Media constructions of terrorism: Framing how the public interprets and responds to terrorism

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Abstract

The media play a significant role in the transmission and construction of how we understand terrorism, the organizations that employ and respond to it and the threat it entails. Terrorism is not only constituted by the violence of its action, but also the social construction of the action in its aftermath. We argue that framing theory serves as a useful lens for understanding the communicative constitution of the terrorist actor, providing deeper insight into the core questions of terrorism studies. In this paper we outline an approach to studying and understanding framing and framing effects as they pertain to terrorism. We then illustrate this approach by looking at the ways in which al Qaeda has been used in the media to frame Daesh, and the implications thereof.

Keywords: terrorism, framing, social constructionism, media discourse

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In the aftermath of the attacks on September 11, 2001, al Qaeda emerged as not only the specific perpetrator of the act but also as the focus of the "war on terror"; the organizations leader, Osama bin Laden, became the face of the enemy, and the face of global terrorism and Islamic jihad. Having a particular journalistic 'face' or 'faces' for terrorism is not unusual, for example in the 1970's it was Carlos "the Jackal" or Muammar Qaddafi or simply the photo of an unnamed Fedayeen pictured at the Munich Massacre (see Stohl, 1983, for a discussion of stardom and the "theatre of terror"). However, al Qaeda, the organization, has served a particularly long lasting role in how the public understood terrorism, constricting the understanding of broader global security issues.

Until this past year, and during the almost decade and a half following 9/11, al Qaeda did not recede from its perceived position as a primary (if not *the* primary) international terrorist threat and enemy of the United States. Despite al Qaeda having attained such a strong foothold on how the media and government portrays, and how the American public understands and responds to, the international terrorist threat, several new players have surfaced as potentially problematic enemies (e.g., Boko Haram, al Shabab and most importantly, Daesh), especially during the last two years. Media coverage of these groups often connects them, either implicitly or explicitly, to al Qaeda, using al Qaeda to explain their form and function. As such, it is important to take a critical look at the way al Qaeda and its actions have been depicted in the media during this ascendant period for other terrorist threats, and to explore the effects and consequences of these portrayals.

The Discursive Construction of the Terrorist Actor

The field of terrorism studies has long been dominated by questions of what terrorism is, what causes it, who are the terrorists, and how we can counter their actions (Hülsse & Spencer, 2008; Toros, 2008). Much of the research focuses on understanding and combating the terrorist actor, to get at the origins, structures and operations of terrorists and terrorist organizations. These questions have been explored from a variety of academic disciplines, with psychologists and social psychologists exploring the terrorist mind (Forest, 2006; Stern, 2003; Victoroff, 2005), criminologists and economists using information about the financial and social networks of terrorists to better understand and predict their actions (Gambetta, 1993; Husslage, Borm, Burg, Hamers, & Lindelauf, 2015; Krueger, 2007), and sociologists exploring the role of social, political, and economic power as drivers of terrorism (Bigo & Guittet, 2011; Joosse, Bucerius, & Thompson, 2015), to name a just a few.

Studying the terrorist actor has been a useful venture, providing greater insight into the motives, functions and structures of terrorist organizations, and as such allowing for better counterterrorism strategies. However, as Hülsse and Spencer (2008) argue, "the focus on the terrorist actor in terrorism research is misleading. It is based on the assumption that knowledge about the terrorist means knowledge about terrorism" (p. 571). Thus, much of the existing terrorism research is based on the assumption that there is an objective reality of terrorism, rather than the far more tenable assumption that terrorism is only "an interpretation of events and their presumed causes" (Turk, 2004, p. 271).[1] If terrorism is not only constituted by the violence of its action, but also is a social construction as many have argued (see, e.g., Bhatia, 2008, 2009;

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[1] As Hülsse and Spencer (2008) stress: "To avoid any misunderstanding, let us clarify that such a constructivist perspective does not deny terrorism, Islamic or other. There are real people who purport real actions, but what these people and their deeds mean is a matter of interpretation" (p. 575).

Hülsse & Spencer, 2008; Turk, 2004), and furthermore that the reaction to this social construction is more important than the act itself in understanding terrorism (Stohl, 1983; Walter, 1969), then it is incumbent upon researchers to explore beyond the 'objective' realities of terrorist organizations to understand how these organizations and actors are discursively constructed.

This approach to studying terrorism has been widely embraced by media scholars, especially as it concerns media framing of terrorism writ large. Scholars have explored how the Bush administration's framing of the 9/11 attacks and the 'war on terror' (Entman, 2003; Hutcheson, Domke, Billeaudeaux, & Garland, 2004; Reese & Lewis, 2009), the framing of Muslim-Americans and Islam in relation to the broader terrorism discourse (Nacos & Torres-Reyna, 2003; Rane, Ewart, & Martinkus, 2014), and even the rhetorical usage of the word 'terrorist' (Finlay, 2009). However, there has been little research looking at the framing of specific terrorist actors and organizations.

It is our contention that framing theory can serve as a useful lens for understanding the communicative constitution of the terrorist actor, providing deeper insight into the core questions of terrorism studies, while answering the call of Hülsse and Spencer (2008) for a new kind of terrorism studies – one that "analyses the making of terrorism in academic, political and popular discourse" (p. 588). By using framing theory to closely explore media constructions of the terrorist actor we believe it is possible to gain a better understanding of how the American public interprets and responds to terrorism in general, and how the public perceives the origins, structures and operations of terrorists and terrorist organizations.

Defining Frames from a Constructionist Perspective

The primary role of the journalist is to convey, interpret, and evaluate information about political actors, events and/or issues in such a way as to ensure "that the complexity of [the events or issues are] reduced to a graspable plausible whole" (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 65) with the result as Lippmann (1922) argued that journalists and the media create "pictures in our heads" through which we interpret and understand the story being recounted. Work focusing on the impact of media frames has demonstrated that they can influence audience perceptions (Edwards, Elwyn, Covey, Matthews, & Pill, 2001), recall (Valkenburg, Semetko, & De Vreese, 1999), and even voting decision strategies (Shah, Domke, & Wackman, 1996). However, the theory lacks an unequivocal and agreed upon conceptualization (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001; D. A. Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010; Van Gorp, 2007). Many definitions have been proposed to refine the dual concepts of *frames* and *framing* (a far from exhaustive listing includes: Chong & Druckman, 2007; Entman, 1993; Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Gitlin, 1980; Goffman, 1974; Reese, 2001; B. Scheufele, 2004; D. A. Scheufele, 1999; Tankard, 2001; Van Gorp, 2007), with the choice in conceptualization being largely dependent upon the paradigm – cognitive, critical, and/or constructionist – within which the corresponding research exists (D'Angelo, 2002). However, there appears to be an agreed upon core in framing theory: the role of selection and interpretation.

Framing

In the process of crafting news stories, journalists are confronted with a need to make choices regarding how to construct meaningful narratives around the issues, events and actors being depicted, simplifying often complex topics and explaining their importance in order to make them more accessible to lay publics (Nisbet, 2010a; Shah et al., 1996). *Framing* is the

process wherein journalists (and others) select to prioritize some facts, images or developments over others, and provide an interpretive structure for understanding the provided information (Norris, Kern, & Just, 2003). This process of selection and interpretation serves to ensure that the complexities of reality are reduced to a graspable plausible whole (see: Van Gorp, 2007, p. 65), and whether intentional or not functions to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993, 2004) of the events, issues or actors being portrayed.

Frames

The framing process inherently relies upon the selection of one or more *frames*, which can be viewed as socially shared and persistent sets of organizing principles, "which media and individuals rely on to convey, interpret, and evaluate information" (Neuman, Just, & Crigler, 1992, p. 60), and "that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2001, p. 11). An important distinction arising from this conceptualization is that frames and media content must be viewed as distinct entities. From a cultural constructivist perspective, frames exist solely within the collective memory of a group or society, and serve simply as *conceptual tools* for condensing the dense complexity of life into easily digestible narratives (Nisbet, 2010b; Shah et al., 1996); they are distinct from their symbolic manifestation (Reese, 2001). In other words, frames 'live' in the public consciousness, they only become embedded and manifest in discourse products (e.g., news texts) through the framing process.

Bertram Scheufele (2004, 2006) extends this line of reasoning, while providing a useful framework for understanding the spread of frames, and the role frames play in creating meaning within media texts. He contends that frames and framing can be delineated across a two-dimensional matrix of arenas and levels. First framing can occur across three different contexts,

or arenas – (a) the political arena (e.g., the administration and other elites), (b) the media arena, and (c) the public or societal arena.[2] Similar to Entman's (2004) cascade model, each of these arenas are understood to interact with the others, "jostling to influence the political environment, and being affected by it in turn" (p. 11). In addition to the three arenas, frames (and framing) can be identified at three different levels: within (a) cognition, (b) discourse, and (c) discourse products. Within this system, frames can be thought of as "cognitive tools for information processing (cognitive level), which emerge and change in discourse (discursive level), and manifest themselves in discourse products (textual level), such as newspaper articles or party platforms" (D. A. Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010, p. 111).

The Manifestation of Frames in Discourse Products

While frames do not exist in media discourse products, their manifestations can be represented schematically as a *frame package,*[3] defined as a logically organized set of symbolic devices, clustered around a central organizing theme, or principle. Each frame package is composed of three constituent parts: (a) a set of manifest framing devices, (b) a set of manifest and/or latent reasoning devices, and (c) an underlying (and generally implicit) central organizing theme (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 64). Frames become manifest in media texts (and discourse in general) through the use of *framing devices* – metaphors, stock phrases, iconic images, arguments, exemplars etc. Within a frame package, the internally congruent framing devices are held together under the umbrella of an implicit, culturally shared *organizing theme or concept* (victim, perpetrator, freedom of speech, etc.), i.e., the frame itself. These two aspects signify the latent and manifest aspects of the frame within the framing device, but "do not equate the frame,

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[2] Later, this was expanded to include a fourth arena, i.e., counter publics (D. A. Scheufele & Scheufele, 2010).

[3] Alternatively referred to as 'media packages' (Gamson & Modigliani, 1989) or 'news frames' (e.g., Norris et al., 2003, pp. 10-11).

because they often lack the quality to define and understand other events, issues, and persons (Fisher, 1997)" (Van Gorp, 2007, p. 64). The final aspect of any frame package is the set of *reasoning devices* used to connect the implicit frame (manifest in the framing devices) to the events, issues and actors being framed in a logically coherent way.[4] Reasoning devices are what provide the framing package with the quality of defining and interpreting events, issues, and actors. Importantly, reasoning devices allow for a large amount of flexibility in how frames can be used, allowing the same framing devices and organizing concept to be used to promote diametrically opposite conclusions.

The Current Study

This paper combines the results of three lines of research, in an effort to better understand the communicative constitution of the terrorist actor. First, using semantic network analysis methods, we seek to understand the landscape of media terrorism discourse, and we find that al Qaeda is the primary referent for understanding global terrorism. Next, we provide a brief explication of the attribute frames used by journalists when constructing a meaningful understanding of al Qaeda and its actions. We conclude by exploring the application of these attribute frames to other organizations and discuss the implications.

Data Collection and Sampling Methods

Body of Texts

As part of a larger research project, we developed a database of newspaper articles from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* that discuss terrorism, terrorist organizations and/or terrorist actors. The database includes all print articles published in either paper between January 1, 1996 and December 31, 2014. We obtained articles using the ProQuest News & Newspapers

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[4] For a more complete explication of the frame package concept, and the component parts of a frame package, see Van Gorp (2007).

databases. Stories included in our database were located using a very inclusive search command,

which we have included in *Appendix A* along with the full set of data collection procedures. Due

to limits imposed by ProQuest, we collected data for each newspaper one month at a time,

downloading all files for that month into a single text file. We then split the files into individual

documents using the document break in each file as a delimiter.[2]

Article Sampling

The studies reported on in this paper can be split into two major classes. In the first part

we focus on the differential coverage of terrorist actors, with the second part focused on the

actual content of that coverage. Each part utilizes a different part of the database discussed

above. In the first part, we look specifically at articles which the newspapers themselves

identified as covering terrorism, using the 'subject' meta-tag. We also limited the sample to

actual 'news' articles, in contrast to editorials, commentary, etc., and which mentioned at least

one of the organizations designated as a terrorist organization by the United States State

Department between 1996 and 2014. This resulted in a total sample of 22,006 articles, 16,740

from the *New York Times*, and 5,266 from the *Wall Street Journal*.[5]

Most of this study (i.e., that which is focused on the framing of al Qaeda and the use of al

Qaeda as a framing device) focuses specifically on articles printed between January 1, 2013 and

December 31, 2014 that explicitly mentioned al Qaeda. The goal in selecting this specific time

period was to sufficiently limit the influence of the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election, while

allowing us to investigate the impact of the emergence of Daesh. In order to be as inclusive as

possible, articles were included in our sample if the words Qaeda, Qaida, or Qa'ida were

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[5] The disparity in the number of articles between the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* can be attributed to the focus of each paper. Most *Wall Street Journal* articles discussing terrorism are found in the editorial section of the newspaper.

mentioned anywhere in the article's file (e.g., anywhere in the title, body text, photo caption, etc.).[6,7] This resulted in a sample of 2,734 unique newspaper articles, 1,498 from the *New York Times* and 1,236 from the *Wall Street Journal*. To create a set of coding units, each article was searched to identify instances of the term al Qaeda, using the same procedure we used to identify relevant articles. Each time al Qaeda was mentioned, the paragraph containing the reference was recorded into a separate database for use in our analysis, resulting in a collection of 6,332 coding units. The actual coding was conducted on randomly selected units from the database (see next section). Each article was given a randomly generated unique object identifier, so that coders did not know the date the article was published, nor the newspaper from which the article was taken.

Dominant Actors in the Media's Terrorism Discourse

The first part of this investigation aimed simply at understanding the landscape of media terrorism discourse. Using the 22,006 articles published between 01/01/96 and 12/31/14 in the New York Times and Wall Street Journal that were tagged by the respective newspapers as covering 'terrorism', we attempted to determine the number of articles mentioning each of the different organizations designated as 'terrorist' by the United States State Department. The results were somewhat surprising. We began the research expecting to observe a pre-dominant amount of coverage about al Qaeda (due to the events of 9/11), but that beyond that we would observe a rather uniform distribution of articles, dependent upon the region the organization was located in and the frequency of attacks or other newsworthy events conducted/threatened by the organization. What we found instead was a near perfect example of Zipf's Law, a special case of a power-law probability distribution.

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[6] In order to be as inclusive and complete as possible, we used wildcard search terms, which allow us to find articles with any version of these three spellings, e.g. Qaeda, Qaeda's, al Qaeda etc.

[7] For this investigation, we did not limit the sample to only 'news' articles, opting instead for being as inclusive as possible.

In its more basic form, a power-law probability distribution "specifies that the probability of observing an item of size k is proportional to $k^{-\alpha}$" (Adamic, 2011, p. 164). Zipf's law is a special case applied to the frequency of words, in which it has been empirically demonstrated that the frequency with which a word is used in natural language is inversely proportional to its rank of usage. In other words, the most commonly used word will be used roughly twice as much as the next most commonly used word, which is used roughly twice as much as the next most commonly used word, etc. We see this exact relationship when looking at the frequency of articles mentioning terrorist organizations, as shown in *Figure 1*. Al Qaeda is mentioned in 5459 articles, followed by Hamas with 1063 case occurrences, Gama'a al-Islamyya with 697, and Daesh with 349. What makes this interesting is the generally agreed upon psychological and evolutionary explanation for why natural language use follows Zipf's Law: the principle of least effort (Adamic, 2011; Ferrer i Cancho & Solé, 2002).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Complex language has evolved to be as efficient as possible, and Zipf's law is the natural "outcome of the nontrivial arrangement of word–concept associations adopted for complying with hearer and speaker needs" (Ferrer i Cancho & Solé, 2002, p. 790). In other words, language has evolved to follow a Zipfian distribution because all other configurations take more effort: it is cognitively easier to use highly symbolic words frequently, only using less symbolic words (and less universally meaningful words) when absolutely necessary for sharing meaning. Thus when we see the frequency of articles mentioning each terrorist organization falling into a Zipfian distribution (rather than a normal or uniform distribution, etc.), we are left to assume that the organizations discussed most frequently must carry the most symbolic meaning, and are thus used to characterize the less frequently mentioned organizations.

We confirm this assumption – specifically in reference to the distribution anchor, al Qaeda – by looking at the co-occurrence of organizations within news articles, using a simple inclusion index measure. This coefficient measures the conditional probability that an article mentioning organization X (e.g., AQAP) will also mention organization Y (e.g., Core al Qaeda). It will take the maximum value of 1 when one of these organizations always appears when the second one appears, even if the reverse is not necessarily true. It will take the minimum value of 0 when the organizations never co-occur.

Confirming the assumptions derivative of Zipf's law, al Qaeda frequently has very high inclusion index coefficients, with a co-occurrence rate of over 30% for 33 of the 53 other State Department designated terrorist organizations.[8] The inclusion index coefficient can be considered significant in 29 of 53 cases, as shown in *Figure 2*. No other organization has comparable rates of co-occurrence. What this demonstrates is the central role that al Qaeda has played over the last two decades, frequently being discussed in connection with lesser known terrorist organizations. Given what we know about the principle of least effort, it may be concluded that al Qaeda is a symbolically meaningful organization used to characterize lesser known threats.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Constructing Terrorism: Framing al Qaeda and the Framing of al Qaeda

Having demonstrated the central role held by al Qaeda within the broader media discourse of terrorism, our attention now turns to understanding the discourse itself. Using a constant comparative method, we first identify the attributes of al Qaeda which are most commonly referenced (e.g., their organizational structure, motivations, etc.) and the 'values' these attributes most commonly take. Given the length restrictions of this manuscript we do not

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[8] This total excludes terrorist organizations with no mentions in our data set.

provide a full explication of each attribute value, but instead provide a general overview of our findings.[9] In the second part we shift from identifying the framing of al Qaeda to looking at instances wherein al Qaeda is used as a framing device. Again, the length restrictions of this manuscript prevent the full inclusion of our results. As such, we will only be providing a cursory overview of our findings as a demonstration of the role al Qaeda plays in the broader terrorism discourse.

Coder Assumptions

Before proceeding, it is useful to understand the three basic assumptions underlying the dual investigation of al Qaeda as a framing device and the framing of al Qaeda. First, it was assumed that communication through language is based on the idea that words have a shared meaning within a set context, second, that the process of encoding information into language requires making choices from among the options available in grammar, and finally that the choices made while encoding information into language, though not always conscious, are deliberate. From this, we can state that our primary concern was in identifying the repertoire of signs employed by journalists when writing about al Qaeda, or when using al Qaeda as a symbolic reference. Additionally, our interest was in identifying how the use of particular signs in context served to communicate wider ideas, identities and attitudes. Finally, we sought to make interpretative judgments as to why certain choices were used to shape meaning, instead of others, and the implications of these choices.

Attribute Framing and the Discursive Construction of al Qaeda

The purpose of this portion of our study was to identify and explicate the repertoire of attributes and attribute frames used by journalists when writing about al Qaeda and its actions.

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[9] The full results have been submitted for presentation at the 2016 International Communication Association Conference.

Our analysis of news articles published in the print versions of the New York Times and the Wall

Street Journal that reference al Qaeda[10] revealed four distinct attribute classes and a total of 19

different attribute frames (see Table 1): Inter/Intra-organizational structure (network,

hierarchical-type corporation, franchise-type corporation, plant-like organization), Functional

Identity (paramilitary, government/corporation, nefarious/shadowy, movement), Motivation

(idealistic/ideological, Islamic/religious, anti-American/anti-Western, confrontational/reaction

seeking), and Evaluative Judgment (destabilizing entity, evil/bad, radical/extreme, terrorist,

criminal, extraordinary threat, enemy). The manifestation of these attribute classes and frames

are explicated in full in a separate research report.[11] What follows is an abridged discussion of

the findings, comparing and contrasting the frames with a focus on their application within texts.

<div align="center">[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]</div>

Initially one of the more evident differences between the attribute classes is how they

differed in the manner they manifested within the text. Whereas the Inter/Intra-Organizational

Structure and Functional Identity classes were most often identified through the use of allusions

or metaphors (e.g., network/relational metaphors such as 'hubs' and 'cells'), the Motivation

attribute class was often stated explicitly (e.g., al Qaeda has an overtly ideological motivation).

However, a more comprehensive review of these four distinct attributes and their 19 discrete

frames reveals several areas of contradiction, overlap, and mutual exclusivity.

Our analysis showed that although some of the attribute frames seem to contradict one

another (e.g., hierarchical-type corporation vs. franchise-type corporation), this is not the case

overall. In fact, most of the attribute frames share the underlying connotation of al Qaeda as an

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[10] All articles were published between 01/01/13 and 12/31/14; we did not limit the sample solely to news articles, opting for maximum inclusion for this analysis.

[11] See: Smith, B. K., Figueroa-Caballero, A. & Stohl, M. (2015). *Al Qaeda in the American consciousness: The communicative construction of the terrorist actor*. Manuscript submitted for publication.

adversarial force (e.g., al Qaeda as 'evil/bad,' 'anti-American/anti-Western.,' a 'paramilitary,' or 'nefarious/shadowy'). Although these results are not entirely surprising, a review of previous work on attribute framing (Levin, Schneider, & Gaeth, 1998) suggests that the application of such attribute frames to al Qaeda and its actions necessarily influences how the group is fundamentally understood by the American public. In this case, the attribute frames contribute to the overarching notion of al Qaeda as a hostile enemy and as such they shape and limit our understanding of the group in that regard. Echoing Hülsse and Spencer (2008), our intent is not to argue that al Qaeda and its actions are not terroristic, but rather that how the group is discussed at large has implications for how we understand the group and interpret its actions.

Further, our results indicate that most of the attribute classes are composed of mutually exclusive frames. For example, the Inter/ Intra-Organizational Structure attribute class is composed of four wholly distinct structure-related attribute frames used to refer to al Qaeda within the text: network, hierarchical-type corporation, franchise-type corporation, and plant-like organization. Importantly, these attribute frames were not used in conjunction with one another. That is to say, you did not see al Qaeda referenced as having both a plant-like and hierarchical-type corporation infrastructure within the same coding unit. Likewise, within the Functional Identity attribute class al Qaeda is labeled as having a paramilitary, government-like/corporate-like, nefarious/shadowy, or social movement function, it was not portrayed as having more than one of these at a time.

Although in most instances attribute frames within a class are mutually exclusive, the attribute classes themselves are not. Thus, it was not uncommon to find attribute frames embedded in the coding unit that are drawn from, for example, both the Functional Identity and Motivation classes. In the same vein, there exists a stronger connection between some classes

than between others such that some attributes were identified together more often than others. For instance, evaluative judgments characterizing the organization and their actions as terrorists/terroristic are often accompanied with language establishing the functional identity of al Qaeda as a network. Alternatively, the criminal evaluative judgment is rarely associated with mentions of al Qaeda as a paramilitary group, but rather, it is associated with al Qaeda as a network, whose functional identity is characterized as nefarious/shadowy and whose motivation is confrontational or reaction seeking.

      One instance in which attribute frames are not wholly separate but in fact additive is within the Evaluative Judgments attribute class. Attribute frames in this class were often used in conjunction with one another; for example, it was not unusual to find al Qaeda referred to as both 'radical and extreme' and as 'a destabilizing entity' within the same coding unit. Indeed, as noted above, Evaluative Judgment attribute frames often appear in groups of two or three and, although our analysis revealed a level of interconnection amongst all of the attribute classes, the Evaluative Judgment attribute class was found to rarely manifest alone in the text but instead its primary role was to serve as an amplifier for the other attributes.

      The use of framing theory to identify how al Qaeda is communicatively constituted led to the identification of these four attribute classes and their 19 distinct attributes frames. By pinpointing the manner in which this particular terrorist actor is constructed in the American discourse, we can begin to look at some of the questions that have long been the focus of terrorism studies more generally: what causes terrorism, who are the terrorists, and how do they work to carry out their terrorist actions (i.e., their structure and operations; Hülsse & Spencer, 2008; Toros, 2008)? The overarching manifestation of al Qaeda as an adversarial force

throughout the attribute frames is the one clear and consistent theme that can be derived from our study and it necessarily colors how al Qaeda and its actions are evaluated.

Beyond this, the remaining characteristics needed to address the above questions appear to have a fluidity that make answering them a difficult task for communication and terrorism studies scholars alike. Perhaps the best example of this is how the organizational structure of al Qaeda is left untenably amorphous in the popular press. This lack of cohesion in conceptualizing the structural nature of al Qaeda is echoed in academic work and as a consequence is reflective of how the public understands al Qaeda and, as such, how it responds to the terrorist threat. However, it worth taking a close look at two specific attribute frames related to the theme of al Qaeda as an adversarial force, as they appear to be the predominate frames for understanding al Qaeda and its actions: al Qaeda as having a paramilitary function and al Qaeda as being motivated by ideology.

Function: Al Qaeda is a Paramilitary

The most common function attributed to al Qaeda was that of a paramilitary. Members of al Qaeda were often referred to as 'militants,' 'commandos,' 'insurgents,' 'rebels,' 'fighters,' etc. Members of al Qaeda were also described as taking 'orders.' In turn, al Qaeda was frequently described as 'attacking,' or engaging in 'offensives,' often with the organization's 'allies.' The organization was described as acquiring 'footholds' or setting up 'beach heads,' 'training camps,' 'staging areas' and 'command centers.' The use of military metaphor and description painted al Qaeda as a 'foreign invading force,' and in turn implied a particular problem solution, i.e., 'military intervention.'

Motivations: Al Qaeda is Idealistic or Ideological

More than any other motivational attribute frame, al Qaeda was described in this sample of texts as motivated by ideology. Importantly though, this attribute frame does not concern religious ideology, which we conceptualize as a separate motivational attribute. Instead, this attribute frame connoted al Qaeda's primary motivation as driven by a set of rules, both explicit and implicit, which sets boundaries and expectations for what al Qaeda will do in any given situation. It was implied throughout the texts that actions against al Qaeda would be responded to, and that an attack against one al Qaeda 'branch' was an attack against all al Qaeda branches. Moreover, the ideology of al Qaeda was primarily manifest in descriptions of what al Qaeda would not do, because of the organization's ideological motives. This was especially true when contrasting the organization against other groups, like Daesh. Al Qaeda was described as bound by its ideals, and several texts argued that their ideological motivations forced al Qaeda to break from Daesh.

Projecting the Known onto the Unknown: The Framing of Non-Dominant Actors

Identification of the available repertoire of attribute classes and frames used by journalists when discussing al Qaeda (especially the organizations function and motive) have allowed us to start thinking beyond the terrorist actor and its actions as a wholly objective phenomenon based on a knowable reality, and shift to an examination of how they are interpreted and are thus socially constructed. In doing so, the data showed that the manner in which al Qaeda is discussed not only has implications for how the organization itself is understood, but also for how it's framing shapes the broader terrorism discourse and to how emerging terrorist threats are attended.

Our preliminary analysis revealed a reoccurring theme—the use of al Qaeda as cultural frame of reference in media discussions of other terrorist groups. Indeed, the organizational metaphors present in texts were often used in order to paint other groups and actors as having an association (whether real or not) with al Qaeda. For instance, the phrase "al Qaeda like' was frequently used in lieu of naming less familiar terrorist organizations. We also demonstrated earlier that al Qaeda is clearly the predominate focus of terrorism coverage, serving as the anchor for the Zipfian distribution of articles mentioning different terrorist organizations. In turn, we demonstrated that the implications of this finding, as summarized in the principle of least effort, were realized in the frequent inclusion of al Qaeda in articles ostensibly discussing lesser known organizations.

The implications of this discursive practice are two-fold: first, it binds the cultural understanding of international terrorism to a particular actor and in doing so limits our understanding of the causes of terrorism to the particular set of framing attributes associated with al Qaeda's motivations. This in turn constricts our ability to solve the problem to using only al Qaeda-centric solutions. This point is echoed by Hülsse and Spencer (2008) in their discussion of counter-terrorism policies as inherently limited by a discursively derived understanding of al Qaeda. As they explain, "by mapping a source domain onto a target domain, a metaphor puts the target domain in a new light. By projecting the known onto the unknown, metaphors create reality; they constitute the object they signify" (p. 578). Similarly, when using al Qaeda as a framing device, the framed organization, or organizational actor, takes on (to some extent) the attributes associated with al Qaeda. However, we extend this line of thought not only by noting that other terrorist groups are also implicated in this discourse, but also that this particular facet constrains how we are able to understand and tackle emerging terrorist threats—the second

implication of using al Qaeda as a cultural frame of reference. Thus, it is our contention that although not every terrorist group falls neatly within the heretofore-outlined attribute classes and attribute frames used to communicatively constitute al Qaeda, they are most often treated as if they do. Further, the power of al Qaeda as a framing device is such that it imposes important limitations upon the understanding of terrorism more generally and hence the development of potential responses.

It should be noted that the use of al Qaeda as a framing device is not an inherently bad practice: by giving a familiar and culturally shared frame of reference, journalists are able to more clearly get information across to a wide audience. However, Entman (1993) makes note that "most frames are defined by what they omit as well as include, and the omissions…may be as critical as the inclusions in guiding the audience" (p. 54) To treat the unfamiliar groups within the framework used to understand al Qaeda necessarily masks the ways in which the organizations differ, harming the public's understanding.

Table 2 provides an extremely abridged version of our findings as they pertain to the identification of framing packages that utilize al Qaeda framing device. As with our investigation of how al Qaeda is framed, it is not within the scope of this paper to fully explicate the different framing packages, but instead to simply provide an abridged discussion of the findings. The results are explicated in full in a separate research report.[12]

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Looking specifically at articles mentioning al Qaeda that were published between 2013-14 in the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal*, we identified eleven distinct framing

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[12] See: Smith, B., Salcido, E., & Stohl, M. (2016, March). *Al-Qaeda in the American consciousness: The role of al-Qaeda in framing the global terrorist threat.* In R. Rice (Chair), *National Security and the Media.* Symposium conducted at the annual conference of the Western States Communication Association, San Diego, CA.

packages that utilize al Qaeda as a framing device: (a) devil you know, (b) to be or not to be, (c)

excuse, (d) team awesome, (e) descriptor/exemplar, (f) bad guy frame, (g) bad group frame, (h)

threat continuum, (i) enhancer, (j) something wicked this way comes, (k) good guy frame, and (l)

axis of evil.

One of the most surprising elements of this investigation was the realization that framing

packages which utilize al Qaeda as a framing device very rarely draw direct links to al Qaeda,

the primary exception to this rule being the 'devil you know' framing package, which utilizes

organizational metaphors to directly associate different organizations, whether a real link exists

or not.[13] Instead, the conclusions are generally implied. Similar to the framing of 'Islamic

terrorism' proposed by Jackson (2007), using al Qaeda as a framing device appears to provide for

"a series of oppositional binaries" which create "particular kinds of subjects within the overall

discourse and enforce highly constricting subject positions upon them vis-à-vis other subjects"

(p. 401). Therefore, using al-Qaeda as a frame is significant not only in transferring attributes to

unfamiliar object references, but also in terms of this 'oppositional binary'. For example, if al-

Qaeda is used in terms of: "French troops routed a militant group associated with al Qaeda", the

attributes associated with al Qaeda are applied to the unfamiliar and ill-defined 'militant group'

(an example of the 'devil you know' frame package) but opposite attributes are applied to the

'French troops' merely by being placed in opposition to al Qaeda (an example of a relatively

mild 'team awesome' frame package). These oppositional binaries serve a critical role as

reasoning devices throughout the corpus of texts.

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[13] In some cases, it is probable that direct 'links' do indeed exist, but in all cases this was unclear from the text itself, especially as many of the texts did not actually name the organization being framed, instead referring to them as 'militants' or 'rebels'.

The common thread running through all of these framing packages is the use of al Qaeda to define the other organizations and organization actors being framed, applying the attributes of al Qaeda, as largely defined within the press, to these other organizations. Again, the limits of the current paper preclude us fully explicating the impact of this and implications of this practice. However, a particular case did emerge in our investigation that serves to highlight the problems associated with the use of al Qaeda as a blanket heuristic for terrorism: the rise of the Islamic State

The Changing Face of Terror

The emergence of the terrorist organization known as Daesh within recent years has drawn considerable media attention. Our analysis, which covers the period of time in which Daesh entered the public consciousness, reveals a particular relationship between Daesh and al Qaeda—they're understood to be wholly distinct entities that differ in important ways (e.g., in their ideologies) but they are also inextricably connected. Their consistent association within the texts is understandable given that up until 2013 Daesh was formally affiliated with al Qaeda (Byman, 2015). However, their very different ideological stances, for example, al Qaeda's critique of Daesh's methods as too extreme and brutal, as well as their critique of Daesh's attack on Muslims, not only caused a schism between the two groups (Sly, 2014) but also points to potentially critical differences in the motivation behind their respective actions. In addition, the tactical strategies are qualitatively, and quantitatively distinct (Byman, 2015).

Despite these and other differences, the texts within our sample most commonly referred to Daesh as an 'al Qaeda offshoot' or an 'al Qaeda-linked splinter group.' These descriptions might be factually accurate, but as we have previously noted, the use of al Qaeda as a frame of reference prohibits a more nuanced understanding of Daesh as an independent terrorist

organization with its own unique motivations, organizational structure, functional identity, etc. These somewhat self-imposed limitations have far-reaching implications for how the United States responds to the changing face of terrorism and more importantly, in the context of this study, how the public understands that response and the organization at which it is directed.

Conclusion

We have argued that the media play a significant role in the transmission and construction of the understanding of terrorism and consequently how the public (and public officials) think about the construction of counterterrorism choices and policies. We have examined how al Qaeda has dominated the construction of the terrorist threat through its emergence as the primary referent for understanding terrorism and the organizations that employ it. We found four attribute classes and nineteen distinct attribute frames which have been used to describe al Qaeda and its behaviors. In addition to the importance that these frames have had for shaping the public's understanding of terrorism, perhaps the more important impact has been the use of these al Qaeda frames and attributes to frame Daesh and other emerging threats, masking the ways in which the organizations and their threats differ, harming the public's understanding and quite possibly masking policy maker's understanding as well. The power of frames to structure not only what we think about when we think about threats and the organizations that employ them as well as how these frames eliminate choices most vividly illustrates the importance of identifying the frames which structure our understanding of terrorism.

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Tables

Table 1

Attributes and Attribute Frames Used in the Communicative Construction of Al Qaeda

Al Qaeda Attributes	Attribute Frames
Inter/Intra Organizational Structure	Network
	Corporate [Hierarchical]
	Corporate [Franchise]
Functional Identity	Paramilitary
	Government / Corporate Like
	Nefarious / Shadowy
	Movement
Motivation	Idealistic / Ideological
	Islamic / Religious
	Anti-American / Anti-Western
	Confrontational / Seeking Reaction
Evaluative Judgment	Destabilizing
	Evil / Bad
	Radical / Extremist
	Terrorist
	Criminal
	Extraordinary Threat
	Enemy

Table 2

Framing Packages Utilizing al Qaeda as a Framing Device

| Framing Package	Description of Package and Implied Connotations
DEVIL YOU KNOW	Gives a frame of reference to unknown or little known entities; generally uses organizational metaphors to make connection between entities
TO BE OR NOT TO BE	Similar to 'Devil You Know' in manifestation, but expressed with caveats; framed entity is explicitly not part of the organization, or their link to the organization is explicitly in doubt
EXCUSE	Excusing or justifying action or (more commonly) inaction because… al Qaeda
TEAM AWESOME	Saying how 'awesome' a country group or individual is because of actions against al Qaeda (e.g., glorification)
DESCRIPTOR / EXEMPLAR	Al Qaeda as simile; used to identify the typology under consideration; ("al Qaeda style"; something similar to what al Qaeda does)
BAD GUY	Individual linked to group, therefore individual bad (explicit individual, explicit connection, generally implicit connotation)
BAD GROUP	A group or country that is not the threat, but actively 'supports' or previously 'supported' (loosely defined) the threat, therefore bad; manifests differently than and implies different conclusions than the 'bad guy' frame
ENHANCER	Al Qaeda multiplies an existing threat (e.g. fighters, radicals); 'radicals' = bad, 'Qaeda radicals' = worse
SOMETHING WICKED THIS WAY COMES	Shadowy actions / vague fears used to highlight the specter of the evil; fears are approaching but not present (generally)
GOOD GUY	Individual linked to actions against Qaeda (past - also present? -), therefore individual good (explicit individual, explicit connection, generally implicit connotation)
AXIS OF EVIL	Using al Qaeda as a baseline to describe something else (generally direct comparison between al Qaeda and another group; better than / worse than / same as)

Figures
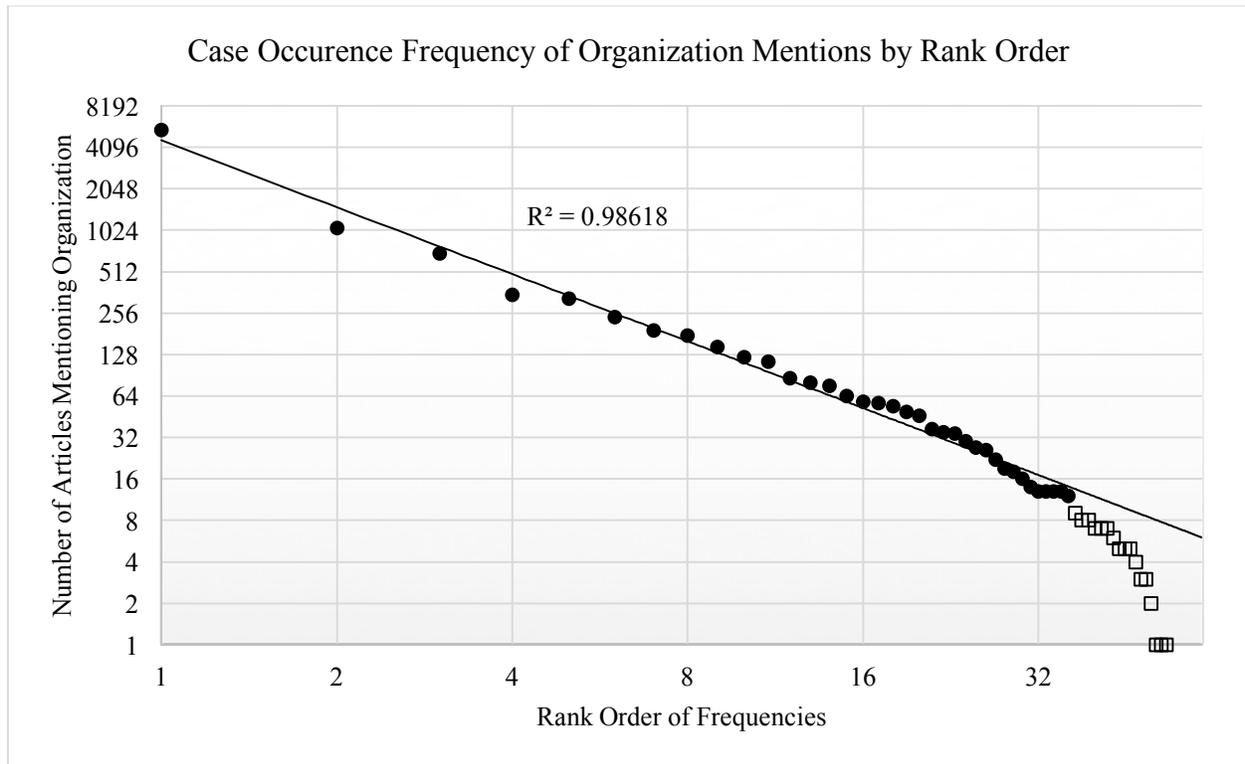
Figure 1. Graph of the case occurrence frequency (i.e., number of articles mentioning each State Department designated terrorist organization) by frequency rank. The straight line is the expected distribution if case occurrence frequency follows a power-law distribution (e.g., Zipf's law), and has a coefficient of determination of .986, meaning that expected distribution explains 98% of the variance in the observed distribution. As is typical with a Zipfian distribution (and with all power-law distributions), the power-law distribution tends to breakdown at small quantitates. As such, we have excluded those organizations from the calculation of the trend line (they are included in the graph, and displayed as squares). The R^2 for all organizations = .925.
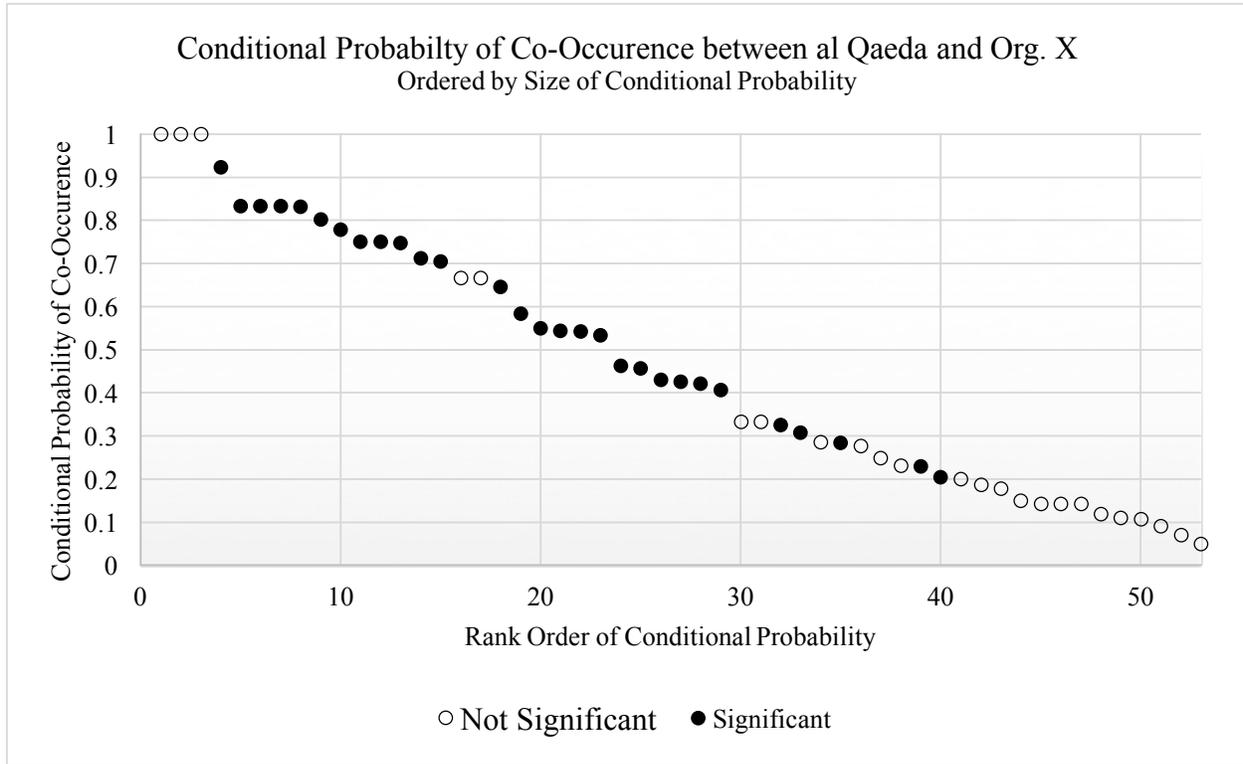
Figure 2. The probability that al Qaeda is mentioned in an article when organization X is mentioned, by the rank order of the inclusion index coefficient. Significance is determined by the association strength coefficient (>0), which measures the co-occurrence of items taking into consideration the possibility that two items will occasionally co-occur by chance. By this method, 29 of the 53 inclusion index co-occurrence coefficients cannot be attributed to chance alone, and as such should be considered statistically significant.

Appendix A – Data Collection Guidelines

The following information was given, verbatim, to the individuals who assisted with data

collection. The data collectors were told to follow the instructions in the document exactly, and

to note any difficulties in procuring the requested documents.

Instructions

```
URL: http://search.proquest.com/nytimes/advanced

INPUT:
Under Advanced Search:
search strings =
ROW 1: Exact("suicide bombings" OR "terrorism" OR "serial bombings" OR
"bombings" OR "biological & chemical terrorism" OR "counterterrorism")  in
     Subject heading (all) --- SU
ROW 2:      OR    (     terror     OR    terrorism  )     in     Anywhere
ROW 3:      OR    (     terrorist  OR    terrorists )     in     Anywhere
ROW 4:      OR    (     al-Qaeda   OR    Qaeda )     in    Anywhere
ROW 5:      OR    (     al-Qaida   OR    Qaida )     in    Anywhere
ROW 6:      OR    (     al-Qa'ida  OR    Qa'ida     )     in     Anywhere
ROW 7:      OR    (     Exact("Al Qaeda in Mesopotamia" OR "Al Qaeda")  OR
     )     in          Company/organization --- ORG


Under Search Options:
Limit to: Full Text
Publication Date: Specific date range...
     Start:      01/01/2013
     End:  01/31/2013
Source type: check "Newspapers"
Sort Results by: Publication date (oldest first)
Items per page: 100

CLICK SEARCH

THERE SHOULD BE 265 RESULTS - IF THERE ARE NOT 265, RE-DO THE SEARCH, DOUBLE
CHECKING ALL OPTIONS

TO SAVE YOURSELF TIME, SWITCH FROM "DETAILED VIEW" TO "BRIEF VIEW"

USE THE "SELECT ###-###" BUTTON TO SELECT ALL 265 JANUARY ARTICLES

NYT_01_2013!!!IMPORTANT!!! It will say there are 265 articles until you get
to the final page. However, as you will see, there are only 264.

ONCE ALL ARTICLES ARE SELECTED CLICK "EXPORT/SAVE"

EXPORT/SAVE:
Output to:  Text only
Content:    Custom
Include:    Uncheck all boxes

CLICK CONTINUE

CUSTOM FORMAT:
REMOVE "Publication info" from the selected fields
ADD THE FOLLOWING FROM THE "Available fields:
```

Abstract
Author
Company / organization
Country of publication
Database
Document type
Full Text
ISSN
Last updated
Location
Pages
People
ProQuest document ID
Publication date
Publication year
Section
Subject
Title
column

CLICK CONTINUE

FILE WILL BEGIN TO DOWNLOAD. DO NOT NAVIGATE AWAY FROM THIS PAGE, OR THE
SEARCH RESULTS PAGE UNTIL THE DOCUMENT HAS DOWNLOADED.
SAVE THE DOCUMENT AS "NYT_01_2013.txt"

OPEN THE DOCUMENT AND MAKE SURE THERE ARE NO ISSUES

REPEAT PROCESS EXACTLY AS ABOVE FOR ALL TWELVE MONTHS IN 2013 - ONE MONTH AT
A TIME
        Note: it may be easiest to simply click "Modify search" and then change
the date
!!!IMPORTANT!!! After each month, make sure to DESELECT all of the articles.
If you do not de-select the articles, they will be included in the next month

NAME EACH FILE NYT_MO_YEAR.txt

ONCE NYT IS DONE, DO SAME FOR WSJ (i.e. wall street journal)

URL: http://search.proquest.com/wallstreetjournal/advanced

NOTE: After you do the search, there is one additional step for the wall-
street journal. In the search results, on the right hand side of the page,
click the plus sign next to "publication title"
        Select Wall Street Journal NOT "Wall Street Journal (Online)"
!!!IMPORTANT!!! The selection of publication titles will have to be repeated
every time you search. The option is not saved when you modify the search.

Save all WSJ articles in the same format as the NYT, replacing "NYT" with
"WSJ".

Following completion for all of 2013 (for both WSJ and NYT), repeat the
process for 2014, 2012, 2011, and on backward through January of 1996.