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## **Press Coverage of Lone-Actor Terrorism in the UK and Denmark:**

### **Shaping the Reactions of the Public, Affected Communities and Copycat Attackers**

#### **Abstract**

*Following 9/11, Al-Qaeda-orchestrated plots were considered the greatest threat to Western security and sparked the coalition's war on terror. Close to a decade later, the post-9/11 threat landscape had shifted significantly, leading then CIA-director Leon Panetta to describe 'the lone-wolf strategy' as the main threat to the United States. Subsequent lone-actor attacks across the West, including the cities of London, Nice, Berlin, Stockholm, Ottawa and Charleston, further entrenched perspectives of a transformed security landscape in the 'after, after-9/11' world. The unique features of lone-actor terrorism, including the challenges of interdiction and potential of copycat attacks, mean that the media is likely to play a particularly important role in shaping the reactions of the public, affected communities and copycat attackers. This paper presents findings from a content analysis of British and Danish newspaper reporting of lone-actor terrorism between January 2010 and February 2015. The study highlights that lone-actor terrorism is framed, with national variations, as a significant and increasing problem in both countries; that Islamist lone-actors are frequently represented as distinct from far-right lone-actors; and that some reporting, despite relatively limited amplification of specific terrorist messages, potentially aids lone-actors by detailing state vulnerabilities to attacks.*

**KEY WORDS:** Media, Terrorism, Lone-Wolf, Lone-Actor

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## **Introduction**

In the wake of 9/11, externally orchestrated acts of terrorism committed by groups such as Al-Qaeda were considered the greatest threat to Western security. This perception shaped the security policies of the USA and many European states, culminating in the coalition's global war on terror (Bush 2002). Close to a decade later, the post-9/11 threat landscape had shifted, and Leon Panetta, then head of the CIA, described 'the lone-wolf strategy' as the main threat to the US (CBS News 2010). Subsequent lone-actor attacks across the West, including the cities of London, Nice, Berlin, Stockholm, Ottawa and Charleston, have further entrenched perspectives of a transformed security landscape in the 'after, after-9/11' world. The emergence of lone attacks as a primary security concern sharpen the focus on a range of issues, including media coverage of terrorism. The unique features of lone-actor terrorism, including the challenges of interdiction and the potential for copycat attacks (Gill 2015; Hamm and Spaaij 2017b), mean that the media is likely to play a particularly important role in shaping the reactions of the public, affected communities and copycat attackers. This paper presents findings from a content analysis of British and Danish newspaper reporting of lone-actor terrorism between January 2010 and February 2015. It highlights that lone-actor terrorism is framed, with national variations, as a significant and increasing problem in both countries. Islamist lone-actors are frequently represented as distinct from far-right lone-actors (who are more likely to be described as mentally ill) and, although amplification of specific terrorist messages is rare, some reporting potentially aids lone-actors by detailing counter-terrorism weaknesses.

The term 'lone-wolf terrorism' was originally used in reference to far-right actors in the US, but since the mid-1990s, the term has increasingly been used to describe a range of terrorist ideologies. This is especially so in the 'after, after-9/11' period with the rise of Islamic State and increased concerns about the extreme far-right in Western countries (Gartenstein-Ross 2016, 4; Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017, 16-17). There are a range of definitions for lone-actors (Bouhana et al. 2017). For the purposes of the paper we define lone-actors as unaffiliated individuals who 'acts on his or her own without orders from—or even connections to—an organization' (Burton and Stewart 2008). However, we include any media report using 'lone-wolf' that satisfies the search criteria, whatever the paper's interpretation of the term. The terminology and its increased use is problematic for several reasons, including potential glamorisation of attackers and inaccuracies about attackers' independence (Schuurman et al. 2017). Many policy-makers have stopped using the term, but it remains common in media reporting and has entered lay understandings of terrorism. Media coverage of the 'lone wolf' has become increasingly high profile for several reasons: lone attacks in the West have increased in the 'after, after-9/11' era (Hamm and Spaaij 2017b; Pantucci, Ellis, and Chaplais 2016, 1; Simon 2015, 24); some lone attackers (e.g., Anders Breivik) have intentionally sought media attention; and terrorist groups, including ISIS and Al-Qaeda, have used sophisticated propaganda to promote and glorify lone-actor attacks (Hamm and Spaaij 2017b; Shehabat, Mitew, and Alzoubi 2017). This has reignited debate about media acting as a mouthpiece for terrorists (Wilkinson 1997; Nacos 2002; Winter 2017; Lim 2016). Some media have responded positively to these concerns. For example, certain French media outlets no longer publish pictures of perpetrators to avoid 'posthumous glorification' (Borger 2016). However, the relationship between terrorists and

the media remains symbiotic (Eid 2014, 1-2; Wilkinson 2011, 150; Spencer 2017), as these dramatic attacks inevitably end up on the front pages.

It is difficult to establish causality of media influence. However, the literature on media and political representations of terrorism is extensive (Jackson 2007; Spencer 2012, 2017), and it is generally accepted that the media play a significant role in shaping how people understand issues (Norris, Kern, and Just 2003). Even if we accept that 'terrorism' is an appropriate label, whether it is framed as crime, acts of evil or elements in a wider conflict can influence public understanding and subsequent views on counter-measures. Consequently, media framing is of particular interest to critical terrorism scholars. Media reporting of lone-actor terrorism in the 'after, after-9/11' era has the potential to be particularly problematic because of the unique features of this form of terrorism and the range of audiences that could be influenced.

Three audiences are of particular note when trying to understand the impact of media reporting around lone-actor terrorism. The first is the general public. Terrorism is designed to instill fear within a wide target audience (Hoffman 2006, 40-41). The low sophistication and seemingly random nature of many home-grown lone-actor attacks, compared to external attacks by foreign groups, make them more unpredictable and thus potentially more concerning for the public. As Pantucci notes, terrorists groups 'now push out this methodology that you should use whatever the hell you have to hand to kill whoever the hell you can find' (Beauchamp 2017). The homegrown aspect can be especially alarming. Of the 51 Islamist attacks that took place in Europe and North America between June 2014 and

June 2017, 73% were committed by citizens of the country in which the attack took place (Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017, 17). Again, when the press uses the lone-wolf terminology, it risks sensationalising these acts and further enhancing anxiety in the public (Slone and Shoshani 2006).

The second audience is specifically affected communities. For example, with the increase in Islamist attacks in the 'after, after-9/11' era (Davies 2017; Hanrahan 2017), Muslim communities may be at risk from media reports which depict Islam in terms of difference, risk or violence (Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Altikriti and Al-Mahadin 2015; Janos 2015; Richardson 2009) and terrorism (Khiabany and Williamson 2012; Woods 2007). Findings suggest that terrorism often leads to societal bias toward all members of religious or ethnic groups affiliated with the perpetrator (Steele et al. 2017, 2). Indeed hate crime against Muslims spiked following recent Islamist attacks in the UK (Innes et al. 2016, 12-13; Travis 2017). Furthermore, media coverage of lone-actors which focuses on the mental health of perpetrators has the potential to stigmatise people who are mentally ill and exaggerate the prevalence and role of mental illness as a driver for terrorism (Corner and Gill, 2017).

The third audience is potential copycat attackers (Bakker and De Graaf 2011, 46; Gordon, Sharan, and Florescu 2015, 244; Lichfield 2014). A significant number of lone-actors in the West read literature about other lone perpetrators or copy and reference previous lone attacks (Gill, Horgan, and Deckert 2014, 430; Hamm and Spaaij 2017b). This is especially concerning if reporting inadvertently glamorises the attacker or amplifies his/her grievance or message. Indeed, Haroro suggests that sensationalised anti-hero 'celebrity reporting' of

perpetrators (think 'Jihadi John') may increase their appeal to others (Haroro 2017, 12). Media reporting could thus potentially contribute to the decision to commit a terrorist attack (and what to target) by indirectly providing inspiration.

Potential copycats may also be inspired by media amplification of state messaging about terrorism. Many lone-actors are 'self-activating' (Feldman 2013, 271), meaning triggers for action are more individual and potentially more rapid than in a coordinated attack. A study of lone-actor vehicle attacks suggests that the immediate aftermath of specific political or security-related events is more vulnerable to lone-actor attacks, and efforts should be made to prevent event-triggered motivation (Perry, Hasisi, and Perry 2017, 11). Amplification of state messaging arguably has the potential to contribute to this prevention or inadvertently provide inspiration. Content that amplifies counter-terrorism strength (often to reassure the public) could introduce doubt into the mind of an attacker by conveying a message of likely failure. This may be particularly pertinent for lone-actors, who typically display a higher prevalence of social marginalisation (McCauley and Moskalenko 2014; Spaaij 2011; Gill 2015; Corner and Gill 2015), which means that their attack planning (especially if rapid) is less likely to be detected. Indeed, lone-actors are widely considered more difficult to disrupt by traditional methods, such as surveillance (Michael 2014, 50; Perry, Hasisi, and Perry 2017, 2). Conversely, information designed to increase public vigilance or explain the challenges of interdiction could aid attack planning by conveying a message of state weakness to this form of attack or provide attackers with information about techniques or targets (Schmid 1989).

To increase understandings of media coverage of lone-actor terrorism and its potential impact on these three audiences, this article presents results of a quantitative and qualitative content analysis of British and Danish newspaper reporting of lone-actor terrorism. This cross-country analysis of data from a five-year period is the first in-depth examination of media coverage of lone-actors. It sheds light on the specific impacts of lone-actor terrorism and contributes to the wider literature on media reporting of terrorism. The next section outlines the methodology; the following section presents the results in relation to trends, amplification of messaging, and lone-actor framing. Results are discussed in relation to their social impacts on the three audiences.

## **Methodology**

A content analysis of British and Danish national newspaper coverage of lone-actors between 1 January 2009 and 28 February 2015 was conducted to: (1) examine trends across a five-year period, (2) understand the extent to which the media amplifies either terrorist or state messages, and (3) explore how the media frame lone-actors. National daily newspapers were selected for analysis as they are the most widely read print media, set the tone for public debate and shape the selection of stories for television news coverage and regional and local newspaper coverage (Greenslade 2005; Lewis 2005). Both tabloid and broadsheet newspapers were included to maximise the range of editorial positions, writing styles and potential audiences.

The analysis covers two countries as framing can differ considerably across Western contexts (Papacharissi and De Fatima Oliveira 2008) and to allow for identification of broad trends

that hold across contexts. The UK and Denmark were selected as both have a history of terrorism and have sizeable minority populations. Some aspects are comparable cross-nationally; others differ. The UK has experienced lone-actor and group-based terrorist attacks (Irish nationalism, the 7th July London bombings, the 2013 murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich, attacks on London Bridge, Manchester and Finsbury Park in 2017). Denmark has fewer historic encounters with terrorism but has been on high alert since the 2005 Danish cartoon crisis and has subsequently experienced several unsuccessful group-based plots and three lone-actor attacks (two attempted; one successful). Immigration has been an important policy issue in both countries in recent years, but they have different experiences in terms of scale and integration. Denmark's population was estimated to include 310,000 immigrants in 2016 compared to 4,130,000 in the UK. Nevertheless, Muslims make up a sizeable percentage of the population in both countries: 6.3% in the UK and 5.3% in Denmark (Hackett 2017, 29-30). The similarities and differences make the two countries excellent cases for comparing media reporting of lone-actor terrorism.

Publications with the highest circulation figures were selected, as the public is most likely to have been exposed to this content. The British dataset was drawn from the top-five national daily tabloid newspapers (*The Sun*, *The Daily Mail*, *The Daily Mirror*, *The Daily Express* and *The Star*) and top-five<sup>1</sup> national daily broadsheet papers (*The Daily Telegraph*, *The Times*, *The i*, *The Financial Times* and *The Guardian*). Articles were sourced from the Nexis UK

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<sup>1</sup> Based on Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC) figures for the newspaper industry published June 2014.

database using the search terms ['lone wolf' OR 'solo actor' OR 'solo-terror'] AND ['terroris\*' OR 'extremis\*' OR 'plan']. The Danish dataset was drawn from the top-four national daily tabloid newspapers (*BT, Ekstra Bladet, 24timer, and Metroxpress*) and the top four national daily broadsheet papers (*Berlingske, Jyllands-Posten, Kristeligt Dagblad and Politiken*). Articles were sourced using the expert search function in Infomedia and the search terms ['Solo-aktør' OR 'lone wolf' OR 'solo-terror\*' OR 'soloterror\*'] AND ['terror\*' OR 'ekstremis\*' OR 'radikalis\*' OR 'angreb' OR 'plan']. The search string was developed by applying the most common terms identified in the grey and academic literatures and then including additional search terms identified in the initial pilot search (e.g. the term 'solo-terrorist' was found to be commonly used in Danish media). 'Lone-actor' was used in preliminary searches but was rejected during the pilot stage as the term was hardly used in media reporting during the period under focus. Nexis UK and Infomedia are two leading media databases in the UK and Denmark respectively, providing access to digital archives of print media. LexisNexis has a leading position among online databases for academics in North American and Europe and is one of the most widely used news archives by social scientists (Tamul and Martínez-Carrillo 2017, 97-98; Weaver and Bimber 2008, 516). Similarly, Infomedia is the most comprehensive database of news coverage from Danish newspapers. As both databases have bias towards English and Danish language articles respectively, two separate databases were utilised, a common approach for studies looking at cross-national media reporting.

Articles that on review did not pertain to lone-actor terrorism were excluded from the analysis. Articles under 200 words were excluded as the study analyses the framings of lone-actors, rather than simply the number of mentions or articles. Longer articles provide space

for this framing to be developed and suitable for analysis. Weekend and regional editions were excluded because newsworthy stories, such as terrorism, are covered in the national press. Coverage of the same events in regional editions are likely to mirror the national press whilst weekend editions often repeat stories and analysis. This process produced a dataset of 219 articles in the UK (149 broadsheet and 70 tabloid) and 97 in Denmark (73 broadsheet and 24 tabloid). These articles amounted to the full population of articles in both countries that matched the search criteria. That the UK saw more articles is a result of lone-actor terrorism being a more salient news issue in the UK than in Denmark during the investigated period.

The articles were analysed via mixed-methods content analysis. Content analysis was developed in the empirical social sciences as a systematic method to reduce large amounts of data into a brief description of features of interest (Bauer 2000; Berg 2001). This technique makes it possible to code the text systematically using pre-established categories and allows different coders to examine the same texts with the same categories, i.e. conduct reliability checks (Silverman 2001). This is not to suggest that there is one single valid reading of the text. Rather, this approach is procedurally explicit and replicable. Thematic analysis of individual texts allows researchers to draw examples to illustrate the findings of the systematic coding to supplement quantitative findings. A coding frame was developed to enable systematic coding of the articles using pre-established categories to identify their focus, content and framings. The coding frame was refined during an iterative process in which four coders (two in each country) coded the same batches of UK articles during repeated rounds until agreement was reached within the coding team, to ensure inter-coder

reliability. Where consensus was not reached, those individual variables were deleted from the study – leaving only variables where consensus had been reached. To minimise reliability issues the coding was conducted over a short period of time (approx. three weeks). To further minimise discrepancies just one coder in each country was used once consensus had been reached between the original four coders. Articles that provided a framing were coded for the following frames: mentally ill, criminal, violent, indoctrinated or isolated. An ‘other’ category was included to identify frames that we had not anticipated in advance. One article may contain multiple framings and be coded for more than one category. The final coding frame is available as an online appendix.

## **Results**

Tabloid and broadsheet results have been collapsed in the following analysis because, in contrast to the authors’ expectation, no significant statistical difference in lone-actor framing was found in coverage between the two types of newspaper in either country. In the full UK dataset, 162 of the articles were reports, 41 were commentary pieces and 16 were reports that also included commentary. In the full Danish dataset 39 reports, 29 were commentary pieces and 29 were coded as reports that also included commentary.

### *Reporting trends of lone-actor terrorism*

Table 1 shows the number of articles that focus on lone-actor terrorism in the UK and

Denmark by year and publication type for all full years. *TABLE 1*

UK coverage increased from two articles in 2009 to 69 in 2014 (the last full year analysed). Most references to ‘lone wolf’ appeared in articles discussing lone-actor terrorism generally (38.8%) or in reports covering attacks or attempted attacks by lone-actors (32%). Discussion

of policy to address the threat was limited (14.6%). In Denmark, the number of articles increased from zero in 2009 to 28 in 2012 and declined from 2012 to 2014 (last full year analysed). However, in the two first months of 2015, 11 articles referred to the topic. Most references to 'lone wolf' appeared in articles concerning lone-actor terrorism in general (58.8%) or in reports describing attacks or attempted attacks involving a lone-actor (21.7%).

The results suggest that media coverage is generally increasing, despite fluctuations in Denmark, and that media coverage of lone-actor terrorism is highly event driven. In the Danish data, the surge in coverage in 2011 is due to Anders Behring Breivik's attack in Norway and the Danish court case against Lior Doukiev. The bulk of 2012 coverage concerned the shooting of four Jews in Toulouse, France, by Muhammad Merah, and the court case of the first lone-actor attack on Danish soil, Mohammed Geele's axe-attack on cartoonist Kurt Westergaard. The tendency to focus on nearby and/or local Danish events is also clear in 2013 where about 25% of the published articles deal with the attack on Danish Islam critic Lars Hedegaard outside his apartment. The unusually high volume of coverage in the beginning of 2015 is connected to the worst lone-actor attack in Denmark to date – the attacks on a free speech debate and the Jewish synagogue in Copenhagen on February 14-15, where three people were killed by Omar Abdel Hamid El-Hussain. British coverage is also event driven as illustrated by peaks in the frequency of articles focusing on far-right terrorism following Anders Breivik's attacks in Norway 2011 (when 43.5% of far-right terrorism coverage appeared) and in 2013 following Pavlo Lapshyn's attacks on mosques in the UK (when 30.4% of coverage of far-right terrorism occurred). British publications focus on attacks closer to home as well as further afield. As Figure 1 shows, the largest peaks in

coverage followed the May 2013 attack on Lee Rigby in London, the Canadian parliament attack in October 2014, and the Sydney and Paris attacks late 2014/early 2015.

*FIGURE 1*

Content-wise, reporting in both countries primarily focused on Islamist terrorism. In UK, 73.5% discussed Islamist terrorism, 10.5% far-right terrorism, 8.7% discussed more than one category of terrorism, and 7.3% discussed lone-actor terrorism in general without specifying a particular category of terrorism. Articles that discussed more than one category generally referred to both Islamist and far-right terrorism, and Irish dissident terrorism and anarchist terrorism were also mentioned. In Denmark, 60% of articles focused exclusively on Islamist terrorism, 6.1% on far-right terrorism, and about 32% discussed more than one type of terrorism.

Finally, reporting in both countries presented lone-actor terrorism as a significant security threat. Of the 106 British articles that discussed the likelihood or scale of the threat posed by lone-actors, 63.2% characterised lone-actor terrorism as a frequent or large problem, and 28.3% described it as an increasing problem. Only five articles framed lone-actor terrorism as rare. Of the 76 Danish articles that discussed the likelihood or scale of the threat, 48.6% characterised lone-actor terrorism as a frequent or large problem, and 46.0% described it as an increasing problem. Only one article framed lone-actor terrorism as rare.

### *Amplification of terrorist and state messaging*

All reports about terrorism have the potential to promote terrorist agendas, but only a few articles in both countries amplified a lone-actor grievance or goal in detail. 19 British articles (8.7%) directly quoted lone-actor messages, and 13 articles (5.9%) indirectly acted as a conduit for the message (e.g. reporting lone-actors' claims regarding motivation). For example, the *Daily Mail* reported that Omar Abdel El-Husseini had declared allegiance to ISIS on Facebook minutes before the attack, directly quoting his post and lyrics to 'The Sword of Jihad', a song he posted about destroying the West (Martin 2015). Following the murder of Lee Rigby, the *Daily Telegraph* reported that 'Adebolajo and Adebawale claimed they were "soldiers of Allah" and the killing was legitimate because the British people were at a war with Muslims' (Whitehead and Dixon 2013). In Denmark, two articles directly quoted attackers, and four indirectly conveyed lone-actors' messages by describing their claims. *Berlingske*, for instance, directly quoted the video Adebolajo recorded after murdering Rigby: 'eye for an eye, tooth for tooth' (Bjerre 2013).

In comparison, amplification of state messaging was significant in both countries. In the UK, 104 articles (47.5%) included statements from elected UK officials, security officers or intelligence services. However, only 33 (31.7%) of these discussed the state's counter-terrorism capabilities: 13 of which included counter-terrorism strengths, 12 included counter-terrorism vulnerabilities and eight included both weaknesses and strengths. The 21 articles amplifying counter-terrorism strengths (solely or in combination with vulnerability) drew attention to heightened security (e.g. following the death of Bin Laden); highlighted effectiveness of counter terrorism in the run-up to large events (e.g. London Olympics);

described allocation of extra resources (e.g. following Breivik's attacks in Norway); and publicised the scale of terrorism plots foiled by UK security services. For example, the *Daily Telegraph* amplified messaging about Olympic security:

Boris Johnson, the Mayor of London, and the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Bernard Hogan-Howe warned yesterday that a 'lone wolf' attack during the Games was a distinct security concern. But the commissioner added that 'we have things in place to prevent that happening'.

(Kirkup 2012)

*The Guardian* quoted David Cameron's praise for the security services:

There have been a series of plots that have been detected and prevented, that would have seen police officers or other authority figures murdered in cold blood, as Lee Rigby was murdered in cold blood. It's thanks to the brilliance of our policing and security services that these things have been prevented.

(Wintour and Dodd 2014)

Statements about counter-terrorism strength tended to be issued prior to major public events and following terrorist incidents. However, eight of the post-event statements also included messages from official sources that highlighted challenges and therefore potential

vulnerabilities to lone-actor attacks. The 20 articles which described difficulties in interdicting lone attacks focused primarily on online or self-radicalisation. For example, a *Daily Mail* article, 'Jihadi Attacks on the UK Inevitable', reported that:

Sir Bernard [head of London's Metropolitan Police] said there was a 'growing concern about the risk of a lone wolf attack on British Streets ... It doesn't take an awful lot of organising, doesn't take too many to conspire together, there's no great complexity to it,' Sir Bernard said. 'So that means we have got a very short time to interdict ...'

(Slack 2014)

Similarly, a *Daily Mirror* article reported that:

After a lone wolf gunman murdered two in Copenhagen before being shot dead at the weekend, fears were growing the wave of violence by Islamist extremists could spread here at any moment. MI5 believe it is 'only a matter of time'.

(Collins 2015)

Despite some national differences, similar trends were apparent in the Danish data. Of 53 articles (54.7%) including messaging from officials, a higher proportion included specific content about counter-terrorism strengths or weaknesses, at just over 50% compared to

31.7% in the UK. 17 of these 27 articles communicated Danish counter-terrorism strengths, and 10 communicated the interdiction challenges posed by lone-actors. A key theme in articles amplifying state messaging about counter-terrorism strengths was increased surveillance of online radicalisation. For instance, *Berlingske* quoted officials from the Danish Security and Intelligence Service's new task force:

We will increase surveillance on the internet, we follow what goes on in relevant web fora, but it is also about enforcing the IT-investigatory capacity so that we can interdict and stop individuals who are planning criminal activities. This will include wiretapping. People like Anders Breivik radicalise online, and therefore the internet is our best chance of identifying lone actors.

(Haslund and Beck Nielsen 2011)

Other reports, for instance in *BT*, reinforced this message:

The Danish Security and Intelligence Service is already keeping an eye on online chat rooms with an extremist content. However, now they establish a task force dedicated to this search for potential terrorists who communicate with each other online, be it Islamist or rightwing extremists. 'Most terrorist activity happens online nowadays. And we are especially looking for solo-terrorists who work alone'.

(Karker 2012)

The majority of articles emphasising counter-terrorism strength were post-event responses. For instance, following attacks by Breivik, some reports focused on the authorities' increased surveillance of fertilizers. *Jyllands-Posten* wrote:

Danish tax authorities are increasingly watching out for 'suspicious transactions' when it comes to the import of fertilizers. The national board of Nature and Businesses has 10-12 people employed who are monitoring and checking that only registered farmers and businesses are buying fertilizers, and checking that the bought products actually fit the plants the farmer is producing.

(Ellegaard and Bonde Broberg 2011)

Following the Copenhagen attacks in February 2015, *Berlingske* reported then Danish prime minister Helle Thorning Schmidt's trust in the Danish counter-terrorism efforts:

I don't think there are any major holes in our defence against terrorism. We have a very robust counter-terrorism system. This is demonstrated by several previous foiled plots. We also had a robust system and response last Saturday. The police did a great job.

(Stigsgaard Nissen and Bjørnager 2015)

As in the UK, Danish post-event reporting includes details of vulnerability alongside articles on counter-terrorism strengths. Most of the 10 articles in which state actors highlighted difficulties in preventing lone attacks also tended to follow terrorist incidents. Messaging conveying vulnerability generally focused on two areas. The first explains why it is not possible to prevent lone-actor events. *Jyllands-Posten* reported that:

The lone wolf-terrorist is characterized by not having spoken to anybody before he attempts an attack. This makes it much more difficult for security services to interdict than in the case of large and more complex attacks.

(Ellegaard and Boddum 2012)

The second theme was the adaptability of terrorists and the difficulties tracing them. *Kristeligt Dagblad* wrote:

Terrorist attacks carried out by 'solo-terrorists' [...] are difficult to prevent as the planning leaves the police and security services with few leads and traces. Furthermore, terrorists are constantly developing new methods and tactics, which makes it difficult for authorities to trace their communication. They use new platforms of communication and are increasingly using encryption. Authorities have to be up to speed, says a source at PET [The Danish Security and Intelligence Service].

(Weichardt 2015)

### *Framing of lone actors*

A substantial minority of reports described actors using labels that provide a frame for understanding lone-actor types. 98 British articles (44.7%) and 30 Danish articles (30.9%) provided a frame. Of the 98 British articles, 70 (71.4%) were in the context of Islamist terrorism, 18 (18.4%) in the context of far-right terrorism and 1 (1%) in the context of anarchism. Nine articles (9.2%) framed actors in the context of more than one category of terrorism (although primarily Islamist). Of the 30 Danish articles, 13 (43.3%) were in the context of Islamist terrorism, 4 (13.3%) in the context of far-right terrorism and 13 (43.3%) in more than one category of terrorism. The larger proportion of articles which focus on Islamist terrorism reflects the higher frequency of articles in both national datasets that focus on this topic rather than a greater tendency to characterise lone-actors as Islamist attackers. Indeed, UK articles were more likely to be coded as providing a frame for lone-actors if they focused on far-right terrorism, with 78.3% of articles on far-right terrorism coded for framing compared to 43.5% of articles that on Islamist terrorism.

The nature of the dataset – having relatively few cases for each ideologically motivated lone-actor attack and the event-driven nature of reporting – means the findings cannot be considered generalizable to all right-wing and Islamist cases. Nevertheless, the differences in coverage are striking and, we argue, not solely a product of the individual cases that dominate the dataset as the articles often reference lone-actors in broad terms or about specific attackers coming from a particular sub-set of society without reference to their personal biographies. Results show clear differences in framing between Islamist and far-

right lone-actors; especially in the UK. Table 2 shows the number of British articles coded in order of frequency and by category of terrorism:

*TABLE 2*

This breakdown shows that Islamist actors tend to be framed in relation to crime and violence, both explicitly in criminal terms and indirectly in articles that feature criminal aspects in their biographical information – with reporters explicitly referencing this feature between separate cases. For example from *The Guardian*:

Commentators pointed out that Merah and the suspect in the Jewish museum shootings came from similar backgrounds and had engaged in petty crime before becoming radicalised in prisons.

(Penketh 2014)

Similarly, a commentary piece concerning the attack on a café in Sydney by Man Haron Monis, also in *The Guardian*, included broad comments about criminality and the types of individual that commit lone attacks:

Like automatons, those with grievances, with criminal pasts awaiting trial, have now learned the phraseology of otherness and resistance, through the employment of symbols. Beneath that black flag lurks some unspeakably monstrous dimension, exposed through attacks like Monis's. The spectre of the

violent jihadist haunts our social imaginary. In response, that imaginary has become a place to play, and a place to redeem criminality and intolerance by turning them into a false pursuit of justice.

(Morsi 2014)

Notably, it is only in the context of Islamist terrorism that lone-actors were characterised as indoctrinated. From the *Sun*:

A security source said: This man [Anwar al-Awlaki] uses every conceivable network to pollute the minds of his followers. He was directly responsible for brainwashing this young woman [Roshonara Choudhry who committed a lone-actor knife attack] into trying to kill a British MP.

(Sullivan 2010)

A report two years later in the same publication suggested that:

Driving in a heavy machine-gun convoy across Mogadishu this week, it is the knowledge that indoctrinated Britons could have you in their sights that is perhaps most unnerving.

(MacDougall 2012)

In contrast, far-right actors in the British data were more than twice as likely to be described in relation to mental health issues. For example, a *Daily Mail* article stated that:

Last night Scotland Yard was trying to unravel a complex web of links between the crazed neo-Nazi [Anders Breivik] and British extremists.

(Gysin 2011)

In the Danish data, criminality also featured heavily, although mental illness and violent were the most common framings. For example, *Politiken* suggested:

If we want to prevent foreign fighters and lone-actor extremist attacks, we need to prioritize treatment of mental health problems among vulnerable individuals.

(Sheikh 2015)

Table 3 shows the number of Danish articles in order of frame frequency:

### TABLE 3

In general, the difference in framing of Islamist and far-right lone-actors is small in the Danish data. However, Islamist actors are twice as likely as far-right actors to be framed as criminal and violent (often combined). Sometimes these elements of lone-actors' pasts are used to

explain their deeds or as characteristics that are shared by a relatively large subsection of the population, as the following from *Politiken* illustrates:

Omar El-Hussain had been convicted of violence. He had been to prison, he had been a gang member. This profile he shares with several hundred young Muslims in Copenhagen alone, whom authorities have not been able to integrate. Little suggested that Omar would deviate from the others and choose to become a holy warrior.

(Pundik 2015)

Other articles made similarly broad categorisations, for instance in *Kristeligt Dagblad*:

The solo-terrorist of today is far more likely to be a petty criminal and a socially challenged and isolated individual who feels in opposition to mainstream society and who seeks excitement in life. Al-Qaeda is determined to recruit from exactly this group via the internet.

(Søndergaard 2011)

While the dominant framings in both countries were criminal, violent and mentally ill, a significant number of 'other' framings in the British data further highlighted differences in

framings of far-right and Islamist lone-actors. Table 4 shows the additional frames identified within this subset<sup>2</sup>:

*TABLE 4*

Of the 52 British articles coded for an ‘other’ framing, 23 characterised lone-actors as fanatics, making this the fourth most common framing. A *Sun* report reported that, ‘Lone-wolf fanatics pose the greatest terror threat now, a security expert warned last night (2011). In 2013, *The Daily Telegraph* reported:

The Woolwich attack has all the hallmarks of the very nightmare MI5 [the UK intelligence service] has feared – low-key fanatics arming themselves with basic weapons and targeting a soldier or other victim at random.

(Whitehead 2013)

Although ‘fanatic’ implies a single-minded interest that is outside of the norm, it does not necessarily imply diagnosable mental illness (although the two are often seemingly conflated). This distinction is made explicit in a 2014 *Times* article which noted that “‘It does not matter whether these criminal acts were the deeds of fanatics or individuals with psychiatric problems”, the newspaper [Figaro] said.’ (Bremner 2014)

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<sup>2</sup> A minimum of three instances were required for the identification of a frame.

The most frequently observed 'other' framing applied to far-right actors (and second-most frequent framing for far-right actors after mental illness) was 'evil'. The *Daily Star's* quotes a Norwegian police official describing Brevik as a 'sociopathic lone wolf who kept his diabolic plans to himself ... He is total evil' (Hughes 2011).

Despite the frequent characterisation of far-right actors as mentally ill and/or evil, they were still more likely to be described as skilful or well-educated in comparison with Islamist terrorists (10.5% vs. 2.6%), as the following example from *The Times* highlights:

The security profile of the far-right 'lone wolf' is that of a male who is older than his Islamist counterpart, more integrated in his community, with a better education and employment history and more skilled at making and acquiring weapons.

(O'Neill and San 2013)

Another contrast between framings of Islamist and far-right actors is the greater tendency to characterise Islamist lone-actors in general as young, particularly 'young men,' as illustrated in the *Daily Mirror* and *Daily Telegraph*:

Thousands of lone wolf Islamic extremists could launch similar attacks to the Woolwich bloodbath, a senior police officer warned yesterday. Assistant

Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Cressida Dick said that the threat cannot be eradicated while young men in the UK become radicalised via the internet.

(Myers 2013)

And so long as the mullahs continue to pump out their poisonous rhetoric, there will always be impressionable young Muslims willing to commit random acts of violence.

(Coughlin 2014)

Although most representations highlight lone-actors' differences from the general population, a small proportion (8.2%) framed lone-actors as 'normal' prior to their attacks.

## **Discussion**

These findings contribute insights into five key debates on media reports on terrorism or the impacts of lone-actor terrorism, all of which relate to at least one of the three audiences identified in the introduction. First, most articles in our dataset do not report terrorist messaging in detail. This challenges the claim that the media problematically amplifies terrorist narratives. We do not reject that coverage of lone-actor terrorism may act as a 'force multiplier for terrorist campaigns' (Hamm and Spaaij 2017a, 177), but our findings support a smaller body of studies which conclude that only a minority of reports actively and in detail convey terrorist grievances (Abrahms 2014, 8).

Second, in analysing media amplification of state messaging, this paper goes beyond extant studies by considering a wider range of message amplification that could influence copycat attackers. Although amplification of state messaging exceeds coverage of terrorist messaging, state messaging that could indirectly deter or inspire attackers is approximately equal in volume. Indeed, in the UK, more articles combined amplify terrorist narratives or state counter-terrorism weakness than state counter-terrorism strengths. This highlights the potential for reporting to contribute to copycat attacks. That most state amplification is event driven is especially important. Europol highlights that post-attack messaging from groups such as ISIS is ‘designed to inspire a copycat effect in audiences’ and concludes that a post-incident communication strategy is necessary to mitigate against further attacks (Reed and Ingram 2017, 13). Similarly, researchers have found that the immediate period after security-related events is more vulnerable to lone-actor attacks and efforts should be taken to prevent this event-triggered motivation (Perry, Hasisi, and Perry 2017, 11). Media amplification of state or terrorist messaging that could indirectly inspire or deter copycats in this period could thus be especially relevant.

Third, our data supports the contention that Muslims are framed as distinct or negatively in media reports, including in relation to terrorism (Ahmed and Matthes 2017; Khiabany and Williamson 2012). The differences in framing between Islamist and far-right lone-actors was especially pronounced in the British data. Whilst the limitations of the datasets means findings cannot be assumed to be automatically generalizable, Islamist actors were most likely to be depicted as criminal or violent and were often portrayed as having characteristics typical of Muslim youth. In contrast, far-right actors were twice as likely to be labelled

mentally ill and were frequently framed as evil, more individualistic framings. Framing Muslim attackers as distinct to other types of attacker or as potentially representative of a sub-set of a community may further antagonise Muslims who already view press depictions of Muslims as discriminatory and negatively shape public perceptions of this affected community. Indeed, some research suggest that such reports can act as a contributing radicalising influence by fuelling existing perceptions that Muslims are treated as an out group (Parker et al. 2017, 14; Gurski 2016). Such outcomes may inadvertently support propaganda by terrorist groups like ISIS who have warned the public in the West that ‘you will pay the price as you walk on your streets, turning right and left, fearing the Muslims’ (Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017, 29).

One reason for the greater media focus on Islamist terrorism is that more attacks were carried out by Islamist actors during the period of analysis. However, a comparison of the two lone-actor events that took place in the UK during this period – the murder of Lee Rigby in Woolwich London (an Islamist attack) and the murder of Mohammed Saleem and attempted bombing of mosques in Birmingham (a far-right attack) – suggests that the category of terrorism may also affect the volume of media coverage of an event. The attacks took place the same year, in the same country and both had one fatality. The Woolwich attack was filmed, whereas the Birmingham attacks were covert. Nonetheless, the British media coverage differs considerably in terms of the focus drawn by the publicity-seeking nature of the Woolwich attacks (which resulted in 21 articles in the immediate aftermath compared to six on the Birmingham attacks) and the enduring symbolic value of the attack. In 2014, the Woolwich attacks were mentioned in 20 articles; the Birmingham attacks were not mentioned again. Whilst these two cases have similarities, they are not sufficiently like-

for-like to make firm conclusions about ideology being the primary factor in the level of reporting received (e.g. Breivik had self-publicised a lot). However, it does seem to tentatively support the work of Kearns, Betus and Lemieux (forthcoming) which finds that that terrorist attacks receive significantly more press attention when the perpetrator is Muslim.

Fourth, the fact that framings in media coverage are not always reflective of the characteristics of lone attackers has the potential to stigmatise affected communities. The common framings of lone attackers as young (especially young Muslims) or mentally ill are especially pertinent. While these are genuine characteristics of some lone attackers, they are minority characteristics or in line with group-based terrorists or even the general population. For instance, Gill, Horgan and Deckert (2014, 427-428) found that lone-actors are typically older than group-based terrorists. Indeed, although some younger Muslims radicalise, the average age is not unusually young, and nearly a third of Islamist attackers between June 2014 and June 2017 were over 30 (Vidino, Marone, and Entenmann 2017, 16). In terms of mental illness, some researchers suggest that assumptions of its prevalence are partly fuelled by poor reporting using mental illness as a 'silver bullet' to explain terrorist involvement (Corner and Gill 2017, 1). Findings indicate that lone-actors have a higher prevalence of mental illness than group-based terrorists and the public at large. Nevertheless, at approximately 40% (Corner, Gill, and Mason 2016, 563), it remains a minority characteristic. Broad framing of lone attackers as 'crazed' or mentally unwell could influence public perceptions of mental illness. Indeed, studies have found that reporting on

terrorist acts by perpetrators with suspected mental illness increased public perceptions of mental illness as dangerous and unpredictable (Schomerus et al. 2017).

Finally, the media in both countries describe lone-actor terrorism as an increasing and/or existing significant problem. It is almost never framed as rare. As noted, the increase in attacks is recognised in the literature, and lone attacks are a significant concern. Indeed, the US and Europe experienced approximately twice as many successful lone attacks in 2015 and 2016 as they did between 2011 and 2014 (Byman 2017). However, to suggest that it is common is not reflective of reality, as the overall number of attacks remains low. For example, despite heightened counter-terrorism awareness in Denmark following the 2005 cartoon crisis there have subsequently been only three attempted and one successful lone-actor attack. A review by RUSI of all lone-actor plots and attacks across 30 European countries (EU member states plus Norway and Switzerland) between 1 January 2000 and 31 December 2014 identified 72 attacks and concluded that 'lone-actor terrorism in Europe is rare' (Ellis et al. 2016, vi). The need for public vigilance makes coverage of the risks of lone-actor terrorism important. Nevertheless, inaccurate framing of such attacks as commonplace has, in combination with the sensationalist 'lone-wolf' terminology, the potential to increase public anxiety and exacerbate the social divisions that terrorism can cause.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the emergence of lone-actor terrorism as a primary (if not the primary) security threat facing many Western states represents a fundamental 'after, after-9/11' shift from the post-9/11 era terrorist threat landscape. This has refocused the debate about press

reporting of terrorist attacks because of the unique features of lone attacks, i.e., potential copycat attackers, negative social implications of home-grown attackers, and possible anxiety in the public, especially when the media use the sensationalist 'lone wolf' terminology. This paper highlights that press reporting in both countries frequently frames lone-actor terrorism as a significant and increasing problem. In both countries, but especially in the UK, reporting differentiates between Islamist and far-right lone-actors. Islamists are more often framed as a criminal and violent sub-set of a community, and far-right actors are more likely to be framed as mentally ill or evil. Finally, the data shows that amplification of specific terrorist messages is rare and is outweighed by amplification of state messages. State messaging not only highlights counter-terrorism strength, which potentially deters attackers; it also includes details on counter-terrorism weakness and state vulnerabilities, which may aid the attack planning of potential lone-actors. Press coverage thus has a clear potential to shape the reactions of the public, affected communities and copycat attackers in both positive and negative ways.

The study leaves open several avenues for further research. In particular, future research conducting focused comparisons of similar cases with different ideological backgrounds could provide useful results concerning the influence of perpetrator ideology on the levels of media coverage and framing. Comparisons of cases both before and after the attacker's ideology has been identified, such as the case of Mohammed Salem's murder where Pavlo Lapshyn was not identified as the killer until weeks later, would add additional nuance to understandings of the media coverage of lone-actor terrorism.

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