

1 SHOOTING FOR NEUTRALITY?

2 Analysing bias in terrorism reports in Dutch newspapers

9 Abstract

10 As with other nations, terrorism is a compelling preoccupation in The Netherlands. One issue within
11 the public debate concerning news coverage is whether it fairly reports the perpetrators' racial, ethnic
12 and religious backgrounds. This article asks whether there is disproportionate attention (coverage
13 bias), selection (gatekeeping bias) and presentation (statement bias) in various Dutch newspapers
14 between 2015-2017. Using content analysis, we find that all three types of bias present, albeit to
15 different degrees. We propose that Critical Race Theory (CRT) usefully explains how bias is often
16 *unintentional* and that journalistic outcomes are consequent of unconsciously imprinted ideas about
17 what constitutes a "terrorist", facilitated and amplified by institutionalised media practices and wider
18 societal power relations.

20 Keywords

21 Bias, critical race theory, terrorism, news coverage, content analysis

23 The terror threat and its wider perceptions

24 Hoping to ignite a race war by targeting black parishioners, on 17th June 2015, Dylann Roof killed nine
25 people in a church in Charleston, South Carolina. The incident was covered extensively, including in
26 the Netherlands, with the *type* of coverage being also debated particularly on social media. One key
27 issue was whether Roof should be labelled a "shooter" or "terrorist" (see: Captein, 2015).

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29 Similar discussions emerged after shootings in Orlando (2016) and Las Vegas (2017) and media outlets
30 began outlining their policies on covering such incidents, explaining why some labels prevail over
31 others. The senior editor at the Dutch national public broadcaster *NOS* argued that the word "attack"
32 [*aanslag*] implied premeditation, which in the case of Charleston was unclear. Therefore, *NOS* chose
33 "shooting" [*schietpartij*] instead (see Captein, 2015). ¹ Similarly, *De Volkskrant's* ombudswoman
34 argued it was not for a newspaper to determine who should be labelled terrorists. Highlighting
35 instances where white perpetrators were so identified, she concluded that assumptions that only
36 Muslims are labelled terrorists is incorrect (Kranenberg, 2015). De Jong (2017) reached a similar
37 conclusion in *NRC Handelsblad*.

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39 One opening premise therefore, is an apparent discrepancy between how news consumers and
40 newsmakers perceive terror reporting. While the former might detect bias, the latter might disagree,
41 with both likely to find evidence supporting their case. Therefore, comparative, independent research
42 into the portrayal of perpetrators from different backgrounds is important. The value of our study also
43 lies in raising awareness about unintentional bias, which has real consequences. Furthermore, it
44 addresses feelings of wariness and scepticism towards media beyond our Dutch focus. We introduce
45 Critical Race Theory (CRT) to the arena of journalism studies, noting that despite disciplinary overlaps,
46 few scholars have adopted such a lens. While our central aim is to demonstrate how bias is developed
47 through linguistic practice, we use CRT to explain that such bias is a consequence of societal
48 conditioning rather than purposeful intent. After outlining our theoretical and methodological
49 approach, we describe our content analysis findings before discussing their wider implications. In sum,
50 our study illustrates how, facilitated and amplified by media practices and wider societal power

¹ From here on, all translations from Dutch to English are the author's unless explicitly stated otherwise.

51 relations, unconsciously imprinted ideas about what constitutes a “terrorist” can result in reporting
52 favouring the dominant (white, non-Muslim) majority.

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54 **Understanding bias and conditioning**

55 News bias is the deviation from “accurate, neutral, balanced and impartial” reporting (McQuail, 2000,
56 p.491), and so news is considered biased when it deviates from what is *considered* good journalistic
57 practice. Broadly speaking, bias can be intended and unintended. Intended bias means that journalists
58 or media organisations purposely present events in certain ways, for example explicitly supporting
59 particular political parties (partisanship) or favouring certain ideologies (propaganda). Entman (2007,
60 p.163) terms this ‘distortion bias’. We expect professional journalists would consider this a breach of
61 the normative ideals of news reporting. Accordingly, we focus on the more complex practice of
62 unintended bias.

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64 Unintentional bias (McQuail, 2000, p.491) is not premeditated but is consequent of habits, routines
65 and social/cultural landscapes. Harder to detect, it influences the selection of news, sources and events
66 and presentation. Similarly, editorial decision-making often unwittingly determines some events
67 should receive more coverage than others. This ‘decision-making bias’ (Entman 2007, p.163) reflects
68 news *selection* while ‘unwitting’ bias (McQuail, 2000, p.491) or ‘content’ bias (Entman, 2007, p.166)
69 attends to news *presentation*. Unintended news bias is the differential treatment of social groups
70 borne out of journalistic choices *without* intending to do so.

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72 Of course, news can never completely reflect reality. That journalism is fully objective is widely
73 contested by journalists and media scholars, as the extensive literature on framing highlights (see
74 McLaughlin, 2016). Tuchman (1978) asserts that news presents a “window into the world” (p.1),
75 showing a glimpse of events, but one determined by the window’s frame, its position and the structure
76 of its glass. She posits that news is also influenced by professional journalistic standards, organizational
77 habits and particular social realities and so internal (*e.g.* news values) and external (*e.g.*
78 commercialisation and digitalisation) factors both influence the process of framing (De Vreese, 2002,
79 p.52). Accordingly, we argue that explanations of bias should move beyond simplistic conclusions that
80 news organisations are institutionally racist. Instead, we propose that bias is a function of a less
81 obvious process. While assessing audience reception is beyond our scope here, we see our paper as a
82 first step in a process of identifying news reporting that has real-life consequences. News reports even
83 implicitly preferencing white majorities contribute to a wider social conditioning where, as Bonilla-
84 Silva (2014) notes, ethnic minorities suffer every-day disadvantages where they are treated differently,
85 remunerated differently and offered different opportunities to white citizens. While, for example,
86 there is a consistent misrepresentation of Muslims, via “reinforcing antagonistic narratives” (Sian et
87 al., 2012, p.266), it seems reasonable to imagine that exposure to such reports might develop more
88 extreme and violent reactions.

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90 **Bias, racism and CRT**

91 Scholars identify divisions between ‘old’ and ‘new’ racism. ‘Old’ racism is associated with intended bias
92 and is generally manifested through promotion of white superiority (Campbell, 1995; Downing and
93 Husband, 2005). ‘New’ racism (Van Dijk, 2000), also described as ‘institutional’ (Carmichael and
94 Hamilton, 1967; Downing and Husband, 2005), or ‘modern’ (Entman, 1990), can be resultant of
95 unconsciously developed ideas and social practice rather than emerging from purposeful ideology
96 (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). Manifestations include job applicants with African-American or Arab-
97 sounding names being less likely to be successful, even amongst ‘Equal Opportunity Employers’
98 (Panteia, 2015). Our premise is that media professionals, making every effort to be fair and objective,
99 may not realize that their coverage is a function of unintended socially-conditioned news practice. We
100 propose that such consequences can be explained by Critical Race Theory (CRT).

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102 CRT proposes that race/racism is socially constructed. Race is not fixed but dependent on ever-
103 changing social landscapes (Hall 1997) and is resultant of social processes where people *construct*
104 boundaries by appointing labels, rather than it being biologically fixed (Baumann, 1999). A further
105 complication is that 'race' is a contributor to human identity that intersects with ethnicity, religion,
106 gender and nationality. Muslims, for instance, are regularly juxtaposed to a white majority (see Shadid,
107 2009) but this means comparing a religious entity with a 'racial' (ethnic) group. After all, one could be
108 white *and* Muslim, or non-white *and* non-Muslim. The fluidity of these labels depends on outside
109 acceptance, social context and power (Demmers, 2012). In some situations, aspects of our identity
110 matter more than others, and the dominant aspects are not solely controlled by the subject. Our
111 identity therefore does not only relate to how we see ourselves but also how society sees us
112 (Demmers, 2012). Hence, investigating bias is also a question of social power: who is able to define
113 and transform group boundaries. In order to recognize news bias, we should determine which social
114 identities dominate when shooters are identified, who has the power to decide that, and whether this
115 differs when accounting for the perpetrators' background.

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117 This will also address how 'race', religion and ethnicity interrelate and become salient through news
118 coverage, setting boundaries for certain in- and out-groups. The label used to describe someone or
119 something can serve to create or strengthen a certain in-group ('us', the positive) and out-group
120 ('them', the negative) (Reisigl and Wodak, 2001, p.45). It is thus concerned with questions of power as
121 the majority have the power to define group boundaries and decide who belongs to the in- and out-
122 group.

123 124 **CRT and media studies**

125 Integrating CRT and media studies theories is welcomed (Harris, 2012; Bennett Capers, 2015) and
126 presents opportunities to move beyond legal scholarship (Harris, 2012) and education (Solórzano and
127 Yosso, 2001; Bernal, 2002) to which CRT is traditionally close. There seems to be growing interest into
128 (frame) analysis of news coverage of particular minorities amongst CRT-scholars (e.g. Rodríguez, 2007;
129 Vélez et al., 2008). These studies, feeding off media theories, however, tend to focus on one social
130 group only (often a minority). Although this highlights trends in the portrayal of certain minorities, it
131 cannot exclude this being a society-wide phenomenon also affecting the majority. Other more
132 comparative studies seem to discuss 'the media' without acknowledging all its varieties (e.g. Writer,
133 2002; Corbin, 2017).

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135 Other media scholars that have focused on the portrayal of terrorism without a CRT-lens (e.g. Powell,
136 2011; Kearns et al. 2019). In fact, the study by Kearns, Betus and Lemieux (2019, p.18) analysing
137 coverage of U.S. terrorist attacks found that "attacks by Muslim perpetrators received, on average,
138 357% more coverage than other attacks". This emphasizes the timeliness of this topic and the
139 relevance of this research, which is set within the Dutch context. Focusing on terrorism coverage
140 remains relevant as language is performative (Demmers, 2012, p.21). The way certain actors are
141 identified may affect behaviour (Thibodeau and Boroditsky, 2011; Powell, 2011) or feelings towards
142 them. Although the nature and strength of the effect is debated (see: Scheufele, 1999; Herda, 2010)
143 framing is said to have at least some influence on news consumers (Van Dijk, 2000; Bhatia, 2005).

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145 Indeed, focus group respondents evaluated perpetrators differently when labelled "terrorist" or
146 "freedom fighter" (Montiel and Shah, 2008), and the labels "Islamist" and "terrorist" increased the
147 length and severity of proposed punishments by respondents when compared to "shooter" (Baele et
148 al., 2017, p.14). Not only may different labels influence public perception, this also emphasizes the
149 relevance of investigating the link between religion and terror.

150 151 **Framework**

152 In order to assess "racial", religious and/or ethnic bias in news reports, we adapt the broad analytical
153 framework developed by D'Alessio and Allen (2000). Originally designed to analyse election campaigns,

154 the framework categorises bias into coverage, gatekeeping and statement bias. The focus on all three
155 makes enables conclusions about the scope and variety of news bias.

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157 Coverage bias relates to news coverage volume (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000), and attends to some actors
158 or groups receiving more coverage than others, whilst also accounting for factors such as relevance
159 and newsworthiness (Eberl et al., 2017). Coverage quantity matters because it can influence audience
160 understandings, as well as how "natural" events appear to them. Measuring this is challenging because
161 it is difficult to establish how much coverage each actor *deserves* (Eberl et al. 2017, p.1132). We
162 therefore focus on the number of articles per case (1) and their length (2), whilst accounting for
163 similarity between cases and the characteristics of each outlet. A fair balance would entail insignificant
164 differences between the visibility of the attack(er) in each outlet.

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166 Gatekeeping bias focuses on information *selection* (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000). Identifying it is
167 challenging, since "fairness" can only be determined once the range of stories is known (D'Alessio and
168 Allen, 2000, p.135). In order to satisfactorily operationalise gatekeeping bias, we focus only on quoted
169 *sources*, how much prominence they have and how they are contextualised. This shows who is framing
170 the attack(er) and directing the debate, and research suggests Dutch news is dominated by white, elite
171 sources (Van Dijk, 2008) while Muslim experts are asked to comment much less frequently, even when
172 news stories concern them (Devroe, 2007). Here, we measure the type of source, their frequency as
173 well as the way they are introduced and contextualised by the journalist, as this may influence their
174 credibility in front of the reader.

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176 Finally, statement or tonality bias concerns content *presentation* (D'Alessio and Allen, 2000; Eberl et
177 al., 2017), since labels reveal value judgments when describing attackers. Statement bias is detected
178 by labels (nouns) and descriptions (adjectives) used to describe perpetrators and their actions,
179 categorising them as positive, neutral or negative. In addition, we count how often ethnicity, "race"
180 and religion are mentioned, to determine the relevance and fluidity of social identities. Of course,
181 statement bias can be considered subjective, as it requires both interpretation and categorisation.
182 However, we mitigate this by applying the same categorisation systematically across cases.

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184 **Sample and method**

185 This research conducts a comparative case study in order to point out the differences between the
186 portrayal of perpetrators based on specific features. In order to control for potential intervening
187 variables as far as we can, the cases selected were as similar as possible, apart from the variations in
188 attacker ethnicity, religion and race. We acknowledge that expanding the sample with more cases and
189 a longer timespan would benefit generalizability, however, it would be more complex to uphold that
190 any differences detected were due to varieties in race, religion and ethnicity as the number of
191 intervening variables would be greater. We therefore use a smaller, more "controlled" sample. We
192 chose to focus on The Netherlands because of the social debate on biased reporting of terrorism
193 suspects (see introduction) which is likely to be repeated in the event of another terrorist attack.
194 Furthermore, many more academic studies have focused on media reports in English, and fewer have
195 considered Dutch media.

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197 To account for cultural and geographical proximity, we only consider U.S terror attacks by American-
198 born attackers between 2015 and 2017. Previous media research (Galtung and Ruge, 1965; Phillips,
199 2015) suggests that geographically closer events generally receive more coverage. Further, events in
200 countries similar to The Netherlands – with high cultural proximity (Harcup and O'Neill, 2001; Moeller,
201 1999) – also tend to generate more coverage. Choosing only attacks in the U.S without Dutch victims,
202 allowed to account for differences in proximity. As death toll or severity could similarly influence the
203 amount of coverage (Harcup and O'Neill, 2017), we chose cases where the number of casualties was
204 roughly the same for white, non-Muslim perpetrators (68 deaths in total) as it was for Muslim, non-

205 white perpetrators (63 deaths in total). For similar reasons all cases selected were shootings by male
 206 perpetrators born and raised in the U.S.²

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208 Finally, attacker motivation was accounted for as much as possible. Although most shooters did not
 209 survive and their motivation remained ambiguous, the common denominator was that each attack
 210 could be *considered* an act of terrorism. Although there is no universal definition of such an act,
 211 definitions often hinge on premeditated acts of severe violence (1) against random, innocent civilians
 212 (2) for ideological reasons (3) *e.g.* political, social or religious (see: Ganor, 2002; NCTV, 2016).
 213 Acknowledging that differentiating between terrorist attacks and “regular” shootings is subjective, the
 214 lack of a clear personal link between target and perpetrator was deemed crucial, as was a (potential)
 215 link to ideology. Table 1 summarizes our selected cases:

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Table 1. The terror attacks in our study

Case	Perpetrator	'Race', Ethnicity, Religion	Date	Deaths
Charleston	Dylann Roof	White, American, Non-Muslim	June 17 th , 2015	9
Las Vegas	Stephen Paddock	White, American, Non-Muslim	October 1 st , 2017	59
San Bernardino	Syed Rizwan Farook	Non-white, (Pakistani)-American, Muslim	December 2 nd , 2015	14
Orlando	Omar Mateen	Non-white, (Afghan-)American Muslim	June 12 th , 2016	49

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219 We identified broad patterns within 220 articles from print editions of the four most-read newspapers
 220 in The Netherlands ³. Two of these are ‘popular’ editions (*De Telegraaf*, *Algemeen Dagblad/AD*), the
 221 other two ‘quality’ (*De Volkskrant*, *NRC Handelsblad*). The popular editions are most widely read, with
 222 a circulation of 382,000 and 318,000 papers respectively, compared to 218,000 (*De Volkskrant*) and
 223 136,000 (*NRC Handelsblad*) as of 2016 (SVDJ, 2017). Although the reach of television or online news is
 224 undeniable, newspapers remain important for the Dutch audience (Kanne and Driessen, 2017).
 225 Analysing print newspaper articles therefore covers an important section of the Dutch media
 226 landscape. We conducted a content analysis to identify patterns within coverage, and then looked at
 227 typical examples of these trends to examine more qualitatively *what* was written in *what* context to
 228 justify any claim of unintended bias.

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230 **Reporting terror in numbers**

231 *Coverage Bias*

232 Table 2 shows that the Orlando attack received almost double the coverage as any other attack (N=92,
 233 41.8%). This is not simply due to the different type of newspaper since each accounts for roughly a
 234 quarter of all articles, with quality newspapers publishing only slightly more (N=122, 55.5%) than
 235 popular ones (N=98, 44.5%).

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Table 2. Articles distributed per attack and per newspaper

² In one case (San Bernardino), there was a male and female perpetrator. Here, the focus was only on the portrayal of the male perpetrator in those news stories.

³ Articles including the name or place of the attack in a 14-day period following the attack were selected. Stories that included the name or place of the attack(er) but were not about the act were excluded, as were opinion pieces. The sampling was done using LexisNexis and by checking print newspapers.

Case	N	%	Newspaper	N	%
Charleston	34	15.5	Algemeen Dagblad	41	18.6
Las Vegas	51	23.2	De Telegraaf	57	25.9
Total white	85	38.6	Total popular	98	44.5
San Bernardino	43	19.5	NRC Handelsblad	69	31.4
Orlando	92	41.8	De Volkskrant	53	24.1
Total non-white	135	61.4	Total quality	122	55.5
Total	220	100.0	Total	220	100.0

241 Differences between newspapers are only evident in terms of perpetrator background. As Table 3
242 indicates, popular editions divide their attention most equally, with least coverage given to Charleston
243 (12.2% in AD; 19.3% in Telegraaf) and most to Orlando (34.1% in AD; 29.8% in Telegraaf – tied with Las
244 Vegas). The quality editions, however, covered Orlando more extensively; 52.2% of *NRC's* total
245 coverage on all four attacks was dedicated to Orlando, and 47.2% for *De Volkskrant*. Remaining
246 coverage was divided fairly equally between the other cases (roughly 18% each). The popular editions
247 appear more balanced, spending around half of their coverage on non-white attacks (54.1%), versus
248 45.9% on attacks by white perpetrators. The split within quality newspapers is 67.2% versus 32.8%,
249 probably mainly due to the high coverage of Orlando.

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252 **Table 3.** Articles distributed across newspapers
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Case	AD (%)	De Telegraaf (%)	NRC (%)	De Volkskrant (%)
Charleston	12.2	19.3	13.0	17.0
Las Vegas	29.3	29.8	15.9	20.8
San Bernardino	24.4	21.2	18.8	15.1
Orlando	34.1	29.8	52.2	47.2

254 Table 4 shows the average words per article and indicates that articles covering Charleston and Las
255 Vegas (Mean=447 and 464 respectively) are shorter than those reporting San Bernardino and Orlando
256 (Mean=482; 515). This difference is probably explained by the fact that quality newspaper published
257 more and longer stories on these events, as compared to popular outlets.

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260 **Table 4** Words per article
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Case	Mean (no. of words)	St. Deviation
Charleston	447	313
Las Vegas	464	389
San Bernardino	482	364
Orlando	515	372
All cases combined, by newspaper	Mean (no. of words)	St. Deviation
AD	359	310
De Telegraaf	307	187
NRC	604	391
De Volkskrant	625	403

262 Entman (1993) suggests that the general concept of news “framing” is developed by highlighting some
263 elements within a story while marginalising others to construct a particular presentation of people,
264 events and/or circumstances. Accordingly, the next sections about gatekeeping bias and statement
265 bias attend to the choices that have been made in terms of *how* the stories have actually been
266 reported.
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Gatekeeping Bias

We operationalise gatekeeping bias by analysing sources chosen to support the news narratives. This illustrates who comments on the news, who frames the attack(er) and who shapes the narrative. Table 5 indicates that the main sources are either other media outlets (22.9%), politicians (17.9%) or acquaintances of the perpetrators (17.0%). Together, these categories make up over half (57.6%) of all sources quoted. The religious and ethnic background of the perpetrator are not prominent, although politicians are quoted more often if the perpetrator is non-white and Muslim.

Table 5. Sources informing stories

Type of source	Total (%)	White, non-Muslim (%)	Non-white, Muslim (%)
Other media	22.9	24.4	21.8
Politician	17.9	12.2	21.8
Acquaintance perpetrator	17.0	17.2	16.8
Security services	9.3	7.8	10.3
Victim/eye witness	8.6	10.0	7.6
Public	5.4	7.8	3.8
Perpetrator	3.2	7.2	0.4
Other (<5% each)	15.8	13.3	17.6
Total	≈100.0	≈100.0	≈100.0

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Of course, these data say little about *what these sources actually say* about the attack(er) but if we look solely at numbers, Table 5 does not indicate gatekeeping bias.

Statement bias

We also examined how the attack and attackers were framed, and whether their “racial”, ethnic and religious identity played a role. Table 6 indicates that race is only prominent in the Charleston case (41.1%) perhaps explained by the fact that Dylann Roof targeted a black community to begin a race war. Furthermore, the Dutch translation of “non-white” [*niet-blank, niet-witte*] is rarely used in everyday language and when describing a non-white or non-western person, it is more common to highlight their ethnicity or nationality [e.g. *Turkse Nederlander, persoon met Noord-Afrikaanse roots*]. The word ‘white’ [*blank, witte*], however, is quite common.

Table 6. Mentions of race

Case	Named (%)	Not Named (%)
Charleston	41.2	58.8
Las Vegas	3.9	96.1
San Bernardino	0.0	100.0
Orlando	1.1	98.9

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Table 7 shows that the ethnic background of the attacker is most often not specified. However, when it is, this is more likely in articles concerning non-white perpetrators (26.7%). Arguably, this is because the San Bernardino and Orlando attackers have different ethnicity and it was more likely these should be highlighted. However, all perpetrators were U.S-born and raised, and so it is questionable whether ethnicity is relevant at all. This indicates a tendency to emphasise the ethnic background of non-Westerners.

Table 7. Mentions of ethnicity

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Case	Named (%)	Not Named (%)
Charleston	8.8	91.2
Las Vegas	3.9	96.1
San Bernardino	27.9	72.1
Orlando	26.1	80.4

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Religion – especially Islam – seems increasingly used to differentiate between white majorities and non-white minorities (see Shadid, 2009). Because in three out of our four cases the shooter died and religious affiliations were not easily confirmed, we counted *any suggestions* that perpetrators had religious associations. Table 8 shows that over half of the articles about San Bernardino (60.5%) and almost half about Orlando (43.5%) mentioned religion, as compared to 7.8% about Las Vegas and none about Charleston.

Table 8. Mentions of religion

Case	Named (%)	Not Named (%)
Charleston	0.0	100.0
Las Vegas	7.8	92.2
San Bernardino	60.5	39.5
Orlando	43.5	56.5

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Considering the fluidity of social identities, it is also worth examining how often religion and ethnicity are mentioned simultaneously. Indeed, of 36 articles about San Bernardino and Orlando mentioning the attacker’s ethnicity, 33 *also* mentioned his religion (91.7%). And half the 66 times religion was mentioned, ethnicity was too (50.0%).⁴ This strengthens the connection between terrorism, being ‘foreign’ and Muslim. More widely, this furthers ideas of an in-group (a white majority) and an out-group (a non-Western, Islamic minority), and not only highlights how religious and ethnic social identities intersect, but also how such group boundaries can become salient.

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We also examined other labels describing the attacker. For simplicity, we grouped codes into “negative”, “neutral” or “positive”. Negative labels for example, included “terrorist”, as well as those clearly linked to terrorist organisations (*e.g.* “ISIS-supporter”, “KKK-member”). Other categories included are “racist”, “extremist” and “fundamentalist”. Non-judgemental, neutral labels included “perpetrator”, “shooter” or “attacker”. Also included, more contentiously, are neutral labels emphasising race, ethnicity or religion (“Muslim” or “American”). We operationalise positivity by coding labels emphasising the attacker’s “normality”. Examples include family- or work-related labels such as “father” or “colleague”. These labels humanise perpetrators, making it easier for audiences to identify with them. Table 9 shows that most labels are neutral, regardless of the perpetrator’s background (all between roughly 60% and 70% of occasions). Only the Las Vegas shooter was described more positively (16.3% versus 3.8%-9.2%).

Table 9. Perpetrator labels

Case	Negative (%)	Neutral (%)	Positive (%)	Total
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⁴ As can be seen when comparing tables 8 and 9 with table 10

Charleston	28.8	67.5	3.8	≈100.0
Las Vegas	10.5	73.3	16.3	≈100.0
White, non-Muslim	19.3	70.5	10.2	≈100.0
San Bernardino	24.4	69.8	5.8	≈100.0
Orlando	31.4	59.5	9.2	≈100.0
Non-white, Muslim	28.9	63.2	7.9	≈100.0

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Table 10 shows how we nuanced “negative” labels. When data are grouped, the idea that Muslim perpetrators are more likely to be called “terrorists” has some value. For San Bernardino, 76.2% of negative labels were terrorism-related compared to 50.0% for Orlando. This was much less for Charleston (14.3%) or Vegas (11.1%).

Within Las Vegas reports, the “lone-wolf” label was dominant, often combined with references to mental illness (altogether 88.9% of negative labels)⁵. The Charleston attacker – perhaps the best fit within definition of terrorism – was instead mainly identified as a “racist” or “white supremacist” (47.6%). This illustrates how terrorism labels can be avoided for one group and be much more common for another.

Table 10. Nuancing ‘terror’ labels (perpetrator)

Case	Terrorism (%)	Lone Wolf (%)	Mentally Ill (%)	Other (%)	Total
Charleston	14.3	23.8	14.3	47.6	≈100.0
Las Vegas	11.1	55.6	33.3	0.0	≈100.0
White, non-Muslim	13.3	33.3	20.0	33.3	≈100.0
San Bernardino	76.2	4.8	4.8	14.3	≈100.0
Orlando	50.0	20.8	8.3	20.8	≈100.0
Non-white, Muslim	58.0	15.9	7.2	18.8	≈100.0

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Table 11 confirms that ascribing such labels is not random, and that both perpetrator and attack are more often labelled ‘terror(ism)’ when the attacker is non-white and Muslim. This is especially true for San Bernardino, where 25.0% of reports used the terrorism label at least once⁶ versus only 1.1% of articles on Las Vegas and 4.4% on Charleston. This hints at implicit statement bias, even if the attacks were mainly described using ‘non-terrorism’ vocabulary.

Table 11. Nuancing ‘attack’ labels

⁵ It is recognized that the sample size has become rather small and should therefore be assessed with caution. In order to substantiate the findings follow-up research is welcomed.

⁶ Each label used to describe the attack was coded only once, even when used multiple times. This table therefore only shows how many articles included a label, not the prominence of one label compared to another within each article.

Label	Charleston (%)	Las Vegas (%)	San Bernardino (%)	Orlando (%)
Terrorism	4.4	1.1	25.0	11.3
Attack	20.6	16.9	26.0	27.4
Murder	23.5	4.5	0.0	4.2
Shooting	13.2	34.9	23.0	22.0
Bloodbath	11.8	22.5	11.0	13.7
Act/deed	8.8	4.5	3.0	6.0
Other (<10%)	17.6	15.7	12.0	15.5
	≈100.0	≈100.0	≈100.0	≈100.0

372

373 **Beyond the numbers**

374 Our content analysis reveals patterns within articles, but numbers reveal little about the contextual
375 meaning of labels and descriptions. Therefore, we used these patterns to further investigate news
376 discourses in our news sample.

377

378 For example, Stephen Paddock, the white killer of 59 people in Las Vegas was generally described
379 either neutrally or positively, using non-terrorism terminology. One *NRC* headline describes Paddock
380 as a “quiet pensioner, who gambled a lot and ate a burrito every now and then” (*NRC*, 03/10/17). Apart
381 from mentioning Paddock by name, the article includes the labels “perpetrator”, “brother”,
382 “pensioner” and “accountant”. These words emphasise Paddock’s normality and that he was an
383 ordinary man who like many others, enjoyed a snack every now and then. Perhaps because this does
384 not explain his extraordinary behaviour he is – when described negatively – portrayed as a “maniac”,
385 “emotionally unstable” (*AD*, 04/10/17), and a “lone-wolf” who “must have lost it” (*Volkskrant*,
386 03/10/17). This highlights the exceptionality of Paddock’s actions and weakens notions that he may
387 have been ideologically motivated. Of course, when violent actions are connected to a mental illness
388 or inexplicable motivations, the wider societal conditioning proposed by CRT are seemingly side-lined,
389 and the systematic, structural, and culturally constructed news practices remain unexplored, and
390 therefore unchallenged.

391

392 Similarly, Dylann Roof is appointed a terrorism label in only three articles. Rather, he is labelled a white
393 supremacist or racist, his act a hate-crime, mass murder or shooting. One newspaper headline after
394 the attack read: “Hate crime white apartheid supporter in ‘black church’ shocks United States” (*De*
395 *Telegraaf*, 19/06/15). Although this labelling is negative, Roof is identified as a racist, rather than
396 terrorist, despite Roof acknowledging his attack as ideologically motivated, which in itself could be an
397 incentive to ‘safely’ use the terrorism-label. What this suggests is a distinction between white
398 supremacy/violent racism and terrorism, where both cannot be used simultaneously.

399

400 In contrast, *De Volkskrant’s* opening paragraph after Omar Mateen killed 49 people in Orlando
401 identifies him as “the terrorist of Orlando” who had visited the local mosque before shooting 49 people
402 in Orlando (15/06/16). *De Telegraaf* starts by saying that Mateen was “29 years old, child of Afghan
403 parents” (15/06/16). Only in the third paragraph of the article is mentioned that he “was born in New
404 York in 1986 and lived over 10 years in Florida” (*ibidem*). It is worth considering the mental blueprint
405 of a terrorist. This is generally not a quiet pensioner, but a young, emotionally unstable Muslim male,
406 whose family comes from a country often linked with terrorism. It is worth considering how the
407 coverage analysed here reinforces this stereotype.

408

409

410

411

412 **Discussion**

413 While our analysis shows subtle bias in terrorism reports, the question is why this occurs. Is it, as CRT
414 suggests, because of unconscious social conditioning and the social practice of media institutions – and
415 therefore a result and reflection of power relations?
416

417 As we have mentioned, selecting ‘the news’ depends on numerous internal and external factors (De
418 Vreese, 2005). What is considered important to report depends on the social conventions of what
419 news *should be* (Tuchman, 1978; Harcup and O’Neill, 2017). This consensus centres around news value
420 theory that events must contain characteristics such as exceptionality, proximity and severity (Phillips,
421 2015; Harcup and O’Neill, 2017). But news value theory does not satisfactorily explain why the Orlando
422 attack, which claimed 49 victims and took place in a night club, received more coverage than the Las
423 Vegas attack, which despite being similar in nature (at a concert) and severity (59 killed), received less
424 coverage. Even if we consider the possibility that there was less major news deserving coverage around
425 the time of the Orlando attack, and conversely, other events may have dominated news agendas
426 around the time of the Las Vegas-attack. Scrutinising the events at the time of both attacks⁷ suggests
427 that neither is the case.
428

429 Events can also become news simply because they fit into existing interests of media audiences
430 (Harcup and O’Neill, 2017). Dutch newspaper agencies are, alike many others worldwide, operating in
431 an increasingly commercialising landscape. Indeed, research into print and online editions of Dutch
432 newspapers shows that when selecting stories, editors are influenced by audience ‘clicks’ even if this
433 practice clashes with their professional standards as journalists (Welbers et al., 2015). If news media
434 are more likely to provide stories that find favour with their core audience, these in turn might simply
435 perpetuate the type of social system that creates and encourages the news bias we identify. While as
436 Rosenwald (2017) suggests news has value “beyond clicks”, some might argue that nonetheless, they
437 might still function as an “up-or-down vote” of reader interest in a particular story which can then be
438 realised in terms of advertising revenue.
439

440 But not only do news organisations need to satisfy audiences to remain financially viable, according to
441 the theory of political economy, news stories are subject to many other shaping factors. What Shaw
442 (2015, p.121) defines as “a chain of production and distribution processes and structures” that news
443 travels through before reaching the reader can include the circumstances of ownership, advertising
444 funding, available sources, political patronage and so on.
445

446 In the case of Orlando, the increased in stories may have been because of the potential link to IS, the
447 war in Syria and Muslim-extremism in Europe which was fiercely debated at the time. Because it was
448 already part of the social debate, newspapers may have decided to cover such an attack more
449 extensively. The Orlando attack fits into a terror-frame that was already a topic of concern at the time,
450 while the extensive coverage in turn amplified its importance to the reader and helped solidify this
451 frame. This is not unimportant as the more often a particular frame is used, the more natural it
452 becomes to the reader and the less probable its use is challenged (also known as ‘frame resonance’,
453 see: Benford and Snow, 2000).
454

455 We advance this idea within our discussion about gatekeeping bias. Bias can develop because power-
456 holding demographics tend to be able to promote a particular world view more often positive towards
457 their own in-group (Van Dijk 2008, p.56). Our analysis however, indicates reality is more complex. Our
458 initial findings show that the types of sources mentioned are similar for all attacks, regardless of the
459 shooter’s background.

⁷ In the weeks after Las Vegas other topics were the death of the mayor of Amsterdam, Catalonia’s effort towards succession and the coalition agreement. In the weeks after Orlando, these were the murder of UK politician Jo Cox and an alleged rape victim’s return from Qatar.

460 It should be noted, however, that politicians, as primary definers, are often given the opportunity to
461 comment, and what they say is often unchallenged because of their position (Hall et al., 2013). Through
462 this mechanism, politicians can transfer their own (un)intentional bias to the audience. Interventions
463 from Donald Trump for example, are especially insightful. The prominence of religion and ethnicity in
464 both San Bernardino and Orlando-cases may at least in part be explained by the regular statements by
465 Trump, a presidential candidate at that time. In one report after the attack in Orlando, *De Telegraaf*
466 (13/06/16) wrote that Trump wanted action against “jihadist terror” and “radical Islam”, suggesting a
467 link between the attack and terrorism. Similarly, he called for a “total and complete stop of all Muslims
468 entering the country” after the San Bernardino attack (NRC, 08/12/15).

469
470 Accordingly, Trump specified Islam as particular part of the problem. This not only strengthens the idea
471 that terrorism is “naturally” linked to Islam, but also that this type of terror is not American. Trump
472 could have advocated action against domestic terrorism, since Mateen was American, but instead he
473 highlighted the perpetrators’ ethnic and religious identity. A distorted picture of events therefore can
474 prevail, because a prominent person holds a particular view. Even when Trump’s views were countered
475 by Barack Obama or Hillary Clinton, this mainly served to generate debates about immigration and
476 banning ‘foreign’ Muslims. Hence, the notion of objectivity and neutral reporting which gives voice to
477 all sides as a key feature of good journalism does not simply remove implicit bias, rather the journalistic
478 practice of including prominent elite sources as an unwritten rule helps maintain this and keeps certain
479 frames intact.

480
481 Although many journalists are aware of this, resisting using such sources is problematic. Particularly in
482 the contemporary digital news environment, they are under pressure to deliver content quickly which
483 means there is less time to investigate the complexities of major events (Richardson, 2007). Easy-to-
484 obtain accredited sources providing instant, newsworthy soundbites are often the path of least
485 resistance. Including prominent, elite sources is also common journalistic practice, and politicians and
486 their employees increasingly understand how the media operates and how to use this to their
487 advantage (Phillips, 2015). In all probability, Trump and his PR department are aware that controversial
488 statements will make headlines. Hence, the detected gatekeeping bias can be accounted for not only
489 by the views of Trump or other politicians, but also by the pyramid of power in society. Whoever has
490 power, organisational and/or financial means is able to ensure their inclusion in the media debate –
491 something that is facilitated by the structure of the media environment.

492
493 Besides politicians, perpetrator acquaintances also contributed, and we found the same source was
494 often quoted repeatedly by different outlets. Again, this might be explained by pressure, verification
495 and accessibility. Not everyone for example, would want to be identified as related to a mass killer. In
496 addition, if an outlet is not able to get the ‘scoop’ (Schlesinger, 1987, p.51), it is not unusual to follow
497 up on the work of others creating a parallel story that is only slightly different (Phillips, 2015).
498 Consequently, those acquaintances able to comment may be quoted at length, repeatedly, and across
499 multiple outlets. Not only does the inclusion of similar sources present a way for bias to transfer and
500 spread, we found it can also migrate from platform to platform. Furthermore, the same sources
501 repeating the same comments contributes to normalising a particular version of events. Implicit bias,
502 then, is substantiated and reproduced. This is further amplified by the use of foreign news agencies
503 who draw up reports widely distributed around the world. It also shows the complexity of the framing
504 process from the politician’s words, to the news agencies, to the (translated) reports written up by
505 Dutch journalists.

506
507 While the information selected as news provides one dimension within our analysis, how this news is
508 presented adds another. We found that although all perpetrators were most often described in neutral
509 terms, when the labelling was negative there was a stronger link with terrorism when the perpetrator
510 was non-white and Muslim. Meanwhile, white, non-Muslim attackers were generally described using

511 non-terrorism terms. In addition, ethnic and religious roots only played a role in those stories about
512 non-white Muslims.

513
514 An obvious explanation may be the aim to report accurately. Including details describing the attacker's
515 ethnic and religious background could reasonably have been considered relevant to the story and since
516 our sample only included U.S.-born perpetrators, they might have simply been described as
517 "American". This also shows that judging relevance is generally done by those representing the
518 majority whether they be politicians appointing labels or journalists deciding on accuracy. This of
519 course, does not necessarily reflect how minorities see themselves (Demmers, 2012).

520
521 Because news generally has to be comprehensible, short and compelling for mass audiences, it seems
522 reasonable to relate it to the beliefs and standards shared by those audiences "establishing common
523 ground for communication" (Golding and Elliot, 2009, p.644). Journalists therefore tap into already
524 familiar cultural and social conventions. On one hand, newsmakers often must do this to make complex
525 events understandable. On the other hand, early reports about terrorist attacks are especially prone
526 to bias. In the first days after the Orlando attack for example, it was suggested that the perpetrator
527 was a radicalised Muslim who had probably sympathised with Islamic State. The attack in Charleston,
528 on the other hand, was quickly defined as racism, right-wing extremism and white supremacy.
529 Although both attacks *could* have been labelled terrorism, only one was. They connected to two
530 separate and established narratives to which readers could relate - the Muslim-terrorist from the
531 Middle East, and a home-grown right-wing white supremacist. Embedding events within a broader
532 context to ensure "common ground" can thus result in and substantiate (unintended) stereotypical
533 ideas of what a terrorist really is.

534
535 How can such standards become assumed and established? Perhaps – adding further support to our
536 social conditioning thesis – this might be explained by newsroom demographics. Dutch newspapers
537 for example, are dominated by white, non-Muslim male. As of 2015, only 3% of workers within the
538 country's nine largest newsrooms had a non-western background⁸ while a fair reflection of society
539 would mean this should be at least 12% (Takken, 2015). When a homogenous world view prevails in
540 the newsroom, ideas about who is and who is not a terrorist can unknowingly influence reporting. We
541 argue that even unwittingly, the reliance on, and lack of challenge to a "reservoir of stored cultural
542 meanings" (Schudson, 1995, p.40) goes a considerable way to explain the statement bias we identify.
543 This is further supported by the fact that both *De Volkskrant* and *NRC* have adopted guidelines on the
544 use of the terrorism-label – seemingly aware of its contentious use – yet in practice do not appear to
545 apply these labels impartially.

546 547 **Conclusion**

548 We have investigated whether in Dutch newspapers, the perpetrators of American terror attacks are
549 portrayed differently when considering their religious, racial and ethnic background. We found some
550 important differences in the portrayal of non-white, Muslim and white, non-Muslim perpetrators. This
551 bias manifest itself in different ways, often subtly. For example, more articles were published about
552 non-white, Muslim perpetrators, but only about Orlando in quality newspapers. Also, even though the
553 sources quoted were similar, non-white, Muslim perpetrators were more often described as terrorists,
554 as compared to their white equivalents (who were more often described in *non*-terrorism terms, even
555 when addressed negatively). Finally, religion and ethnicity were prominent in articles on non-white,
556 Muslim perpetrators, and these labels were often simultaneously mentioned, strengthening the link
557 between Islam, "foreign" and "terrorism".

558

⁸ Meaning they had at least one parent born in Asia, Latin American or Africa (excluding the former Dutch Indies and Japan).

559 We argue that our findings can be largely explained by Critical Race Theory. This considers racism –
560 here operationally defined as ‘bias’ – as consequent of unconsciously imprinted ideas and social
561 practices. We have illustrated how news values, journalistic habits and power relations in society
562 influence news reports on terrorism, even amid aims to report neutrally and indiscriminately. We wish
563 to be clear that we do not believe the institutions and journalists in our study to be inherently racist,
564 but instead assert that, like many members of society, they operate according to unconscious and
565 unintended preconceptions.

566
567 Of course, more research embracing other cases might further substantiate our findings. It remains
568 difficult to conclude with certainty that news is being reported in a certain way due to the perpetrator’s
569 background and not something else. Combining media analysis and CRT however, proved helpful in
570 this regard. More widely, we hope to have opened the possibilities for using CRT outside its usual
571 arena. We believe our findings are also significant for those who select and report news as they
572 indicate the benefit of re-evaluating particular journalistic habits that may have unintended and
573 potentially catastrophic consequences. That these practices and outcomes are unintended does not
574 mean media practitioners cannot counter these practices or should not feel a responsibility to do so.
575 Small changes, such as the make-up of the newsroom or discussion about our “reservoir of stored
576 cultural meanings” (Schudson, 1995, p.40), can make serious differences. The key point is that
577 potentially neutral practices can, in reality, generate bias. Journalism is difficult, and our objective has
578 been to identify tendencies within news reports. Only when such tendencies are identified can
579 responsibility to change them be taken and some extreme and deadly reactions be avoided.

580
581 *****

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