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Project website: https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/

Helping journalists provide the information citizens need without giving terrorists the attention they want.
**Project Summary**

In covering terrorist attacks, journalists confront a challenging dilemma: news about terrorist activities is both what citizens need and what terrorists crave. Terrorists commit violent attacks to spread fear within targeted states, to promote their causes among non-targeted populations, and to attract as well as inspire new recruits. Achieving any of these goals requires generating widespread publicity (of a particular sort). Yet journalists cannot simply ignore terror attacks. Such events are undeniably important, and citizens in targeted states need to be informed both about the events themselves and the adequacy of state efforts to prevent and respond to them. Only by having broad access to such information can citizens in targeted states gain the understanding needed to support governmental policies for mitigating terrorist threats and to hold their governments accountable for what they have done (or failed to do). Yet the normal journalistic methods for covering important events are inadequate for reporting on terror attacks: terrorist perpetrators are rarely available for interviews or fit for public questioning, the security agencies responding to terror attacks often cannot or will not give out hard information about what they know, and using standard journalistic norms of fairness, balance, or objectivity for reporting on terror attacks would grant the perpetrators of violence a privileged voice in justifying their own actions. As a consequence of these limitations, journalists often default to giving extensive attention to details of the attacks themselves, as well as to the fear reactions and suffering of (potential) victims. This is precisely the kind of news coverage that terrorists want.

As summarized at [https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/](https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/), The Responsible Terrorism Coverage (ResTeCo) project aimed to help journalists cover terrorist events more responsibly by:

- identifying the kinds of news coverage that terrorists want
- analyzing decades of reporting from around the world to understand what kinds of news coverage terrorists typically get
- recommending best practices for responsible news organizations to follow that will minimize the usefulness of that coverage for terrorist groups and create societal resilience to terrorist attacks

The ResTeCo project also aimed to stimulate new and innovative cross-national research among several scholarly disciplines by:

- Defining what responsible news coverage of terrorism looks like from different theories of democratic politics
- Developing new software tools for automatically measuring indicators for responsible terrorism coverage
- Generating publishable research that assesses terrorism news quality cross-nationally over long spans of time
- Releasing datasets that stimulate additional research by multiple scholarly communities

**Project Origins and Goals**

The fragmented nature of research literatures on strategic communication goals of terrorist groups represent an important gap in our ability to identify and mitigate societal vulnerabilities to the strategic aims of violent non-state actors. Within the terrorism literature produced by political scientists and peace
science researchers, media discourse about terrorism is rarely studied empirically. Instead, attention to media reports within this literature tends to focus mainly on the challenges of using news reports to generate valid data on the times and places of terrorist events (e.g., Behlendorf et al., 2016). In the few cases where media coverage is directly analyzed in its own right, these studies tend to measure variance in news attention without examining the content of that news coverage (e.g., Asal & Hoffman, 2015). Since terrorists are seeking much more than mere awareness of their actions, this lack of systematic attention to the content of terrorism news within the literatures of political science and peace science represents a notable and important omission.

In contrast, the research literature on media and terrorism produced by communication scholars tends to focus primarily on news discourse about terrorist acts that focus on single country cases. Although a sizeable portion of the communication literature on terrorism coverage has been marked by normative concerns about the quality of terrorism news, few studies explicitly define or justify the quality criteria that mark appropriate types of terrorism reporting beyond the obvious commitment that coverage should not directly affirm terrorist strategies. Therefore, it is not clear even after 50 years of research which aspects of terrorism coverage might be deemed problematic from which normative angle. To fill this gap and to theoretically ground the ResTeCo project, the research team aimed to devise a multiperspectival normative assessment (MNA) scheme for terrorism coverage in the spirit of Althaus (2012) and Wessler & Rinke (2016). In addition, our 2016 review of roughly 450 communication publications on media and terrorism revealed only 25 using quantitative research designs that explicitly compared media coverage of terrorism across more than one country or language. Most of these 25 studies either compared just two countries, or compared just two news outlets publishing in different languages.

One likely reason that the extant literature on media and terrorism has so rarely ventured beyond two-country comparisons is that computational methods for analyzing news content at large scales have rarely been employed. Instead, the size and scope of such studies are limited by the choice to use human-generated content analysis strategies, which place important limits on the types of comparison that can be reliably implemented on the smaller scales that human analysts can reliably work. The ResTeCo project not only aimed to apply innovative computational methods of content analysis to an unprecedented collection of news coverage from around the world spanning 1945 to the present, but also to produce as an intended byproduct of this proposed research an extracted features dataset that will be released to the broader research community to stimulate a new generation of cross-national comparative research on news coverage of terrorism without requiring members of that research community to master computational methods themselves.

In summary, the Responsible Terrorism Coverage (ResTeCo) project asks how journalists around the world can responsibly report on terror attacks in ways that give citizens the information they need without providing terrorists with the kinds of attention they want. The goals of the ResTeCo project were fourfold:

1. Develop a multidimensional normative framework drawn from competing theories for democratic politics that defines concrete indicators of what responsible news coverage of terrorism looks like from each theoretical perspective;
2. Develop new software tools for automatically measuring these quality indicators in Arabic-, Dutch-, English-, German-, and Turkish-language news texts;
3. Generate publishable research that addresses important questions for social scientists, journalists, and governments by analyzing news coverage of terrorism across multiple countries.
over long spans of time, scales that go far beyond anything yet seen in the published research on media and terrorism; and

4. Provide researchers around the globe with thoroughly validated metadata and extracted features on the extent and qualities of media coverage about terror attacks that can be used to extend and refine the project’s insights long after the project is formally concluded.

Our project team brought unique methodological and substantive expertise as well as news data to the project. Scott Althaus (University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, USA) has expertise in large scale text-analytics projects and normative analysis of news discourse. He directs the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research, which maintains an index of over 170 million news stories—drawn from every country in the world and spanning the period 1945 to the present—that was extensively mined for the project. Hartmut Wessler (Mannheim University, Germany) has expertise on normative analysis of terrorism coverage and had previously collaborated with the Cline Center in analyzing a large collection of news coverage about global climate change. He also brought extensive experience in comparative analysis of news discourse across multiple countries and languages. Wouter van Atteveldt (Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam, Netherlands) has a background in computational linguistics and has co-developed various tools for semantic network analysis in Dutch and English, automatically determining who says and does what to whom.

By charting the quality of terrorism coverage at a global scale, with historical depth, and across multiple languages, the ResTeCo project aimed to clarify how journalists in different places and times have reported on terror attacks, and what responsible terrorism coverage looks like within the limits of journalistic professionalism and media logic. By developing a normative framework and concrete quality indicators for terrorism coverage, and by providing automatic tools to measure these indicators, this project was designed to foster debate among professionals and contribute to improving the quality of terrorism coverage worldwide.

Project Activities, Team, and Participants

Our project brought together three teams, each contributing distinctive forms of methodological expertise, subject-matter expertise, and news data.

The University of Illinois (USA) team based in the Cline Center for Advanced Social Research at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign brought expertise in large scale text-analytics projects, political communication in violent conflicts, and normative analysis of news discourse. Led by Cline Center director Scott Althaus (faculty lead), the Illinois team included Cline Center research affiliate Dr. Marc Jungblut (Postdoctoral Researcher, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich), Cline Center staff members Joseph Bajjalieh and Dan Shalmon, and graduate student researchers Pradnyesh Joshi, Yumeng Bu, Subhankar Ghosh, and Rebeca Agosto Rosa. The Cline Center team analyzed seven decades of terrorism news coverage from the New York Times as well as global news coverage of terrorism from recent years.

The Mannheim University (Germany) team of Hartmut Wessler (faculty lead) and Chung-hong Chan (postdoctoral researcher) brought expertise on normative analysis of terrorism coverage and extensive experience in comparative analysis of news discourse across multiple countries and languages. The Mannheim team analyzed news coverage of terrorism, refugees, and immigrants from six countries spanning the 2015-16 period.
The Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (Netherlands) team of Wouter van Atteveldt (faculty lead) and Kasper Welbers (assistant professor) specialized in computational linguistics and text analytics methods for semantic network analysis in multiple languages. The Amsterdam team worked with an extensive array of news data including the Guardian newspaper from the United Kingdom and several Dutch newspapers.

The project commenced June 1, 2017 with primary cross-team communications occurring by email and a dedicated Slack account shared by all members of the three project teams. The first major cross-team meeting was held in Urbana, IL (USA) in January 2018 as part of the Cline Center’s CRESTA text analytics workshop. This meeting served as a gathering point for the Illinois, Amsterdam, and Mannheim teams to meet and spend five days working on various aspects of the project. The second cross-team ResTeCo meeting was hosted by Mannheim University in Germany during November 2018 which served as a gathering point for the Illinois, Amsterdam, and Mannheim teams to meet and spend three days working on various aspects of the project. At this second meeting it was decided that a monthly video conference would help to improve the coordination of cross-team tasks. The first of these trans-Atlantic video conference meetings started in January 2018 and continued through the remaining project period. A brief coordination meeting with representatives from the three ResTeCo teams was held as an afternoon mini-workshop in Washington DC during May 2019 as part of the International Communication Association meeting that several team members were attending. The final extended workshop gathering was hosted by the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam in the Netherlands during December 2019 which allowed the Illinois, Amsterdam, and Mannheim teams to meet and spend three days working on various aspects of the project. The final major cross-team gathering was expected to occur as part of the 2020 meeting of the International Communication Association (ICA), which was intended to be the “launching event” for public release of the ResTeCo project’s data deliverables. The combined three-country ResTeCo teams succeeded in getting a total of five project-related papers accepted for the May 2020 ICA conference as well as a “Blue Sky Workshop” event to introduce communication researchers to the various data deliverables and train them in their use for research projects. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 global pandemic had other plans, and the intended launch event was relegated to a series of prepared video segments which remain available to the scholarly community on the https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/ web site. The conference’s sudden switch to a fully-virtual format left workshops like ours stranded with no way to interact with visitors or otherwise publicize our presence at the conference. As a result, while the intended launch event succeeded in pushing out our released data to conference attendees and beyond, it failed in generating as much “buzz” about the data release as we had planned and expected.

In terms of project management challenges, the three project teams operated about as smoothly and predictably as one could hope. Many project tasks took longer in practice than the team anticipated (e.g., the topic modelling of all terrorism-related stories in the New York Times corpus turned out to be more labor-intensive than anticipated due to challenges integrating OCR content with “born digital” content as well as the need to rigorously human-validate the final topic clusters), and one planned data source was unable to be used in the project because the data vendor turned out to be completely unresponsive to repeated requests for a purchase invoice (i.e., the ITERATE terrorism dataset). The biggest challenge for the project was the onset of global pandemic. About a third of the way through this performance period, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the world in force. The project teams had to shift into fully-remote working and the associated disruptions with managing workflows from home had a detrimental impact on our project performance. The Illinois team ended up requesting a 12-month no-cost extension (which was
approved by NEH) to ensure that all project deliverables would be completed at the quality level that we expect of Cline Center work, and to account for the uncertainties that might befall the project if one of our team members fell ill.

**Project Outcomes**

The original proposal anticipated that project deliverables would include six planned research articles, a project web page, and an unspecified number of publicly-released data sets and open-source software tools. The final project outcomes include eight publications, four additional working papers in preparation for submission to peer-reviewed journals, 11 conference presentations, seven pieces of open-source software, six publicly-released datasets, and separate sets of recommendations to guide how journalists and social media users can responsibly discuss terrorist attacks. All of these materials can be accessed via the project website at [https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/](https://responsibleterrorismcoverage.org/).

**Publications**


**Working Papers**


Open-Source Software Tools

1. rsyntax – R library to help dealing with syntactic structure
2. gtdnews – Online appendix with data and code for the Linking Event Archives to News paper. This also contains key parts of the 'restecode' repository
3. RNewsflow – Tools for analyzing content homogeneity and news diffusion using computational text analysis
4. textsdc – Statistical Data Cleaning For Text Data
5. textplex – Calculate textual complexity using the algorithm by Tolochko & Boomgaarden (2019)
6. resdtnf – Responsible Document-Term Matrix Format
7. rectr – Reproducible Extraction of Cross-lingual Topics using R

Publicly-Released Data Sets

New York Times Extracted Features Datasets (https://doi.org/10.13012/B2IDB-4638196_V1 and https://github.com/chainsawriot/ots) – Metadata, extracted entities, geocoded locations, sentiment scores, topic model weights, and machine learning classifier results for over 350,000 terrorism-related news items published between 1945 and 2018

– Sentiment scores for all news items published between 1980 and 2006

Global News Extracted Features Datasets (for BBC Monitoring https://doi.org/10.13012/B2IDB-2128492_V1; for FBIS/OSC https://doi.org/10.13012/B2IDB-6360821_V1) – Metadata, extracted entities, geocoded locations, sentiment scores, topic model weights, machine learning classifier results for all terrorism-related news items published between in global news outlets monitored by the Foreign Broadcast Information Service (now
Open Source Center) between 1995 and 2013 and by BBC Monitoring’s Summary of World Broadcasts between 1979 and 2019

Guardian Extracted Features Dataset (available at gtdnews)
- Linkage data for GTD events (N = 112,091) and all coverage of violent events in The Guardian newspaper (N = 446,612) over a period of 13 years, from 2006 to 2018. The repository contains only metadata, but provides code and instructions to collect the full raw data and replicate the linkage

Multilingual Dataset for Sentiment Analysis (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/A4DQP)
- Extracted features from Arabic-, Dutch-, English-, German-, and Turkish-language news texts comparing human-validated emotional tone in over 560,000 articles addressing the 2015-16 Syrian refugee crisis

Recommendations for Journalists and Social Media Users
To provide actionable steps that news organizations and social media users could take to reduce the likelihood of advancing terrorist goals when reporting or sharing information about terror attacks, the ResTeCo project team developed six recommendations for journalists and news organizations and another eight recommendations for social media users and platforms.

Project Evaluation and Impact
In terms of the range and number of project outcomes, the project was more successful than initially envisioned in the original proposal. At the same time, we also faced a number of institutional challenges that left us with some “lessons learned” to pass along to future cross-national data mining collaborative efforts involving textual data restricted both by national laws regarding copyright and licensing agreements with particular institutions that limited what we could do with the data across project teams. The primary institutional challenges were in navigating the complex legal and ethical boundaries required to determine how much access (of what sort) the Amsterdam and Mannheim teams could have to licensed and in-copyright text data curated by the Illinois team. We learned a great deal over the project’s first two years and experienced several frustrations in our attempts to provide desired access to licensed content when copyright and contract laws vary so considerably between Germany, the Netherlands, and the USA. The three PIs ended up summarizing the challenges we encountered as well as the ways we overcame them in a separate peer-reviewed publication that appeared in Political Communication in 2020 as part of a special issue on computational political communication research. This article’s “lessons learned” were subsequently incorporated into an open education resource that emerged from an NEH-funded “Building Legal Literacies for Text Data Mining Institute” held virtually in June 2020.

Project Continuation and Long-Term Impact
The ResTeCo project teams hope to continue collaborating with the publicly-released datasets that were produced as project deliverables. However, it is unlikely that we will be able to continue funding this cross-national collaboration without additional Trans-Atlantic Partnership support in the form of future competitions like the one that funded this project. While separate EU-level funding sources are available to sustain future collaborative work between the Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam and Mannheim University
teams, there appear to be no relevant sources of funding to continue collaborations between these two and the University of Illinois team.

References

