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Mass Media's Role in Terrorism: The Issue of Frame Sending and Terrorist Communication

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Abstract

The propaganda videos of Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) became a widespread issue throughout the Western world between 2014 and 2017. The problem was not that the videos went viral on social media but that people learned about them and their content through the news. Each ISIL video posted on social media provoked some kind of media reaction that generated public attention. Given that a common framing effect leads people to think through the frames offered to them, journalists and media outlets can pick up frames and send them via their reporting. Based on a qualitative content analysis of news articles in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, this article shows that media outlets often sent ISIL's frames and discussed related problems using the frames set by ISIL. Therefore, the media played a crucial role in the logic of this terrorist organization and its communication strategy by sending specific strategic communicator frames to the public. However, this analysis reveals that media framing changed over time: reporting became more balanced and, in some cases, even contested ISIL's frames.

Keywords: framing; frame sending; terrorism; ISIL; propaganda videos; news; content analysis

Intent to Spread Fear

The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), a Salafi–Jihadist terrorist organization, created propaganda videos that became a widespread issue throughout the Western world between 2014 and 2017. The problem was not that the videos went viral but that “the world learned almost instantly about the executions via the traditional mass media that in ever more ‘breaking news’ versions aired alarming details of the unspeakably cruel acts.”¹ Each ISIL video posted on social media provoked some kind of media reaction, and public attention was mostly generated

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¹ Brigitte L. Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers: 2016), 28.

by the media.² When it comes to terrorism, the generation of public attention is problematic because terrorism can be understood as a communication strategy, particularly if the messages of terrorist organizations are disseminated.³ From this perspective, journalists play a crucial role in the functional logic of terrorism because terrorists seek media attention to increase the impact of their actions and spread fear in a targeted society.⁴ Modern terrorism can be understood as “mass mediated” and involving media symbiosis because there is “the centrality of communication via all kinds of mass media in the calculus of terrorism on the one hand and media gatekeepers’ preference for shocking violence on the other hand.”⁵ This is partly why the role of the media in reporting on terrorism has long been a subject of controversy.⁶

In this article, we show that the media sent strategic communicator frames (SCFs) and that many outlets reacted immediately to ISIL’s media incentives. Although there are strong indications that the media attempted to counter terrorist framings, it still played a crucial role in terrorist logic.

The media faces a dilemma with regard to terrorism. On the one hand, journalists and media outlets have to fulfil their duty to provide information and report on terrorist acts. On the other hand, by doing so, they can end up disseminating SCFs, albeit inadvertently. When that happens, the reach and significance of terrorist messages and actions increase.⁷ Therefore, the issue of frame sending⁸ is of particular importance when journalists report on terrorism.

In their study on the media framing of terrorism, Hoewe and Bowe built on the findings of Powell.⁹ Using quantitative content analysis, they examined 1,094 articles from the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* from 1981 to 2016 regarding the use of the term “radical Islam.” In an experiment, they tested the influence of language on the formation of recipients’ opinions and behaviors. The authors identified intensified reporting and changes in media framing in relation to terrorist acts.¹⁰

² Petter Nesser, *Islamist Terrorism in Europe* (London: Hurst, 2018); Michael Oswald and Michael Johann, “Im Kampf für eine Gegenkultur: Wie der Islamische Staat den Terrorismus revolutioniert,” *Zefko—Zeitschrift für Friedens- und Konfliktforschung* 5, no. 2 (2016): 299–312, <https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-1741-2016-2-299>.

³ Peter Waldmann, *Terrorismus. Provokation der Macht* (Hamburg: Murmann, 2011), 14–16; Alexander Spencer, *Lessons Learnt. Terrorism and the Media* (Wiltshire: Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2012), 6.

⁴ Waldmann, *Terrorismus*; Spencer, *Lessons Learnt*; Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (Columbia, SC: Columbia University Press, 2018).

⁵ Nacos, *Mass-Mediated Terrorism*, 31.

⁶ Abraham H. Miller, *Terrorism and the Media and Law* (Dobbs Ferry, NY: Transnational Publishing, 1982); Zizi Papacharissi and Maria de Fatima Oliveira, “News Frames Terrorism: A Comparative Analysis of Frames Employed in Terrorism Coverage in U.S. and U.K. Newspapers,” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 13, no. 1 (2008): 52–74, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1940161207312676>; Kimberley A. Powell, “Framing Islam: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism since 9/11,” *Communication Studies* 62, no. 1 (2011): 90–112, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510974.2011.533599>; Kimberley A. Powell, “Framing Islam/Creating Fear: An Analysis of U.S. Media Coverage of Terrorism from 2011–2016,” *Religions* 9, no. 9 (2018): 257, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel9090257>; Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western Media* (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1982); Michel Wieviorka, *The Making of Terrorism* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1993); Paul Wilkinson, “The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 9, no. 2 (1997): 51–64, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954659708427402>.

⁷ Miriam Meckel, “Zwischen Informationspflicht und Instrumentalisierung. Zur Widersprüchlichen Rolle der Medien in der Symbolkommunikation des Terrorismus,” in *Paradoxien des Journalismus. Theorie—Empirie—Praxis*, eds. Bernhard Pörksen, Wiebke Loosen, and Armin Scholl (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2008), 247–66, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-91816-7_14; Wilkinson, “The Media and Terrorism: A Reassessment,” 52.

⁸ Michael Brüggemann, “Between Frame Setting and Frame Sending: How Journalists Contribute to News Frames,” *Communication Theory* 24, no. 1 (2014): 61–82, <https://doi.org/10.1111/comt.12027>.

⁹ Powell, “Framing Islam.”

¹⁰ Hoewe and Bowe, “Magic Words or Talking Point? The Framing of ‘Radical Islam’ in News Coverage and its Effects,” 9; Powell, “Framing Islam,” 94.

Powell published subsequent key studies on framing theory and terrorism.¹¹ Using Entman's¹² approach, Powell analyzed U.S. media coverage of 11 terrorist attacks in the United States after 11 September 2001 (9/11). She identified the thematic frames in U.S. reporting and suggested that the media trivialized attacks by U.S. citizens without a migration background. In contrast, terrorist acts planned outside the United States and carried out by people of other nationalities or by U.S. citizens with a migration background were always associated with Islam and portrayed as a greater threat to the nation.¹³ In the follow-up study, the same main frames were reconstructed in U.S. reporting on 11 more terrorist attacks between 2011 and 2016.¹⁴

Iyengar conducted research on the effects of news framing, including episodic and thematic framing of terrorism and the consequences on public perceptions.¹⁵ After evaluating the extent of thematic and episodic framing in the news programs of broadcast networks, Iyengar concluded that terrorism news is highly responsive to framing because terrorism is associated with poorly understood disputes.¹⁶ Some findings have suggested that there is a "strong 'event' bias in network treatment of terrorism."¹⁷

Furthermore, Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira¹⁸ analyzed U.S. and British media coverage of terrorist attacks in the aftermath of 9/11. They reconstructed the main media frames and explored the differences in coverage in the context of the War on Terror.¹⁹ The study concluded that, in general, both U.S. and British daily newspapers supported the policies of President George W. Bush and Prime Minister Tony Blair because SCFs were frequently present in the reporting.

Although research exists on the general framing of ISIL in the media,²⁰ as well as on the framing of ISIL as such,²¹ there is a lack of studies on the SCFs of terrorists and the associated frame sending by journalists and media outlets. Based on previous considerations and key studies on the media framing of terrorism, our research questions were as follows: (1) Does the media play a role in terrorist logic and its communication strategy by sending ISIL's SCFs in the public?

¹¹ Powell, "Framing Islam"; Powell, "Framing Islam/Creating Fear."

¹² Robert M. Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication* 43, no. 4 (1993): 51–58, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.1993.tb01304.x>.

¹³ Powell, "Framing Islam."

¹⁴ Powell, "Framing Islam/Creating Fear."

¹⁵ Shanto Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible? How Television Frames Political Issues* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1991), <https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226388533.001.0001>.

¹⁶ Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, 26.

¹⁷ Iyengar, *Is Anyone Responsible?*, 27.

¹⁸ Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, "News Frames Terrorism."

¹⁹ Stephen D. Reese, "Finding Frames in a Web of Culture: The Case of the War on Terror," in *Doing News Framing Analysis. Empirical and Theoretical Perspectives*, eds. Paul D'Angelo and Jim A. Kuypers, (New York, NY: Routledge, 2010), 14–42.

²⁰ Kris Boyle and Jordan Mower, "Framing Terror: A Content Analysis of Media Frames Used in Covering ISIS," *Newspaper Research Journal* 39, no. 2 (2018): 205–19, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0739532918775667>.

²¹ Jan Christoffer Andersen and Sveinung Sandberg, "Islamic State Propaganda: Between Social Movement Framing and Subcultural Provocation," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 32, no. 7 (2020): 1506–26, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2018.1484356>; Charlie Winter, "Framing War: Visual Propaganda, the Islamic State, and the Battle for East Mosul," *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 33, no. 5 (2020): 667–89, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2019.1706074>; Carol Winkler, Kareem El-Damanny, Zainab Saleh, John Hendry, and Nagham El-Karhili, "Intersections of ISIS Media Leader Loss and Media Campaign Strategy: A Visual Framing Analysis," *Media, War & Conflict* 14, no. 4 (2021): 401–18, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1750635219889370>.

(2) How does the media framing of ISIL change over time, and how does media coverage relate to actions and the release of terrorist material? By posing these questions, we aimed to find evidence on the extent to which the German media played a role in terrorist logic by sending specific SCFs.

Frame sending means that journalists and media outlets can pick up frames and use them in their own frame building, producing “media texts that include certain frames and neglect others.”²² Consequently, frame sending in the context of ISIL mainly involves journalists integrating terrorists’ SCFs into their own frame building. One of the core assumptions of framing theory is that the framing of an issue can affect how information is received and processed by the recipients.²³ Such framing effects—that is, changes in recipients’ behaviors and perceptions—are widely documented.²⁴

When it comes to terrorism, framing and the use of mass media are not new phenomena; for example, parts of manifestos and responsibility claims can be printed in newspapers. However, compared with terrorist groups of the past, ISIL had more tools at its disposal for advancing its chosen framing. In fact, with its narrative and frame-setting capabilities on the screen, ISIL has changed terrorist communication. One of ISIL’s goals was to promote its narratives,²⁵ and each element of ISIL’s social media strategy was part of spreading and advancing the narrative this group wanted to convey.²⁶ Normatively speaking, the media bears the responsibility of not inadvertently distributing terrorist propaganda and thus fear.²⁷ In this article, we focus specifically on media reporting in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland), but first, we take a deeper look at the theoretical background.

Theoretical Background

Terrorism as a Communication Strategy 2.0

Terrorism is multifaceted and ever changing, which means that there is no universally valid definition of terrorism.²⁸ A widely accepted and frequently quoted basic definition comes from Peter Waldmann, who described terrorism as deliberately prepared, shocking violence from the underground directed against a

²² Brüggemann, “Between Frame Setting and Frame Sending,” 64.

²³ Paul R. Brewer, “Value Words and Lizard Brains: Do Citizens Deliberate About Appeals to Their Core Values?,” *Political Psychology* 22, no. 1 (2001): 45–64, <https://doi.org/10.1111/0162-895X.00225>; Paul Marx and Gijs Schumacher, “The Effect of Economic Change and Elite Framing on Support for Welfare State Retrenchment: A Survey Experiment,” *Journal of European Social Policy* 26, no. 1 (2016): 20–31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0958928715621711>.

²⁴ James P. Farewell, “The Media Strategy of ISIS,” *Survival* 56, no. 6 (2014): 49–55, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00396338.2014.985436>; Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, “News Frames Terrorism”; Christian von Sikorski, Jörg Matthes, and Desirée Schmuck, “The Islamic State in the News: Journalistic Differentiation of Islamist Terrorism from Islam, Terror News Proximity, and Islamophobic Attitudes,” *Communication Research* 48, no. 2 (2021): 203–32, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650218803276>; James N. Druckman, “What’s It All About? Framing in Political Science,” in *Perspectives on Framing*, ed. Keren Gideon (New York, NY: Psychology Press/Taylor & Francis, 2011), 279–300.

²⁵ Moran Yarchi, “ISIS’s Media Strategy as Image Warfare: Strategic Messaging Over Time and Across Platforms,” *Communication and the Public* 4, no. 1 (2019): 53–67, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2057047319829587>.

²⁶ Douglas C. Derrick, Karyn Sporer, Sam Church, and Gina Scott Ligon, “Ideological Rationality and Violence: An Exploratory Study of ISIL’s Cyber Profile,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 9, no. 1–3 (2016): 57–81, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17467586.2016.1267866>.

²⁷ Heinz Bonfadelli, *Medieninhaltsforschung. Grundlagen, Methoden, Anwendungen* (Konstanz: UVK, 2002), 114–15.

²⁸ Peter R. Neumann, *Old and New Terrorism. Late Modernity, Globalization and the Transformation of Political Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 6.

political order.²⁹ These acts are intended to create a general sensation of insecurity and fear as well as sympathy and willingness to support the terrorist cause. This strategy works through terrorist actions being conveyed through media reports. Because terrorists seek to destabilize a political system through violence, there is both political motivation and a larger strategic context associated with such actions.³⁰ For example, some terrorists adopt the strategy of generating maximum publicity to sow intimidation. From this perspective, terrorism is strategic violence designed to attract (media) attention.³¹

Terrorist acts are mostly designed in such a way that the media cannot ignore them; indeed, the media tends to respond immediately.³² By reporting on terrorist acts and relating them to other issues, journalists and media outlets become key multipliers of terrorist messages.³³ To provoke fear in society and push governments toward an overreaction, terrorists deliberately exceed legal and societal conventions, particularly through emotionally charged, offensive breaches of norms. Consequently, their actions are mostly inhuman, arbitrary, and brutal³⁴ because the violence that underpins the propaganda enables the creation of messages that would not receive this kind of exposure otherwise.³⁵ Therefore, the relationship between terrorism and the media is symbiotic: terrorists gain attention while their actions increase the circulation of news reports.³⁶

In addition to following these crucial pathways based on the symbiotic relationship between the media and terrorism, ISIL has greatly profited from its social media communication. Social media was used as a tool for recruitment and an outlet for gaining attention.³⁷ However, the relevance of traditional media outlets to the public perception of terrorist organizations should not be underestimated. Based on a large-scale network analysis of tweets after the 2015 Paris attacks, Yang and Sung demonstrated that “professional mass media organizations still hold a greater agenda-setting power than individual opinion leaders for setting the public agenda.”³⁸ Thus, we argue that ISIL’s strategic communication benefitted from both social media and the coverage of traditional media outlets.

ISIL’s overall strategy served a specific goal. In general, terrorists are weak political actors: their actions do not receive broad public support, and their claims do not bear democratic legitimacy. This weak position can become powerful only through communication strategies whereby terrorists make themselves appear much more powerful than they really are. Publicity helps generate fear and

²⁹ Waldmann, *Terrorismus*, 14–17.

³⁰ Christopher Daase, “Terrorismus,” in *Handbuch Politische Gewalt. Formen—Ursachen—Legitimation—Begrenzung*, ed. Birgit Enzmann (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2013), 335–48, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-18958-1_15.

³¹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 182.

³² Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 183.

³³ Jürgen Gerhards, Mike S. Schäfer, Ishtar Al-Jabiri, and Juliane Seifert, *Terrorismus im Fernsehen. Formate, Inhalte und Emotionen in westlichen und arabischen Sendern* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2011), 13, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-531-94053-3>.

³⁴ Waldmann, *Terrorismus*, 16.

³⁵ Anthony Richards, *Conceptualizing Terrorism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198746966.001.0001>.

³⁶ Waldmann, *Terrorismus*; Spencer, *Lessons Learnt*, 6.

³⁷ Lisa Blaker, “The Islamic State’s Use of Online Social Media,” *Military Cyber Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2016): 1–10, <https://doi.org/10.5038/2378-0789.1.1.1004>.

³⁸ Fan Yang and Tongxin Sun, “Who Has Set Whose Agenda on Social Media? A Dynamic Social Network Analysis of Tweets on Paris Attack,” *Communication Quarterly* 69, no. 4 (2021): 341–63, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2021.1951789>.

intimidation.³⁹ This strategy serves to reach a wider target audience; therefore, the “real” target group in this communication strategy is not the victims, because violence is meant to spread fear and outrage among the public.⁴⁰

The development of modern information and communications technology favors this terrorist logic. In addition to guns and bombs, terrorism has included minicams, editing suites, and production facilities in its arsenal.⁴¹ ISIL even considered its media offensive a form of jihad and its media officers to be mujahid.⁴² In short, the digitization and availability of professional video production tools were game changers for terrorist propaganda. Nowadays, terrorists are not only in charge of such production but can control the content and context of their messages.⁴³ In other words, terrorists have greater capabilities to build the frames that the media uses to report on them.

Terrorism and Framing

Media reports usually offer a framework of interpretation by framing specific issues.⁴⁴ Such media frames are generally understood as a “central organizing idea or story line that provides meaning to an unfolding strip of events.”⁴⁵ Frames can differ in terms of their scope of interpretation and associated implications.⁴⁶ Sometimes, journalists and media outlets oppose a specific communicator frame and counter it with their reporting.⁴⁷ *Counter-framing* is a technique for neutering and opposing a specific framing by deliberate defiance through a contrary frame. *Frame contestation* goes one step further and can be defined as an attack on certain communicators and their claims. In both techniques, a frame is built to guide audience perceptions away from the original framing.⁴⁸

If terrorists can set their own framing in social media productions, then the larger media coverage that they want to provoke is likely to be spun around their own narratives. As previous research has shown, people tend to think through the frames offered to them, and journalists and media outlets can pick up some of the frames they receive.⁴⁹ *Frame sending* occurs when such SCFs are disseminated through reports.⁵⁰

Regarding terrorism, frame sending is particularly problematic because, with the rise of professional social media propaganda, symbolic images of terrorist

³⁹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 182.

⁴⁰ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 183; Waldmann, *Terrorismus*, 29–32.

⁴¹ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 205.

⁴² Winter, “Framing War,” 13.

⁴³ Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism*, 205.

⁴⁴ Gerhards et al., *Terrorismus im Fernsehen*, 13.

⁴⁵ William A. Gamson and Andre Modigliani, “The Changing Culture of Affirmative Action,” *Research in Political Sociology* 3 (1987): 143.

⁴⁶ Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm,” 52; Martin Rein and Donald Schon, “Reframing Policy Discourse,” in *The Argumentative Turn in Policy Analysis and Planning*, eds. Frank Fischer and John Forester (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 145–66.

⁴⁷ Dennis Chong and James N. Druckman, “Counterframing Effects,” *The Journal of Politics* 75, no. 1 (2013): 1–16, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022381612000837>.

⁴⁸ Jessica E. Boscarino, “Setting the Record Straight: Frame-contestation as an Advocacy Tactic,” *Policy Studies Journal* 44, no. 3 (2016): 280–308, <https://doi.org/10.1111/psj.12121>; Brüggemann, “Between Frame Setting and Frame Sending”; Michael Oswald, *Strategisches Framing* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2021), <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-36205-8>.

⁴⁹ Brewer, “Value Words and Lizard Brains”; Marx and Schumacher, “The Effect of Economic Change and Elite Framing on Support for Welfare State Retrenchment.”

⁵⁰ Brüggemann, “Between Frame Setting and Frame Sending.”

actions can be staged more easily than in the past, which helps terrorist organizations control framing. For example, consider Osama bin Laden's messages being sent on Al-Jazeera: when we see a video claiming responsibility for a terrorist act, we know that it is the terrorist leader speaking in the context of a terrorist agenda. In contrast, when receiving descriptions of ISIL based on the narratives and productions set by ISIL through news coverage, we do not know whether journalists took balancing measures. In addition, research has shown that ISIL sent messages strategically, portraying itself as a successful, powerful (or overpowering), and collective actor who posed a threat to everyone who did not adhere to its agenda. ISIL also legitimized violence through religious references and glorified its followers.⁵¹ The three most commonly communicated issues were power projection, violence, and religious messages.⁵² Specific SCFs included the collective action frame, the dissolution of boundaries frame, the heroization/glorification frame, and the overpowering frame.⁵³ The dissemination of such messages is problematic not only because the intent of terrorism is to spread fear and violence; ISIL's larger strategic goal was to polarize societies in the West by creating anger and distrust between Muslims and non-Muslims. The ISIL strategy could be described as erasure of the gray zone, and its messages were geared to serve this purpose.⁵⁴

Method

To answer the research questions, we conducted a qualitative content analysis of articles in German-language print and online media on the propaganda videos of ISIL. Qualitative frame analysis, as discussed by Löblich,⁵⁵ is category based and reconstructs frames using Entman's elements of problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and treatment recommendation.⁵⁶ A category-based qualitative approach provides the flexibility to reconstruct dominant coherent text patterns.⁵⁷ Entman's⁵⁸ approach has become one of the most popular frame study designs. However, there are no such analyses of the issue of terrorist communication and frame sending in German-speaking countries. Therefore, our study was an initial exploration of this issue.

Selection of Material

To obtain a comprehensive picture of how the media framed ISIL propaganda videos, we focused on the reports (including online articles) of *Süddeutsche Zeitung*

⁵¹ Yarchi, "ISIS's Media Strategy as Image Warfare," 61; Oswald and Johann, "Im Kampf für eine Gegenkultur," 305–8.

⁵² Yarchi, "ISIS's Media Strategy as Image Warfare," 64.

⁵³ Michael Oswald and Michael Johann, "Framing Terrorism. ISIL's Video Messages as a Strategy of Fear and Recruitment," in *The Visual Politics of War. Volume Two. Truth and Lies of Soft Power*, eds. Ibrahim Saleh and Thomas Knieper (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2018), 135–58.

⁵⁴ "The Extinction of the Grayzone," *Dabiq* 7 (2015): 54–66.

⁵⁵ Maria Löblich, "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse von Medienframes. Kategoriengeleitetes Vorgehen am Beispiel der Presseberichterstattung über den 12. Rundfunkänderungsstaatsvertrag" in *Framing als politischer Prozess. Beiträge zum Deutungskampf in der politischen Kommunikation*, ed. Frank Marcinkowski (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 63–76.

⁵⁶ Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," 52; Jörg Matthes, *Framing* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2014), 18; Jörg Matthes and Matthias Kohring, "Die empirische Erfassung von Medien-Frames," *Medien & Kommunikationswissenschaft* 52, no. 1 (2004): 56–75, <https://doi.org/10.5771/1615-634x-2004-1-56>.

⁵⁷ Löblich, "Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse von Medienframes," 67.

⁵⁸ Entman, "Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm."

(SZ), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ), *Die Welt*, *Tageszeitung* (taz), *Tagesspiegel*, *Handelsblatt*, *DIE ZEIT*, *Spiegel*, and *Focus*. With *DIE ZEIT Online*, *Spiegel Online*, and *BILD Online*, there are also online media included. *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ) (Switzerland) and *Kronen Zeitung* (Austria) were also included to complete the list of the most popular German-language newspapers. This combination of media sources means that the sample contained quality and tabloid media, daily and weekly editions, newspapers and magazines, and print and online media.

The timeline stretched between June 2014 and July 2016—the peak phase of the global fear caused by ISIL, its propaganda video releases, and the corresponding media attention.⁵⁹ We used a keyword search in the databases WISO Presse and LexisNexis as well as in the databases of individual media organizations (if available) to identify relevant articles. The search terms were inductively derived from the examined material on the basis of an initial manual search and were adapted step by step to generate the most relevant results for various search queries. Finally, the following search query was used: (“Islamic* State*” OR “IS” OR “ISIS” OR “ISIL”) AND (*video* OR *film*). The resulting article list was double-checked for relevant articles; thus, the dataset could be considered exhaustive. Articles in which videos were only mentioned incidentally were excluded from the analysis. Articles that appeared in both print and online versions were not counted twice. This was also the case for wire service items appearing in several offline and online outlets. In total, the sample comprised 156 relevant articles.

Operationalization

To reconstruct media frames, we used Entman’s frame elements⁶⁰ as deductively derived categories. This approach is designed to ensure the validity and objectivity of the analysis.⁶¹ These major categories were then inductively divided into analytical subcategories based on the characteristics of the examined articles. This dimension-reducing method not only allows one to define entire frames a priori but also facilitates the consideration of new individual frame elements.⁶² In addition, this procedure enables the reconstruction of more than a single frame in an article because frames are not, as in many other framing analyses, fixed at the article level but rather in relation to actors and topics.

We conducted the coding process in stages. First, framing categories were inductively created by two independent coders who went through the material. In the second stage, these manifold categories were reduced to the central categories of the code system. The final step consisted in deductively coding all text using the frame categories. Another independent group of two coders then went through the same coding procedure and arrived at roughly the same results concerning the dominant media frames, with only a minor variation in the number of frames. This process ensured that the analysts could identify any systematic errors hiding in the data.

⁵⁹ Stuart M. Bender, *Legacies of the Degraded Image in Violent Digital Media* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64459-2>; Mehdi Semati and Piotr M. Szipunar, “ISIS Beyond the Spectacle: Communication Media, Networked Publics, Terrorism,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 1–7, <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2018.1414751>.

⁶⁰ Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.”

⁶¹ Matthes, “Framing,” 42.

⁶² Löblich, “Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse von Medienframes,” 65–69; Matthes and Kohring, “Die empirische Erfassung von Medien-Frames,” 57–61.

Table 1. Operationalization of the Frame Elements

Frame Element	Categories	Subcategories
Problem definition	Actor	ISIL as a group (collective action), individual followers, converted Westerners, Western states
	Main theme	Violence and power, religion, recruitment, video production, glorification, territorial gains, distribution via social media, Western interests in the Middle East
Causal interpretation	Responsible actor	ISIL actor, Western states
	Responsible situation	Past in the Middle East, social order in targeted countries, oppression and social injustice, Western (social) media culture
Treatment recommendation	Attribution of competence	Resilient (Western) society, aimed caliphate
Evaluation	Required measures	Prevention, government intervention through (security/military) measures, measures by operators of (social) media
	Moral evaluation	Vulnerability and subjection of the West, debunking the propaganda strategy, condemnation of brutality
	Prognosis	Fight against or end of ISIL, establishment of a caliphate

The reliability requirements of qualitative content analysis in terms of the stability, reproducibility, and accuracy of the results⁶³ were met through iterative coding processes, detailed coding rules, and intensive coding training. Reliability was measured for all subcategories in the code system. The coders achieved moderate reliability in the subcategories “power and violence” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.67$), “social media as a propaganda platform” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.67$), and “condemnation of brutality” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.67$). Strong reliability⁶⁴ was achieved for the subcategories “ISIL as a group” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.86$), “converted Westerners” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.86$), “religion” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.86$), “recruitment” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.80$), “territorial gains” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.80$), “caliphate” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.80$), and “debunking the propaganda strategy” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.89$). The remaining subcategories of “ISIL actor” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 0.91$), “video production” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1.00$), “resilient society” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1.00$), and “fight against/end of ISIL” (Cohen’s $\kappa = 1.00$) were coded with (almost) perfect reliability.⁶⁵ Table 1 illustrates the operationalization of the frame elements based on the deductive–inductive category development.

Results

Dominant Media Frames

The aim of the first research question was to reconstruct dominant media frames. For this purpose, we interpreted the results of the analysis in terms of the interrelationships among the individual analytical categories. If two or more frame elements occurred together, we considered this to indicate a media frame.⁶⁶ The analysis revealed four dominant media frames (see fig. 1). In the following, we briefly describe these four frames.

⁶³ Klaus Krippendorff, *Content Analysis. An Introduction to Its Methodology* (London: Sage, 1980); Philipp Mayring, *Qualitative Inhaltsanalyse. Grundlagen und Techniken* (Weinheim: Beltz, 2015).

⁶⁴ Jacob Cohen, “A Coefficient of Agreement for Nominal Scales,” *Educational and Psychological Measurement* 20, no.1 (1960), 37–46, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001316446002000104>.

⁶⁵ Cohen, “A Coefficient of Agreement for Nominal Scales.”

⁶⁶ Entman, “Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm.”

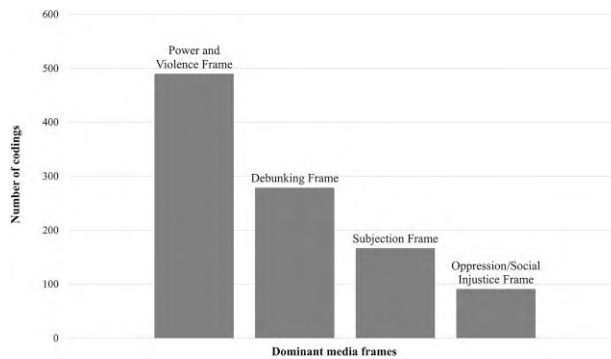


Figure 1. Dominant Media Frames Extracted From the Dataset (Source: Authors' Own Analysis)

Power and violence frame. The power and violence frame was a dominant frame in media coverage, with ISIL being portrayed as a violent and ruthless collective actor with enormous capabilities to defeat its enemies. This was also ISIL's dominant SCF. The spread of the frame regarding a highly violent actor can be illustrated with an excerpt of a *BILD Online* article⁶⁷ from 4 February 2015, in which the author addressed the murder of the royal Jordanian fighter pilot, Muath Al-Kasasbeh. Al-Kasasbeh was captured by ISIL after his aircraft crashed over the Syrian city of Raqqa in December 2014 and was executed in January 2015. The killing was recorded and used in a graphic video. Even though most media outlets refused to show the video, some articles described the event in detail (e.g., *BILD Online*, 4 February 2015), thus portraying the situation from the perspective set by ISIL through staging, cinematography, and the narrative plot. In many other examples, authors framed reports on ISIL by referring to its power and cruelty, territorial gains, torture, drownings, and beheadings. In other words, picking up ISIL framing meant sending the power and violence frame, which helped create the perception of a powerful and brutal force. It is striking how many authors depicted the terrorist organization in this way: the frame was coded 490 times and was, therefore, the most frequently used media frame.

Oppression/social injustice frame. Another frequent schema of interpretation was the oppression/social injustice frame, which depicted Western culture and its apparent societal order as problematic. This was part of ISIL's narrative and it relied heavily on the causal interpretation that in the West, Muslims, especially young people, are marginalized, oppressed, and excluded from society. Articles using this frame concluded that oppressed people who suffer social injustices can be easily influenced and are thus highly susceptible to ISIL's propaganda. An article in *FAZ* on 18 January 2015 serves as a good example.⁶⁸ The author stated that when hundreds of young Europeans brought up with Western standards become murderers and rapists in the name of ISIL, something must be wrong in Europe. The problem was defined to be that young Muslims in the West are not fully integrated and, therefore, choose to join ISIL and live together with people who share their beliefs. This interpretation also dominated the aforementioned

⁶⁷ Oswald and Johann, "Horror-Video der Terrormiliz. ISIS-Geisel im Käfig angezündet und lebendig verbrannt," *BILD Online* (Berlin), (February 2015, accessed 24 September, 2021, <https://www.bild.de/politik/ausland/isis/terrormiliz-isis-verbrennt-jordanischenpiloten-bei-lebendigem-leib-39619964.bild.html>)

⁶⁸ Paoli Guillaume, "Nächste Runde: Paradies," *Frankfurter Allgemeine Sonntagszeitung*, 18 January 2015.

FAZ article. The writer pointed out that the terrorists were not solely to blame when young people with few prospects left their home states to join ISIL. The journalist even concluded that ISIL's popularity rested on the existing deficiencies of the social system and that social grievances in the West produced the rise of ISIL. The oppression/social injustice frame was coded 91 times. It may have been the least frequent of the four dominant frames but it legitimized ISIL's claims of oppression.

Subjection frame. According to many media outlets, the mere online presence of ISIL and its propaganda posed a serious threat. Consequently, these outlets created the image of subjection because, in their interpretations, there was nothing that could be done against the spread of the videos, not even at the level of sanctioning online hosts. For instance, this was defined as a problem in an article published in SZ on 23 August 2014: "YouTube deleted the video within minutes, Twitter removed all the links, but it had already been copied and was newly linked" (our translation) (SZ, 23 August 2014).⁶⁹ In some articles, the authors went even further by stating that intelligence agencies were overwhelmed with the social media offensive, which implied that governments could not cope with the threat that the journalists and media outlets saw in these clips. Such articles depicted the authorities and the platform operators as powerless and unable to control the situation due to the high number of published and reposted posts. The subjection frame was coded 167 times and was part of ISIL's narrative of it being a powerful organization.

Debunking frame. Our analysis showed there was an attempt to debunk parts of ISIL's propaganda strategy. Debunking frames were used quite frequently (279 times) and were second only to the power and violence frame. Using the debunking frame, journalists and media outlets made their readers aware of the intentions behind ISIL's communication strategy by highlighting or countering specific frames of ISIL. For example, media actors pointed out logical errors in ISIL's ideology or showed that the actual power of and support for this terrorist organization in Iraq and Syria were much lower than what was portrayed in the videos. The attempts to counter ISIL's SCFs were accompanied by frame contestations in which the danger posed by the "fighters" was presented as overestimated. Such debunking efforts were aimed at contesting an important factor in ISIL's appeal: the glorification of its members. This SCF was widely countered by the media. Furthermore, ISIL's assertion that the fight against the oppression of the West is a holy duty for every Muslim received strong countering efforts, in which obvious misinterpretations, wrongful instrumentalization, and a lack of historical contextualization of the Qur'an were exposed. In addition, we detected some highlighting of ISIL framings, for example, on occasions when Surahs citations were presented out of context to radicalize young people (e.g., *Spiegel Online*, 27 April 2016).⁷⁰ In the debunking frame, the fact that ISIL's propaganda was directed at Western societies was defined as a problem, but unlike to the other dominant media frames, the debunking frame offered an evaluation that conveyed a completely different meaning than the terrorists' claims.

⁶⁹ Fromme Claudia, "Aus dem Arsenal des Terrors," *Süddeutsche Zeitung* (München), 23 August 2014.

⁷⁰ Langer Annette, "Ins Fleisch geschnittene Botschaften sind wirkungsvoller als der Koran," *Spiegel Online* (Hamburg), (April 2016). Accessed 24 September 2021, <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/gesellschaft/berlin-wissenschaftler-diskutierenreligion-und-gewalt-a-1089496.html>

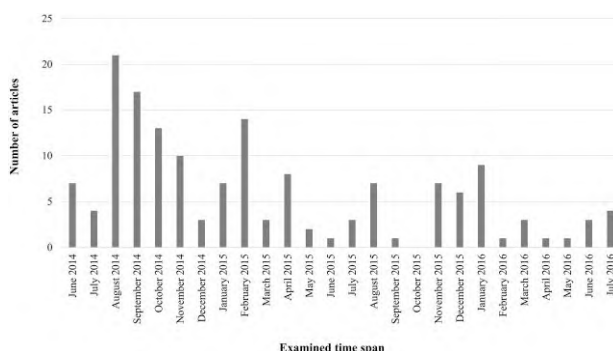


Figure 2. Number of Published Articles by Month (Source: Authors' Own Analysis)

Changes in Media Framing Over Time

Studies have suggested that changes in how media organizations frame terrorism are associated with terrorists' actions.⁷¹ Thus, if a propaganda strategy is based on fear spreading and attention seeking, then media coverage should increase after a new propaganda video is posted. On 20 August 2014, SZ published its first article about a video showing the execution of U.S. journalist James Foley (uploaded on 19 August).⁷² Within eight days, SZ also published two detailed analyses of this video: a commentary and a report. *Spiegel Online*, *BILD Online*, *taz*, *Tagesspiegel*, *FAZ*, *Die Welt*, *Spiegel*, *Handelsblatt*, and *NZZ* published a total of 21 articles (see [fig. 2](#)).

On 2 September 2014, SZ initiated another series of articles on a new ISIL propaganda video showing the execution of U.S. journalist Steven Sotloff. The newspaper published three more pieces about this video, *Spiegel Online* and *Tagesspiegel* published two each, and *BILD Online* published one. *DIE ZEIT* released three articles about the murders of Foley and Sotloff in September. In total, seventeen articles about the video were published that month. Although this was a high number, it was lower than that of the previous month. The third peak in coverage was reached with the release of the execution video of Jordanian pilot Muath Al-Kasasbeh. From 4 to 6 February 2015, the headlines read, for example, "Breach of Civilization" (*taz*, 6 February 2015) and "Just like a Glimpse of a KZ Gas Chamber" (our translations) (*Tagesspiegel*, 6 February 2015).⁷³ The choice of words indicated that the video content was disturbing, because the German media is particularly well aware of the significance of gas chambers and of the Holocaust itself. In addition to these three peaks, which attracted media attention, four more peaks were identified (April 2015, August 2015, November 2015, and January 2016).

These spikes in reporting were correlated with terrorists' actions. On 19 April, two ISIL videos were posted online showing the shooting and beheading of some thirty Ethiopian Christians in Libya. In August 2015, videos of the deaths of Tomislav Salopek and Khaled al-Asaad were released. Al-Asaad was accused of

⁷¹ Hoewe and Bowe, "Magic Words or Talking Point?"; Powell, "Framing Islam"; Isaac Speer, "OfficialSources, Dramatic Events, and Changes in Media Framing," *Journal of Communication* 67, no. 2 (2017):282–302, <https://doi.org/10.1111/jcom.12289>.

⁷² Anetzberger Martin, and Rietzschel Antonie. "Brutalstes Buhlen um Aufmerksamkeit."

⁷³ Mertins Silke, "Zivilisationsbruch," *Tageszeitung* (Berlin), 6 February, 2015; Huber Joachim, "Wie der Blick in eine KZ–Gaskammer," *Tagesspiegel* (Berlin), 6 February, 2015.

being a traitor and an infidel and was beheaded by ISIL. In November 2015, ISIL carried out attacks in Paris that left 137 people dead. On 3 January, a video was published showing the execution of five Syrian prisoners and the eulogization of nine of the twelve terrorists who perpetrated the November 2015 Paris attacks. In the footage, the perpetrators executed hostages and announced that more attacks similar to those in Paris would follow. In the media, discussions of propaganda videos flared up with every new video or attack.

Furthermore, the timeline shows that the use of the power and violence frame declined over time. From June 2014 to February 2015, this frame was clearly predominant, but its use fell off from March 2015 to July 2016. Meanwhile, frame contestation elements became more visible, along with the contextualization of ISIL's propaganda strategy and of its impact on Western society. In addition, the total number of articles dealing with ISIL's propaganda decreased within this time frame. In the period from June 2014 to February 2015, an average of eleven articles were published every month. From March 2015 to July 2016, this number decreased to four.

Regarding media outlets and their ways of reporting, the embedding of the power and violence frame was more balanced in media outlets focused on mixed analysis of factual data and subjective interpretation than in media outlets that endorsed an exclusively narrative style of reporting. Media outlets with highly varied forms of reporting (i.e., from factual, succinct reporting to opinion-based commentaries) were the largest group. The media outlets belonging to this group were as follows: *FAZ* (fifteen articles), *Der Spiegel* (nine articles), *Spiegel Online* (sixteen articles), *Tagesspiegel* (eleven articles), *SZ* (twenty-four articles), *NZZ* (twelve articles), and *Die Welt* (nineteen articles). For example, in an opinion piece in *NZZ*, a journalist pointed out ISIL's communicative goals: "The videos of his [Jihadi John's] killing ceremonies, which became regular from then on, had the obvious purpose of intimidating Western audiences and recruiting hateful young people to the terrorist movement" (our translation) (*NZZ*, 14 November 2015).⁷⁴ In an early report in the summer of 2014, *Der Spiegel* also considered ISIL's horrific social media communication in a broader sociopolitical context: "The Islamic State is a master of propaganda on social networks: the image it paints of itself in its videos and the stream of Twitter messages is different from reality."⁷⁵ They conceal the fact that they are not primarily fighting against the Alawite-Shiite regime in Syria but against other Sunnis" (our translation) (*Der Spiegel*, 7 July 2014).

The power and violence frame dominated the news articles that mainly contained narrative and analytical elements, for example, in longer reports and features. This could mainly be seen in articles in *DIE ZEIT* (ten articles), *DIE ZEIT Online* (six articles), *taz* (seven articles), *Handelsblatt* (two articles), *Focus* (three articles), and *BILD Online* (seventeen articles). For example, in a report, *DIE ZEIT* described in great detail what could be seen in the videos that ISIL was disseminating on social media and drew parallels to the atrocities committed during the Second World War: "But ISIL is real.⁷⁶ We see *livor mortis* on the tortured faces, the half-open mouths ... This was probably what Hannah Arendt

⁷⁴ Rüesch Andreas, "Schlag gegen die Terror-Propaganda," *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 14 November, 2015.

⁷⁵ Reuter Christoph, "'Stirb an deiner Wut'," *Spiegel* (Hamburg), 7 July, 2014.

⁷⁶ Finger Evelyn, "Schaut auf diese Bilder!," *DIE ZEIT* (Hamburg), 4 September, 2014.

meant by the ‘banality of evil’: the casualness with which the worst happens and yet life goes on. This little tweet hits us with the same realization as the photos from Auschwitz: what is happening here is abysmally evil” (our translation) (*DIE ZEIT*, 4 September 2014). Moreover, descriptions of ISIL’s power and violence could be found in some opinion pieces, such as a commentary in *Die Welt* that reflected on the powerlessness of the media in reporting on terrorist acts: “As a journalistic medium, one cannot escape this dynamic.⁷⁷ You contribute to the success of the IS by showing the pictures or even reporting on the deeds. Even if you are stunned and outraged when you describe the crimes as barbaric, you have already played along with the game imposed by ISIL and, *nolens volens*, accelerated the further dissemination of violent porn directed by the Islamists” (our translation) (*Die Welt*, 5 February 2015).

Discussion

The results show how the terrorist strategy of using the media as a communication tool plays out in the digital age. There was a spike in reporting every time a brutal act of ISIL became viral. This episodic framing centered on dramatic events shows that the media is eager to react to and publish reports on terrorist actions, setting its framing accordingly to ISIL’s SCF. Furthermore, of the four dominant media frames that were reconstructed in our analysis, the power and violence frame indicated that ISIL succeeded in its strategy of being heard from rather than heard about. In fact, power and violence were two major themes that recurred constantly in ISIL’s propaganda, whose purpose was to stage this organization as a superior and overwhelming force with fighters who could defeat entire armies and punish sinners. This SCF implied that ISIL would take revenge on their enemies with the utmost brutality.⁷⁸ It can be speculated that because it is the objective of terrorist groups to spread fear among those who do not share their ideologies or religious views, this is the perception that ISIL wanted to create.⁷⁹

By picking up this image and portraying ISIL through the power and violence frame, media outlets not only depicted ISIL as a powerful and violent organization but also potentially contributed to the perception that ISIL posed a threat to Western societies, particularly when attacks occurred, as was the case in Paris in 2015. The frame sending of propaganda material went so far that scenes from ISIL’s videos were, at times, vividly reproduced through writing. Consequently, recipients could see how violent this group was without ever having to watch any actual videos. Executions of Westerners served not only as a symbol of ISIL’s brutality; rather, the implicit message was that Western governments could not protect their citizens.⁸⁰ Therefore, reporting via this power and violence frame helped establish the image of a brutal and capable organization and undermine trust in Western governments, which apparently could not protect their citizens and defeat ISIL.

The spikes in reporting and the sending of the power and violence frame showed that the media worked in favor of terrorist strategies, albeit inadvertently. The media might have even played a crucial role in ISIL’s functional logic because, without

⁷⁷ Lehnartz Sascha, “Mord-Regie,” *Die Welt* (Hamburg), 5 February, 2015.

⁷⁸ Yarchi, “ISIS’s Media Strategy as Image Warfare,” 59, 64; Oswald and Johann, “Im Kampf für eine Gegenkultur”; Oswald and Johann, “Framing Terrorism.”

⁷⁹ Yarchi, “ISIS’s Media Strategy as Image Warfare,” 61, 64.

⁸⁰ Kelli Foy, “Framing Hostage Negotiations: Analysing the Discourse of the US Government and the Islamic State,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 8, no 3 (2015): 516–31, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17539153.2015.1091655>.

mass media reporting, most videos might have gone unnoticed by large parts of society. Such media complicity is a problem not only because it helps spread the fear of terrorism but media participation in terrorist logic may lead to increasingly violent acts to achieve increased attention.⁸¹ The brutality of the scripts increases from killings to beheadings to burning or drowning people in cages. Therefore, we can conclude that, similar to other terrorist actions, such as attacks, this digital communication strategy involves escalation to produce a shock effect and the desired media attention.⁸² However, this study does not fully answer the question of causal relationships between terrorists' and journalists' message-sending. For example, ISIL may have responded to the ways in which news organizations reported on its actions at specific times by changing its video messages to conform to press preferences, which would indicate an implicit process of mutual influence between terrorist and journalist message dissemination. This question of mutual influence could also be explained by the hybrid character of contemporary media events that accompany terrorist acts, which involves "a complex network of mass media, internet-based and mobile communication technologies, and ... creates relatively fluid social intensifications between and among different actors."⁸³ ISIL's acts were usually accompanied not only by legacy media coverage but also by broad resonance on social media. Following the idea of hybrid media events, the fluid social intensifications among terrorists, journalists, and amateur actors on social media can be expected to affect a message's environment, motive power, circulation, and acceleration, which may result in uncontrollable circulation and mutual influences.⁸⁴ Therefore, future research should delve deeper into the specific interactions among terrorists, media, and amateur reactions to provide a more holistic answer to the question of whether terrorist actors adapt to mass media's logic and/or vice versa.

However, we found that over time, violence-oriented episodic framing gave way to more contextualized thematic framing that countered terrorist narratives. Although this decline in the power and violence frame cannot be clearly attributed to a specific reason, it may be connected to the waxing and waning of ISIL's power and territorial control, as the group suffered military defeats and lost territory. The timeline established in our study seems to match these changes in framing. As a result, media outlets most likely found it easier to employ debunking framing, although decreasing public interest in ISIL's propaganda might also have been a factor, as the news value of ISIL's propaganda videos decreased. Finally, the waning of the power and violence frame might indicate a great awareness of how these messages/frames are sent out and spread across society. Therefore, there may have been a kind of journalistic learning curve that produced an increasing sensitivity to the communicative strategy of ISIL.

Although the power and violence frame seems to have been intended to provoke fear, the oppression/social injustice frame indicates the possibility of a greater strategic purpose to divide society. ISIL not only rejected the Western social order and its liberal values, it specifically wanted to create the image that Muslims in the West

⁸¹ Yarchi, "ISIS's Media Strategy as Image Warfare."

⁸² Derrick et al., "Ideological Rationality and Violence," 57.

⁸³ Johanna Sumiala, Katja Valaskivi, Minttu Tikka and Jukka Huhtamäki, *Hybrid Media Events: The Charlie Hebdo Attacks and the Global Circulation of Terrorist Violence* (Bingley: Emerald Publishing, 2018), 15, <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787148512>.

⁸⁴ Sumiala et al., "Hybrid Media Events."

were systematically oppressed and exposed to severe injustices. This storyline was often used in ISIL's propaganda videos.⁸⁵ ISIL "perceives and presents itself as a victim of Western oppression ... to encourage diaspora Muslims in Western countries to stand up against what they conceive to be a cultural and ideological attack."⁸⁶ In this scheme, the oppression/social injustice frame constituted the overarching strategic aim of ISIL's terrorism: ISIL strategists attempted to alienate Muslims from the Western societies in which they were living by building on existing cases of islamophobia.⁸⁷ Putting these kinds of messages out there is part of ISIL's erasure of the gray zone strategy, whose specific goal is to polarize societies in the West, thereby creating a clear dividing line between Muslims and non-Muslims. The gray zone consists of all Muslims who have not yet joined ISIL or who do not yet adhere to its ideology. ISIL strategists stated, "The Muslims in the West will quickly find themselves between one of two choices, they either apostatize and adopt the kufri religion ... or they perform hijrah to the Islamic State and thereby escape persecution from the crusader governments and citizens."⁸⁸ This strategy was intended to create a clear Manichean "friend or foe" dichotomy by disseminating the following message: you are either with us or against us. It also served to demonize specific Muslim in-groups and Westerners using religious framings.⁸⁹

Straight frame sending occurs when journalists and media outlets identify Western culture and social order as factors in ISIL recruitment. The problem definition according to which Muslims are marginalized, excluded, and oppressed in Western societies suggests that following ISIL and adopting its ideology is a logical outcome, which matches the solution offered by ISIL's framing.⁹⁰ It is likely that young Muslims who feel oppressed hold significant anger against the supposedly anti-Islamic society; therefore, oppression could, indeed, be a compelling reason for the radicalization of ISIL sympathizers living in the West. However, we must not lose track of the bigger picture: the oppression frame may not be problematic in the sense that ISIL sympathizers would get the idea of joining ISIL from reading newspapers. More important is the fact that this frame can create the impression that every Muslim is potentially capable of becoming an ISIL fighter or, even worse, a lone wolf.

The perception that every Muslim can potentially become a danger is part of the erasure of the gray zone strategy because this sentiment can produce mistrust of and skepticism toward Muslims in the West. Although there is no indication that this mechanism can serve ISIL's grand strategy and divide society, it is worrying that journalists and the media reproduce the oppression/social injustice frame instead of countering ISIL's attempt to polarize society. Therefore, this frame can be reconstructed to promote the idea that ISIL and its propaganda strategy can

⁸⁵ Barbie Zelizer, "Journalism's Deep Memory: Cold War Mindedness and Coverage of Islamic State," *International Journal of Communication* 10 (2016): 6060–89.

⁸⁶ Alexandra Herfroy-Mischler and Andrew Barr, "Jihadist Visual Communication Strategy: ISIL's Hostage Executions Video Production," *Visual Communication* 18, no. 4 (2019): 519–48, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357218803396>.

⁸⁷ Lydia Wilson, "Understanding the Appeal of ISIS," *New England Journal of Public Policy* 29, no. 1 (2017): 1–10.

⁸⁸ "The Extinction of the Grayzone," 62.

⁸⁹ Herfroy-Mischler and Barr, "Jihadist Visual Communication Strategy," 529, 534.

⁹⁰ Yarchi, "ISIS's Media Strategy as Image Warfare," 58–59; Herfroy-Mischler and Barr, "Jihadist Visual Communication Strategy," 534.

undermine the Western social order, as was stated, for instance, in an article published in *Spiegel* on 19 November 2015, which provided a specific example of a group of young German citizens joining the terrorist organization.⁹¹ The journalist explained this decision by the lack of opportunities for young people in Germany.

Another dominant media frame did not involve direct frame sending but likely produced an effect desired by ISIL: the subjection frame included the problem definition whereby the West is vulnerable to ISIL propaganda. This was interpreted as a threat by journalists because the terrorists' content was seen as highly contagious. It was assumed it could lead people to commit "lone wolf attacks" or join ISIL on its home soil. This supposed vulnerability also indicated that governments were powerless against the communication skills of modern terrorists. Therefore, this frame could amplify the perception of the power held by ISIL.⁹²

Indeed, ISIL's videos can appeal to some people and lead them to ISIL or motivate them to become lone wolves. However, if we consider that media reporting on terrorism is the real societal and political danger in this communication strategy,⁹³ we can state that the existence of these videos may not be the actual problem, because they are only available on fringe platforms—frankly, every source of violence and hate ideology is available there. Rather, it is the widespread reporting on the availability of such material that makes it a widely regarded topic. The articles conveyed the sense that Western states and their people were highly vulnerable and could not do much against the influence of ISIL, which could provoke feelings of impuissance. However, without the media buzz, which conveyed the idea that this propaganda is influential and cannot be stopped, the videos would probably not have gotten much of a notice from society at large because they would not have been omnipresent on popular Western internet platforms, or at least they would have been deleted immediately by the operators. Contrary to what some articles suggest, regular users usually do not come across these videos unless they are specifically searching for them.

Overall, in the sample of German, Austrian, and Swiss print and online news media, the three terrorist SCFs (power and violence frame, subjection frame, and oppression/social injustice frame) captured 72.8 percent of the frames reconstructed in the coverage of ISIL. However, journalists attempted to counter and debunk ISIL framings, which accounted for 27.1 percent of the cases (debunking frame). By debunking information to reveal ISIL's strategy, the journalists were setting countering or contesting frames. Frame contestation involves a counter-frame to openly contest the opposed interpretation, that is, to criticize or even attack it. Through contestations, actors attempt to discredit claims, policy ideas, or entire groups.⁹⁴ Approaching issues via a debunking frame contextualizes terrorists' strategies and may decrease their impact on recipients. This technique cannot be reduced to factual statements, such as highlighting that ISIL's power is exaggerated through staging; rather, authors relativize and sometimes even ridicule the dramatic self-portrayal of terrorists in their propaganda videos. For example, the label "computer kids" contests the glorification of fighters and "fallen warriors," an important part of the narrative in ISIL videos that stage terrorist fighters as

⁹¹ Baumgärtner Maik, Diehl Jörg, Knobbe Martin, et al., "Boxen im Dunkeln," *Spiegel* (Hamburg), 19 November, 2015.

⁹² Yarchi, "ISIS's Media Strategy as Image Warfare," 59, 64.

⁹³ Waldmann, *Terrorismus*.

⁹⁴ Boscarino, "Setting the Record Straight," 280.

“victorious, powerful, cruel, and just.”⁹⁵ Contesting such glorification is a way to undercut ISIL’s narrative; in this context, the debunking frame is especially important because it creates awareness of and relativizes the threat perception. This attempt to debunk terrorist propaganda was the second most used frame in the news articles. Normatively speaking, this sort of frame contestation should be the main media framing strategy when reporting on ISIL’s propaganda. The fact that the appearance of this frame increased over time suggests that the change in framing occurred not only due to contextual changes, such as the defeat of ISIL, but also to a learning curve in the media that involved debunking instead of sending the terrorists’ SCFs.

To analyze a framing strategy also means to look at the issues that are not sent. In this case, it is important to highlight that the analyzed articles did not pick up any religious framings. Other than to counter the legitimizations of violence based on beliefs and Qur’an excerpts, journalists and media outlets did not send any religious framings of the videos. This is remarkable because ISIL follows ideological leader messaging framed in terms of sacred, shared principles and beliefs.⁹⁶ Although there were frequent connections to religion in both the videos and the articles, compared with similar studies,⁹⁷ we could not reconstruct any dominant frame with the category of religion or its subcategory Islam as a primary frame element, even though ISIL aimed to link the idea of fighting against the West’s liberal value system with the religious duty of every Muslim.⁹⁸ The specific framing of Qur’an excerpts was designed to foster this belief and was meant to achieve the greater goal set forth in the erasure of the gray zone blueprint. This could mean that media outlets were very careful not to send ISIL’s frame regarding the inherent connection between jihad and Islam as a religion, thereby preventing an even stronger amplification of the message of Muslims versus non-Muslims. Despite the high frequency of religious references in the articles, they did not delve deeply into the issue and thus avoided supporting or sending these frames. In other words, the religious framings that ISIL often employed were not picked up, and journalists did not analyze the issue through these frames. However, the examined media outlets did not succeed in completely disconnecting terrorist acts from religion. News recipients were still exposed to denominational differences in terrorist messaging through media coverage. Because this was part of the strategic interest of ISIL,⁹⁹ the lack of counter-framing of the false narratives of ISIL could be considered a problem. However, the media did manage to avoid straight frame sending.

Conclusion

In this article, we showed that the examined media outlets often sent ISIL’s frames and discussed problems within the frames set by ISIL. Because this finding is a well-known framing effect, highlighting this matter is important to help avoid journalists and media outlets becoming part of terrorists’ strategies. Without the dissemination of the messages of violence, threat, danger, social injustice, and subjection, the messages in terrorist videos would only reach a fringe audience that

⁹⁵ Yarchi, “ISIS’s Media Strategy as Image Warfare,” 62.

⁹⁶ Derrick et al., “Ideological Rationality and Violence,” 57.

⁹⁷ Papacharissi and de Fatima Oliveira, “News Frames Terrorism”; von Sikorski et al., “The Islamic State in the News.”

⁹⁸ Oswald and Johann, “Im Kampf für eine Gegenkultur.”

⁹⁹ Oswald and Johann, “Im Kampf für eine Gegenkultur,” 306.

already condones or even welcomes this sort of fundamentalism. Although this is certainly a problem, it would not have the same impact on a society as do discussions of such violent propaganda videos. Reinforcing the narratives of ISIL could even produce the effect desired by this organization, namely, increased distrust toward Muslims. This would be the first step on the path to erase gray zones. ISIL's fear-based strategy intended for the public would probably not work if the media did not reproduce the terrorists' content or set the agenda according to the terrorists' frames. However, although most of the examined media outlets did not counter the terrorists' communication strategy in their coverage of ISIL's propaganda videos in the beginning, there is an indication of a change in media coverage over time. The reporting became more balanced, and the power and violence frame was abandoned, in some cases even contested, which suggests that ISIL's self-depiction as a mighty and powerful organization vanished with its defeat and territorial losses. However, this change could also indicate a learning curve among media actors, which resulted in not sending ISIL's SCFs. Media focus shifted from predominantly descriptive coverage of video content to reports that questioned and contextualized ISIL's strategy and the impact of its propaganda.

Here, we confirm that in the age of digital propaganda, major news outlets can spread terrorists' messages and play an unwitting role in terrorist logic. Compared with the "analog" form of terrorism, the difference is that contemporary terrorists' strategists are much more capable of setting the frames that they want to convey through the media. Therefore, our findings contribute to the research fields of terrorism theory and media coverage of terrorist content. We have to consider that terrorism goes beyond public attacks; today, a crucial part of the strategy involves media warfare. The findings also highlight the value of the frame-sending approach and confirm the thesis that people tend to keep the framing that is offered to them. Despite our study being limited to the analysis of print and online media in Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, as well as the analysis of text material, the developed deductive-inductive analytic approach is suitable for further investigations in this research field. It would be interesting to compare our results with coverage of ISIL at the international level and in terms of the real impact of terrorist frame sending. Furthermore, future studies on media framing could include visual content (e.g., images and television reports) in reporting on ISIL's propaganda videos. To summarize, this exploratory study constitutes a suitable starting point for further quantitative studies.