



# To what extent is terrorism a social construct?



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## **Internal research ethics application form for taught student modules (where University ethical approval is in place for the module)**

For modules LAW3035 covered by University of Leeds ethical approval reference [AREA 11-019]

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## Abstract

This project aims to identify the extent to which terrorism has been socially constructed. Terrorism is a term that is used regularly by the news media and politicians, and whether its application is unbiased is fundamental to the debate. The political implications of such a label can have profound demonising effects. One would expect establishments with such power to proportionately use the label; otherwise imprecise images of the threat distort our worldview. Firstly, questioning the ability to define the phenomenon will set the tone for the investigation. Using academic debates alongside a document analysis of a right-wing (*Daily Mail*) and left-wing (*The Guardian*) news media source will highlight key debates while uncovering any political bias ingrained in the terrorism label. Regrettably, the document analysis exposed disproportionality in reporting the Lee Rigby and Jo Cox incidents. Evidently, the news media are rapid to report and sensationalise Islamic extremism, as opposed to right-wing extremism. The *Daily Mail* was more inclined to use extracts demonising Islam alongside subtle sympathy for Cox's killer, signifying its greater political bias. Consequently, analysis found race/religion/ethnicity to be fundamental factors for labelling terrorism. The social constructionist explanation facilitated reasoning around such xenophobic rhetoric. Those with supreme power of control are responsible for deciding who is labelled terrorist based on national interest. Liberal Western democratic powers, such as the USA and the UK, have set a precedent for the 'War Against Terrorism' that has shaped media representations and the very structure of society.

## Introduction

In a society where international terrorism monopolises the news media and political discussion alike, there is no greater need than to analyse the extent to which the term 'terrorism' is constructed through social processes. This research project will be using key academic debates that form the pillars surrounding the discourse. Arguments in the field are instrumental to explaining how society perceives terrorism, and the implications of this. Academic definitions are fundamental to constructing legal practices. In the absence of an international legal definition of terrorism, each country has interpreted and adopted a framework for categorising the phenomenon. Whether this is a fair and objective method will be critically evaluated through each chapter. In chapter 1, the definition of terrorism will be established and scrutinised to set the basic framework used for analysis in the latter part of the investigation. Setting a suitable methodology for the document analysis is vital and takes place in chapter 2. A rigorous evaluation of the document analysis in chapter 3 will then highlight whether the traditionalist definition is obeyed for crimes similar in their characteristics but differing in their motivation. Chapter 4 critically evaluates the *de facto* characteristics evident in news media representations, and looks to the wider debates around why these are central in our understanding of terrorism. The media have a moral obligation to objectively inform the public through a reliable image of crime. The media's power of communication is one that terrorists often adopt, creating an overwhelming responsibility to not sensationalise the crimes of certain individuals. A document analysis of news media sources is required to directly establish whether objectivity is used in

recent mediatised incidents. The power put into the hands of academics, reporters and especially politicians is central to the ostracised communities of 2017. Context is key for this debate: as society grows more diverse but more divided, the Muslim community suffers harsh repercussions from the acts of a few. Terrorism studies are growing, and the varied academic ideologies continue to shape the label itself. Each distinctive pathway for understanding terrorism will be explored, to find which is most useful in reality.

## 1. What is the definition of terrorism?

It is important to appreciate that there is currently no internationally agreed definition of terrorism. So a variety of both academic and national definitions will be analysed to highlight the recurring elements in the hundreds of definitions that have been established. The definition of terrorism has a history of controversy and simply defining from a singular viewpoint would not be adequate without discussing the different academic approaches to such a problem. The social constructionist, traditionalist, tactic and legalistic approaches have been explained alongside existing legislation to offer a fair dimension to this research project. Public fears over the mass reported global terrorism threat in the post-9/11 climate places intense demands on the need for an internationally recognised definition. The need to prosecute is hampered by historical paralysis that prevents an agreed definition.

### 1.1 Why do we need a definition?

Defining terrorism is important because of the fundamental risk it poses to society. Terrorism is different from other serious crime, as fanatics and those driven by an ideological purpose are less predictable (Lord Carlile, 2007). The example of a suicide bomber depicts the possible catastrophe and risk to human life. Like past terrorist organisations, modern Islamic extremist groups have far-reaching networks and are financially secure. Globalisation has had an impact on terrorism (Nassar, 2010; Giddens, 2005), as fears propagate that modern communication and travel links situate the 'New Terrorist' and the dangers that they represent. Arguably, this threat has

been exaggerated for government foreign policy, playing into the hands of the 'Terrorism Industry' (Johnson, 1994). But the psychological threat this poses to the democratic values of Western society is so far-reaching that it is irrefutably intoxicating (Lord Carlile, 2007). There are of course examples where individuals fall inappropriately into the terrorist label, for example the Suffragette Emily Davison and other political protestors. But as Lord Carlile (2007) concludes, the risk posed by certain groups, alongside the discretion that is put in place to protect 'inappropriate' individuals, makes it seem justifiable to apply a special label. Essentially "a definition of terrorism is required to describe and circumscribe the circumstances in which the special provisions may be used" (Lord Carlile, 2007:28). Special provisions exist in national law, for example in the UK's Criminal Justice Act 2003; the pre-charge detention period can last 14–28 days and it allows post-charge questioning of terrorist suspects. A comprehensive definition is necessary to account for the special provisions instigated; if the threat is overplayed, perhaps these provisions should be revised.

The term 'terrorism' has become ingrained in mundane vocabulary. While there is consistency in its use by news media and politics, and it is recognisable by the mass, its actual definition has been widely debated. Hundreds of definitions have already materialised; Schmid and Jongman (1988) found 22 definitional elements across 109 various definitions of terrorism. Likewise, Laqueur could pinpoint 100 definitions, and concluded that the only "general characteristic generally agreed upon is that terrorism involves violence and the threat of violence" (Laqueur, 1999:6). This adds to



the controversy of defining terrorism as a separate entity, as it is not the only criminal act to do this. Accepting that terrorism has similar elements to other crimes leads one to believe that it cannot be objectively analysed, but instead as Furedi (in Hale *et al*, 2013) explained it is a moral statement on one's behaviour. For both legal and academic purposes, when determining an act as terrorism, one would need to "be aware that he is making a value judgement about perpetrators of the alleged act, and about the circumstances of their actions" (Wilkinson, 1974:21). This leads to debate as to whether it is legally justified to perpetuate such moralistic terms, especially when lawful trial sets out to deal fairly with such matters.

The broad sphere of terrorist definitions confuses the rudimentary elements that can be included. While attacks on property can often be catastrophic, an important differentiation for the international community is the need for violence or the threat of violence against humans (Walter, 2003). In a recent study, Schmid (2011) compared the US State Department definition, United Nations draft definition, and Academic Consensus Definition developed in the 1980s. Human targets were common to all, but confusion around terminology appeared. Violence against non-combatants seemed to create ambiguity, and so the term 'civilian' seems more appropriate. Discussing 9/11 events and the attacks on the Pentagon (US military HQ) illustrated the confusion, as fundamentally individuals inside were actively engaging in conflict (Schmid, 2011). Furthermore, Slim (2010) controversially argued the term 'civilian' explaining that, while international law uses negative description of those not members of armed forces, the

distinction has never been clear. Globally, 60% of weapon bearers are civilians, media promotion of propaganda and taxpayers funding war efforts; all these points Slim (2010) articulates questions the civilian element. Another conceptualisation for terrorism is to view it as a strategic tactic. Wilson (2003) depicts how terrorism was initially established through the use of unconventional tactics targeting civilians, spreading fear, and countering unconventional warfare. Targeting innocent non-combatants is regarded by Furedi (in Hale *et al*, 2013) to be widely accepted by specialists as a key aspect of the phenomenon, although defining 'innocent' is often a controversial topic (Record, 2003). Continuing with the element of communicative violence, civilians are used for "anxiety-inspiring" (Schmid and Jongman, 1988). The focus on civilian targets has blurred definitional lines but is important when defining terrorism.

## 1. 2 What are the legal definitions?

Discussion of the approaches available alongside determining a definition has its advantages, but one needs to consider a purely legalistic view spotlighting its criminal components. Essentially the term 'terrorism' is widely used yet "it is far from evident what these words actually mean" (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013:268). Legal definitions are important for the purposes of prosecution. Under the Terrorism Act, 2000, 'terrorism' is defined as something which involves serious violence against a person and property, endangers a person's life (other than that of the person committing the action), creates a serious risk to the health or safety of the public or a section of the public, and is designed to interfere with or disrupt an electronic

system. Despite UK law's attempt, the term is highly subjective as it lists elements to distinguish terrorism from other crime (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013). Listing may be ideal for criminal prosecution, however the definition is undermined when elements listed are found in other areas of criminal law. Perhaps Baxter was correct in his strongly worded statement denigrating the legal concept of terrorism; as the "term is imprecise; it is ambiguous; and above all, it serves no operative legal purpose" (Baxter, 1974). Another viewpoint from eminent international lawyers, Higgins (1997), concurs with the objection that the concept has no legal significance. There is no denying that the post-9/11 climate puts immense pressure on legal bodies to prosecute such hated individuals (Walter, 2003), indicating how political pressures have shaped the legal field.

Political violence has indisputably been around for centuries, but it was during the French Revolution (1778–1799) that the term 'terror' was coined in a political context. Often terrorism is a force against repressive schemes (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013). Terrorists aim to transform society to match their values, meaning they believe they have moral justification to commit violence. A term once associated with democracy has been successfully tainted with negative connotations. The illegitimate methods used by terrorists have led to a universal resistance from governments (Halliday, 2004). One can now accentuate that the 'political' dimension of this phenomenon is widely accepted as an important element when defining. It not only serves a political function, but accumulates a wealth of political connotations. For the simplicity of defining such an act is in itself political: it

serves to undermine the legitimacy of individuals (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013). In law, single words have great importance, for their meaning can catastrophically influence case decisions. Walter (2003) depicts how in UK legislation the word 'coercing' was replaced with 'influencing' the government. This arguably makes it easier for the government to label ill-fitting groups 'terrorists' and de-legitimise individuals. 'Influencing' seems an incredibly vague term to invoke such a devastating label, especially as a mere political demonstration might be said to have this intention (Walter, 2003). The difficulties exemplified in the various conflicting laws make it questionable whether the term 'terrorism' should exist at all. Perhaps instead there should only be political violence, and individuals should be criminalised through existing laws for other criminal acts. However there are other elements distinguishing terrorism from other violence that influence the desire for a separate legal definition.

Section 1 of the UK Terrorism Act 2000 includes action that involves the "use or threat of action" designed to "influence the government or to intimidate the public or section of the public". In previous UK legislation (the 1989 Prevention of Terrorism (Temporary Provisions) Act) terrorism alone "means the use of violence for political ends and includes any use of violence for the purpose of putting the public or any section of the public in fear". Of course this received widespread criticism: Lord Lloyd (1996) stressed it was too narrow, and predicted the future of terrorist legislation's fixation with religious terrorism. Expansion to wider and more inclusive terminology takes into account the "moral and ideological power that

[terrorism]...is able to exercise" (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013:271). Terrorism has transformed from merely a tactic for inflicting fear to a fixation with ideology. Rather than sheer large-scale violence, the UK's Terrorism Act 2000 considers threats of serious disruption or damage to be sufficient criterion. The Canadian definition in Bill C-36, the Framework Decision of the Council of the European Union and anti-terrorist provision in the USA, all employ similar criteria; the need for violence against persons is dated. The Italian approach uses anti-Mafia legislation to deal with international terrorism (Walter, 2003), stressing similarities between terrorists and organised criminals. A single comprehensive definition could eliminate the climate of uncertainty around international law (Senechal de la Roche in Schmid, 2011). The multitude of definitions makes it difficult to establish a single legal definition. It would therefore seem useful to employ the main elements determining terrorism.

There is a debate about whether additional ideological elements are needed for the definition of terrorism. Walter (2003) disputes such an argument, contemplating that perpetrators do not necessarily need an ideological cause. The 1958 Israeli Prevention of Terror Ordinance and German criminal law both address terrorism as merely violence that causes death or injury, leaving broad definitional scope. The USA holds several national legal definitions for terrorism symbolising divisions (Walter, 2003). The Department of Defence and Department of Justice promotes the importance of political, religious or ideological aims when defining such acts. Similarly the UK, EU and Canada include these three 'causes' (Walter,

2003). It would seem important to use ideology to differentiate terrorism clearly from other criminal activity. Fundamentally, “[w]hat distinguishes terrorism from both vandalism and non-political crime is the motivated violence for political ends” (Crozier, 1974). The EU Framework Decision, however, is broad in that it includes the phrase about violence without juxtaposing these three ideological elements (Walter, 2003). Surely including both terms in the definition contradicts the initial argument that it needs narrowing?

Terrorism may be a legalistic term, but there is an underlying propaganda war that weakens its credibility. Lawfully identifying an individual “as a terrorist is to render judgement on them, not simply to make a discovery” (Card, 2003:178). This does not primarily refer to legal definitions, as academic discussions are riddled with bias (Bonn, 2009). Irrefutably “when a definition serves in part as a political statement it is likely to become a focus for controversy” (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013:270). The Government is after all the principle-defining agency and so there is a process of “pejorative political terms of stigmatization to express moral condemnation in official and public discourse” (Schmid, 2011:40). It is clear that ‘terrorism’ may be the most politicised term in the vocabulary. As Bell (in Schmid, 2011:42) stated “tell me what you think about terrorism, and I will tell you who you are”. Legal definitions are however of great practical importance, as they trigger powers enabling the authorities to take action against dangerous individuals. Anderson (2016) produced a report on the operation of the Terrorist Act 2000 and part 1 of the Terrorism Act 2006 that was presented to parliament with

concerns over their worryingly broad nature. Preventing terror attacks is critical, but miscarriages of justice could catastrophically destroy public trust (Anderson, 2016). The case of *R (Miranda) v Secretary of State for the Home Department and Commissioner for the Metropolitan Police* [2014] EWHC 255 concerned an individual stopped under the Terrorist Act 2000 while in possession of material taken from the National Security Agency by Edward Snowden for publication. Regarding journalism as terrorism symbolised absurdities created by the Act's breadth. While the Home Secretary's (2014) response promoted a flexible statutory framework, it was agreed alongside the Court of Appeal decision to narrow the definition. The Minister of State at the Home Office stressed to Lord Carlile (2007) that the current definition in UK legislation was comprehensive and needed to be protected. As it stands there are fundamental issues that need to be addressed; however, perhaps it is unnecessary to remove the term altogether.

### 1.3 What are the academic definitions?

The social constructionist approach helps to understand why these definitions are so politicised. By focusing on terrorism in democratic contexts, one is self-consciously accepting a biased approach to what is right and wrong in their context (Innes and Levi, 2012). The absence of an international definition highlights that, within different political spheres, "terrorism is in the eyes of the beholder" (Kimhi *et al*, 2009:75). The famous quote "one man's terrorist is another man's freedom fighter" is again relevant here (Seymour, 1975). What makes defining terrorism difficult is that

characteristics of individuals considered to be terrorists can differ depending on who is making the judgement. For social constructionists, it is the reaction from states that is important: as Wilkinson (1974) alleged, terrorism is purely a political label that defines which side one is on. Terrorism may be no more than political violence; its fluidity in definitions mirrors the issue that social constructionists highlight. Jenkins (2003) famously explained how it is the motive that inspired the act that constitutes terrorism. The politicisation of terrorism leads to the belief that governments have a vested interest in revealing the full extent of information about terrorism (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013). It needs to be made clear that this approach does not dismiss terrorism as a phenomenon (Jenkins, 2003) but stresses how “the attempt to portray terrorism as a distinct form of political violence represents an attempt to objectify it” (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013:269). While it is easy to accept a simple definition, one should always be prepared to question the dominant consensus.

A traditionalist viewpoint could avoid problems by defining terrorism based on its basic elements. What differentiates terrorism from other kinds of violence is its ability to spread monumental fear. Terrorism is fundamentally about provocation; it is not this element alone that distinguishes it from other criminal acts but this process is crucial to initiate a reaction. As Walter (2003) contends, ‘fear’ and ‘intimidation’, alongside the intention to compel a government, are often used in various legal definitions. What this means for criminal action is that individuals can compel governments without spreading fear, and this would still constitute a terrorist act. The boundaries are flexible



to say the least. A traditionalist viewpoint for defining terrorism would look to the common features that separate it from other criminal acts. Furedi (in Hale *et al*, 2013) spoke of the distinct form of violence that distinguishes terrorism. Initially agreeing that it pursues indiscriminate violence for political means (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013), its next unique characteristic is the nature of this violence, characterised by “indiscriminateness, unpredictability, arbitrariness, ruthless destructiveness and the implicitly amoral antinomian nature of a terrorist’s challenge” (Wilkinson, 1976:17). Pinpointing the main elements that have recurred so far—political motivation, communicative violence and civilian target—it would seem that over-simplification might be necessary to prevent confusion.

#### 1.4 Difficulties with defining terrorism

One main reason why there is no internationally approved definition is that some states and political leaders have had a history of engaging in terrorist activities. Even the United Nations, consisting of 192 member states, has not proposed an agreed definition largely because of this (Innes and Levi, 2012). An example would be the African National Congress movement led by Nelson Mandela, which engaged in terrorism (Schmid, 2011). While their attacks on civilians were minor, they used terrorist tactics previously discussed; the “overlapping grey zones” illustrate that “it is not all black and white, criminal or legitimate. Context matters” (Schmid, 2011:44). Issues surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict have cemented these concerns, re-emphasising the subjectivity of the terrorist label. Shanty (2011) discusses Israel and national side-taking that has prevented an agreed international

definition for the sake of democracy. Simon (in Schmid, 2011) put simply that; while there is a quest for a clear-cut definition, governments and academic institutions will all have their own criteria based on political, religious and social contexts. It would seem more plausible to base labelling at a local level. There are concerns over distinguishing between crime and terrorism; for example, the Andres Breivik case could be classed either as terrorism or as spree killing (Innes and Levi, 2012). Identifying states and individuals under terrorism becomes complex.

A controversial issue pressing on definitional arguments is whether the term 'terrorism' should be applied to states. Terrorism is usually defined as non-state action, but emphasis on this obscures the role of the state in promoting acts of political violence (Furedi in Hale *et al*, 2013). Many critics share the view that "the United States surely needs to take steps to radically correct its own wrongdoing if it is to respond justly to the related wrongdoing of Bin Laden and his followers" (Sterba, 2003:24). Arguably states actually cause more harm: "since the French Revolution [state terrorism] has claimed far more victims-in-terms-of-million than terrorism perpetrated by non-state actors" (Record, 2003:7). Furedi (in Hale *et al*, 2013) exemplifies the use of 'shock and awe' by the Bush administration, with a series of air strikes against Iraq. It is hard to believe that, like this example, many state attacks or state-sponsored violence should be exempt from the definition (Blakeley, 2009). Ustinov famously said, "terrorism is the war of the poor, war is the terrorism of the rich" (Ustinov in Christensen, 2005:16). The terrorist label is used by the powerful to stigmatise the activities of the powerless (Furedi in

Hale *et al*, 2013; Gearty, 2002; Record, 2003). State terrorism is more devastating in that it “has been responsible for more killings, more tortures, and more disappearances than all other forms’ of crime” (Williams, 2004:499). Walter (2003) portrayed state violence and genuine freedom fighters as the two biggest boundaries preventing an international definition. The world community is divided over this matter, as is evident throughout UN debates (Walter, 2003). There is a strong moral argument suggesting state violence should not be separate from definitions of terrorism. However, it appears that legally there is unlikely to be an agreed consensus, as it would not suit states’ ‘best interests’.

### 1.5 Concluding remarks

The three dominant viewpoints for defining terrorism all have their legitimacy. The legalistic approach requires a definition to lawfully prosecute dangerous individuals. Although the social constructionist highlights the dangers of such a powerful and demonising label, traditionalists argue that a definition is possible by stripping the phenomenon back to its basic elements. Controversy around the topic’s fine details will continue to grow in a society that uses such a detested phrase in the vocabulary of politicians and media. A definition is primarily needed for this same reason and, by using the three elements highlighted by this discussion—politically motivated, civilian targets and communicative violence—the basic definition has been constructed. The broad nature of this approach is an indisputable weakness, as social constructionists would claim it enables governments to discredit individuals that go against the democratic order. Not only are states culpable of labelling

for political purposes, but also they can be guilty of the act themselves. It would seem in a just world that the definition should stretch to cover all state and non-state actors. The definition needs proportionality.

## 2. Methodology

The following chapter will discuss the methodological process applied to finding out whether terrorism is socially constructed. Document analysis seemed the most appropriate method considering the importance of news media in shaping one's perception of the world. A robust data collection approach will be described in this chapter and data analysis will take place throughout the final two chapters.

Documents are “written records about people and things that are generated through the process of living” (Matthews and Ross, 2010:277). Being non-reactive they are unaffected by the research process, aiding the validity of the data (Bryman, 2004). Document analysis is the process of interpreting and analysing data, which materialises meaning (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). While there is a range of different types of document, this research used newspaper archives. It is important to note how “[j]ournalistic accounts can prejudge and stereotype an event” (MacDonald, 2008:300). Documents have been produced for a “specific context and for a particular purpose” (Matthews and Ross, 2010:277). This is particularly important for studying the social construction of terrorism, as news media is “socially constructed...they can tell us more than just the...information...they contain” (Matthews and Ross, 2010:277). Happer and Philo (2013) conducted a review of empirical studies that determined the media's responsibility in socially constructing the way individuals view the world, and found unprecedented evidence to suggest their central role. Fundamentally, document accuracy is not important but instead one has to “approach them

for what they...are used to accomplish” (Atkinson and Coffey in Silverman, 1997:47). The uncovering of context will influence the final chapter of analysis.

Firstly, it was important to choose appropriate case studies that, while fulfilling the traditionalist definition of terrorism, contrasted in political orientation. It seemed necessary to select incidents that encompassed terrorist tactics of a similar nature, and within a maximum of five years, meaning that public perceptions around terrorism would not have significantly changed. The criteria would portray how terrorists are depicted in the news media for crimes of a similar nature and origin without too much contextual variation. Following widespread research of current hot topics, growing fears around homegrown terrorism (Thachuk *et al*, 2008) indicated an appropriate route to take. The Lee Rigby and Jo Cox incidents appeared striking case studies for analysis because of similarities in the nature of the crimes, although one was an Islamic extremist attack and the other a far-right-wing attack, both in the UK.

Media sources were selected using the National Readership Survey (2016), which produced data based on the online and printed readership of British adults aged 15+. It identified the *Daily Mail* as the most widely read right-wing tabloid, and *The Guardian* as the most widely read left-wing media source. These will be used for the document analysis. The media are selective when publishing data, meaning there is a biased nature to reporting, leading to distortion (MacDonald, 2008). Under normal

circumstances, distortion would affect the credibility of the documents (Bryman, 2004) but, as previously noted, this document analysis can appreciate media bias. Investigating the political orientation will put any bias in perspective.

Lexus, an online archive, was used to access the news articles for analysis. The Internet is a free, quick and easy way of accessing large quantities of data (Matthews and Ross, 2010). Rather than using a single article from multiple news sources, or multiple articles from the same news source, the documents require cross-examination (MacDonald, 2008). The first 15 articles written following each incident were selected, from two different media sources. Thirty articles about each incident constitute a rich data source. Admittedly, the representativeness of this document analysis does have its limitations. While sixty articles in total is sufficient for this analysis, they are not completely representative of all media sources' accounts of the incidents. The restricted number of articles shortens the time scale during which the events were reported, so the analysis investigates the immediate reporting of both incidents. It therefore has its limitations, but this should not destroy the credibility of results. Lexus allows a refined search to be performed; the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* were selected separately for both incidents, the date chosen based on the date of the incident, and the key words "Lee Rigby" and then "Jo Cox" were entered. After separately selecting each option, the first fifteen articles to appear post-incident were analysed.

Establishing a set of research questions makes interpreting and analysing the data achievable. Qualitative data is rich, requiring critical analysis. Analysing documents can replicate the researcher's personal interpretation (Bryman, 2004). Research questions induce a higher chance of completeness and reduce selectivity. Subsequently, a comprehensive and even evaluation takes place. The research questions set for this document analysis include: 1) What is its origin? 2) Were the attacks represented as terrorism? 3) What characteristics of terrorism are mentioned? 4) What other characteristic are mentioned? 5) Are there political undertones? This will determine whether the traditionalist or social constructionist definitions are applicable to media representation. Text will be explored, and significant words/sentences will be identified. The data will be critically analysed to pinpoint key findings forming the basis for evaluation in the subsequent chapters.

The methodology of the document analysis has been set, and seemingly the advantages vastly outweigh any limitations. The step-by-step analytical procedure includes: finding the appropriate documents, selecting the specific documents, appraising them, and finally synthesising the data. Alongside academic research, the results will make up the final two chapters. Detecting bias in the news media is vital to understanding the extent to which terrorism is socially constructed.



### 3. Does the traditionalist definition of terrorism explain media representations?

The two case studies used for the duration of this analysis were the Lee Rigby and Jo Cox murders, chosen based on their similarity. The murder of Rigby occurred on 22 May 2013 in Woolwich, and was perpetrated by Michael Adebolajo and Michael Adebawale, who violently hacked to death the British soldier using knives and a cleaver, claiming revenge for British government involvements in the Middle East. Cox, a Member of Parliament (MP), was also brutally knifed and shot to death in her constituency in West Yorkshire on 16 June 2016 by Thomas Mair, who was motivated by neo-Nazi values. It would seem that, although similarities were evident, when scrutinising two influential media outlets' coverage of the incidents, there were catastrophically different attitudes. The *Daily Mail*, a right-wing source, and *The Guardian*, a left-wing source, were chosen based on their popularity and therefore potential influence on the British public, one on either side of the political spectrum. Using the traditionalist perspective alongside news media representation of terrorism will help unravel the extent of social construction.

#### 3.1 Were the attacks represented as terrorism?

It was important to establish if terrorism was immediately associated with either incident in the early stages of reporting, as this would give an understanding of when the news media use the term. The *Daily Mail* immediately associated Rigby's killers with terrorist activity, using emotive language such as "savages bent upon flaunting their martyrdom before the

world” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a). The fifteen *Guardian* articles analysed were reluctant to begin with to label the crime terrorism, instead it was called a “brutal murder” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013a). It was clear that right-wing media were more inclined to assert the terrorism label. However later *The Guardian*, when referring to 9/11, 7/7 bombings, subtly included the terrorist category, the English Defence League (EDL) and counter-terrorism measures. *The Guardian* asserts that the men are “not being detained under terrorism laws but under normal criminal legislation contained in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (Pace)” although they soon after explain how one of the two men was stopped trying to visit Somalia, “a training ground for violent jihadists” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013f). The *Daily Mail* fluently but subtly compared the incident to suicide bombings and used phrases such as “hijacked the agenda”, referring to commonly acknowledged jihad terrorist techniques throughout (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a). Comparing both news media side by side elaborates the extent to which their representations differ politically, while exposing wider representations of terrorism.

The war against terrorism is consistently mentioned throughout the *Daily Mail* articles, comparing the state of alert to that of the 1970/80s IRA threat and to victims of the Taliban (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013b). Association with global terrorism is a key technique the *Daily Mail* incorporates, comparing the attack to tactics “seen employed by Palestinians in Israel” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013c) and talking of 9/11 and Al Qaeda (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a), while *The Guardian* devoted an article to trying to define the Woolwich event, suggesting it is a whole new type of crime that “can easily

be self-started at home” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013h). There is contemplation as to whether the event constitutes a terrorist crime, ordinary knife crime or hate crime, and the suggestion that it fits all “in some ways, not in others” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013h). Prior to understanding the political undertones of the label, which can be reflected by certain political viewpoints, *The Guardian’s* discussion is admirable, but overall the two media sources are sure to categorise the Rigby incident an act of terrorism. Previously discussed was the idea that terrorism can be similar to other crimes, meaning the label is possibly not needed. It would seem Adebolajo and Adebawale were constructed as terrorists through the news media. The actual criminal activity that occurred was knife attack (in the case of Rigby) or knife and shotgun attack (in the case of Cox); clearly the “nature of terrorism is not inherent in the violent act itself” (Jackson, 2008). Rather it was the intention of the attack that is the most important element. Although motivation will be discussed later on, this point brings to light the difficulties of applying the traditionalist perspective. One needs to be careful when applying the label ‘terrorism’ that these characteristics, not underlying political bias, are used to define it.

Media discussion of the reaction to the Rigby murder is noteworthy. The far-right reaction from the EDL saw violent attacks against Muslims, yet the *Daily Mail* categorises the perpetrators as “thugs” rather than terrorists (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013g). Since the *Daily Mail* usually immediately defines a politically motivated attack on an innocent civilian that aims to spread fear as terrorism, it would only seem appropriate to do the same for the EDL. There

is more of an attempt to include white supremacy in *The Guardian* coverage, with narrative on the vulnerability of society to “heavy violent attack[s], [whether they are]...white supremacist or...blasphemy and distortion of Islam” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013d). The *Daily Mail* was perhaps less inclined to apply such a derogatory term to a group that promotes views similar to its own, unlike *The Guardian*’s left-wing ideals condemning far-right groups. Where the *Daily Mail* fails to include terrorist comparisons that are not Islamic, one *Guardian* article compares Adebolajo and Adebawale to Anders Breivik, and the role of social media in spreading his message (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013h). The propaganda war is one where judgment is directed towards the labelled individual (Card, 2003). David Cameron, Prime Minister at the time, gave a powerful political speech about the fight against Islamic extremism following the Rigby incident as noted in both the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian*. However, when compared with the response to the Cox murder, where condolences were merely extended to the family, the political aspect is noticeable. Condemnation of Islamic extremism was overtly expressed, contrasting with the lack of condemnation of far-right terrorism. The political stigmatisation (Schmid, 2011) that Cameron inflicted may be understandable considering the violent nature of the attack, but there needs to be proportionality when doing so. If not, as in the case of these two incidents, political bias materialises through the news media coverage communicated to the public. Perhaps the ‘terrorism’ label should be eradicated altogether to avoid any disproportionality. Tarik Kafala, the head of the BBC’s Arabic service, avoided using the term during the *Charlie Hebdo* attack, arguing that it was loaded and value-laden (*The Guardian*,

27/01/2015). Similarly, Zulaika and Douglass (1996) discuss ways in which the media give power to the terrorists and propose that the phrase should not be promoted if this is the case. “Does the negative cultural and political connotations...[eliminate] any real analytical value” (Jackson, 2008)? Jackson does maintain that, by using a consistent and careful framework for the word ‘terrorism’, it should still be used; otherwise scholars risk marginalisation in the academic field.

The Cox coverage categorically failed to label Mair a terrorist in the same way as Adebolajo and Adebowale, indicating bias. When discussing the incident, it was described as an “attack”, “murder”, “killing”, or even “act of hatred” but nowhere does the initial coverage suggest that it was a terrorist attack (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016a;b). The incident is described as an “MP allegedly murdered by a troubled loner” (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016b). The *Daily Mail* has a tendency to focus on Mair as a “volunteer gardener and special needs helper” (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016b). Despite finding widespread evidence of neo-Nazi links, including “texts on how to build homemade guns and explosives” and “Ich Kampfe, an illustrated handbook issued to Nazi party members”, the *Daily Mail* refuses to entirely politicise the murder (*Daily Mail*, 18/06/2016k). Despite the same amount of evidence suggesting that both incidents fulfilled the traditionalist understanding of terrorism, the Islamophobic tendencies of the news media swiftly categorise Islamic ideologies while sympathising with far-right white backgrounds. Scahill, an investigative journalist and war correspondent, spoke of the “terrorism expert industrial complex”, Neiwert (2015) explains the neo-conservative ideologues

that deliver news reports to the public and claim they are terrorism experts. Journalists falsely inform the public of the imminent terror threat, but instead “are primarily engaged in whipping up xenophobic fears about Muslims” (Neiwart, 2015). The media are streaming heavy Islamophobia on a daily basis. Johnson’s (1994) concerns around the terrorism industry could be decoded here. Both media sources promptly label Adebolajo and Adebawale terrorists, and produce considerable coverage on the phenomenon to exemplify it. The reluctance to label Mair a terrorist could be explained through this same phenomenon, playing down Mair’s far-right neo-Nazi influences and instead considering his mental health as of prime importance.

Freedom of the press is important; but political sensitivity is essential when using the terrorism label. Primarily, the mass media play a vital role in defining terrorism (Jenkins, 2003). Subjective perceptions come from the media, “with its narrow focus on the exceptional over the ordinary” (McQueeney, 2014:298). The portrayal of Mair is worlds apart from that of Adebolajo and Adebawale. The *Daily Mail* includes perspectives from Mair’s neighbours of how there would be more chance of him turning “into Father Christmas... than him being a neo-Nazi”, and accounts that have “rejected claims the attack was politically motivated” (*Daily Mail*, 18/06/2016k). One book Mair possessed had previously “inspired Timothy McVeigh, who killed 168 people in the 1995 Oklahoma truck bombing” (*Daily Mail*, 18/06/2016k). There are indisputable links to terrorist ideologies that the *Daily Mail* refuses to take up. *The Guardian* similarly fails to label the attack as terrorism, but it does subtly mention that “MPs were vulnerable to terrorism” (*The Guardian*,

16/06/2016c), also how “[r]ude, crude Nazi-style extremism is mercifully rare” (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016g). *The Guardian* does refer to other terrorism incidents, explaining how it is the “first murder of a British politician in office since the assassination of Ian Gow by the IRA” (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016i). However, this is not to suggest that an act of terrorism has occurred; rather it was to identify the previous MP to be assassinated. Despite not directly labelling the murder as terrorism, *The Guardian* claims that the “rhetoric of western racism and Islamophobia is the mirror of the ideology with which ISIS and al-Qaida” operate (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016l). Both coverage’s fail to present the crime with its correct labelling, the right-wing *Daily Mail* being considerable worse in doing so.

### 3.2 Does it fit the traditionalist definition of terrorism?

#### i. Motivations

Deconstructing the Rigby incident will help give an idea of whether the crime should constitute terrorism. Political motivation is an important element in defining terrorism; the *Daily Mail* pointed out that the “men now identified a means to dignify their deeds as supposed political acts, executed in the name of jihad”, giving the crime a political motivation (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a). Adebolajo and Adebowale’s political ideology was identifiable when they claimed revenge for “crimes of the British government” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013e). *The Guardian* discuss how two men were “held on suspicion of inciting racial and religious hatred” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013e). Extremist cleric Omar Bakri Mohammad “described Adebolajo as a shy man who has been angered by the Iraq invasion” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013e).

There were claims that he went to meetings of a now banned Islamic extremist group during 2004–2011 (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013g). Seemingly there is plenty of evidence given by both media outlets for it being a politically driven crime. The brutality of crimes instigated for such a purpose re-establishes the importance of using the label: for the threat it poses to society. This reinforces Lord Carlile's (2007) concerns that terrorism differs from other crime, as it is less predictable. This was clear for the Rigby murder, considering that Adebolajo and Adebowale were on the police radar for years although neither was deemed a serious threat.

Considering both media sources decided not to link the Cox murder directly to terrorism, Mair's political motivation is recognisable. He was "shouting 'put Britain first'. He shouted it about two or three times. He said it before he shot her and after he shot her" (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016d). *The Guardian* covers police investigative reports questioning "possible reference to the far-right political party" (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016b;e). It further mentions links with extremist websites and possibility of being "linked to white supremacy"; he had "dangerous political affiliations" (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016f). Comments from the US Secretary of State in a *Daily Mail* article identified "the killing as an assault on democracy"; it was indeed a politically motivated attack (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016a). This same article includes opinions from Mair's friends, claiming he did not possess strong political views and was instead mentally ill, despite mentioning fears that Mair was "motivated by Mrs Cox's political campaigning" as she campaigned heavily for the Remain campaign and refugees (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016b).



The *Daily Mail* actually shames other journalists and politicians for politicising her murder, when they highlight “neo-Nazi, white supremacist group” and “hard Right” “extremism” links “despite the fact police had made no comment on the motive for the attack” (*Daily Mail*, 18/06/2016b;c). Double standards appear: to immediately regard the Rigby murder as terrorism, and then condemn others when they do the same for Cox. The Cox murder had a political nature, making claims that *The Guardian* politicised the story dubious. Furthermore, Cox’s assistant, who witnessed the incident, claimed that Mair deliberately targeted Cox; there was a clear aim to the killing (*Daily Mail*, 18/06/2016g). Crozier’s (1974) assessment that terrorism is different from other forms of crime because of its politically driven element is crucial to this debate. While some may view the Cox incident as murder, the political dimension to the crime transforms it into terrorism.

## ii. Communicative violence

The next element vital to constructing terrorism is that the violence is communicative. During Rigby’s murder, the perpetrators took advantage of the video recordings from members of the public, suggesting that they wanted to spread fear (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a). The *Daily Mail* has a tendency to discuss the incident very graphically, using terms such as “gore” and “pool of blood” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013d). The brutal nature of the crime was purposely shocking, as it is common for terrorists to maximise the shock factor to spread a psychological message. *The Guardian* also depicts how Rigby was “hacked to death in broad daylight” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013c). *The Guardian* explains how “the victim was unknown to his killers except as a soldier”, implying a regular characteristic of terrorism (*The Guardian*,

24/05/2013h). Comparing it with IRA incidents, *The Guardian* claimed the event was different in that they “carved him up in full view of onlookers” and were “eager to be filmed” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013h). A fair amount of sensationalism is apparent in the way the articles were written. The brutality of the violence, alongside the political message emphasised by Adebolajo and Adebowale, brings the event closer to fitting what is known as terrorism. It would be important to establish whether the events were terrorist incidents for the purpose of sentencing. Higgins (1997) may claim that the term has no legal worth, but it must be accepted that ‘terrorism’ is a widely used term and therefore its correct use is imperative. Political influences need to be scrutinised considering the disproportionality that has appeared in the document analysis.

Although the Cox coverage does not explicitly label it terrorism, both media sources cover the crime’s communicative factor. The *Daily Mail* highlights the very brutal nature of Cox’s “violent death” (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016a). She was “shot three times with a saw-off shotgun and stabbed repeatedly with a foot-long hunting knife in a frenzied attack”; the violence was executed to stand out from regular crime (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016b). The killing lasted 15 minutes according to reports (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016d), alongside the political message; this displays the intention to spread fear. *The Guardian* similarly talks of the “horrific murder” (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016d), examining details of the “daylight attack” and how Mair “shot her up to three times and stabbed her repeatedly” (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016h). The way the crime was carried out was regarded to be

“exceptionally heinous villainy”, standing out from other street crime (*The Guardian*, 16/06/2016). It is extraordinary for the nature of this crime to be regarded differently from Rigby’s murder. While the characteristics of the Rigby and Cox incidents mirror each other, although there arguably was more violence towards Cox, the media discourse differed. The social constructionist viewpoint is better suited to understanding why Jenkins (2003) previously explained, ideological motive is more important than the actual characteristics of the event. Rigby’s killers shouted “Allahu akbar” while Cox’s killer shouted “Britain first”, both seeking to send a message and create fear. Reporting procedures consequently symbolise political prejudice in the media. Perhaps Wilkinson (1977) was correct to believe that terrorism is a political label. Clearly fluidity with labelling needs to occur; the media need to be challenged on their current approach.

### iii. Civilian target

The final characteristic needed to constitute the traditionalist definition of terrorism is the civilian victim, a key concept that is “extremely subjective and difficult to determine objectively” (Jackson, 2008). The civilian victim characteristic of terrorism can be viewed as highly subjective. Whether Rigby, a soldier, can be defined as a civilian is debatable, similar to discussions around whether attacks on the Pentagon during 9/11 should be included in the terrorism identification (Schmid, 2011). Goodin (2006) deliberates the civilian–military distinctions, contending they are counter-productive, as they allow for actors to legitimise equally devastating violence. Conceptualising terrorism in such a manner could again influence biases when labelling. Furedi’s (in Hale *et al*, 2013) fears over the terrorism label

being more a moral statement can be reflected through this document analysis. *The Guardian* commonly refers to Rigby as a “British soldier” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013b), which indisputably marks the symbolic reason he was chosen by the perpetrators. The *Daily Mail* was clear to mark him as “innocent” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013b). It was highlighted that he was off duty in England at the time, so perhaps the civilian criteria are fulfilled in this case. The *Daily Mail* thoroughly discusses his past in the army and his family, referring to him as “Drummer Lee Rigby” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013d). Both media sources extensively cover Rigby’s personal life; he would certainly fit this characteristic. Conclusively, the events in Woolwich would seem to fit what has been constructed as terrorism.

Cox indisputably fits the civilian aspect that terrorism requires. The *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* cover plenty of her life as an activist, MP and family member (*Daily Mail*, 23/05/2013a;c;d;g; *The Guardian*, 23/05/2013a; 24/05/2013b;c;d). Despite fitting all characteristics fundamental to the definition, the media sources chose not to label her murder as terrorism. Jackson (2008) notes how victims are often chosen for “symbolic reasons”, evident in both cases: Rigby being a soldier and representative of British work overseas; and Cox, an active MP and supporter of immigration. While their backgrounds differed, the perpetrators’ choice of victim was designed to reach a wider audience. Judging against s.1 of the Terrorism Act 2000, both events comprise the elements vital to it. Violence was instigated to influence the government and to intimidate the public. Lord Lloyd’s (1996, in Hale *et al*, 2013) concern about a fixation on religious terrorism has been reflected in

this document analysis. While the press were quick to categorise Adebolajo and Adebowale as terrorists, Mair seemed to attract sympathy over his mental health and community-oriented background. It might be suggested that the press did not want to wrongfully label such an incident, but following this careful analysis it would seem both crimes fit. For the Rigby murder to be labelled terrorism is therefore viable, but for this same process to not be carried out for the labelling of the Cox murder would seem incorrect.

### 3.3 Concluding remarks

After conducting a critical document analysis there were clear conclusions to be drawn from the data. Fundamentally, the Islamic extremist incident was categorised as terrorism and the far-right terror incident was not. The breakdown of both incidents into the previously established characteristics essential to defining terrorism, confirmed each to fit. The crime's motivation, victim and use of communicative violence were visible. The political element was of great importance for defining, and extensive indications of Mair's political motivation emphasised only the double standards in reporting. Despite the sheer brutality of his crime, Mair almost received sympathy from the news media. Information about his history of volunteering was irrelevant considering the extensive evidence that was recorded throughout the news coverage. Comparing and contrasting two news media sources with opposing political orientations exposed the right-wing *Daily Mail* to be far more demonising of the Rigby perpetrators while sympathising with Cox's. Although both sources were guilty of political bias, the *Daily Mail* stood out as highly prejudiced compared to *The Guardian*. The news media require greater political sensitivity considering their instrumental

part in constructing what the public considers terrorism. Underlying Islamophobia has been prominent throughout, although this aspect will be analysed in greater detail in the next chapter. Sensationalism seems a very ominous aspect of the reporting of Rigby's death, with claims that Islamic extremism is developing to become worse than anything seen before, and regarding the backlash against the Muslim community as down to mere 'thugs'. Worryingly, this will only play into the hands of the terrorists, with their determination to spread fear. The emotive and barbaric language deployed here by right-wing tabloid media fulfils the growing stereotype and sustains a political agenda. Disproportionality is what the social constructionists have been criticising, and rightly so.

#### **4. Does the social constructionist definition of terrorism offer a more comprehensive understanding of media representations?**

This chapter focuses on the social constructionist understanding of terrorism to help explain why the traditionalist perspective failed to interpret the way that terrorism is constructed in the news media. It would seem that terrorism as a label is too subjective, and those in power use it disproportionately. The construction of identity is equally important to this debate, to establish why the current media discourse has interpreted the Rigby and Cox incidents in opposing ways. The wider literature is fundamental to exploring deep-rooted socio-political undercurrents, taking a radical viewpoint at the end of the discussion to explore all possible reasoning.

##### **4.1 What does the social constructionist argument propose?**

The natural bias that lies within the news media has affected a fair application of the terrorism label. Despite efforts to use the traditionalist perspective, “[c]onstruivism seemed best placed in evaluating terrorism” (Lynch, 2006). The three basic elements for establishing terrorism were disproportionately used in the news media, as the label was easily applied to Adebolajo and Adebowale unlike white, right-wing Mair. Although it has been contended that terrorism is a type of crime, it is “not a given in the real world; it is instead an interpretation of events and their presumed causes” (Yehuda, 1993). It is the same way “races do not exist”, objectivity is somewhat impossible, and rather it is “a meaningful way of assigning identities and behavioural characteristics to individuals” (Jackson, 2008). In such a

politicised period “the concept of terrorism cannot be separated from a wider linguistic, social, political, and cultural context” (Erlenbusch, 2014:471). Similar studies such as Spencer’s (2012) metaphor analysis of the British tabloid newspaper the *Sun* highlighted the importance of language in constructing terrorism. It is not that social constructionists deny terrorism’s physical existence, but rather through discourse “we all make terrorism what [we say] it is” (Onuf, 2009: 54). The argument that the “terrorist [label] is almost never applied rigorously and consistently to describe the tactics a group is using – rather, it is invoked as a pejorative to vilify the actions only of groups one wishes to discredit” (Friedersdorf, 2012) is evident through the document analysis. Primarily the politics of fear is a dominant motif in news and popular culture today (Altheide, 2009). The news media are at the heart of this debate with their influence “to shape opinions and [present]...a particular version of reality” (Yusof *et al*, 2013). The portrayal of terrorism has duly distorted our world-vision, as seen in the previous chapter.

Each violent group throughout history has considered themselves to be legitimately fighting against a form of evil, be it right/left-wing/religious terrorism, or even governmental institutions. This phenomenon is called the “patriot paradox” and is part of the issue with using the terrorism label (Alpher, 2016). Just like the so called Jihadist religious battle, right-wing extremists believe they are defending their constitution, for example the recent Oregon militia standoff, who used the threat of violence for a political cause but declared themselves patriots. Although Mair’s violence was condemned, the inability to label him a terrorist prevents condemnation of the



right-wing Islamophobic movement currently active in the West. The potential power domestic terrorists possess to influence society is one that Islamic extremists fail to achieve. Foreign fighters can kill, but they are unlikely to divide society (Alpher, 2016); the current political climate rightly exemplifies this. The social construction of terrorism has been shaped by past events. Terrorist attacks such as 9/11, 7/7, 11 March 2004 in Spain, and 11 July 2006 in India, “created a collective atmosphere of hysteria” (Kosic and Nordio, 2007:2). The media have a central role in ethnic categorisation, yet they have a tendency to present Islam only in its extremist form (Asmelash *et al*, 2014). Although the violence of Adebolajo and Adebowale was correctly shunned and labelled terrorism, the disproportionate bias throughout the news media leads the public to view terrorism as purely a religious phenomenon. Ironically, attacks such as the Rigby incident “[enhance] patriotic and nationalistic attachments”, fostering a wave of prejudice, xenophobia and racist backlash, meaning while right-wing terrorism is on the rise it has become, in a way, socially accepted (Kosic and Nordio, 2007:2). Subsequently, the traditionalist definition of terrorism seems useless in a society that categorises the type of group/individual that should be so labelled.

The social constructionist perspective explains the criminalisation of Islam in the 21st century. Terrorism has been constructed to be associated only with Jihad, polarising the Islamic religion (Asmelash *et al*, 2014), to the extent that terrorism has become a loaded word routinely used in the media to demonise Muslims (Asmelash *et al*, 2014). Leading up to and following

9/11, “the human rights of Arabs and Muslims in the US have been increasingly threatened by anti-Muslim rhetoric, airport screenings, traffic stops, detentions, deportations, and hate crimes” (McQueeney, 2014:297). Furedi’s (in Hale *et al*, 2013) concerns around radicalisation and homegrown terrorism need to be balanced against his earlier evaluation of lone-wolf terrorists that originated among American white supremacists (Furedi, 2012). Global concerns that “Muslims are increasingly being defined in terms of an oppositional dialectic that pits Islam and Muslims against the rest of the world” (Noor, 2007:261) have grown as Islamophobia has become mainstream media discourse “where images of Muslims as murderous fanatics abound in movies, videos and computer games” (Noor, 2007:267). These concerns begin to unravel the current issues surrounding the value-laden term ‘terrorist’. As the two incidents under scrutiny in the document analysis have suggested, all terrorist groups have the capability to commit serious crime, but it is important that the news media report the threat equally.

#### **4.2 Race, religion and ethnicity as characteristics of terrorism**

Understanding social identities is important for explaining news media representations of terrorists. Zevallos (2011) described identities not as innate but as a reflection of established social categories within society, for example cultural/ethnicity. Those with the greatest political power are in the majority, controlling the representation of groups, and consequently construct the minority as ‘others’ (Zevallos, 2011). The complexity of identity is a continuous “process of construction... between self definition and definition

by others within a hierarchical structure” (Kosic and Nordio, 2007:4). It is mundane practice for Western media to stereotype Muslims as terrorists and racial others (Said, 1997; Shaheen, 2001; Jackson, 2010). Western culture predominantly considers the white, middle-to-upper class, heterosexual Christian (man) as the dominant group, and it is through visual representations and discourse that this cultural authority prevails (Hall, 2013). Mair fits the dominant group characteristics, possibly explaining why the news media was reluctant to label him a terrorist despite him fitting the traditionalist requirements. McQueeney (2014) characterised the immediate image that the dominant group assigned to the Arab world, as violent and uncivilised. Following the delegation of the ‘other’ label, foreign-based individuals are much more likely to be assigned the terrorism label by politicians and reporters alike. Adebolajo’s “white robes” are portrayed, as is his “Nigerian descent” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013g). Nationality seems an important point for the *Daily Mail*, as they discuss the “two young men of Nigerian descent who had been given every advantage life in this country offers” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013i). *The Guardian*, on the other hand, begins with “Adebolajo, the London-born man” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013g); soon, however, referring to him being “from a Nigerian churchgoing family and... converted to Islam” (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013h). It is much less likely for domestic hate groups to be associated with the ‘other’ group.

Ethnicity/religion was not spoken about throughout all media coverage of Mair. News media and politics have painted “the Middle East as a land of barbarism and tyranny” sparking “fear of the Arab Other” (McQueeney, 2014:299; Hirchi, 2007). Arguably, the media cannot be blamed directly for

causing a certain view (Hall, 1980 in Hall *et al*); rather McQueeney (2014) argues how controlling images of Arab and Muslim Others reinforce mainstream assumptions that they are terrorists. This makes human rights violations against ordinary Muslims around the world seem acceptable (Jackson, 2010). The habitualised discourses convey the stereotypes, and they are unconsciously accepted (Gotsbachner, 2002). Ethnicity, race and religion are dominant factors in shaping characteristics deemed important for constructing our interpretation of terrorism.

When profiling terrorists, and subsequently defining them based on physical characteristics, individuals of certain races are perceived to be more likely to commit acts of terrorism. Racial characteristics are dominant attributes used in Western counter-terrorism measures and media discourse, although this is described as the “crudest and most egregious method of profiling terrorists” (Rae, 2012). Arguably, as the Rigby incident indicated, Islamic extremism is a real threat to Western society. But, the fact that “ethnicity and alienage are viewed as adequate demographic divisions to be proper subjects of scrutiny” is a worrying feature in our society (Rae, 2012). In many countries, most notably the USA post 9/11, “racial profiling re-emerged as a viable system for detecting potential terrorists and was implemented by the border security agencies” (Rae, 2012). Noting the backlash surrounding the police’s “prejudiced, unconstitutional or institutionally racist” stop-and-search of young black males, it seems nonsensical that the equivalent for the Arabic and Muslim population is considered fair (Rae, 2012). Arabs and Muslims are a huge part of

mainstream society, and the vast majority have no terrorism connections, while there is a non-Arab part of society that has indeed joined the Jihad, making focus on ethnicity, race or religion “both discriminatory and foolish” (Ellman, 2003:688). The terrorism label alienates huge parts of society; there seems to be a vicious cycle of fear and backlash that results in more terroristic incidents.

Further on the point of ethnicity, terrorism is largely a white phenomenon. The second most lethal terror attack on US soil was committed by the white American citizen Timothy McVeigh (Rae, 2012). When discussing why terrorists with white skin evoke less of a social outcry, there seems to be “something strangely, and profoundly, disproportionate about it all” (Neiwert, 2015). The document analysis highlighted how, when the *Daily Mail* discussed other racist killings by white supremacists, it categorised them not as terrorists, but instead “just thugs” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a), further remarking that “British Christians do not seek confrontation with Islam” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013a). The culture clash is a barrier to using the label proportionately. Post 9/11, the climate of fear has materialised a “culture of terrorist stereotyping” (Rae, 2012). This can explain why, in the immediate aftermath of the Breivik terrorist attack, American media channels labelled it likely work of Islamic radicals (Neiwert, 2015). Fundamentally, right-wing extremism is a very potent domestic issue that has largely been ignored in the news media. Breivik, like other Christian right-wing extremists, was played down in the news media his ideological motives being cast aside (Neiwert, 2015). Right-wing domestic terrorism has been whitewashed from

the news. Attempts to report proportionately on domestic terrorism subsequently leads to accusations of a liberal media bias and has therefore “grossly distorted the shape and nature of our discourse about terrorism” (Neiwert, 2015). This selection bias has been translated to academic studies: “the terrorism label is applied almost solely to non-state groups opposed to Western interests” (Jackson, 2008). Arguably this is partly down to definitional problems, but fundamentally there is an “avoidable ideological bias amongst many Western scholars who adopt the interests of their own governments” (Jackson, 2008). The same treatment is needed for all types of terrorism.

Throughout time there are periods where types of crime are heavily reported, presenting an uneven account of real life. Cohen’s (1972) ‘moral panic thesis’ explained how media sensationalism of crime stories falsely exaggerates the behaviour of groups labelled ‘folk devils’ to influence societal perception of the unwanted ‘other’. These ‘folk devils’ are then viewed as a security threat, demanding tougher governmental sanctions, as seen currently with Islamic terrorists. The power of language, rhetoric and discourse reinforces the role the news media plays in “conveying the hierarchical norm and habitual referential patterns imposed by the dominant social group” (Kosic and Nordio, 2007:4). Arguably, the majority of international terrorists have an Arab/Muslim identity but this should not mean all are associated with terrorism (Rae, 2012). Both the *Daily Mail* and *The Guardian* allocate plenty of coverage on the Rigby killers’ link to a local extremist, Choudary, giving detailed accounts of his political views, claiming

he “wants Britain to become an Islamic state” and implying that all Muslims agree with the view that the killing was a result of “British prejudice and racism towards young Muslims” (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013n). One of the *Daily Mail* articles, committed 2077-words to Choudary, how he lives off benefits and influenced the Woolwich killers (*Daily Mail*, 24/05/2013n). *The Guardian* also speaks of Choudary’s role in radicalising Adebolajo (*The Guardian*, 24/05/2013c). Considering the lack of political or religious background coverage Mair received, the focus on the constructed ‘other’ is prevalent here. Our beliefs and values are governed through “[s]ocial institutions such as the law, the media, education, religion”, and their “representation of what is accepted as ‘normal’ and what is considered Other” (Zevallos, 2011). The news media has a moral responsibility to defuse biased reporting, yet they generally adopt the stereotypical pro-Western and negative-other themes (Van Dijk, 2005; 2006 in Kotic & Nordio, 2007). These themes have been transparent in the document analysis and correspond with the social constructionist interpretation of terrorism.

#### **4.3 The important of context**

It is important to put the incidents in context. It was said in the past that “[f]ailure to account for terrorism as a historical phenomenon produces serious analytical and epistemological problems that result in an anachronistic, ahistorical, and reductive understanding” (Erlenbusch, 2014:470). The EU referendum was significant in explaining why the Cox incident was not associated with terrorism. It was fuelled by anti-immigration rhetoric, highlighting the current “[p]olitical destabilization within the various

countries of the EU and a push towards far-right political parties” (Brady, 2017). Following Cox’s death and Brexit, “UK far-right groups gained a significant number of followers” (Smith and Colliver, 2016). Britain’s fractured society has consequently seen a rise in “nationalist tendencies” (Brady, 2017). When Mair murdered Cox, his slogan “put Britain first” (*Daily Mail*, 17/06/2016d) coincided with much of the ‘Leave’ campaign’s rhetoric. The news media’s key role in constructing terrorism failed to proportionately report this a terrorist attack, further constructing terrorism as a purely Islamic phenomenon. Across Europe the atmosphere of fear is evident, with the burkini ban in France, attacks on mosques, and Brexit itself (Brady, 2017). The fear of Islamic terrorism has allowed incidents like Cox’s murder to occur without recognition of its true nature, terrorism. With the winning majority voting to leave the EU, it would seem the Islamophobic rhetoric used by news media and politicians continues to shape our understanding terrorism and threaten large parts of society unduly associated with terrorism.

#### 4.4 The politics of terrorism

Following the disproportionality evident in the document analysis, it is clear that terrorism is a political label. Academic attempts to define and use the term objectively would reify its political bias (Tilly, 2004). While the political reaction can be viewed as playing into the terrorist’s hands, the politics of terrorism works very much both ways. Jenkins rightly notes how every “lesson in counter-terrorism warns against overreaction” (Jenkins, 2016). But still, post 9/11, Blair and Bush’s crusade against militant Islam mirrored their wars on poverty and drugs with the rhetoric for governing and



pursuing political interests (Jenkins, 2016). The increasing use of the term unreflectively by academics is concerning as it “is central to the way in which the Global War on Terror is prosecuted by the authorities both domestically and overseas”, also affecting how it is “dealt with as a criminal act under international and domestic law” (Jackson, 2008). Claim-makers “deploy dominant language and symbols that circulate in the culture to construct social problems” (McQueeney, 2014:298). Similar language is mirrored through “media representations... [instrumental] for advancing political agendas, including war and the restriction of civil liberties” (McQueeney, 2014:299). A likely explanation why the *Daily Mail* was reluctant to label Mair a terrorist, is that it would have damaged their Brexit agenda. Media focus on Islamic extremism works in favour of foreign policy decisions by displaying Arabs/Muslims as innately violent. Foreign policy in the Middle East; such as the “2003 invasion of Iraq [has] undoubtedly been made easier by a century of images of the Arab and Muslim Other” (McQueeney, 2014:299; Shaheen, 2001). Terrorism is a label that holds great political power and is used by politicians to shape media discourse in their favour.

In this chapter, the consequences of failure to internationally agree upon a definition have become clear. Terrorism discourse has somewhat “played into the hands of powerful political interests by producing definitions that were ahistorical, open to political instrumentalization, and biased” (Erlenbusch, 2014:473). Radical scholars such as Bigo and Tsoukala (2008), Dillon and Reid (2009) and Evans (2012), highlight the liberal democratic War on Terror’s profoundly illiberal operational procedures. The

scaremongering tactics of governments have fuelled contemporary imperialism. The politics of terrorism has had merciless repercussions for the Muslim community. Media discourse on the Arab/Muslim Other has led to support for harsh counter-terrorism measures. Consequently there have been “substantial indirect consequences for individuals and groups labelled as terrorists – who may be legally subject to torture, rendition and internment without trial – and for the suspect communities they belong to” (Jackson, 2008). Of course one might contend that these measures are necessary to counteract potential violence against society. From the recent START Background Report (2016), it would seem that ISIS has grown considerably, the number of attacks nearly doubling in a year. However, Adebolajo and Adebowale, like most terrorists operating on Western soil, were lone wolf copycats, meaning concerns should be concentrate on not spreading the fear. The Global Terrorism Index recorded the proportion of terrorist deaths in Western countries to be 0.5% (excluding 9/11) (Brady, 2017). The media, to perpetuate the Arabic/Muslim terrorist image, sensationalise the small number of successful attacks. Agamben (1998) warned of the dangers of sovereign power inherent in liberalism. Exceptional measures that Arab/Muslim individuals are routinely subject to, including “Guantanamo Bay, black sites and torture facilities such as Abu Ghraib, but also exceptional legislation such as the USA PATRIOT Act or the UK Terrorism Act are a case in point” (Erlenbusch, 2014:478). Holland (2014) notes that the stereotype of evil ‘other’ was previously applied to the Soviets during the Cold War. Terrorism is not an empirically based definition, so it can fluctuate

according to the needs of the definers (Berry, 2006). Perhaps the terrorism discourse is the latest method of maintaining political power.

#### 4.5 Concluding remarks

While in theory the traditionalist definition helps to understand terrorism, the social constructionist perspective reveals the reality of using the label. The document analysis's results provided evidence supporting academic debates around the dangers of such a label. The lack of a universally agreed definition has allowed governments to influence how the label is applied, polarising certain groups. Clearly, constructing the Arab/Muslim 'other' has had serious implications for how we view terrorism. While Islamic extremism is a problem and this argument was not proposed to dispute the threat, there is a serious issue of disproportionately in reporting it. Right-wing extremism is a pressing issue that has been whitewashed across Western media. The inability to use the label fairly has xenophobic repercussions for the wider Muslim community. The politics of terrorism, or more correctly the politics of fear, continue to shape foreign policy and domestic counter-terrorism measures that threaten individual freedoms. Therefore, objectivity and sensitivity is fundamental in media discourse, as events such as the EU referendum subject the foreign community to continued hardships.

## Conclusion

Terrorism is ingrained in routine language used by the news media and politicians alike. The hundreds of definitions will continue to grow and morph into whatever shape politicians deem suitable. Fundamentally, the terrorism label is a moral statement, as the lack of an internationally agreed definition has had important implications for the way society perceives the phenomenon. It was first established that the need to define terrorism is explained by its inherent risk to democratic society. However, media sensationalism plays into the hand of government interests with the concept of the terrorism industry and terrorist propaganda itself. The dangers of using terrorism as a legal term have been exemplified by cases involving journalists, who have been wrongfully held under terrorism legislation. The extraordinary measures that the government and criminal justice system can perpetuate are some of the dangers of the legal term. Early on in the discussion, despite their broadness, the three basic elements were established (political motivation, the communicative nature of the violence, and the civilian target). Despite some controversy around the civilian target aspect, the traditionalist perspective offered the ability to define such a crime. When applying this framework to real life cases, the news media failed to label the murder of Jo Cox (which included each characteristic) as terrorism. Subsequently, the social constructionist perspective has been most helpful in explaining representations of terrorism. After the document analysis highlighted the disproportionality of reporting, deep-rooted issues surfaced. Here the context of the crime became vital to understanding how certain groups are considered terrorists. The current political climate has seen a rise

in Islamophobia that has become commonplace in society. Terrorism may constitute a separate crime, but the deep-rooted socio-political implications of its label prevent objectivity. Terrorism's ability to spread monumental fear is one of its defining characteristics, but this would not apparently be possible alone. The media has a lot to answer for in spreading the message of fear: it has constructed the Arab/Muslim 'other' that continues to polarise much of the foreign community. State accountability is another feature fuelling the controversy, with many states fulfilling the requirements of terrorism, yet avoiding labelling through their sovereign rights, again highlighting the overlapping grey zones. Terrorism is not a black/white label, meaning it is easy to apply on the basis of political interests. The Israeli–Palestinian conflict, like many atrocities on-going and historical, is symbolic of the issues with selectively defining terrorism. While it is imperative that academics include states in terrorism definitions, these practices are diminishing. When issues of immorality are whitewashed and state-proofed, the whole liberal democratic system is brought into question. To conclude, terrorism is socially constructed to suit the dominant group in society and this practice will continue to prevail until academics push for fair practice.

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