

***Representations of terrorism in online media:
a comparative examination of UK, Germany, Greece and Turkey***

George Pleios

Associate Professor of Media & Communication Department, University of Athens

Stamatis Poulakidakos

***Specialized Research Personnel of the Laboratory of Social Research in the Media,
Media Department, University of Athens***

Anastasia Veneti

***Adjunct Assistant Professor, Department of Public Relations & Communication,
Technological Educational Institution of Ionian Islands***

Abstract

The scope of this paper is to examine the representations of terrorism within center-left and center-right online media in the UK, Germany, Greece and Turkey, by analyzing comparatively which particular cases attract the journalistic interest in these countries.¹ The rationale of the current research grounds itself on the agenda setting approach in terms of the quantitative and qualitative characteristics of terrorism presentation in the news sites. By applying the rationale of content analysis through a coding protocol, we explore the journalists' conceptions and specific understanding in these countries about historical roots of terrorism as well as its economic, social and cultural dimensions and consequences.

Keywords: *terrorism, online media, agenda setting, content analysis, comparative research, coding protocol, journalism*

¹ Part of this research was presented in the conference "Global Media and the War on Terror", organized by Westminster University, in London, September 2010. The current paper has been edited and enriched for the purposes of this publication. We would also like to thank the reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions.

In late modern societies, the relationship between citizens and politicians/political system is being extremely mediated in the sense that citizens' major political activity becomes their mass mediated relation with politics (Meyer & Hinchman, 2002; Edwards, 2001; Lees – Marshment, 2002). Media stand in many cases as a basic factor in defining political issues, problems and solutions, allies and enemies (Edelman, 1988), as well as indicating methods of confronting and solving these issues (Bennett, 2003). In this perspective a crucial issue regarding relations between terrorism, media and politics is the way in which media depict or represent terrorism, terrorists, their scopes and their victims.

This research examines the representations of terrorism within center-left and center- right online newspapers in four different countries, two of northern Europe, and two of southern Europe. We first approach the notions of terrorism and the relationship between terrorism and the media. Then, we conduct a content analysis on the abovementioned media, in order to test our research hypotheses.

Terrorist acts, being in their majority violent, interrupt abruptly and exogenously the unity and the functional integrity of a physical body or institution. In this sense, they belong in the group of the so called “bad news” (Gerbner, 1979; Bowman, 2003; Galtung, et al., 1965), that attract media attention, according to journalistic criteria used by media institutions (McQuail, 2003; Schudson, 1997) and travel very fast (Patterson, 1996).

Terrorism is not a phenomenon of modern times; it has occurred throughout the ages in a wide range of forms. As an activity, it has a lineage of at least two millennia and can be traced back to Roman times (Combs & Slann 2007, C.E.D.A.T. 2008:1). Its motives, methods, aims and consequences differ between different periods of time. Under this lens, of utmost importance are the views on terrorism in different contexts, the way terrorism is being defined and assessed. The relevant academic field recognizes the multi-dimensional difficulties of attempting to define terrorism (Bosi, 1996; Paschos, 2005; Tuman, 2003; Begin, 2006).

Defining terrorism

Terrorism is not a subject that is easily defined or fully understood. Both political and academic efforts to get to grips with terrorism have repeatedly been hung up on the issue of definition, of distinguishing terrorism from criminal violence or military action. Part of the difficulty in either defining or understanding terrorism is that the activity of terrorism is

itself dynamic. Terrorism not only takes on different forms, but the forms themselves are constantly changing, sometimes in unanticipated ways².

Yet the popular U.S. State Department's definition of terrorism as "premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by subnational groups or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience" (U.S. State Department 2001), omits terrorist atrocities, war crimes and population massacres conducted under state commands in conventional wars and any other conflict situations. Likewise civil wars may or may not be considered as terrorist conflicts, notwithstanding the high casualties and gruesome conduct usually associated with them (Cooper, 2004).

Terrorism and the media: a symbiotic relationship

Terrorism benefits from what has been called an "amplification effect" when the actions are broadcast through the media to a much larger audience than would be available on the spot where the action is occurring³. This confluence of interest between the media—who thrive on sensational news—and terrorists—who are only too happy to provide the sensational events—has raised questions about the possible complicity of the media in modern terrorism. The amplification, to a worldwide audience, of the news events created by terrorists certainly fulfills one of the goals of terrorists (publicity), and perhaps lends more significance to the acts than would ordinarily accrue. This amplification effect, then, dramatizes the theatrical crime of terrorism in ways that can enhance the message sent by the terrorists to their audience (Combs & Slann 2007:8). Getting information out to a large, even a global, audience about the cause for which the acts are being committed is a vital part of the terrorist act itself. Press coverage that makes the world aware of the "problem" that the individual or group is seeking to resolve is clearly advantageous. This publicity can offer both tactical (short-term) and strategic (long-term) gains for the operation itself (Weimann, 1993, Nacos, 1994).

² A generation ago, for example, neither the term nor the activity of cyber terrorism was a consideration.

³ For instance, having in mind that terrorism is perpetrated against innocents, insurgents carried out rural guerrilla warfare in several countries, including Angola and Mozambique, with many civilian casualties, for more than a decade without receiving much attention from the rest of the world. But when a similar number of Palestinians carried their warfare into the urban centers of Europe and the Middle East, their actions and their causes became dinner table conversation for television audiences around the world, because in the urban centers of Europe and the Middle East, the terrorists were within reach of TV news reporters and their cameras. The endless guerrilla struggles that remain largely unnoticed in more remote settings for decades cause at least as many casualties and destruction but seldom attract an international audience or provoke international reaction. We make this remark, knowing that guerilla warfare can be considered similar but not identical to terrorist acts. Their common characteristic though is the audiences they will both influence through their media presentation.

According to Schmid (1989), terrorism is closely connected to the provocation of fear in certain population groups (elite or citizens), usually through the use of violence, the aiming to certain political ends, etc. Contemporary terrorism is a mediated terrorism, in terms of the importance the media play in the dissemination of the terrorists' doctrines. It stands for the media researcher as the result of the deliberate (on behalf of the terrorists) conjunction of violence and communication (Maringela, 1991; Moroni, 2002), that is the baptizing of violence in the baptistry of communication (Hacker, 1980; Zulaika & Douglass, 1996). Such a conjunction is not pursued only by terrorists in their effort to form the news agenda, (Morini & Rote, 2002; Kassimeris, 2002), but by the media too, especially because of their function within a commercial context, urging them to an infotaining coverage of events (Thussu, 2003; Schmid & Graaf, 1982). Hence, media pay attention more on the actions which constitute a "message", including real messages that stand as warnings or capstones of violent symbolic acts.

Therefore, contemporary terrorism emerges as the result of the propagandistic rationale of the terrorist organizations together with the infotaining-commercial rationale of the media. This applies for the domestic political reality of and even more for the foreign policy and international relations, because along with the political apathy in contemporary society, citizens are less experienced in this domain (Webster, 2003). Within this context, such "bad news" obtains a special political and ideological meaning, besides the communicational one. In western countries, from the political reality point of view, the focal element is the transition from domestic- asserting power- revolutionary terrorism, to "new wars", which ground themselves on identity politics and seek mainly the return to the past (Kaldor, 1999). In the case of the new wars, the discrimination between domestic and international relations becomes difficult due to globalization, as well as the discernment between war and terrorism, religious and political aims, etc. (Kaldor, 1999). To be accurate, the two poles of similar dilemmas are closely connected to each other. Given the almost total eradication of revolutionary terrorism, its – more or less- wide political acceptance, and the reinforcement of the media democracy in western countries, several changes in the perception of terrorism and its representation through the media are taking place:

- a) The perception of terrorism, and therefore its definition, focuses on practices exercised by organizations conducting the "new wars", cutting, at the same time, these practices off their aims. Hence, terrorism is defined as the extra- or anti-institutional political violence/crime that is exercised by non legitimate domestic or international institutions/organizations/movements, aiming to achieve direct or indirect political aims. Terrorism coincides with political

violence exercised by any other organization than the nation, international organization (UN, NATO) or internationally recognized leader. This explains, in our opinion, the popularity of the definition of the US Department of State, especially among politicians and political institutions (governments, etc.).

- b) Terrorism is understood as international, exercised by organizations based abroad or connect their demands to foreign countries/organizations, but conduct attacks to local populations, services or functions of one or more countries
- c) Terrorism is understood as practice aiming at the indirect achievement of political goals, through the promotion of cultural (religious, national) identities. In this sense contemporary terrorism is tightly connected to the politics of identity.
- d) The communicational/media dimension of the terrorist actions and practices receives specific attention. Both political actors and the media focus on the effects of terrorism on the media, on the media audiences, or the communication actions of the terrorists (public messages in the internet, interviews, and proclamations). Due to the political rationale (focusing on the state power), and media rationale (characterized by dramatization and fragmentation), the above mentioned characteristics of terrorism perceptions apply not only in “new wars”, but also in the revolutionary terrorism of the past and the present, aiming at causing internal alterations to the political and financial system.

As we already mentioned, contemporary terrorism is being planned and conducted as a baptism of political violence in media power. Though western media might present some differences (Hallin & Mancini, 2004), they all function under commercial rules, with specific consequences in the presentation of events, the ideological point of view and coverage of the events. The media of the more advanced media democracies are expected to focus on international terrorism and the “new wars”, mainly through “Islamic terrorism”, stressing out its characteristics (unexpected deadly attacks against innocents). This phenomenon, for reasons having to do with the evaluation of the relation between political and cultural identities is more intense in conservative center-right media, compared to more liberal or center-left media.

As far as the extent of news coverage is concerned, significant contemporary phenomena are regionalization (Hjarvard, 2001) and domestication (Clausen, 2004) of the news. Though, when terrorism is connected to the international relations of a certain

country, these two phenomena tend to be diminished. In countries of northern Europe, where for ideological reasons contemporary media attention is focused mainly on international terrorism, the coverage is more extensive, than the one of 'revolutionary' terrorism, unless 'revolutionary' terrorism is connected to international terrorism. The opposite can be encountered in the countries of the south, especially in Greece, where attention is focused on domestic, 'revolutionary' terrorism. In such countries regionalization and domestication, which appears also as introversion of the news (Pleios et al., 2008) are further more intense, due to the fact that such peripheral countries do not play leading role within the international political relations domain.

Hence, the extent of the coverage of terrorist acts is dependent upon: whether these acts take place within or outside the country, which foreign country they are taking place in (which are the relations of a certain country with the victim-country), how much an international terrorist-act influences the internal life of a country (if this country can be victimized too) or the international relations and the place of a certain country in a global scale, which organization takes responsibility for the terrorist act and which is the attitude of a certain country towards this organization, which is the number and identity of the victims and the weapons used to conduct the attack.

In any case, a significant differentiating factor of media coverage of terrorist acts is the position of the country's government towards terrorism, especially if a certain government is directly involved in military action against terrorism (Lehman, 2003). The official government's position determines in various ways the media view and therefore their coverage, which might differ regarding the stance of each specific medium to the party in office. On the contrary, in the less developed media societies/democracies, having early modernity characteristics, like those in southern Europe, especially in Balkans, the extent of media attention on international terrorism is expected to be limited (compared to the north). At the same time, the coverage of domestic, revolutionary terrorism is expected to be more intense. The further we go from the western north to the south, the presence of domestic terrorism becomes denser, whereas "new wars" terrorism becomes infrequent.

In one hand, as far as the criticism towards terrorism (either domestic or international) is concerned, media attitude in the more developed media democracies of central and Western Europe is expected to be a totally rejective or totally negative position against terrorist organizations and their acts, with a restricted understanding on the causes of the existence of this phenomenon. On the other hand, within party democracies, with more or less significant, remnant, political culture (Demertzis, 1999), like the countries of the European south, where we expect a more "understanding" position towards

international terrorism and the “new wars”, given that these countries have a lower contribution to the “war on terrorism”. In addition, one might encounter an underlining of the differences between revolutionary and international terrorism.

To end with, an important characteristic of media coverage of terrorism is the kind of discursive construction of the terrorist phenomenon. Due to the “nature” of the internet and the structure of the news in western world, commentary journalism, what McNair (1998 & 2000) calls ‘the interpretative moment’, has become particularly significant. In addition, priming within internet news sites is more restricted than in “traditional” media, and therefore we expect a central presentation of terrorism mainly because of specific terrorist acts.

Additionally, within the internet, dramatization is rather low compared to older media (Hewitt, 2005). This low dramatization is expected to be valid for the articles referring to terrorist acts too, even though the presence of commentaries favors dramatization. Yet, in the countries of the south and especially Greece, one can find a strong presence of pre-modern cultural elements in communication, even in TV news bulletins. According to research in the Greek television domain there are higher percentages of verbal dramatization in Greek TV news (Pleios, 2005 & 2010), than image/iconistic dramatization. Due to the fact that though internet content is polytropic, e.g. is based not only on the moving and static image discourse, but also on natural (spoken and written) language as well as other semiotic systems, natural language is the main ‘house’ of information in journalistic internet texts. Thus, we expect a rather high degree of verbal dramatization, in online covering of terrorism.

Media attention on terrorism depends firstly on the definition they adopt for terrorism. In this sense media coverage becomes a kind of self-fulfilled prophecy. The definition of terrorism ‘governs’ the kind of media coverage (what country, what acts, what terrorist ideology or cultural identity etc is picked up for coverage) and the last reinforce the kind of defining contemporary terrorism. A prophecy formulated in accordance to the social, political and financial system and the historically formed relationship between these factors. At the same time, the communication system and the media act either as autonomous protagonists or as subjects under the power of political system.

Research Outline

Based on our theoretical background we formed our main research question and the research hypotheses to be answered by the findings of our analysis of the internet

newspaper articles. Our main research question is: Which are the characteristics of the projection of terrorism in the online media of Germany, UK, Greece and Turkey? This main research question is being accompanied by several research hypotheses, which we will either accept or reject:

1. Terrorist attacks as «bad news» attract lots of attention on behalf of the online versions of traditional newspapers (too).
2. Media attention shifts from the revolutionary terrorism to the new forms of terrorism, in particular towards «international», «Islamic» terrorism. This is more evident in the North.
3. Media's attitude is formulated according to their political and ideological identity. International terrorism is more intense in the conservative media.
4. The extent and the intensity of negative opinions of journalists towards terrorism are more intense in the conservative media
5. Verbal Dramatization is low, though high in Greece and Turkey.

Our method of analysis is the quantitative content analysis with the use of a research protocol. The online media selected come from four countries (UK, Germany, Greece and Turkey), and each country is being represented by two online newspapers (one center left and one center right). To be more specific, the newspapers chosen are: from the UK, "The Guardian" and "Daily Telegraph", from Germany "Die Sueddeutsche Zeitung" and "Die Welt", from Greece "TA NEA" and "Kathimerini", and from Turkey "Zaman" and "Hurriyet" (online articles in English). It is necessary to clarify that for the purposes of the paper and the conceptual equivalence of the terms, we classify "Zaman" and "Hurriyet" in the above mentioned categories (center left and center right). "Zaman" is rather "conservative Islamic" and "Hurriyet" is a central liberal newspaper.

Our sample consists of 10% of the articles published in these internet news sites, having terrorism as their main subject, between July 2009 and July 2010. We applied random systematic sampling, choosing 1 out of every 10 articles. Articles were selected using the search bar of each site with the keyword "terrorism" (Terrorismus, tromokratia), so as to trace in an immediate way the most relevant to our research rationale articles. The sample articles were coded and analysed using SPSS 17 and the credibility of the data input by the coders was tested using the North, Holsti, Zaninovich and Zinnes coders' reliability test (North et al., 1963)⁴.

Our coding protocol includes variables seeking to examine mostly content characteristics of articles under research (country in which the described event takes place,

⁴ $R = 2(C1, C2) / C1 + C2$, having as minimum level of credibility 70%.

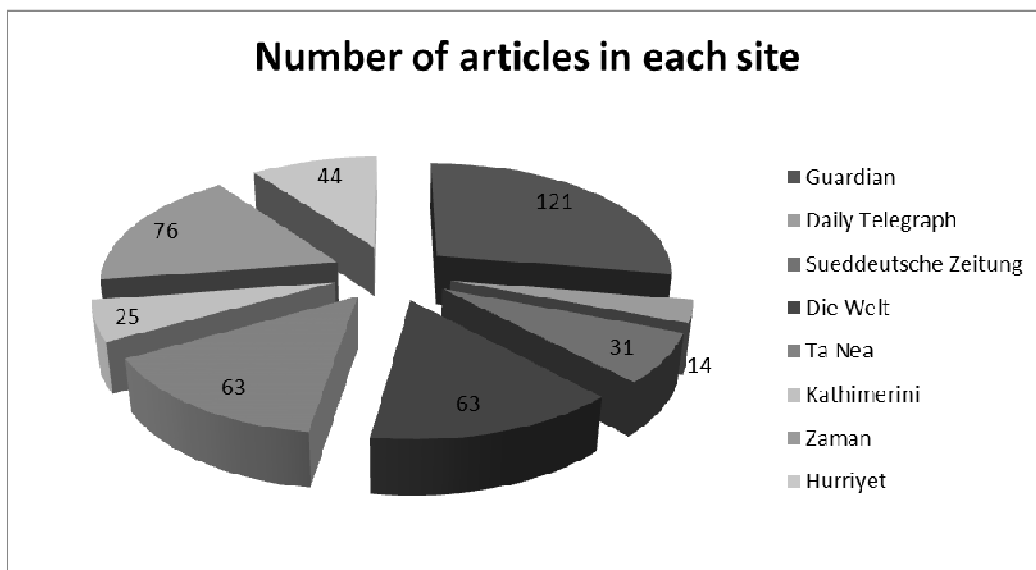
kind of the described terrorist act, reference to casualties, geographical dimension of the terrorist act, perpetrator of terrorist acts, the ideological identity of the terrorists mentioned, the national identity and status of the casualties, the journalist's opinion as it emerges from the article, the verbal dramatization rate).

During the presentation of our results we will be conducting several chi-square statistical tests, so as to investigate the existence of statistically significant relationships between specific dependent and independent variables.⁵

Presentation of Results

Seeking to explore the extend of media coverage on terrorist acts we found out that, as shown in Graph 1, terrorist acts appear rather frequently in reports of the news sites we examined. To be more specific, 121 reports were published by "The Guardian", having terrorism as their main issue, 76 articles were found in "Zaman", 63 articles in "Ta Nea" and "Die Welt", 44 in "Hurriyet", 31 in "Die Sueddeutsche Zeitung" and 14 in the "Daily Telegraph", ranging from 0.4 to three articles for each day of our research.

Graph 1: Number of articles in each site:

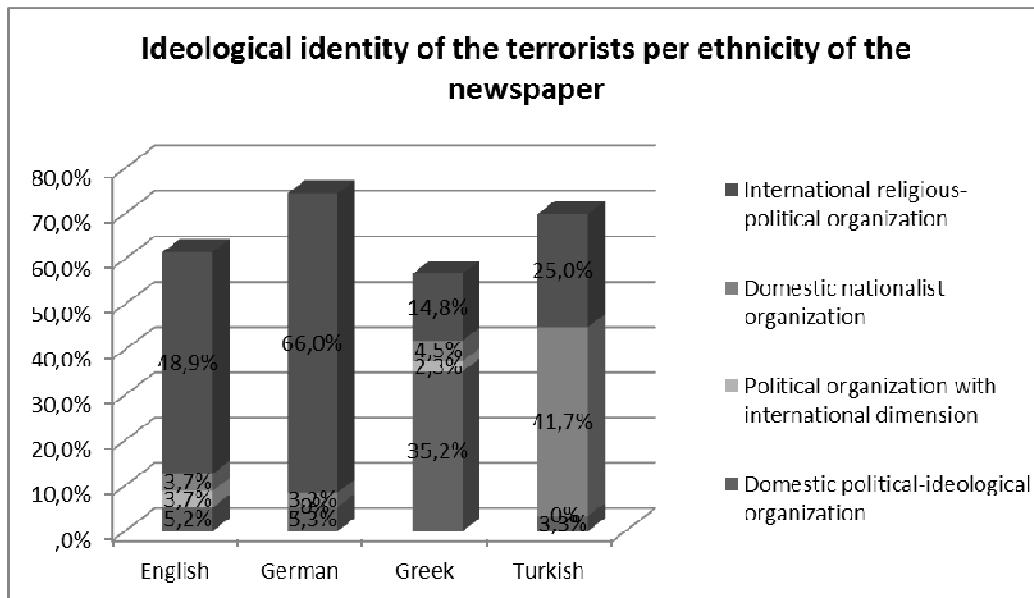


Another important aspect to explore- apart from the quantitative appearance of articles referring to terrorism- is the kind of terrorism presented by the articles in online newspapers of different countries. The following graph (Graph 2) demonstrates a rather

⁵ We state now a general null (H0) and alternative (HA) hypothesis, so as not to repeat it every time we conduct the test: H0: The dependent variable is not influenced by the independent variable. HA: The dependent variable is influenced by the independent variable. We accept the null hypothesis with chi square p-values > 0.05, and we decline the null hypothesis with chi-square p-values < 0.05.

different course of the reports on terrorism between the online newspapers of the north (English and German), compared to the ones of the south (Turkish and Greek). As we can see, English and German sites deal more with international religious-political terrorism (in the vast majority of cases the Al-Qaeda), whereas Greek and Turkish sites seem focused on domestic terrorist organizations. In one hand, almost half of the articles of the British sites (48.9%) and almost two thirds of the German sites (66%), deal with international political-religious organizations. On the other hand, 40% of the articles in the Greek sites focus on domestic terrorist organizations, whereas only 17.1% deal with the international aspect of the phenomenon. A similar image is formed in Turkish online newspapers too. Almost half of the articles (44%) focus on domestic terrorism, whereas, at the same time only 25% of the articles report on international terrorism. The statistically significant relationship between the two variables is being confirmed by our chi square statistic test ($\chi^2 = 0.000 < 0.05$),⁶ demonstrating that the reference to terrorism differs between sites of different countries.⁷

Graph 2: Ideological identity of the terrorists per ethnicity of the newspaper



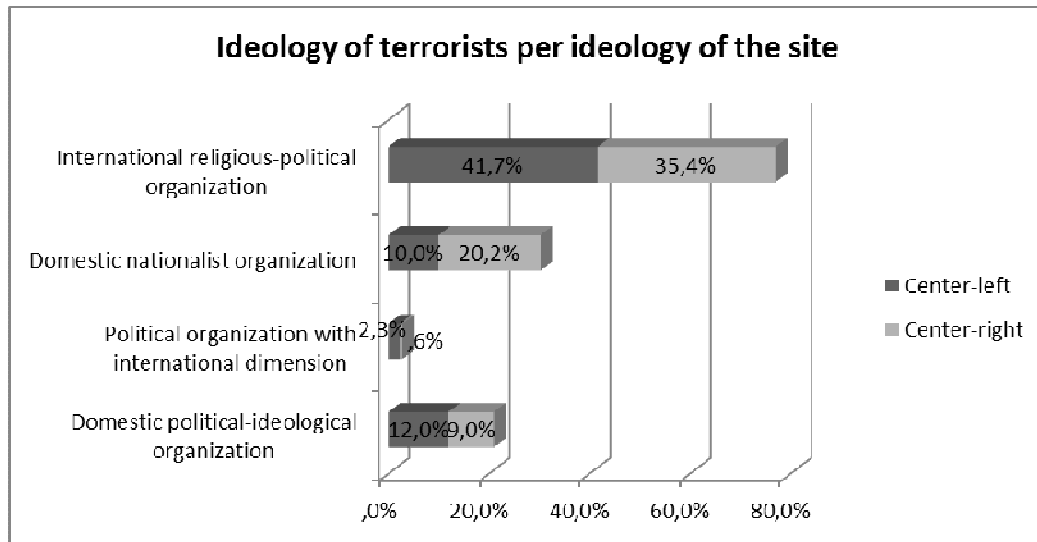
Dividing the researched online newspapers, according to their ideological orientations, to center-left and center-right ones, we came up with Graph 3, which demonstrates that center-left newspapers appear to focus more on international religious-

⁶ For the conduction of the current statistic tests we accept the 0.05 confidence interval as the distinguishing point between statistically significant and insignificant relationship.

⁷ The rest of the percentages up to 100% for each country come from the “no specific organization” option, respectively 37.8% for the English, 24.5% for the German, 43.2% for the Greek, and 30% for the Turkish newspapers. These percentages were deliberately omitted from the formation of the relevant graph, so as to stretch out in a more emphatic way the different orientation between the newspapers per country regarding the division between domestic and international terrorism.

political terrorism (41.7%), than center-right newspapers (35.4%). The last ones appear to focus more on domestic nationalist terrorism (20.2%), than center-left newspapers (10%). Despite these differences though, our statistic test did not show any significant statistic relationship stemming from the cross tabulation of terrorist and newspaper ideologies (chi square= 0.064>0.05).

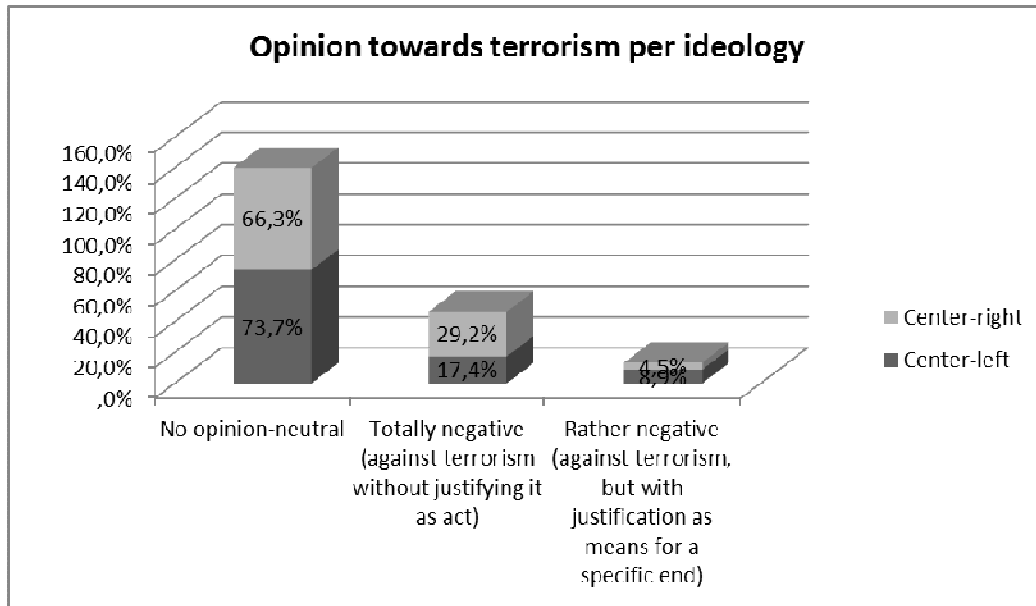
Graph 3: Ideology of terrorists per ideology of the state



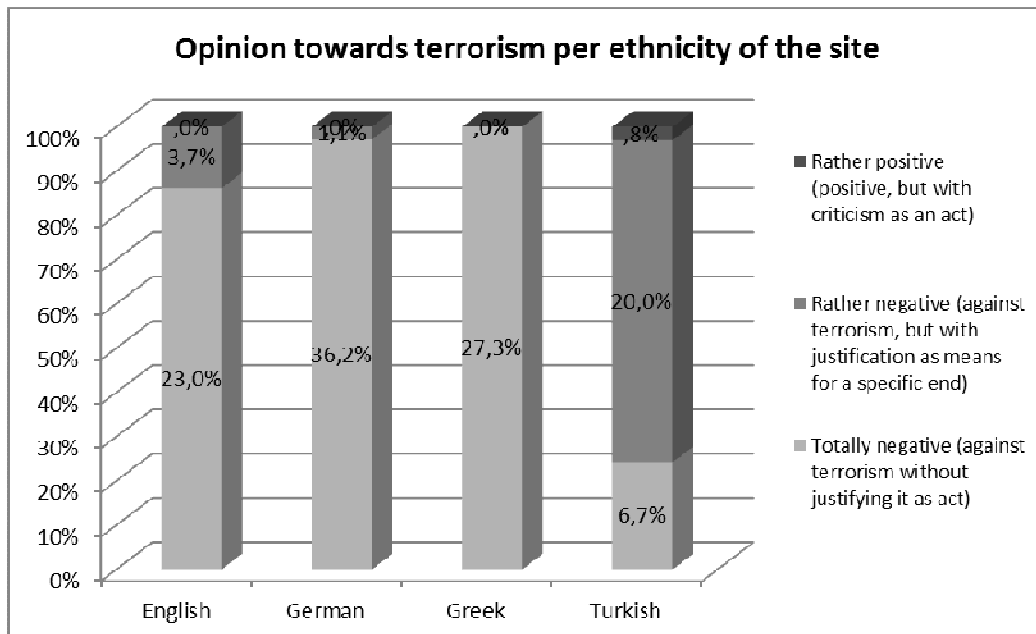
As far as the attitude of the online newspapers towards terrorism is concerned, even though the majority of the opinions of both center-left (73.7%) and center-right (66.3%) newspapers is neutral, there is a marginally statistically significant relationship within this cross tabulation (chi square=0.04< 0.05), mainly depicted by the difference in the totally negative opinion towards terrorism, where center-right newspapers appear more intensively against terrorism (29.2%), than center-left newspapers (17.4%). The intensity of the negativity towards terrorism is counted by the existence of negative adjectives evaluating terrorism, with or without a justification of its practices (Graph 4). Dividing the examined newspapers by their ethnicity, we can assume that totally negative and rather negative opinion conquer our findings, but there seems to be a difference between the Turkish and the rest of the newspapers on the intensity of terrorist condemning. While, English, German and Greek newspapers appear totally against terrorism, the Turkish ones appear to hold mainly a rather negative stance (Graph 5).⁸

⁸ We conducted a cross tabulation and a chi-square statistic test, which gave us a p-value of 0.000 <0.05, therefore there is a statistically significant relationship between the ethnicity of the newspaper and the opinion

Graph 4: Opinion towards terrorism per ideology



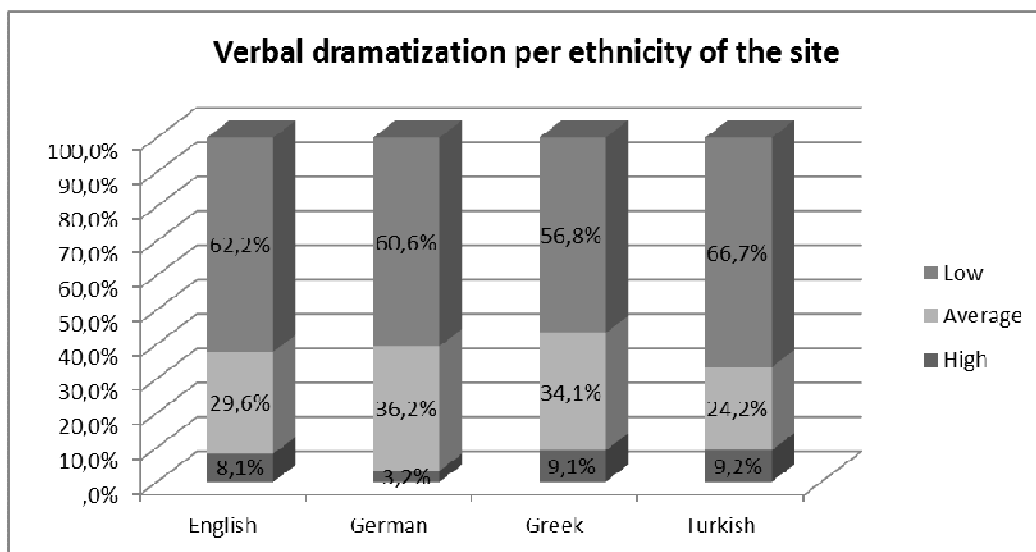
Graph 5: Opinion towards terrorism per ethnicity of the site



towards terrorism. The rest of the percentages (up to 100%) refer to the articles bearing no opinion on terrorism (English 73.3%, German 62.8%, Greek 72.7%, Turkish 72.5%).

Our final point of examination of the articles in our research is the dramatization⁹, as a journalistic practice of framing and presenting significant events and the so called “bad news”, within which- as we demonstrated in the theoretical background of the current paper- terrorist acts can be found. The examination of the news sites showed a rather low dramatization both per country of the site and per ideology of the site. To become more specific, Turkish news sites appear to have the biggest percentage of low dramatization (66,7%), followed by the English sites (62,2%), the German (60,6%) and the Greek ones (56,8%). In addition, high dramatization can be found in a small percentage of the articles, as shown in Graph 6 (9,2% in the Turkish articles, 9,1% in the greek articles, 8,1% in the English articles, and only 3,2% in the German ones).

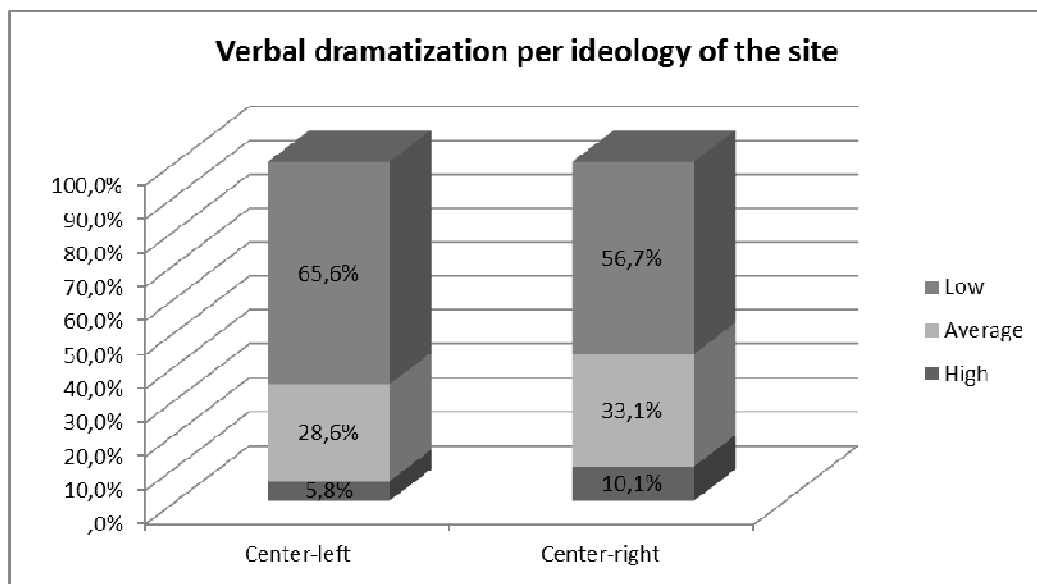
Graph 6: Verbal dramatization per ethnicity of the site



Similar is the image depicted by the division of the articles per ideology of the news site, though center-right newspapers appear to have a bit more dramatized articles on terrorism, judging by the percentages of high and medium dramatization. Though our statistic test showed no significant statistic relationship between the two variables (chi square=0.96> 0.05), medium and high dramatization in center-right newspapers appears more frequently than in center-left ones (33,1% for medium dramatization in center-right news sites, to 28,6% in center-left newspapers and 10,1% for high dramatization in center-right news sites, compared to 5,8% in center-left ones) (Graph 7).

⁹ For the current research, dramatization is being measured by the presence of one or more words implying panic, terror, disaster (the words themselves or synonyms), ranging from low dramatization (no presence of such characterizations), to high dramatization (presence of more than two of the abovementioned words or synonyms). Of course there is a wide range of ways in which dramatization can be measured, depending on the aims of each research.

Graph 7: Verbal dramatization per ideology of the site



Conclusion

Based on our results we can evaluate the validity of our research hypotheses so as to form a complete picture of the presentation of terrorism within the articles of the news sites we examined. The frequency (0,4- three articles per day) of the articles on terrorism lets us accept our first working hypothesis on the rather frequent coverage of terrorism by the internet sites we examined for the period of the conduction of our research.

As far as our second hypothesis is concerned, a more intensive focus of the northern sites (English and German ones) on international terrorism can be traced, a fact which is not evident in the southern sites. The main reason behind this differentiation is that, whereas northern European countries (in our case Germany and United Kingdom) are influenced more by international terrorism, southern countries (for the current research Turkey and Greece), on the contrary, are not directly influenced by international terrorism. In addition, southern European countries suffer from significant domestic terrorist organizations and acts, while northern European countries do not seem to suffer from significant domestically created and developed terrorist acts.

Based on the results of the current research, we cannot accept our third hypothesis referring to a more intense focus of center-right news sites on international terrorism, due to the prevalence of center-left news site in the presentation of international terrorist incidents for the period and sample of our research.

Though negative in general, both the extent and intensity of the opinions the articles express on terrorism differ significantly between center-left and center-right sites or

different countries' sites, allowing us to accept our fourth research hypothesis. In addition, verbal dramatization is apparently limited and does not differ significantly between "northern" and "southern" reports on terrorism. Same stands for the ideological division of the online newspapers, making us partially accept our fifth working hypothesis. In short, terrorism (including 'war against terrorism') becomes a significant media issue per se, despite its various ideological and stylistic interpretations.

To conclude, we should mention that the current research has some limitations, which a future research should overcome in order to come up with more results. A future study might well include more countries in order to offer a more analytical comparison between north and south. Moreover, the current research examines a specific period of time. In order to come up with more valid results on a diachronical phenomenon such as terrorism and its relation to mass media, different periods should be examined in a comparative rationale. A comparative study would provide us with more concrete evidence for the stages of the undeniably close relationship between terrorism and the media.

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Email: George Pleios, gplios@media.uoa.gr; Stamatis Poulakidakos, s.poulakidakos@gmail.com; Anastasia Veneti, anastasia_veneti@yahoo.com.

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