




# The view from above (and below): A comparison of American, British, and Arab news coverage of US drones

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## Abstract

In recent years, the United States has significantly expanded its use of drone warfare. Experts are divided: some defend drones as a legal, effective way to target terrorists while others suggest drones are inaccurate and contribute to anti-Americanism. In addition, international public opinion differs starkly with Americans largely supportive of the program while publics across the globe condemn it. Suspecting news coverage might play a pivotal role in these differences, the authors explored the framing of the US drone program in American, British, and Arab news coverage. Consistent with research on social identity theory and ethnocentrism in news, they find that US coverage was more likely to frame the policy favorably – emphasizing its legality, strategic value and technological sophistication while downplaying civilian deaths – while British and, to a greater extent, Arab coverage was more critical. The authors discuss how these findings build on existing theory and explore the implications for US drone policy.

## Keywords

content analysis, drones, framing, news, social identity

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The use of unmanned aerial vehicles, or drones, by the US military and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) has drawn intense criticism from the international community. United Nations officials, legal experts, and government officials within targeted countries contend that US drone warfare violates international law and human rights (Singer, 2009), and critics allege many more civilian casualties than are officially acknowledged (International Human Rights and Conflict Resolution Clinic [IHRCRC], 2012). Nonetheless, drones continue to be 'an increasingly important element of US national security policy' (*Washington Post*, 2013). As then CIA Director, Leon Panetta, noted shortly after President Obama took office in 2009, drones are 'the only game in town in terms of confronting or trying to disrupt the Al Qaeda leadership' (CNN, 2009a). Since then, US drone strikes have occurred in at least six countries – Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Yemen, Somalia and Libya – and, in 2013 alone, over \$6 billion was spent by the United States on the drone program (Parsons, 2013). Moreover, across the political spectrum, US policymakers seem to agree that drone strikes are legal under international law, strategically valuable, precise and pose minimal risk to civilians.

Take, for example, a speech made on 30 April 2013 by John Brennan – then chief counterterrorism advisor to President Obama and now current CIA Director – about the US drone program. Regarding their legality, Brennan emphasized: 'Targeted strikes are legal ... There is nothing in international law that bans the use of remotely piloted aircraft for this purpose.' On their strategic value, he noted: 'We conduct targeted strikes because they are necessary to mitigate an actual ongoing threat – to stop plots, prevent future attacks, and save American lives.' Referring to the technological capability of drones, he described their 'surgical precision' and emphasized 'their ability to fly hundreds of miles over the most treacherous terrain, [and] strike their targets with astonishing precision.' Finally, on civilian casualties, he stated: 'It is hard to imagine a tool that can better minimize the risk to civilians.' Such sentiments, we argue, have been frequent and pronounced in US elite discourse surrounding the drone program, which is notable, given the tendency among US journalists to align their news coverage with the positions expressed by political and military officials, especially on issues related to national security and foreign affairs (see Bennett, 1994; Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004; Zaller and Chiu, 1996).

American public opinion seems to reflect these pro-drone policy positions. A Spring 2012 Pew poll, for example, showed 62 per cent of Americans approve the use of US drone strikes, with solid majorities of Republicans (74%), Independents (60%) and Democrats (58%) expressing support for the policy. Public opinion abroad, however, is significantly more negative: 60–70 per cent of Europeans and more than 80 per cent of Middle Easterners disapprove of US drone strikes, and the vast majority of the public in countries that have traditionally been US allies – France, Germany, Italy, Brazil, Mexico, Japan and Turkey, to name a few – staunchly oppose the policy (Pew Global Attitudes Project, 2012). This global opposition also gave rise to a UN investigation – launched in January 2013 – into the legality of the US drone program and the extent to which US drone strikes have been responsible for civilian deaths (Devereaux, 2013). Such divergence between US and global attitudes about the US drone program raises important questions about whether variation in how this policy has been framed both domestically and abroad helps explain these differences.

Consider, for example the differential framing of a US drone attack that took place on 6 May 2011 in a remote region of Pakistan. According to US government officials, the drone made ‘a clean strike’, hitting a pickup truck and killing all nine militants inside; British and Pakistani journalists contended, however, that the same drone attack had ‘hit a religious school, an adjoining restaurant, and a house, killing 18 people – 12 militants, but also 6 civilians’ (Shane, 2011). Such differential framing of this incident is consistent with *New York Times* journalist Scott Shane’s observation that accounts of drone strikes ‘from official and unofficial sources are so at odds that they often seem to describe different events’. These differences, if found to be systematic across domestic and international news coverage over time, might help explain why US and international public opinion is so deeply divided over the US drone program.

With this in mind, we conducted a content analysis of US, British and Arab news coverage of the US drone program during the Obama administration’s first term – January 2009 to November 2012. Based on previous research (Jones and Sheets, 2009; Rivenburgh, 2000), we expected news framing of the US drone program to differ significantly across national contexts due to social identity considerations: whereas US journalists should feel beholden to protect US identity and, thus, offer less critical interpretations of drone policy, foreign journalists are likely to feel no such constraints. In addition, building on previous work in mediated public diplomacy (Entman, 2008; Sheafer and Gabay, 2009; Sheafer et al., 2014), we expected differences across foreign news coverage in line with the cultural and political proximity between nations – with British news coverage being more favorable toward US drones than Arab news coverage. Our data support these expectations and suggest that national identity as well as the cultural and political proximity of nations exert powerful influences on news coverage of such controversial policies.

## Framing, national identity, and news

Communication scholars have long understood the power of journalists to embrace and emphasize certain news frames over others. To frame ‘is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation’ (Entman, 1993: 52). Divergent news frames matter because they encourage distinct audience interpretations and lead to contrasting recollections of what took place (Entman, 1993, 2004). Framing effects literature (Iyengar, 1994; Kahneman and Tversky, 1984) suggests that stories framed as isolated events – such as an errant drone strike gone wrong – tend to evoke narrower attributions of responsibility than stories framed as ongoing problems – such as a flawed drone policy in general. Specifically, audiences who perceive an incident to be an aberrant episode are much more likely to assign responsibility *solely* to those low-level individuals directly involved than to assume a systemic policy problem. Since the news plays an important role in creating these different interpretations, the frames chosen by journalists to represent a given event or policy matter deeply.

Research has shown that interpretations of controversial international events vary meaningfully across national contexts (Clausen, 2003; Kolmer and Semetko, 2009;

Wolfsfeld, 1997, 2004). As Hafez (2000: 4) notes, given that the norms and processes associated with national news systems often differ, journalists typically select 'topics, arguments, or frames that ... result in diametrically opposed coverage in different countries, even when the same event is concerned'. The broader consequences of such differential framing can be quite striking: take, for example, the implications associated with labeling the US military scandal at Abu Ghraib as an isolated case of 'abuse' (as US journalists did; see Bennett et al., 2008) versus a systemic policy of torture (as European journalists did; see Jones and Sheets, 2009). Public reaction to an isolated incident of abuse is likely to be much less critical than if the incident were understood to be part of a larger policy of torture. Because the torture label was largely absent from US news, substantive public debate within the United States about the underlying causes, scope and broader consequences of the scandal diminished considerably. The same, we argue, could very well be true for the US drone program.

A powerful, though relatively under-explored, influence on the process by which journalists frame news stories in the context of international relations is social identity. Social identity theory suggests that an individual's identity is meaningfully shaped by the social groups to which he or she belongs (Rivenburgh, 2000; Tajfel, 1982). In particular, individuals derive comfort, security and self-esteem from those groups with which they strongly identify and, as a result, tend to evaluate them more favorably (compared to out-groups) and behave in ways that support their interests and reputation (Tajfel and Turner, 1986; Transue, 2007). As Mercer (1995: 242) suggests, 'just as people explain events in ways that enhance their self-esteem, group members tend to explain behavior in ways that enhance their group.' Social identities can take many forms – for example, ethnic, religious, partisan – but perhaps the most potent form of group identity is *national identity*. As Anderson (1983) notes, national identity commands 'profound emotional legitimacy' among citizens living in an 'imagined community' (see also Billig, 1995; Gellner, 1983). Such attachments can lead citizens to engage in behavior designed to protect or enhance the nation when it is perceived to be threatened, either physically or psychologically (Entman, 1991; Rowling et al., 2013; Wohl and Branscombe, 2008). Put simply, the more invested one is in a group, the more motivated one is to protect the image and reputation of that group.

In this study, we theorize about how the social identities of journalists – specifically their national identities – might shape how they report on controversial foreign affairs such as the US drone program. Extant scholarship has suggested that journalists are sensitive to national identity pressures when deciding how to report the news (Jones and Sheets, 2009; Rivenburgh, 2000; Slattery and Doremus, 2012). This is because journalists create news stories within a particular cultural context, which makes their 'presumptions about collective identity ... an especially important element in the construction of news' (Bennett and Edelman, 1985; Entman, 1991, 2004; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008: 42). In addition, business imperatives make it professionally advantageous for journalists to construct news stories that resonate with the broader citizenry. As Hutcheson et al. (2004) suggest, the desire to win over and appease national audiences makes it commercially tempting for journalists to cover controversial news stories in a way that appeals to the broader cultural values of the citizenry. Indeed, as Gans (1980) and others (Bennett and Edelman, 1985; Gamson and

Modigliani, 1989; Hallin, 1989) have shown, such cultural congruence is an ‘enduring news value’ because it allows news stories to align with the values shared by journalists, their editors, and their audiences. Thus, journalists have significant and powerful reasons for creating news stories that celebrate, accentuate, or at least align with prevailing cultural sentiments.

News reporting particularly reflects such ethnocentric biases in times of conflict (see Gans, 1980). Often, this aligns with the tone and frames emphasized by US political and military officials who seek to reassure the citizenry and protect the nation in such moments (see Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004; Zaller and Chiu, 1996). Social identity, we argue, plays a crucial role here too in determining which elite frames will be amplified within the press (see Rivenburgh, 2000; Rowling et al., 2011). Specifically, those elite frames that effectively tap into and resonate with the broader national identity in such moments – by, for example, downplaying the perceived threat to the nation and extolling the virtues of the nation – become more likely to ‘cascade’, as Entman (2004) puts it, past political opposition and into the press. This, in turn, serves to shape how the public perceives and comes to understand the issue or event. This seems to be consistent with Wolfsfeld’s (2004) ‘politics-media-politics’ (PMP) model, which focuses on how the news media and political environment influence one another. In effect, elite communications shape news media coverage, which, in turn, further shapes the political environment and broader public discourse. Wolfsfeld et al. (2008: 7) have also shown that journalists exhibit a ‘defensive mode of reporting’ on situations in which national members have killed innocent civilians from another nation by adopting ‘techniques that lower the emotional impact of such stories and attempt to rationalize what happened’ (see also Fishman and Marvin, 2003; Slattery and Doremus, 2012). This serves to reduce the visceral nature of such incidents and diminishes the potential impact such stories are likely to have on the broader citizenry (Entman, 1991). Put simply, journalists – taking cues from political and military elites – often exhibit a tendency to frame controversies in ways that, when possible, favor the nation.

## Framing US drone policy

With this in mind, we sought to understand and compare how the US drone program has been framed in US, British and Arab news coverage. Consistent with social identity theory, we predict differences across these news sources in their coverage of US drones. Specifically, we argue that US journalists are likely to adopt and present more favorable frames regarding the US drone program because of the controversy surrounding this policy. Allegations in political and news discourse, for example, that US drone strikes violate international law and human rights, spur anti-American sentiment, and routinely kill innocent civilians threaten the image and reputation of the United States. As a result, we argue that US news coverage is likely to downplay or omit such claims and, instead, portray the US drone program in a more positive light. This is not to suggest, however, that US journalists *intentionally* or even consciously adjust their coverage of drones in favor of national interests, but that the potency of the identity dynamics in play here prompts them to favor news frames – in this case, about the positive aspects of the policy – that protect the national identity.

In this study, we focus on four frames in US and international news coverage of US drone strikes: an emphasis on their *legality*, *strategic value* and *technological sophistication* and a downplaying of the *collateral damage* caused by such strikes. As explained in further detail below, we derived these four frames both from previous scholarship on the rhetorical strategies used by officials to legitimize and justify military action as well as textual analysis of public statements made by the Obama administration in support of the US drone program. Specifically, based on the literature, we had a broad sense of what frames might appear in US official discourse about the US drone program, but to identify and categorize the specific frames that were emphasized, we closely examined a sub-sample of randomly selected White House speeches. This led to the creation and operationalization of these four frames, which we anticipated would manifest in news discourse, given the tendency among journalists to respond to cues from officials when covering foreign affairs and national security issues (see Bennett, 1994; Entman, 2004; Wolfsfeld, 2004). Together, we argue, these four frames do much to protect American national identity as well as limit substantive, critical examination of US drone policy. As Bandura (1990: 37) states: 'as long as the detrimental results of one's conduct are ignored, minimized, distorted, or disbelieved, there is little reason for self-censure to be activated.' Each frame merits a brief discussion.

First, the *legality* frame involves emphasizing that US drone strikes comply with international law. As Butler (2012) has shown, it has now become imperative in the post-Cold War era for US presidents to frame military interventions as 'Just Wars' for the purposes of selling their legitimacy to the American public and the broader international community (see also Hurd, 2007). Such frames tend to resonate among Americans because they provide both a moral and legal justification for such action, even if much of the rest of the world disagrees (McNab and Matthews, 2011; Radsan and Murphy, 2011). Indeed, such arguments have been frequent in White House statements about the drone program. As White House Press Secretary Jay Carney succinctly stated on 5 February 2013: 'These strikes are legal, they are ethical and they are wise' (Carney, 2013).

Second, the *strategic value* frame pertains to the perceived effectiveness of US drone strikes in eliminating threats and defeating terrorism. As scholarship suggests, officials routinely justify military action by highlighting its strategic necessity and emphasizing the potential security benefits that could be gained by engaging in such action (Auerbach and Bloch-Elkon, 2005; Pape, 1996; Reese and Lewis, 2009). Providing such a rationale is imperative for those seeking to garner public support for military strikes. Obama, for example, provided such a rationale in a speech about drones on 23 May 2013: 'Our actions are effective ... Dozens of highly skilled Al Qaeda commanders, trainers, bomb makers and operatives have been taken off the battlefield. Plots have been disrupted ... Simply put, these strikes have saved lives' (Obama, 2013).

Third, the *technological sophistication* frame involves emphasizing the technical merits and capability of drone warfare – e.g. its precision and capacity to eliminate threats in remote and/or treacherous areas. As Entman (1991) and Wolfsfeld et al. (2008) suggest, officials – and the press – often exhibit a tendency to focus on the technical details of a controversial military policy rather than its moral complexity. This serves to diminish the potential threat such a policy might pose to the image and reputation of the nation. Moreover, citizens tend to be fascinated by the technology of modern warfare

and, as a result, are inclined to be receptive to arguments that emphasize – and even exaggerate – how advancements in military technology might lead to success on the battlefield (Singer, 2009). This frame was particularly evident in a speech given by Chief Counterterrorism Adviser to President Obama, John Brennan (2013), on 30 April 2013: ‘It’s this surgical precision – the ability with laser-like focus to eliminate the cancerous tumor called an Al Qaeda terrorist, while limiting damage to the tissue around it – that makes this counterterrorism tool so essential.’

Finally, the *collateral damage* frame relates to the minimization of civilian casualties caused by US drone strikes. As Tirman (2011) has shown, Americans have historically exhibited an indifference to the ‘deaths of others’ caused by US military actions during war: political and military officials rarely acknowledge the occurrence of collateral damage, the press tends to underreport the number of civilians killed, and the American public tends to be unmoved when evidence of civilian deaths caused by US military action is exposed. These dynamics have been evident, Tirman argues, in the context of massive US aerial bombardment campaigns (see also Pape, 1996; Slattery and Doremus, 2012) as well as atrocities caused by US military actions on the ground (see also Greiner, 2010). Such a downplaying of civilian casualties has also been evident in White House framing of US drone policy: Brennan, for example, stated on 29 June 2011: ‘I can say that the types of operations [drone strikes] ... that the US has been involved in, in the counter-terrorism realm, that nearly for the past year there hasn’t been a single collateral death.’ Overall, then, we expect US news to emphasize the positive aspects of the US drone policy by highlighting its legality, strategic value and technological sophistication while downplaying the collateral damage.

In contrast, foreign journalists, we argue, would have a markedly different perspective from which to guide their coverage of US drone policy. These journalists face minimal risk of alienating their audiences by emphasizing critical frames – e.g. that US drone strikes violate international law, spur anti-American sentiment, routinely misfire and have killed numerous civilians – because they are not critiquing their own nation or its policies. As such, they are unlikely to be motivated to defend the United States’ image and reputation in the context of this controversial policy. With this in mind, we propose our first expectation:

H1: US journalists will be more likely than British and Arab journalists to frame the US drone policy positively, by emphasizing the legality, strategic value and technological sophistication of drones, and downplaying the collateral damage caused by drone strikes.

## Cultural and political proximity to the United States

We expect British and Arab news coverage to be more critical than US news coverage in its treatment of the US drone program, but we do not expect the coverage to be homogenous across these two foreign news sources. There are important differences, we argue, in how countries may react to controversial, identity-sensitive issues about a foreign nation – in this case, the United States. Put simply, countries that are more similar to the United States may *act* in ways that are more similar to the United States. In turn, the



news media operating in countries that are more similar to the United States may frame news stories in ways that are more similar to the way media outlets in the United States frame them. Scholars contend that this is because of the ‘proximity’ – along cultural, political, and policy dimensions – between these sets of nations (Sheafer and Gabay, 2009; Sheafer et al., 2014). This argument provides a valuable basis for studying domestic and international news coverage of the US drone program.

In particular, scholars working in fields ranging from sociology to international relations to public diplomacy agree on the notion that some countries are more culturally similar than others. This can manifest through shared values (Inglehart and Welzel, 2005, 2010; Schwartz 1999), shared policy tendencies (Sheafer et al., 2014), shared religious tendencies (Huntington, 1996; Norris and Inglehart, 2011) and shared languages (Inglehart and Carballo, 1997; Inglehart et al., 1996), and it can be driven by and related to a host of historical and sociopolitical factors. Regardless of the complexity of these dynamics, their effects can be quite dramatic when it comes to the behavior of the media across countries. For example, Sheafer et al. (2014) showed that the greater the cultural and political proximity between Israel and another nation, the more likely it was that Israel’s preferred strategic frames made it into press coverage within that other country. Likewise, Sheafer and Gabay (2009) demonstrated that competing strategic actors – Israel and the Palestinian Authority – had differential success promulgating their preferred frames within the US and the UK where each of the latter two countries’ cultural proximity to the actor played a defining role. Finally, Jones and Sheets (2009) found that the news media in ‘Anglo’ (English-speaking) countries behaved more similarly to one another in covering the Abu Ghraib scandal than the news media in non-Anglo countries. Thus, as Entman (2008) argues, there is reason to expect differential levels of adoption of a given frame across different countries’ news media, depending on the cultural and political proximity of the nations in question.

The categorization of various countries into different groups elicits considerable debate. Recent scholarship, however, has settled on a multi-dimensional method of using both the cultural and policy proximity between countries (Sheafer et al., 2014). Thus, countries are classified as more or less similar based on their individual, cultural, and political values, as well as their policy similarities. For our purposes, we are interested in differences in news coverage of the US drone policy across British (BBC) and Arab (Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya) news sources. The two Arab sources merit a brief discussion. Though both channels are considered trans-national or ‘pan-Arab’ and not representative of a single country (though Al Jazeera is tied to Qatar and Al Arabiya to Saudi Arabia), they can be taken to represent news tailored to, and from, an Arab and (often) Islamic culture (Huntington, 1996; Schwartz, 1999; Yarchi et al., 2013).<sup>1</sup> This selection affords us several advantages when it comes to expectations about news coverage. First, according to this framework, both the US and the UK would rate very similarly – effectively ‘the same’ – on cultural and value similarity, as well as on scores of their level of democracy (Freedom House, 2013); Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya would represent news from a different linguistic, cultural, value, and democratic perspective (see Sheafer et al., 2014). Additionally, the US and the UK possess close policy proximity in that both countries use drones – sometimes in coordination with one another – to engage in military strikes, while few others possess such capability (Bergen and Rowland, 2012). Finally, the US



and the UK have similarities in media structures (Hallin and Mancini, 2004), whereas the Arab news outlets operate outside the western democratic realm.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, we see cultural, political, and structural reasons to expect significant differences in British versus Arab news coverage of US drones, leading to our second hypothesis:

H2: British news stories will be more likely to frame US drone policy positively than Arab news stories, by emphasizing the legality, strategic value and technological sophistication of drones, and downplaying civilian casualties caused by drone strikes.

## Methodology

To examine international news framing of US drone policy, we conducted a content analysis of four news media sources: CNN (American), BBC (British), Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya (Arab). From the US, we chose CNN because it is the main, 'relatively neutral' cable news network in viewership (Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, 2013); we analyzed its website content because this contains original news stories which are longer and more in-depth than its television news transcripts and because it was among the most popular news sites for Americans in 2012. From the UK, the BBC was chosen because it is the preeminent public service broadcaster; we used the website for BBC News, which in 2012 was the most popular news website in the UK (Ofcom, 2012). Finally, we chose two sources – Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya – for our Arab news sources for several reasons.<sup>3</sup> They are the two most popular pan-Arab news websites and are considered agenda-setters in the region (Zeng and Tahat, 2012). But Al Jazeera attempts to present information in an explicitly non-Western way and it is considered more sensational and less pro-Western than its main competitor, Al Arabiya (Nisbet and Myers, 2011; Zeng and Tahat, 2012). We thought it important to include both sources, to be more representative of the range of discourse in Arab satellite channels, and to avoid having our sample skewed by the idiosyncrasies of either channel in particular. This range in western-orientation (and language, see note 3), we argue, provides a stricter test of our hypotheses.

The news content analyzed for CNN.com and Al Arabiya.net was gathered from LexisNexis; we searched for the key terms ('drone' OR 'UAV' OR 'unmanned aerial') in the full-text of the articles. Content from BBC.co.uk and AlJazeera.net was gathered from their website archives because they were not available via LexisNexis; using the same search terms, we again searched the full-text of these articles.<sup>4</sup> The unit of analysis was the article and the time period analyzed was the period from 1 January 2009 to 6 November 2012. We focused on this time period because, as Bergen and Tiedemann (2010) have noted, 2009 was the 'Year of the Drone' in which the Obama administration took office and significantly expanded the US drone program. We continued analysis through Obama's re-election in 2012, to cover the entirety of his first term in office. All news stories on US drone policy, including editorials, feature stories, news analyses, profiles and commentaries were analyzed – the universe of stories that mentioned drones on these outlets during Obama's first term. Articles about US domestic surveillance drones, those about non-US drones, and irrelevant 'false hits' (e.g. articles about the 'drone' of insects or musical instruments) were eliminated, yielding a total of 898

stories from CNN, 690 from BBC, 387 from Al Jazeera, and 383 from Al Arabiya: 2358 news stories in all.

Once the news content was gathered, the entirety of each news story was manually coded for a number of variables. The codebook was developed in two ways: first, based on relevant scholarly literature; second, based on an in-depth reading by two separate coders of a sub-sample of 20 White House public statements about US drones. Specifically, based on previous scholarship, each coder had a broad sense of what to look for in the discourse surrounding drones. We expected, for example, that officials, in general, would seek to emphasize the technological merits of drones and downplay civilian casualties caused by drones since these are common rhetorical strategies used by officials during war, but we were unsure about the specific ways in which these broader rhetorical strategies (and others) might manifest in the discourse. Each coder then examined the White House statements to identify clear patterns across the texts and to categorize and operationalize the different frames that emerged within these statements. This was, essentially, an inductive coding phase. Next, the two coders discussed these findings and mutually agreed upon the creation and definition of the four conceptual frame categories elaborated earlier: *legality*, *strategic value*, *technological sophistication* and *collateral damage*. We then created a deductive codebook for each of these frame categories. In addition, during our coding of news texts, we looked for any other relevant frames that might have manifested in the discourse but were not included in our conceptual framework; as expected, we found no additional frames prominent enough to include in the study.

Each frame category comprised a balanced number of sub-frames that were either pro- or anti-drone in valence, which were coded for presence/absence in each news story. Positive references to the *legality* frame include emphasizing that drone strikes are consistent with international law and/or that they are authorized by target countries; negative references include emphasizing that such strikes violate international law and/or that they are not authorized by target countries. For example, a statement saying ‘the White House maintains that drone strikes are consistent with international law’ would be coded as positively valenced, whereas a statement alleging that ‘Pakistan officials view drone strikes as a violation of national sovereignty’ would be coded as negatively valenced. Positive references to the *strategic value* frame include statements that drones are an effective tool for the US military and/or that they save American lives; negative references include statements that imply the futility of drones in fighting terrorism and/or that they cause anti-American sentiment. Thus, the statement that ‘drone strikes have significantly weakened Al Qaeda’ would be positively valenced and the statement that ‘drone strikes fuel anti-Americanism’ would be negatively valenced.

Positive references to the *technological sophistication* frame include an emphasis on the accuracy and/or technological merits of drones compared to traditional warfare; negative references include statements about the inaccuracy of drones and/or that their technological merits are overstated. A statement, for example, about the ‘surgical precision’ of drone strikes would be positively valenced here while the suggestion that ‘drones are prone to malfunction and targeting errors’ would be negatively valenced. Finally, positive references to the *collateral damage* frame include statements that minimize the number of civilian deaths caused by drone strikes and/or only mention militant

casualties; negative references include any acknowledgement of civilian deaths caused by drone strikes. Thus, the statement that the ‘United States does everything possible to ensure that drone strikes do not kill civilians’ would be positively valenced here while the allegation that ‘drone strikes have been responsible for numerous civilian deaths’ would be negatively valenced.<sup>5</sup>

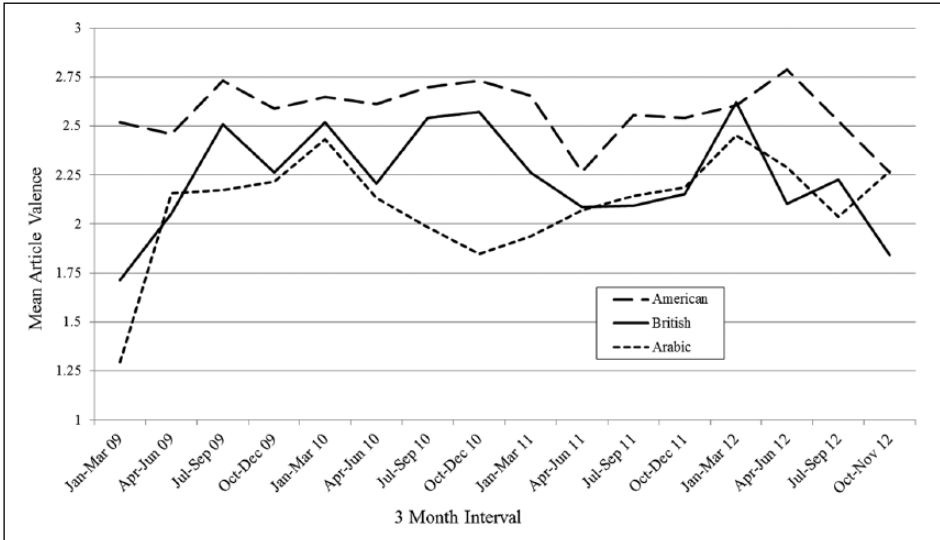
In order to account for imbalances within articles – if, for example, two competing sub-frames (*legal* and *illegal*) were present, but in very different proportions – we coded an overall valence code for the *legality*, *strategic value*, *technological sophistication*, and *collateral damage* frame categories: ‘1’ if the balance of the sub-frames in the article was anti-drone (i.e. within the *legality* frame category, there were more – or more prominent – references to drone strikes being illegal and/or unauthorized by the target country than references to their legality and/or authorization by the target country); ‘2’ if the sub-frames were evenly present or balanced in terms of prominence in the story (i.e. within the *legality* frame category, there is an equal number of references to the legality/illegality of drone strikes and/or whether they are authorized/unauthorized); and ‘3’ if the balance of sub-frames was more pro-drone (i.e. within the *legality* frame category, there were more – or more prominent – references to drone strikes being legal and/or authorized by the target country than references to their illegality and/or that they are unauthorized by the target country).<sup>6</sup>

Finally, we computed an overall *article valence* variable, assessing the balance of frame category valences within the entire article, by summing the frame category valence scores and dividing by the number of categories coded (thus eliminating cases in which no sub-frames were present from the calculation). This yielded a full article valence score on the same 1-to-3 scale.

Inter-coder reliability was assessed for all variables. Two coders coded the English-language content on a random 10 per cent subsample of news stories, and their ICR scores ranged from a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.72 to 0.92 across all codes. The Arabic-speaking coder was trained in English by one of the coders, and both coded a different subsample of 10 per cent of English-language articles. Their ICR scores ranged from a Cohen’s Kappa of 0.71 to 0.89 across all codes.

## Results

To test our hypotheses – that American news outlets would frame the US drone program more positively than both British and Arab news outlets, and that British outlets would be more favorable than Arabic outlets – we began by looking at the overall article valence variable within each type of news source (American vs British vs Arab). As expected, we found that the universe of American news stories was, on average, more pro-drone (on a scale from 1 to 3;  $M = 2.56$  ( $SD = .75$ )) than its British ( $M = 2.24$ ,  $SD = .80$ ) or Arab ( $M = 2.15$ ,  $SD = .83$ ) counterpart. Notably, the mean for all three source types was above the neutral point of 2; this means that, on average, articles framed drones relatively more favorably than not across these news sources, but that US coverage was significantly more positive than British and Arab news coverage, providing initial support for H1. Similarly, the British mean valence was above that of the Arabic mean valence, initially supporting H2.



**Figure 1.** Mean article valence, by news source, over time.

We also looked at overall valence in these news stories over time. This was done to assess whether these differences persisted throughout the four years examined. As Figure 1 illustrates, the relative order of valence across these news sources remained for the most part consistent throughout this time period, with US news coverage most favorable, Arab news coverage least favorable, and British news coverage typically somewhere in between. There were occasional exceptions, but overall this pattern remained robust throughout the 4-year period.

It should be noted here that there were some important events that may have triggered significant changes in the overall valence in news coverage of US drones across these news outlets over time. We see evidence, for example, that news coverage of US drones became increasingly favorable both in the summer of 2009 – this was during an aggressive US drone offensive in Pakistan, which resulted in the death of Pakistani Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud – and in the summer of 2010, when another US drone offensive in Pakistan occurred in which numerous militants were alleged to have been killed. Conversely, negative news coverage of US drones could also be potentially linked to some notable events. In October 2009, for example, the UN Human Rights Council issued a report, alleging that US drone strikes had killed numerous civilians; this may explain the significant dip in valence that occurred in late 2009. A similar dynamic may have been at work in June 2010 and June 2012 as well, when additional UN Human Rights reports were issued detailing civilian deaths caused by US drone attacks. In addition, when the report, ‘Living under Drones’, was released in November 2012, which was a scathing indictment of the drone program by legal scholars at New York University and Stanford University, it seemed to negatively impact how the policy was portrayed across the news outlets (IHRCRC, 2012). This occurred at the same time that Pakistani presidential candidate, Imran Khan, achieved considerable attention for his efforts to

**Table 1.** Mean scores on pro-drone valence, across frames, by news source.

	American news	British news	Arab news
Collateral damage	2.70 (SD = .66; n = 470)	2.48 (SD = .76; n = 402)	2.43 (SD = .78, n = 437)
Strategic value	2.56 (SD = .81; n = 416)	2.28 (SD = .86; n = 383)	2.17 (SD = .93; n = 350)
Legality	2.39 (SD = .89; n = 205)	1.99 (SD = .92; n = 255)	1.59 (SD = .88; n = 219)
Tech. sophistication	2.43 (SD = .89; n = 107)	2.15 (SD = .94; n = 88)	1.90 (SD = .95; n = 62)

Note. *ns* in parentheses represent the number of articles that contained each frame within that news source.

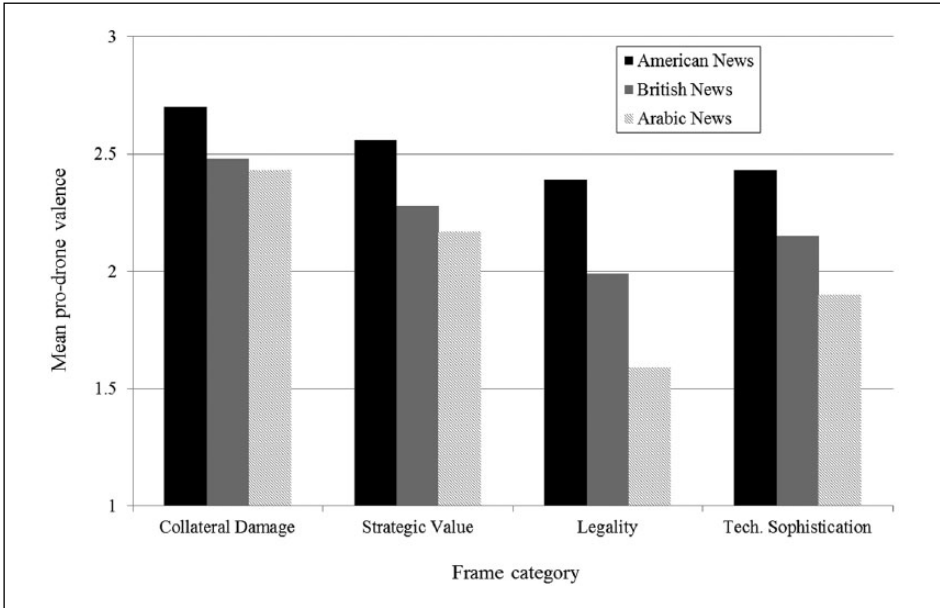
organize highly visible protests against US drones across Pakistan. Thus, it would seem, news coverage of US drones was significantly shaped by a series of notable events throughout the time period we examined.

Next, we examined the mean valence of the *collateral damage*, *strategic value*, *legality*, and *technological sophistication* frames, comparing US, British, and Arab news coverage. In all frame categories, the US news stories had higher mean valences, or were more pro-drone, than both British and Arab stories. The results can be found in Table 1.

In Table 1, we see strong evidence of a more favorable framing of the US drone program among US news stories compared to British and Arab news stories. Specifically, US news stories were significantly more likely to emphasize the strategic value, legality and technological sophistication of the drone program and downplay the extent to which drones kill civilians. As with the overall valence, we also see that British news stories were more likely to frame US drone policy more positively than Arab news stories. All four frames encountered more resistance in Arab news than in British news, with two frames – *legality* and *technological sophistication* – having a negative average valence. Thus, we find strong additional support for H1 and H2. These patterns can be seen visually in Figure 2.

Next, we examined US, British and Arab news treatment of the competing sub-frames within each frame category that were most frequently mentioned in news articles – thus, the primary sub-frames within each broader category. These were: if *only militant casualties* were mentioned in an article versus *only civilian casualties* (collateral damage); whether drone warfare is *tactically successful* versus a source of *anti-Americanism* (strategic value); whether drone strikes are *authorized* versus *unauthorized* by the target country (legality); and whether drone strikes are *accurate* or *inaccurate* (technological sophistication). Our goal here was to provide more detail and nuance to the broader patterns previously discussed. The proportions of stories from each news source in which these sub-frames were present can be found in Table 2.

Table 2 shows that there is more variability in the news than illustrated by the frame valences alone. A couple of key findings are worth highlighting. First, we see that the proportion of positive versus negative sub-frames was significantly skewed more pro-drone in US news coverage: +33.4% (collateral damage); +26.7% (strategic value);



**Figure 2.** Mean pro-drone valence of each frame, in American, British and Arab news stories.

**Table 2.** Percentage of news articles containing major competing sub-frames, by news source (%).

		American news	British news	Arab news
Collateral damage	Only militant casualties	39.1 (+33.4)	31.9 (+25.7)	33.5 (+24.8)
	Only civilian casualties	5.7	6.2	8.7
Strategic value	Tactical success	36.9 (+26.7)	41.6 (+12.5)	31.3 (+12.7)
	Anti-Americanism	10.2	29.1	18.6
Legality	Authorized by target	12.1 (+7.4)	22.3 (+2.9)	10.5 (-4.0)
	Not authorized	4.7	19.4	14.5
Technological sophistication	Accurate	6.7 (+2.9)	7.1 (+1.6)	3.6 (-1.2)
	Inaccurate	3.8	5.5	4.8

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent the gap in percentages of stories featuring the pro- and anti-drone sub-frames.

+7.4% (legality) and +2.9% (technological sophistication). In contrast, Arab news coverage was significantly less favorable and, in two cases, contained a negative balance of sub-frames: +24.8% (collateral damage); +12.7% (strategic value); -4% (legality) and -1.2% (technological sophistication). British news coverage, as expected, tended to fall somewhere in between: +25.7% (collateral damage); +12.5% (strategic value); +2.9% (legality) and +1.6% (technological sophistication). These patterns further support our expectations that US news coverage would be most positive in its coverage of the US

drone program and Arab news coverage would be most negative. Second, we see that in three out of four instances, British news outpaced American news both in its inclusion of pro-drone sub-frames – e.g. *tactical success*, *authorized*, *accuracy* – and its inclusion of their competing, anti-drone sub-frames – e.g. *anti-Americanism*, *unauthorized*, *inaccuracy*. These patterns suggest that, on the whole, British news was more likely to discuss both the pros *and* cons of drone warfare within an article, whereas US news typically emphasized only favorable frames, and Arab news typically only emphasized negative frames.

As a final step, we wanted to highlight excerpts from US, British and Arab news coverage to further illustrate the differences among them in their reporting on the US drone program. Stark differences were particularly evident during the summer of 2009 when the US began an intensive drone offensive in South Waziristan, Pakistan. During this military campaign, US news coverage predominantly highlighted the number of militants killed while downplaying civilian casualties. A CNN article on 7 July stated: a ‘suspected US drone attack killed at least 12 people and wounded five others in north-west Pakistan Tuesday ... all the dead and wounded were Taliban’ (CNN, 2009b). In contrast, British coverage was decidedly mixed in its assessment of the casualties caused by these drone strikes. A BBC article on 8 July, for example, emphasized: ‘there have been dozens of suspected US pilotless air strikes ... killing hundreds of militants and civilians. Last month, a suspected drone struck twice within hours killing more than 60 people – most of them militants’ (BBC.com, 2009). Finally, Arab news coverage was far more critical. An Al Arabiya article on 15 July, for example, stated: ‘Residents in the area say indiscriminate firing of US drones has resulted in the deaths of hundreds of innocent civilians’ (Al Arabiya, 2009a). Here we see clear divergence among US, British and Arab news sources, particularly in their treatment of the *collateral damage* frame.

Differences across these news sources also manifested during this time in terms of the *strategic value*, *legality* and *technological sophistication* frames. A CNN article on 23 July, for example, noted: ‘Drones are dramatically tilting the war in favor of the United States ... drones are killing Al Qaeda leaders who thought they were beyond US reach’ (Robertson, 2009). Furthermore, a CNN article on 9 August emphasized the close coordination between US and Pakistani officials on drone strikes, which resulted in the death of Pakistani Taliban leader, Baitullah Mehsud: ‘If Mehsud was killed, it means that US cooperation with Pakistan is “having a good effect and that we’re moving in the right direction”’ (CNN, 2009c). British coverage, however, was much more balanced. A BBC article on 8 July, for example, noted: ‘The increased number of drone attacks has caused a great deal of insecurity among the Pakistan Taliban commander’s fighters.’ Nonetheless, it goes on to state: ‘Pakistan has been publicly critical of drone attacks, arguing that they fuel support for the militants.’ Lastly, Arab news forcefully contested these frames. An article on 2 July 2009 in Al Arabiya (2009b), for example, emphasized: ‘Pakistan publicly opposes US strikes, saying they violate its territorial sovereignty and deepen resentment among the populace.’ Thus, in the wake of the US drone offensive in Pakistan during the summer of 2009, which received largely favorable news coverage within the US, foreign news was much more critical, with important differences between British and Arab coverage across the four frames.



## Discussion

Considerable scholarship has shown that news frames vary meaningfully across cultural contexts. The professional, cultural and, as we suggest, national identity motivations of journalists influence their coverage of international events. Our goal in the current study was to examine whether such influences were reflected in patterns of coverage of a controversial US military policy: drone warfare. As expected, we found that US news coverage was most favorable towards the drone program, emphasizing the strategic value, legality and technological capability of drones and downplaying civilian casualties. British and Arab news outlets, on the other hand, were significantly more critical in their coverage of drones: Arab coverage was the most critical, sharply disputing drones' legality and technological sophistication. British news outlets fell somewhere in between these poles, with more mixed-valence coverage. Across all major frame categories and over time, we found support for both of our hypotheses. Within the sub-frames, we found additional support for these patterns, but with a bit more nuance – both pro- and anti-drone sub-frames were likely to be present in British news coverage, making the overall valence more neutral. These patterns, we argue, suggest that social identity and cultural proximity dynamics may indeed have shaped how US, British and Arab journalists reported on the US drone program.

A few points merit attention. First, the primary limitation of the present study – and indeed all studies that assume the cause of news patterns without assessing them – is that we cannot definitively show that it is national identity motivations – and cultural and political proximity – that drive these patterns. Our data do, however, add another piece to the ongoing puzzle suggesting that these national and cultural contexts have important implications for news coverage (Entman, 2004; Gamson and Modigliani, 1989; Gans, 1980; Rivenburgh, 2000; Wolfsfeld et al., 2008). It is worth noting, however, that of course the nature of a particular event also impacts how it will be discussed in the news; we do not mean to suggest that the national and cultural context is the *only* driving factor. Instead, we aim to show that across large numbers of texts relating to drone policy, we see distinct variations in coverage based on the reporting context. An important, though perhaps difficult, next step for scholars exploring these dynamics might be to conduct a study among newsrooms in different national contexts, examining their choices for selection of news frames and stories, and using interviews, focus groups or surveys to gauge opinions among news workers about such decisions. Furthermore, attention should certainly be paid to the sources quoted or referenced by journalists in these articles; many of the framing differences may be attributable to the sources upon whom journalists relied in their coverage. While our goals were to assess the overall framing of each news article – including what both sources and journalists said – future research would no doubt benefit from a detailed analysis of source framing. Doing so would likely provide further insight into the reasons why significant differences exist across these news outlets in their coverage of US drone policy.

A second point of attention relates to our Arab sources. What might be particularly interesting to scholars working with Arab news coverage is that we saw striking similarity between the Al Jazeera Arabic and Al Arabiya English coverage of drones. Despite different stances toward western nations (Nisbet and Myers, 2011) and different national

ties and histories, these outlets were consistently more negative toward drones than either British or US coverage. This could be unique to the US drone policy context; future studies should continue to flesh out the differences between the English- and Arabic-language content of these outlets (Kraidy, 2008) to see in which contexts important differences manifest and in which they do not.

A final point relates to the coverage of civilian casualties. We saw that American news coverage was much less likely to emphasize civilian casualties, and that the overall valence of such coverage was much more pro-drone than the coverage in the other outlets. British and Arab coverage, however, employed nearly identical valence in their coverage of this frame category. This may be due to the fact that whether or not there are civilian casualties in a given drone strike has essentially only two sides: yes or no. The ability to mention such casualties in an article is similarly limited, at least to the context at hand. It is possible, however, for a journalist to step back from a specific incident to the policy more broadly, and raise the issue of civilian casualties. But because this frame is relatively narrow in that regard, perhaps both foreign news sources simply reached relative capacity. Notably, the valence suggests that these news sources were still, on the whole, more positive than negative – but this may be related to the number of militants (rather than civilians) who were also listed as killed in any given incident: any report that includes mention of militant casualties would necessarily tilt the balance in that direction. A point for future research is to explore terms that hedge the assessments that casualties were militants; foreign articles often referred to ‘alleged’ or ‘suspected’ militants, which has a decidedly different flavor from simply saying ‘militants’ alone. Future coding schemes should attend to these differences.

In sum, our data show that US news audiences – at least during Obama’s first term – received largely favorable and uncritical news coverage of the US drone policy. This suggests that Americans were not – and may indeed still not be – receiving an accurate picture of the ramifications and implications of the US drone policy. Without this information – or at the very least, exposure to open debate over the merits of drones – it seems unlikely that the American public will demand accountability and oversight of such policy. In an era of fractured and contentious global public opinion, skewed news coverage will only exacerbate the polarization of opinion in different countries and, inevitably, lead Americans to continue to wonder why anti-Americanism continues to persist around the world.

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## Notes

1. Although Huntington's (1996) arguments have been controversial, we follow Sheaffer et al. (2014) in arguing that we are simply interested in the idea that there may be differences between different religious cultures more generally, a perspective also consistent with Norris and Inglehart (2011) and Yarchi et al. (2013).
2. Sheaffer et al. (2014) go through a multi-faceted analysis to determine the cultural proximity of the nations involved in their study – Israel, Palestine, and a number of other countries – looking at the aggregated values of individuals, democratic proximity, religion/civilization similarity, and UN voting pattern similarity. Our characterization of our three categories of media sources – US, British, and Arab sources – is inspired by this analysis, but we do not undertake the same point-by-point calculation for several reasons. First, Al Jazeera and Al Arabiya conceptualize themselves as global, pan-Arab news channels; to associate these *only* with the countries in which they are based may be an unfair limitation of their approach. Second, even if we did link them directly to Qatar and Saudi Arabia, some of the source data used by Sheaffer et al. does not exist for these countries, and not for the same time period as the US and the UK. And finally, we are not actually interested in distinguishing the two Arab sources in terms of distance to the US or UK in our study; rather, we take both Arab sources to be more representative of Arab news, and to avoid the political bias associated with either one of those outlets in particular. Since, along all of the dimensions discussed above, these Arab sources together are clearly culturally less proximate to the US than the UK, we believe a more detailed analysis is not necessary, even if it could be appropriately undertaken.
3. We coded Arabic language stories from Al Jazeera. The only stories that were systematically available for this period from Al Arabiya, however, were in English – available through LexisNexis. Thus, both Arabic-language and English-language news from Arab outlets were analyzed. While more exploration of the differences between Arabic and English-language news on these sites is warranted (e.g. see Zeng and Tahat, 2012), for our purposes, using English-language Arab news actually provides a stronger test of our hypotheses. Theoretically, news tailored for an international audience by these Arab channels may not be as social identity-driven as news in the original Arabic. Furthermore, Al Arabiya is considered to be 'closer to pro-western governments' (Zeng and Tahat, 2012), suggesting another reason why its coverage – especially in English – might be less critical than that of Al Jazeera. We found no such difference in coverage, however: the two outlets were quite similar and similarly critical in their coverage. Henceforth, we describe the outlets as 'Arab' due to their representation of news from the Arab world.
4. It should be noted that videos embedded within news articles on the BBC and CNN websites were also coded (only the language was coded, not the images) and treated as part of the same text within that article (i.e. the text and language from the video were coded as one article).
5. We conceptualize this discussion of civilian casualties as a frame, rather than a simple inclusion of certain facts versus other facts, for two reasons. First, whether, and how many, civilians are killed in a given drone strike is notoriously difficult to assess (see Currier, 2013; Serle and Fielding-Smith, 2015). Therefore, there is not often information readily available for each strike about whether civilians were killed. Second, we argue that it is a choice on behalf of journalists or their sources to include discussion of civilian casualties alongside discussion of drones. For example, a journalist might report on a given 'successful' drone strike that killed a high-level terror suspect; that journalist could also then choose to mention (or to quote someone who mentions) that other strikes have been known to kill innocent civilians. We saw some journalists do this in specific stories, whereas others stayed focused only on a particular

attack (regardless of whether there were civilian casualties of the particular attack). Whether the journalist and his or her sources extend the discussion to this broader issue needs not be constrained by the known facts about a given strike. Therefore we approach this as a frame, rather than a factual distinction.

6. To clarify, we did not just simply do a count of frame references – both positively and negatively valenced – to determine overall frame valence. In addition to counting the number of references, we examined placement of these references. If, for example, the headline and lead paragraph of a news article each contained one positively valenced reference to a particular frame, but two negatively valenced references were included towards the end of the article, the frame would be given a ‘1’ (i.e. ‘positive’ valence) because of the prominence of the positively valenced references. Conversely, if there were equal numbers of positively and negatively valenced references to a particular frame, but these appeared in the middle of the article – or in equivalently visible/prominent positions within the article – we coded the frame as a ‘2’ (i.e. ‘neutral/mixed’ valence). Thus, the summative valence codes were not only about the relative frequency of positively versus negatively valenced references; they also included a broader assessment of the prominence of these references within the news article.

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