Labeling and Framing: Understanding Responses to Terrorism and the Far-Right

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The War on Terror narrative has created gaps in the critical understanding of terrorism studies, particularly in how the media and the state label politically motivated violence. The understanding of what terrorism means for western states has shifted dramatically after the events of September 11, 2001. With that shift, there has also been an increase in social movements that attempt to work within or work outside the current government rhetoric. However, the existence of such movements and groups and the violent acts they commit has been on the rise. This paper seeks to explore whether or not the inconsistent labeling of far-right social movement violence in western states as 'lone wolf violence' or 'hate crime' rather than 'terrorism' is detrimental to the critical understanding of both terrorism and counter terrorism.

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Robert M. Entman explains that, "successful political communication requires the framing of events, issues, and actors in ways that promote perceptions and interpretations that benefit one side while hindering the other."¹ By analyzing how framing theory and social movement theory impacts not only media and state responses, but also the responses and successes of far-right extremists, there is significant evidence to support that this inconsistency illustrates the west's history of racism and indirectly defines the violent actions of far-right social movements as permissible.

¹ Robert M. Entman, "Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House's Frame After 9/11," *Political Communication* 20, no. 4 (October 2003): 417. *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 30, 2017).

Understanding Far-Right Violence

Far-right hate groups and social movements have been on the rise since 1996.² However, it was not until 1995 following the Oklahoma City bombing that the United States recognized the far-right as a threat.³ Before 9/11, the Oklahoma City bombing was the deadliest act of terrorism in the United States. In order for a social movement to gain momentum and for those subscribing to their ideology to feel empowered to act violently, actors must first come together based on a shared grievance.⁴ According to Ehud Sprinzak, there are four reasons why far-right social movements turn violent:

“(a) A sudden and intense sense of insecurity which produces emotional extremist action; (b) a conviction of right-wing leaders that they can rationally benefit from terrorism; (c) a sense of increasing public support for radical action against ‘undesirable people;’ (d) the imposing presence of violent personalities who resort to terrorism is made purely for personal-psychological reasons.”⁵

Right now, there is a lot of (c) being exhibited in the west. With the threat of foreign attacks weighing on the minds of many civilians, academics, and politicians alike, anti-immigration and anti-multiculturalism rooted groups are embracing violence to legitimize their cause and further their ideologies.

Those most likely to join an organized far-right extremist group are individuals from “organized youth gangs... prisons... military organizations, and marginal religious groups, especially ones whose theology encompasses a conspiratorial worldview and hatred of minority racial or ethnic groups.”⁶ Institutions like the Southern Poverty Law Center and Klanwatch regularly report violent activities coming out of these groups and have been for a long time and racial hate groups in particular have become more prevalent.⁷ For example, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Hatewatch has identified 917 active hate groups in the U.S. that the government should be watchful of.⁸ However, the record of legal action and criminal prosecution of far-right extremists minimally meets common expectations of justice.⁹

Interestingly, far-right groups in the west have been gaining traction with the development of what appears to be “a common identity that cuts across national boundaries and is built around the celebration of race and civilization.”¹⁰ A common argument against the cause for alarm regarding these groups’ increase in violence is that it is unlikely that any western democracy’s political regime will fall as a result of far-right terrorist violence.¹¹ Rather than this being unlikely because far-right social movements simply are not strong

² Stuart A. Wright, “Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network,” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 21, no. 2 (April 2009): 192-193, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 3, 2017).

³ Leonard Weinberg, “On Responding to Right-wing Terrorism,” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 8, no. 1 (1996): 80. *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 2, 2017).

⁴ Wright, “Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network,” 190.

⁵ Ehud Sprinzak, “Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Split Delegitimization,” *Terrorism & Political Violence* 7, no. 1 (1995): 39, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 1, 2017).

⁶ Weinberg, “On Responding to Right-wing Terrorism,” 84.

⁷ Ibid, 89.

⁸ “Hate Map,” Southern Poverty Law Center. <https://www.splcenter.org/hate-map> (accessed June 3, 2017).

⁹ Weinberg, “On Responding to Right-wing Terrorism,” 84.

¹⁰ Ibid, 89.

¹¹ Ibid, 90.

enough, it is much more likely that a far-right social movement will not topple the existing order because the existing order is fundamentally colonial with a long history of racism. It is clear that an increase in both public and academic critical understanding of the legitimacy of this threat is desperately required not only to provide much needed prioritization of combating this kind of political violence, but to also think critically of the ramifications that persistent hatred will have in the west.¹²

Framing

Whether employed by the media, the state, or social movement groups, “framing entails selecting and highlighting some key facets of events or issues, and making connections aiming them so as to promote a particular interpretation, evaluation, and/or solution.”¹³ With framing strategies in any form of publication, public opinion always serves as the dependent variable.¹⁴ If that opinion is in favour of those behind the framing, their power is dramatically increased.

Media outlets in the United States, more often than not, lean towards patriotic narratives.¹⁵ Much of the debate surrounding framing by the media and its patriotic narratives is with regards to the application of the label ‘terrorist’ or ‘terrorism’ itself. As Na’ama Nagar points out, “the absence of the word is as important as its presence, since media frames reinforce and emphasize some ideas while ignoring others”.¹⁶

All media outlets subscribe to media gatekeeping practices that outline the unspoken rules and regulations of news media broadcasting and publication. Journalists, editors, and those with similar positions act as information gatekeepers because they are determining the relevancy and framing of the story or issue at hand.¹⁷ Though many news media outlets attempt to be objective with their reporting, their efforts are inadvertently compromised by the biases and perspectives of their external sources.¹⁸

According to Entman, media framing can be observed through what he calls a cascade model: those in power (political or otherwise) influence media framing, which thereby impacts public opinion and perception.¹⁹ Public opinion can also travel back up the cascade to bring information from below to those situated at the top.²⁰ “Word choice, information distribution and withholding, and timing” are strategies employed within the cascade model by state leaders and those in similar positions to gain greater control over media compared to others with elite influence.²¹ An example that Entman provides is how during the Bush administration, “the belief that Saudi Arabia contributed to the problem of terrorism” spread quickly through news media frames.²²

¹² Ibid, 81.

¹³ Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11,” 417.

¹⁴ Ibid, 420.

¹⁵ Na’ama Nagar, “Who is Afraid of the T-word? Labeling Terror in the Media Coverage of Political Violence Before and After 9/11,” *Studies In Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 6 (June 2010): 533, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 30, 2017).

¹⁶ Ibid, 535.

¹⁷ Ibid, 534.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Entman, “Cascading Activation: Contesting the White House’s Frame After 9/11,” 421.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, 422.

²² Ibid, 428.

In media framing there is also an element of counter framing, or rather critiques of the dominant narrative. For Entman, “the counter framing themes need to activate and diffuse on the news pages and in television-news, where the majority of Americans might see them – and where elites perceive that the public will learn about them and possibly change their views.”²³ Counter framing can be observed in competing media narratives (i.e., this media outlet defines an individual as a terrorist whereas another media outlet does not), in narratives coming from the state that contradict popular opinion, and in social movements attempting to gain traction with their ideological values.

Anders Breivik & Far-Right Absence in Media Framing of Terrorism

On July 22, 2011 a man by the name of Anders Breivik committed two attacks (a car bomb and a shooting spree) and killed seventy-seven people in Oslo, Norway. The *Wall Street Journal* immediately published an article stating the reason Norway was targeted was because it is a “liberal nation committed to freedom of speech and conscience, equality between sexes, representative democracy, and every other freedom that defines the West.”²⁴ This was published before the attacker’s identity and/or motive was known.²⁵ Kundnani explains, “that the ways in which counter-terrorism is narrated leads to a disproportionate security focus on Muslim populations, who are conceived as harbouring a generational problem of identitarian violence, while the issue of far-right violence is neglected.”²⁶ This is exemplified in the *Wall Street Journal*’s assumption that Breivik was affiliated with Middle Eastern terrorist activities or anti-Western ideologies and not a white man let alone a pro-west, far-right white supremacist.

Around the same time as the attacks in Oslo, German authorities discovered the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (National Socialist Underground), a German neo-Nazi group that had killed ten people over the last thirteen years with no repercussions. It is likely that this group’s activity went largely unnoticed because, by many states including Germany, right-wing extremism was not deemed a priority in comparison to Islamist extremism.²⁷ After 9/11, western states saw the emergence of counter-jihadist narratives: a “new version of this identitarian narrative... often promoted by new political actors without the usual neo-Nazi baggage.”²⁸ Though traditional far-right ideals remain at the heart of the evolved neo-Nazi and white supremacy social movements, it can actively be observed that in the context of the west’s history of racism and colonialism, “the identity of Western liberal values has been substituted for white racial identity, Muslims have taken the place of blacks, and multiculturalist elites are the new Jews.”²⁹ This evolution of the far-right demands calls for further study in this area and greater recognition of its potential threat. In the case of Anders Breivik, his manifesto is a written representation of the counter-jihadist ideology.³⁰ A key component of the manifesto was how “multiculturalism has weakened national identity and encouraged ‘Islamic extremism.’”³¹ Kundnani notes, “the uncomfortable truth is that the central plan

²³ Ibid, 425.

²⁴ Arun Kundnani, “Blind spot? Security narratives and far-right violence,” *Security & Human Rights* 23, no. 2 (June 2012): 129, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 31, 2017).

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid, 132.

²⁸ Ibid, 134.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid, 136.

of [Breivik's] narrative is shared by heads of Western European governments" and unfortunately, this problem is not limited to Europe.³²

Kundnani observes a trend in western news media reporting. Specifically, how there are almost always the same main characters: "the protagonists (us, moderate Muslims, and extremist Muslims)... a disturbance (terrorist violence), an explanation for the cause of the disturbance (extremism), and a suggested resolution (rejecting multiculturalism and asserting our values forcefully)." ³³ Though this trend was exhibited in observed British media broadcasting, it is very easy to connect it to the much of the anti-multiculturalist rhetoric that has emerged in the U.S. post-9/11. It is important to consider that a potential reason that far-right groups seem to run rampant and free is because their political and ideological rhetoric align with current government discourses.³⁴ Many Americans with a high degree of political influence view the far right as an irritant, but not a problem of great significance because though dramatic and spectacular, their views can be quite similar. Islamist extremists on the other hand, are viewed as dangerous security threat.

Framing in Social Movements

9/11 and subsequent domestic terrorist attacks in the west in particular "catalyzed a torrent of feverish patriotism and nationalism while breeding nativist suspicion of immigrants and foreign nationals."³⁵ This new fervour created the perfect environment for the cultivation of a variety of social movements but particularly that of the far-right. As discussed previously, framing theory also analyzes the dynamics of social movements in addition to the workings of news media publication.³⁶

Social movement theory is a three-part framework that addresses "political opportunities, mobilizing structures, and collective action framing."³⁷ When examining social movements through the lens of framing theory and social movement theory, "the rhetoric of social movements is conceptualized by collective action frames."³⁸ Collective action framing is comprised of diagnostic, prognostic, and motivational elements.³⁹ They are "emergent action-oriented sets of beliefs and constructs that invigorate social movement activities and campaigns."⁴⁰ Similar in likeness to the collective action framing of the media, it is the selective presentation of information in order to alter the observer's perception of a larger issue or experience.⁴¹ This type of framing has been and continues to be an excellent tool to understand far-right violence in western states.⁴²

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid, 137.

³⁴ Ibid, 139.

³⁵ Wright, "Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network," 195.

³⁶ Lars Erik Bernzten and Sveinung Sandberg, "The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement," *Terrorism & Political Violence* 26, no. 5 (November 2014): 760, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 1, 2017).

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid, 761.

⁴⁰ Wright, "Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network," 191.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Bernzten and Sandberg, "The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement," 761.

Stuart A. Wright notes, “racial-nationalist ideas and theories are not new but the strategic framing – or reframing – of these ideas by key movement leaders in recent years has gained greater currency in the face of broad social and political change.”⁴³ For social movements, their ability to survive depends on “the ability of movement actors to reframe issues and reinvent themselves in ways that transform contention and change the discourse of ongoing struggles.”⁴⁴ In the case of the far-right, an “element of the racial-nationalist framing has focused on immigration and multiculturalism;”⁴⁵ a currently trending ideology across the west and outside of far-right social movements.

Labeling

A frequent argument for the inconsistency in terrorism labeling is that there are numerous, subjective definitions of what constitutes as terrorism and the legitimacy of such a label.⁴⁶ In addition to this potential explanation, another theory for the inconsistency is that states do not want to label their own citizens as terrorist and that “each country has its own national nemeses to whom it refers as terrorists.”⁴⁷ This is particularly evident when observing the rise of the far-right. Na’ama Nagar notes that in western states, labeling depends on the nationality of the victims, especially in the United States where it has been found that American news media outlets to be more likely to use the word if the victims were American.⁴⁸

In reference to the findings in labeling in the United States, Nagar brings forward two hypotheses as to why this occurs: 1) “news media organizations that identify with a conservative political ideology are more likely to frame politically violent groups as terrorist” and, 2) “western media are more likely to frame groups of Islamic affiliation as terrorists.”⁴⁹ Her student gathered information and records from the United States State Department and it is important to note that both hypotheses were proven in her research study.⁵⁰

The ‘Lone Wolf’

There is a large trend that labels the ideologically motivated violence committed by white people as ‘lone wolves’ and it is a popular claim that “loners are the future of terrorism.”⁵¹ A problem with label of ‘lone wolf’ is that this metaphor “evokes images of ideologically and socially unaffiliated individuals, and direct the attention away from the social character of language and political narratives.”⁵² Using the aforementioned example of Anders Breivik, Bernzten and Sandberg argue that that case “demonstrates the

⁴³ Wright, “Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network,” 189.

⁴⁴ Ibid, 190.

⁴⁵ Ibid, 198.

⁴⁶ Nagar, “Who is Afraid of the T-word? Labeling Terror in the Media Coverage of Political Violence Before and After 9/11,” 535.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 536.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 542.

⁵¹ Bernzten and Sandberg, “The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement,” 760.

⁵² Ibid.

importance of seeing the terrorism of loners as embedded in, and motivated by, the rhetoric of larger social movements.”⁵³

Another example of a lone wolf that should not be labeled as such is Wade Michael Page. On August 5, 2012, Page killed six people at a gurdwara (a Sikh temple) in Oak Creek, Wisconsin. He was a self-proclaimed white supremacist who was known in the neo-Nazi community and frequently advocated for a “race war.”⁵⁴ Similar to Breivik and Dylann Roof of the Charleston shooting, Page’s actions were also described as a rogue “lone wolf” and “hate crime” despite fulfilling the definitions of domestic terrorism.⁵⁵ Breivik, Roof, and Ward cannot truly be a lone wolf terrorist because their actions were inspired largely by anti-Muslim and white supremacist rhetoric.⁵⁶ The discrepancies in media response to violent actions taken by individuals demonstrate a need for a greater critical understanding of terrorism and far-right violence.⁵⁷ The lone wolf label is incorrect because it ignores the individual’s affiliation with a social movement and dismisses their actions as a threat to state security. This inaccurate term must stop being applied to far-right social movements and individuals inspired by their rhetoric in order to properly acknowledge the threat and move forward with strategies to counter and understand these terror attacks.

Labeling by the State: The Problem with ‘Hate Crimes’

On June 17, 2015, nine people were shot and killed by Dylann Roof at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Before he started shooting, he stated that he came “to shoot black people” and after he was apprehended, he said his goal was to inspire a “race war.”⁵⁸ Roof published a white supremacy manifesto on his website, *The Last Rhodesian*, along with photos of himself with the Confederate flag and at several historical slavery-era sights.⁵⁹ After the attack, then FBI Director James Comey released a statement illustrating the apparent randomness of the attack saying, “the attacks did not seem to be “political,” making him doubt that it was terrorism.”⁶⁰ After authorities discovered the manifesto outlining Roof’s political motivations, the narrative did not change.⁶¹ Ultimately, Roof’s actions (and subsequent criminal charges) were labeled a hate crime and not terrorism.⁶² Though Roof had no connections to an organized group, like Anders Breivik, his actions are reflective of far-right social movements.

Jesse Norris argues, “the term hate crimes, unlike terrorism, tends to refer to attacks that are unplanned and unconnected to broader ideological objectives.”⁶³ Similarly to the lone wolf, this adequate

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Colleen E. Mills, Joshua D. Frielich, and Steven M. Chermak, “Extreme Hatred: Revisiting the Hate Crime and Terrorism Relationship to Determine Whether They Are “Close Cousins” or “Distant Relatives,”” *Crime & Delinquency* (December 21, 2015): 2, *SAGE Journals* (accessed June 3, 2017), doi:10.1177/001128715620626.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Bernzten and Sandberg, “The Collective Nature of Lone Wolf Terrorism: Anders Behring Breivik and the Anti-Islamic Social Movement,” 772.

⁵⁷ Jeff Gruenewald, Steven Chermak, and Joshua D. Freilich, “Far-Right Lone Wolf Homicides in the United States,” *Studies In Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 12 (December 2013): 1006, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 4, 2017).

⁵⁸ Jesse J. Norris, “Why Dylann Roof is a Terrorist Under Federal Law, and why it Matters” *Harvard Journal On Legislation* 54, no. 1 (January 2017): 502-503, *Political Science Complete*, EBSCOhost (accessed June 3, 2017).

⁵⁹ Ibid, 503.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid, 503-504.

⁶² Ibid, 504.

⁶³ Ibid.

label not only ignores the perpetrators affiliation to a movement at large; it also carries less gravity (criminal sentencing or otherwise) in comparison to terrorism. With the actions committed by Dylann Roof, it is clear that “the government has no excuse for not officially categorizing and publicly referring to the attack as terrorism.”⁶⁴ As Norris explains, “properly identifying Roof (and attackers like him) as terrorists could lead to several positive results, including more balanced media coverage... increased public vigilance... more attention to the [United States’] history of racist terrorism, less support for Islamophobia and racism, and a more rational distribution of counterterrorism resources.”⁶⁵ In the words of previous FBI Agent Michael German, “rhetoric is important.”⁶⁶ Hate crime and terrorism do not carry the same societal implications and that is something that needs to be considered when labeling the actions of violent social movements.⁶⁷ There needs to be consistency regarding the application of terrorism as a label. To have the same actions that many other terrorist groups take, but carried out by far-right extremist labeled as a hate crime instead of terrorism is a gross double standard and miscarriage of justice.

The Challenges of Understanding the Legitimacy of the Threat of the Far-Right

While left-leaning extremism is often views as being in conflict with the current government regime, the views of far-right extremist movements are often aligned with that of the government.⁶⁸ For example, U.S. President Donald Trump’s anti-immigration rhetoric is shared by a variety of far-right social movements, especially those with white supremacy roots. It is a well-known fact that terrorism is “seen as a crime against society as a whole.”⁶⁹ The problem here is that the majority of the victims of far-right attacks, namely immigrants or racial minorities, are not viewed as a part of society. Norris suggest a potential solution lies in having “a more balanced terrorism discourse in the media and government, instead of a single-minded focus on jihadi terrorism, would play some role in preventing anti-Muslim hate crimes and terrorism, as well as other forms of discrimination.”⁷⁰

Conclusion

The fact of the matter remains, most far-right perpetrators of terrorism are “charged with other crimes less severe than terrorism.”⁷¹ Whether it is labeling the violence of far-right groups as terrorism or not labeling any politically motivated violence as terrorism, there needs to be consistency with the application of such a label. The discrepancies in media and state responses prove that changes must be made in order to truthfully understand far-right social movements and the terror they have the potential to inflict. By labeling the violent crimes committed by far-right groups as lone wolf or hate crime, it diminishes the severity of the consequences for such actions and denies that the victims of the attack were targeted based on a group’s political ideologies.

The far-right should not be absent from discussions surround politically motivated violence and threats to security. Far-right social movements’ capacity to tap into public fear and hatred is a cause for

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid, 505.

⁶⁶ Ibid, 508.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Ehud, “Right-Wing Terrorism in a Comparative Perspective: The Case of Split Delegitimization,” 17-18.

⁶⁹ Norris, “Why Dylann Roof is a Terrorist Under Federal Law, and why it Matters,” 531.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 532.

⁷¹ Gruenewald, Chermak, and Freilich, “Far-Right Lone Wolf Homicides in the United States,” 1011.

concern because it is indicative of dynamic political endurance.⁷² Ignoring their existence, or dismissing them as a threat is detrimental to the democratic order of the west. By keeping consistent with labelling and remaining cognisant of the effects framing can have on public opinion, states can work towards better articulating counter-terrorism measures that accurately reflect the threat of terrorism lies: the far-right.

⁷² Wright, "Strategic Framing of Racial-Nationalism in North America and Europe: An Analysis of a Burgeoning Transnational Network," 194.