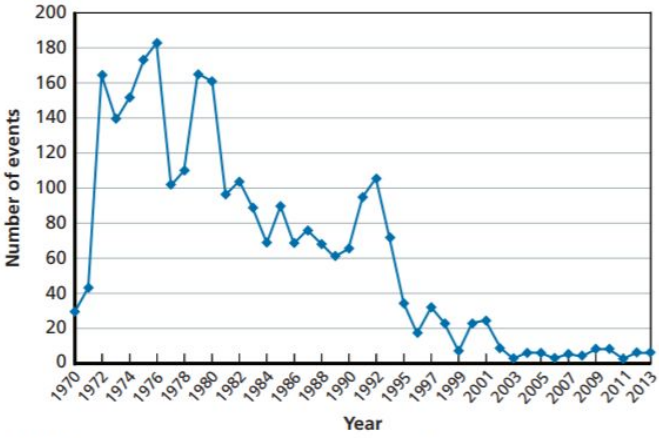
Sharing Terror

Less than twenty four hours after a man open fired on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, a single video of the terrorist attack had been shared over 1.5 million times on Facebook alone. The social media outlet attempted to remove every trace of the video, but about two hundred thousand copies remained unscathed, ready to be viewed by internet consumers in every corner of the world (Mahtani 1). In the the age of apps, live streams, and tweets, news travels faster and further than ever. In many situations, this is a positive technological advancement. However, if the goal of a terrorist attack is to affect and frighten as many civilians as possible, does this contagious diffusion enable terror to persist beyond the time and place of the attack? Social media has acted as a stimulant for terrorism for decades, igniting unwarranted fear, creating false images, and serving as a gathering place for fanatics to obsess and take part in violence.

Globally, terrorism rates have been declining since 2014. Deaths from attacks have been reduced from about 45,000 to 26,400 world wide (Taylor 1). Especially within the United States and Western Europe, the number of successful attacks has decreased significantly over the last 5 decades. As seen in Figure 1, a graph comprised of data from the RAND Corporation, terror events peaked in the 1970's with over 180 attacks resulting in at least one death each. From 2003 forward, incidences have been far fewer- less than 20 per year (RAND 1). Seeing as the threat of violence has notably

Figure 1. Number of Successful Terrorism Attacks in Western Europe and the United States



NOTE: This figure reflects data from the Global Terrorism Database for successful attacks in the United States and Western Europe that killed at least one person; were judged to, without doubt, meet all three criteria for considering an attack to be terrorism; and had a known target, weapon, and attack type. There are no data for 1993.

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decreased, it would be reasonable to assume that the online reporting of attacks would decline proportionally.

However, this is not the case. According to Dr. Michael Segalla of HEC Paris, “More than 14,000 articles related to deadly acts of terrorism were published in 2013, a 55% increase over the 9,245 published in 2001. In 2016, 23,548 were published, a 155% rise over 2001. It is evident that there has been a very large increase in articles published in recent years about specific deadly attacks.” (Segalla 2).

This anomaly is part of a much larger internet news trend that Professor of Psychology Graham C.L. Davey Ph.D. refers to as “negative sensationalism”. Negative sensationalism is the act of media outlets over-reporting on fear-inspiring events and emphasizing potential risk even if the that risk’s probability is low. Davey claims that “This is basically ‘scaremongering’ at every available opportunity in order to sensationalize and emotionalize the impact of a news story.” This practice has been on the rise for the last three decades (Davey 1).

The effect that the negative sensationalism of terrorism has had on the public’s conceptualization of potential threats is difficult to monitor, but many psychologists believe that it has the potential to increase an individual’s worries of an attack. To prove this idea, Davey conducted a study on people who had consumed different types of media, including negative, fear-mongering articles. He reported that, “We found that those people who had watched the negative news bulletin spent more time thinking and talking about their worry and were more likely to catastrophise their worry than people in the other two groups. Catastrophizing is when you think about a worry so persistently that you begin to make it seem much worse than it was at the outset and much worse than it is in reality.” The increased publishing, sharing, and

consumption of terrorist related media has cultured a false subconscious idea that terrorism is worsening. The public is worried.

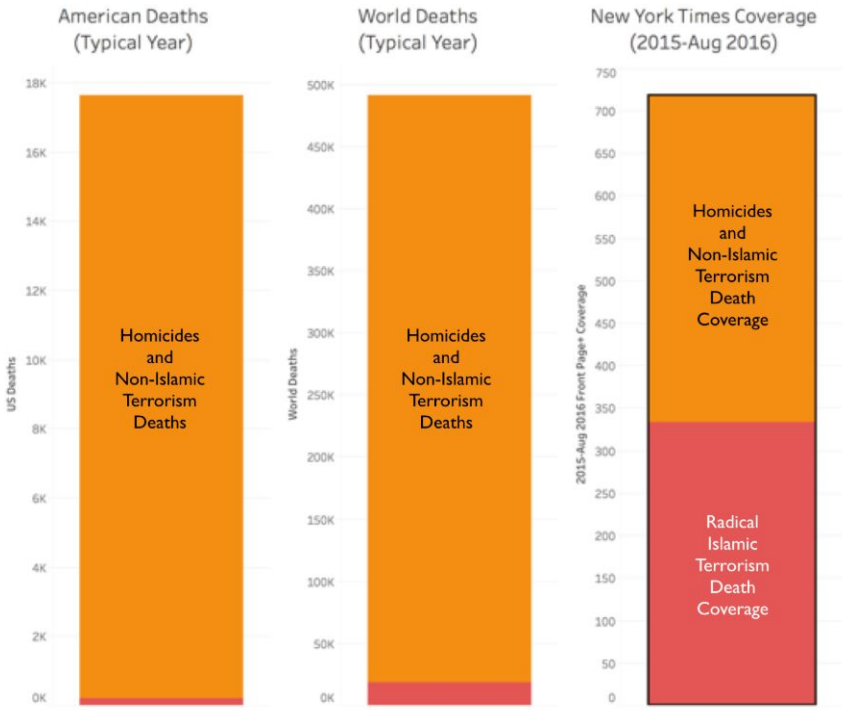
While the goals of different terrorist groups vary, the one purpose that they all have in common is exactly what the word “terrorism” would suggest; they aim aim to cultivate terror and fear among the masses. The attacks are an attempt to make both civilians and world leaders feel threatened. When the media perpetuates the idea that terrorism is on the rise, it inadvertently provides aid in achieving those goals.

On December 2, 2015, a terrorist attack killed fourteen people in San Bernardino, California. New York Times asked United States citizens to respond online with their fears following the event. Wendy Malloy, a mother living in Florida was quoted saying, “When my son gets out of the car in the morning and walks into his high school… When I drop him at his part-time job at a supermarket. When we go to the movies, concerts and festivals. When I walk into my office. It is a constant, grinding anxiety. And it gets louder every single day.” (Kleinfeld 1). People like Wendy claim to be more frightened than ever, despite the statistical evidence indicating that those fears are unwarranted.

While the majority of events of terrorism are over-reported, certain cases surpass the others by a considerable margin. According to research done at Georgia State University and University of Alabama, on average, an attack carried out by a Muslim receives 357% more media coverage than an attack from a non-Muslim perpetrator (Kearn 1). Meanwhile, the chance of being killed by an Islamic terrorist, both in the United States and globally, is extremely low in comparison to non-Islamic attackers.

The data in Figure 2, gathered from the Global Terrorism Database and the World Bank, shows the disproportionate reporting done specifically by New York Times, a well trusted media source (GTB 1). This perpetuates a negative stereotype that Middle Easterners are inherently prone to terrorism. Most prominently in post-9/11 America, irrational fear towards Muslims sprung from media-cultivated racism. As people read articles about Osama bin Laden, they decided to fear hijabs and turbans, despite the fact that one was a militant terrorist and the others were cloth on a person's head. But not only did the American public become worrisome and prejudiced, it became violent and aggressive. According to the Huffington Post, "Suddenly, Muslim Americans went from being one of the least targeted religious groups in the U.S. to seeing hate crimes against those associated with Islam jump 1,600 percent, an FBI report in 2002 found. Today, Islamophobic hate crimes remain five times more common than they were before 9/11." The over-accentuated coverage of the crimes of a miniscule sector of Muslims enabled violence to represent a much larger, more diverse and wholesome religion and culture, and the Islamic community could not escape that stereotype unscathed.

Figure 2. Overreporting of Islamic Terrorism



Source: Terrorism data from National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START). (2016). Global Terrorism Database [Data file]. Retrieved from https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd. Custom NY Times analysis for media coverage data, with articles representing the first few pages of The New York Times shown. Homicide data from the CDC and the World Bank. Note: We'll use a 15-year average for US terrorism deaths, which includes 9/11 in the US. As a result, these numbers will be higher than any single year in the last 14 years – but also less than 9/11. We'll also use a shorter multi-year average for world terrorism. Front page+ is defined as the first few pages (~3) of The New York Times, consistent with how an average reader may experience it.

Social media provides a defense from confrontation, and people can say almost anything they wish to, no matter how racist, nationalist, or hateful it may be. Many individuals and groups take to Facebook or Twitter to comment hateful messages in lieu of a terrorist attacks. After fifty Muslims were killed in a terrorist attack in New Zealand, United Kingdom citizens took advantage of their internet freedom, posting comments such as "I hope Muslims die" and "my hero" in reference to the terrorist (Cook 1). Social media provides an outlet for the expression of white supremacy following terror events.

Some even go beyond racist comments, taking part in cult-like followings of terrorists. The internet has made this process much easier, allowing for the names and photos of terrorist to spread across social media platform, essentially popularizing these criminals.

Some of the most extreme examples of this practice are those of Hoda Muthana and Kimberly Gwen Polman. When Muthana, a University of Alabama student, was twenty-years-old, she decided that she wanted to join the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, better known as ISIS. She was joined by by Polman, a forty six-year-old Canadian woman, in her determination to join the terrorist group. They both flew to Turkey, were smuggled into Syria, and were married ISIS terrorists.

While the stories of Muthana and Polman are extremely difficult to relate to or understand, one would most likely assume they chose to marry into ISIS for deep-rooted, religious or cultural reasons. However, when asked what her motivations were, Muthana said she "was first drawn to ISIS in high school reading Twitter and other social media posts" (Callimatchi 1).

Since the social media sensationalism of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, as many as fifty nine Americans have abandoned their home country to be smuggled into Syria and join the terror group (Callimatchi 1).

However, the benefits of a tech-savvy, fast paced online world should not go unrecognized. In the Norwegian Official Report regarding the Utøya attack in 2011, "Cell phones, social media and fast news dissemination spread the knowledge of the attacks quickly from the places of perpetration to large parts of the population" (UTO 14). Logistically, the ease of notifying thirty individuals of an attack is much greater when sharing one Facebook versus contacting each person separately.

In the process of recovery for communities, families, and hospitalized victims, social media plays a key role. Outlets such as Kickstarter and GoFundMe have become one of the most efficient fundraising platforms. A donations website called LaunchGood set to raise money for Christchurch mosque attack victims. On their website they wrote, "In only 1 hour, this campaign hit its initial goal to raise $10,000 NZD for the victims' families. In only 7 hours, we had reached $100,000 NZD - 10 times the original goal… The campaign has reached $2.2 million NZD ($1.5M USD) in only 100 hours. There are nearly 40,000 donors from 125 countries. We have raised the goal again - for the 25th time" (LaunchGood 1). Through Facebook posts, retweeting, and direct messaging, funds for people in New Zealand poured in from every corner of the world faster than anyone could have imagined.

Being able to be heard after an attack is also a service that social media provides for victims and community members reeling in wake of an attack. After the massacre in Christchurch, Samir Madad, a popular Muslim Instagram influencer took to the internet to write

that “He thought killing 50 Muslims would stop Islam. The Quran was recited in Parliament. The Athaan was called across the world. The Khutbath was aired on television. The Hadith was read by the Prime Minister. The Hijab was worn by NZ women. Congratulation terrorist- you failed.” Platforms such as Instagram give many a place to be heard, and after an attack against one’s religion, knowing that the world can still hear one’s voice is essential. Social media followings can provide the feeling of validation for those hurt both physically and emotionally by attacks. Additionally, Madad’s audience was provided with words of positivity.

Following that same attack, Iman Meskini, a popular Muslim-Norwegian actress utilized her social media fame to hold a question and answer session on Instagram. The goal was to better educate the internet on Islam. In under an hour, nearly one hundred questions had been answered by Meskini, dissuading many previous stereotypes of her religion. Platforms capable of spreading information in such an efficient, but personal, manner are few and far.

While social media has its place in preventing and recovering from terrorist attacks, it has a long way to go in order to prevent sensationalism and promotion of terrorism. In a world that is quick to post, share, and like, it is becoming increasingly important that internet consumers avoid the inadvertent increases in the stereotypes and hate that spring from terrorism. Media outlets best serve the world when used to connect individuals in order to keep one another safe, informed, and supported.

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