Framing Grey Area Violence in Media and Politics: A Framework for Decision Making

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Abstract

This paper creates a decision-making framework for determining best practices for media and political accounts of acts of violence that may reasonably be described as terrorism but are not definitive cases of terrorism. The framework seeks to explore the ethical and practical dimensions of using the term "terrorism" to describe these "grey area" acts of violence. Relevant texts in social psychology, security studies, and philosophy of language are consulted to develop a multi-disciplinary approach.

Background

What differentiates terrorism from political violence?[8] Despite a $70 billion global increase in homeland security investments since 2001, "*one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter*" is still tossed around as experts debate the exact definition of "terrorism" (King, 2008). Although this cliché is often used by

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[8] There are many more aspects of the definition of terrorism that are still debated, but this paper is primarily concerned with the blurred line between terrorism and political violence (justified or otherwise).

political leaders to disguise terror campaigns as "revolutionary violence" and "national liberation movements," there is a legitimate basis for discussion on the definition of terrorism (Ganor, 2002, p. 124). There is a category of violence that is undeniably terroristic, but some violence also exists in a proverbial "grey area." The choice to label such violence terrorism is neither simple nor inconsequential. In order to better understand the term's significance when describing such violence, this paper seeks to provide an account of the effects of employing the term in media and political settings and to construct a framework for making the decision to use or avoid the label in these settings.

For the purposes of this paper, the term "grey area violence" will be used to describe acts of violence which could reasonably be labeled terrorism (especially in public discourse where competing conceptions of terrorism are given equitable platforms) but which are not blatantly obvious acts of terrorism. For example, attacks coordinated by recognized terrorist organizations such as Boko Haram or ISIS are textbook acts of terrorism. However, in ordinary usage, ideologically motivated active shooters may be termed terrorists by some and common criminals by others. This paper will not venture to form a more specific definition of grey area violence in order to keep the term appropriately interpretive, but the way the term would be employed in ordinary usage serves as a useful rule of thumb. Moreover, the usage of the term terrorism discussed here will be termed "media and political usage," but this terminology is also left intentionally broad. Media usage generally refers to employment of the term in media coverage of terrorism, political violence, and other forms of political violence. Political usage refers generally to the use of the term in statements and speeches from politicians that are directed toward their constituencies or the public at large; this usage seeks to exclude formal intra-governmental policy debate.

Given that grey area violence is an increasingly salient threat, this paper has two goals[9]. Firstly, the paper seeks to examine the ramifications of labeling grey area violence "terrorism" in media and politics through an examination of relevant literature in philosophy and social psychology. Secondly, the paper seeks to produce a framework for making the choice to use the label "terrorism" when discussing acts of grey area violence in media and political usage. The way

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[9] For example, rates of lone wolf terrorism have risen markedly in the U.S. since the 1950's (Spaaij, p. 860). The European Union defines lone wolf terrorism as "intentional acts that are committed with the aim of seriously intimidating a population, or unduly compelling a Government or international organization to perform or abstain from performing any act, or seriously destabilizing or destroying the fundamental political, constitutional, economic or social structures of a country or an international organization."

grey area violence is portrayed in the media and in politics plays an important role in co-opting the public as a partner in counterterrorism efforts, and thus plays an important role in advancing international security interests. Therefore, policy suggestions made in this paper will primarily be to the end of advancing national and international security. However, the paper will conclude with a brief discussion of the ethical elements of the decision.

Philosophy: The Significance of Labeling Grey Area Violence Terrorism

To understand the significance of the term "terrorism," it will be helpful to pick apart its functions using the philosophy of language. Eric Reitan produced a particularly useful account of the term terrorism in his paper *Defining Terrorism for Public Policy Purposes: The Group-Target Definition*. Reitan asserts that "terrorism" is an *essentially contested concept*, meaning that it is characterized by "competing definitions unified by a common appraisive meaning and a shared set of paradigms" (Reitan, 2010, p. 255). This means that the term does not have a singular definition; rather, its usage indicates a condemnation of whatever it is used to describe and may be appropriately used to describe things that fit a *loose* set of criteria. While Reitan thinks that "contested concepts perform the valuable function of preventing some voices from being cut out of public debate by a kind of *definitional fiat*," a precise definition is necessary for professional usage in order to draft coherent public policy aimed at addressing a *specific* threat (Reitan, 2010, pp. 255–256).

By definition, contested concepts have a descriptive and evaluative character, but terrorism also seems to have a *prescriptive* character that Reitan does not touch on. For example, when one says, "The toilet is broken," the term "broken" prescribes fixing, or asserts that someone *should* fix the toilet. Similarly, a sentence like "Active shooter violence is terrorism" prescribes a need to control and combat that violence. This is, at the very least, true in the cultural context of the United States and Europe, where counterterrorism plays a significant role in political debate and, to an extent, patriotism and national identities. Using the term "terrorism" in societies with this context to describe an act of violence indicates that it is not simply a random act of violence beyond a given society's control, but that it is part of a class of violence that the U.S., the European Union, and many other societies across the globe have made a concerted effort to combat. While this prescriptive character does not necessarily imply a specific course of action or assign obligations to a specific actor, it clearly does indicate a need for *some*

course of action by *some* actor. This prescriptive character is an important part of the ordinary usage of the term and, by extension, the way the public understands the term.

The public's conception of terrorism and other forms of political violence is important to counterterrorism and international security efforts, especially for forms of grey area violence that are especially difficult for intelligence agencies to anticipate. Family members and close friends of potentially violent people on a path of radicalization are in the best position to intervene, either by dissuading the individual or by contacting authorities (RAND, p. 24)[10]. Given the significance of public cooperation with counterterrorism efforts, the descriptive, evaluative, and prescriptive character of "terrorism" should be carefully weighed before being employed. Using the term in a media and political setting to describe a form of violence communicates not only condemnation and categorization of that violence, but a call to action to combat it.

Reitan sought a definition that could be used to shape public policy while acknowledging that creating a clear-cut definition for ordinary usage would be both impossible and irresponsible. This paper deals in the space between Reitan's public realm and policy realm. It would be misguided to construct a strict definition for media and political usage given the significance of the word, the importance of public cooperation in counterterror efforts, and the complexities of public response to perceived threats of terrorism. Creating a *framework* for media and political usage decisions will be a more appropriate path forward.

Social Psychology: The Impact of Terrorism and Media Coverage of Terrorism

The first step toward understanding the repercussions of labeling grey area violence terrorism in media and politics is understanding the social psychological impact of terrorism on a society. For the purposes of this paper, it will be best to analyze the societal response to terrorism using the concept of *relative risk appraisal*. This is the process wherein human beings evaluate future risks to their health and safety based on indicative events. Studies have indicated that events with high *Dread Risk*, meaning events that are extremely "catastrophic, uncontrollable, and inequitable," and events with high *Unknown Risk*, meaning events with

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[10] According to the RAND Corporation's report on lone wolf terrorism, *Stray Dogs and Virtual Armies*, an estimated one-third to one-half of known [lone wolf terrorist] cases began with a tip from within the Muslim community.

"characteristics such as not being observable, not knowing when one is exposed, and not knowing the mechanism of potential injury," contribute to high *signal potential* of a given hazardous event. Signal potential "functions as a warning sign that a new ongoing threat has entered the environment" (Marshall et al., 2007, pp. 308–309). High *Dread Risk* and *Unknown Risk* also tend to produce "attitudes towards the [threat] such as willingness to pay for safeguards and demands for regulation" (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 308).

Acts of terrorism have a high signal potential because they have high *Dread Risk*, high *Unknown Risk*, and because the ideological character of terrorism can be collectively understood by the targeted society as indicating the existence of an *ongoing* threat rather than an isolated incident. The way that politicians and media present information on terrorist attacks have a major impact on the signal potential of such events. For example, psychologists have linked media exposure of the 9/11 attacks to PTSD symptoms in U.S. residents who were not directly threatened by the attack. They proposed that the relationship formed because "unlike most media coverage of disasters, specific aspects of the 9/11 attacks – its scale, unpredictability, novelty as a threat, and implications for future safety, together with media saturation of graphic images and frequent government warnings of future attacks—carried the signal potential that there was a significant ongoing threat, with greatly elevated risk for being harmed in additional attacks" (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 309). Both the nature of terrorism and the way that journalists and politicians depict it contribute to the threat's high signal potential. This high signal potential causes disproportionately intense relative risk appraisal.

Exaggerated relative risk appraisal can account for the drastic uptick in hate crimes committed against people of Middle Eastern descent and people of color in the U.S. in the weeks following 9/11. The relative risk appraisal was also likely responsible for the 20% decline in air passenger travel in the last four months of 2001 (Marshall et al., 2007, pp. 310–311). The increased rates of avoidance behaviors and racially motivated violence illustrate the grave psychological, social, and economic impacts distorted relative risk assessment can have on a society when it occurs *en masse* as the result of large scale violence.

Research has also indicated that acts of terrorism produce a heightened need for *cognitive closure*. The desire for cognitive closure is defined as "aversion toward uncertainty and ambiguity, with a preference for firmness and stability in beliefs and expectations" (Orehek et al., 2010, p. 280). Subjects who exhibited an aroused need for cognitive closure when confronted with terrorism threats showed reinforced ingroup and outgroup identification, enhanced feelings of solidarity amongst ingroup members, and heightened negative attitudes toward

outgroups (Orehek et al., 2010, p. 288). Affected subjects also showed higher levels of support for tough counterterrorism tactics, including costly measures and "controversial ones at apparent odds with individual rights and humanistic concerns" (Orehek et al., 2010, p. 281). Support for severe counterterrorism policies was shown to be positively related to optimism about future safety from terrorism (Orehek et al., 2010, p. 286). Group identifications and bolstered support for tough counterterrorism policies were termed the "rally around the flag effect." Finally, research indicated that subjects confronted with terrorism that show heightened need for closure are more likely to support decisive leaders and less likely to support indecisive leaders, and perceived failure of a given counterterrorism policy may prompt individuals in this psychological state to shift support to other leaders or other courses of action (Orehek et al., 2010, p. 289). This research illustrates that terrorism has a significant impact on public sense of security and political and social orientation.

Extensive research has been done on the social psychological impact of terrorism, but the research outlined here is the most pertinent to the question of media labeling of grey area violence. In the subsequent sections, this paper will attempt to create a guideline for making the choice to label or not label a given act of grey area violence terrorism. All the research explained in this section will play a crucial role in that framework, but special attention should be paid to signal potential and need for cognitive closure. These are foundational features with significant social, political, and economic ramifications and thus must be considered very carefully.

Theoretical Analysis: Foundations of a Best Policy

The research presented thus far serves as the basis for constructing the best policy because it gives a preliminary account of both the linguistic function of the term "terrorism" and the concrete repercussions of terrorism on the public. A framework for decision making should function on both a theoretical, linguistic level and a concrete, evaluative level. It should also focus on the application of the research to media and political usage and the unique features of grey area violence as opposed to traditional forms of terrorism. Therefore, the framework constructed here will have two distinct parts: the first will be a theoretical foundation for decision making, and the second will be a practical analysis of expected societal impacts of media and political usage. This section will serve as the theoretical foundation, exploring how labeling grey area violence terrorism alters the meaning of that violence and how this affects the

way the public understands both the given form of violence and terrorism as a broader class of violence.

The linguistic function of the term terrorism, when applied to grey area violence, must be understood according to both the previously explored philosophy and social psychology. The term "terrorism" can be conceptualized as a marker or tag that alters the context of grey area violence. The descriptive character of the word indicates simply that the qualities of a given act of violence fit the definition of terrorism. The evaluative character marks the form of violence that the term describes as being condemnable and unjustified. Most importantly, the prescriptive character of the term marks the form of violence as one that *should be combatted* as part of the larger counterterrorism effort. In this way, the prescriptive character means that choosing to label an act of grey area violence an act of terrorism is a framing mechanism. The label changes the way that the event is understood by the public by communicating the idea that it is not merely an isolated incident of indiscriminate violence, but a single incident in a larger pattern of terrorism. The event is thus contextualized as indicative of a threat that is targeted, ongoing, and presently being combatted. By extension, this can alter the public's conception of terrorism by making it appear broader, more varied, and thus, potentially more difficult to combat. Therefore, framing an act of grey area violence as terrorism affects public understanding of that event, the type of violence that the event exemplifies, and the nature of terrorism. The linguistic action of the term is, therefore, the foundation for shifts in cognition and, in turn, behavior.

Note that this linguistic function can be performed regardless of whether a given act of violence fits neatly into widely accepted professional definitions of terrorism or not because of the dissonance between professional and ordinary usage discussed in Reitan's paper. In fact, the linguistic action is especially significant because it has the potential to inspire the psychological responses to terrorism that otherwise may not have occurred in citizens who would not have considered an act of violence an act of terrorism without framing in media and political usage. Consider an act of grey area violence wherein a perpetrator, acting alone, uses a knife to attack civilians in a crowded public area. After being arrested, the perpetrator indicates that the attack was motivated by political ideology and intended to send a message to the public. However, the attacker is not involved in or ideologically aligned with any existing terrorist organization. An attack like this would be considered terrorism according to many professional definitions, but ordinary usage would likely diverge on this case as many would only consider such a perpetrator a common deranged criminal rather than a calculated terrorist. In such cases, media and political usage of the term "terrorism" has the

potential to manufacture a specific set of social psychological responses unique to terrorism.

This is to say that framing instances of grey area violence by labeling them terrorism lends them a stronger signal potential. An act of violence that ordinary usage would diverge on would more likely be understood as an act of senseless, random violence rather than an indicator that more similar violence is to come. Calling an act of grey area violence terrorism could give the impression that the given form of violence is likely to recur and that the threat of terrorism is diversifying. This is clear in the way that lone wolf terrorism is understood as an extension of "traditional" terrorism. Both effects would clearly be to the detriment of the public's sense of security and can result in a plethora of other effects. Some of the most salient potential effects will be analyzed in the next section.

Practical Analysis: Consequential Framework of a Best Policy

The previous section explored the theoretical shifts in cognition that framing grey area violence as terrorism produces. This section will explore the changes in societal behavior and political attitudes that have the power to produce tangible consequences in society and counterterrorism efforts. To do this, expected societal responses to the framing of grey area violence (and their consequences) will be organized into two categories: potentially positive and potentially negative. These will be categorized primarily according to their impact on state security.

The potentially positive effects position encourages the public to be a more effective partner to organized counterterrorism efforts. The most significant potentially positive effect is that framing a form of grey area violence as terrorism communicates a greater level of severity of such violence. Although assigning more gravity to a threat can harm the public's sense of security, it can also result in a greater level of awareness of a given form of violence. The public is more likely to make countermeasures a political priority and support expenditures on and enactment of such measures (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 308). They are also more likely to enact a "see something, say something" mantra and contact appropriate authorities when they are aware of signs of such violence. This is extremely important for combatting forms of grey area violence like lone wolf terror, which is otherwise extremely difficult to detect in advance. A public awareness and understanding of a given form of grey area violence, thus, lends itself to greater public partnering in efforts to counter that violence.

The "rally around the flag" effects may be aggravated by a perception that the terrorism threat is growing and diversifying and a decimated sense of security. These effects are best understood as a double-edged sword. The potentially positive side of these effects include a bolstered sense of patriotism, heightened support of state counterterrorism measures, and support for decisive political leaders. In a democracy, public political "rallying" around a given course of action has significant power in enacting desired policies through electing leaders who support the given policies and through constituencies pressuring their elected officials to support those policies. A shared vision and sense of unity in a democracy can go far in producing desired results. Again, these "rally" effects are positive because they improve the public's ability to act as a partner in counterterrorism efforts.

However, the potentially negative side of that sword is the dark underbelly of nationalism. An aggravated sense of ingroup and outgroup identification in a society can exacerbate racism and provoke hate crimes, as was the case after 9/11 (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 311). A sense of insecurity can result in a hunger for populist leaders, and a dissatisfaction with policies perceived as ineffective or not appropriately severe can result in a push for policies that are inhumane or sacrifice important rights like privacy. In that vein, note that counterterrorism measures often involve much stickier policy debates, weighing human rights, restrictions on weapons, and personal privacy against measures to increase public safety. There is also concern about security policies discriminating against religious minorities and people of color. Public support for more extreme measures has the potential to steamroll these nuanced pieces of the conversation. In short, labeling grey area violence terrorism has the potential to further attack the public's sense of security, and this has the potential to push portions of the population toward bigotry and extremism.

The heightened sense of insecurity can also produce avoidance behaviors in a society. The relative risk appraisal of an act of violence associated with terrorism can produce a public fear of a given place or activity that the threat of violence appears to have rendered less safe. The resultant avoidance behaviors can have economic ramifications. This occurred after 9/11 when air passenger travel rates plummeted, harming the industry (Marshall et al., 2007, p. 310). It can be argued that this sense of fear, its resultant avoidance behaviors, and increased political instability produced by a surge in populism and extreme views *give the terrorists what they want*." The significance of this point and the question of whether this encourages more radicalism and terrorism can be debated, but the notion is worth considering when deciding whether to label grey area violence terrorism in media and political usage. The notion, as well as the effects that feed into it, are important potentially negative effects in a framework for decision making.

Conclusion: Limitations and Ethical Considerations

Ultimately, the choice to label or not label an act of violence will likely produce both positive and negative outcomes including, but not limited to, those previously described here. This paper seeks to present some of the most salient of these possible effects. However, analyzing the power of the word "terrorism" and then enumerating its possible outcomes is an isolating and highly abstract approach. In reality, social response to mass political violence is extremely complex. There are too many moving pieces to keep track of, and they interact with each other in ways that mute some effects while amplifying others. Therefore, this paper is limited to producing a framework for decision making. It seeks only to offer "something to chew on" when making the choice, but not to offer a single "yes" or "no" answer to the question, *should the media label a given act of grey area violence "terrorism?"* There are no simple answers to this question and striving to produce one would be a fool's errand.

Moreover, there is a moral layer to the question that must be addressed alongside pragmatic considerations. There are ethical questions lying beneath every security concern explored in this paper. For example, the use of the term "terrorism" as a framing mechanism can have real repercussions on complex policy debates. Framing can influence a society to blindly support security measures at the expense of rights like privacy. There is an ethical dimension here that has the potential to offset security considerations. While it may aid the state in counterterrorism efforts to render a society more supportive of such efforts, even this potentially positive effect borders on a fearmongering technique that capitalizes on violence to further state ends. Moreover, this increased support comes at the expense of the public's sense of security and runs the risk of producing economically and socially damaging consequences like avoidance behaviors and hate crimes. Framing—both in terms of the choice to use terrorism to describe grey area violence and, in a broader sense, the way media and politicians portray violence—is a question not only of efficacy but of ethics.