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Between Information and Alarmism

Media, the Public, and Coverage of Islamist Attacks

The way reporters cover Islamist incidents and attacks influences the way the public perceives threats, affiliation, and responsibility. Media portrayals of violence and terrorism have a lasting impact on people's sense of security, political attitudes, and their perceptions of social groups. At the same time, the media fulfill their constitutionally guaranteed mandate to provide information freely, critically, and independently – a fundamental prerequisite for democratic oversight and public debate. Policymakers can create the conditions necessary for quality journalism, media literacy, and scientific evidence to support an open, resilient society. To that end, it is important to neither downplay Islamism nor to exaggerate it in an alarmist manner – both approaches undermine trust, weaken society's resilience, and fuel polarization.

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The attacks in Mannheim and Solingen in 2024, if nothing else, have made it clear just how closely the media, politics, and the public are interconnected when it comes to security-related events. Following the attacks, the focus was not only on Islamist extremism but also on debates regarding migration and asylum procedures. The same issues remained prominent in 2025 – a federal election year – and had an impact on migration policy.[1]

Online communication, visual symbolism, and real-time reporting place immense pressure on newsrooms to quickly make sense of complex events, often before verified facts become available. This speed can make it difficult to recognize important nuances. At the same time, social media amplifies narratives that fuel fear, anger, or polarization. Beyond the day-to-day news cycle, a fundamental question arises: How can accurate information be combined with social responsibility while also safeguarding media diversity and editorial independence?

Public expectations in this regard are ambivalent: On the one hand, there is a legitimate interest in information. On the other hand, concerns are growing because of the way information is presented and because the choice of words themselves shapes reality. Even subtle linguistic nuances can place information in a specific context; they can signal closeness or distance, suggest causes, or shift responsibility.[2]

How the Media shape Perception

Media coverage plays a key role in shaping how social issues are perceived, categorized, and evaluated. Research shows that the media do not necessarily influence what people think, but rather what they think about(agenda-setting).[3] For example, increased coverage of terrorism following the attacks of September 11, 2001, caused issues of domestic security and extremism to move to the forefront of public attention.[4]
Moreover, recurring images, terms, and emotional framing trigger certain associations and thus influence how events are evaluated (priming).[5] If, for example, media coverage fails to clearly distinguish between Islam as a religion and Islamism as a political ideology, this can lead to distorted perceptions and sweeping generalizations.[6]
The way information is contextualized – or "framed" – is also crucial: **Reporting that emphasizes individual cases draws attention to individual behavior, while thematic presentations make structural causes and political contexts more visible**.[7]

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These mechanisms interact to profoundly shape the public's interpretation of issues such as Islamism, security, and affiliation. Media coverage can have problematic side effects for specific groups. For example, intensive reporting on terrorism can significantly heighten hostility toward Muslims and refugees.[8] Furthermore, the way Islamist attacks are reported has the potential to trigger feelings of anger or fear – emotions that may fuel demands for political measures targeting Muslims indiscriminately.[9] At the same time, media also carry warnings against stigmatization in the context of reporting on Islamism.[10]

Differences in the Portrayal of Extremist Attacks and Incidents

German media coverage of Islamist attacks is dominated by a security-oriented perspective – unlike the coverage of far-right attacks. Islamist attacks are frequently linked to seemingly overarching themes such as Islam, migration, and integration. Far-right attacks, by contrast, are more often treated in individual terms and are less frequently placed within broader, comparable societal contexts. This asymmetry creates the impression that Islamism is a transnational security threat that must be addressed through stricter immigration policies. In contrast, when it comes to far-right incidents, the discussion focuses far more on (individual) radicalization than on broader societal issues.[11]

In the media coverage following the attacks in

Mannheim and Solingen, topics such as asylum law, deportation policy, and internal security took center stage, while questions regarding radicalization processes or prevention received significantly less attention. This focus contributes to framing migration and religion as security risks, even though empirical studies show that there is no monocausal link between migration and Islamist attacks.[12]

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Political actors can exploit these dynamics: In the wake of attacks, positions that link Islamism and migration gain increased traction.[13] At the same time, right-wing parties and the far right benefit from this dynamic by promoting simplistic cause-and-effect models linking Islam, migration, and violence.[14] **The danger is that fear may become a political resource**.

A Framework for Responsible Journalism

Freedom of the press and media pluralism are cornerstones of a democratic public sphere. Politics must not curtail this freedom, but it can establish a framework that promotes quality journalism and media literacy – for example, through research, continuing education, and preventive communication strategies.

This includes a policy of transparency on the part of government bodies, the promotion of independent research, and support for media literacy among the public. In addition, the so-called Press Code provides a sound framework for a self-regulation mechanism that calls for a sensitive approach to religion, violence, and those affected.[15]

Structural factors in journalism – such as time pressure, competition, and algorithmic amplification – encourage emotional headlines and often make it difficult to provide context. Terrorist actors, in turn, deliberately factor in this media response. Terrorism is therefore also described as a "communication strategy".[16] Journalists thus face the challenge of informing the public while avoiding playing into the calculations of extremist actors.

Between Public Perception and Political Pressure to Act

The media, public opinion, and political decisions are frequently interconnected in a way that is difficult to disentangle, and that also applies to media coverage of Islamist-related incidents.[17] Studies show, for instance, that the frequency and nature of media reports following attacks can influence calls for legislative initiatives regarding internal security and migration.[18]

One challenge lies in dealing with uncertainty and neither ignoring nor instrumentalizing media discourses. Reporting on attacks often begins under time pressure; misinterpretations are possible. **Policymakers must not become part of an alarmist discourse themselves**. Instead, they should communicate transparently and on the basis of evidence. This means putting information into context rather than exacerbating uncertainty in times of crisis. Clear timelines, verified interim updates, and openly acknowledged uncertainty help put events into proper perspective and avoid stirring up emotions even more. Furthermore, such practices strengthen trust in public communication.

The danger is that fear may become a political resource.

At the same time, the media need to be aware of their ethical responsibility. Journalists must reflect on the frames and emotions their reports evoke – and policymakers must support research and professional development that strengthens precisely this kind of reflection.

A Democratic Public Sphere Needs Quality and Trust

The media are more than just conveyors of information – they help shape public realities and opinions. Reporting on Islamist attacks influences

perceptions of threat and political demands.[19] Therefore, fact-based, context-oriented, and objective reporting is central to democratic processes. Such reporting clearly identifies threats, draws an analytical distinction between Islamism as an ideology and Islam as a religion, and avoids sweeping generalizations.[20]

Policymakers must create the structural conditions under which such standards can realistically be implemented: a framework for quality journalism, support for independent research on media impact, and programs that strengthen media literacy and critical thinking. Furthermore, state institutions must provide fact-based information to reinforce trust in both the media and public authorities. With regard to freedom of the press and diversity, political interference in editorial work must be ruled out; the focus must be on support rather than regulation.

Freedom of the press and social responsibility are interdependent. Only by maintaining a balance is it possible to consistently withstand the logic of terror – fear, oversimplification, and division. The media should neither downplay nor generalize Islamist violence. Instead of attributing such actions to religion, analyses of the causes and recruitment strategies as well as of methods of prevention are needed. The goal is a culture of discourse that allows for criticism without making sweeping condemnations and that identifies dangers without dividing society.

Recommendations

Targeted political and structural measures are needed to promote responsible and fact-based journalism that strengthens democracy:

1: Media and political communication surrounding events such as terrorist attacks should be tracked and analyzed through **systematic monitoring**. The results can be incorporated into **evidence-based guidelines for (government) crisis communication** and used to inform prevention and integration strategies. To ensure that contextual information is made available quickly and reliably, communication channels between government agencies, researchers, and newsrooms should be improved.

2: **The relationship between media impact, radicalization, and trust should be the focus of ongoing interdisciplinary research**. The findings should be made available – for instance, in the form of supplementary materials – for use in areas such as journalist training, professional development for practitioners, and media education curricula.

3: In **youth education, critical media literacy, the ability to engage in dialogue and to cope with disinformation, and discourse skills** should be strengthened. Suitable focus topics include developing nuanced approaches to sensitive topics and understanding the effects of stereotypical portrayals. This can be achieved, for example, by expanding the school curriculum at state level or through programs offered by civil society organizations for both in-school and extracurricular education. Establishing regional networks between schools, media organizations, and prevention agencies is also a promising approach.

4: Independent journalism requires sustainable support. A diverse and pluralistic media landscape is not a disadvantage but a strength of democracy. Different editorial approaches and interpretations foster nuanced reporting and ensure a broad range of information. Especially when dealing with sensitive topics or terrorist attacks, such diversity helps counteract partiality and distortions.

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BAG RelEx stands for the German Council on Preventing Extremism (Bundesarbeitsgemeinschaft religiös begründeter Extremismus e. V.). We are a non-profit organization established in November 2016 with the aim of creating a platform for networking, professional exchange, content development, and advocacy for civil society actors in the field of democracy promotion and prevention of religiously motivated extremism. These objectives remain the foundation of our work today. Currently, our primary focus is on preventing Islamist extremism.

As an umbrella organization for around 40 member organizations across Germany, we represent a diverse range of approaches and methods, reflecting the extensive experience within this field.

We see ourselves as a platform for civil society actors and as an interface between civil society, politics, media, and the public.

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