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# Latent Memories of Terror: Media Perceptions of the Woolwich Attack

Logan Stickel

*University College London*, [lstickel@hushmail.com](mailto:lstickel@hushmail.com)

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# Latent Memories of Terror: Media Perceptions of the Woolwich Attack

## **Author Biography**

This research was conducted while Logan Stickel was a graduate student at University College London. Currently, Logan is an All Hazard Dispatcher with the U.S. Forest Service, specializing in fire suppression and law enforcement operations in wildland environments. His full professional profile can be found on his personal website, <http://www.lstickel.com>, as well as his LinkedIn profile.

## **Abstract**

The Woolwich Attack of 2013 remains a distinctive case of lone wolf terrorism in terms of its hyper violent theatricalization and symbolic presentation of user-generated content. Although being described as having a paradigmic effect on the way terrorism is viewed and presented, its relationship to traditional media is under examined. To understand the perceptive impact, an exploratory qualitative research project was designed to gauge public views in terms of event presentation by media modality. Primary data was collected through interviews upon a theoretical sampling of fifteen Londoners and interpreted using a framework analysis technique. Results indicated that the main mode by which residents learned of the incident was not through social media, but through traditional media. Although there was significant discussion upon the video address created by the assailants during attack, this was generally only viewed after or in conjunction with journalistic interpretation. Definitions of terrorism were not seen to change as a direct result of the attack, it only reaffirming prior conceptions proffered in media cases, reducing the plausibility of its paradigmic effect. Despite the small sample, the early dawning of patterns and redundancies demonstrates some level of data saturation, verifying its probative value in terrorism and media research.

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## Introduction

The Woolwich Attack of 2013 has been said to be indicative of a new paradigm of hyper violence in lone wolf terrorism.<sup>1</sup> When assailants Michael Adebolajo and Micheal Adebowale murdered Fusilier Lee Rigby in the streets of East London, it not only was an intentional exhibition of malice, but also was designed to maximize its symbolic value through the use of social media and user-generated content.<sup>2</sup> In the infamous video address, Adebolajo explained in plain words with blood soaked hands that their actions were retribution for atrocities committed in Islamic lands by Western military forces, it “an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.”<sup>3</sup> No such act had been documented outside of conflict zones with such a direct communicative effect to date.

The corporeal realities of the Woolwich Attack succeeded in creating an environment of fear in its wake and leading to a series of emulative incidents, prompting serious inquiry into its reception on social media platforms.<sup>4</sup> Yet, the qualitative impact it had on Londoners in relation to traditional news media has never been fully explored.<sup>5</sup> This remains an important facet to this

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<sup>1</sup> Elisabetta Brighi, "The Mimetic Politics of Lone Wolf Terrorism," *Journal of International Political Theory* 11.1 (2015): 145-164, available at: <http://ipt.sagepub.com/content/11/1/145.short>; Raffaello Pantucci, "A Death in Woolwich: The Lone-Actor Terrorist Threat in the UK," *The RUSI Journal* 159.5 (2014): 22-30, available at: <https://rusi.org/publication/rusi-journal/death-woolwich-lone-actor-terrorist-threat-uk>.

<sup>2</sup> Imran Awan, "Islamophobia and Twitter: A Typology of Online Hate Against Muslims on Social Media," *Policy & Internet* 6.2 (2014): 133-150, available at: <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/1944-2866.POI364/abstract>; Pete Burnap, Matthew L. Williams, Luke Sloan, Omer Rana, William Housley, Adam Edwards, Vincent Knight, Rob Procter, and Alex Voss, "Tweeting the Terror: Modelling the Social Media Reaction to the Woolwich Terrorist Attack," *Social Network Analysis and Mining* 4.1 (2014): 1-14, available at: <http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13278-014-0206-4>.

<sup>3</sup> Ross McGarry, "Dismantling Woolwich: Terrorism 'Pure and Simple'? Ross McGarry Asks About the Relationship Between the 'Victim', the 'Criminal' and the State," *Criminal Justice Matters* 95.1 (2014): 28-29, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09627251.2014.902206>; Mike Cole, "Austerity/Immiseration Capitalism and Islamophobia—Or Twenty-First-Century Multicultural Socialism?" *Policy Futures in Education* 12.1 (2014): 79-92, available at: <http://pfe.sagepub.com/content/12/1/79.abstract>.

<sup>4</sup> Imran Awan and Mohammed Rahman, "Portrayal of Muslims Following the Murders of Lee Rigby in Woolwich and Mohammed Saleem in Birmingham: A Content Analysis of UK Newspapers," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 36.1 (2016): 16-31, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/13602004.2016.1147151?journalCode=cjmm20>; Primavera Fisogni, "Lone Wolves: Updating the Concept of Enemy in the Social Media Age," *International Journal of Cyber Warfare and Terrorism (IJCWT)* 4.1 (2014): 36-44, available at: <http://www.igi-global.com/article/lone-wolves/110981>.

<sup>5</sup> Stuart Allan, "Witnessing in Crisis: Photo-reportage of Terror Attacks in Boston and London," *Media, War & Conflict* (2014), available at:

purported paradigm shift in lone wolf terrorism portrayals as many similar attacks in London and other major urban centers have not had an equivalent symbolic presentation.<sup>6</sup> To address this discrepancy, this project was designed around the following main research question (RQ).

- RQ<sup>main</sup>: Did the user-generated media portrayal of the Woolwich Attack have a significant impact on altering Londoners' perceptions upon terrorism?

Further subsidiary questions were also generated concerning the consequential definitional views of terrorism and how the Woolwich Attack compares to other acts of media terror, especially in its terms of graphic messaging.<sup>7</sup>

- RQ<sup>sub</sup>: Were definitions of terrorism changed because of the Woolwich Attack?
- RQ<sup>sub</sup>: Do historical cases of terrorism influence interpretations of the Woolwich Attack?

Having no formal hypothetical assumptions, the methods to remain inductive and exploratory in scope, competing literature in terrorism and media research nevertheless shaped the project in a confirmatory manner. With comparative incidents of lone wolf terrorism routinely demonstrating that traditional media interpretations have the largest effect on determining public perceptions, methods were designed to directly investigate this general construct as relevant to the most notable confound of the attack, the graphic video address created by the assailants.<sup>8</sup>

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[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290289633\\_Witnessing\\_in\\_crisis\\_Photo-reportage\\_of\\_terror\\_attacks\\_in\\_Boston\\_and\\_London](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/290289633_Witnessing_in_crisis_Photo-reportage_of_terror_attacks_in_Boston_and_London); Tony McEnery, Mark McGlashan, and Robbie Love, "Press and Social Media Reaction to Ideologically Inspired Murder: The Case of Lee Rigby," *Discourse & Communication* (2015), available at: <http://dcm.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/02/03/1750481314568545>.

<sup>6</sup> Nacos, Brigitte, *Mass-mediated Terrorism: Mainstream and Digital Media in Terrorism and Counterterrorism* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2016).; Ramakrishna, Kumar, "From 'Old' to 'New' Terrorism: History, Current Trends and Future Prospects" in *The Handbook of Security* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2014), 159-181, available at: [http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-349-67284-4\\_8#page-1](http://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007%2F978-1-349-67284-4_8#page-1).

<sup>7</sup> Avraham Bleich, "A Longitudinal Study of Changes in Psychological Responses to Continuous Terrorism," *The Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences* 50.2 (2013), available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24225437>.; Jeffrey Kaplan, Heléne Lööw, and Leena Malkki, "Introduction to the Special Issue on Lone Wolf and Autonomous Cell Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26.1 (2014): 1-12, available at: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2014.854032>.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Evans and Simone Schuller, "Representing 'Terrorism': The Radicalisation of the May 2013 Woolwich Attack in British Press Reportage," *Journal of Language Aggression and Conflict* 3.1 (2015): 128-150, available at:

## Methods

### *Overview*

To maximize topical intimacy, researchers collected primary data upon a theoretical sampling of fifteen Londoners using semi-structured interviews lasting twenty minutes. The design of the question schedule and interview process elicited personalized accounts from participants related to the endemic media coverage of the Woolwich Attack in a progressive manner, minimizing initial subject suggestion to more accurately measure latent perceptions.

### *Theoretical Sampling*

Participants were required to have lived in London since the incident and be under the age 35. The parameters generated were based on the notions that long-term residents would have experiences from the attack and that younger populations are more active consumers of social media.<sup>9</sup> Functionally, sampling employed convenience and snowballing techniques within the theoretical framework, with initial participants selected by convenience and those subsequent by participant referral. All participants completed standard consent forms describing the nature of response usage and ensuring their anonymity.

### *Interview Schedule*

The interview schedule elicited generalized conceptions of terrorism and progressively built upon these within the context of the Woolwich Attack. The instrument included six sequential thematic categories.

- Introduction [Terrorism Definitions]
- Woolwich Attack Case Study

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<https://benjamins.com/#catalog/journals/jlac.3.1.06eva/details.>; Tony McEnery, Mark McGlashan, and Robbie Love. "Press and Social Media Reaction to Ideologically Inspired Murder: The Case of Lee Rigby," *Discourse & Communication* (2015), available at: <http://dcm.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/02/03/1750481314568545>.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Dennett and John Stillwell, "Population Turnover and Churn: Enhancing Understanding of Internal Migration in Britain Through Measures of Stability," *Population Trends* 134 (2008), available at: <http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1303150/>; Kristoffer Holt, Adam Shehata, Jesper Strömbäck, and Elisabet Ljungberg, "Age and the Effects of News Media Attention and Social Media Use on Political Interest and Participation: Do Social Media Function as Leveller?" *European Journal of Communication* 28.1 (2013): 19-34, available at: <http://ejc.sagepub.com/content/28/1/19.abstract>.

- Media Source
- Personal Ideology
- Perception of Risk
- Conclusion [Participant Handout]

Each category consisted of two sections of queries. Researchers mandated primary queries and selected secondary queries based on topical relevance and time affordances. While the design of the schedule gave researchers discretion to transcend primary queries to make and address relevant digressions, administration of the Participant Handout stimulus remained a structured and summative measure.

### *Participant Handout*

Given the time lapse between the Woolwich Attack and the interviews, the Participant Handout administered at the conclusion of the interview allowed participants to reflect on their post-event memories and perceptions. The document consisted of four factual sections.

- Assailants
- Victim
- Sequence of Events
- Common Media Images

Each section used an eclectic sourcing of journalistic articles, containing only demographic and ecological facts specific to the event. Assailant motivations and media interpretations were purposefully omitted.

### *Collection*

Over a one-month period each of the five assigned researchers apart of the data collection process conducted three independent interviews in private one-on-one settings to allow for audio recordings. Interviews were subsequently transcribed by the executing researcher with memorandums included for contextual and structural understanding.

### *Analysis*

Researchers compiled and analyzed transcripts using a multi-staged framework.<sup>10</sup> Given the semi-structured schedule and administration mode,

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<sup>10</sup> Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, "Using Thematic Analysis in Psychology," *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3.2 (2006): 77-101, available at: [http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735/2/thematic\\_analysis\\_revised](http://eprints.uwe.ac.uk/11735/2/thematic_analysis_revised); Nicola K. Gale, Gemma

query homogeneity was verified in the initial familiarization stage. Queries with low or sporadic coverage were deprioritized. Next, in vivo open coding focused on recurrent participant language, with the codes created subject to an axial coding protocol where the merging of in vivo codes with schedule themes ensured the accurate measurement and comparison of researched phenomena. Lastly, the thematic codes created to exemplify excerpts were plotted on a framework divided by thematic categories and anonymized participant cases for assessment.

### *Researcher Reflexivity*

The continual collaborative interchange between researchers during the design and data collection process had a profound effect on the analysis. Despite prior rehearsals and interview discussions that stressed collection parallelism, researchers nonetheless took full advantage of all explorative discretions afforded. Independent researcher topical fixations were evident in the disuse or truncation of optional secondary queries. Given the graphic, emotive nature of the topic, procedural and micro ethics additionally played a significant role in the progression through each interview, leading to natural contextual discrepancies in the transcripts produced. Many researchers routinely commented upon the unspoken emotionality of participants on the topic despite the time lapse since the attack, which was observable in the participant dialogues connoting degrees of Islamophobia.

## Results & Discussion

### *Themes in Perspective*

Thematic patterns emerged both complementary and contrasting to previous research. The main media source cited was not user-generated content, despite the theoretically relevant sample, and attack theatrics did not have a significant impact on perceptions of terrorism given the effects of historic terrorism cases. The following analytical categories summarize specific findings.

- Baseline Terrorism
- Media Source

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Heath, Elaine Cameron, Sabina Rashid, and Sabi Redwood, "Using the Framework Method for the Analysis of Qualitative Data in Multi-disciplinary Health Research," *BMC Medical Research Methodology* 13.1 (2013), available at: <https://bmcmedresmethodol.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/1471-2288-13-117>.

- Interpretations
- Terrorism Changes

### *Baseline Terrorism*

The core definition of terrorism consisted of abstracted negative emotions. Terrorist profiles reflected a lack physical universality, but were unified in their psychical motivations and causal mechanisms. The consensual view was that terrorism as portrayed in the media was associated with Islamic racial and religious groups. The inclusion of specific terrorism cases and organizations indicates a fixation upon notions of fundamental extremism, the headline terms *9/11*, *7/7*, *al-Qaida* and *ISIS* routinely mentioned.

“From what I understand, terrorists or terrorism has changed over time, it has evolved. I know in the past the main terrorist threat, for instance in the UK, was the IRA. And I guess right now the most predominate terrorist threat comes from radical Islamists.”<sup>11</sup>

“When people say terror you associate that with fear. When people say terrorism to me I think of 9/11 because that's the biggest terrorist attack that's happened in my lifetime. It's had the biggest impact on so many lives.”<sup>12</sup>

### *Media Source*

Traditional mainstream news was the predominate manner by which participants learned of the Woolwich Attack with the video address typically viewed only with or after journalistic interpretation. News media disseminated through online, television and print mediums had the greatest reputed informative impact. Only three participants gave significant attribution to social media, the platforms of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter reported as mutually exclusive sources with no cited information crossover.

Participants expressed difficulty in recollecting the context in which they accessed and utilized media information. Nonetheless, most were able to comment accurately upon factual aspects of the Woolwich Attack even prior to the administration of the Participant Handout, indicating a strong temporal media latency of the incident depiction. The mixed views on the objectivity of the media source referenced showed subjectivity was determined generally by the perceived level of sensationalism and

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<sup>11</sup> Study Participant 1, Interviewed by Logan Stickel, London, 2015.

<sup>12</sup> Study Participant 5, Interviewed by Joshua Guinea, London, 2015.



discriminatory concepts used in initial reports. The graphic nature of the incident affected the perception of subjectivity, but participants generally focused on stereotypical use of negative terrorism media constructs.

### *Interpretations*

There were varying interpretations of terrorism risk because of Woolwich and related media portrayals. London was not necessarily stated as more vulnerable to other UK cities despite the perceived omnipresent terrorism risk, but media portrayals were generally understood as invoking either conscious or unconscious Islamophobia, heightening vigilance upon these groups. There appeared to be a significant preoccupation not with lone wolf tactics, but with grander orchestrations of terrorism. Of all the named threats, *ISIS* was the most prominent.

### *Terrorism Changes*

Participants considered the Woolwich Attack an instance of terrorism, with some minor semantic exceptions. Universally seen as generating a pervading atmosphere of terror, this perceptual trend clearly originated in large part from the nature of the endemic media coverage of the attack and ascribed correlation to past attacks. In multiple interviews though, the individualized target led to the labeling of the attack as murder on comparative grounds to historic cases of terrorism such as *9/11* given the multiplicity of targets. In others, full classification was not proffered.

Despite the contested definition of Woolwich, macro conceptions of terrorism did not change as a result of the incident, prior conceptions being reaffirmed.

“Did it change my opinion? Well no, because I think after a while you become like desensitized. You start thinking this is what happens when we go and interfere with people's business for too long.”<sup>13</sup>

“It's only because of *ISIS*. In the news they've said that there will be attacks in London. That would be my fear. That's in the news at the moment.”<sup>14</sup>

Such statements, when compared to their initial baseline definitions appear accurate as there is little evidence for interviewee self-contradiction. This definition remained unchanged because the portrayal of Woolwich, whether

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<sup>13</sup> Study Participant 3, Interviewed by Logan Stickel, London, 2015.

<sup>14</sup> Study Participant 9, Interviewed by Bernardita Valdes, London, 2015.

or not seen as objective or subjective, paralleled stereotypical radical Islamic terrorism.

## Conclusions

The Woolwich Attack is undeniably a unique case in contemporary lone wolf terrorism. Adebolajo's video address was particularly revolutionary in its raw hyper violence theatrics and spawned numerous imitations. Its continued relevance illustrates the substantive weight the terrorist event had on the perceptive agendas of London residents. Although the exact perceptive effect of the media is difficult to generalize using retrograde measurement methods, the early dawning of patterns and redundancies demonstrates some level of data saturation. Counter to the implications denoted in numerous reports on the subject, this research indicates that the user-generated content from the attack did not have a preponderant informative effect nor did it permanently alter views on terrorism, suggesting that traditional media coverage of Islamic terrorism remains highly influential on public opinion. The continued development of social media in the interim nonetheless warrants further examination on the role of user-generated content in the dissemination and reception of terrorism.