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Lars W. Nord and Jesper Strömbäck

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# Making Sense of Different Types of Crises

## A Study of the Swedish Media Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the United States and the U.S. Attacks in Afghanistan

*Lars W. Nord and Jesper Strömbäck*

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How did the Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan differ when it came to the use of sources, speculations, and anti-American and anti-Muslim reporting? That is the central question in this study. The results show that the Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan differed in many respects. There are many reasons for this, but one main explanation may be found in the different categories of the two crises with regard to media preparations and media routines. Another important explanation might be the increasing commercialization and reliance on a particular kind of media logic within Swedish media.

**Keywords:** *Swedish journalism; terrorism; war; media logic*

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There are certain days that we will never forget, days that for decades live in our collective memory. September 11, 2001, was without any doubt one such day. When the first Boeing 737 crashed into the World Trade Center in New York at 8:45 A.M. local time, it certainly shook and shocked not only America but the whole world (Halliday 2002). All over the world, suddenly all other activity stopped, and people gathered in front of TV screens to see the now so familiar images of the planes crashing into the World Trade Center and the towers falling down. In Sweden, within one hour, 65 percent of the adult population knew what had happened (Morge and Modh 2002:40).

About a month later, on October 7, America launched the first attacks against the Taliban regime and the al-Qaida terror network in Afghanistan. Unlike the

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first event, this one was anticipated. Even though very few people knew exactly when the United States would launch the attacks, everyone knew that it would probably happen sooner or later.

As it turned out, it happened later than most so-called experts in Sweden had predicted in the immediate aftermath of September 11th, but for the media, that proved to be fortunate. It gave them time to prepare and plan for their reporting strategies regarding the war in Afghanistan. Theoretically, they could seek out knowledgeable and reliable sources, discuss the risks of becoming propaganda carriers, send journalists to the region, discuss the importance of rapid reporting in relation to the importance of accurate reporting. Whether the media actually did this is another question.

### **Similar but Not Alike Events**

These two events—the terror attacks against the United States on September 11 and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan starting on October 7th—offer an interesting opportunity to study how the media handle similar but not identical global events.

Both events were similar in that they were important global events with far-reaching political consequences. Both events raised questions about global security, global terror, global power, religious fundamentalism, and the relationship between the rich Christian countries and the poorer Muslim countries. One of the main actors in both events was the United States. In the first event, however, the United States was the victim, while in the second event, the United States was the aggressor. However, whereas the terror attacks against the United States represented something hitherto unknown and never before experienced in modern time—an attack on the United States on its own soil—the American attacks in Afghanistan resembled situations that the media had previously experienced. The terror attacks against the United States were by any standard something completely new. In contrast, the American attacks in Afghanistan could be compared with, for example, the Gulf War in 1991 and the Kosovo War in 1999. True, these events were not similar in all aspects, but the basic fact was that the outbreaks were planned and prepared for and could be anticipated by experts and the media.

In both cases, the events taking place are geographically distant to Sweden, but in a cultural sense, the United States is close whereas Afghanistan remains distant. Even though many Swedes admittedly are skeptical of U.S. politics, we continue to consume American music, movies, and clothes, and what happens in the United States is often more newsworthy than what happens in geographically more nearby countries such as Germany, France, or Norway. This difference between how Sweden relates to Afghanistan and the United States might have affected the way the media in Sweden covered the course of these events.

## Main Research Questions

This study focuses on two main questions. First, how did the Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan differ when it came to the use of sources, speculations, and anti-American and anti-Muslim reporting? Second, how can the differences in the Swedish media coverage, if any, be explained?

## Empirical Data and Method

The data in the study include all news journalism relating to the terror attacks in the United States and the American attacks in Afghanistan in the four main newspapers and the three main television news shows in Sweden. For the television news shows, the main show each day was chosen, while for the newspapers, the supplements were excluded.

Two of the newspapers, *Dagens Nyheter* and *Svenska Dagbladet*, are traditionally broadsheet newspapers, even though *Svenska Dagbladet* is tabloid in form. The other two newspapers, *Expressen* and *Aftonbladet*, are up-scale tabloids in both their form and journalistic style. One of the television news shows, *TV4 Nyheterna*, belongs to a commercial station, while the other two, *Aktuellt* and *Rapport*, are part of the public service broadcasting company (Sveriges Television, SVT) in Sweden.

In both cases, the first five days of reporting were chosen. The main reason for that choice is that a limited time span allows us to compare the difference between the media coverage of anticipated and unanticipated events, respectively. The downside of that choice is that the results may exaggerate the weaknesses of the media coverage, which should be noted.

Since the newspapers, with one exception (*Aftonbladet*), did not report the events on the day they happened while the news programs could report in real time, the time periods included in the study depend on the medium. For the newspapers, the first five days of reporting occurred between September 12 and 16 and October 8 and 12, respectively, while for the television news, it was between September 11 and 15 and October 7 and 11, respectively.

All news articles and news features in the above-mentioned media that explicitly referred to either the terror attacks or the American attacks in Afghanistan were chosen for this study. The material was examined using quantitative content analysis.

## Setting the Stage

The design of this study makes it possible to compare the media reporting of two similar but not identical events but also the journalism in the different media with their different traditions at a time marked by media convergence,

expanding news systems, real-time news, and growing commercialization of the Swedish media system.

Since the end of the 1980s, the Swedish media system has gone through major structural changes (Djerf-Pierre & Weibull 2001; Hadenius & Weibull 1999; Strömbäck 2000). Until that time, no private television or radio stations were allowed. The market for newspapers was stable and profitable. In 1990, surveys showed that 81 percent of the Swedish population read a morning newspaper at least five days a week (Eriksson 2002:193-211).

On New Years Eve in 1987, however, the public service monopoly in television was for the first time broken by the private channel TV3, broadcasting from London. Two years later, another private cable channel started broadcasting, and in 1991, the first private terrestrial television in Sweden (TV4) received permission to start broadcasting. Two years later, the public service radio monopoly was also broken, which means that Sweden now has a mixed public service/private system in television and radio.

The 1990s in Sweden, as well as in large parts of the world, was a period of economic downturn, causing major problems for the newspapers, which lost both advertisers and readers. The worst year was 1996, when readership dropped to 71 percent. In an international comparison, this is still a high percentage, but the change in readership forced the newspapers to cut down on staff and develop new strategies to compete in an increasing struggle to survive and maintain profitability. One effect was that the Swedish newspapers, according to observers, became increasingly market driven (Hultén 1999; Hvitfelt 1999, 2002; see also McManus 1994; Underwood 1995). For economic reasons, several regional newspapers also merged or entered into different kinds of partnerships (Alström and Nord 2002). Another change that occurred is that foreign media companies now own parts of different Swedish newspapers and that the links between the newspapers and the political parties, whose influence used to be very strong in the party press model, now have, in general, disappeared.

Traditionally, the broadsheet papers and the public service broadcast news are known for the quality of their coverage of public affairs, while the commercial news media and particularly the tabloids are generally considered to be more market driven and oriented toward infotainment. Recent research, however, has found that there seems to be a convergence of the journalism in these different media (Strömbäck 2001).

One theory that is relevant to describe the changes that have taken place within Swedish journalism is the theory regarding a certain kind of media logic, first developed by Altheide and Snow but further elaborated on by other scholars. According to the former,

Media logic consists of a form of communication, the process through which media present and transmit information. Elements of this form include the

various media and the formats used by these media. Format consists, in part, of how material is organized, the style in which it is presented, the focus or emphasis on particular characteristics of behaviour, and the grammar of media communication. (Altheide and Snow 1979:10)

Building on this and on theory developed by Hernes (1978) and Asp (1986), Strömbäck (2000) has argued that the concrete expressions of the media logic are certain storytelling techniques. The substantial storytelling techniques that follow from the media logic are simplification, personification, polarization, intensification, concretion, stereotyping, and enhancement.

In a time marked by a surplus of information and a deficit of attention, there has been increasing competition among the different news media for people's attention. One result is that the news media has come to adapt the media logic to a larger extent than before. It has led to a journalism that often tends to interpret rather than describe and speculate rather than stick to known facts, which blurs the line between straight reporting and so-called news analysis and gives the journalists themselves a more prominent position within the news (Djerf-Pierre and Weibull 2001; Nord and Strömbäck 2002; Strömbäck 2001).

These features of modern Swedish journalism can be found not only in the commercial TV news and in the tabloids but also in the public service news and the broadsheet papers, although not necessarily to the same extent. Whether it is the former that has adjusted to the latter or vice versa is an empirical question that still awaits a definitive answer. Most observers, though, would agree that there is a convergence and that it is the growing commercialization that drives the changes observed in journalistic content (Hvitfelt 2002; Nord and Strömbäck 2002; Strömbäck 2001).

Ultimately, this may lead to a situation in which journalism is replaced by other forms of more or less defined media content, at least if one takes the definition of journalism offered by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (1999) seriously.

According to them, what distinguishes journalism from other kinds of media content are nine elements. First, that journalism's first obligation is to the truth. Second, that journalism's first loyalty is to the citizens. Third, that its essence is a discipline of verification. Fourth, that the practitioners of journalism must maintain an independence from those they cover. Fifth, that journalism must serve as an independent monitor of power. Sixth, that journalism must provide a forum for public criticism and compromise. Seventh, that journalism must make what is significant interesting and relevant. The eighth and ninth elements are that journalism must keep the news comprehensive and proportional and its practitioners must be allowed to exercise their personal conscience (Kovach and Rosenstiel 2001:12-13). All these elements are means to fulfill the end, which is that journalism must provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.

If this account of journalism is correct, then a lot of media content that today is called journalism should probably be labeled as something else. But that might be the case even if the minimum requirement for journalism is that it is geared more toward the topics or events being covered by the media than toward the media format, the journalistic practices and routines and the need to catch people's attention.

If this minimum requirement is not fulfilled, the result might be called "postjournalism" or "pseudo-journalism" rather than journalism. According to Altheide and Snow, (1991), postjournalism is defined by two characteristics: "First, journalistic practices, techniques, and approaches are now geared to media formats rather than merely directing their craft at topics; second, the topics, organizations, and issues that journalists report are themselves products of media-journalistic formats and criteria" (p. x).

The first question to be asked, however, should not be how the media coverage might best be labeled but the media coverage itself and its characteristics. That brings us back to the focus of this study: How did the Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan differ when it came to the use of sources, speculations, and anti-American and anti-Muslim reporting?

## Results

To start with, it is obvious that the terror attacks against America were much bigger news events for the Swedish media than the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. In total, 482 news articles and 179 news features were published about the terror attacks, while 272 news articles and 76 news features were published about the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. In both instances, the tabloids devoted more space to the events than the broadsheet papers did. At the same time, the public service news shows broadcast more features about both events than the commercial TV4 *Nyheterna* did (see Table 1). The main explanation for that pattern is that the commercial news show is shorter than the news shows in the public service channels.

The number of articles and news features about the terror attacks and the U.S. attacks can be compared with the coverage of the Swedish general election in 1998. During the last three weeks before that election, the same newspapers as studied here published 742 articles, while the same news shows broadcast 280 news features (Strömbäck 2001). That means that they published nearly as many articles and news features in just five days about the terror attacks as they did during the three weeks preceding the general election in 1998.

In a cynical sense, the news about the terror attacks against the United States was perfect news even for the Swedish media. The news also fitted perfectly with

**Table I**

Number of articles and news features about the terror attacks in the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan

	<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (BS)	<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (BS)	<i>Expressen</i> (T)	<i>Aftonbladet</i> (T)	<i>Rapport</i> (PS)	<i>Aktuellt</i> (PS)	<i>TV4 Nyheterna</i> (C)	<i>n</i>
Terror attacks in the United States	110	102	127	143	65	74	40	661
U.S. attacks in Afghanistan	63	49	77	83	28	33	15	348
Total	173	151	204	226	93	107	55	1,009

Note: BS = broadsheet; T = tabloid; PS = public service; C = commercial.

the criteria that Swedish media are found to employ when judging the newsworthiness of different events.

According to the professor in journalism Håkan Hvitfelt (1985), the probability that something will become news in Swedish media increases (1) if it concerns politics, economics, or crime; (2) there is a short geographical or cultural distance (3) to events and conditions that (4) are sensational or surprising, (5) about elite persons, (6) and can be described sufficiently simply but (7) are important and relevant; (8) take place within a short period of time or as part of an established theme, (9) with negative elements, (10) and with established authorities as sources (Hvitfelt 1985:215-16). The terror attacks against United States concerned politics, economics, and crime. There is a rather short cultural distance between Sweden and the United States, as compared with the cultural distance between Sweden and Afghanistan. The events were sensational and surprising, and they were about an elite nation. The terror attacks could be described rather simply, using storytelling techniques such as personification. They were important and relevant, had negative elements, and allowed for follow-ups, and the media had access to established authorities as sources.

The news about the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan did not fit these criteria as well as the news about the terror attacks did, and that might explain why Swedish media devoted less attention to the U.S. attacks. Another explanation might be that the availability of pictures differed between the two events. The terror attacks against the United States were unique not only in themselves but also in that they could be witnessed live across the globe and that important parts of the events that followed were photographed and recorded on video. In contrast, during the war in Afghanistan, there was a lack of pictures, and during the first

five days of the war, no Swedish journalist managed to get into Afghanistan to report what they saw.

### Use of Sources

When almost five hundred news articles are published and almost two hundred news features are broadcast within just five days—as in the case of the terror attacks—without any possibility for the news organizations to prepare beforehand, there is an obvious risk that quantity will push quality aside. The demand and striving for rapid news might compromise the demand and striving for accurate news. This was also a risk in the media coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan.

In Swedish journalism, there are certain ethical guidelines and traditions concerning the use of sources. One such guideline, by no means unique to Sweden, is that journalists should always use two separate independent sources, especially if the facts being reported might be controversial. There is also a tradition that the use of anonymous sources should be restricted. Furthermore, there is a tradition that the news should include balancing sources (Fichtelius 1997; Leth and Thurén 2000:22-36; Sahlstrand 2000; *Spelregler för press, radio och TV* 2001). This last guideline is considered especially important in times of crises, wars, or other instances in which the news might otherwise be biased toward one side or the other in a conflict.

Normatively speaking, surveys have shown that the three most important tasks for the Swedish media, according to the journalists themselves, are (1) to present information that can help citizens to freely and independently form their own opinions, (2) to be a watchdog against power holders and authorities, and (3) to give visibility to different opinions and cultural expressions (Strömbäck 2001; see also Djerf-Pierre 2001). What this means is, among other things, not only that journalism should allow different sources to speak and search out sources that have the information citizens might need but also that journalists should be critical regarding the sources used. They should not let themselves become mere carriers of information without trying to establish the accuracy of that information.

Each of these journalistic virtues might be compromised in a situation where there is great pressure on the news organizations to report, when there is a shortage of time, and where there is a lack of consideration concerning the context of what is being reported. The last condition refers to a situation in which, for example, journalists do not see any underlying conflicts that might exist and that are not immediately apparent.

To see whether this was the case in the media coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan, we studied the percentage of articles and news features that explicitly included at least one anonymous source. In this case, only individuals count as a source, which means that if a

**Table 2**

Use of sources in the coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan

	Media Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the United States		Media Coverage of the U.S. Attacks in Afghanistan	
	At Least One Anonymous Source Included (%)	Average Number of Quoted or Mentioned Sources/News Article or News Feature	At Least One Anonymous Source Included (%)	Average Number of Quoted or Mentioned Sources/News Article or News Feature
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (BS)	54	2, 8	43	2, 2
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (BS)	56	3, 3	26	1, 9
<i>Aftonbladet</i> (T)	50	3, 3	29	1, 9
<i>Expressen</i> (T)	49	5, 2	13	1, 8
<i>Rapport</i> (PS)	49	3, 0	29	3, 6
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PS)	53	2, 9	30	2, 3
TV4 <i>Nyheter</i> (C)	50	3, 1	13	2, 4
Average	52	3, 4	26	2, 3

Note: BS = broadsheet; T = tabloid; PS = public service; C = commercial. Number of sources and percentages have been rounded off.

news article refers to an institution such as the FBI or the American government, that will count as anonymous sources. We also studied how many quoted or mentioned sources were used on average. The results are shown in Table 2.

The results show that anonymous sources were used much more frequently in the coverage of the terror attacks than in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. In the latter case, the results also show that the extent to which anonymous sources were used varied between the different media types. Interestingly enough, the news media that most frequently included anonymous sources was *Dagens Nyheter*, a newspaper that in Sweden is traditionally considered to feature the most qualitative journalism.

Obviously, these results cannot be explained by structural factors such as media category (TV vs. newspaper), media type (tabloid vs. broadsheet papers), or ownership (private vs. public service). Instead, explanations must be found either at an editorial or individual level. When it comes to the difference in the use of anonymous sources between the two events, however, the explanation might be that in the case of a war, journalists are probably, in general, conscious of the fact that wars are fought not only with weapons but also with propaganda. Thus, journalists might be more critical of their sources and less willing to risk

becoming a part of the war by uncritically reporting what anonymous sources say.

The results in Table 2 also show that the number of sources used varies between the different types of media and between the coverage of the terror attacks on one hand and the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan on the other. On average, more sources are used in the coverage of the terror attacks than in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. In the latter case, in three of the media studied, the articles on average include less than two sources. That is remarkable, given (1) the principle of using two separate independent sources and (2) the fact that what we are counting here are number of sources used, not whether they are independent of each other.

### **Type of Sources Used**

Besides the number of sources used, it is also important to note what kind of sources the different media used. Since it is the sources that provide much of the information that journalists transmit to the audience, the use of different types of sources inevitably has consequences for the journalistic content (Gans 1980; Sahlstrand 2000; Shoemaker and Reese 1996). Thus, Table 3 shows how frequently different kinds of sources were used in the coverage of the two events.

The results show that in the coverage of the terror attacks against the United States, American and Swedish elite sources were the two most frequently used sources. The next group is the victims of the terror attacks, which include both relatives, friends, and colleagues of those who died due to the terror attacks and in some cases even those who actually died. The latter may sound strange, but the explanation is that in some articles and news features, quotes that are said to come from passengers in the hijacked planes or persons who died in the World Trade Center are included as if they were alive. This is an example of how the media sometimes dramatize the news in a way that blurs the distinction between fact and fiction.

As can be seen from Table 3, even in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan, the two most frequently used types were American and Swedish elite sources. Afghani elite sources are, relatively speaking, less commonly used.

What is also notable is the absence of spokespersons from the United Nations as sources. Even though this was and is an international conflict in which the United Nations has an important role to play and in which its views are important for the legitimacy of American military action, Swedish journalism failed to report on the views and the declarations from the United Nations.

These results indicate that there was a bias in the media coverage of these two events, which ultimately favored the American side of the conflict. These results should not, however, be seen as an indication that the Swedish media intentionally wanted to be biased in the selection of sources. The explanation is more

**Table 3**

Types of sources used in the coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan (in percentages)

	Media Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the United States		Media Coverage of the U.S. Attacks in Afghanistan	
	News Articles That Include Different Types of Sources	News Features That Include Different Types of Sources	News Articles That Include Different Types of Sources	News Features That Include Different Types of Sources
American elite sources	40	42	35	46
Afghani elite sources	4	4	18	26
Pakistani elite sources	1	4	8	12
Palestinian elite sources	2	4	3	1
Israeli elite sources	2	2	0	0
Swedish elite sources	23	22	32	32
Spokespersons for countries within the European Union (EU)	8	7	8	3
Spokespersons for EU institutions	1	1	1	0
Spokespersons for United Nations	1	0	3	4
American or Afghani victims	13	10	2	8
Eyewitnesses	5	4	2	5
Ordinary American or Afghani citizens	8	10	4	6
<i>n</i>	482	179	272	76

*Note:* Percentages have been rounded off. Included in the different elite categories are politicians, experts, and military spokespersons.

likely that American elite sources, as well as Swedish elite sources, were more accessible than, for example, Afghani elite sources.

Another likely explanation is the fact that the reports of Swedish journalists were very dependent on American news media and their reporting. In many cases, it is obvious that what on the surface appear to be original reports from Swedish journalists are actually rewrites of articles or news features from different American media and news bureaus. That is the case particularly in the coverage of the terror attacks. However, if one judges from explicit references in the articles and news features, the media studied used other media as sources in no

**Table 4**  
Percentage of articles and news features that explicitly use other media as sources

	Media Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the United States		Media Coverage of the U.S. Attacks in Afghanistan	
	News Articles That Use Different Media as Sources	News Features That Use Different Media as Sources	News Articles That Use Different Media as Sources	News Feature That Use Different Media as Sources
CNN	8	3	3	4
Other American media	10	8	6	0
Al-Jazeera	0	0	3	26
Afghani media	0	0	3	0
International news bureaus	8	3	8	13
Other Swedish media	6	1	1	0
<i>n</i>	482	179	272	76

Note: Percentages have been rounded off.

more than 10 percent of their coverage of the terror attacks and in 26 percent of the news features about the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan (see Table 4).

In the coverage of the terror attacks, different American media apart from CNN was used as a source in 10 percent of the articles and 8 percent of the news features. But as noted, since Table 4 shows only how often different media were explicitly used as sources, that is without doubt an underestimate.<sup>1</sup> In the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan, Al-Jazeera was explicitly used as a source in 26 percent of the news features. In most instances, however, only pictures from Al-Jazeera were used.

The fact that the Swedish media used foreign and international media including news bureaus as sources, even though they did not always explicitly state this, raises a question concerning the credibility of the news. The reason being that every time journalists choose or are forced to rely on other media instead of doing their own original reporting, there is a risk that disinformation and errors will keep circulating throughout the news pages and the news shows. Several examples from the coverage of the terror attacks illustrate this (Leth and Thurén 2002). For example, on the first day of reporting, one could learn from the Swedish media that a bomb had exploded outside the State Department, which later proved to be incorrect. Another example is that the Swedish media on September 13 reported that five firefighters had been found alive in the ruins of World Trade Center, which also proved to be incorrect.

In a situation of confusion, time pressure, and a lack of reliable information, it is especially important for readers and viewers that the factual information provided by the media be correct. If one media outlet relies too much on another medium—which is also under stress and has a lack of reliable facts—for information, the risk that factually incorrect information spreads is obvious and is one of the main reasons why the media should rely primarily on their own original reporting. If this is not possible, at least they should state clearly where they obtained their information, whether it is from other media or other types of sources. In this respect, the Swedish media often failed, which made it harder for readers and viewers to separate fact from fiction and information from disinformation.

Moreover, the results so far also show that Swedish journalism often failed to fulfill the journalistic virtues journalists themselves theoretically hold as very important. While this might be understandable due to the chaotic situation that characterized the terror attacks and their immediate aftermath and given the lack of access to Afghanistan during the U.S. attacks, it is of no less importance for journalism during situations like these to act as responsible gatekeepers. The usage of two separate independent sources, the task of providing reliable information and acting as a watchdog, are no less important in times of crises and wars. On the contrary, it can be argued that those journalistic virtues are more important during such times than under more ordinary conditions.

### **The Occurrence of Speculations**

In their study about how the American media covered the Lewinsky scandal, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel (1999) write about what they call a “new mixed media culture.” In that,

the classic function of journalism to sort out a true and reliable account of the day’s events is being undermined. It is being displaced by the continuous news cycle, the growing power of sources over reporters, varying standards of journalism, and a fascination with inexpensive, polarizing argument. (P. 5)

The results in this study so far seem to confirm that not only the American media but also the Swedish media are part of a new mixed-media culture in which the function of journalism to act as reliable gatekeepers is being undermined. To report rapidly, cheaply, and extensively sometimes seems to be more important than to report correctly, truthfully, and by carefully checking the information provided by different kinds of sources.

One trend that is part of this scheme, noted by several authors, is the growing tendency within mainstream journalism to speculate. This tendency can be seen as part of another trend, which is the growing prominence of commentary or analysis within mainstream journalism, even within articles and news features

that seemingly appear to be straight reporting (Kovach and Rosenstiel 1999; McNair 2000; Strömbäck 2001). For example, Swedish studies of election coverage have shown that on average, as many as 37 percent of the news articles and the news features covering the Swedish general election in 1998 were interpretative rather than descriptive. Speculations were present in more than half of the articles and news features (Strömbäck 2001:315, 328).

In this study, we examined how frequently three kinds of speculations occurred in the coverage of the terror attacks and how frequently three other kinds of speculations occurred in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. The results are displayed in Table 5.

The results show that speculations of different kinds are rather common and that it is obviously wrong to view modern journalism as merely descriptive. This is particularly true regarding speculations about who might be responsible for the terror attacks and how the war in Afghanistan might develop, which frequently occurred. The results also show, once again, that it is hard to generalize from structural factors when trying to explain journalistic content. As before, neither media type (TV vs. newspaper) nor media category (tabloid vs. broadsheet papers) or ownership (private vs. public service) can explain these patterns.

Furthermore, these results illustrate how facts, interpretations, and speculations intermingle even in what are seemingly ordinary news articles or news features, which helps to contribute to a blurring of the line between fact and fiction. This is especially true since it can often be hard to discover the speculations if the texts are not being read particularly carefully.

### **Anti-American or Anti-Muslim Reporting?**

In the Swedish debate following both the terror attacks and the war in Afghanistan, the Swedish media were accused of being too pro-American and too anti-Islamic in their coverage. In an attempt to study whether this criticism is warranted or not, this study sought to find out how often different rhetorical figures were featured within the news articles and the news features. By rhetorical figures, we mean the usage of certain stereotypical descriptions of reality, such as "Muslims are fanatics," or the rebuttal of such stereotypical descriptions. In both cases, the rhetorical figure is part of the journalistic content since, for example, an argument that Muslims are not fanatics would not be made without the assumption that they might be considered to be fanatics.

The use of these stereotypical descriptions must not be explicitly stated. If, for example, one Muslim is portrayed as a fanatic and at the same time it is implicit that he or she acts as a representative of Muslims generally, then it is counted as if the rhetorical figure "Muslims as fanatics" occurs in the article.

In this study, the occurrence of six rhetorical figures was examined. The results are shown in Table 6.

**Table 5**

Occurrence of speculations in the coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan (in percentages)

	Speculations about the Number of Dead due to the Terror Attacks	Speculations about Those Responsible for the Terror Attacks	Speculations about How the United States Might Respond to the Terror Attacks	Speculations about the Number of Dead due to the U.S. Attacks	Speculations about Future Development in the War in Afghanistan	Speculations about Future Terror Attacks	<i>n</i>
<i>Dagens Nyheter</i> (BS)	11	27	20	10	27	18	173
<i>Svenska Dagbladet</i> (BS)	22	28	15	10	16	20	151
<i>Aftonbladet</i> (T)	12	30	12	12	17	27	226
<i>Expressen</i> (T)	13	27	17	10	20	25	204
<i>Rapport</i> (PS)	18	20	25	21	32	18	93
<i>Aktuellt</i> (PS)	22	24	24	12	24	18	107
TV4 <i>Nyheter</i> (C)	19	35	22	20	47	13	55
Average	17	27	19	14	26	20	

Note: BS = broadsheet; T = tabloid; PS = public service; C = commercial. Percentages have been rounded off. Speculations are defined as statements about reality based on "facts" that do not yet exist.

**Table 6**

Occurrence of different rhetorical figures in the coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan (in percentages)

	Media Coverage of the Terror Attacks against the United States		Media Coverage of the U.S. Attacks in Afghanistan	
	News Articles	News Features	News Articles	News Features
The Muslim world is a threat to Western societies	10	4	6	4
Muslims are fanatics	19	13	3	3
Muslims are oppressed by the Western world	5	2	4	13
The United States is the defender of freedom and democracy	10	8	6	1
The United States is an oppressor of the poor in Third World countries	5	3	3	7
The United States acts as a self-approved world police force	14	14	6	5
<i>n</i>	482	179	272	76

*Note:* Percentages have been rounded off.

The table shows several results. One result is that the occurrence of these rhetorical figures was, generally speaking, larger in the coverage of the terror attacks than in the coverage of the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. Perhaps this is a reflection of the fact that journalists had more time to prepare for the coverage of the attacks in Afghanistan than for the terror attacks and that the debate about the coverage of the terror attacks made journalists conscious of the risk of portraying Muslims in an unjustifiable and unfavorable way.

A second result is that the occurrence of these rhetorical figures, to some extent, mirrors the underlying events. So, for example, the anti-Muslim rhetorical figures are more prominent in the coverage of the terror attacks, where Muslim individuals actually were responsible for the attacks, than the rhetorical figure “Muslims as oppressed by the Western world,” which occurred more often in the coverage of the war in Afghanistan where Muslims were, to some extent, actually the targets of the U.S.-led attacks.

If one counts the total number of anti-Muslim and anti-American rhetorical figures, the former occurs in 170 news articles and news features, while the latter occurs in 128. The inference from this is that, to some extent, the coverage was biased against Muslims and the Islamic world. If, however, one studies whether these rhetorical figures gain support or are rebutted, one finds that, particularly, the rhetorical figure “Muslims are fanatics” is criticized more often

than it is supported. In the articles and news features about the terror attacks where this rhetorical figure occurs, it is criticized in 56 percent of the articles and 55 percent of the news features.

If not only the occurrence but also the degree of support for these rhetorical figures is considered, the results therefore show that generally speaking, it is not warranted to accuse the Swedish media studied of being biased against Muslims. That does not mean that one cannot find examples of articles that, perhaps inspired by Samuel P. Huntington's (1996) theory about future clashes of civilization, portray Muslims as fanatics in extremely stereotypical ways and the Muslim world as a threat to the Western world. On balance, however, those articles and news features are exceptions. Overall, there is no reason to claim that the picture of Muslims in the Swedish media was particularly negative or that the coverage was particularly pro-American.

### **Two Different Types of Crises**

The results show that the media coverage of the terror attacks and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan differed in several ways. The news about the terror attacks was much bigger than the news about the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan. The use of anonymous sources was more widespread in the coverage of the terror attacks than in the coverage of the war in Afghanistan. At the same time, the number of quoted or mentioned sources was higher in the first case than in the second. Speculations occurred frequently in both cases, but they were slightly more common in the coverage of the terror attacks. The occurrence of stereotypical rhetorical figures was also higher in the coverage of the terror attacks than in the coverage of the war in Afghanistan.

These differences are substantial enough to raise the question as to whether it is relevant in media research to compare the coverage of these kind of events. Undoubtedly, modern terror activities and modern warfare challenge modern media reporting in quite different ways.

War, in present circumstances, is fairly easy for the media to recognize. There are at least two parts to a conflict, and they are usually engaged in an intensive and well-recognized propaganda war as well as the ongoing military war. Nowadays, war is also often characterized by uneven propaganda resources, where the only existing superpower in the world, the United States, has much better information channels, with the capacity and the possibility to influence the global media. However, awareness of this superpower superiority might also make the media more cautious. Many Swedish media organizations seem to have learned the lesson from the 1991 Gulf War, where they were heavily criticized for biased and uncritical pro-Western reporting (Hvitfelt and Mattsson 1992).

When it comes to terrorist acts, there are no such lessons to be learned, as these acts in general are, almost by definition, somewhat surprising deviations from normality and not a foreseeable development of war. The empirical data

		Media Preparations	
		Bad	Good
Media Routines	Bad	<i>Type I</i> (new and surprising events)	<i>Type II</i> (new but expected events)
	Good	<i>Type III</i> (surprising events that have happened before)	<i>Type IV</i> (expected events that have happened before)

**Figure 1**  
Media and Crises: Four Typical Cases

presented in this article support this conclusion. The number of anonymous sources was much greater in the terror news as was the frequency of negative stereotypes of Muslims and Islam. Thus, the war in Afghanistan was covered as a usual conflict between well-defined political actors, which made traditional professional journalism more effective. On the other hand, the new elements of the conflict, the basic confusion surrounding the terror attacks, and the lack of preparations resulted, generally speaking, in lower journalistic quality in articles and the TV news.

No crises are identical, and when it comes to their media coverage, our theory, which is based on the results of this study, is that the media's ability to give adequate information to citizens is dependent both on the existence of media routines and the possibility for the media to make adequate preparations. The greater the opportunity to prepare and to use existing routines, the more likely it is that citizens will be adequately informed. In accordance with this, it is possible to consider four types of crises in which the media's ability to inform differs significantly (see Figure 1).

Type I represents a kind of crisis that we have not heard about before and have no possibility to foresee. Of course, the terror attacks in the United States on September 11 fall into this category. The excellence of journalism is in this case challenged both by the lack of preparations and the lack of routines, especially when there are time pressures and a perceived need to report extensively.

Type II and type III represent situations in which the quality of journalism is usually higher but still far from excellent. In type II, a new crisis develops for which the media have been able to prepare. The outbreak of the Gulf War in

1991 might be a good example. It was a new kind of war, which made it difficult to cover, and therefore a lot of disinformation occurred. At the same time, the outbreak of that war was not a surprise. The media could foresee the outbreak and therefore make preparations accordingly. Type III crises, on the other hand, happen suddenly but have happened “before.” Airplane accidents, earthquakes, and floods belong to this category.

Finally, type IV represents a kind of crisis that presents the media with few problems. The situation is possible to prepare for (such as sending correspondents to a war region and consulting political experts), and there are media routines for these kinds of events. As a result, media coverage of type IV crises is more often characterized by journalistic professionalism. The war in Afghanistan represents this or a type II crises.

Thus, the Swedish media coverage of the terror attacks and the Afghan war differed in many respects. There are many reasons for this, but our theory is that one main explanation may be found in the different categories of the two crises with regard to media preparations and media routines.

## Conclusions

For anyone following the Swedish debate about the journalistic coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan, the conclusion must have been that the main problem was that the Swedish media was too pro-American and too anti-Muslim.

What our study has shown is that such conclusions are largely unfounded. The main problem was not any ideological stance toward the United States, Afghanistan, or Muslims. Instead, the main problems concern the journalistic quality.

What the study has shown can be summarized as follows. First, the use of anonymous sources was rather frequent particularly in the coverage of the terror attacks. Second, American elite sources and, to a lesser extent, Swedish elite sources dominated the coverage. Third, the average number of quoted or mentioned sources was rather low, particularly considering that we have studied not whether the sources used were independent of each other but only the number of sources used. But if several parts of the media failed to provide two sources or just above that per news article or news feature, then it is highly unlikely that they have succeeded in using two separate independent sources. Fourth, the study suggests that the Swedish media, to a large extent, relied on the American media and news bureaus as sources but without explicitly telling the readers and the viewers the extent to which this was happening. Fifth, the occurrence of speculations was very common in all the media studied.

These are some of the concrete empirical findings, and they point to a sixth finding. Namely, that it is almost impossible to explain these results by looking at

structural factors such as media ownership (private vs. public service), media type (TV vs. newspaper), media category (tabloid vs. broadsheet), or structural position in the audience market (elite media vs. popular media). This indicates that there is indeed a growing media convergence not only in a technical sense but also when it comes to the journalistic content in the different types of media.

How can the results of this study and the differences in the coverage of the two events be explained? Our theory is that there are two main explanations. The first is that all Swedish media are affected by the growing competition for people's attention, that they are all increasingly market driven, and that they all seem to rely more on the particular media logic than previously.

One result is that the line between fact and fiction sometimes has become increasingly hard to discern, due to the frequent use of speculations, the blending of straight reporting and commentary, and the use of storytelling techniques following from the media logic such as personification, simplification, and enhancement.

If one relates this to what Kovach and Rosenstiel have defined as the elements of journalism, then there are surely reasons for concern. If they are correct when they state that the essence of journalism is a discipline of verification, then one could question whether a lot of the news articles and news features are journalism at all. Drawing on the theory of postjournalism (Altheide and Snow 1991) and pseudo-journalism, a lot of the media coverage of the terror attacks against the United States and the U.S. attacks in Afghanistan should rather be characterized as pseudo-journalism or postjournalism.

The second explanation is that the journalistic quality will vary depending on what type of crisis the media are covering. Our theory is that the media coverage of crises of type I (bad media preparations and lack of media routines) will be of less journalistic quality than the coverage of crises of type IV (good media preparations and good media routines). Whether the existence of media routines is more important than the media preparations or the other way around remains so far an open question, until further research building on this theory has been done.

The risk that postjournalism or pseudo-journalism will replace journalism, seen as a discipline of verification, might therefore be especially high when the news concerns events that involve limited media preparations and a lack of media routines. However, much more research is needed to verify or falsify the theory of how different kinds of crises affect the media coverage, in a Swedish and an international context.

## Note

1. This conclusion is supported by conversations with journalists covering the events.

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### Biographical Notes

Lars W. Nord, Ph.D., is an associate professor of political communication at the Institute for Democratic Communication in Sundsvall, Sweden. He received his doctorate from Stockholm University in 2000 and has written several books in Swedish about media and politics.

Address: Institute for Democratic Communication, Mid-Sweden University, S-851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden; phone: (+46) 60-14 86 25; fax: (+46) 60-14 89 34; e-mail: lars.nord@mh.se.

Jesper Strömbäck, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of journalism at the Institute for Democratic Communication in Sundsvall, Sweden. He received his doctorate from Stockholm University in 2001 and has also written several books in Swedish about media and politics.

Address: Institute for Democratic Communication, Mid-Sweden University, S-851 70 Sundsvall, Sweden; phone: (+46) 60-14 86 17; fax: (+46) 60-14 89 34; e-mail: jesper.stromback@mh.se.