

Don't Say "Terrorist" About "White People Like Ourselves": Washington Post

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Theme: [Media Disinformation](#)

Dylann Roof appears in court: A **Washington Post** writer argues against calling him a "terrorist."

Corporate media are demonstrably [reluctant](#) to use the word "terrorist" with regards to Charleston shooting suspect Dylann Roof—even though the massacre would seem to meet the [legal definition](#) of terrorism, as violent crimes that "appear to be intended...to intimidate or coerce a civilian population."

Generally, news outlets don't explain why they aren't calling Roof a terrorist suspect; they just rarely use the word. But the **Washington Post's** Philip Bump gave it a shot in a piece headlined "Why We Shouldn't Call Dylann Roof a Terrorist" ([6/19/15](#)), and his rationale is worth taking a look at.

Bump starts out by acknowledging that "a terroristic act, [which this was](#), is treated and identified differently when the actor is a young white man." He contrasts the treatment of the Charleston massacre with the attack on the Mohammad cartoon contest in Texas:

In each case, someone hoping to prove a political point attacked a gathering because of who was in attendance. In the case where the only deaths were the attackers, we call it terrorism. In the case where the only deaths were the innocent people, we debate it.

"But," Bump then says, "we shouldn't call Dylann Roof a terrorist." His argument for this:

Roof wants to be a terrorist—for us to admit that he terrorized us. He likes the attention, telling the police as he admitted to his acts that he wanted to make sure they were "[known](#)."... What if we just call him a racist, grotesque person. What if we laughed at him instead of telling him he scared us?

This makes as much sense as arguing that you shouldn't charge someone with kidnapping because the person they abducted wasn't a kid. "Terrorism" is the name of a crime, and the relevant question isn't whether we like the etymology of the term, but whether the murders fit the elements of the definition—which has to do with intent to intimidate or coerce, not with whether anyone actually felt "terror."

On some level, Bump understands that "terrorism" is a legal term with serious legal consequences, and that the fact that it's unevenly applied based on the race and religion of the perpetrators is a real problem:

When Dzhokhar Tsarnaev was arrested in Boston in 2013, the debate was over how to treat him given that he was a terror suspect—as [manifested by Sen. Lindsey Graham](#)—not over whether or not he was a terror suspect. That’s part of why Tsarnaev and the Texas cartoon attackers were so quickly identified as terrorists.

This, Bump notes, “reflects the same racial chasm that Roof wanted to exacerbate.”

He also notes that the word has become politicized by the “War on Terror”—“which is, in essence, a war on certain groups of Middle Easterners and Muslims.” As Bump observes, “Calling more non-American people terrorists also serves to bolster the arguments of those calling for more military intervention.” Which leads him to conclude that “the problem...isn’t that we’re too slow to call Roof a terrorist. It’s that we’re often too quick to call everyone/else a terrorist.”

Yet Bump doesn’t seem to have written a column about how “we’re too quick to call everyone *else* a terrorist”; he didn’t seem to have any problem referring to the Boston Marathon bombing as “terrorism,” for example. (“The key component to any terrorist attack is luck” was the lead sentence for a piece he wrote on the Tsarnaev brothers, for instance—**The Wire**, [4/22/13](#).) So why write this piece, urging people to do what most journalists are already doing—avoiding saying “terrorism” in connection to Charleston?



Washington Post’s Philip Bump: “When I see Dylann Roof, I remember being a white male his age”

The answer seems to be in a remarkably revealing passage in the middle of the piece, where Bump acknowledges that he identifies with Roof because they share a skin color:

Most Americans are white, and we see white people like ourselves. When I see Dylann Roof, I remember being a white male his age, barely out of my teenage years and experiencing weird anger in a difficult time.... We can identify much more easily with who he is.

Huh. You would think a self-respecting journalist, recognizing this kind of irrational bias in himself, would try to avoid letting it influence his work—would certainly not want to call for giving a criminal suspect special journalistic treatment based on this identification. Yet there's not really any other explanation offered in the column as to why it was written about Roof and not about Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

Bump closes his column by rejecting the arguments that referring to the Charleston massacre as “racial terrorism” would “help...America come to terms with the fact that the ideology he assumed is dangerous and urgent” and put Roof in line for stiffer penalties. “Fine,” he says—but

each of these is predicated on our insistence that terrorism is somehow a higher order of evil than simply murdering elderly people for being black even as they held their Bibles in a church. It implies that his mass murder was one thing, but that his scaring us was made things more problematic. Perhaps we should demonstrate to him—and every other angry young man like him—that we aren't scared of his dumb Internet rhetoric. Not in the least.

And let's reel in our use of the word “terrorism” back in.

Let me note parenthetically that the law constantly takes intent into account—it's the difference between murder and manslaughter, to name just one example—so suggesting that there's something odd about taking the intent of a murder into account is specious.

But the real debate here is not about whether terrorism is worse than mass murder with no political motive; it's whether we're going to call some acts of politically motivated murder “terrorism” while withholding that label from other murders that are equally politically motivated—when we know that this label has real consequences, legally and politically.

“We aren't scared by his dumb Internet rhetoric,” says Bump. If he's still using “we” to mean “white people like ourselves,” it is certainly true that whites generally don't feel personally afraid of white supremacist terrorist who target African-Americans. They're much more likely to be afraid of Muslim terrorists who target Americans in general—even though right-wing extremists (not all of whom are white supremacists, of course) killed five times as many people in this country as Muslim extremists in the decade after 9/11, according to a study from the US Military Academy (**New York Times**, [6/16/15](#)).

If you really think the word “terrorism” is being used too much, you should argue against it in the cases where it's actually frequently used—which is mostly in cases involving Muslim suspects. But that would mean going against conventional wisdom, possibly with some professional cost. To argue instead that journalists are right to avoid the label with regard to a suspect with whom “we can identify much more easily”—well, there's never much of price to be paid for endorsing institutional prejudices.

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