Risk Perceptions and Explanation in Terrorism News

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- Terrorists try to provoke a high level of public outrage beca
  News framing of risk can strongly influence public response
  how journalists view terrorism coverage can serve as a use

- Through a national survey of journalists, this study explores
  terrorism and the potential use of explanatory content in ne
  outrage.

- The proposed framework:
  - Explores how explanations in news coverage of crises r
  - Reflects social amplification of risk theory and Slovic's r
  - Is used to examine media framing of terrorism, because
    public outrage, depending on how the risk is framed in t

Outrage

Outrage – a negative public response to uncertainty, such as panic,

Two risks that provoke high outrage:

- Dread risk – a low-probability, high-damage event in which many large numbers of people have little or no individual control over th about the true level of risk associated with the hazard.
- Unknown risk – not observable, not evident to those exposed, eff

Risks that are both dread and unknown are more likely to produce br consequences.

Outrage is more likely to occur when the public perceives that a

- Poses coerced or unfair exposure
- Is artificial, unfamiliar or memorable
- Has catastrophic consequences
- Is unknowable or controlled by others
- Is reported by untrustworthy sources

- Involves a
- Affects a v
- Has delay
- Poses a su
- Has identif

Hypotheses

Five hypotheses examined the relationship between explana coverage of terrorism.

- **H1**: Stories that contained uncertainty or vague/confusing c frightening than stories without this content (outrage-only s

- **H2**: Stories that contained uncertain/vague/confusing conte credible, authoritative, and trustworthy than stories without

- **H3**: Stories that contained uncertainty or vague/confusing c reassuring and credible than outrage-only stories, if they al

- **H4**: Stories that contained both conflicting reports and factu as more credible/authoritative than stories that contained o

- **H5**: Stories that contained no uncertain/vague/confusing co

Self-administered national survey of 147 U.S. media profess
journalism educators examined:

- Attitudes about terrorism threats
- Experiences and risk perceptions about terrorism
- Reactions to hypothetical stories about biological attacks
- News routines in terrorism coverage
- Critical evaluation of terrorism reporting strategies
- Demographic/professional data and media use

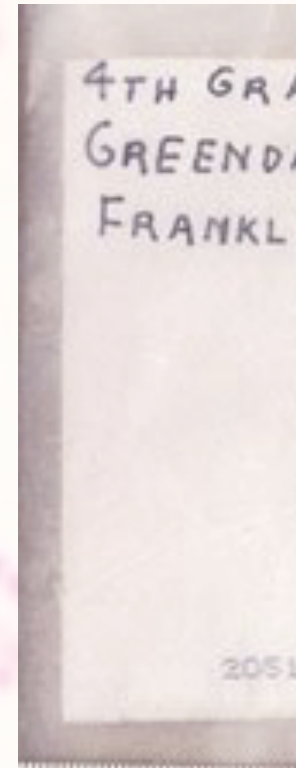Respondents rated characteristics of four hypothetical storie
confusing content:

- Speculation about frightening scenarios
- Off-record or anonymous sourcing
- Conflicting reports (such as dualing sources)
- False alarms or hoaxes

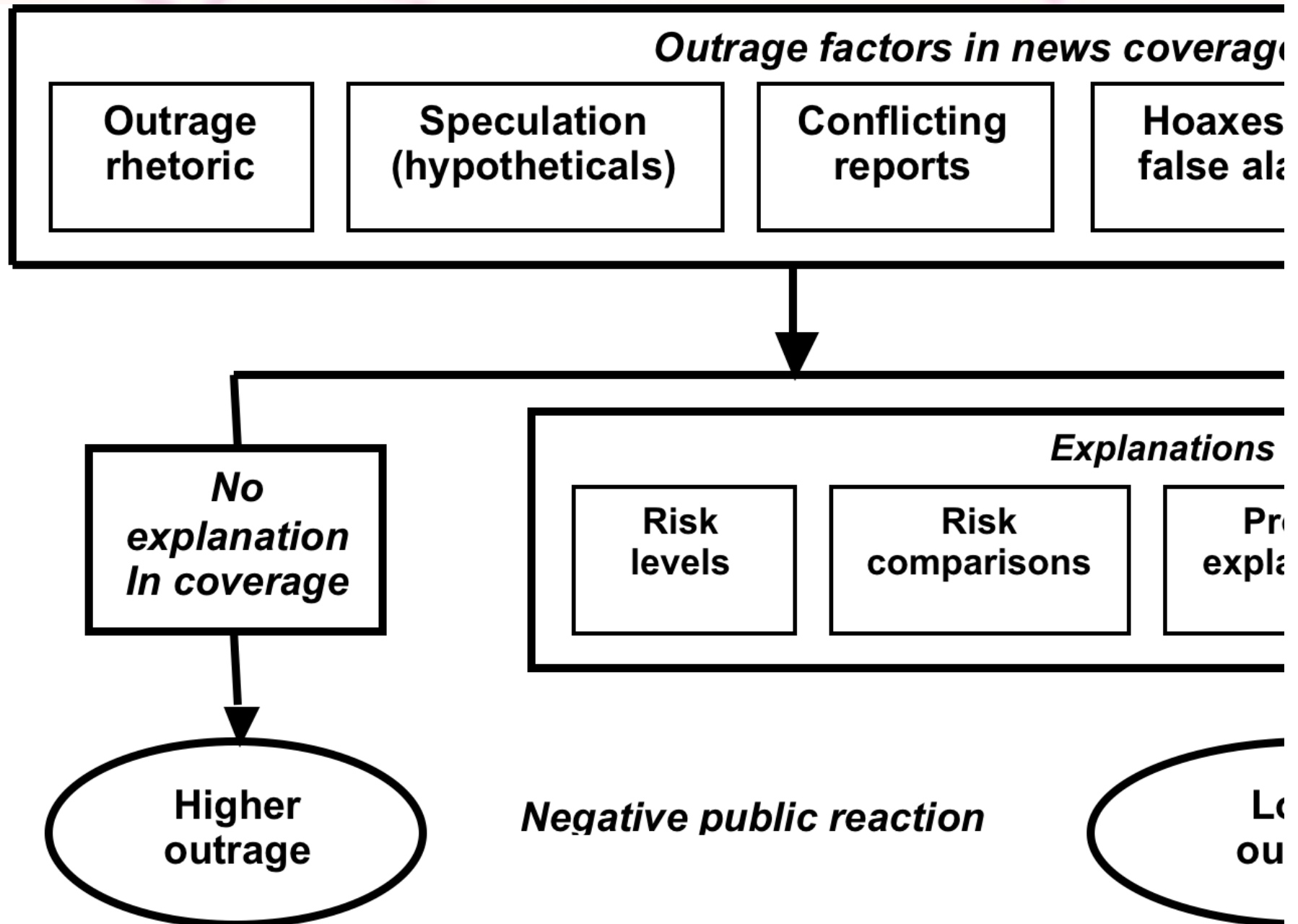**Explanatory (mitigating) content** in the hypothetical scena

- Risk comparisons
- Practical advice
- Definitions of unfamiliar concepts
- Explanations of processes and relative risk

Respondents:

- 49% female, 51% male
- 7% from minority groups
- 75% had a college degree
- 68% liberal or liberal-leaning
- 61% rarely or never participated in religious activities
- 69% had worked as media professionals (49% for 6+ years).
  professionals:
    o 29% said they are at a higher risk of experiencing a terroris

Outrage Explanation

Outrage factors in news coverage

Outrage rhetoric	Speculation (hypotheticals)	Conflicting reports	Hoaxes false al...

Explanations

Risk levels	Risk comparisons	Pr... expla...

No explanation In coverage

Higher outrage

Negative public reaction

L... ou...

Story 1: Genetically engineered virus kills thousands

- Condition: outrage content + no explanatory content
- High level of outrage: involuntary, catastrophic, dread, fat unknown to science, not controllable, new threat
- Outrage content: outrage rhetoric, speculation, vague adv
- Explanatory content: none

Story 2: Reporter receives suspicious letter

- Condition: outrage content + explanatory content
- Moderate level of outrage: involuntary, dread, known to s
- Outrage content: outrage rhetoric, speculation, conflicting
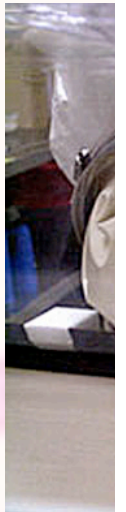- Explanatory content: practical advice, relative risk, definiti

Story 3: Crop duster disperses white powder over stadiu

- Condition: no outrage content + explanatory content
- Moderate outrage: involuntary, dread, known to exposed, delayed effects
- Outrage content: None
- Explanatory content: risk comparisons, process explanati

Story 4: Three people infected with anthrax

- Condition: no outrage content + no explanatory content
- Moderate outrage: involuntary, dread, known to exposed, delayed effects
- Outrage content: None
- Explanatory content: None

- Stories containing explanatory content but no outrage content trustworthy, helpful, reassuring, authoritative, explanatory and more certain, less vague, and less confusing.
- Stories containing explanatory content were more reassuring b it. This explanatory content included:
  - Risk comparisons
  - Explanation of relative risk
  - Risk assessments and other testing processes
  - Specific/practical advice
  - Translation of unfamiliar language
- Stories containing outrage content were seen as more frighteni confusing, as well as less authoritative, less reassuring, less e trustworthy than stories that lacked outrage content.
- Explanatory content did not improve story perceptions when th
- The most credible and least confusing stories were those conta

Implication

- Findings supported the proposed outrage-explanation mod
- Although terrorism stories are inherently sensational, certai mitigate public outrage to terrorism and weaken the impact
- To promote news coverage that is more engaging, trustwor journalists and crisis managers should:
    - o Strive to provide more factual explanation about risk a content.
    - o Avoid using conflicting reports (dualing sources) and s scenarios.
    - o Highlight evidence-based quotes from interviews, ever most colorful.
    - o Provide practical and specific advice to avoid provokin

Condition				
Out + no mit	2.93	2.95	3.15	3.42
Out + mit	2.87	2.90	2.88	2.96
No out + mit	2.25	2.19	2.17	2.12
No out + no mit	2.57	2.43	2.94	2.60

Condition	Credible	Trustworthy	Authoritative	Ex
Out + no mit	2.54	2.24	2.61	2.0
Out + mit	2.23	2.15	2.38	2.4
No out + mit	3.02	3.06	3.08	3.1
No out + no mit	2.77	2.77	2.77	2.4