Media Coverage of Right-Wing Violence:

A Comparative Study

by

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Abstract

This study seeks to understand how media coverage of right-wing extremism and right-wing terrorism compares to the more general coverage of terrorism that appears in major US newspapers. A qualitative content analysis was completed of 936 articles published by the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. The primary findings include that right-wing ideology is explicitly explained; the terrorism label is used mainly for bombings committed by right-wing perpetrators and not for other violent events, such as shootings; and counterterrorism is a major topic in terrorism reporting in general but it is nearly nonexistent in the coverage of right-wing violence. The results showcased that the news media is not consistent in its coverage of right-wing violence and terrorism in a way that dampens the significance of right-wing violence in America.

Keywords: right-wing violence; right-wing extremism; terrorism; media coverage; print news; newspapers; news frames

Acknowledgements

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Introduction

Acts of terrorism by right-wing groups and individuals have increased steadily over the last decade and so has coverage of those attacks by the news media (Auger, 2020). However, instead of covering right-wing terrorism in similar ways to other forms of terrorism, the news media consistently frames the coverage of right-wing violence in different ways from the way it presents acts of terrorism by non-right-wing groups (Barnett and Reynolds, 2009; Chermak and Gruenewald, 2006; Hanes and Mathin, 2014; Hoffman, Jengelley, Duncan, Buehler, and Rees, 2010; Ivanova, 2018; Jenkins, 1981; Khairil, Ali, Zakaria, Arifin and Razman, 2017; Kornerup, 2021; Marthoz, 2017; Ross, 2007; Rothenberger and Hase, 2023; Ryan, 2004; Schmid, 1989). For instance, articles about right-wing violent events tend to avoid using the word "terrorism" to characterize attacks and are more likely to focus on the perpetrators' backgrounds than their ideology (Zdjelar and Davies, 2021).

Differences like these between the reporting on right-wing violence and non-right-wing terrorism tend to result in less threatening portrayals of the former. When the media focuses on the perpetrators' background, their family history, relations, hobbies, etc., it humanizes them and dampens the severity of the violence they committed. It allows the reader to draw comparisons between the perpetrator and a regular citizen and increases perceived similarities (Knupfer, Kaskeleviciute, and Matthes, 2023).

Before we can conclude, however, that the news media treats right-wing violence differently from terrorism, it is important to consider the set of stories about right-wing violence that the media explicitly classifies as terrorism. While the news media tends to resist categorizing right-wing violence as terrorism, the media does not do this all the time. At least some attacks by right-wing perpetrators are seen as terrorism by the news media, but these cases are often ignored in scholarly research in this area.

 Accordingly, this project is designed to examine how those instances the news media recognizes as instances of right-wing terrorism are covered by the news media relative to its coverage of right-wing violence and its coverage of terrorism. Specifically,

I ask *How does media coverage of right-wing terrorism compare to that of right-wing violence and terrorism overall?*

I answered this question by conducting a content analysis of three samples consisting of 936 articles about right-wing violence, right-wing terrorism, and terrorism overall that appeared in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* between 1995 and 2021. I explored and compared news frames utilized across the three samples, focusing in particular on ideology, othering, counterterrorism efforts, terrorism label, and humanization.

The results of this study both differed and were consistent with the extant literature on media coverage of right-wing violence and terrorism. For instance, when the media labels right-wing violence as terrorism, it is usually in relation to bombings and not other types of violence, such as shootings. Print news media coverage of right-wing violence is not dominated by counterterrorism efforts while coverage of terrorism overall is. Additionally, right-wing perpetrators are not humanized as often as the literature may suggest.

The media is a powerful actor in society. It is because of the news media industry's ability to affect the way society perceives violence and terrorism, this study aimed to examine the way the media discusses right-wing violent events in comparison to terrorism. This research project includes a literature review and research design section. Then I discuss the findings and conclude with potential avenues for future research.

Literature Review

The following section outlines the power of the media, media framing of right-wing violence and the gap in the literature I address with my research.

Terrorism in the News Media

There is no agreed upon definition of terrorism or a terrorist in either academia or in the media (Cubukcu and Forst, 2018; Cooper, 2001; D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018; Kaczkowski, Lokmanoglu, and Winkler, 2022; Goswami and Bhatia, 2020; Pawlak, 2015; Perry, 1990; Schmid, 2004; Schmid, 2023). For the purpose of this study, I define terrorism the way the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) does as activities involving acts dangerous to human life, critical infrastructure, or key resources that are in violation of criminal laws of the United States or any State. These acts must also appear to "intimidate or coerce a civilian population," impact government policy through intimidation or coercion, and affect the functioning of a government by "mass destruction, assassination, or kidnapping" (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2020). Journalists, however, are not so systematic. Consequently, the term "terrorism" is used inconsistently by the news media.

For instance, the news media is less likely to classify attacks perpetrated by non-Muslims as terrorism compared to attacks committed by Muslim perpetrators (Betus, Kearns, and Lemieux, 2021; Zdjelar and Davies, 2021; D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018). This effect is strong. Betus et al. (2021) found that an article is five times more likely to reference terrorism if the perpetrator is Muslim than if they were a non-Muslim perpetrator.

This effect is also consequential. According to Huff and Kertzer (2018), people's ideas of what is and is not terrorism are influenced by the media's description of perpetrators and events. If the media is less likely to label right-wing violent events as terrorism, then it follows that the public is less likely to conceptualize right-wing violence as terrorism. This is important because the label of terrorism signifies an event and any

individuals involved are especially violent. When an event is labelled as terrorism in the media, people have negative attitudes towards the perpetrators (Hoffman, 2017).

For example, Garzon (2016) found that the media's labelling of Muslim perpetrators over non-Muslim perpetrators influences the public by creating a link between Muslims and terrorism. Garzon (2016) further states the connections between the terrorism label and negative attitudes toward Islam and Muslims "may also create negative feelings among Americans towards Muslims".

When right-wing extremists are able to avoid the terrorism label, they also avoid the impacts of the labels, such as negative attitudes within the public. Exposure to negative rhetoric about a particular group creates a negative perception of that group in the public's mind (Hoffman, 2017).

Beyond avoiding the label "terrorism," Zdjelar and Davies (2021) found news media coverage of shootings perpetrated by right-wing attackers (such as the Tree of Life synagogue shooting and the Charleston church shooting) display other frames: evading motive, and the humanization of the perpetrator. For instance, these events are labelled as "anti-Semitic" and "racially motivated" by official sources such as government officials and attorneys instead of as ideologically motivated acts of terrorism (Zdjelar and Davies, 2021).

The ideological basis of right-wing perpetrators' violence is minimized by depicting them as lone wolf[1] shooters, mentally ill, and acting out with the intention of spreading a message (as opposed to mass casualties) (D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018; Powell, 2018). At the same time, right-wing perpetrators are humanized and discussed as normal people first (as sons, fathers, church goers, etc.). This focus on their personal history does not have the same impact of the terrorism label used with regard to Muslim perpetrators.

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[1] A lone wolf perpetrator acts alone when committing violent crimes, without connection to a larger organization. The term was popularized by White supremacists Tom Metzger and Alex Curtis to encourage white supremacists to act alone (Bakker and de Graaf, 2011).

Foregoing the label of terrorism and using words such as "shooting," "riots," and "protest," not only undervalues the significance and violence of the event, but also the planning, intention, and premeditation of those who were responsible (Hunter, Ginn, Storyllewellyn, and Rutland, 2021). It deviates the focus of the audience from the perpetrator's ideologies and motives to their personal background.

Right-wing violence is not a new phenomenon. Media focus on modern iterations of this violence as acts by mentally ill and lone wolf perpetrators hides its historical white supremacist roots. Kearns and Betus (2022) found that right-wing terrorist attacks received 63% less coverage than attacks based on other ideologies. When this occurs, the media diminishes the significance and impact of right-wing violent attacks.

Gap in the Literature

The news media's ability to shape public opinion and influence the way the public understands the world and the people around them is known in the scholarly literature as framing. According to Pan and Kosicki (1993), media framing involves "placing information in a unique context so that certain elements of the issue get a greater allocation of an individual's cognitive resources." These news frames allow people to perceive, identify, and label information (Goffman, 1974) and they can also narrow public opinion and debate of the subjects to the ideas presented in the frames (Happer and Philo, 2013). When journalists frame the news, they select specific "angles of reality" to describe, define, interpret and apply morals to the subject of interest (Marthoz, 2017).

Right-wing violence is less likely to be classified as terrorism by the media (Betus et al., 2021). In lieu of terrorism, this violence is labelled under other titles such as hate crimes and mass shootings. Coverage of right-wing violence is also less likely to discuss motive and ideology compared to violence committed by Islamist extremists (Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). Moreover, perpetrators of right-wing violence are humanized or are considered to be mentally ill (D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018; Powell, 2018; Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). These conclusions in the extant literature, however, are not representative

of all articles about right-wing violence. There are articles that link to or label right-wing violent attacks as terrorism.

For example, Davis and Meddis (1995) begin their article on the police investigation into the Oklahoma City Bombing[2] with "Mideast terrorists. White supremacists. Religious extremists. And now drug traffickers. As the nationwide manhunt for the people behind the Oklahoma City bombing continues, authorities say they're not ruling out anything or anyone…". In an article detailing terrorist attacks in Britain, Stack (2017), includes the murder of Member of Parliament Jo Cox by "Thomas Mair, a right-wing extremist…". A USA Today (2000) article about a 1963 Alabama bombing of a church that killed four girls associates the "arrest of two former Klansmen" as a "reminder that there can be no statute of limitations in the fight against [hate mongering] and terrorism".

While the existing literature suggests that right-wing violent events are not frequently labelled as terrorism and that they receive different coverage than non-ideologically right-wing perpetrators, the media does occasionally label these events as terrorism. However, within this subset of news media coverage, it is unclear whether the coverage and frames used for right-wing terrorism are consistent with those used in right-wing violence and general terrorism reporting.

Beyond the terrorism label being used more often for violent acts committed by individuals with international and Islamic connections (Powell, 2018), there are other themes that emerge from terrorism reporting. For instance, the type of attack influences the magnitude of coverage. Hijackings, suicide bombings, and hostage takings get more media coverage than other attacks (Chermak and Gruenewald, 2006; Jetter, 2019; Weimann and Brosius, 1991; Weeraratne, 2023). It is uncertain whether coverage of right-wing terrorism also displays similar patterns.

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[2] On April 19, 1995, homemade explosives left in a parked truck detonated outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma, killing 168 people, including 19 children. More than 500 others were injured. The perpetrators, Timothy McVeigh and Terry Nichols, were motivated by anti-government sentiment (Reichel, 2019).

Another theme that emerges from terrorism reporting: counterterrorism and anti-terrorism activities. Following the events of September 11, 2001, American media clearly distinguished the attacks as terrorism and what followed was a singular focus on counterterrorism strategies and military responses to the event (Ryan, 2004). Hoffman (2025) found that this subject dominates in the news media's coverage of terrorism. However, it is unclear if this is the case in right-wing violence reporting.

It may be the case that when right-wing perpetrators are labelled as terrorists, they are depicted through the same frames as non-right-wing perpetrators. It is unclear if right-wing perpetrators are framed in the same way the literature suggests (i.e., humanized) when they are labelled as terrorists. Additionally, it is unknown whether counterterrorism efforts play a significant role in right-wing violence reporting as it does in terrorism reporting (Hoffman, 2025). This oversight is important to study to ascertain if there is some consistency in terrorism reporting across terrorism genres when the terrorism label is used.
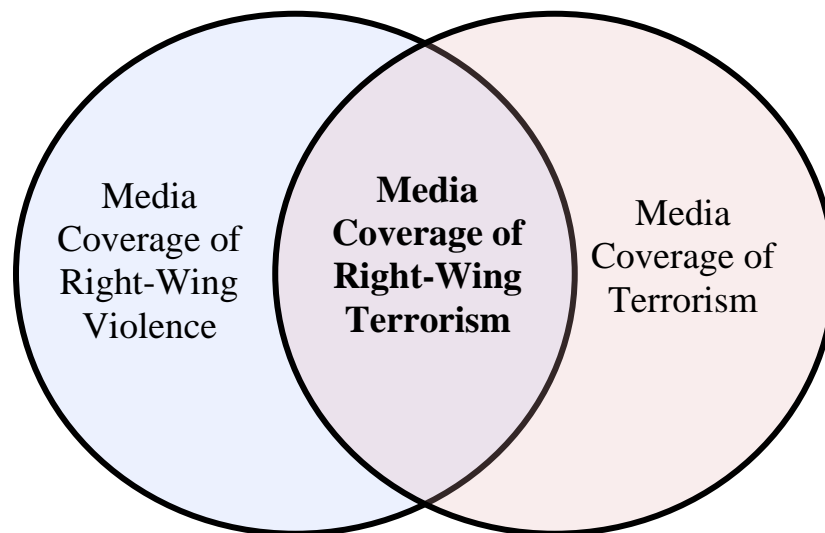
Figure 1.   **Cross-section of the Extant Literature**

Figure 1 showcases this cross-section of articles on right-wing violent events where the term "terrorism" is included that have been overlooked in the literature. In this study, I conducted a content analysis of the coverage of right-wing terrorism, right-wing extremism, and non-right-wing terrorism in U.S. print news media from 1995 to 2021.

Specifically, I compared print news media coverage of right-wing violence both when the label terrorism is used and not used, to the coverage of general terrorism reporting.

The existing literature is dismissive of similarities between the coverage of right-wing violence and general terrorism. I identified frames in the coverage of non-right-wing terrorism that are distinct and do not appear in right-wing violence coverage. I also identified frames that are consistent across all three types of media coverage. I did this to identify whether in articles where the media links right-wing violent events to terrorism, the events are described in similar ways to non-right-wing violent events.

Heading into my analysis, the literature on media coverage of right-wing violence informed my expectations and research design for this study. The following section covers expectations and methodology.

Expectations

There are three patterns in right-wing and general terrorism reporting I expect to be extended to articles that associate right-wing violence to terrorism: humanization of right-wing perpetrators, the absence of right-wing perpetrators being treated as outsiders of Western society, and an abundance of discussion about counterterrorism. These expectations stem from the literature, specifically the works of Zdjelar and Davies (2021), Silva (2017), and Hoffman (2025).

Humanization

The first pattern I expect to find in the analysis follows Zdjelar and Davies' (2021) work which found that articles about right-wing violence evade the subject of motive and ideology by humanizing perpetrators. Humanization occurs when the perpetrator is described via their history and relations to other people (such as being a father, churchgoer, etc.) in an effort to make them seem more humane despite their violent actions. Their ideological background and motives, such as whether they were radicalized or purposefully targeted their victims, are not discussed.

Zdjelar and Davies (2021) found that in articles about mass shootings in America, the perpetrators were humanized. For example, Trip Gabriel, Jack Healy and Julie Turkewitz (2018, as cited in Zdjelar and Davies, 2021) begin their article about the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting with:

> "Robert Bowers, the man accused of gunning down 11 congregants in a virulently anti-Semitic rampage at a Pittsburgh synagogue, was an **isolated, awkward man who lived alone and struggled with basic human interactions**..." (emphasis added).

In the above excerpt, the magnitude of Bowers' violence, "gunning down 11 congregants in a virulently anti-Semitic rampage at a Pittsburgh synagogue," is immediately contextualized by the description of him as a social outcast with a difficult childhood. Highlighting Bowers' difficult childhood creates a veil over his ideologically anti-Semitic motives associated with targeting worshipers at a synagogue. It shrouds his

motives by implying that if he was not isolated and awkward and did not live alone, then he may not have committed these violent acts. It implies that this violence was not ideologically motivated, rather it was caused by a man who was not appropriately socially conditioned. This framing has an impact on the public because it garners sympathy from the readers and lessens the severity of his violence.

Similar to Zdjelar and Davies' work, this study examines media coverage of right-wing violence. Specifically, I analyze articles about right-wing violence that do and do not include the term "terrorism," as well as articles about terrorism overall. I expect the humanization news frame delineated by Zdjelar and Davies (2021) to extend to the articles that discuss right-wing violence, including those that describe violence as terrorism.

I expect there to be humanization of perpetrators and little discussion ideology (some form of white supremacy, nationalism, or separatism). I expect the humanization frame to depict right-wing perpetrators as troubled, mentally ill, insane, or lacking rational thought to distance them from ideology (Crenshaw, 2014).

When a right-wing perpetrator is humanized, their actions are almost justified by making them seem like they are either normal members of society (fathers, sons, churchgoers) or that they lack the resources or wherewithal (familial and social support or cognitive functions) they need to become normal members of society. However, non-right-wing perpetrators are framed in the opposite way. They are casted as outsiders of society, particularly Western society, through the process of othering.

Othering

The second pattern I expect to find is that there would be little "othering" of the right-wing perpetrators. I also expect that there would be "othering" of non-right-wing perpetrators. 'Othering' is the opposite of humanization. It occurs when a minority (such as a non-right-wing perpetrator) is stereotypically imagined as "something 'other', as inferior or threatening, and to be excluded," (Modood, 2019; Modood and Thompson, 2021). When othering occurs, the differences amongst people in terms of race, ethnicity,

and religion are highlighted instead of what may connect them (Foner, 2015; Silva, 2017).

Silva (2017) found that the media 'others' Muslims through references to the processes of radicalization to create symbolic boundaries between Islam and the West. For instance, Silva (2017) highlighted an example of othering in a New York Times article where Western society is positioned in direct opposition to "their" radicalization:

> "*Many followers of Islam* have been indoctrinated by the radicalizing culture of the mosque and have become isolated *from our society*. The further *radicalization of these American-based Muslims by violent Islamic extremists from abroad* who are committed to international jihad adds a virulent component to an already growing *threat to America.* (March 9, 2011).

> Against the new totalitarian challenge of Islamic extremism, we have to *defend our values*; and this means sticking to the values of *our democratic societies*, even under fire. (September 10, 2006)."

This positioning assumes that all Muslims, especially young Muslims, including citizens of Western countries are a threat to Western society and values because they are at risk of radicalization (Silva, 2017; van Leeuwen, 1995). The wording of "Followers of Islam" is directly pitted against "our" society, values, and democracy. Their religious practices are considered alien and an avenue for radicalization. They are not a part of Western society; they are outside normal society altogether. I expect articles about non-right-wing terrorism to include some form of "othering", such as on the basis of race, ethnicity, religion, or culture. There are several markers of othering I expect to see in the data.

For example, an Islamist terrorist may be "othered" on the basis of their religion and possibly race and ethnicity if they were not white. The media may dismiss the perpetrator's motives and logic by highlighting their non-American or non-white background (Crenshaw, 2014). This would be consistent with Boletsi (2017) who found that violent acts committed by Muslims and non-white individuals are ascribed to religion, belief systems, culture, and race in the media whereas the media is more open to diving into the mentality and history of white perpetrators.

Another marker of othering is discussion of the radicalization process. A non-white perpetrator's radicalization process would be emphasized in the media coverage of a violent event (Silva, 2007). If the perpetrator were white, the article would pursue "othering" by discussing the perpetrator's travel to non-white majority countries, association to Islam, association to non-white individuals, etc. The othering news frame is applied when the perpetrator is linked to groups and practices that are depicted as outside or alien to normal society.

I expect the othering news frame would occur in the articles about terrorism overall as the articles would discuss violent events perpetrated by different groups adhering to different ideologies. I also expect there to be an absence of othering in the articles about right-wing violence including those that link right-wing perpetrators to terrorism.

Counterterrorism Efforts

Finally, the third and last pattern I expect to find in abundance within articles about terrorism overall and in scarcity within the articles about right-wing violence is the discussion of counterterrorism. Hoffman (2025) in, *The Terrorism News Beat: Professionalism, Profit, and the Press*, argues that the "terrorism beat," referring to the terrorism coverage in print news media at large, is not as intimidating or sensationalized as it depicted; finding that the language used is not overwhelmingly negative, is chosen carefully, and that counterterrorism reporting dominates the "terrorism beat" in America's most popular newspapers.

Based on Hoffman's (2025) work, articles about right-wing violence and terrorism would also primarily discuss counterterrorism. This study tested this theory for consistency across terrorism genres. I expect that articles about non-specific terrorism may discuss counterterrorism policy (Hoffman, 2025) whereas articles about right-wing violence may lack this due to the government's hesitancy in labelling these events as terrorism.

The following section discusses the sampling methodology employed and introduces the data analysis and coding process.

Research Design

This study aims to answer a descriptive question: *How does media coverage of right-wing terrorism compare to that of right-wing violence and terrorism overall?* Empirical description is a non-causal argument that endeavors to answer "what questions (e.g., when, whom, out of what, in what manner)," about the world (Gerring, 2012). Therefore, the objective of this study was not to establish a causal relationship between the dependent variable, the frames used in print news media, and the independent variables, right-wing extremism, right-wing terrorism, and terrorism overall.

Rather, the objective was to make a descriptive inference by identifying similarities and differences in the framing of news stories about right-wing terrorism, right-wing extremism and terrorism overall. A descriptive study is appropriate in this case because the extant literature on the coverage of right-wing violence and the coverage of terrorism has overlooked those articles that classify right-wing violence as terrorism. It is unknown, therefore, whether the reporting patterns that characterize reporting about right-wing extremism and that characterize terrorism reporting extend to the coverage of right-wing terrorism.

Sampling Methodology

To develop descriptive inferences about the coverage of right-wing terrorism relative to the coverage of right-wing violence and of terrorism, I conducted a content analysis of articles spanning from 1995 to 2021. I developed three samples consisting of articles about right-wing violence (described in relation to terrorism and without any association to terrorism) and terrorism overall published by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*[3] between 1995 and 2021 (see Figure 2). The three samples include 12 articles from each year pertaining to right-wing extremism (hereafter Sample RWE), right-wing terrorism (Sample RWT), and terrorism overall (Sample

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[3] *The New York Times, USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal* were chosen as the sources for this study as they are major print news media sources in America and NexisUni had digitized historical data for all three newspapers.

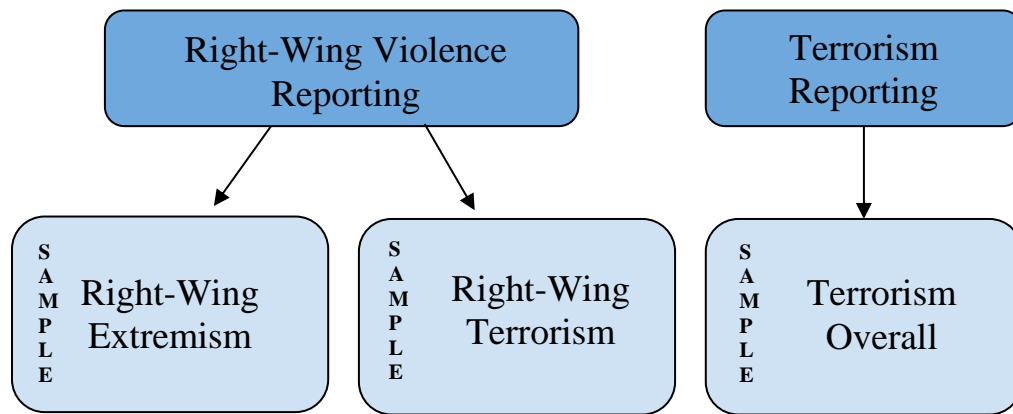TER). Each sample has 312 articles downloaded from NexisUni and the total sample size is 936 articles[4].

Right-Wing Violence Reporting

Terrorism Reporting

SAMPLE Right-Wing Extremism

SAMPLE Right-Wing Terrorism

SAMPLE Terrorism Overall

Figure 2.   Samples.

The timeframe of articles published between 1995 and 2021 was chosen to include key right-wing terrorism events, notably the Oklahoma City Bombings in 1995 and the January 6, 2021 insurrection in the U.S. Capitol. These events are important to consider as they had an impact on American media, national security policy, and way of life. These particular events received a great amount of media coverage from publications across the political spectrum, giving me a much larger population of articles from which I established a sample.

Sample RWE include articles similar to those that have been studied before. It includes articles about right-wing violence that have no mention of the term "terrorism" and includes those about mass shootings. Sample RWT includes articles about right-wing violence that have the term "terrorism" in the body of the article. Sample TER includes articles about terrorism in general, including right-wing and non-right-wing violence. I chose these three categories as they allow me to make comparisons between the coverage of right-wing violence that is described and not described as terrorism and comparisons between terrorism overall and right-wing violence.

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[4] The articles were chosen randomly through the assistance of a random number generator via random.org.

Right-Wing Violence Reporting Samples (Sample RWE and RWT)

Articles in Sample RWE were downloaded via NexisUni by filtering for each year, publisher, and the following keywords: right-wing; *and* bomb, assassination, armed assault, hostage, violence, *or* attack. Some of the keywords are the most common terrorism attack types as identified by the Global Terrorism Database (2024): bombings, assassinations, armed assaults, and hostage takings. The term "terrorism" was filtered out from the search using the "and not" feature in NexisUni to ensure the results excluded articles that had the word "terrorism".

Likewise, the articles in Sample RWT were identified by searching for the keywords: right wing; bomb, assassination, armed assault, hostage, attack, *or* violence; *and* terrorism. Utilizing "terrorism" in Sample RWT meant the dataset included articles about right-wing terrorism that have not been previously studied - those that have been labelled or associated with terrorism directly. This decision was purposeful as these articles allow me to ascertain what characteristics these particular events have that the articles about right-wing terrorism events lacking the "terrorism" label do not, as well as if there are similarities in the coverage of right-wing violence that is described as terrorism and general terrorism events.

Terrorism Overall Sample (Sample TER)

The 312 articles pertaining to terrorism overall, Sample TER, were randomly chosen from an existing dataset developed by Dr. Aaron Hoffman for his book, *The Terrorism News Beat: Professionalism, Profit, and the Press*. Hoffman's dataset spans from 1997 to 2014 and includes 50 articles per year and the articles were collected using simple random sampling methods. Hoffman (2025) utilized LexisNexis (now NexisUni) to establish his sample of articles from various local, national, and international English language newspapers, with the variations of the keywords, "terrorism" and "terrorist." The Hoffman (2025) dataset is not specific to right-wing terrorism and includes all terrorism activities reported on by *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal,* and *Washington Post*.

Utilizing the random number generator on random.org, I selected 12 articles per year published between 1997 and 2014 from Hoffman's (2025) dataset for my analysis[5]. As Hoffman's (2025) dataset does not fully cover the timeline of this study, I used the following keywords to obtain 12 random articles per year from 1995 to 1996 and 2015 to 2021 pertaining to terrorism overall via NexisUni: "terrorism" and "terrorist". These keywords are the same search terms used by Hoffman (2025) to develop his dataset.

I identified five overarching codes within the three samples: Ideology, Terrorism Label, Othering, Humanization, and Counterterrorism Effort. The following section defines the five overarching codes I identified.

The Coding Process

All the articles were downloaded via NexisUni, uploaded to Nvivo, and coded based on each article's headline, lede, and second paragraph[6]. In accordance with Hoffman (2025), the core frames(s) of the article will likely be present in the first three paragraphs of the article as readers are less likely to read long form articles.

I identified frames by examining the angles through which the violent events were discussed within the headline, lede, and second paragraph. I conducted two readings of the articles to ensure that all of the codes are applied equally to the dataset. The codes are not mutually exclusive; articles frequently fit multiple codes.

The five primary codes I identified in my dataset were: Ideology, Terrorism Label, Othering, Humanization, and Counterterrorism Effort.

Ideology

Ideology is a set of beliefs, ideas, and principles, usually based on political or economic theory, through which an individual interprets the world and their place in it

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[5] The selected articles were published by *The New York Times, USA Today*, and *Wall Street Journal*. NexisUni did not have digitized articles published by *The Washington Post* therefore it was excluded.

[6] Articles about irrelevant subjects such as sports, entertainment, and opinion editorial pieces were disregarded.

(Calhoun, 2002). Ideology as a news frame included the discussion of right-wing and non-right-wing ideology, Islamic fundamentalism, motivations, and anti-government sentiment.

An article would be coded for ideology if the subject (the individual(s) or group(s) involved in violent event) was directly labelled or associated with right-wing extremism, including white supremacy, white nationalism, and white separatism, and anti-government/ anti-authority sentiments. For instance, if a group was referred to as having white supremacist origins in an article, it would be coded under the Ideology code.

The Ideology code also included articles that discussed Islamic fundamentalism and violence which stems from individual(s) or group(s) that advocate for increasing the influence of Islamic law in politics and society (Cambridge Dictionary, 2024). This included the discussion of various attacks conducted by Islamic fundamentalists, such as on September 11, 2001, when Al Qaeda terrorists hijacked four planes and crashed them in New York, Washington, and Pennsylvania, killing almost 3,000 people (Reichel, 2019).

Terrorism Label

Terrorism involves acts and threats dangerous to human life, critical infrastructure, or key resources. This code would only occur in Samples RWT and TER as they include articles about activities and individuals associated with terrorism due to the search criteria including the word "terrorism."

An article can include the word "terrorism," but it may not be used in reference to the subject of the article. In this case, the article would not be coded for terrorism label. The Terrorism Label code includes articles that address and label the event as or associate the event of interest to "terrorism".

For example, if a violent event is likened to terrorism, the article would fit the code. On the other hand, if an article is about a mass shooting, and it also discusses

another violent event and only the latter is labelled as terrorism, then the article would not fit under the Terrorism Label code. This is because the article does not link the shooting to terrorism.

Othering

The Othering code refers to the othering of individuals or groups, both right-wing and non-right-wing, in the articles. Othering as a news frame in an article appears as the discussion of a perpetrator's motives and logic by highlighting characteristics that differentiate them from the norm or the majority population, such as by emphasizing their religion, belief systems, culture and/or race (Boletsi, 2017; Crenshaw, 2014).

Another marker of othering is the discussion of a perpetrator's radicalization process by positioning them as a threat to Western society (Silva, 2007). If the perpetrator were white, the news media may "other" the individual by discussing the perpetrator's travel to non-Western states, association to Islam, association to non-white individuals, etc.

Humanization

The Humanization code refers to articles that make an individual seem more humane and relatable by describing them as a family member (father, son, daughter, mother, etc.), and by their affiliations (church goer, etc.). Humanization as a new frame may appear as a history or profile of the perpetrator including their hobbies, interests, and positive quotes from individuals who may have known them.

For instance, an article about a perpetrator of mass violence that discusses their childhood, lack of friends, and potentially unaddressed mental health issues would fit the Humanization code. If the same article also mentioned the individual's ideological motivations, it would be coded for Ideology as well.

Counterterrorism Effort

The Counterterrorism Efforts code refers to the discussion of policies related to terrorism or counterterrorism. It includes articles that discuss violent acts of terrorism but in relation to terrorism, counterterrorism, or national security policy and governance. This code reflects Hoffman (2025) who defined counterterrorism efforts as deliberate "efforts by governments and government officials to either prevent future attacks or to manage the consequences of terrorist violence.

For example, an article that discusses the expansion of powers and increase in the budget of law enforcement agencies following a terrorist attack fits the Counterterrorism Efforts code. This code also includes articles about counterterrorism activities, such as bombings of terrorist cells by the US government.

Limitations

Though the complete sample size was 936 articles, 12 articles per year per subject is not enough to develop concrete theory on the similarities and differences between news media coverage of right-wing terrorism and terrorism overall. However, due to time constraints, lack of funding and additional assistance provided in developing this study, it was not feasible to conduct the same study with a larger sample size even though it would strengthen the validity and reliability of the study. Despite this, this study contributes to the academic field by comparing different kinds of terrorism print news media coverage. I was able to conduct detailed readings of the data and establish links that may be missed with a larger sample size. This study could be used to support large-N studies in the future.

The following section discusses the results of my analysis.

Findings and Discussion

I identified five primary codes in my dataset: Ideology, Terrorism Label, Othering, Counterterrorism Effort, and Humanization. The following section provides an in-depth analysis of these codes. Table 1 displays the 5 primary codes in order of prominence.

Table 1.   Prominence of Codes by Sample

	Right-Wing Extremism (RWE)	Right-Wing Terrorism (RWT)	General Terrorism (TER)
1	Ideology (88%)	Ideology (50%)	Ideology (45%)
2	Othering (12%)	Terrorism Label (31%)	Counterterrorism Efforts (32%)
3	Humanization (0%) Counterterrorism Efforts (0%)	Counterterrorism Efforts (10%)	Terrorism Label (13%)
4	-	Othering (9%)	Othering (9%)
5	-	Humanization (0%)	Humanization (1%)

Note: Articles in Sample RWE did not include the term "terrorism," therefore the Terrorism Label code is excluded.

Ideology

The Ideology code was prevalent across all three samples. In Samples RWT and TER, where the term "terrorism" was included in the articles, ideology was discussed in approximately half of the articles. However, in Sample RWE, which discussed violent events without associating it with terrorism, the ideology code dominated 88% of the articles. This indicates that ideology is not discussed as much in articles about where the term "terrorism" is used to describe a violent event. Ideology may be more likely to be discussed where an event is not labelled as terrorism.

In the TER sample, ideology was mentioned with regard to both right-wing and non-right-wing attacks. However, the discussion of Islamist violence was most prominent in Sample TER with approximately 46% of all instances where ideology was discussed

being associated to Islamist violence. Across all three samples, there was a key difference in the way right-wing ideology was framed compared to Islamic fundamentalism.

When ideology was discussed with regard to right-wing violence across all three samples, it was not self-evident. For example, in Sample TER, an article about the bombing of a lesbian and gay bar in Atlanta in 1996 referred to a letter issued by the perpetrator as having "anti-abortion, anti-homosexual and anti-government rhetoric" (Sack, 1997). Here, right-wing ideology is explained using its tenets. Thus, it becomes clear to the reader what right-wing ideology is.

A reader might not be familiar with what it means to be a right-wing perpetrator. A reader is more likely to understand what it means to be anti-abortion, anti-homosexual, and to have anti-government sentiment. Unlike the discussions of right-wing ideology, Islamic fundamental ideology is not described by its features, it is stated in a self-evident manner.

Islamist violence is discussed in relation to specific groups, such as Al Qaeda and Hezbollah. The ideologies of these groups are not discussed. Rather, simply the name "Al Qaeda," "Jihadi," "Islamic" or the mentioning of notable figures, such as Osama Bin Laden, are enough to convey ideology without regard to the tenets of the groups and perpetrators.

In an article about Bin Laden, the reporter, Jackey Kelley (1998) states: "Bin Laden has declared a **jihad**, or **holy struggle**, against the United States and has been linked to several attacks against U.S. citizens. The State Department has called bin Laden one of the most significant financial sponsors of **Islamic extremist** activities in the world," (emphasis added). While Kelley defines "jihad," he does not describe or define Islamic extremism.

Similarly, an article about a report on terrorism deaths around the world, notes:

"…lone actors with **white nationalist, far-right** or **anti-Muslim beliefs** were responsible for the majority of attacks in North America and Western Europe. "Part

of it is a reaction to the immigration flows, which have been appearing in Europe, with the result of the wars in the Middle East," [the report's author] said. "And also it's a reaction against the terrorist attacks, which have occurred back in the U.S. and in Europe by **violent jihadist or violent extremists, violent Muslim extremists**," (Dudar, 2018) (emphasis added).

In the above excerpt, right-wing ideology is characterized as being white nationalist and anti-Muslim, and a response to increased immigration rates and Islamic terrorist attacks. At the same time, Islamic fundamentalism ideology is not discussed. The Muslim perpetrators are presented as simply violent jihadists and extremists without mention of any principles akin to white nationalism and Islamophobia. This suggests that the media coverage of right-wing violence and ideology may be more illustrative than that of Islamic fundamentalist violence. Beyond ideology, the media treats non-right-wing, specifically Muslim perpetrators, differently in a multitude of ways, including by "othering" them.

Othering

The Othering news frame was present in low amounts, ranging from 9% to 12% across the three samples. In Sample RWE (12%) and RWT (9%) the articles primarily discussed right-wing violence and the perpetrators' ideology of marginalizing minorities and immigrants. In Sample TER (9%), most occurrences of othering were about policies impacting minorities and immigration in response to terrorism.

However, othering did come into play with the process of radicalization. This occurred in a Sample TER, 2001 *New York Times* article:

> The man who threatened to blow up a passenger plane to Miami with explosives in his shoes was a small-time British criminal who converted to Islam in prison, a London cleric said. He may have attended a terrorist training camp of Al Qaeda in Afghanistan, detained members of that group have told the authorities, ("Link to al Qaeda Camp," 2001).

Othering is in effect in several ways in this quote. The perpetrator's criminal history prior to radicalization is minimized. He is described to have converted to Islam, which is not indicative of any negativity or violence. The sentence immediately after links him and Islam to terrorism.

This quote describes Islamist extremist Richard Reid, who boarded a flight from Paris to Miami with a bomb in his shoes in 2001. He was unsuccessful in his mission. While the aforementioned quote describes him as a small-time criminal, he had amassed over ten convictions on his record for crimes against persons and crimes against property and had a family history of criminality (CNN, 2001; Elliot, 2002). His predisposition to crime and radicalization prior to conversion to Islam is not considered.

This narrative antagonizes Islam and positions in opposition to Western values and religion. This is consistent with the work of Silva (2007), who found that media narratives relating to radicalization perpetuate "the assumption that all members of the Islamic religion… share similar belief systems, characteristics, and behaviors." In doing so, the narratives distance Islam from Western society, and reinforce biases that treat Muslims as threatening outsiders (Dreier, Gade, Card, and Smith, 2022).

Counterterrorism Efforts

Hoffman (2025) notes that counterterrorism reporting is the subject of the majority of articles about terrorism in popular American newspapers. This is consistent with the findings of this study where Sample TER had the most articles (34%) about counterterrorism efforts. In Sample RWT, there was little presence of this code, with 10%, suggesting that counterterrorism is not a common subject within articles about right-wing terrorism. On the other hand, Sample RWE, which discussed right-wing violence without using the term "terrorism," there was no discussion about counterterrorism efforts. This variance can be attributed to the data collection strategy as events that are not labelled as terrorism, by definition, would not be subject to counterterrorism efforts.

The few references to tackling right-wing terrorism actually highlight the American government's lack of action. For instance, Kifner and Thomas (1998) state:

> "While Federal and state investigators have focused increasing attention on movements of the far right, white supremacists and paramilitary groups in the wake of the bombing, many of the legal powers they sought in the emotional aftermath

of the [Oklahoma City bombing] to aid the gathering of evidence have not been enacted."

Conversely, this code was extremely common in Sample TER. Two articles discussed efforts to address domestic terrorism, with the rest focusing on efforts against non-right-wing violence. For example, Goldman (2019) discussed the few steps taken by the Department of Justice and the Federal Bureau of Investigation, noting:

> "The bureau has about 850 open investigations across the United States. Prosecutors have backed rewriting the laws on domestic terrorism… [The] Department of Homeland Security finally affirmed in September that domestic terrorism was a national security threat while earlier this year, the F.B.I. established a domestic terrorism-hate crimes fusion cell."

The September 11, 2001 attacks launched a war and a series of legislation expanding the powers of law enforcement and intelligence bodies in America. There was an abundance of information available about the various government responses to 9/11.

However, there has not been significant discussion of responses to right wing terrorism and violence. This lack of reporting could be attributed to a deficiency in counterterrorism efforts addressing right wing violence or to insufficient information about the various efforts. This deficiency could also be explained by the media's overall hesitancy to label right-wing violence as terrorism.

However, this study specifically looked at instances where the print news media did label right-wing violence as terrorism. Within this subset of articles, a unique pattern emerged.

Terrorism Label (Samples RWE and TER)

As expected, articles about activities and individuals associated with terrorism occurred in Samples RWT (31%) and TER (13%) due to the search criteria including the word "terrorism."

During the coding process, there was one right-wing violent event that was most discussed in the dataset: the Oklahoma City Bombing in 1995. The articles about the Oklahoma City Bombing were published between 1995 and 2001. Despite this, the

bombing was the single most prominent act of right-wing violence discussed in the articles.

In Sample RWT (including the term "terrorism"), the Oklahoma City bombing is explicitly labelled as a terrorist attack. For example, Janofsky (1996) calls it the "...the worst terrorist act on American soil…," and similarly, Thomas (1997) labels it "...the worst terrorist attack in the United States....". While there were other violent right-wing events discussed, such as the January 6, 2021 attack on the capitol in Washington, D.C., the Oklahoma City Bombing continues to be the quintessential example of right-wing violence in American news media.

The other instances of this code in Sample RWT also discussed bombings. For example, Minzesheimer (1996) reported on bank robbers who exploded pipe bombs in Spokane, WA and stated their methods were reminiscent of bank robberies and explosions employed by a right-wing terrorist group decades earlier. Bacon (2011) reported on four elderly members of a right-wing Georgia militia who "were trying to extract lethal ricin from castor beans… and talked about scattering ricin from a plane or a car speeding down a highway past major cities, and scouted [U.S. government] offices for possible bombing". Weiser (2019) used the term to describe Cesar A. Sayoc Jr., a Trump supporter, who mailed 16 homemade bombs to popular Democrats political figures in 2018.

Thus, in the subset of articles where the word "terrorism" is used to describe right-wing violence other than the Oklahoma City bombing, the label was used exclusively in relation to bombings. In Sample TER, most articles that utilized the terrorism label also referred to various bombings, however they were committed by non-right-wing perpetrators. Overall, these findings are consistent with the literature as bombings are more likely to be labelled as terrorism (Chermak and Gruenewald, 2006; Jetter, 2019). This could also be the media mimicking the US government by only referring to right-wing bombings as terrorism as opposed to shootings (Dreier et al., 2022).

However, this pattern differs from terrorism coverage of European right-wing violence where the term was used in association to stabbings, bank robberies, bombings, and shootings (Huff and Kertzer, 2018). This is due to non-bombing attacks in perpetrated by right-wing extremists in America usually being described and prosecuted as hate crimes as opposed to terrorism (Corbin, 2017).

This is consistent with the extant literature's findings that the media does not link non-Muslim perpetrators to terrorism as often as Muslim perpetrators (Betus et al., 2021; D'Orazio and Salehyan, 2018; Dreier et al., 2022; Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). However, it also asks the question: are all ideologically motivated shootings not terrorism? If a Muslim perpetrator commits a mass shooting, would it be labelled terrorism?

The foregoing findings are largely consistent with the extant literature's conclusions about media coverage of right-wing violence. Contrarily, the final finding of this study differs from this pattern.

Humanization

This code was not prevalent across all three samples. The humanization news frame did not appear in Samples RWE and RWT. It occurred in 1% of articles in Sample TER.

This single instance of humanization of an American perpetrator stated:

"... the chief suspect turned out to be a fresh-faced veteran of the gulf war, a man from upstate New York named Timothy McVeigh, a man so unassuming that only a missing license plate led to his arrest," ("Days of shared loss", 1997).

This example was in Sample TER, in an article discussing the trials that followed the bombing and the impact on the victims. In "Days of shared loss" (1997), McVeigh is notably not labelled as a right-wing or anti-government extremist.

The existing literature suggests that right-wing perpetrators are often humanized as sons and fathers in the media (Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). This was not evident in this

study. This result could be attributed to the sample size and methodology[7]. Zdjelar and Davies' study examined media coverage of shootings and found that perpetrators were often humanized. In Sample RWT, which primarily classified bombings as terrorist attacks, the perpetrators were not humanized. It may be the case that attack type has an impact on whether a perpetrator is humanized. A perpetrator may be more likely to be humanized if they were responsible for a mass shooting instead of a bombing.

There are several key differences identified in the print news media coverage of right-wing violence compared to terrorism. Overall, American print news media does not provide consistent coverage of right-wing and non-right-wing terrorism.

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[7] The sampling strategy of this project differs from methods utilized in the extant literature on the coverage of right-wing violence as it depends on the media to identify the event as terrorism. For instance, political scientists typically use the GTD to identify cases of right-wing terrorism and then examine articles about those events (Kearns and Betus, 2022; Kearns, Betus, and Lemieux, 2019; Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). I used attack type keywords stemming from the GTD to create a larger pool of articles that may include events that were not classified as terrorism by the GTD. Instead, I looked to the media to associate these events with terrorism.

Conclusion

The goal of this study was to identify how US print news media coverage of right-wing violence differs from the coverage of terrorism reporting overall and answer the question: *How does media coverage of right-wing terrorism compare to that of right-wing violence and terrorism overall?*

The coverage of right-wing extremism differs from the coverage of terrorism overall. There were five central outcomes from the analysis. Firstly, right-wing ideology is often illustrated and explained using descriptive language whereas non-right-wing ideologies are treated differently and not explained by the news media. This suggests that the media may assume the readers are aware of the ideologies and motivations of non-right-wing violence.

Likewise, it suggests that the motives behind right-wing violence continue to be unclear, in that it could be racially motivated, ideologically motivated or both. For instance, while Timothy McVeigh's bombing stemmed from anti-government sentiment, it was not overtly white supremacist. Yet, both of these characteristics fall under the umbrella of right-wing ideology.

Secondly, while counterterrorism efforts were the main subjects amongst articles about terrorism (Sample TER), it was not a common theme in articles about right-wing violence even when that violence was given the terrorism label. This finding is consistent with the existing terrorism literature in that counterterrorism activities and policies are a common topic in the terrorism news media (Hoffman, 2025) and non-US terrorism continues to dominate the media over domestic terrorism despite domestic terrorism potentially having a larger impact on the American audience and populace.

Thirdly, where Islamist extremism is more likely to be labelled terrorism regardless of the type of violence, the "terrorism" label is used, almost exclusively, for bombings where right-wing extremism is concerned. It was not used in reference to shootings which are far more prevalent in the US. Right-wing extremists seemingly get

away with committing large scale violence against minorities and eluding the terrorist label under the guise of being violent racists who commit hate crimes.

Fourthly, the othering of perpetrators based on ascribed characteristics and religious affiliations is not applied consistently amongst terrorism genres. Right-wing, white perpetrators are not subject to othering unlike their Muslim counterparts. However, white perpetrators who are religiously motivated on the basis of Islamic fundamentalism are othered, usually via the discussion of their radicalization process.

Lastly, while the extant literature suggests that perpetrators of right-wing violence are humanized as fathers, sons, and churchgoers, there was little evidence of humanization in this study (Zdjelar and Davies, 2021). This could be due to the sample size and methodology. For instance, Zdjelar and Davies (2021) specifically examined various shootings whereas this study did not examine specific violent events.

Humanization occurred once in relation to Timothy McVeigh, in an article where his anti-government ideology was not discussed. This may suggest that if a perpetrator's ideology is discussed in the print news media, they will not also be humanized and vice versa. It may also suggest that a perpetrator is more likely to be humanized if they commit a mass shooting as opposed to a bombing.

While this study examined over 900 articles, the findings of this study cannot be generalized and applied to the media at large as this sample size is insufficient. A larger sample size may potentially demonstrate more consistency with the extant literature pertaining to the humanization of right-wing perpetrators and the lack of the "terrorism" label being used to describe right-wing violence. Further research needs to be conducted on this discrepancy.

Additionally, with the ongoing increase in right-wing violent activity in Europe and Asia and increasing popularity of right-wing political parties, future studies on the difference in media coverage of right-wing events in Europe versus North America versus Asia would also contribute to the academic field. Moreover, the discussion of counterterrorism activities against right-wing violence across countries is a subject

worthy of investigation. As right-wing extremism continues to prosper in America and across the world, the likelihood of violence increases. The media does not portray right-wing extremism as the danger it poses.

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