, the frames that they receive from the media; (2) "Reflective integrators," who contemplate and reflect on the frames they receive from the news media, and who may consult others on these frames; and (3) "Selective scanners," who utilize the mediated frames that only seem related to their interests (Scheufele 1999, 105).

Since a news frame may not be interpreted the same way by all its receivers, its impact may be ubiquitous, but not "universal." The impact of a news frame on the recipients' interpretations is determined not just by the elements that are encompassed in it, but also by those that are missing from it. "This is why exclusion of interpretations by frames is as significant to outcomes as inclusion" (Entman 1993, 54).

News studies employing the framing approach can either work inductively or deductively. An inductive approach involves generating frames from news content, while a deductive approach involves constructing frame categories prior to analysis (de Vreese

2005). Our approach in this study is deductive – we used prior literature to help delineate frame categories. For instance, prior literature noted that racial and religious identities are often attached to perpetrators of violent acts, so our study sought to measure these aspects of identity. Also, prior literature differentiates between terrorism framing and random or isolated gun violence framing, and highlighted the importance of keywords, including the word "terrorism," in outlining frames. Our study also sought to take these issues into consideration.

Hypotheses

Based on the review of literature and theoretical framework presented here, this study presents the following hypotheses and sub-hypotheses:

H1: During the 7-day post-shooting sample periods, there will be more articles published about the Orlando mass shooting than the Las Vegas mass shooting.

H2: Studied newspapers will be more likely to employ broad terrorism and terrorism-related framing in the context of the Orlando mass shooting than they will for the Las Vegas mass shooting, which will alternatively be framed as a random act of violence.

H2a: A "terrorism" frame will be employed to characterize articles about the Orlando mass shooting, while a "random violent act" frame will be employed to characterize the Las Vegas mass shooting.

H2b: The Orlando mass shooter will be more commonly labeled an evil terrorist, while the Las Vegas mass shooter will be less likely to be labeled an evil terrorist and more commonly labeled as either mentally ill, a loner, or a gunman.

H2c: Articles about the Las Vegas mass shooter will be more likely to invoke mental illness as a possible explanation for the shooting than articles about the Orlando mass shooting.

H2d: Articles about the Orlando mass shooting will be more likely to mention the word "terrorism" and its derivatives than articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting.

H2e: Articles about the Orlando mass shooting will be more likely to link the shooting to the global war on terrorism than articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting.

H2f: Articles about the Orlando mass shooting will be more likely to link the shooter to global terror groups such as Al-Qaeda and ISIS than articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting.

H3: Studied newspapers will be more likely to humanize the Las Vegas mass shooter than the Orlando mass shooter.

H3a: The Las Vegas shooter's hobbies will be mentioned more often than the Orlando shooter's hobbies.

H3b: The Las Vegas shooter's personal relationships with family and friends will be mentioned more often than the Orlando mass shooter's personal relationships with family and friends.

H3c: The Las Vegas shooter's past occupations will be mentioned more often than the Orlando mass shooter's past occupations.

H3d: Articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting will be more likely to include quotes from the shooter's family and friends than articles about the Orlando mass shooting.

H4: Coverage in the two newspapers will focus more on the religion of the Orlando mass shooter than the religion of the Las Vegas mass shooter.

H5: News coverage will focus more on the race/ethnicity of the Orlando shooter than the race/ethnicity of the Las Vegas shooter.

H6: The Orlando mass shooting will be more likely than the Las Vegas mass shooting to be associated with the mention of future violent threats to the United States.

Method

This study employed quantitative content analysis to study how the *Los Angeles Times* and *New York Times* framed the Orlando and Las Vegas mass shootings. These two newspapers were selected for analysis because of their status as elite American newspapers capable of setting the agenda for other American news outlets, and also because they represent the two largest media markets in the United States and the East and West coasts of the country, respectively.

The one-week periods immediately following the two attacks were chosen as the periods of study. These time periods were selected because the researchers desired to examine framing patterns prior to the conclusion of police investigations. It is during these early and initial periods that one may reasonably expect more news framing similarity, rather than dissimilarity, to occur, in particular because shooter intentions are typically unknown and speculations about motivations abound. For the Orlando shooting, the selected time period was 13–19 June 2016. For Las Vegas, the chosen time period was 2–8 October 2017.

The ProQuest newspaper database was used to retrieve articles. The search terms "Orlando" AND "Shooting," and "Las Vegas" AND "Shooting," respectively, were entered into the database, along with the aforementioned search dates. These two searches retrieved a total of 311 articles mentioning the shootings. A large number of these articles, however, proved irrelevant to the study because they only mentioned the shootings in brief and tangential passing. For example, the search for Orlando shooting articles turned up a *New York Times* article published on 17 June 2016 which commemorated the one-year anniversary of another mass shooting, which occurred in June 2015 in Charleston, South Carolina. The article's opening paragraph said the commemoration was happening in "the backdrop of the Orlando shootings," but didn't mention the Orlando mass shooting again. All articles not dealing centrally with the Orlando and Las Vegas shootings were eliminated, and only articles dealing meaningfully with the shootings under study were kept as part of the final sample. A total of 190 articles – both news and editorials – were ultimately examined. Of this 190-article sample, 151 articles were news reports and 39 were editorials/commentaries. A total of 114 articles were published about the Orlando shooting, and 76 were published about the Las Vegas shooting. For both events, the *New York Times* published more articles than the *Los Angeles Times*. For the Orlando shooting, the *New York Times* published 61 articles to the *Los Angeles Times*' 53. Meanwhile, the *New York Times* published 40 articles about the Las Vegas shooting, compared with 36 for the *Los Angeles Times*.

The coding sheet was developed based on both framing theory and prior literature examining Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrated violence. Several questions were

loosely inspired by Powell's (2011) study of U.S. news framing of terrorism. In all, the coding sheet included 15 questions. These included items about the dominant frame of the article (terrorism or random violent attack); mentions of the word "terrorism" and its derivatives; the dominant labeling of the shooter (terrorist, angry loner, mentally ill, or gunman); mention of shooter religious identity; mention of shooter race/ethnicity; humanization of the shooter; mention of the global war on terrorism; link between shooter and global terror groups; and mention of possible future threat. Some of the variables were measured at the nominal level of measurement, while others were measured at the ratio level.

Two graduate assistants served as coders. They were trained on the coding scheme in the Fall and Winter of 2018 and coded all articles during the Winter and Spring of 2019. Intercoder reliability testing was carried out on just under 20% ($N = 37$) of the 190 examined articles. Intercoder reliability figures were computed using the online tool *ReCal* (Freelon 2010). Scott's Pi was calculated for all nominal level variables, and Krippendorf's Alpha was calculated for all ratio level variables. For the nominal level variables, Scott's Pi ranged from .89 to 1, while for the ratio level variables Krippendorf's Alpha ranged from .94 to 1.

Findings

Hypothesis 1 predicted that, during the sample period, more articles would be published about the Orlando shooting than the Las Vegas shooting. This hypothesis was supported. During the first seven days of news coverage following the attacks, the *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* published a total of 114 articles about the Orlando mass shooting and 76 articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting. This is an interesting and important finding, especially given the fact that the Las Vegas shooting inflicted more casualties and stands as the largest mass shooting in American history. Table 1 displays these results.

Hypothesis 2 predicted broadly that the Orlando mass shooting would be more likely to be framed as an act of terrorism than the Las Vegas mass shooting. This hypothesis included six sub-hypotheses (H2a – H2f). Most of the six sub-hypotheses were supported.

Sub-hypothesis H2a predicted that a dominant "terrorism" frame would be more common in articles about the Orlando shooting than in articles about the Las Vegas shooting, which would be more likely to be framed as a "random violent act." This sub-hypothesis was supported. The Orlando shooting was framed as an act of terrorism in 56.1% of articles and as a random violent act in 43.9% of articles. The Las Vegas shooting was framed as an act of terrorism in 11.8% of articles and as a random violent act in 88.2% of articles. A chi-square test showed these differences to be statistically significant [χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 190$) = 37.8, $p < .001$]. These results are displayed in Table 2.

Sub-hypothesis H2b predicted that the Orlando mass shooter would be more likely to be labeled a terrorist, while the Las Vegas mass shooter would be more likely to be labeled

Table 1. Number of articles allotted to each shooting.

Event	Number of Articles Published
Las Vegas	76
Orlando	114
Total	190

Table 2. Dominant frame.

Event	Terrorism	Random Violent Act	Total
Las Vegas	9 (11.8%)	67 (88.2%)	76 (100%)
Orlando	64 (56.1%)	50 (43.9%)	114 (100%)
Total	73 (38.4%)	117 (61.6%)	190 (100%)

χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 190$) = 37.8, $p < .001$.

alternatively as either mentally ill, a loner, or a gunman. This sub-hypothesis was partially supported. Both shooters were frequently labeled as "gunmen," and neither shooter was particularly likely to be labeled as either an angry loner or mentally ill. However, the Orlando mass shooter was much more likely to be labeled as a terrorist (37.7% of articles) than the Las Vegas mass shooter (5.3% of articles), and the Las Vegas mass shooter was much more likely to be labeled as a "gunman" (80.3% of articles compared to 55.3% of articles). A chi-square test showed these differences to be statistically significant at the .05 level [χ^2 ($df = 3$, $N = 190$) = 29.90, $p < .001$]. Results are displayed in Table 3.

Sub-hypothesis H2c predicted that articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting would be more likely to invoke mental illness as a possible explanation for the shooting than articles about the Orlando mass shooting. This hypothesis was not supported. Articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting did include more mentions of mental illness per article (.37 mentions) than articles about the Orlando shooting (.10 mentions), but a t-test showed these differences fell just short of statistical significance at the .05 level [t (190) = 1.78, $p = .078$].

Sub-hypothesis H2d predicted that articles about the Orlando mass shooting would be more likely to mention the word "terrorism" and its derivatives than articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting. This sub-hypothesis was supported. Articles about the Orlando mass shooting included 1.82 mentions of "terrorism" per article, compared with just .57 mentions per article about the Las Vegas mass shooting. An independent samples t-test showed these results, displayed in Table 4, to be statistically significant at the .05 level [t(190) = .−3.93, $p < .001$].

Sub-hypotheses H2e and H2f predicted, alternatively, that the Orlando mass shooting would be more likely to be linked to the global war on terrorism than the Las Vegas mass shooting, and that articles about the Orlando shooting would be more likely to link its perpetrator to global terror groups (like Al-Qaeda and ISIS) than articles about the Las Vegas shooting. Both of these sub-hypotheses were supported, with chi-square tests showing statistically significant differences. A total of 52.6% of articles about the Orlando event linked it to the global war on terror, compared with just 10.5% of articles about the Las Vegas incident [χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 190$) = 35.18, $p < .001$]. Meanwhile, 36.8% of Orlando-related articles linked the shooter in that incident to global terror groups, compared with just 11.8% of articles about the Las Vegas event [χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 190$) = 14.51, $p < .001$].

Table 3. Labeling of shooter.

Event	Terrorist	Angry Loner	Mentally Ill	Gunman	Total
Las Vegas	4 (5.3%)	5 (6.6%)	6 (7.9%)	61 (80.3%)	76 (100%)
Orlando	43 (37.7%)	7 (6.1%)	1 (.9%)	63 (55.3%)	114 (100%)
Total	47 (24.7%)	12 (6.3%)	7 (3.7%)	124 (65.3%)	190 (100%)

χ^2 ($df = 3$, $N = 190$) = 29.90 $p < .001$.

Table 4. "Terrorism" mentions.

Event	Average Number of Terrorism Mentions Per Article
Las Vegas	.57
Orlando	1.82

$t(190) = .{-}3.93, p < .001.$

Hypothesis 3 predicted that newspaper articles would be more likely to humanize the Las Vegas mass shooter than the Orlando mass shooter. There was partial support for this hypothesis, which, included four sub-hypotheses, two of which were supported. Results are displayed in Table 5.

Sub-hypothesis H3a predicted that the Las Vegas shooter's hobbies would be mentioned more often than the Orlando shooter's hobbies. This sub-hypothesis was supported. The Las Vegas shooter's hobbies were mentioned, on average. .64 times per article, compare with just .07 mentions per article, on average, for the Orlando shooter's hobbies. An independent samples t-test showed this difference to be statistically significant [$t(190) = 3.02, p = .003$].

Sub-hypothesis H3b predicted that the Las Vegas shooter's personal relationships with family and friends would be mentioned more often than the Orlando mass shooter's personal relationships with family and friends. This sub-hypothesis was supported. On average, there were 1.53 such mentions in articles covering the Las Vegas mass shooting, and .33 mentions in articles covering Orlando. This difference was statistically significant at the .05 level [$t(190) = 2.25, p = .027$].

Sub-hypothesis H3c predicted that the Las Vegas shooter's past occupations would be mentioned more often than the Orlando mass shooter's past occupations. This sub-hypothesis was not supported. These kinds of mentions were approximately equal in number for the Las Vegas (.39 mentions per article) and Orlando (.37 mentions per article) events. An independent samples t-test showed that these small differences were not statistically significant [$t(190) = .139, p = .890$].

Sub-hypothesis H3d predicted that articles about the Las Vegas mass shooting would be more likely to yield quotes from the shooter's family and friends than articles about the Orlando mass shooting would be to include quotes from that shooter's family and friends. This sub-hypothesis was not supported. The average number of quotes from family and friends were similar for the Las Vegas shooter (.99 quotes per article) and Orlando shooter (.66 quotes per article). An independent samples t-test showed that these differences were not statistically significant [$t(190) = .832, p = .406$].

Table 5. Humanization.

Event	Hobbies Mentioned	Personal Relationships Mentioned	Past Occupations Mentioned	Family/Friends Quotes
Las Vegas	.64	1.53	.39	.99
Orlando	.07	.33	.37	.66

Family/Friends Quotes: $t(190) = 3.02, p = .003$.
Personal Relationships Mentioned: $t(190) = 2.25, p = .027$.
Past Occupations Mentioned: $t(190) = .139, p = .890$.
Family/Friends Quotes: $t(190) = .832, p = .406$.

Hypothesis 4 predicted that news coverage would focus more on the religion of the Orlando shooter than the religion of the Las Vegas shooter. This hypothesis was supported. On average, the Orlando shooter's religion was mentioned 1.00 times per article, and the Las Vegas shooter's religion was mentioned .07 times per article. These differences were found to be statistically significant at the .05 level [$t(190) = -3.70$, $p < .001$].

Hypothesis 5 predicted that news coverage would focus more on the race/ethnicity of the Orlando shooter than the race/ethnicity of the Las Vegas shooter. This hypothesis was supported. On average, the Orlando shooter's race/ethnicity was mentioned .32 times per article. The Las Vegas shooter's ethnicity/race, meanwhile, was mentioned just .07 times per article. An independent samples t-test showed these differences to be statistically significant at the .05 level [$t(190) = -3.351$, $p = .001$]. Table 6 displays results of both H4 and H5.

Hypothesis 6 predicted that the Orlando mass shooting would be more likely than the Las Vegas mass shooting to be associated with the mention of future violent threats to the United States. This hypothesis was supported. In all, 51.8% of articles about the Orlando mass shooting discussed possible future threats to the United States, compared with just 19.7% of articles about the Las Vegas shooting. This difference was found to be statistically significant at the .05 level [χ^2 ($df = 1$, $N = 190$) $= 19.66$, $p < .001$]. Table 7 presents these results.

Discussion

This study analyzed *New York Times* and *Los Angeles Times* framing of the two deadliest mass shootings in modern American history – the 2016 Orlando and the 2017 Las Vegas mass shootings. For the most part, findings from the quantitative content analysis seem to be consistent with previous literature and the researchers' expectations with regard to apparent double standards in American news treatment of Muslim, non-Muslim, white, and non-white perpetrators of violence.

The analysis points to several significant findings. First, and importantly, the Orlando shooting, committed by Omar Mateen, a non-white American Muslim of Afghani origin, received more coverage ($N = 114$) in the studied newspapers than the Las Vegas shooting ($N = 76$), carried out by Stephen Paddock, a white non-Muslim American. The Orlando shooting was allotted more coverage despite the fact that it produced nine fewer fatalities than the Las Vegas shooting. This finding is consistent with prior literature suggesting that American news outlets tend to allot more coverage to violent crimes committed by Muslims than similar crimes carried out by non-Muslims (see Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux 2018), and suggests that Mateen's religious and ethnic identities may have been factors leading to more coverage.

Table 6. Mentions of religion and race/ethnicity of shooter.

Event	Religion Mentioned	Race/Ethnicity Mentioned
Las Vegas	.07	.07
Orlando	1.00	.32

Religion Mentioned: $t(190) = -3.70$, $p = .001$.
Race/Ethnicity Mentioned: $t(190) = -3.351$, $p = .001$.

Table 7. Future threat mentioned.

Event	Future Threat Mentioned	Future Threat Not Mentioned	Total
Las Vegas	15 (19.7%)	61 (80.3%)	76 (100%)
Orlando	59 (51.8%)	55 (48.2%)	114 (100%)
Total	74 (38.9%)	116 (61.1%)	190 (100%)

χ^2 ($df = 1$, $\textbf{\textit{N}} = 190$) = 19.66, $\textbf{\textit{p}} < .001$.

Additionally, the analysis also showed that the examined newspapers were more likely to employ a dominant "terrorism" frame in their coverage of the Orlando shooting than in their coverage of the Las Vegas shooting. In this context, there was a discrepancy in the newspapers' labeling of the two perpetrators. While Mateen was labeled as a "terrorist" in approximately 38 percent of the articles about Orlando, Paddock was described as a "terrorist" in only five percent of articles about Las Vegas. What is even more striking, though, is that Paddock was labeled a "gunman" in over 80 percent of Las Vegas articles, compared to just over 55 percent of the articles for Mateen.

This notable discrepancy in the newspapers' use of a terrorism frame seems unjustifiable, particularly since this study looked exclusively into coverage immediately following each of the two events. During these early stages, the year-long investigations were just underway, and the perpetrators' motives were not yet clear. Before results of the Orlando investigation were revealed, American newspapers did not know with any sort of certainty that Mateen's act was politically or ideologically motivated, and, as noted earlier in this paper, alternative justifications for the shooting were circulating. Moreover, it is puzzling that news outlets didn't more prominently allude to terror as a possible motivation behind Paddock's act. The immediate and arguably premature labeling of Mateen as a terrorist may reflect the larger American news media's tendency to associate Muslims with terrorism in a way that alienates and Others them (see Abrahamian 2003; Powell 2011, 2018; and Said 2001), and point to "the racialization of the concept of 'terrorism'" in American news discourse (Kanji 2018, 8). Notable, too, are findings from this study that both newspapers under study used Mateen's religious and racial identities as qualifiers for the terrorism frame.

Along the same lines, findings also pointed to a greater likelihood to link the Orlando mass shooting with the global war on terrorism. This finding is also consistent with patterns found in prior literature which point to news media use of the war on terror as a foundational frame to pit the non-Muslim West against Muslims in an "us" versus "them" confrontation (see Franks and Shaw 2012; Reese and Lewis 2009). This pattern gives the faulty impression that Islam, as a religion, is the root cause for the spread of terrorism. Based on this media pattern, any Muslim who commits an act of violence is a terrorist by default and is often guilty of terrorizing civilians until proven innocent. Non-Muslim perpetrators, however, seem to be shielded against terrorism characterizations in the news media, particularly when they are white males (see King 2017).

In this context, Ibrahim Hooper, the spokesman for the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR), said in an interview with the *Huffington Post* that if the Las Vegas shooter were a Muslim, the shooting "would be instantly called an act of domestic or even international terrorism; it wouldn't be individualized, but collectivized to the entire Muslim community or faith of Islam" (Ruiz-Grossman 2017).

The media's tendency to project collective guilt by generalizing an individual act of terror is not usually observed when a violent act is committed by a white perpetrator. In this study, Paddock was framed mostly as a lone gunman and there was no suggestion that he was representing the entire white race.

Another finding worth highlighting is the greater likelihood on the part of the studied newspapers to humanize Paddock through highlighting his hobbies and personal relationships. It might be expected that newspapers would shed light on the background of any violent perpetrator – regardless of racial or religious identities – for the sake of providing more context that may enhance readers' understanding of potential motives. However, this study showed that Mateen was not humanized to the same degree as Paddock. This is also consistent with broad patterns in previous literature suggesting that Western media tend to dehumanize minorities, particularly Muslims (see Eid and Karim 2014; Muscati 2002; Steuter and Wills 2009; Suleiman 1999).

As noted, Paddock's white identity did not figure prominently into coverage patterns uncovered here. The downplaying of white male identity in violent crimes carried out by white men may prevent the public's learning about the potential threat of white male shooters, and "also prevents … [the United States] from having an honest conversation about why so many white men do what … [shooters like Paddock] did, and why this nation seems absolutely determined to do next to nothing about it" (King 2017).

In this context, it is worth highlighting, too, that the New York Times and Los Angeles Times were more likely to mention future threats against the United States in articles about the Orlando shooting than they were in articles about the Las Vegas shooting. While this finding supports our previous discussion, it also sheds light on a critical dimension – American news media's tendency to use a "war on terrorism" backdrop to frame crimes committed by Muslims as "external threat[s]" (Dixon and Williams 2015, 35). The two newspapers opted, perhaps unconsciously, to globalize the shooting carried out by a Muslim and to alert the public to potential attacks by other Muslims.

News frames play a critical role in shaping public opinion (An and Gower 2009). Framing differences found in this study may contribute to downplaying the threat of white male gun violence, and to reinforcing fears of Islam and Muslims. Such coverage patterns can "coalesce to frame Muslim violence as an exceptional problem ('terrorism') requiring exceptional solutions" (Kanji 2018, 16). This could further alienate American Muslims and reinforce Islamophobic and prejudicial approaches to dealing with them (see Ogan et al. 2014).

Overall, this study's findings are consistent with the thrust of recommendations from prior literature – American news outlets should shift away from exclusively associating the religion of Islam with terrorism and projecting it as an inherent threat, and also aim for more racially and religiously neutral framing of alleged violent offenders. Future research should study coverage of Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators of violence in different contexts using both qualitative and quantitative text analysis techniques.

Disclosure Statement

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