

Presentations of Terrorism in U.S. News Media

Research Thesis

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by

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Abstract

The framing and presentation of news stories has been shown to influence audience attitudes and perceptions. With this in mind, this experiment analyzed whether the different terms used to describe the terrorist group ISIS may influence audience attitudes about the religion of Islam. It was thought that terrorism labels could impact Americans' attitudes toward religious groups, presidential approval, and national security policies. In this experiment, students ($N = 440$) were exposed to one of three news releases. Two news releases were written to recognize the anniversary of a fictional terrorist attack, whereas the third served as a control and discussed an environmental issue. The terrorism news releases were identical except for the name of the alleged perpetrators as ISIS or Daesh. Following the news release, students reported their attitudes toward the religion of Islam. Given that the term ISIS directly references the religion of Islam, unlike Daesh, use of this term was hypothesized to more negatively influence audiences' attitudes toward Islam. These differences were also studied through Terror Management Theory (TMT), which posits that peoples' attitudes are affected by thoughts of their own death. Depictions of violence in news about terrorism make TMT a useful theory for this experiment. It was hypothesized that participants made to think about their own death would report more negative opinions toward Islam than participants that were not. The results suggested that people's attitudes toward Islam were not significantly different between framing conditions. However, the results suggested that thoughts of death had a greater effect on attitudes toward Islam than the framing manipulation. Additionally, there was suggestive evidence that thoughts of death affected participants' attitudes about national security policy and presidential approval. The outcomes of this experiment have implications for politicians and the news media who seek

to avoid contributing to Islamophobia in their presentations of terrorism. The results contribute to existing research on media effects and terror management theory.

Keywords: Media Effects, Terror Management Theory, Terrorism, Framing

Presentations of Terrorism in U.S. News Media

The framing of news stories have been shown to influence audience attitudes (Entman 1991, 1993; Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997; Pan & Kosicki, 1993). The presentation of news, particularly the rhetoric that frames terrorism, carry implications for the effectiveness of the United States' war against terrorist groups such as ISIS. Political elites are divided about how to label this particular terrorism threat. Some Republicans argue that we cannot win the war on terror unless we refer to ISIS with their preferred term, "radical Islam." In response, President Obama posed the questions, "what exactly would using this label accomplish? What exactly would it change?" (Media Matters Staff, 2016). Words may not wage a war on terror, but research on framing has shown that words do impact politics. Framing studies have shown that word choice and syntactical structures carry implications for how audiences interpret messages (Pan & Kosicki, 1993). In the case of terrorism, word choice may affect Americans' attitudes toward Islam. Additionally, word choice may serve to derogate Islam as an outgroup and create distinctions between "Us versus them, or U.S. versus Islam" in portrayals of conflict and terrorism (Powell, 2011, p. 90). This distinction has revealed a trend toward the "orientalization" of Islam in American culture, news media, and political discourse (Kumar, 2010). As such, the purpose of this study is to empirically test how the news media's presentations of terrorism can affect attitudes toward Islam.

When a terrorist group such as ISIS is referred to by different names, the news media and political elites must make choices about which term to use. This study seeks to understand the implications of this decision on attitudes toward Islam. The effect of word choice is studied through the lens of terror management theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Discussions of terrorism are typically associated with images and descriptions of violence

and death. Similarly, TMT calls to mind thoughts of death, known as mortality salience, and is therefore an appropriate theoretical lens for studying the outcomes of terrorism coverage. Terror management theory has been used in hundreds of studies to understand the effect of mortality salience on emotions and attitudes (Burke, Martens, & Faucher, 2010; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). To study the implications of the terms used to describe terrorism, this review begins by discussing how the terms ISIS and Daesh are used in American news media.

ISIS versus Daesh in the News

Debates surrounding the terms used by the news media are not new. For example, news media outlets have been divided about using the name Burma or Myanmar to describe the same country since 1989 (Wilson, 2008). In the current war on terror, a debate exists regarding terms used to refer to a terrorist group. This study focuses on the use of ISIS versus Daesh. These terms have the potential to affect attitudes toward Islam because ISIS explicitly associates itself with Islam whereas Daesh does not.

Between the news media, political elites, and the general public in the United States, ISIS is the most common term used to describe this terrorist group (Irshaid, 2015). It is a translation of the group's former name, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria. Because ISIS was an early name used by the group, it remains common. The term ISIS directly references two controversial tenets of the group's identity: their purported religion, Islam, and their sovereignty as a recognized state. ISIS explicitly references Islam in their identity. One consequence of this label is that priming the religious identity of this group may lead to misperceptions in the public's attitudes towards this religion. Moreover, referencing religion may also misrepresent the war on terror as a war against Islam.

The term ISIS also references the geographic region the group is seeking as their sovereign state, the Middle East region surrounding Iraq and Syria. Consequently, this term contributes to the “orientalization” of the Middle East and Islam, a framework that casts “the ‘West’ as a beacon of democracy and enlightenment and the ‘Muslim’ world as mired in backwardness and intolerance” (Kumar, 2010, p. 255). There are countless examples throughout American history that illustrate an ideology in which “the ‘West’ is a dynamic, complex, and ever-changing society, whereas the ‘Orient,’ and in particular the world of Islam, is static, barbaric, and despotic, and, therefore, in need of Western intervention to bring about progressive change” (Kumar, 2010, p. 258). Since 9/11, this orientalizing has been exemplified through conflicts with al-Qaeda, Iran, Iraq, and now ISIS.

Another term used to refer to ISIS is Daesh (or Da’ish). This is an Arabic acronym that is considered pejorative because it sounds like an Arabic word, *daes*, which means “to crush under one’s foot” (Condon, 2014). The term Daesh does not include any direct English references to the religion of Islam or the geographic location of the group and is less commonly used than the term ISIS.

There is also a difference between how common these terms are among Americans. Google Trends data are a reliable way to measure the usage of ISIS and Daesh. Trends data shows how frequently people search for any given term on Google, based on location and time. Trends data has recognized ISIS and Daesh as search terms since 2014 (Google, 2017). Since 2014, ISIS has consistently been the more-frequently searched term in the United States. This was most evident in November 2015, when both ISIS and Daesh reached their peak search period in the United States (see Figure 1). In November 2015, ISIS registered an interest score of

100 and Daesh scored a three. Thus, this Trends data provides convincing evidence that the term ISIS is more common among Americans.

[Figure 1 about here.]

The purpose of this study is to compare usage of the term ISIS to Daesh. This comparison is important because a debate exists between news media outlets and politicians about which term to use. For example, the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry decided to use the term Daesh instead of ISIS because of his concern that the Islamic association could negatively impact attitudes toward Islam (Condon, 2014). President Obama concurred with Kerry's intention, but refers to the group as ISIL. According to Obama:

Groups like ISIL and al-Qaeda want to make this war a war between Islam and America or between Islam and the west. ... And if we fall into the trap of painting all Muslims with a broad brush and imply that we are at war with an entire religion, then we are doing the terrorists' work for them. (Media Matters Staff, 2016)

On the other hand, during his run for president, Donald Trump criticized President Obama for failing to use Trump's preferred term "radical Islam". Trump said, "[President Obama] can't even mention the words radical Islamic terrorism" (Media Matters Staff, 2016). These discussions contribute to a debate surrounding the implications of word choice when describing terrorism. To address this debate, this study seeks to understand if the words chosen by the news media affect people's attitudes towards Islam, President Obama, and foreign policy.

Framing

The news media is responsible for framing situations and events. According to Entman (1993), "To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text," (p. 52). In other words, framing selects a certain aspect of the reality and

reinforces certain words and visual images, thus making certain aspects of this selected reality more salient for audiences. Essentially, “the words and images that comprise the frame render one basic interpretation more readily discernible, comprehensible, and memorable than others” (Entman, 1991, p. 7). Selecting and reinforcing certain words in the media is not without measurable effects; framing impacts people’s perceptions and interpretation of events and actors presented in the news.

A situation or event could be framed within one of multiple aspects of a perceived reality. For example, a KKK rally could be presented through one of two frames, a free speech frame, in which the rally is presented as an expression of free speech, or through a public order frame, in which the rally is criticized for inciting violence or danger (Nelson, Clawson, & Oxley, 1997). In Nelson et al.’s study, people tolerated the rally differently after exposure to one of these frames. Similarly, a terrorist group could be framed as ISIS, which selects and emphasizes an Islamic association among audiences, or it could be framed as Daesh, which does not reinforce an Islamic association.

People’s attitudes about Islam and terrorism could be different based on exposure to different framings of ISIS. When terrorism can be framed by a variety of terms, the choice of words becomes important. The term ISIS reinforces the group as an Islamic group and as a sovereign state, whereas Daesh carries none of these associations.

When framing presentations of terrorism, the news media makes a lexical choice about using either the term ISIS or Daesh. Pan and Kosicki (1993) refer to the choice of lexicon as a “designator” (p. 62). The designator chosen to describe ISIS, whether it is ISIS or Daesh, makes implications about the frame being purported by the news media and has implications for how the audience perceives and understands their message about terrorism.

One of the public's responses to the lexical framing of ISIS could be to attribute responsibility (Iyengar, 1989; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). The two types of responsibility attributed from frames are cause and treatment. Causal responsibility is when individuals attribute someone or something to be have caused or instigated the problem. Treatment responsibility is when individuals identify someone or something to resolve the problem. Iyengar (1989) found that media audiences, in response to news stories, attribute causal responsibility for terrorism. The agents of responsibility, according to these media audiences, are generally individual and societal factors.

Causal responsibility is expected to be impacted by the framing of ISIS. In most cases, the action being reported in the news is a violent attack or threat. If the group is framed as an Islamic group, receivers of the frame may assign responsibility for the action to Muslims. Consequently, people will be more likely to express unfavorable attitudes toward this group. These ideas lead to the first hypotheses:

H1: Participants in the control condition will report more positive attitudes toward Islam than participants in the ISIS or Daesh conditions.

H2: Participants in the Daesh condition will report more positive attitudes toward Islam than participants in the ISIS condition.

Terror Management Theory

Terror Management Theory (TMT; Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986) is a useful lens to address our hypotheses because the theory predicts how people react when they are confronted with their mortality. Given that this study is interested in what feelings or attitudes are evoked when terrorism is discussed, tenets from TMT are useful. According to TMT, thinking about one's mortality ("mortality salience"; MS), is generally uncomfortable and does

not give a person's life significance (Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). To avoid the discomfort associated with the inevitability of death, TMT posits that people will invest in beliefs that will "provide a buffer against the anxiety that results from living in a largely uncontrollable, perilous universe, where the only certainty is death" (Greenberg et al., 1990, p. 308). When MS is primed, that buffer is eroded and people react to uncomfortable thoughts of death. More specifically, people's attitudes about their worldview are strengthened as a form of defense (Goldenberg, et al., 2001; Greenberg, et al., 1990; Greenberg, Solomon, & Arndt, 2008). This means people primed with MS will give more positive evaluations to their in-group, because people within an in-group share worldviews, validate these worldviews, and provide a buffer from MS (Rosenblatt, Greenberg, Solomon, Pyszczynski, & Lyon, 1989). On the other hand, people primed with MS will give more negative evaluations to out-groups out of fear that out-group members threaten existing worldviews.

News coverage about terrorism, by its nature, presents a mortality salience prime (Landau et al., 2004). News stories about terrorist groups, terrorist attacks, and counterterrorism efforts often use images of death, violence, and fear. These thoughts impinge upon and threaten audiences' worldview and remind them of their own mortality. People may feel vulnerable or fearful after reading or watching news coverage about terrorism. These vulnerable, fearful reactions elicited by MS can affect people's attitudes about in-group and out-group members.

The in-group and out-groups can be based on religion. Greenberg et al. (1990) applied MS to evaluations of religious groups and found that Christians primed with MS gave more positive evaluation ratings to other Christians and more negative ratings to Jews. Jewish participants primed with MS similarly reported more negative ratings toward Christians and more positive ratings to other Jews.

When the United States is waging a war on terror, the out-group could be perceived as Islam, and this TMT study explores Americans' evaluations of Islam. Despite being a major world religion, Islam is a minority religion in the United States. According to Pew, less than 1% of the U.S. population is Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2015). In the Middle East, the site of U.S. conflict and intervention regarding terrorism for decades, 91% of the population is Muslim (Pew Research Center, 2009). Moreover, Pew (2016) has found that fears of another terrorist attack against the United States are at their highest level since they began polling on this attitude in 2003. Because terrorism has become top-of-mind for Americans and because much of the conflict occurs in a Muslim-majority region of the world, Americans may identify the Middle East as the agent of responsibility for terrorist violence. Consequently, Americans may generalize responsibility for attacks to Muslims, the majority religion in the Middle East.

In this study, references to ISIS should reinforce differences between Americans and people from the Middle East. This out-group distinction should be augmented, compared to Daesh, because of the reference to the religion of Islam and the geographic location in the Middle East. Both features contribute to the orientalizing of this terrorist group and should serve to maximize the perceived differences between the in-group and out-group. This out-group designation is important in TMT. Findings have shown that out-groups are derogated when people are primed with MS, because out-groups threaten worldviews (Brinson & Stohl, 2012; Burke et al., 2010; Greenberg & Kosloff, 2008). This study extends these ideas by seeking to understand how people's attitudes toward Islam may be impacted by presentations of terrorism when primed with MS. In this case, we believe that Americans that are not Islamic are likely to derogate the out-group, Islam, and will report more negative attitudes about Islam when they are primed with MS. This leads to the third hypothesis:

H3: Participants in the mortality salience condition will report more negative attitudes toward Islam than participants in the no mortality salience condition.

Derogating the out-group also carries implications for other public affairs issues. For example, people primed with mortality salience are likely to report greater approval for authority (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950; Greenberg et al., 1990) and offer more positive evaluations of national security policy issues, like immigration (Bassett & Connelly, 2011).

National security policy has been central to the national discourse following terrorist attacks. After the December 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California, Americans raised questions about the government's ability to search suspects' technology devices, like mobile phones. Between text messages, emails, and Internet history, a lot of information can be gleaned from searching these technology devices, but public opinion polls showed that Americans were divided over the issue. A CBS/New York Times poll from March 2016 showed that support was divided between support for the government gaining access (45%) and opposition to government access (50%) to a locked iPhone used by a perpetrator of the San Bernardino attack and acquired as part of the FBI's investigation.

But after being primed with the threat of death and terrorism, people have shown greater approval for national leadership, the president, and national foreign policy. This may partially explain President Bush' approval in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Support for President Bush was explained by American's need for terror management following the terrorist attack (Landau et al., 2004). Support for the president could also render support for their national foreign policy following events of national significance, like terrorist attacks. It follows that Americans favorable to the president, like President Bush, after a terrorist attack will be favorable to granting the government greater authority to investigate suspected terrorists to

relieve duress caused by MS. This rationale leads to our fourth and fifth hypotheses:

H4: Participants in the mortality salience condition will report more positive attitudes toward a) President Obama, and b) US national security policy, than participants in the no mortality salience condition.

H5: More participants in the mortality salience condition will endorse a petition about giving the federal government greater security power than participants in the no mortality salience condition.

Not only would the threat of mortality affect Americans' attitudes, but also the threat of terrorism. If people react more favorably to leaders and national security policies after terrorist attacks, it follows logically that people would be more likely to endorse a petition if it was in response to a terrorist attack. Thus, the controversial policy in the petition will likely be more favorable to people after reading terrorism-framed news releases than an environmental story.

H6: More participants in the ISIS and Daesh conditions will endorse a petition about giving the federal government greater security power than participants in the control condition.

Method

Participants

Participants ($N = 440$) were undergraduate students at Ohio State University. The sample was 70.2% female. In addition, 69% of the sample identified as white/Caucasian, 7.8% African American, and 2% mixed. The other 21.2% identified as Asian (9.2%), Hispanic/Latino (2.9%), Middle Eastern (1%), or other (1.6%). The age of the sample ranged from 18 to 44 ($M = 20.35$, $SD = 2.75$). All students received course credit for their participation.

Design

Participants were randomly assigned to one of six conditions in a 3 (framing: ISIS, Daesh, control) x 2 (MS: yes or no) experimental design. Each condition started with the same three questions about interest in politics (Kazee, 1981; Parmelee, Davies, & McMahan, 2011; Prior 2010). Participants assigned to the MS condition were then asked two open-ended questions about death (Greenberg et al., 1990; Goldenberg, et al., 2001). Participants were then randomly assigned to read one of the three news releases. The news releases isolated the group attributed causal responsibility; the news releases emphasize that authorities “believe with increasing confidence that the Rockwell attack was planned and carried out by ISIS [Daesh]” (see Appendix A). Following the news release, two reading comprehension questions were asked to ensure participants had read the release. After exposure to the news release, all participants were asked questions about public affairs, attitudes towards religious groups, and foreign policy and national security attitudes. Participants were also shown a petition and asked if they would be willing to sign (Landau et al., 2004). The petition read,

“GIVE THE GOVERNMENT ACCESS TO SUSPECTED CRIMINALS’ TECHNOLOGY DEVICES. We ask the White House to take meaningful steps to prevent violence on American soil, especially regarding investigations into criminal suspects. We are calling on the White House to demand that technology companies provide government access to the mobile and Internet devices of suspected criminals.”

At the end of the survey, all participants were redirected to the petition, hosted on the White House’s “We the People” website, and given the opportunity to sign. All participants were also asked basic demographic questions and questions about their religiosity (Hollander, 1998; Regnerus, 2003; Smidt, 2005).

Framing

Participants were exposed to one of three news releases (see Appendix A). In the two terrorism conditions, the news release commemorated the anniversary of a fictional terrorist attack in the fictional town of Rockwell, Colorado. The news releases were exactly the same except for the name of the alleged perpetrators, ISIS ($n = 133$) or Daesh ($n = 132$). A third news release about a fictional water contamination incident served as a control ($n = 133$). After the news release, participants were asked “who was believed to be responsible for the attacks [water contamination]?” and “where did the attacks [water contamination] occur?” Participants that answered either of these questions incorrectly were removed from analyses ($n = 42$).

Mortality Salience

Participants were randomly assigned to either receive MS measures ($n = 193$) or not ($n = 199$). The MS questions had been used in prior research (Greenberg et al., 1990; Goldenberg, et al., 2001). These items included: “Please briefly describe the emotions that the thought of your own death arouses in you,” and “Jot down, as specifically as you can, what you think will happen to you as you physically die and once you are physically dead.” Following these questions, a modified version of the Positive and Negative Affect Scale was used to evaluate participants’ mood in both conditions (PANAS; Watson & Clark, 1999). Consistent with expectations, participants in the MS condition expressed more negative emotions after answering the MS questions, $t(386) = 2.98, p < .05, d = 0.30, (M = 3.71, SD = 0.64)$ than participants in the non-MS condition ($M = 3.88, SD = 0.49$), illustrating a successful manipulation.

Outcome Measures

The questions for each outcome measure can be found in Appendix B.

Attitudes toward Islam. Attitudes toward Islam were measured on a feeling thermometer from unfavorable (0) to favorable (100) (Pew Research Center, 2014). Sliding

scales asked participants to indicate their favorability toward nine religions, including Islam ($M = 45.19$, $SD = 22.99$).

Attitudes toward leaders. Three presidential approval questions were averaged to measure approval of President Obama (Pew Research Center, 2016; Landau et al., 2004). Responses were measured using 5-point Likert scales that ranged from disapproval (1) to approval responses (5), with an option for “don’t know” ($M = 3.44$, $SD = 1.24$, $\alpha = .91$).

Attitudes about national security. Attitudes about national security were measured with one question adapted from Gallup about the military’s preparedness to defend the U.S. against a terrorist attack (Riffkin, 2015). Responses were measured on a 5-point scale from not at all prepared (1) to extremely prepared (5), with an option for “don’t know” ($M = 4.08$, $SD = 0.97$).

The experiment also asked participants to rank order public affairs issues based on importance (Pew Research Center, 2015). Seven issues were listed: terrorism, health care, immigration, climate change, military, religious freedom, and the economy. From this measure a dichotomous variable was created to assess whether “defending the country from future terrorist attacks” was ranked as the top priority ($n = 149$, 38%) or not.

Intention to sign petition. Participants’ intent to sign the national security petition was measured based on their response to the question, “To what extent do you endorse this petition?” (Landau et al., 2004). Participants indicated whether they would like to sign ($n = 112$, 28.9%) not sign ($n = 126$, 32.6%), or did not know if they would sign ($n = 149$, 38.5%).

Results

Hypothesis one predicted that participants exposed to the news releases about terrorism (ISIS and Daesh) would report more negative attitudes toward Islam than those exposed to the control (environmental) condition. In order to test this hypothesis, an independent samples t-test

was used. The results of this test indicated that framing did not significantly influence attitudes towards Islam, $t(356) = 0.68, p = .497$. This suggests that participants' attitudes toward Islam were not affected by whether they were exposed to the environmental news release ($M = 47.07, SD = 25.22$) or either terrorism condition ($M = 44.82, SD = 22.56$). Thus, results did not support hypothesis one.

Hypothesis two predicted that participants exposed to the news release with ISIS framing would report more negative attitudes toward Islam than those in the Daesh framing condition. The results of an independent-samples t -test revealed no significant difference, $t(234) = -0.37, p = .709$. This suggests that attitudes toward Islam were not affected by whether participants were exposed to the terms ISIS ($M = 45.35, SD = 22.05$) or Daesh ($M = 46.43, SD = 22.42$) in their respective news releases. Thus, this result does not support hypothesis two.

Hypothesis three predicted that participants in the MS condition would report more negative attitudes toward Islam than participants in the no MS condition. The results of an independent-samples t -test revealed no significant differences, $t(356) = 0.43, p = .664$. This suggests that participants' attitudes toward Islam were not affected by whether they were exposed to the MS condition ($M = 44.64, SD = 21.46$) or the no MS condition ($M = 45.70, SD = 24.40$). Thus, the results do not support hypothesis three.

Hypothesis four made two predictions. First, hypothesis four predicted that participants in the MS condition would report more favorable attitudes toward the president. The results of an independent-samples t -test revealed significant differences, however these differences were in the opposite direction, $t(364) = 2.13, p < .05$. Participants' approval of President Obama was more favorable in the no MS condition ($M = 3.58, SD = 1.20$) than the MS condition ($M = 3.30,$

$SD = 1.27$). Thus, results testing the first part of hypothesis four were inconsistent with expectations.

The second part of hypothesis four predicted that participants in the MS condition would report more favorable attitudes of U.S. national security policy. This hypothesis was tested in two ways. When the dependent variable measured participants' attitudes about preparedness to defend against a terrorist attack, the results of an independent-samples t -test revealed no significant differences, $t(362) = -1.42, p = .156$. This suggests that participants' attitudes toward national security policy was not affected by whether they were exposed to the no MS condition ($M = 4.01, SD = 0.91$) or the MS condition ($M = 4.15, SD = 1.03$). However, interestingly, these means approached statistical significance when using a one-tail test ($p = .078$). Thus, although results trended in the correct direction, the results of this measure did not support hypothesis four.

When the dependent variable asked participants to rank their policy priorities, more participants in the MS condition rated terrorism as their top priority ($n = 81$) than in the no MS condition ($n = 68$). However, the results of a Chi-square test revealed no significant differences, $\chi^2(1, N = 392) = 2.53, p = .119$. Thus, the results of this measure did not support hypothesis four.

Hypothesis five predicted that MS would affect whether participants would sign a petition giving the government greater authority to investigate suspected criminals. Those who reported "unsure" were removed from analysis ($n = 149$). Participants in the MS condition endorsed the petition ($n = 64$) more than the no MS condition ($n = 48$). The results of a Chi-square test approached significant differences in the expected direction, $\chi^2(2, N = 238) = 3.36, p = .071$. This suggests that MS affected participants' decision to sign a petition about national security. Thus, hypothesis five was statistically supported.

Hypothesis six predicted that frame would affect whether participants would sign a petition giving the government greater authority to investigate suspected criminals. Those who reported “unsure” were removed from analysis ($n = 149$). Participants in the Daesh and ISIS conditions endorsed the petition ($n = 41$, $n = 37$) more than the environmental condition ($n = 34$). Accordingly, less participants in the Daesh and ISIS conditions refused to endorse the petition ($n = 34$, $n = 46$) than the environmental condition ($n = 46$). The results of a Chi-square test revealed no significant differences, $\chi^2(2, N = 238) = 2.62$ $p = .271$. This suggests that participants’ decision to sign a petition about national security was not affected by the frame. Thus, hypothesis six was not statistically supported.

Discussion

This study set out to understand how the terms and presentation of ISIS in the news media affect attitudes toward Islam. The wording, or lexical framing, of ISIS was the primary interest in the early stages of developing this study. Political elites have suggested that one term or another used to describe ISIS could impact attitudes toward Islam or cause military consequences. Their claims were tested in this study by exposing participants to nearly identical news releases, one which used the term ISIS and one using Daesh, and then measuring subsequent attitudes toward Islam on a feeling thermometer.

Additionally, this study sought to understand how news media coverage of terrorism could impact attitudes. The nature of terrorism lends itself to terror management theory (Greenberg, Pyszczynski, & Solomon, 1986). Images and descriptions of terrorist attacks prime thoughts of death in audiences, similar to how TMT studies prime MS in participants (Landau et al., 2004). Participants in the MS condition were made to think about death with two open-ended questions. The responses to these MS questions primed emotional reactions that were

similar to reactions after seeing news coverage of a terrorist attack. TMT research has shown that people respond to MS by changing their worldviews, belief systems, or attitudes to avoid uncomfortable thoughts of death. This study sought to understand the potential effect MS has on attitudes amid the war on terror.

Thus, this study asked, does the presentation of terrorism matter, and does it affect attitudes toward Islam? The results suggest that the presence of MS has a greater effect on attitudes toward Islam than the framing of ISIS. It was expected that ISIS would prime Islam and Daesh would not, and when presented in a news story about a violent terrorist attack, causal responsibility and more negative attitudes would emerge. Surprisingly, the framing of ISIS did not affect attitudes toward Islam, national security, or even presidential approval. However, even though the results were not statistically significant, some of the analyses were trending in the expected direction.

The results suggest that the presence of MS influenced attitudes toward this terrorist group. It was expected that participants primed with MS would express more confidence in U.S. national security policy and would be more confident in the U.S.'s preparedness to defend itself against a future terrorist attack. This was because the emotions primed with MS could only be relieved with confidence in the policies that could keep them safe. After being asked to think and write about their own death, people's evaluations of national security policy were in the expected direction, but there was not suggestive evidence of policy evaluations between conditions.

Similarly, people primed with MS were more likely to endorse a petition giving the government greater authority to investigate suspected criminals. Americans were split over their support of this controversial national security and criminal justice issue after the 2015 terrorist attack in San Bernardino, California. This study found that people were more likely to surrender

the rights of suspected criminals and endorse a petition to give the government greater investigative capabilities.

The effect of MS in this study was limited to attitudes, not behaviors. To further study effects from MS and the threat of terrorism, participants were given the opportunity to sign the petition online after being redirected to the White House's petition website. But few participants that endorsed the petition went on to sign the web petition; thus, the impact of MS on behavior was minimal.

MS also affected attitudes toward President Obama in this study. Previous research has shown that people will become more favorable to authority when primed with MS, like for President Bush after 9/11 (Landau et al., 2004). Surprisingly, this study found the opposite effect for President Obama. People primed with MS were less favorable toward President Obama. One explanation for this finding is partisan affiliation. Pew Research (2015) has shown that Americans vary in how they perceive Democrats and Republicans ability to respond to terrorism. Moreover, the scope of armed conflict in the war on terror, which changed between presidents Bush and Obama, could also have had an impact on people's approval of the president. Either of these explanations could have caused the opposite result of what we expected from this terror management study. Future research could explore how presidents are evaluated differently after incidents of national importance, like terrorist attacks or declaring war.

The wording, ISIS or Daesh, did not show a measurable effect on attitudes toward Islam. Attitudes toward Islam were similar for all conditions, and therefore hard to affect by the presence of MS or threat of terrorism. However, before generalizable conclusions can be drawn from these results, a few limitations should be proposed.

First, it is possible that participants misrepresented their attitudes toward Islam, the primary attitude of interest, because of the social desirability bias. Studies asking about feelings toward religious groups are susceptible to social desirability biases (Paulhus, 1984). This bias could have been exacerbated by presenting a news release about terrorism amid the national political discourse of Islamophobia and concern that Muslims in the United States are commonly associated with terrorism. Additionally, if participants understood that attitudes toward Islam were of interest in this study, social desirability biases would have been strongest in the ISIS conditions. This might explain why data in this condition were no different from the Daesh condition or the control condition.

Moreover, this study may not have found significant differences between attitudes toward national security issues because they are already highly-prioritized issues among Americans. The adapted survey measure that asked participants to prioritize public affairs issues according to their importance was used by Gallup in a poll in December 2015. This poll found that Americans prioritized terrorism at its highest level since 9/11 (Riffkin, 2015). It is likely that many participants in this study shared this attitude of importance on the issue of terrorism before being exposed to the study's conditions and manipulation.

Additionally, this study could not naturally or ethically replicate the shock and emotional distress caused by a real terrorist attack. The study needed to present a fictional terrorist attack that was distant in time and place to prevent psychological distress. The distance given to the terrorist attack likely limited the affected attitudes of participants. If presented with a more realistic or dramatic scenario, participants' attitudes could have been more pronounced.

Finally, the study could be improved in future research with a national sample. The sample used in this study is limited in its external validity because it was selected from a

participant pool on a college campus and therefore does not reflect the American population. Future research could expand the study to a more representative population.

Despite these limitations, the results of this study are not without implications. The results do not lend support to politicians on either side arguing for or against their preferred term to describe ISIS. However, the results do have implications on the presentation of terrorism, particularly for the news media. This study affirmed that presentations of terrorism that describe violence and death can prime MS in audiences (Landau et al., 2004). These violent presentations, and the consequential priming of MS, impact attitudes toward national security policy, like investigating suspects. It can even impact the favorability of the political actor leading counterterrorism efforts, like the president.

News media and political actors speaking out about counterterrorism efforts should be mindful of the impact of their speech. Although this study found that attitudes toward Islam and Muslims are difficult to affect through media or TMT, the policy and politicians involved in counterterrorism can see effects on their support based on the presentation of terrorism. If the presentation of terrorism invokes an American's sense of mortality, as TMT research does, Americans' attitudes will change in a way that best avoids the discomfiting thought of their own death. This means that it is not the words that have the most impact on audience attitudes; rather, it is the audiences' perception of their own mortality. Audiences will change their attitudes to maintain the cognitive "buffer" between their fears and their worldview (Greenberg et al., 1990, p. 308). News media and political actors can relieve or break away at this buffer, and as a result, impact Americans' attitudes.

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html

Appendix A: Press releases

**NEWS RELEASE**

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 16, 2016

For more information, contact:

Chris Henderson

Press Secretary

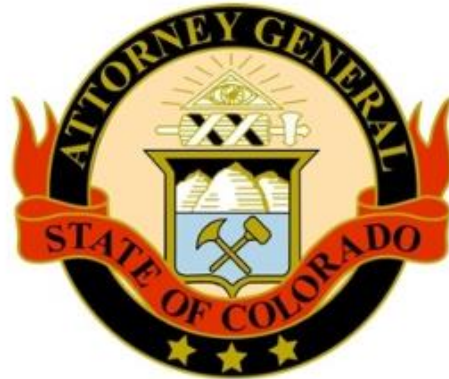
Attorney General's remarks on similarities between ISIS attacks and Rockwell

DENVER, Colo. – The people of Rockwell understand too well the consequences of mass shootings and as such, we are asking our citizens to remain vigilant against the continuing threat of attack from ISIS. Today I join the governor and leaders across the state to pay tribute to the victims, their families and all others affected by the mass shooting in Rockwell, Colorado on the two-year anniversary of this tragic event.

Although Rockwell has begun to recover, the investigation into whether ISIS was responsible for the attack remains ongoing. However, the similarities between the event in Rockwell and recent incidents of ISIS violence lead us to believe with increasing confidence that the Rockwell attack was planned and carried out by ISIS.

Going forward, to protect communities from the threat of ISIS, we urge legislators and leaders across the country to give authorities all the financial, technological and military support they need. We hope that a successful investigation will help bring closure to our community. If anyone has any information related to the Rockwell attack, especially regarding ISIS motives, please contact authorities immediately.

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 16, 2016

For more information, contact:
Chris Henderson
Press Secretary

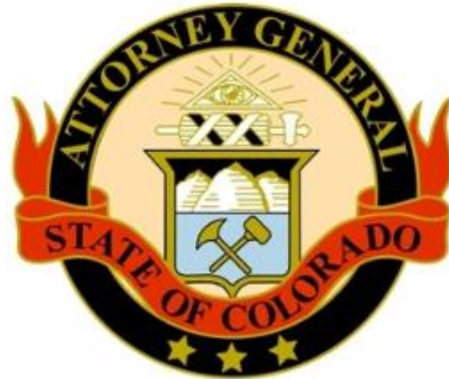
Attorney General's remarks on similarities between Daesh attacks and Rockwell

DENVER, Colo. – The people of Rockwell understand too well the consequences of mass shootings and as such, we are asking our citizens to remain vigilant against the continuing threat of attack from Daesh. Today I join the governor and leaders across the state to pay tribute to the victims, their families and all others affected by the mass shooting in Rockwell, Colorado on the two-year anniversary of this tragic event.

Although Rockwell has begun to recover, the investigation into whether Daesh was responsible for the attack remains ongoing. However, the similarities between the event in Rockwell and recent incidents of Daesh violence lead us to believe with increasing confidence that the Rockwell attack was planned and carried out by Daesh.

Going forward, to protect communities from the threat of Daesh, we urge legislators and leaders across the country to give authorities all the financial, technological and military support they need. We hope that a successful investigation will help bring closure to our community. If anyone has any information related to the Rockwell attack, especially regarding Daesh motives, please contact authorities immediately.

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NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Jan. 16, 2016

For more information, contact:
Chris Henderson
Press Secretary

Attorney General's remarks on similarities between Elroy and Rockwell water crises

DENVER, Colo. – The people of Rockwell understand too well the consequences of lead contamination and as such, we are asking our citizens to remain vigilant about their water usage. Today I join the governor and leaders across the state to offer support for the families and all others affected by the water crisis in Elroy, South Carolina on the two-year anniversary of Rockwell's own water crisis.

Although Rockwell has begun to repair its water systems, the investigation into whether corrosive water was responsible for the contamination remains ongoing. However, the similarities between the event in Rockwell and recent crisis in South Carolina lead us to believe with increasing confidence that the Rockwell crisis was the result of aging pipes and poor water testing.

Going forward, to protect communities from the threat of lead contamination, we urge legislators and leaders across the country to give authorities all the financial, technological and regulatory support they need. We hope that a successful investigation will help bring closure to our community. If anyone has any information related to the Rockwell water crisis, especially regarding causes of the contamination, please contact Rockwell Public Utilities immediately.

###

Appendix B: Questions

Attitudes toward Islam

Using the slides, please indicate your feelings towards the following religious groups.

	100 degrees	...	0 degrees
Evangelical Christians			
Catholics			
Protestant Christians			
Mormons			
Jews			
Muslims			
Atheists			
Buddhists			
Hindus			

Attitudes toward leaders

Do you approve or disapprove of the way President Obama is handling his job as president?

If President Obama were running for reelection in November, how likely would you be to vote for him?

To what extent are you confident in President Obama's leadership capabilities?

Attitudes about national security

To what extent do you believe the military is prepared to respond to an attack against the United States?

How would you prioritize, or rank, the following public affairs issues from most important (1) to least important (7)? Drag and drop the issues in order of importance, where the top of the list is most important and the bottom is least important.

1. Defending the country from future terrorist attacks
2. Reducing health care costs
3. Dealing with the issue of immigration
4. Dealing with global climate change
5. Funding military
6. Promoting religious freedom
7. Strengthening the nation's economy

Intention to sign petition

To what extent do you endorse this petition?

At the conclusion of the study, we can direct you to the White House website so that you can sign the petition. Would you like to sign this petition on the White House website?

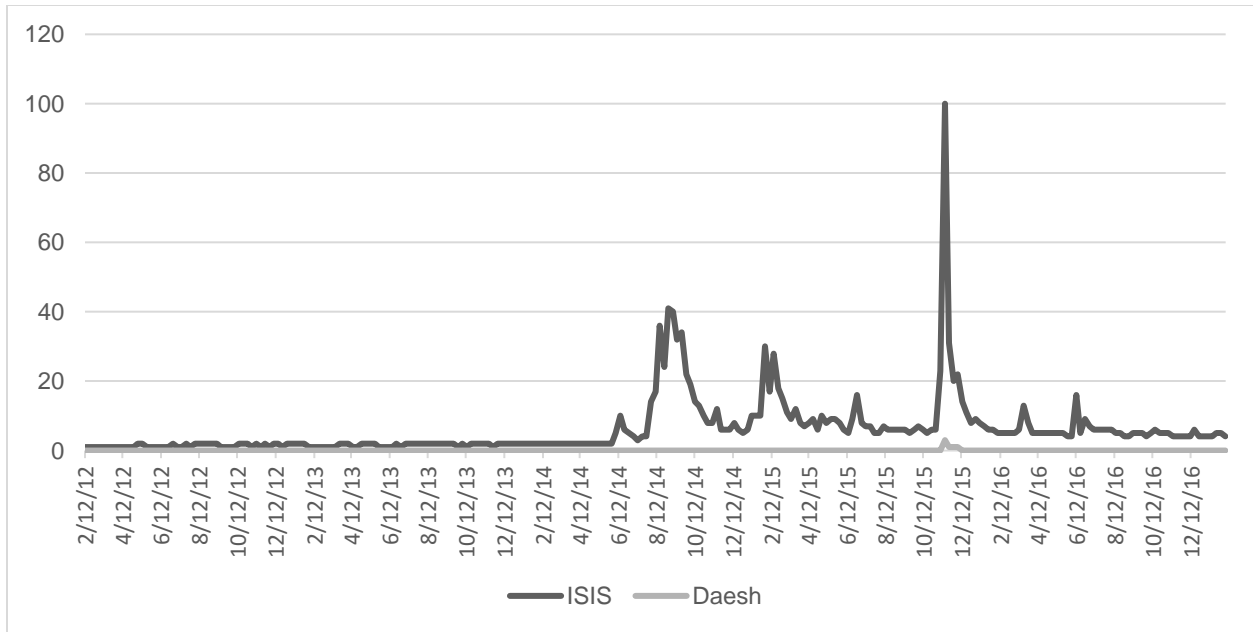


Figure 1. Google Trends between ISIS and Daesh. Interest in ISIS versus Daesh as a search term in the United States. Data source: Google Trends.