

What's Love Got To Do With It? Framing 'JihadJane' in the US Press

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the US press coverage accorded to female terrorist plotter, Colleen LaRose, with that of two male terrorist plotters in order to test whether assertions in the academic literature regarding media treatment of women terrorists stand up to empirical scrutiny. The authors employed TextSTAT software to generate frequency counts of all words contained in 150 newspaper reports on their three subjects and then slotted relevant terms into categories fitting the commonest female terrorist frames, as identified by Nacos's article in *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism* (2005). The authors' findings confirm that women involved in terrorism receive significantly more press coverage and are framed vastly differently in the US press than their male counterparts.

Keywords: female, framing, gender, jihadi, Colleen LaRose, newspapers, press, terrorism, women

Introduction

This article analyses US press reports on a woman and two men arrested in the US in 2009 and 2010 for their parts in three separate jihadi terrorist plots. The female plotter is widely known as 'JihadJane', which was an online pseudonym for Colleen LaRose, an American woman charged with four terrorism-related offences and taken into custody by US law enforcement at Philadelphia International Airport on her return from Europe in October 2009 (Shiffman, 2011).[1] LaRose is accused of using the internet to recruit individuals for the purpose of engaging in violent jihad, to include the murder of Swedish cartoonist Lars Vilks. LaRose pleaded not guilty to all four charges at a hearing in March 2010, but entered a subsequent guilty plea in March 2011; she remains in federal custody pending sentencing. The male plotters discussed in this article are Farooque Ahmed and Daniel Patrick Boyd. Ahmed conspired with people whom he thought were al Qaeda operatives to bomb metro stations in the Washington DC area. Arrested in October 2010 on three terrorism-related charges, Ahmed was sentenced in April 2011 to 23 years' imprisonment after pleading guilty to charges of attempting to provide material support to a terrorist organization and collecting information to assist in planning a terrorist attack on a transit facility (Hedgpeth, 2011). Daniel Patrick Boyd, also known as Saifullah, was arrested in July 2009 on terrorism-related charges stemming from his having trained for and planned attacks on targets outside the US. Having entered a guilty plea in February 2011, Boyd's trial is ongoing at the time of writing.

The purpose of this article is to compare and contrast the press coverage accorded to the female plotter, LaRose, with those of the male plotters in order to test whether assertions in the academic literature regarding media treatment of women terrorists stand up to empirical scrutiny. The article is composed of four sections. We begin by reviewing previous research on the interrelationship between women, terrorism and the media. Section two details our methodology, including case selection decisions. The article's third section is concerned with the amount of media coverage accorded

to LaRose versus her male counterparts. Section four is the article's longest section and contains our analysis of LaRose's press framing as compared to that of Ahmed and Boyd. Our findings confirm that women involved in terrorism receive significantly more press coverage and are framed vastly differently in the US press than their male counterparts.

Research on women, terrorism, and media

There is a large body of scholarly work exploring the intersections of terrorism and media dating back to the early 1970s. The bulk of this research treats the traditional mass media – newspapers and television – and their coverage of terrorism perpetrated in or against Western countries. A miniscule amount of this research is concerned with women, media and terrorism. In an article reviewing research on female terrorism conducted between 1983 and 2006, Jacques and Taylor (2009: 501–502) located a total of just 54 publications, 11 of which treated the portrayal of female terrorists in the media. In fact, Jacques and Taylor's 'perceptions of female terrorists: perceptions and media' category was the second largest in their study after the 'overview' category that contained all those publications (22), which provided an 'overview and history of female involvement in terrorism' (p. 504). The steep pace of increase in terrorism research post 9/11 (see Silke, 2004: 25, also Gordon, 2004) continues apace; Jacques and Taylor found that 70 per cent of all those publications on women and terrorism contained in their review were published after 2002 (p. 502). A relatively large number of books and articles on women and terrorism have also appeared since 2006 (see, for example, Gonzalez-Perez, 2008; Hamilton, 2007; Whaley-Eager, 2008), when Jacques and Taylor stopped collecting data for their study, as did a large number of texts on media – including 'new' media – and terrorism more generally (see, for example, Awan et al., 2011; Debrix, 2008; Seib and Janbek, 2010; Spencer, 2010; Weimann, 2006). Nobody has yet contributed a booklength analysis of the treatment of female terrorists in the traditional mass media however.

What does the research, contributed to date, on the intersection of women, terrorism and media focus on? A majority of this literature is concerned with showing how Western publics' deep ambivalence regarding terrorism perpetrated by women causes Western media to fit them into already existing media 'frames'. Framing may be defined as 'the process of culling a few elements of perceived reality and assembling a narrative that highlights connections among them to promote a particular interpretation' (Entman, 2007: 164). The study of media frames draws attention to the ways in which the mass media categorize and present issues and events. In particular, it has been shown that news frames reify what Groshek (2008: 316) describes as 'ideologically grounded, prevailing socio-political relationships and viewpoints' which therefore have a tendency to favour more powerful social and political actors over less powerful ones (Entman, 2004, 2007). More than a century of feminist activism is founded upon the belief that women are generally less socially and politically esteemed and powerful than men. In terms of media frames, this has the effect of men and women being depicted in starkly different ways. The former most often receive much greater and more positive coverage than the latter whether, for example, in the realms of election coverage (Bystrom et al., 2001; Nacos, 2005), sports reporting (Billings and Eastman, 2003), or television advertising (Coltrane and Messineo, 2000). Much of the research on gender in media framing underlines the ways in which women are stereotyped, with female election candidates' appearance,

family status, domestic arrangements and personal lives trumping their politics in almost every instance (Bystrom et al., 2001; Falk, 2010; Fridkin-Kahn, 1996; Nacos, 2005; Norris, 1997; Ross, 2010: ch. 4). Broadly similar frames are utilized in reporting on female terrorists.

Brigitte Nacos (2005) has identified six separate – albeit sometimes overlapping – frames that she claims are routinely employed in coverage of women terrorists. These are: (1) the physical appearance frame; (2) the family connection frame; (3) the ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame; (4) the women’s lib/equality frame; (5) the ‘tough-as-males/ tougher-than-men’ frame; and (6) the ‘bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality’ frame. While other authors are not as explicit as Nacos in identifying and describing the frames or categories into which female terrorists are generally placed, these frames, and variations of them, have been shown to be employed in a wide range of media settings, including in the US (Friedman, 2008) and international press (Hasso, 2005; Issacharoff, 2006). Two significant caveats must be noted with regard to this research, however: first, it is very narrowly focused, being almost wholly concerned with media portrayals of Palestinian female suicide bombers (Berkowitz, 2005; Brunner, 2005; Friedman, 2008; Gentry, 2009; Hasso, 2005; Issacharoff, 2006; Toles Patkin, 2004); second, all of it is qualitative rather than quantitative in nature and all is focused exclusively on female political violence perpetrators without explicit comparison with media coverage of their male counterparts. In other words, while all the authors who have contributed on this issue have marshalled evidence that accords with their analyses, none have engaged in systematic, comparative content analysis to prove their case. This article is a first step in seeking to remedy this aporia by reporting upon our comparative content analysis of the differential frames contained in US newspaper reports on one American female and two American male terrorist plotters. The next section thus provides a description of our case selection choices and content analysis techniques.

Methodology

Case selection

The authors’ original interest in LaRose was generated by her online activity, particularly her YouTube activity, which meshed with our joint research interest in terrorism and the internet (Birmingham et al., 2009; Conway and McInerney, 2008). We soon became intrigued by LaRose’s media portrayal, however, which appeared to fit with research in this area, albeit all previous research on women, media and terrorism was composite, focused on non-Americans, and made no explicit comparisons with media coverage of male terrorists. The research reported on in this article therefore diverges from previous research in the area in a number of ways. First, we focus on the press portrayal of a single American female terrorist plotter rather than media coverage of a number of Palestinian female suicide bombers, as has been the tendency to date. Second, our research has both explicitly quantitative and qualitative components, which results in a deeper and more rigorous analysis than provided in previous work. Third, and perhaps most importantly, our analysis of LaRose’s media portrayal is in conjunction with the same frame analysis applied to two male terrorist plotters. A number of males who were involved in failed plots at around the same time as LaRose were identified. These included James Elshafay who plotted an attack against New York’s Herald Square subway station; Daniel Patrick Boyd who trained for and planned to carry out attacks internationally; Farooque

Ahmed who was convicted on charges relating to a plot to bomb subway stations in the Washington DC area; and Tarek Mehanna, who conspired to attack shoppers at a US mall, American soldiers abroad and two US government office-holders. Elshafay and Boyd are American-born US citizens, while Ahmed and Mehanna are naturalized US citizens. The decision to include Ahmed and Boyd in our research rather than Elshafay and Mehanna was based on a number of factors.

A simple compilation of UK and US newspaper coverage of Ahmed, Boyd, Elshafay and Mehanna showed that, at the time of data collection, Ahmed and Boyd had received more US press coverage than the other two (see Table 1). Further, Boyd, like LaRose, is white, an ethnic American and a convert to Islam. Unlike LaRose, Boyd's family members were also allegedly involved in the jihadi terrorist plot in which he and his family were charged. Ahmed, on the other hand, similar to LaRose, was involved in a plot with persons largely unknown to him (whom it subsequently transpired were US government agents). Ahmed also differed from both Boyd and LaRose in terms of his ethnicity: although he is a naturalized US citizen, Ahmed is of Pakistani origin. Ahmed and Boyd are each thus sufficiently like LaRose in some ways and sufficiently different in others to make the comparison effective. As already pointed out, LaRose was unique as a female who had conspired to carry out a terrorist attack, therefore there was no direct female comparator case to include in the research. In the event, it was decided that because UK newspaper coverage of Daniel Boyd was almost non-existent, the analysis would be restricted to the coverage of the three plotters in their national press.

Table 1. Number of newspaper articles containing search terms to 28 July 2011.

| | UK national newspapers | US newspapers | Total |
|---------------------|------------------------|------------------|-------|
| Colleen LaRose | 74 | 193 ^a | 267 |
| Farooque Ahmed | 18 | 34 | 52 |
| Tarek Mehanna | 3 | 19 | 22 |
| Daniel Patrick Boyd | 1 | 21 | 22 |
| James Elshafay | 1 | 14 | 15 |

^a Original total for LaRose was 199, but 6 were removed because they were not about her (but Nada Prouty and others).

Source: Nexis UK (major mentions selected, duplicate options = Off).

Description of media content selection and analysis

The research reported here is based upon 150 US newspaper articles containing the search terms 'Colleen LaRose' (115), 'Farooque Ahmed' (21), and 'Daniel Patrick Boyd' (14) as gathered from the Lexis-Nexis Database for all dates up to and including 28 July 2011 (see Table 2). Articles with less than three mentions of each individual's name in whatever permutation, including pseudonyms, were excluded manually from our dataset (248-98 = 150). This had the effect of reducing the number of both editorial pieces that mentioned the plotters only in passing and the number of very short factual reports from the dataset. In other words, all articles with only a cursory mention of those we were interested in were excluded at this stage. The remaining corpus was subjected to content analysis using the Free University of Berlin's TextSTAT software,[2] producing frequencies for all words contained therein. Stopwords such as 'and', 'the' and so forth were then excluded. All remaining words that were possibly related to Nacos's frames (described later in the physical appearance frame section) were checked for context to establish whether or not they

were descriptive of the individuals we were concerned with. For example, an occurrence of the word ‘pretty’ was excluded if it related to anyone other than LaRose, Ahmed, or Boyd. All those words that were directly relevant to our subjects were then placed in the appropriate categories composing the identified frames as per our analysis and Tables 3 to 6.

Table 2. Number of US newspaper articles containing three mentions or more^a of individuals to 28 July 2011.

| | Articles with three mentions or more | Total word count | Average number of words per article |
|---------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Colleen LaRose | 115 | 57,912 | 504 |
| Farooque Ahmed | 21 | 13,755 | 655 |
| Daniel Patrick Boyd | 14 | 8,212 | 587 |

^a Manually excluded articles that contained less than three mentions of individuals.

Quantity of coverage of female versus male terrorists

Female candidates for political office often struggle to obtain media coverage (Bystrom et al., 2001; Falk, 2010: ch.5), but this is not the case with female terrorists. If women are ‘most newsworthy when they are doing something “unladylike”’ (Braden, quoted in Nacos, 2005: 437) then it follows that female terrorists should be the subjects of massive media coverage as there is hardly anything less ‘ladylike’. This is because, as Mia Bloom (2011: 233) has pointed out, ‘even agencies that should know better are surprised and unprepared for the threat women pose. The common assumption that women are inherently non-violent remains fixed in people’s minds.’ Female terrorists may thus be expected to receive increased media coverage precisely because of their femaleness. In fact, according to Bloom, a female-perpetrated terrorist attack receives, on average, eight times as much press attention as one perpetrated by a male (pp. 23, 128).

As a first step in our analysis, therefore, we tested if this also held true for terrorist plotters and found that it did. LaRose was covered in 8.2 times more newspaper reports than Boyd and had 5.5 times the amount of articles devoted to her as those featuring Ahmed. In terms of word counts, LaRose was in receipt of c. 58,000 words of coverage, Boyd had c. 8000 words devoted to him, and Ahmed was the subject of c. 14,000 words in the press (see Table 2). The difference in amount of coverage received by LaRose versus that received by Ahmed is particularly noteworthy as Ahmed has already been indicted, tried, and sentenced while LaRose is still awaiting sentencing. In other words, the press coverage we analyse below is all the press coverage Ahmed may ever be expected to receive, whereas LaRose’s sentencing will surely elicit extensive additional coverage.

What is the explanation for the particular attraction of LaRose for the press? There is a possibility that LaRose’s screen name, ‘JihadJane’, resonated with press and public alike, particularly given its likely provenance in the Hollywood movie *GI Jane* (1997). The name ‘Jane’ is also noteworthy for its ‘ordinariness’, even ‘commonness’, thence the terms ‘Plain Jane’ and ‘Jane Doe’. The name also has historical resonance in the US where the actress and anti-war activist Jane Fonda was referred to by some as ‘Hanoi Jane’ following her 1972 visit to Hanoi and more recent media reports hailed Fonda as ‘JihadJane’ in response to her anti-Iraq War stance (McCaslin, 2005). Relatedly, however, and more importantly, LaRose was seen as the embodiment of a

number of factors that, when considered simultaneously, shatter traditional terrorist stereotypes (see, for example, “‘JihadJane’ shatters terror stereotype”, the headline of Pitts, 2010). Her female gender and ‘all-American appearance’ (Novick, 2010; Pilkington, 2010) caused many journalists and commentators to reflect on the alleged widening of the terrorism threat. Yet, at the same time, either intentionally or unintentionally, their portrayals minimized the perceived threat posed by female terrorists in general, and LaRose in particular. This is commensurate with the findings in the scholarly literature on the media framing of female terrorists. The type of coverage accorded LaRose in the US press contrasted with that of Ahmed and Boyd is the subject of the next section.

The gendered US press framing of ‘JihadJane’

This section contains both quantitative and qualitative examination of US press coverage of terrorist plotters Colleen LaRose, Farooque Ahmed and Daniel Patrick Boyd in the context of a number of media frames identified by Brigitte Nacos (2005) in her work on women terrorists’ depiction in the mass media. Nacos identified and described six frames into which media portrayals of female terrorists can generally be categorized. Two of these frames were not apparent in the press reports we analysed and are not therefore covered here; these are ‘the women’s lib/equality frame’ and ‘the tough-as-males/tougher-than-men frame’ (pp. 442–445). This probably results from LaRose’s involvement with violent jihadism, which may be conceived as radically patriarchal, rather than with Leftist- or even nationalist-inspired movements that may be expected to be more equal in their treatment of women, and thus open to the latter frames. The four frames identified by Nacos that made an appearance in the US press reports we analysed were ‘the physical appearance frame’, ‘the family connection frame’, the ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame, and ‘the bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality frame’. Each of these is treated individually in the following sections with respect not just to LaRose but also to the two male plotters in order to illustrate the hugely different way in which the female’s virtual jihadi activities and subsequent indictment were reported upon as compared with that of her male counterparts.

The physical appearance frame

Nacos’s (2005: 438–439) physical appearance frame draws our attention to the way in which the media find the physical appearance, including clothing choices, of female terrorists especially noteworthy. Every major newspaper that covered the ‘JihadJane’ story commented upon LaRose’s physical characteristics. These included her height, body shape, skin colour, hair colour and style, and eye colour. The only physical characteristic of Farooque Ahmed mentioned was his beard and this only twice. Contrast this with 38 references to LaRose’s ‘size/stature’, 26 to her ‘skin colour’, and 33 to her ‘eyes’ (see Table 3). Boyd’s beard was mentioned on just one occasion and its absence noted once upon his shaving it off. The total number of references to Boyd’s hair was 3, which contrasts sharply with the total number of mentions of LaRose’s hair at 86 (see Table 3). Boyd is blond like LaRose, but Boyd’s hair colour had in no way the same significance as LaRose’s, being mentioned only once. LaRose’s hair colour was judged by the press to be of particular importance, appearing in every description of LaRose, while her eye colour – described in some reports as blue and in others as green – and height were also repeatedly remarked upon. The *New*

York Post, for example, described LaRose as ‘a 5-foot-2 blonde’ (Soltis, 2010) while the *Philadelphia Daily News* also emphasized her height and hair colour describing ‘the 5-foot-2 woman with dirty-blond hair’ (Caparella and Campisi, 2010). *The New York Times*’s description of LaRose as ‘white’ with ‘blond hair and green eyes’ (Urbina, 2010) stands out somewhat as many of the descriptions of LaRose appeared to leave the reader to infer LaRose’s ‘whiteness’ from their descriptions of her ‘blondeness’ and eye colouring.

In fact, LaRose used her appearance to ‘sell’ herself as a potential ‘martyr’, writing in an email to one of her co-conspirators that her physical characteristics would allow her to ‘blend in with many people’ (US District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2010: 3–4). It should be noted too that some of the press descriptions of LaRose’s physical characteristics were pertinent, insofar as they were contained in articles discussing the efficacy of the use of racial profiling in counterterrorism, but most were not. ‘JihadJane’ represents a distinct case with respect to media treatment of her clothing choices too. She was very widely pictured in the press at the time of

Table 3. The physical appearance frame.

| | LaRose | Ahmed | Boyd |
|--------------------------------|---|--|--|
| Size/stature | 105(8), 4-foot-10 (1), 4-foot-11 (8), 4-foot-11-inches (2), 5-foot-2 (4), diminutive (4), petite (3), short (2), slender (2), slight (1), small (3) | | |
| Total | 38 | 0 | 0 |
| Skin colour | Pale skin (8), white (18) | | |
| Total | 26 | 0 | 0 |
| Hair | Bleached (2), blond (hair) (44), blonde (hair) (17), blond-haired (8), blonds (1), braided (1), braids (1), cornrows (3), dirty-blond(e) (3), fair-haired (1), hair (5) | | Blond-maned (1), hair (1), pony-tail (1) |
| Total | 86 | 0 | 3 |
| Eyes | Blue-eyed (10), blue eyes (14), green-eyed (2), green eyes (7) | | |
| Total | 33 | 0 | 0 |
| Other physical characteristics | Physical appearance (4), sashayed (1), sashays (1), slender (2) | Beard (2) | Beard (1), chest (1), clean-shaven (1) |
| Total | 8 | 2 | 3 |
| Clothing | Muslim attire (4), burka (2), burqa (2), clothes (1), covering (1), dress (17), dressed (3), (Muslim) garb (1), shorts (6), T-shirts (5), hijab (2), jeans (1), jumpsuit(s) (4), sneakers (2), veil (1) | Jeans (1), jumpsuit (3), dressed inappropriately (2), casual clothes (1), Muslim clothing (2), dark-rimmed glasses (1), eyeglasses (2), polo shirt (1) | Jumpsuit (1) |
| Total | 52 | 13 | 1 |
| Other appearance-related | All-American (3), cigarette (1), drab (2), eyeliner (1), fingernails (1) | | |
| Total | 8 | 0 | 0 |
| APPEARANCE TOTAL | 251 | 15 | 7 |

release of information of her arrest. A photograph of her wearing a white hijab (see photo accompanying O'Connell et al., 2010) and another of her in a black niqab (Drogin and Portnoy, 2010) were reproduced alongside many newspaper accounts, often side-by-side with a headshot in which she appears sombre and sporting a halo of teased blond hair (see photographs accompanying Pilkington, 2010).[3] LaRose's previous Islamic dress is not mentioned in any of those articles describing her appearance at her most recent (at time of writing) court hearing in March 2011, but the detailing of her present hair, clothing and other style choices appear to suggest to readers that her commitment to an Islamic dress code was ephemeral. The *Philadelphia Daily News*, for example, described her appearance on entry into the courtroom 'with bleached blonde hair, orange sneakers and a hunter-green prison jumpsuit' (Hinkelman, 2011). The *Philadelphia Inquirer's* description went into even greater detail as to LaRose's appearance and drew a direct contrast between her altered appearance in the court and her former online persona: 'With long, tangled blond hair and stylish fingernails, the soft-spoken, 4-foot-10 LaRose struck a meek and diminutive pose in court Tuesday, a vivid contrast to the strident and often virulent jihadist prose she posted online' (Shiffman, 2011).

LaRose's clothing was referred to on 52 separate occasions in the articles analysed, which is considerably greater than the mentions made of the males' sartorial choices. Having said this, it is worth remarking that while Daniel Boyd's clothing is referred to once, Farooque Ahmed's clothing received 13 mentions. Noteworthy too is that the mention made of Boyd's clothing is to his prison jumpsuit, which he was obliged to wear, but the references to Ahmed's clothing are largely with respect to his personal style choices. Whilst the Ahmed family were described by a neighbour as dressing in traditional Muslim clothing, description of Farooque Ahmed's clothing was limited to three mentions of his eyeglasses, the jumpsuit he was required to wear whilst in custody, and the attire he wore during court proceedings – blue jeans and gray polo shirt. Despite the average article length for Ahmed exceeding that of LaRose and thereby providing ample opportunity for comment, description of appearance was largely reserved for Ahmed's wife – described as 'pretty' – and the 'hip Muslim Mom' group to which she reportedly belonged. The latter were described as wearing stilettos when they left the kids with their husbands and went to the movies to see *Sex in the City 2*.

All told, the amount of coverage of LaRose that fits the physical appearance frame dwarfs that of the males, standing at a ratio of 36:2:1 (see Table 3).

The family connection frame

Nacos's (2005: 440) 'family connection frame' draws attention to the way 'the news pays a great deal of attention to the family backgrounds of female terrorists'. Our research bears this out because in spite of Daniel Boyd's two sons being arrested and charged for their part in the same terrorist plot as him, LaRose still records 1.5 times greater coverage for this frame as a whole compared to Boyd (see Table 4). There are two reasons for this. First, LaRose appears to have no close relatives, but her press coverage nonetheless contains 39 mentions of the word 'father'. These largely refer not to LaRose's own father, but to her boyfriend's father whom she cared for until his death, immediately after which she vacated her boyfriend's apartment and departed

for Europe to further the jihadi terrorist plot in which she was engaged. Second, LaRose’s sexual/marital relationships, both contemporary and past, received distinctively high levels of attention, surpassing those of her male counterparts by almost 10 times. Worth noting in respect of LaRose too is that all 186 references in the category ‘sexual/marital’ are to males as are 42 of the mentions in the ‘family’ category. The implicit assumption illustrated by these figures is that men played a critical role in LaRose’s life and decision-making. A *Washington Post* article makes this explicit, stating that LaRose’s ‘path to radicalization took years and included a series of online contacts with men who urged her to action’ (Johnson and Crites, 2010). This directly contradicts LaRose’s indictment, which represents her as recruiting men and not the other way around (US District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2010: 2). Numerous articles too contained quotes from LaRose’s boyfriend, Kurt Gorman (Caparella and Campisi, 2010; Nunnally et al., 2010; Shiffman, 2011; Urbina, 2010). LaRose lived with Gorman for about 5 years and apparently converted to Islam and became radicalized during that time. He was widely reported as saying she ‘never talked about international events, about Muslims, anything’ (Soltis, 2010).

Table 4. Family connection frame.

| | LaRose | Ahmed | Boyd |
|--|--|---|--|
| Sexual/marital | Barnum ^a (4), boyfriend(s) (54), Cavazos (8), divorce(s) (10), divorced (15), Gorman (49), ex-boyfriend(s) (6), fiancé (10), ex-husband (1), marriage (4), married (22), relationship (1), spouse (2) | Mirza-Ahmed (13), wife (4), married father (1), husband (1) | Couple’s (2), divorced (2), married (5), Sabrina (8), spouse (1), sweetheart (3) |
| Total | 186 | 19 | 21 |
| Family | Brother’s ^b (2), family (6), father (39), mother (6), sister (6), stepfather (1) | Baby (1), son (1), father (2), child (2), family (1) | Brother (5), brothers (2), Dad (1), daughter (1), family(s) (28), families (2), kids (2), son(s) (35), father (8), mother (5), boys (4), parents (2), stepfather (2) |
| Total | 60 | 7 | 97 |
| Other (friends, work, neighbours, etc.) | Friends (5), relatives (2), neighbours (14), neighbourhood (2) | Neighbours (4), Imam (5) | Community (8), friends (12), neighbour(s) (21), neighbourhood(s) (4), acquaintances (2) |
| Total | 23 | 9 | 47 |
| FAMILY TOTAL | 269 | 35 | 165 |

^a LaRose’s first husband.

^b A number of references related to ‘brothers’ in Islam and thus not included here.

The ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame

Another frame identifiable in the coverage of ‘JihadJane’ is Nacos’s (2005: 440–442) ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ frame, which involves portraying women’s involvement in terrorism as at the behest of a lover, in a search for love, or both. There were 42 terms contained in the press coverage of LaRose that related to this frame; the coverage of Ahmed and Boyd contains not a single parallel term (see Table 5). The most egregious example of ‘terrorist for the sake of love’ framing with respect to LaRose was an editorial by Gwen Florio (2010: see also Urbina, 2010) entitled

‘Women tripped up by their search for love’, that appeared in a number of US and international publications:

Colleen LaRose put a weird, midlife twist on the stereotype of the sixth-grade girl stuffing her bra with Kleenex in hopes boys will notice her. Except LaRose stuffed her hair under a hijab and sashayed onto the Internet as JihadJane. But she seemed more intent upon domestic bliss than domestic terrorism, the founder of My Pet Jawa told *The New York Times*. She used his site and others almost as a dating service, he said, ‘like she was looking for a soul mate’.

On this analysis then, and again contrary to LaRose’s indictment, the purpose of her virtual activity was not the recruitment of men and women for violent jihad and jihadsupport (US District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2010: 2), but essentially an alternative to mainstream online dating. Another *Philadelphia Inquirer* story asserted similarly that ‘She flirted with people who commented on the extremist videos she posted on YouTube’ (King, 2010).

Table 5. ‘Terrorist for the sake of love’ frame.

| | LaRose | Ahmed | Boyd |
|-------|---|-------|------|
| | Dating service (2), lonely-heart (3), love (3), marry(ing) (30), soul mate (2), suitor (2) | | |
| TOTAL | 42 | 0 | 0 |

The ‘bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality’ frame

‘With respect to female terrorists’, Nacos (2005: 445) states, ‘the notion of the naïve, bored, non-political, out-of-touch-with-reality woman who turns to terrorism, too, is perpetuated in the media’. This frame is starkly apparent in coverage of Colleen LaRose (see Table 6). One widely distributed article entitled “‘JihadJane’s” life like a “country music song””, opened with ‘She married young and badly. She bounced checks at Pizza Hut and the grocery. She hit the bottle to excess sometimes, talked to her cats, and once attempted suicide’ (Nunnally et al., 2010). In fact, the latter is a fairly accurate synopsis of the thousands of words of newspaper coverage of LaRose’s personal history. A headline in the *Washington Post* read ‘Early life may have left woman open to terrorism; “JihadJane” suspect married at 16, dropped out before high school’ (Johnson and Crites, 2010). This was just one of a large number of articles that made a causal link between LaRose’s ‘troubled’ life and her present situation.

An article in the *Wall Street Journal*, entitled “‘JihadJane” had troubled past: American suspected of recruiting jihadis on internet exhibited signs of instability’ (O’Connell et al., 2010), which also mentioned her previous run-ins with the police, her failed marriages and her suicide attempt, quoted one informant as describing LaRose as ‘definitely out there’. The latter was underscored in many articles with descriptions of LaRose talking to her two indoor Persian cats. Such coverage was not restricted to the US press, a headline in the UK’s *Guardian* newspaper described LaRose as the ‘cat lady’, quoting a neighbour to the effect that ‘She was the weird lady who lived across the hall. We always called her the crazy lady’ and followed up with the information that the neighbour’s wife ‘said LaRose used to talk to her cats’ (Pilkington, 2010). *The New York Times* also devoted space to LaRose’s cats: ‘Ms. Newell said she occasionally heard Ms. LaRose, who was unemployed, speaking

Table 6. ‘Bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality’ frame.

| | LaRose | Ahmed | Boyd |
|-------------------|--|--|--|
| General demeanour | Angry (3), lonely (7), normal (1), nice (5), troubled (2) | Nice (1), pleasant (1), private (1), reclusive (1) | Blended (2), chatted (3), friendly (5), harmless (1), mild-mannered (2), nicest (2), normal (4), ordinary (3), typical (2), unassuming (4) |
| Total | 18 | 4 | 28 |
| Emotional state | Alienated (4), counselling (6), depressed (9), depression (2), insanity (4), mental health (5), muscle relaxers (7), overdosing (1), pills (2), suicide (10), unstable (2) | | |
| Total | 52 | 0 | 0 |
| Addiction-related | Alcohol (5), drunk (7), drunken-driving (5), drunkenness (7), intoxicated (4), intoxication (2) | | |
| Total | 30 | 0 | 0 |
| Employment | Unemployed (2) | Computer science (5), computer scientist (1), computer networking (1), engineer (6), Ericsson (10) | Construction business (2), drywall (6), general contractor (1) |
| Total | 2 | 23 | 9 |
| Pastimes | Care (8), caretaker (15) | | Canoe (2), garden(ed) (4), gardening (2), pond (4) |
| Total | 23 | 0 | 12 |
| Pets | Babies (2), cat (lady) (4), cats (21) | | Dog (1) |
| Total | 27 | 0 | 1 |
| TOTAL | 152 | 27 | 50 |

loudly to her two Persian cats through the wall their apartments shared’ (Urbina, 2010). The same neighbour went into more detail on LaRose’s interactions with her pets in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, explaining ‘She would say things like, “Oh, my babies”, at the top of her lungs’ (Nunnally et al., 2010).

It is somewhat erroneous, on the other hand, for us to include the males under the ‘bored, naïve, out-of-touch-with-reality’ frame in Table 6 as the terms ‘nice’ and ‘normal’ were used to described LaRose just a handful of times while the males, particularly Boyd, could be described as falling into an entirely separate ‘nice and employed’ frame.

Conclusion

The research reported on in this article provides empirical confirmation of the assertions that, on the one hand, female terrorists receive significantly increased levels of coverage in the press as compared to their male counterparts and that, on the other hand:

The media fetishizes female terrorists. This contributes to the belief that there is something really unique, something *just not right* about the women who kill. We make assumptions about what these women think, why they do what they do, and what ultimately motivates them. Women involved in terrorist violence are demonized more than male terrorists ... The common assumption is that female terrorists must be even *more* depressed, *crazier*, *more* suicidal, or *more* psychopathic than their male counterparts. (Bloom, 2011: 33–34, emphases in original)

The article clearly illustrates the continued existence of media frames, highlighted in the literature, that treat females associated with terrorism in a dramatically different manner to their male counterparts. We learned from just one press report that Daniel Patrick Boyd had a dog, which is the same number of mentions as the fact that Boyd has a daughter. Boyd's daughter's name could not be learned from the press coverage analysed, but an article in *The Philadelphia Daily News* informed us that LaRose's cats' names were Fluffy and Klaus. Overall, when total frequencies for all four female terrorism frames described and analysed in this article are added together, the overall total for LaRose amounts to more than 9 times that of Ahmed and more than 3.2 times that of Boyd, despite the figure for Boyd being somewhat distorted due to the number of references to his sons who were charged in the same plot as him. Clearly evident from both the extent and content of press coverage of LaRose is that females simply do not conform to societywide expectations that terrorists are male and are thus framed very differently in media accounts. This framing serves two functions: 'It conveys news in a package with which the audience is familiar, rendering the female terrorist culturally intelligible, and it serves to hide the individual activist so that we are not forced to comprehend her as an agentic individual' (Jacques and Taylor, 2009: 504–505).

The shock of the arrest of an individual on terrorism charges who was not only female, but white and American-born seems to be the most likely explanation for the original frenzy of reporting on LaRose's case. We mentioned that LaRose's catchy online pseudonym may also have played a role in this. It will be interesting to see if, in their coverage of her sentencing, the US press will persist in their portrayal of LaRose as the 'cat lady', thus continuing to detract from the risk that she posed.

Finally, much more research needs to be conducted on women, terrorism and media, 'old' and 'new'. The fixation in this research area on newspapers' portrayals of female Palestinian suicide bombers must be transcended. More systematic and empirical research of the sort contained here, but on a larger scale and having a transnational component, is a logical next step. Greater attention should be paid furthermore to the portrayal of female terrorists in media other than newspapers, including in film, television and online. The way in which the internet has impacted on the role(s) of women in terrorism more broadly is another issue yet to be adequately addressed; 'JihadJane' is an interesting case in this respect too.

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Notes

[1] LaRose's arrest was not publicized until 9 March 2010, when seven of her alleged co-conspirators – five of whom were later released by the Irish authorities – were arrested in Ireland.

[2] TextSTAT software free to download from <http://neon.niederlandistik.fu-berlin.de/en/textstat/>.

[3] This research did not consider the images accompanying the newspaper reports we analysed nor the captions describing them. However, a cursory examination of both seems to indicate that such an analysis would lend further weight to our position on the differential treatment of female terrorists by the press as photographs of LaRose were much more numerous than those of Ahmed and Boyd.

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