

**THE IMPACT OF TRUST IN THE MEDIA
ON TERRORISM AS THE COUNTRY'S MAJOR CONCERN
CONTROLLING FOR EDUCATION LEVEL**

Aubrey Leigh Grant, Grey Montgomery Alphin, Pamela Renée Lawrence
Department of Public & International Affairs
University of North Carolina Wilmington

Submitted in partial fulfillment of course requirements for
PLS 401, Senior Seminar in Political Science

27 April 2009

INTRODUCTION

Statement of the Problem

Mass media is a mode of communications that almost everyone has access to in the United States. For some, this mode is their only ability to be tied to national and international events. When media plays a role in peoples' perceptions of international and national events, this may dictate how they perceive the problems facing the country. For others, education plays a role in the ability of the media to influence them. After the September 11th, 2001 terrorist attacks, terrorism became a major concern for the country as well as a focal point of the media. This study will address three questions. The first question, is there a majority of citizens that believe terrorism is the most important problem facing the country? The second question, would there be a majority among us who are most trusting or least trusting in the media, with regards to terrorism? The third question, would there be a majority among the different education levels, with respect to trust in media and terrorism?

Literature Review and Hypotheses

Univariate hypothesis

With the invasion on Iraq in mid-2003, foreign conflicts and threats became a main focus of the American public. With American troops involved in a foreign conflict, the idea of terrorism became a more important concern to most Americans. The USA Today reported in September of 2003, 70% of Americans believed Saddam Hussein was involved with the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks. With this belief, the United States' "war on terror" in Iraq was at the forefront of most Americans' minds. In 2003, the association between terrorism and the war in Iraq were major concerns for most Americans. In a 2004 Gallup Poll, when questioned about the possibility of future terrorism, 42% of people responded they worried a great deal and 28% worried a fair amount. Three years after the September 11 attacks, the American public continued to worry about future terrorism. This poll reiterates the magnitude of the impact of the terrorist attacks on the American psyche, as well as future action being taken to prevent attacks.

In July of 2004, *The 9/11 Commission Report* was released documenting detailed insight into the 9/11 attacks turning people's focus on foreign conflicts. *The 9/11 Commission Report* not only provided detailed insight into the attacks, but also information to help guard against future attacks. This document pinpointed specific ways that our security measures were infiltrated, and this information cast doubt on future protection. Security was a major issue in the 2004 election, and terrorism was still a major topic of discussion.

A 2003 Gallup Poll stated that 59% of the respondents reported terrorism as the major concern in the country, while in 2004, 49% still thought terrorism was the most important issue. Since the Prysby & Scavo findings were taken in 2003 before the election, and in 2004 in exit polling, it is logical that a majority of the respondents would still agree that terrorism was the most important problem facing the country.

H1: a majority, but not a consensus, of people will believe terrorism as the greatest concern.

Bivariate hypothesis.

Of the main media outlets including newspapers, the internet, magazines and talk radio, news received from television is the most highly trusted. A study performed by the BBC Media Center Poll using 2005 information, argued that television was still the most highly trusted media source with an 82% trust rate. News stories concerning terrorism and Iraq were quite common in 2004. However, it is important to note that these two stories are not mutually exclusive from each other. Stories reporting on Iraq often have elements of terrorism woven throughout them, such as reports of suicide bombings or the search for links between Al Qaeda and Saddam Hussein. The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) study showed that Iraq had the most televised media coverage with 2,567 stories, followed by economy/business (domestic issues) with 1,108 stories, then terrorism with 917 stories, and crime (domestic issue) with 691 stories. Additionally, MSNBC reported in December 2004 that the top five stories voted by the Associated Press were the US election; Iraq; Florida Hurricane (domestic issue); Abu Ghraib scandal (foreign issue); Sept 11th Commission Report (terrorism).

H2: those with a high trust in the media are more likely than those with a low trust to identify terrorism as the greatest concern.

Multivariate hypothesis.

Through schools students are taught critical and analytical skills. With advancements in education, individuals are given less teacher led activities and more individual based work. The nature of the movement away from teacher led to student orientated advances the critical and analytical abilities of individuals. With increasing levels of education peoples' analytical and critical skills become more advanced, decreasing the role of media on their perception of terrorism as the country's major concern.

A Gallup Poll reports that between 1997 and 2003, the overall trust in the media was fifty-four percent. The poll distinguished between the different levels of education and the percent of trust in the media. Overwhelmingly, sixty-four percent of individuals with a "high school diploma or less" trusted the media. The trust percentage decreased for those with "some college" to forty-nine percent. By post-graduate, only forty-four percent of individuals trusted the media. This poll shows how trust in the media is affected by education; with advancements in education there is a decline in trust in the media.

In the 2004 election, the group with the most trust in the media and least education will most likely have a majority view of terrorism as the greatest concern. From this hypothesis it can be predicted that in the "high school diploma or less" subgroup, the bivariate relationship will be stronger than in the total population. Whereas, in the "some college" subgroup, the bivariate relationship will be the same as the total population; and in the "college degree or more" subgroup, the bivariate relationship will be weaker than in the total population. The "high school diploma or less" subgroup will have the strongest trust in the media, like predicted in the Gallup Poll, because the analytical and critical skills of these individuals are not as advanced as the skills of the "some college" and "college degree or more." With the furthering of education and advancement of the critical and analytical skills, via educational institutions, the impact of trust in media on terrorism as the major concern will weaken. This weakening will be noted in the "some college" and "college degree or more" subgroups.

H3: controlling for education does change the impact of trust in the media on terrorism as the major concern; the strength of the bivariate will have an inverse relationship with education.

METHODS

Data Definition

In order to run the test for the first research question we used variable V060 from *Prysbly & Scavo*, which asked; what do you think is the most important problem facing this country? In order to get an even distribution we recoded the variable into three categories. The first category was "terrorism," followed by "Iraq and other foreign or defense issues," and finally "the economy and other domestic issues." In our bivariate table we introduced variable V033; how much of the time do you think you can trust the media to report the news fairly? This variable was also recoded into two categories; "most or all the time" and "some or never." Our control variable was V148; what is the highest grade of school you have completed? This variable was recoded into three categories; "high school diploma or less," "some college," and "college degree or more."

Data Selection

The data for the research analysis is taken from a 2004 National Election Study performed by the Center for Political Research at the University of Michigan. People were interviewed before and after the 2004 elections. The respondents were drawn from 150,000,000 even though only 1,066 were used; the error of margin is within +/- 3.1%, and 95% confidence level. Of this sampling only a portion of the information was available for our educational research. The data used was gathered through stratified probability sampling. The country is stratified into regions, and a proportionate number of people are drawn randomly from each region. Then there is a drawing from the sample from the substrata based on the region's population. The data set is also weighted to be a more demographic representation of the population.

Data Analysis

In the research conducted, the tau-b is implemented to test the strength of the statistical association of the variables. If the tau-b is less than +/- 0.10 then a weak relationship is indicated. A moderate relationship will be indicated by a tau-b between +/-0.10 and 0.25. A strong relationship exists if the tau-b is greater than +/- 0.25. The chi-square will be utilized to determine the statistical significance between the variables based on the probability of the random-sampling error. If the chi-square is less than 0.05, the relationship is statistically significant. If the chi-square is equal to or greater than 0.05, the relationship is not statistically significant.

FINDINGS

Test of the Univariate Hypothesis

A majority, but not a consensus, of people will believe terrorism is the most important issue facing the country is not observed in the table; rather it is contradicted by the sample data in Table 1. The pattern predicted by H₁ is not observed in the sample data because 42.9% believe the most important issue to be terrorism, and 29.3% believed the most important issue to be Iraq and other foreign or defense issues, followed by the economy and other domestic issues at 27.8%. The pattern observed was statistically significant, but with a random-sampling error margin for the sample size being $\pm 3\%$, terrorism would still not have a majority of people agreeing that it is the most important issue.

TABLE 1:

FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION FOR THE MOST IMPORTANT PROBLEM FACING THE COUNTRY

Problems Facing the Country

What do you think is the most important problem facing the country?

Cells contain:

-Column percent

-Weighted N

Distribution

Problems Facing the Country

1: Terrorism	42.9 443
2: Iraq and other foreign or defense issues	29.3 303
3: Economy and other domestic issues	27.8 287
COL TOTAL	100.0 1,034

Random-sampling error margin = + 3.0%

Test of the Bivariate Hypothesis

Our hypothesis, those with a high trust in the media are more likely than those with a low trust to identify terrorism as the greatest concern, was not supported by the sample data in Table 2. The pattern predicted by H₂ is not observed in the sample data because terrorism was not the majority concern. Additionally, the tau-b is .03 which indicates that the relationship is also weak. However, this sample finding is not statistically significant. The chi-square probability of random-sampling error is not less than 0.05 (it is 0.25)

**TABLE 2:
CROSSTABULATION OF THE MAJOR CONCERN IN THE COUNTRY
BY TRUST IN THE MEDIA**

Problems Facing the Country by Trust in the Media				
		Trust in the Media		ROW TOTAL
		1 Most or all of the time	2 Some or never	
Cells contain:				
-Column percent				
-Weighted N				
Problems Facing the Country	1: Terrorism	43.7 158	42.6 285	43.0 443
	2: Iraq and other foreign or defense issues	31.6 114	28.1 189	29.3 303
	3: Economy and other domestic issues	24.7 90	29.3 196	27.7 286
	COL TOTAL	100.0 362	100.0 670	100.0 1,032

Summary Statistics

Tau-b = 0.03
Chi-square probability = 0.25

Test of Multivariate Hypothesis

H₃ (controlling for education does change the impact of trust in the media on terrorism as the major concern; the strength of the bivariate will have an inverse relationship with education) is not supported by the sample data. The tau-B indicates the weak relationship between the level of education and the bivariate relationship (major concerns facing the United States and trust in the media). The strength of the bivariate relationship did change as predicted in the partial-table subgroups, however, the change was not statistically significant. The tau-B was strongest (.06) within non-college, weaker within (.05) some college, and weakest (-.03) within bachelors degree or more.

Although the statistical significance of the bivariate relationship did change in the partial-table subgroups, the results do not become statistically significant. In the first subgroup, “high school diploma or less,” the chi-square (.18) is weak. The chi-square becomes weaker with the some college (.66) and bachelors degree (.77) or more subgroup charts. The weak chi-squares determine the research to be statistically not significant.

On the row totals, with advancements in education there is an increase in those who view terrorism as the major concern facing the United States. Only 38.3% of individuals with “high school diploma or less” viewed terrorism as the major concern facing the United States; in contrast, individuals with some college viewed terrorism as major concern by 45.4 % and those with a college degree viewed terrorism as the dominant concern by 48%. By running an analysis on the impact of education levels on terrorism as the major concern facing the United States the significance of education and terrorism as the major concern can be found. Although the table is statistically significant, it had a weak relationship; the tau-B was .05, showing a weak relationship but the chi-square was .01 showing a statistical significance.

**TABLE 3 (a, b and c):
CROSSTABULATION OF THE MAJOR CONCERN IN THE COUNTRY
BY TRUST IN THE MEDIA
CONTROLLING FOR EDUCATION LEVEL**

TABLE 3A

Problems Facing the Country by Trust in the Media (High School Diploma or Less)				
		Trust in the Media		ROW TOTAL
		1 Most or all of the time	2 Some or never	
Problems Facing the Country	1: Terrorism	39.7 68	37.4 109	38.3 177
	2: Iraq and other foreign or defense issues	37.9 65	31.7 92	34.0 157
	3: Economy and other domestic issues	22.4 39	30.9 90	27.8 129
	COL TOTAL	100.0 172	100.0 291	100.0 463

Summary Statistics

Tau-b = .06
Chi-square probability = .18

TABLE 3B

**Problems Facing the Country by Trust in the Media
(Some College)**

		Trust in the Media		ROW TOTAL
		1 Most or all of the time	2 Some or never	
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N				
Problems Facing the Country	1: Terrorism	48.9 45	44.0 91	45.5 136
	2: Iraq and other foreign or defense issues	27.4 25	28.4 59	28.1 84
	3: Economy and other domestic issues	23.7 22	27.6 57	26.4 79
	COL TOTAL	100.0 92	100.0 207	100.0 299

Summary Statistics

Tau-b = .05
Chi-square probability = .66

TABLE 3C

**Problems Facing the Country by Trust in the Media
(College Degree or More)**

		Trust in the Media		ROW TOTAL
		1 Most or all of the time	2 Some or never	
Cells contain: -Column percent -Weighted N				
Problems Facing the Country	1: Terrorism	45.7 45	49.6 86	48.2 130
	2: Iraq and other foreign or defense issues	24.5 24	21.9 38	22.8 62
	3: Economy and other domestic issues	29.8 29	28.5 49	29.0 78
	COL TOTAL	100.0 98	100.0 172	100.0 270

Summary Statistics

Tau-b = -.03
Chi-square probability = .77

IMPLICATIONS

Substantive Conclusions

Terrorism remains the single highest problem facing the country, regardless of education level or trust in the media. This suggests that the fear of terrorism was still a major concern for voters in the 2004 election. Although other issues, such as cancer and automobile wrecks, cause more deaths annually than terrorist attacks in the United States, terrorism still remains to be a key issue for the American citizens. Because the 9/11 attacks were seen all over the world by the media and the acts of terrorism were seen by everyone in their homes, the magnitude of the attacks seemed much greater than they were. People are more aware of the deaths from these attacks, and still believe the threat level to be high. Even though a majority does not agree it is the greatest concern in the country, it still received the highest percentage of votes, making it an important issue.

As recent as 2006, Americans still had a greater trust in the government (67%) rather than the media (59%) (BBC/Reuters/Media Center Poll). The trust in the government may play a more vital role in the determination of the major concerns facing the United States as perceived by citizens. Therefore the affects of the government's alerts, language, and actions may have a heavy influence on people's beliefs.

Methodological Conclusions

Terrorism was the single most important concern, regardless of trust in the media. This concern could be due to the nature of the 9/11 attacks, the terrorist alert system, and their implications on the public. The ability of outside non-state actors to penetrate the United States' borders and to carry out terrorist attacks on the "homeland," exhibiting the vulnerability and lack of security in the United States may have placed the terrorist attacks as a key issue with Americans. Furthering this impact was the ability of the mass media to capture footage of the terrorist attacks. This footage combined with the overwhelming stories broadcasted daily by the mass media kept the attacks on the forefront of people thoughts. More research should be done to investigate whether the nature of the attacks and the responses caused terrorism to remain the single largest concern.

With 67% of American citizens having a greater trust in the government, terrorism as the most important issue facing Americans may be associated with the actions of the government. The presidential election of 2004 may have increased the attempts by the incumbent administration to make terrorism a focal issue. In that year, President Bush was seen as being tougher on terrorism than John Kerry. President Bush was reelected but the race remained close throughout the entire campaign. Bush's perceived toughness on terrorism and the importance of the issue in the country may have aided him in reelection. However, more research needs to be performed.

As time goes by, the concern of terrorism may decrease as apathy increases and the death toll is put into context. For example, the death toll from the 2005 Tsunami that hit south Asia approached nearly 250,000 people. This is a much more significant number than the death toll of the 9/11 attacks. When events like these are compared, putting the death toll into perspective may decrease the impact of the 9/11 attacks.

REFERENCES

- American National Election Studies*. 2005. "How Much of the Time Trust in Federal Government: 1958-2004." < http://www.electionstudies.org/nesguide/graphs/g5a_1_2.htm > accessed, 04/02/09.
- Bolce, Louis, De Maio, Gerald., and Douglas Muzzio. 2001. "Dial-in democracy: Talk radio and the 1994 election." *Political Science Quarterly* 111: 457-472.
- Braithwaite, Valerie A., and Margaret Levi. 1998. *Trust & Governance*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.
- Holbert, R. Lance. 2004. "Legitimacy Political Talk Radio, Perceived Fairness, and the Establishment of President George W. Bush's Political Legitimacy." *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* 9: 12-27.
- Hollander, Barry A. 1997. "Fuel to the Fire: Talk Radio and the Gamson Hypothesis." *Political Communication* 14: 355-369.
- Madison, James. 1788, February 6. "The Federalist No. 51: The Structure of the Government Must Furnish the Proper Checks and Balances Between the Different Departments." *Independent Journal*.
- "Media Monitor: 2004 Year in Review." 2004. Center for Media and Public Affairs. 1 (19). Online. www.cmpa.com/files/media_monitor/05janfeb.pdf.
- "Media More Trusted Than Governments-Poll. BBC. 3 May 2006. Online. www.globescan.com/news_archives/bbcreut.html.
- Miller, Arthur H. 1974. "Rejoinder to 'Comment' by Jack Citrin: Political discontent or ritualism." *American Political Science Review* 68: 989-1001.
- Pfau, Michael, Moy, Patricia, Holbert, R. Lance, Szabo, Erin A., Lin, Wei-Kuo, and Weiwu Zhang. 1998. "The Influence of *Political Talk Radio* on Confidence in Democratic Institutions." *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 75: 730-745.
- "Poll: 70% believe Saddam, 9-11 Link." USA Today. Online Edition. 9 September 2003. Online. March 20, 2009. http://www.usatoday.com/news/washington/2003-09-06-poll-iraq_x.htm.
- Prysby, Charles, Carmine Scavo, American Political Science Association, and Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research. *SETUPS: Voting Behavior: The 2004 Election [Web site]*. Greensboro, NC: Charles Prysby, University of North Carolina/Greenville, NC: Carmine Scavo, East Carolina University/Washington, DC: American Political Science Association/Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [producers], 2005. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2005. < <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/SETUPS/frame01.html> >
- Shively, W. Phillips. 2008. *Power & Choice: An Introduction to Political Science*. 11e. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- "Terrorism." Gallup Poll 2004. 5 April 2004. Polling the Nations. Online. www.0-poll.orpub.com.uncclc.coast.uncwil.edu/search.php. 20 March 2009.
- The Gallup Poll. Alec Gallup, George Horace Gallup, Frank Newport, Gallup Organization. Published by Rowman & Littlefield, 2007. http://books.google.com/books?id=WOug0pzW6_IC&printsec=frontcover
- "US election voted top news story of 2004". MSNBC. 21 Dec 2004. Online. www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6740860. 4 April 2009.