

Risk Perceptions of Outrage and Explanation Content in Terrorism News Coverage

Kristen Alley Swain, PhD
Meek School of Journalism and New Media
University of Mississippi
kaswain@olemiss.edu

Background

- Terrorists try to provoke a high level of public outrage because the expected payoff is greater. News framing of risk can strongly influence public response to terror attacks. Understanding how journalists view terrorism coverage can serve as a useful preparedness tool.
- Through a national survey of journalists, this study explores attitudes about news coverage of terrorism and the potential use of explanatory content in news stories to mitigate potential outrage.
- The proposed framework:
 - Explores how explanations in news coverage of crises mitigate outrage responses to risk.
 - Reflects social amplification of risk theory and Slovic's risk perception model.
 - Is used to examine media framing of terrorism, because news can provoke a high level of public outrage, depending on how the risk is framed in the coverage

Outrage – a negative public response to uncertainty, such as panic, anxiety or overreaction.

Two risks that provoke high outrage:

- Dread risk – a low-probability, high-damage event in which many people are killed at one point of time, large numbers of people have little or no individual control over the hazard, or there is vast uncertainty about the true level of risk associated with the hazard.
- Unknown risk – not observable, not evident to those exposed, effects are delayed or unknown to science.

Risks that are both dread and unknown are more likely to produce broad social, economic, and policy consequences.

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

Poses coerced or unfair exposure	Affects a vulnerable population
Is artificial, unfamiliar or memorable	Has delayed effects or is not preventable
Has catastrophic consequences	Poses a substantial risk to future populations
Is unknowable or controlled by others	Has identifiable victims
Is reported by untrustworthy sources	Has few or no benefits
Has morally-relevant assurances or control efforts	Has received substantial media attention
Involves an unresponsive process	Poses an opportunity for collective act

Hypotheses examined the relationship between explanatory and outrage content in terrorism coverage.

- **H1:** Stories that contained uncertainty or vague/confusing content will be perceived as more frightening than stories without this content (outrage-only stories).
- **H2:** Stories that contained uncertain/vague/confusing content will be perceived as less credible, authoritative, and trustworthy than stories without this content (outrage-only).
- **H3:** Stories that contained uncertainty or vague/confusing content will be perceived as more reassuring and credible than outrage-only stories, if they also contain factual explanations.
- **H4:** Stories that contained both conflicting reports and factual explanations will be perceived as more credible/authoritative than stories that contained only conflicting reports.
- **H5:** Stories that contained no uncertain/vague/confusing content will be perceived as more reassuring and credible if they also contain factual explanations.

Methods

Self-administered national survey of 147 U.S. media professionals, journalism students and 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 stories containing **uncertain or confusing content**:

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

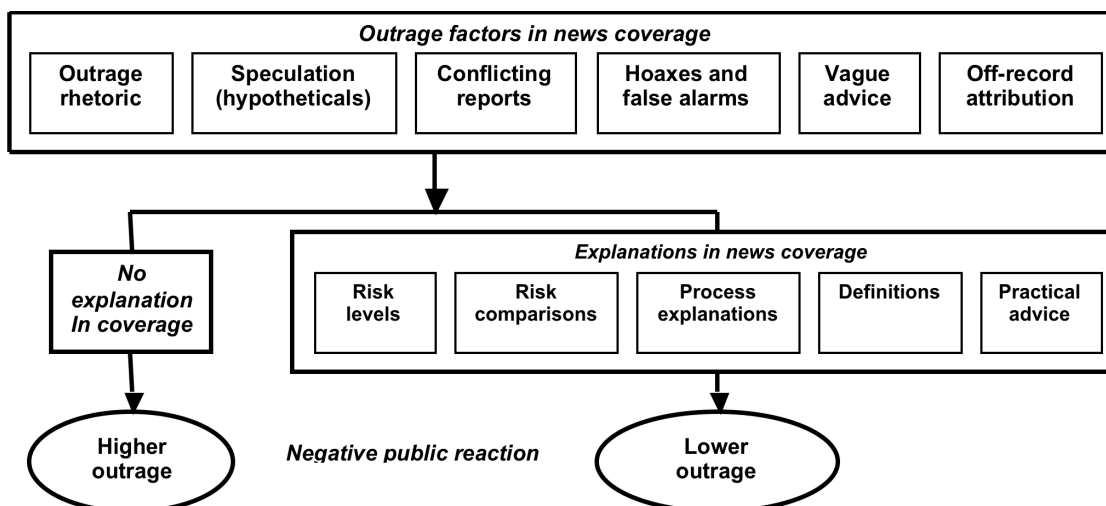
Explanatory (mitigating) content in the hypothetical scenarios included:

- 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). Among the media professionals:
 - 29% said they are at a higher risk of experiencing a terrorist attack than the general population.
 - 26% said work put them in places where terrorist attacks were more frequent than in the U.S.

Outrage-Explanation Framework



Hypothetical Stories

Story 1: Genetically engineered virus kills thousands

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

Story 2: Reporter receives suspicious letter

- Condition: outrage content + explanatory content
- Moderate level of outrage: involuntary, dread, known to science, controllable, delayed effects
- Outrage content: outrage rhetoric, speculation, conflicting reports
- Explanatory content: practical advice, relative risk, definitions

Story 3: Crop duster disperses white powder over stadium

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

Story 4: Three people infected with anthrax

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

Key Findings

- Stories containing explanatory content but no outrage content were seen as more credible, trustworthy, helpful, reassuring, authoritative, explanatory and ethical, as well as less frightening, more certain, less vague, and less confusing.
- Stories containing explanatory content were more reassuring but just as engaging as those without 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 frightening, unethical, uncertain, vague and confusing, as well as less authoritative, less reassuring, less explanatory, less credible and less trustworthy than stories that lacked outrage content.
- Explanatory content did not improve story perceptions when the story contained conflicting reports.
- The most credible and least confusing stories were those containing explanatory content without any outrage rhetoric.

Implications

- Findings supported the proposed outrage-explanation model.
- Although terrorism stories are inherently sensational, certain journalistic routines could mitigate public outrage to terrorism and weaken the impact of future attacks.
- To promote news coverage that is more engaging, trustworthy, helpful and reassuring, journalists and crisis managers should:
 - Strive to provide more factual explanation about risk and less confusing and frightening content.
 - Avoid using conflicting reports (dualing sources) and speculation about frightening scenarios.
 - Highlight evidence-based quotes from interviews, even when these quotes are not the most colorful.
 - Provide practical and specific advice to avoid provoking outrage.

Condition	Vague	Confusing	Unhelpful	Non-reassuring	Frightening	Uncertain
Out + no mit	2.93	2.95	3.15	3.42	3.44	3.00
Out + mit	2.87	2.90	2.88	2.96	3.33	3.02
No out + mit	2.25	2.19	2.17	2.12	2.42	2.35
No out + no mit	2.57	2.43	2.94	2.60	2.72	2.60

Condition	Credible	Trustworthy	Authoritative	Explanatory	Ethical	Engaging
Out + no mit	2.54	2.24	2.61	2.08	2.47	2.97
Out + mit	2.23	2.15	2.38	2.44	2.08	2.71
No out + mit	3.02	3.06	3.08	3.13	2.98	3.06
No out + no mit	2.77	2.77	2.77	2.49	2.72	2.53