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journal homepage: [www.elsevier.com/locate/jpube](http://www.elsevier.com/locate/jpube)The effect of media attention on terrorism<sup>☆</sup>

Michael Jetter

University of Western Australia, 35 Stirling Highway, Crawley, WA 6009, Australia  
 IZA, Bonn, Germany  
 CESifo, Munich, Germany

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## ABSTRACT

This paper tests for a causal connection between media attention devoted to terrorism and subsequent attacks. Analyzing 61,132 attack days in 201 countries produces evidence that increased *New York Times* coverage encourages further attacks in the same country. Using natural disasters in the United States as an exogenous variation diminishing media attention, the link appears causal. One additional article is suggested to produce 1.4 attacks over the following week, equivalent to three casualties on average. This result is robust to numerous alternative estimations and it appears unlikely that attacks are simply postponed. If terrorists do not receive media attention, they will attack less.

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*How do you defeat terrorism? Don't be terrorised.*

Salman Rushdie, novelist

## 1. Introduction

Is media attention devoted to terrorism actively encouraging further terrorist attacks? It has been suggested that terrorist organizations systematically seek media coverage to spread their message, create fear, and recruit followers (Wilkinson, 1997; Pries-Shimsh, 2005; Frey et al., 2007; Walsh, 2010). Most of the time, attacks are not even directly aimed at specific victims but are rather conducted to scare and convey a message (Krueger and Malečková, 2003). Thus, it is possible that once the media is paying attention a terrorist organization may seek to exploit that platform and continue their attacks. The following pages present empirical evidence that supports this hypothesis.

In reality, terrorism has become a popular news topic: media outlets worldwide dedicate TV marathons, front-page headlines, and

in-depth portraits to terrorist groups.<sup>1</sup> In fact, the extent of the media coverage terrorist organizations receive (free of charge) has been compared to the “advertising budgets of some of the world’s largest corporations” by Melnick and Eldor (2010, p.965). It is possible that people’s irrational fear of terrorism is, at least in part, owed to such media exposure. Half of the US population is worried that they or their family will be a victim of terrorism (PRRI, 2015), even though the odds of dying at the hands of a terrorist are approximately equal to drowning in one’s own bathtub (Mueller, 2006; Sandler, 2015). Similarly, according to a World Values Survey study (WVS, 2015), people worldwide worry more about terrorism than losing their job, a war involving their country, or a civil war.

A natural question to ask then is whether media coverage of terrorism carries direct consequences for the behavior of terrorist groups. Once in the spotlight, terrorist groups may choose to exploit this exposure to further spread their message, create fear, and recruit followers. Thus, presumably unintended consequences of covering terrorism may result in encouraging terrorists to continue attacking. If this were the case, society could draw several conclusions. For example, self-imposed restrictions have been powerful drivers in the media industry concerning other topics, such as the sensible and limited coverage of suicides or the coverage of so-called “sucker

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 E-mail address: [mjetter7@gmail.com](mailto:mjetter7@gmail.com) (M.i. Jetter).

<sup>1</sup> In general, media coverage of terrorism (like coverage of other issues) could be demand- and/or supply-driven (Gentzkow et al., 2015; Puglisi and Snyder, 2015), where the demand side relates to consumer preferences and the supply side is commonly associated with the preferences of media owners.

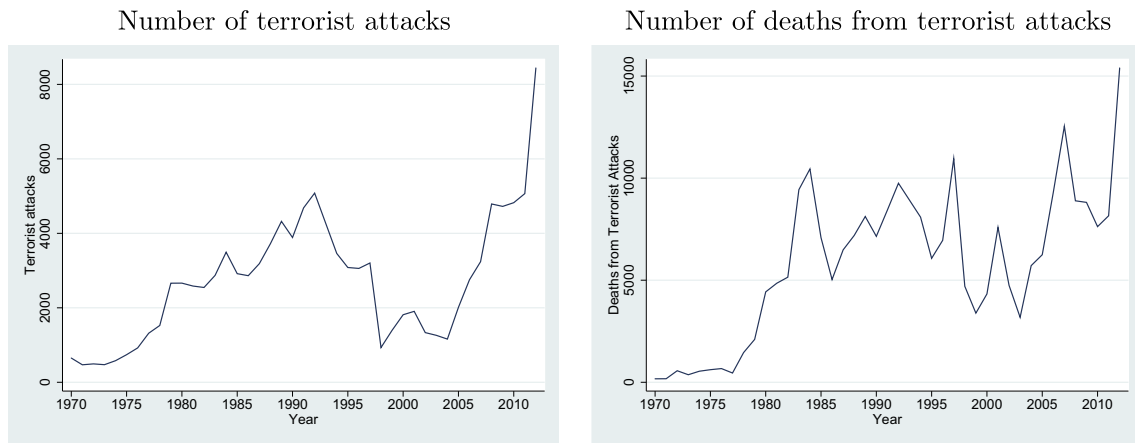


Fig. 1. Terrorism over time, using data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD).

punches.”<sup>2</sup> One could imagine similar arrangements for the coverage of terrorism, raising awareness in the media industry. Other, more drastic options include policies that regulate the coverage of terrorist attacks.

Unfortunately, it has been proven difficult to empirically test the systematic interplay between media attention and terrorism, not to mention studies allowing for a *causal* interpretation. In addition to limited data availability and comparability, persistent endogeneity concerns have plagued such studies.<sup>3</sup> The following pages try to take one step in that direction, studying a sample of 61,132 attack days in 201 countries from 1970 to 2012. First, I derive a measure for the international media attention each attack day receives in the *New York Times* (NYT). Then, I use this measure of media coverage as a predictor of upcoming attacks in the same country. To isolate causality, natural disasters in the United States (US) provide an exogenous variation, decreasing media attention devoted to contemporary terrorist attacks in the rest of the world. Such events prove to be a strong predictor of the media coverage terrorist attacks receive in the NYT, but are unlikely connected to non-US based terrorist organizations through other meaningful channels.

The findings produce quantitative evidence supporting the hypothesis that media attention devoted to terrorism actively encourages subsequent attacks. The results from instrumental variable estimations reveal a robust positive effect of NYT coverage on the number of subsequent attacks in the same country. The magnitude of the derived relationship suggests that one additional article increases the number of attacks in the following week by approximately 1.4. This corresponds to about three casualties on average.

These results account for the inclusion of a comprehensive set of control variables, such as the detailed characteristics of the initial attack, country fixed effects, country-specific time trends, and country-year fixed effects for countries most notorious for terrorism,

in addition to economic, political, and social aspects. Further, I find no evidence that decreased media attention, because of a natural disaster occurring in the United States, merely postpones attacks. Thus, less press coverage may indeed lead to fewer terrorist attacks overall and not just affect their timing.

The paper aims to contribute to several areas of research. First, it suggests a methodology for systematically collecting data on media coverage of specific terrorist attacks and isolating the causal effect on subsequent actions. In the spirit of [Eisensee and Strömberg \(2007\)](#), who analyze the effect of media coverage on disaster aid, researchers may be able to better investigate the consequences of media coverage. Second, regarding data collection and availability, the paper provides an example of how we can use internet archives to systematically derive data that are readily available for analyzing timely questions.<sup>4</sup>

Third, the paper adds to the growing literature on the consequences of media coverage. In particular, the media has been shown to influence economic and political decision making, such as consumer decisions or voting behavior (e.g., see [DellaVigna and Gentzkow, 2010](#); [Puglisi and Snyder, 2015](#), for recent summaries). Fourth and final, the paper adds to our understanding of the determinants of terrorism. Although media attention has long been speculated to provide an incentive for terrorists’ strategies, this paper provides quantitative evidence using 43 years of data on 61,132 attack days.

The paper proceeds with a discussion of the literature on the media-terrorism link, before introducing the data and methodology. [Section 5](#) presents the main findings, in addition to a number of additional specifications and robustness checks. Finally, [Section 6](#) concludes.

## 2. Background and literature review

### 2.1. The rise of terrorism

[Fig. 1](#) documents the recent surge of terrorism. In 2012 alone, 15,396 casualties and 25,426 wounded victims were recorded by the Global Terrorism Database (GTD, introduced by [LaFree and Dugan, 2007](#)). Beyond the immediate victims, the substantial economic and

<sup>2</sup> In the case of suicides, it is recommended to “decide whether to report,” “modify or remove information that may increase risk,” and “present information about suicide in ways that may be helpful” (see [ABC News, 2014](#); [Mindframe, 2014](#), or [www.reportingonsuicide.org](#)). Indeed, the media appears to have found a sensible way to report on suicides, usually referring to “incidents” and wisely choosing words that are unlikely to encourage copycats. In the case of “sucker punches” or “king hits”, an ample discussion in Australia about labeling sudden knockout punches as an act of cowardice has led to a change in language by the media (e.g., see [ABC News, 2014](#), or [Courier Mail, 2014](#)).

<sup>3</sup> Most notably, [Rohner and Frey \(2007\)](#) suggest positive Granger causality between terrorist attacks and media attention, counting the word “terrorism” in the *New York Times* (NYT) with 87 monthly observations.

<sup>4</sup> Another recent example includes [Stephens-Davidowitz \(2014\)](#), who studies the effect of racial sentiments on presidential elections in the US, using data from Google searches.

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