

## **Typifying Terror: The Pattern of Storytelling in Terror News and the Case of San Bernardino Shooting**

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### **Abstract**

The study advances the argument that the news reporting of terror has increasingly become formulaic in the United States. This news frames the act thematically within the global war on terror discourse, uses lengthy storylines and background stories altering the conventional news reporting patterns, portrays the perpetrators as ‘others’ and foreigners even when they are U.S. citizens, configures the incident symbolically as targeting the entire nation, constructs images of a collectively suffering and mourning nation through victim and hero stories, and devotes the majority of coverage to these details while attending briefly to the actual journalistic questions of when, where, how and what actually took place. The pattern propagates ideological conceptualizations of terror as an Islam and Muslim-related phenomenon and contributes to the bias against Muslims. By studying the news coverage of the 2015 San Bernardino, California shooting the study reveals the typifying story elements creating this pattern.

**Key words:** Representations of Muslims, discourse of terrorism, narratives, narrative patterns, typifying and news reporting.

### **Tipikleştirilen Terör: Terör Haberlerindeki Hikaye Anlatımı Örüntüleri ve San Bernardino Saldırısı Örneği**

#### **Özet**

Bu çalışma son yıllarda Amerika Birleşik Devletleri’nde yayınlanan terör haberlerinde belirgin bir tipikleşme görüldüğü tespitinde bulunmaktadır. Amerikan medyası terör haberlerini düzenli bir şekilde ‘küresel terörle mücadele’ söylemi içinde tematik bir çerçevede sunmakta, olay ve habere odaklanmak yerine, yerleşmiş habercilik geleklerrinin dışına çıkarak saldırganların geçmişleri hakkında fazlasıyla detaylı, uzun ve gereksiz hikayeler anlatmakta, Amerikan vatandaşı olsalar bile saldırganları ‘yabancılar’ olarak sunup ötekileştirmekte, saldırıları sembolik ve tüm ulusu hedef alan saldırıların gibi sunmakta, sık sık haberlerin içerisine mağdur ve

kahraman hikayeleri katarak topluca zarar görmüş ve yas tutan bir millet imgesi kurgulamakta, ve haberin büyük bir kısmını bu detaylara ayırırken gerçek haberciliğin temeli olan kim, ne, nerde, ne zaman, ve nasıl sorularına kısaca değinip geçmektedir. Kalıplaşmakta olan bu haber yazım ve anlatımı, terörün ideolojik anlamda İslam ve Müslümanlarla ilgili bir olgu olarak tanımlanıp algılanmasına yol açmakta ve toplumdaki Müslüman karşıtlığını beslemektedir. Bu çalışma 2015 yılında California eyaletinin San Bernardino şehrinde gerçekleşen saldırının yazılı basın haberleri incelemekte ve tipikleşmeye yol açan haber anlatım öğeleri belirlemektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Müslüman temsilleri, terörizm söylemi, anlatılar, anlatı örüntüleri, tipikleşme, habercilik.

## Introduction

On December 2, 2015, in San Bernardino, Calif., a married couple, Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, walked into the Inland Regional Center where the annual training and Christmas party for the county's health department employees was taking place, and opened fire. Both were dressed in tactical gear, wore face masks, and carried semi-automatic weapons. They killed fourteen people and seriously injured twenty-two others. The couple fled the scene in a rented sport utility vehicle but was pursued and killed four hours later in a shootout with police.

The next day the FBI opened a counter-terrorism investigation. President Obama's address from the Oval Office on December 6, 2015, officially designated the attack as terrorism. The FBI searched the perpetrators' home and discovered a sizable amount of ammunition and bomb-making materials, suggesting that the couple might have intended a larger attack or planned a series of other attacks. The investigation revealed no ties or contact between the couple and any known terrorist organization, except a Facebook post in which Tashfeen Malik declared her allegiance to ISIS, and it consequently concluded that the attack might have been inspired by ISIS propaganda but not planned or directed by the organization.

With the San Bernardino shooting the number of people who had died in Muslim-linked violent acts in the U.S. since the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, increased from 56 to 70 people. Including the most recent mass shooting in a night club in Orlando, Florida, on June 12, 2016, in which 49 people were killed, this number today stands at 119 (Government Accountability Office, 2017). During the same period, more than 240,000 Americans were murdered in the U.S. (Kurzman, 2017). Muslim-related violence since 1980 collectively makes up six percent of deadly attacks in the U.S. (FBI, 2005) and less than two percent in Europe

(Ahmed, 2015). Yet the perception of Muslims as the main threat to the United States, and the world at large, persists.

Several scholars have questioned this perception and attributed its causes to the media's biased coverage of Muslims (e.g., Chuang & Roemer, 2013, 2014; Kumar, 2010; Powell, 2011; Szpunar, 2013). This paper advances a different argument. It argues that the terror-related news coverage has increasingly become typified in recent years, and the typifying of the news has contributed significantly both to the development of a specific way of understanding terror and the bias against Muslims. To reveal the pattern and the story elements creating it, the study examines the newspaper coverage of the San Bernardino shooting.

### **Terror, Media, and Muslims**

Terror and the relationships between the United States and Muslims have become important concerns for scholars since the World Trade Center attacks on September 11, 2001, and led to the emergence of a considerable amount of research in several disciplines. Inspired by postcolonial and critical/cultural traditions, many of these studies in the communication discipline have had an identity and representation foci. Studying the Orientalist discourse decades ago, Edward Said (1978) argued that the tradition of representing Muslims as the West's inferior 'other' was rooted in nineteenth-century European colonization. Conflating the historical, geographical and cultural boundaries of the Orient, Said (1978) argued, Orientalist discourse reduced these civilizations into fictional essences, represented their people as primitive, barbaric, irrational, violent, despotic, fanatic others, and justified the Western colonization and superiority over them. Later in *Covering Islam*, Said (1981) wrote that the Orientalist stereotypes served an important political function of justifying contemporary Western imperialism.

Following the same line of research, several scholars have examined the evolving images of Muslims and Islam in the media after 9/11, explored various cases of violent attacks involving Muslims perpetrators and their coverage, critiqued the emerging discourse of terrorism and discussed their potential political, social, and cultural implications. It has been argued that the media differentiate between the violence committed by Muslims and non-Muslims and represent them differently: If perpetrators are non-Muslim U.S. citizens, the media tend to use episodic frames, describe their acts as 'crimes,' and individualize and humanize the attackers by depicting them as mentally ill. If perpetrators are Muslims, regardless of their citizenship, the media

describe their acts as ‘terror,’ use thematic frames, depicting them as a part of Islamic extremism whether the perpetrators are associated with extremist organizations or not (Morin, 2016; Powell, 2011).

The media’s internalization of the ‘global war on terror’ discourse after 9/11 has been regarded as the source of this discriminating coverage. It has been argued that the U.S. media have uncritically embraced the government’s ‘global war on terror’ after 9/11 (Freedman & Thussu, 2012), and frequently framed Muslim-related news within this discourse (Lewis & Rees, 2009). The ‘global war on terror’ discourse presented a binary image of the world inherent in Orientalist conceptualizations, and portrayed the “‘West’ as the civilization that spreads democracy” and Islam as breeding “terrorism,” (Kumar, 2010, p. 254). The media’s use of these binary configurations as “explanatory frames” (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2007, p. 5) invoked “the anti-Islamic stereotypes which were cultivated for decades” and led to Orientalist representations of Muslims (Schiffer, 2011, p. 211). Islam has been depicted as a “uniquely sexist” and “inherently violent” religion, and Muslims as “incapable of rationality and science” (Kumar, 2010, p. 254). The repetitive portrayal of Muslims as “irrational, primitive, belligerent and dangerous” fanatics created a distinct and a “clearly observable pattern” of media reporting (Shadid & van Koningsveld, 2002, p. 74).

The representation of the perpetrators is undoubtedly an important part of the storytelling pattern in terror news. Mainly concerned with the villain’s representation, however, one question this research has often overlooked has been the other story elements creating the pattern, such as the act, the setting, the plotline, the portrayal of the other characters, and their functions within these stories. This study expands the focus. It asks how the other narrative elements, as well as the portrayal of villains, contribute to the typifying of terror news.

### **Typifying**

Several studies on crisis and disaster reporting have found that news stories covering such events tend to follow similar thematic structures and patterns. Usually defined as ‘typifying,’ the use of familiar story templates in covering semantically similar events involves assembling news items into a predictable narrative with a predictable scheme of actors, settings, and plots (Berkowitz, 1992). Journalists resort to typifying to facilitate news coverage especially when unexpected crises demanding instant coverage put them under the extreme pressures of limited

time and source availability (Berkowitz, 1992). Such crises are termed as ‘what-a-story’ in the journalism literature due to their high shock value, demand for instant coverage, and immediate potential to create wide-scale human interest. The news on plane and train crashes, fires, high-profile murders or shootings, and scandals have been studied as examples of ‘what-a-story.’

Terrorist attacks pose special challenges to the category of news known as ‘what-a-story.’ Though they perfectly fit the definition, they differ from plane or train crashes, fires, or scandals in three aspects: 1) Terror attacks are recurring incidents. 2) They create coverage that continues long after the initial event is over. 3) Unique incidents such as crashes tend to be presented in episodic frames in the news, whereas recurring incidents, such as terror attacks, tend to use thematic frames.

Framing refers to the way that information is selected, organized, and presented in the media. Framing is “how news stories are made” and “how pieces of information are selected and organized to produce stories that make sense to their writers and audiences” (Ryan, 1991, p. 53). While episodic news frames focus exclusively on the immediate event and present it as a unique incident, thematic frames link several newer or older stories together under one broad theme and present them as parts of a pattern (Iyengar & Simon, 1993).

Resorting to typifying while covering singular, unique, and episodically framed events such as crashes may not be socially or politically consequential. When thematically framed stories about recurring events are typified, however, the practice produces serious unforeseen outcomes. Thematic frames link an individual incident to several other similar events in the past, and present it as part of a larger story. As such, when presented in a thematic frame, a typified ‘what-a-story’ becomes what might only be called a ‘not-again’ story. This way of covering an incident positions it as part of a larger unfolding event and narrative. When presented in a thematic frame, a typified ‘what-a-story’ can no longer be understood as a singular event. It takes on an appearance of being a typical one in a long chain of similar events, with similar actors, plots and settings, reaching from the past to the present. Such presentations contribute significantly to the creation and maintenance of larger public and political discourses, shape public perceptions, and grant those perceptions durability.

Terror reporting has been caught in a cycle of producing and reproducing typified stories in recent years. No matter how unique the act or how unusual the circumstances, every terror story reads and sounds like the one before. The pattern starts with the labeling of only certain

incidents as terrorism and extends to the rhetorical configuration of the story, including the framing, the length and the focus of the story line, types of details included in it, the argument made, and the evidence provided. As will be demonstrated in the findings section in detail, terror stories use thematic frames contextualizing the act within the larger discourse of the ‘global war on terror,’ portray the perpetrators as ‘others’ based on their religion and immigrant status, use lengthy storylines inundated with irrelevant details about the attackers’ pasts, construct the incident as a symbolic act of war targeting the entire nation, depict a collectively suffering and mourning nation through victim and hero stories, and devote a majority of the coverage to these details while only briefly attending to the actual journalistic questions of when, where, how and what actually took place. The San Bernardino coverage is an illustrative example of this pattern in storytelling.

### **Method**

To demonstrate the pattern and the typifying story elements creating it, the study examined the first thirty days of news reporting of the shooting, during which the incident was most intensely covered, and the five newspapers that published the highest number of stories during this period: *The LA Times* (79), *The Wall Street Journal* (72), *The New York Times* (38), *San Bernardino Sun* (38), and *New York Post* (36). The news stories were collected through a keyword search in the LexisNexis and *Wall Street Journal* databases, using as keywords Farook, Malik, San Bernardino shooting, shooting, terror, terrorism. After the elimination of letters to the editors, duplicates, reprints, and stories with high similarity, the search resulted in a total of 263 news stories.

The study combined narrative analysis with rhetorical analysis to examine the stories. Narrative analysis allows in-depth examination of the structural elements of stories such as the act, actors, setting, plot and general framing of the narrative. Although originally developed within literary studies to analyze individual stories, the method was used to make more global claims about the general narrative structure of multiple stories within a given genre even in the earlier studies of Vladimir Propp (1968). Later adopted by several branches of social sciences and communication, narrative analysis has been widely used to study broad range of stories from personal stories of individuals to grand narratives and media texts (Hyvarinen, 2007). When used in the analysis of media texts, the method is usually complemented by components of discourse

or rhetorical analysis, depending on the aim and the scope of the study. This method of studying allows researchers to critically examine not only the structural elements of stories and the narratives embedded in them, but also the language used in constituting both. In such studies narrative is understood rhetorically as “somebody telling someone else that something happened” (Smith, 1981, p. 228). News stories fit nicely to this rhetorical conceptualization of narrative. This conceptualization also brings the structural components of narrative analysis in alignment with the conventional narrative structure of news stories that organizes the information around who, what, when, where, how, and why questions. What corresponds to the act, who to the actor(s), where, when, why and how to the setting and the plot. Using them as the critical vantage points allows the study to identify and examine the similarities in structure, content, style, interpretation, and framing among the San Bernardino stories and reveals the common pattern of covering the incident among five newspapers.

## Results

### Typifying Elements in the San Bernardino Case

#### **The act: Identifying and framing of the act as typifying elements**

*Identifying the act as terror.* In the wide spectrum of political violence that ranges from assassinations to vandalism, terrorism distinguishes itself by three characteristics: First, terrorism is a violent *communicative* act. Unlike other forms of violence, terrorism’s goal is not hurting or punishing its immediate victims, but sending an intimidating message to a target population, state, or organization. The immediate victims of terrorism serve only as “message generators,” and their suffering functions “to manipulate” the main target audience, turning them “into a target of terror, a target of demands, or a target of attention depending on whether intimidation, coercion, or propaganda is primarily sought” (Schmid & Jongman, 1988, p.28).

Second, the communicative nature of the act makes terrorism dependent on the media. Terror spreads “beyond the immediate vicinity” of the attacks through the “media spectacle” (Featherstone, Holohan & Poole, 2010, p.174). Which acts journalists consider terrorism and how they cover them become especially crucial at this point, because it is through the media coverage that terror enters into our living rooms, shatters our everyday sense of safety, and creates a “climate of fear” (Kumar, 2014).

Third, terrorism is defined by the ‘act’ itself, not by the ‘ideology.’ Terrorism is “a method, a modus operandi, not an ideology or worldview” (Armborst, 2010, p.422). Whether the act is committed by an individual or an organization that subscribes to one or another ideology is irrelevant to defining an act as terrorism. Its communicative nature, its reliance on the media in terrorizing masses, its indifference to its immediate targets and the immediate consequences of the act are what distinguish terrorism from other forms of political violence—not its ideology.

Though its definitions suggest otherwise, in today’s context terror has become exclusively associated with ideology, jihadism to be exact, and consequently with Islam. The media’s internalization of the government’s ‘global war on terror’ discourse has contributed propagating the ideological conceptualization of terror. The ‘global war on terror’ discourse the media have adopted came with a set of predetermined story elements, such as established foes and friends, arguments, tensions, contexts and explanations. It presented a polarized view of the world, setting the presumably shared cultural values of a civilized ‘West’ in opposition to that of a supposedly monolithic ‘Islamic world,’ and designating the first as the beacon of freedom and democracy and the second as the breeding ground for oppression, violence and terrorism (Kumar, 2010).

Within this frame of understanding the world and the conflict, the war on terror discourse identified the enemy as ‘Muslim extremists.’ It designated ideology and creed as the markers of terrorism. These two identifiers rendered irrelevant the other primary identity markers of the attackers, such as their nationality, race, ethnicity, age or gender. The fact that 15 out of 19 hijackers of the 9/11 attacks were Saudi nationals played a role neither in shaping the official discourse following the attacks nor in the U.S. response to them. Eradication of the key identity markers helped the war on terror discourse depict an international enemy that was not united by geography, citizenship, ethnicity, race, language, or politics, which provided the support for the government’s ‘global terror’ arguments and justified U.S. intervention in multiple countries.

When adopted in news reporting, however, such ideological designations of terror has created stories that turn on the religious identity of the attackers. The media have been quick to label Muslim-linked violent acts as terrorism, while showing hesitance to define similar acts as such when perpetrators are not Muslims. Most of the time the discovery of the attacker’s name or religion has been enough to lead reporters and readers to make instant connections between the individual’s identity and ideology, hence terror (Semati & Szpunar, 2018; Szpunar, 2013). Consequently, exploring the attackers’ religious affiliations and identities and discussing their



possible radicalization at length have become typical story elements in terror news. Stories have often interrogated the real or perceived connections of the perpetrators to known jihadist organizations and offered 'self-radicalization' as an explanation in the absence of such connections.

In the San Bernardino case, the newspapers comfortably labelled the attack as terrorism. The cache of weapons discovered at the couple's Redlands townhome left little room for doubt that the assailants had been planning the attack for some time. Interestingly, however, it was not the hard evidence of weapons but the discussion of Islamic radicalization that anchored the terrorism argument in the stories. "As San Bernardino mourned its victims," reported *The LA Times*, "contacts with suspected extremists" pointed "to terrorism as a possible motive" (Serrano et al., 2015, p.B1). When investigators discovered no tangible evidence of contact, other than Tashfeen Malik's Facebook post declaring her allegiance to ISIS, the argument in the stories turned into that of self-radicalization. While some suggested that Said and Tashfeen were separately self-radicalized, others argued that Tashfeen radicalized her husband. The FBI director James Comey was quoted widely saying that the evidence suggested that the couple was "talking about jihad and martyrdom, before they became engaged" (Serrano & Bennett, 2015, p.A1). Not the method or the nature of the attack but the religion and presumed ideology of the attackers classified the act as terrorism in the stories.

The ideological conceptualization of terror as an Islam-related phenomenon made it possible to frame the incident thematically and contextualize it within the other terrorist attacks that occurred both in the U.S. and abroad. "Tashfeen Malik and her husband, Syed Rizwan Farook, killed 14 people and wounded 21 others in San Bernardino, Calif., in the deadliest terror-related attack on U.S. soil since Sept. 11, 2001," reported *The Wall Street Journal* (Miriam, 2015, p.A6). "The young couple who slaughtered 14 people in San Bernardino fit a profile now distressingly familiar from other recent acts of terrorism in the United States," wrote *The LA Times*. The story outlined this 'familiar' profile of a terrorist in a few short phrases: The attackers were "devout Muslims," displayed no "warning signs," were not a part of any organized "terrorist cell," but were "self-radicalized," (Cloud & Bennett, 2015, p.B1). Likening the shooting to the November 13, 2015, attack in Paris, "a little bit of Paris comes to San Bernardino" read another story (Lopez, 2015, p.B7).

To underline the effects of ideological conceptualization of terror as a strictly Islam-related phenomenon on framing of the news, it is worth noting that the stories associated the San Bernardino shooting with 9/11 but not with other terrorist attacks in U.S. history, such as the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing. Though 9/11 is a significant turning point, terrorism has a longer history in the U.S. The characterization of the perpetrators as devout and self-radicalized Muslims additionally illustrates the emphasis placed on ideology as the marker of terrorism. This invented demarcation between the violence committed by Muslim and non-Muslim perpetrators leads to intentional or unintentional practices of selective labeling and contextualizing violent acts in reporting. While selective labeling practices perpetuate the bias against Muslims, thematic frames create a continuous line of narrative, generating the impression that such acts happen more often than they really do.

Though the stories framed the attack thematically and associated it with previous ones, they also attributed to it an exceptional status. The newspapers distinguished the San Bernardino shooting from others based on three factors: its location (American soil), its attackers (two individuals, one of whom was female) and its lethal power. In the words of the reporters, the incident was the nation's "worst" and the "deadliest act of terrorism on American soil since Sept. 11" (Goffard, 2015, p.B1). The "violence on this scale was unheard of" (Mozingo & Jamison, 2015, p.B2). The incident also stood apart from others because "there were at least two assailants and one was female" (Esquivel et al., 2015, p.B1). Such contextualization functioned to warn readers that terror had come to the homeland, the attacks were becoming more and more destructive, and the base of jihadism was growing—now including female terrorists as well.

### **The actors: Portrayal of the perpetrators, victims and heroes as typifying elements**

*Perpetrators as others.* Othering the perpetrators was a common rhetorical strategy used among the stories covering the San Bernardino shooting. The stories portrayed Syed Farook as a permanent other based on his religion and immigrant family background, underplaying his nationality as a U.S. born citizen. They depicted his wife, Tashfeen Malik, simply as a foreigner with malicious intent—a Muslim Pakistani citizen with possible ties to extremist groups who had secret motives in marrying Syed.

*The LA Times* introduced Syed to its readers as a "U.S. citizen of Pakistani descent" who was born to an immigrant family (Karlman et al., 2015, p.B1). The stories presented his

parents' immigrant background, his religion, and his devotion to his faith adjacent to his name as if they made him especially alien in the U.S. Adjectives such as devout, observant, religious, and Sunni frequently followed Syed's name in the stories. *The Wall Street Journal* presented him as "a religious Muslim and U.S. citizen" (Shishkin & Kamp, 2015, p.A1), *The LA Times* described him as a "devout Muslim" (Dolan et al., 2015, p.B1), and *The New York Times* as an "observant Sunni" (Medina et al., 2015, p.A1). The newspapers presented Syed's regular attendance at mosque and "memorization of the Qur'an," which was qualified as "a rare accomplishment for even devout Muslims," as evidences of his deep commitment to his religion, over any commitment he may have had to the country whose citizenship he carried (Karlman et al., 2015, p.B1).

Tashfeen Malik, the first female Muslim shooter in the U.S., attracted the special interest of the newspapers and the investigators. Newspapers described her as a "Pakistani national" who held a conditional green card (Karlman et al., 2015, p.B1). She was, as Homeland Security Chairman Michael McCaul called her, the "wild card" in the case (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). Her niqab, a covering which revealed only her eyes, drew suspicion. According to the stories, Malik wore her niqab even during family gatherings and everybody "knew her only as Syed's wife" (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). More than just religious piety, Malik's covering was presented as a deliberate act to conceal her identity. After Malik died in the shootout with police, a reporter at the scene announced "incredulously that she was wearing a red bra" (Banks, 2015, p.B2). It is "sad" and "subversively ironic," Banks (2015) wrote the next day, "that a woman so modest she only ventured out totally covered, with only her eyes showing, would be immortalized in lingerie, her combat garb askew" (B2). Malik's niqab functioned to invoke fearful suspicions from the "covered other" in the stories. Within this context, 'devout' and 'terrorist' came to mean the same things. The stories suggested that the foreign wife radicalized her immigrant husband. When a co-worker was asked if he believed "Syed had been radicalized," he replied, "Yes, by the wife. I think he married a terrorist" (Schram et al., 2015, p.4). When Homeland Security Chairman Michael McCaul was asked the same question, he replied, "We think that she had a lot to do with the radicalization process and perhaps with Mr. Syed's radicalization from within the United States" (Shultz, 2015, p.7).

It is not the use of McCaul's first impressions or the comments of grief-stricken co-workers who were still in shock in the immediate aftermath of the shooting, but the cumulative

effects of presenting such speculations back to back in the stories that set the frame of the argument: Malik, the red-bra wearing jihadist other, was the mastermind behind the attack. She came to the U.S. on a mission, hid behind her niqab and pretend marriage, and planned murderous acts. Such a construction made it possible to attribute the violence to an external enemy, a foreign other. It worked to distance the self—the larger American society—from violence. The stories' portrayal of Syed as a gullible husband whose religious devotion could easily be manipulated by external others, on the other hand, implicitly painted all American Muslims as potential threats.

*Victims and heroes and the implicit construction of nation.* The victim and hero stories generally function to create emotional appeals in disaster and crisis news, inviting readers to collective action or participation in the recovery efforts. In the San Bernardino case, these stories performed additional functions. They constructed an implicit 'nation' image, portrayed it as under an attack, and attributed to the attack a national status. They helped advance an implicit argument that the attack targeted the entire country and its founding values, and its citizens suffered and mourned the loss collectively.

Although terrorists do not always pick their immediate targets selectively or care about whom they harm, the victim and hero stories told in the newspapers were handpicked in the San Bernardino case. The reporters chose the most touching personal stories for the greatest impact. These stories recalled the most precious images of the U.S. as a country of immigrants and the Promised Land, evoking its most cherished values. Accordingly, the victims were diverse, from every creed, race, ethnicity and national origin: A Christian who dabbled in Hinduism, a Jew who attended the baby shower Syed's co-workers threw for his baby, a Muslim Iranian woman who came to the U.S. to escape extremism, a 60-year-old Eritrean émigré . . . They were family-oriented, church-going, god-fearing, hard-working, decent men and women of middle class who loved their adopted country. None entertained violent thoughts. One of them, a registered nurse at the Arrowhead Regional Medical Center, attended the wounded in the shooting as she also mourned the loss of her own husband (Zarembo et al., 2015, p.B4). They all had plans, such as getting married or raising grandchildren, ordinary plans that could no longer come true. For the "victims of the San Bernardino shootings, America seemed like a promise of safety. But on Wednesday, that hope disappeared when attackers carrying long guns rushed into a holiday party at the Inland Regional Center," wrote *The LA Times*. "Nowhere is safe," not even the U.S., the

country in which they took refuge, concluded the Eritrean émigré (Zarembo et al., 2015, p.B4).

Along with the victims, there were heroes, such as the San Bernardino Police Lieutenant Mike Madden, who was among the first responders. Lt. Madden happened to be in the neighborhood when the shooting began. Shortly after he reported the shooting and asked for reinforcements, he entered the building. "The situation was surreal," Madden, a 24-year old veteran, was reported saying. "It's something that we prepare for . . . and they talk about sensory overload . . . It was all of that and more. It was unspeakable carnage we were seeing" (Elinson & Frosch, 2015, p.A6).

The responders symbolized American heroes protecting freedom, country, all that it stood for, and all those who took refuge in it. The victims, whose lives had changed forever, and whose sense of safety and security were shattered, symbolized the ordinary folks, any American citizen. Neither the targets nor the place of the shooting had a national symbolic value, but the representation of the victims as 'ordinary American folks' granted them a symbolic significance and transformed the incident from one of local violence to a national attack, targeting the entire nation and the fundamental principles upon which the Land of Promise was built. Juxtaposed against the 'traitors within' image of the Muslim shooters, the portrayal of victims and heroes as 'ordinary folks' created a stark contrast and conveyed a sense of betrayal.

### **Plot: Structure of the story line as a typifying element**

In general, the need to answer the basic journalistic questions of what, where, when, and how something happened and who did it, inclines reporters to focus their attention in their reporting on the immediate incident. This pattern of covering an incident tends to be most evident especially in early reporting. In later coverage, some reports may provide a background story while attempting to offer an answer to the 'why' question, but it is rare even in those reports that the background story replaces or displaces the incident itself. As was evident even in the early coverage of the incident, however, the San Bernardino stories inverted this common news reporting structure. They provided limited or no details about the incident itself, but built lengthy background stories about the attackers' past lives.

The story line presented in the San Bernardino case was impressively long, covering two generations of the Farook family. This story began with the immigration of Syed Rizwan Farook's family to the U.S. and ended with the day of the shooting. The background story made

up the majority of the story line, while the events surrounding the shooting itself were but a small part of it. Rich in detail and poor in explanatory power, the background story swelled with irrelevant information about the perpetrators' pasts, including specifics, even trivial details, about Syed's childhood, his family, school and social life, friends, family pets, worship habits, mosque attendance, his travels abroad, and the internet courting of and marriage to Tashfeen. The story line constructed for Tashfeen Malik similarly included details about her family and school life in Afghanistan, her meeting and marrying Syed, visa application and immigration to the U.S., her daily life in the U.S., her limited contacts with others, and her covering. These details fortified the othering of the perpetrators as aliens, as well as presented the shooting as an inevitable climax of the couple's entire life story.

Stories depicted a family coming "from modest means" for Syed Farook (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). The family first lived in Illinois, where Syed was born, and later moved to Southern California, settling "in an ethnically diverse working-class neighborhood of Riverside" (Audi et al., 2015, p.A1). Syed's mother had an associate degree and worked as "a clerk" at a local medical center, and his father was a "truck driver" (Karlman et al., 2015, p.B1). Syed had an older brother and two sisters. All had college degrees. His brother was a decorated Navy veteran who was awarded "two medals for service in the 'Global War on Terrorism'" (Karlman et al., 2015, p.B1). Syed graduated from "California State University in San Bernardino in environmental health in 2010," and had a well-paying, steady job for five years at the county's health department as a health specialist (Goffard, 2015, p.1A).

This could have been seen as an impressive American Dream story of an immigrant family of six. With the multitude of other details presented in the news, however, it became a story of maladjusted aliens. By contrasting the opportunities the U.S. granted to the family with their strange foreign traditions, practices and the dysfunctional family life, the stories collectively painted a picture of an alien family remaining alien within a welcoming host culture. One might wonder why the news stories reporting on the bloodiest mass shooting up to its date would include trivial details about the pets and farm animals the perpetrator's family had once kept, but even such details were not far from the reach of the reporters attempting to display how unfit the Farooks were for U.S. society.

According to the stories, Syed's family kept "chickens, roosters and goats on their property," which sometimes annoyed the neighbors (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). Most mornings

the neighbors woke up to sound of Farook's roosters crowing. "Around Christmas one year," Syed's father asked a neighbor "where he could buy a goat" and "he especially wanted a pregnant animal, saying that goat fetus was a delicacy." The neighbor helped him buy two goats. The family ate one, and "kept the other alive in the backyard, along with some chickens, where neighbors heard it bleating" (Nagourney et al., 2015, p.A1).

This was not a story of poor immigrants establishing a new and better life in a new country and blending in, but a story of foreigners remaining foreign. The implicit argument these details advanced was that the Farook family lived as if they were still in Pakistan, and in complete disregard to their new surroundings. They were primitive, barbaric, and at times, outright disgusting as their practice of killing pregnant goats in their backyard and eating their fetuses as delicacies implied. They were unfit from the beginning.

The details of a chaotic and violent home life also flooded the stories, describing the family as dysfunctional. According to the newspapers, family violence invaded the Farooks' lives behind the tightly closed doors, but this became public only when Syed's mother, Rafia, filed for divorce in 2006. In the divorce files Rafia defined her husband as a "negligent alcoholic" who was physically and verbally abusive, and detailed the "violent marital history in which her children often had to intervene" (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). Often unemployed, the father used to ask for money "to buy cigarettes" from neighbors (Nagourney et.al., 2015, p.A1). He forced his family to move out of their home in 2006, but continued to harass them. "My husband is mentally ill and is on medication but is also an alcoholic and drinks with the medicine," Rafia Farook was reported stating in the court papers (Nagourney et.al., 2015, p.A1).

Similarly, the stories presented Tashfeen and Syed's online dating, marriage, and married life in detail. Despite coming from a dysfunctional family, one story argued, Syed was "intent on settling down," but being in a "foreign" country limited his prospects (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). He set up an online profile on a "Muslim" dating website to search for a wife and met Tashfeen Malik (Parvini et al., 2015, p.A1). They met in person and got engaged when Syed travelled to join Tashfeen's family during their pilgrimage trip to Saudi Arabia in July 2014. The couple returned to the U.S. together and married within a few weeks. They welcomed their baby in May 2015.

The worst of the details about their married life in the U.S. came out when the landlord opened the couple's house to reporters only three days after the shooting. The reporters

rummaged through the couples' belongings room by room and displayed them live on national television. The next day, reporters and columnists were discussing how all those baby bottles, diapers, toys, laundry baskets full of freshly washed cloths, half-eaten food on the kitchen table, a grocery shopping list, and a few dirty dishes in the sink suggested nothing but an ordinarily hectic life of a young couple with a six-month old baby. As they discussed how such a seemingly normal couple leading such a seemingly normal life can commit such atrocities, they implanted in the hearts of their readers a fear of all ordinary and seemingly well-integrated Muslim-American families.

The space devoted to what actually took place during the shooting was relatively small in the stories. They summarized the shooting briefly, sometimes in a single sentence as *The LA Times* and *NY Post* did: "Masked assailants armed with assault rifles opened fire on a holiday banquet for county employees in San Bernardino on Wednesday, killing 14 people" (Esquivel et al., 2015, p.B1). Even the dramatic car chase, broadcast live on national television, found only a brief mention in the coverage. At about "3:00 p.m.," *The LA Times* wrote, "law enforcement officers discovered the couple in a black SUV several miles away from the center and, after a chase, killed them in a gun battle" (Gerber, 2015, p.B1). The focus on the background story in news coverage shifted the attention from the act to the actor, thus from terror to ideology.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

While defining data, Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) differentiated uncontested factual information from commonly held beliefs and values. They argued that once a claim is established and becomes a commonly held opinion, it can function in public discourse as data without its validity or truthfulness questioned. Typified terror news functions much in the same way. Repeated over and over in every story and in every new event, typifying story elements establish themselves as structures and claims that can be taken for granted, and create a discursive environment in which they pass as data—accepted facts—without their validity questioned.

This study has identified several typifying story elements used across five major newspapers that covered the San Bernardino case and proposes them as a set of systematic questions, a method, that can lead and guide critical analysis of future terror news: Terror news designates terror ideologically; frames the incidents thematically within the global war on terror discourse; contextualizes violence as an attack targeting the entire nation; attributes an



exceptional status to it; others the perpetrators; constructs thick background stories for the attackers; routinely employs victim and hero stories that construct an implicit image of a victimized nation fighting evil; and encourages binary (us/them) notions of enmity.

Used across print media, and perhaps in other media as well, typifying story elements in terror news collectively tell a larger story. They create a continuous narrative, present individual acts as part of a pattern and of a concerted effort, generate an impression that such violence is more common and occurs more often in the U.S. than it actually does, promote a false conceptualization of terror as an exclusively Muslim-related phenomenon, and propagate bias against Muslims. Viewed in this way, each typifying story element provides a critical vantage point to examine the larger narrative the news stories collectively create. When used collectively in an analysis, on the other hand, these typifying elements allow a fuller and multi-layered critical examination of such large narratives and their taken-for granted claims.

### **Limitations**

Although the study builds on the findings of a considerable amount of research done on previous cases of terrorism coverage in the U.S., it uses a single case as a representative sample for analysis. The San Bernardino case differs slightly from other terrorist attacks committed by Muslims in the U.S. in that one of the two attackers was female. As the analysis reveals, the gender of the attacker and the marital status of the couple have found their reflections in the news coverage.

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