

## **BLOWING THINGS UP: New evidence that media coverage of terrorist violence can trigger further attacks**

Sensationalist news coverage of terrorist attacks can cause more atrocities in the future. That is the central finding of economic research by **Michael Jetter**, to be presented at the annual congress of the European Economic Association in Mannheim in August 2015.

By studying over 60,000 terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2012, the author finds a link between the number of *New York Times* articles on the initial attacks and the number of follow-up attacks in the next few weeks. To find out whether this effect is direct (and not just larger terrorist campaigns getting more coverage), the study compares attacks with ones where a larger story (such as a natural disaster) overshadowed reporting.

The results suggest that one extra *New York Times* article on an attack increases the number of attacks in the same country by 11-15% over the next few weeks. On average, this leads to an extra one or two casualties in the upcoming week.

The author comments:

‘What my research suggests is that we may need to rethink the sensationalist coverage of terrorism (such as the cruel murders of ISIS) and stop providing terrorists a free media platform.’

‘Media coverage of other events that are causing more harm in the world should not be neglected at the expense of media marathons discussing the cruelties of terrorists.’

### **More...**

Do the media actively encourage terrorist attacks by too much coverage? Terrorist organisations receive extensive media attention. Whether it is the Taliban, Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram or recently ISIS: terrorism is everywhere on TV stations, newspapers, and the radio. We also know that terrorists need media coverage to spread their message, create fear, and recruit followers. But until now we do not know whether media attention actively encourages terrorist attacks. This study derives an empirical methodology to provide an answer to that question.

Analysing a comprehensive list of over 60,000 terrorist attacks between 1970 and 2012, a strong link between media coverage devoted to initial terrorist attacks (measured as the number of *New York Times* articles) and the occurrence of more attacks within the upcoming week becomes clear. But it is difficult to conclude that media attention causes these future attacks from looking at the pure relationship between the two phenomena.

Isolating the causal effect of media attention on terrorist attacks is possible with an empirical strategy that requires another event that is unrelated to the initial terrorist, but can independently affect media coverage. For example, if a natural disaster happens in the United States (think Hurricane Katrina), then the associated press will

overwhelmingly report on said disaster, but will report much less about a contemporary terrorist attack that happened in any other country of the world.

Indeed, using this technique makes it possible to isolate the causal effect from media attention of terrorist attacks on the occurrence of future attacks. The results show that more coverage is indeed predicted to lead to more attacks in the near future. One additional *New York Times* article is suggested to increase the number of ensuing attacks in the same country by 11-15%. On average, an additional *New York Times* article appears to lead to one or two casualties from terrorist attacks within the upcoming week.

Now, these results should of course be interpreted with care and by no means are they suggesting an end of reporting about terrorist activities. But it may help to put the numbers in perspective: 42 people die every day from terrorist attacks and 7,123 children die every day because of hunger-related causes.

What this research is suggesting is that we may need to rethink the sensationalist coverage of terrorism (such as the cruel murders of ISIS) and stop providing terrorists a free media platform. Media coverage of other events that are causing more harm in the world should not be neglected at the expense of media marathons discussing the cruelties of terrorists.

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