

Charlie Hebdo: Differences in Corporate and Alternative Media Coverage

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Abstract

In the following mini-study, quantitative content analysis was used to investigate differences in the United States print media's coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting. Four articles were analyzed, two from the corporate media and two from independent sources. The four articles did not disagree on the existence of terrorism, but they differed in terms of their assumptions regarding the cause(s) of terrorism as well as in terms of how the terrorist subject is configured discursively. Blaming Islam in general, or all Muslims, in relation to terrorist acts perpetrated by a few criminals can have drastic results, such as Islamophobia.

Introduction

In this mini-study, quantitative content analysis, as outlined in *Research Methods in Psychology*,¹ was used to investigate differences in the United States print media's coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting, wherein the Kouachi brothers killed 12 people on 7 January 2015 in Paris, France. Four articles were analyzed, two from the corporate media (the *New York Times*² and the *Wall Street Journal*³) and two from independent sources (Truthdig⁴ and Chomsky.info⁵).

According to a report by the Alliance for Audited Media (as cited in Politico),⁶ the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times* are among the top US newspapers in terms of circulation. Although a larger ($n > 4$) and more diverse sample would have been more powerful, I have chosen to focus on two of the most widely circulated newspapers in the US, news sources that are highly influential on the American public.

According to another report by Pew Research Center,⁷ the *New York Times* leans ideologically towards an audience that is more “consistently liberal”, whereas the *Wall Street Journal* is aligned with a more centrist following. The independent news sources that were chosen for the purposes of this study can be considered leftist or alternative rendering them in line with the “consistently liberal” label used in the previous report, although I would argue that these independent news sources are rather progressive because they are uninfluenced by corporate sponsors and their politico-economic pressures.

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The research question that guided the collection and analysis of the data was: how is causality made sense of in the US print media in the context of the Charlie Hebdo shooting? Quantitative content analysis was used to examine the “collocation”—or “frequency lists of the words that occur in the context around a key word”⁸—between certain words (e.g. “terror*” and “Islam*/Muslim*”) and their morphologies, but other signifiers were considered, too, such as “violen*”, “attack*”, and “crim*” (see Figure 1). To clarify, the word “terror*”, for instance, has the following variants: terrorist(s), terrorism, and terrorize(d).

In my coding of the data, I arrived inductively at 19 categories (see Table 1), *in vivo* words that were descriptive of either the terrorist act or the terrorists themselves. In terms of frequency, the following categories (x = frequency) and their morphologies were the most recurrent across all four articles: “terror*” (33), “Muslim*” (30), and “Islam*” (29). To look at the collocation between the two variables of interest, I combined “Muslim*” and “Islam*” into one broad category “Islam*/Muslim*” (59).

The other, less frequent, categories were very telling nonetheless. For instance, Hedges⁹ configured the Kouachi brothers in a humanized fashion as French citizens and as the children of Algerian/North African immigrants—products of French colonialism and postcolonial marginalization. Chomsky¹⁰ did not make any references to Islam or Muslims at all; instead, he showed that the selective application of the term “terror*” to be hypocritical due to examples of “State terrorism”¹¹ perpetrated by Western imperialism, which is never highlighted in the media.

The other two articles (“Islamist terror in Paris”¹² and “Satire, Terrorism and Islam”¹³), as one would expect from the corporate media, tried to establish a link between terrorism and Islam based on the “grand narrative”¹⁴ that there is “a clash of civilizations”,¹⁵ which goes back to the times of the Crusades, between East (Islam) and West (Judeo-Christianity). This artificial link—a *costly association* not unlike “free

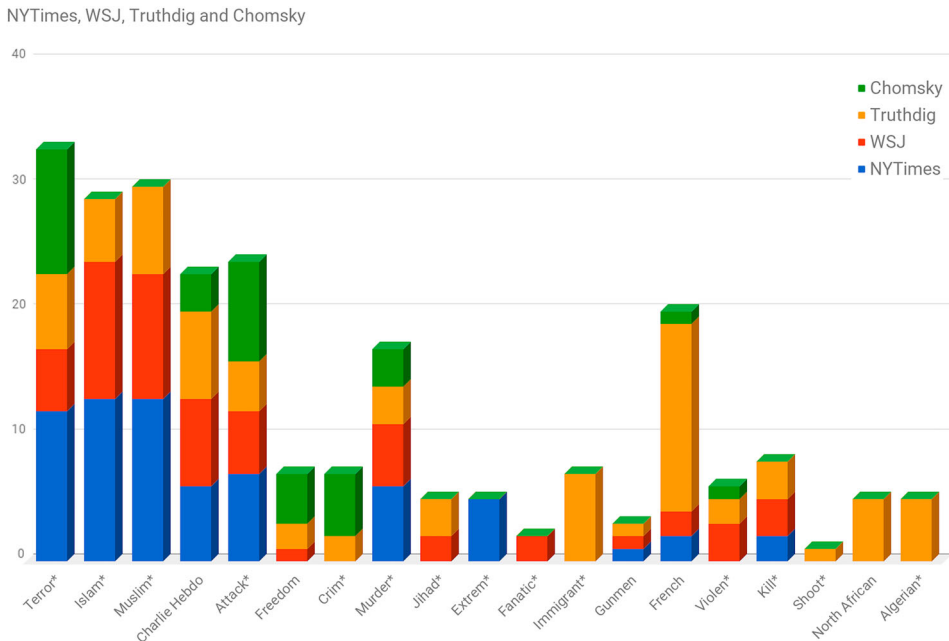


Figure 1. The US print media’s coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting.

Table 1. The frequency of categories in the four print media analyzed.

	Terror*	Islam*	Muslim*	Charlie Hebdo	Attack*
<i>NYTimes</i>	12	13	13	6	7
<i>WSJ</i>	5	11	10	7	5
Truthdig	6	5	7	7	4
Chomsky	10	0	0	3	8
	33	29	30	23	24
	Freedom	Crim*	Murder*	Jihad*	Extrem*
<i>NYTimes</i>	0	0	6	0	5
<i>WSJ</i>	1	0	5	2	0
Truthdig	2	2	3	3	0
Chomsky	4	5	3	0	0
	7	7	17	5	5
	Fanatic*	Immigrant*	Gunmen	French	Violen*
<i>NYTimes</i>	0	0	1	2	0
<i>WSJ</i>	2	0	1	2	3
Truthdig	0	7	1	15	2
Chomsky	0	0	0	1	1
	2	7	3	20	6
	Kill*	Shoot*	North African	Algerian*	
<i>NYTimes</i>	2	0	0	0	
<i>WSJ</i>	3	0	0	0	
Truthdig	3	1	5	5	
Chomsky	0	0	0	0	
	8	1	5	5	

association”¹⁶ in psychoanalysis—between terrorism and Islam, which is reinforced through repetition and collocation in the politico-media complex, dehumanizes criminal subjects and can result in stereotyping, prejudice, and/or discrimination as far as Muslims, and “Muslim-looking”¹⁷ subjects, are concerned. Of course, when a non-Muslim-looking (or “White”) person commits a similar crime, such as crashing Germanwings Flight 9525 in the French Alps and killing 150 passengers or murdering three Muslim students in Chapel Hill, NC, then the cause is either “depression”¹⁸ or a “parking dispute”,¹⁹ respectively, and not “White terrorism”.²⁰

Furthermore, the *us* versus *them* rhetoric, with its Orientalist binarism, sets up a false dichotomy sustaining the *war on terror* (WOT) discourse in its reproduction of only two official subject-positions: the counterterrorist (*us*) and the terrorist (*them*). The former is the lawful subject of the State who has human rights while the latter’s “absent subjectivity”²¹ renders him/her an extralegal object, whose ultimate fate is either death or indefinite detention and torture in Guantanamo Bay. Deconstructing the binarism of the WOT discourse is uncomplicated using the semiotic square,²² with which we can map out four subject-positions: counterterrorist (S1), terrorist (S2), not-counterterrorist (\sim S1), and not-terrorist (\sim S2). Islamophobia results from “a relation of implication”²³ between S1 and \sim S2 in particular, and it mainly affects Muslims and Muslim-looking subjects, who do not identify with either of the two politically violent subject-positions (i.e. S1 and S2) reinforced by the industry of “terrorism experts”.²⁴ Unfortunately, the WOT is not just an endless war on an “imaginary Enemy”,²⁵ or a “metaphor”.²⁶ Beyond its function as a trope, many of the victims of both war and terrorism are the wretched civilians (many of whom are Muslims); after all, the WOT

is not a conventional war between States, but a permanent war between the State and non-state actors.

With the WOT, we are dealing with a mass-mediated propaganda (or “manufacture of consent”²⁷), which often conceals the truth that: the majority of Muslims (around “1.8 billion”²⁸ people around the world) are not terrorists, there is no conclusive empirical evidence that Islam is the leading cause of terrorism because “there is no general theory of terrorism”²⁹ to begin with (I understand terrorism, by non-state actors or the State, as “political violence”³⁰), terrorism is a complex problem that cannot simply be reduced to one cause, hence the need for “critical terrorism studies”,³¹ “religious terrorism” (*circa* 1979) is merely the “fourth wave” of “rebel terrorism”³² which will eventually be replaced by a fifth wave (cyber-terrorism?), and counterterrorism in its current military form is *not* “the most effective strategy” in comparison to other historically successful approaches, such as local policing and/or terrorist groups joining the political process³³—not mentioning nonviolent approaches.³⁴

The two articles from the corporate media framed the crime, the killing of 12 people, as caused by Islamic ideology, while the other two articles from the independent media framed the same crime in terms of multifaceted politico-economic and world-historical forces, such as global capitalism and Western imperialism. The four articles did not disagree on the existence of terrorism, but they differed in terms of their assumptions as to the cause(s) of terrorism (see Figure 2) as well as in terms of how the terrorist subject is positioned discursively. Blaming Islam in general, or all Muslims, in relation to terrorist acts perpetrated by a few criminals can have drastic results, such as “Islamophobia”,³⁵ so it is imperative to challenge how Islam is being framed, in addition to how Muslims are being represented in the media, in the context of the WOT discourse. Scholar-activists, interested to take up this challenge, are encouraged to follow in the theoretico-methodological footsteps of Edward W. Said³⁶ and Jack G. Shaheen.³⁷

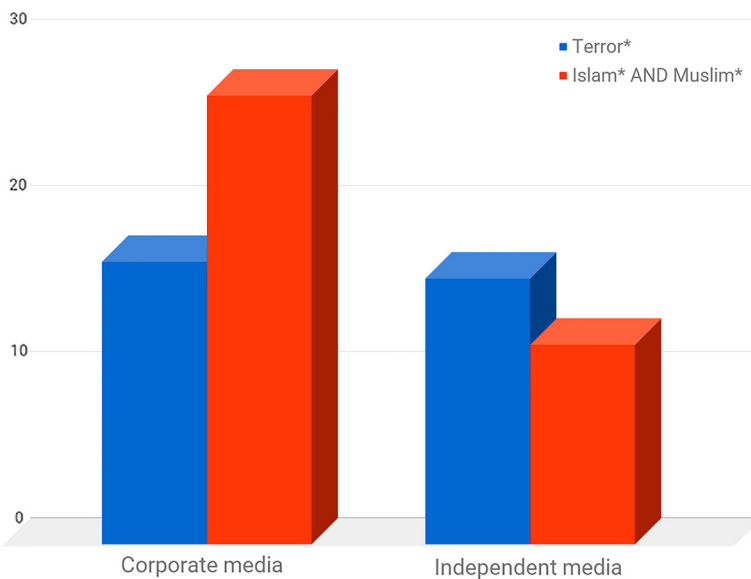


Figure 2. The collocation of the categories “terror*” and “Islam*/Muslim*”.

Table 2. Chi-square test of the collocation of the categories “terror*” and “Islam*/Muslim*” in the US print media’s coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting.

Results			
	Terror*	Islam* AND Muslim*	Row totals
Corporate media	17 (21.73) [1.03]	37 (32.27) [0.69]	54
Independent media	16 (11.27) [1.99]	12 (16.73) [1.34]	28
Column totals	33	49	82 (Grand total)

Note: The chi-square statistic is 5.0491. The p -value is .024638.

The result is significant at $p < .05$.

At any rate, it is crucial to keep in mind that terrorism, though it necessitates an urgent solution, is a Gordian problem that cannot be solved unilaterally, and so a critical approach to interpreting (counter)terrorism is essential for thinking beyond the binarist rhetoric and Islamophobic logic of political violence. Above all, we must never forget the moral universalism of human rights, which requires “the capacity to mourn in global dimensions”³⁸ or for *all* victims of political violence. Having said that, the “public intellectual”³⁹ has a responsibility to analyze why a terrorist (S2) commits a crime without dehumanizing him/her or *othering* a whole group of people (\sim S2)—i.e. Muslims and Muslim-looking subjects—who are merely related to the former in both a “contradictory”⁴⁰ and an “imaginary”⁴¹ way.

In conclusion, a chi-square test was performed (see Table 2) and the results were significant ($p \approx .02$). In the future, however, I aim to address the limitations of my study by including a larger as well as a more diverse sample. Furthermore, I am seriously considering “radical qualitative research”⁴²—e.g. discourse analysis and psychoanalysis—as a supplement to the current quantitative approach.

In the end, it is worth noting another major limitation of using quantitative content analysis: while it is significant to look at the collocation between certain words (and their morphologies) in news articles, one has to further pay attention to context because that is where meaning is derived from. For example, Kristoff⁴³ used “terror*” 12 times and “Islam/Muslim*” 26 times in his article, but he was equally promoting a message of tolerance as evidenced here: “let’s be careful not to respond to terrorists’ intolerance with our own”. The same cannot be said of the *Wall Street Journal* article⁴⁴ whose author chose to remain anonymous for obvious reasons.

Recommendations

Future studies should include a larger ($n > 4$) and a more diverse sample, that is, not just the print media but also other media forms (e.g. TV, the Internet, and portable devices), media ideologies (i.e. conservative, liberal, and radical), and media sources (i.e. mainstream and alternative). Comparing the media coverage of the Charlie Hebdo shooting across several countries can additionally shed light on both the nuanced differences and similarities of the reporting in terms of its rhetoric and logic, particularly in relation to the Islamophobic representations of Muslim, or Muslim-looking, subjects.

Conclusion

Lastly, the media (like “intellectuals”) has not only a moral “responsibility”⁴⁵ to tell the truth, but also “to speak truth to power”.⁴⁶ Standing on the right side of history means

radically rejecting both terrorism and Islamophobia as two sides of the same coin: political violence. Crimes against humanity come in all shapes and forms, be they war crimes or hate crimes. The “public intellectual”⁴⁷ has a political duty to not only expose but also oppose all “faces of oppression”,⁴⁸ whether they go by the name of racism, sexism, and/or classism. This nonviolent ethic of international solidarity amongst intersectional subjects of the world is captured succinctly in verse 5:32 of the Qur’an: “if anyone kills a person ... it is as if he [or she] kills all [hu]mankind, while if any saves a life it is as if he [or she] saves the lives of all [hu]mankind”.⁴⁹

NOTES

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