The Psychology of
Mass-Mediated Terrorism

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The growing use and manipulation of modern communications by terrorist organizations have led communication and terrorism scholars to reconceptualize modern terrorism within the framework of symbolic communication theory. Some applied the theater-of-terror metaphor to examine modern terrorism as an attempt to communicate messages through the use of orchestrated violence. This article examines the psychological importance of the mass media for modern terrorism, the media tactics of terrorists, and the challenges they present to media organizations and governments. Special attention is given to the use of the Internet by modern terrorists and the rhetoric of terrorist Web sites based on 8-year-long monitoring of terrorist presence on the Internet and the analysis of more than 5,000 terrorist Web sites. Finally, the article concludes with various responses of modern democratic societies to the challenge poised by media-oriented and media-savvy terrorists.

When one says "terrorism" in a democratic society, one also says "media." For terrorism by its very nature is a psychological weapon which depends upon communicating a threat to a wider society. This, in essence, is why terrorism and the media enjoy a symbiotic relationship.

Paul Wilkinson, 2001, p. 177

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism led several communication and terrorism scholars to reconceptualize modern terrorism within the framework of symbolic communication theory (Jenkins, 1975; Weimann, 1983; 1986; Weimann & Winn, 1994). Karber (1971) has pointed out that "the terrorist's message of violence necessitates a victim, whether personal or institutional, but the target or intended recipient of the communication may not be the victim" (p. 529), and Weimann and Winn (1994) adopted the theater-of-terror metaphor to examine modern terrorism as an attempt to communicate messages through the use of orchestrated violence.

The growing use and manipulation of modern communications by terrorist organizations have led governments and several media organizations to consider certain

steps in response. These included limiting terrorists' access to the conventional mass media, reducing and censoring news coverage of terrorist acts and their perpetrators, and minimizing the terrorists' capacity for manipulating the media (Weimann, 1999). However, the new media technologies allow terrorist organizations to transmit messages more easily and freely than through other means of communication. The networks of computer-mediated communication (CMC) or the Internet are ideal for terrorists-as-communicators: This is a decentralized medium, it cannot be subjected to control or restriction, it is not censored, and it allows access to anyone who wants it (Tsfati & Weimann, 1999, 2002; Weimann, 2006b). This article examines the psychological importance of the mass media for modern terrorism, the media tactics of terrorists, and the challenges they present to media organizations and governments.

The Psychology of the "Theater of Terror"

From its early days, terror has entailed a mass psychological aspect: the word *terror* comes from the Latin word *terrere*, which means "to frighten" or "to scare." During the "popular" phase of the French Revolution in September 1793, the Reign of Terror was officially declared and activated, causing the execution of 17,000 people. Executions were conducted before large audiences and were accompanied by sensational publicity, thus spreading the intended fear. But contemporary terrorists became exposed to new opportunities for exerting mass psychological impacts as a result of technological advances in communications. Paralleling the growth in technology-driven opportunities for terrorist action was the effort by terrorists themselves to hone their communications skills. As one of the terrorists who orchestrated the attack on the Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympic Games testified,

> We recognized that sport is the modern religion of the Western world. We knew that the people in England and America would switch their television sets from any program about the plight of the Palestinians if there was a sporting event on another channel. So we decided to use their Olympics, the most sacred ceremony of this religion, to make the world pay attention to us. We offered up human sacrifices to your gods of sport and television. And they answered our prayers. From Munich onwards, nobody could ignore the Palestinians or their cause. (as cited in Dobson & Paine, 1977, p. 15)

During the 1970s, academic observers remarked increasingly on the theatrical proficiency with which terrorists conducted their operations. As Jenkins (1975) concluded his analysis of international terrorism,

> Terrorist attacks are often carefully choreographed to attract the attention of the electronic media and the international press. Taking and holding hostages increases the drama. The hostages themselves often mean nothing to the terrorists. Terrorism is aimed at the people watching, not at the actual victims. Terrorism is a theater. (p. 4)

Modern terrorism can be understood in terms of the production requirements of theatrical engagements. Terrorists pay attention to script preparation, cast selection, sets, props, role-playing, and minute-by-minute stage management. Just like compelling stage plays or ballet performances, the media orientation in terrorism requires full attention to detail to be effective.

Several terrorist organizations realized the potentials of mass-mediated terrorism in terms of effectively reaching huge audiences. Our study (reported in Weimann & Winn, 1994) examined 6,714 incidents of international terrorism from the late 1960s to the early 1990s. The analysis revealed a significant increase in terrorist acts that apply media-oriented considerations (in choice of victims, location, timing, form of action, contact with media, etc.). No wonder that Bell (1978) argued, "It has become more alluring for the frantic few to appear on the world stage of television than remain obscure guerrillas of the bush" (p. 89). Terrorist theory was gradually realizing the potential of the mass media. Acts of terrorism were more and more perceived as means of persuasion and psychological warfare, when the victim is "the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience" (Schmid & de Graaf, 1982, p. 14).

The 9/11 Performance

The most powerful and violent performance of the modern theater of terror was the September 11, 2001, attack on American targets. In November 2001, shortly after the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden discussed the twin attacks. Referring to the suicide terrorists, whom he called "vanguards of Islam," bin Laden marveled, "Those young men said in deeds, in New York and Washington, speeches that overshadowed other speeches made everywhere else in the world. The speeches are understood by both Arabs and non-Arabs, even Chinese."[1] In her study "The Terrorist Calculus Behind 9-11," Nacos (2003) argued that bin Laden revealed that he considered terrorism first and foremost as a vehicle to dispatch messages—"speeches" in his words—and with respect to the events of September 11, 2001, he concluded that Americans in particular had heard and reacted to the intended communication.

From the theater-of-terror perspective, the September 11 attack on America was a perfectly choreographed production aimed at American and international audiences. Although the theater metaphor remains instructive, it has given way to that of terrorism as a global television spectacular with "live" breaking news, watched by international audiences, and transcends by far the boundaries of theatrical events. In the past, most, if not all, acts of terrorism resulted in a great deal of publicity in the form of news reporting, but the September 11 attack introduced a new level of mass-mediated terrorism because of the choices the planners made with respect to method, target, timing, and scope. Nacos (2003) noted that since the first World Trade Center bombing in 1993 and the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the world has entered into a new age of megaterrorism, and the new age of terrorism is a more powerfully

media-oriented production than ever before. The targets chosen for September 11, for example, were symbols of American wealth, power, and heritage. According to a detailed manual of the Afghan jihad that was used for the instruction of would-be terrorists in al Qaeda's training camps, publicity was (and most probably still is) an overriding consideration in planning terrorist acts. Thus, the manual advised holy warriors to target "sentimental landmarks," such as the Statue of Liberty in New York, Big Ben in London, and the Eiffel Tower in Paris, because their destruction would "generate intense publicity" (as cited in Nacos, 2003).

In the attacks on New York and Washington, argued Nacos (2003), the architects of terror were successful in realizing some of their objectives. With their deadly assault, bin Laden and his followers managed to set America's public agenda for many months, perhaps even years. Opinion polls revealed that literally all Americans followed the news of the terrorist attacks (99% or 100% according to surveys) by watching and listening to television and radio and logging onto the Internet. Around the world, there was an equally universal interest, shock, and tuning in to the mass media. This was a perfect achievement with respect to the "agenda-setting" goal for which all terrorists strive. Until September 11, the terrorist assault on members of Israel's Olympic team by the Palestinian "Black September" group during the 1972 Olympic Games at Munich, Germany, was considered the single largest terrorist action, watched by an estimated audience of 800 million around the world. The advances in communication technology put the events of September 11 into the record books as the most watched terrorist spectacle ever.

Opinion polls revealed that the terror attacks on New York and Washington heightened Americans' fears of more terrorism to come and of the likelihood that they themselves or a member of their family might become victims. This effect on the targeted population was not lost on bin Laden and his associates. In commenting on the impact of the terror attack on the American enemy, the al Qaeda leader remarked with obvious satisfaction, "There is America, full of fear from north to south, from west to east. Thank God for that."[2] Moreover, by striking hard at America, argues Nacos (2003), the terrorists forced the mass media to explore their grievances in ways that by far transcended the quantity and narrow focus of the pre-crisis coverage. Media coverage of Islam-related issues changed in a rather dramatic fashion after al Qaeda's attacks on September 11 when the U.S. media tried to answer the question that President Bush had posed in his speech before a joint session of the U.S. Congress: Why do they hate us? In the process, the perpetrators of the violence achieved perhaps their most important media-dependent goal, namely, to publicize their causes, grievances, and demands.

The intensive coverage of these topics in the mass media increased the American public's knowledge about Islam. According to a CBS News survey, 55% of Americans said at the end of February 2002 that they knew more now about Islam than they did before September 2001 (Nacos, 2003). The same survey showed that 30% of the public had a positive view, and 33% a negative view, of this religion

(Nacos, 2003). However, this was actually a net gain in terms of Americans' positive attitudes toward Islam as compared to a 1993 survey conducted by the *Los Angeles Times*, when 14% revealed positive and 22% negative feelings toward Islam (Nacos, 2003). But bin Laden's most important target audience was not the American public but rather the population in Muslim countries. In the eyes of many among the Muslims, Osama bin Laden was the biggest hero: The Arab media and especially the Arab news network al Jazeera covered him as America's number one public enemy and thereby bolstered his popularity, respectability, and legitimacy among millions of Muslims abroad. In the international media—from CNN to *Time Magazine* and from al Jazeera to al Arabiya—Osama bin Laden was covered as frequently and prominently as the world's most influential legitimate leaders or sometimes even more frequently and prominently. The attention conferred on him by both the mass media and political leaders elevated him as much to a global leading figure.

The Production

One of the most influential theorists of modern terrorism was the Brazilian Carlos Marighela, whose "Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla" (1971b) became a sourcebook for many terrorist movements all over the world. In his publications, Marighela outlined the various uses that can be made of the media:

> To kidnap figures known for their artistic, sporting, or other activities who have not expressed any political views may possibly provide a form of propaganda favorable to the revolutionaries. . . . Modern mass media, simply by announcing what the revolutionaries are doing, are important instruments of the propaganda. The war of nerves, or the psychological war, is a fighting technique based on the direct or indirect use of the mass media. (Marighela, 1971a, pp. 87-90)

The coordination of urban guerrilla action, including each armed action, is the principal way of making propaganda. These actions, carried out with specific and determined objectives, inevitably become propaganda material for the mass communication system. Bank assaults, ambushes, desertion and diverting of arms, the rescue of prisoners, executions, kidnapping, sabotage, terrorism, and the war of nerves, are all cases in point. Airplanes diverted in flight, ships and trains assaulted and seized by guerrillas, can also be solely for propaganda effects. (Marighela, 1971b, p. 103)

Karber (1971) suggested a new model of analysis: "As a symbolic act, terrorism can be analyzed much like other media of communication, consisting of four basic components: transmitter (the terrorist), intended recipient (target), message (bombing, ambush) and feedback (reaction of target audience)" (p. 529). Dowling (1986) suggested applying the concept of "rhetoric genre" to modern terrorism, arguing that "terrorists engage in recurrent rhetorical forms that force the media to provide the access without which terrorism could not fulfill its objectives" (p. 14). Some terrorist events become what Bell (1978) has called "terrorist spectaculars" (p. 50) that can

be best analyzed by the "media event" conceptualization (for a comparative analysis of media events and terrorist spectaculars, see Weimann, 1987).

The growing importance attributed to publicity and mass media by terrorist organizations was revealed both in the diffusion of media-oriented terrorism (Brosius & Weimann, 1991; Weimann & Brosius, 1989, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994) and in the tactics of modern terrorists who have become more media minded. It is clear that media-wise terrorists plan their actions with the media as a major consideration. They select targets, location, and timing according to media preferences, trying to satisfy the media criteria for newsworthiness, media timetables and deadlines, and media access. They prepare visual aides for the media, such as video clips of their actions, taped interviews and declarations of the perpetrators, films, press releases, and video news releases. Hezbollah's attacks on Israeli targets were always taped, leading some analysts to suggest that every terror unit consists of at least four members: the perpetrator, a cameraman, a soundman, and a producer. Modern terrorists feed the media, directly and indirectly, with their propaganda material, often disguised as news items. They also monitor the coverage, examining closely the reporting of various media organizations. The pressure of terrorists on journalists takes many forms, from open and friendly hosting to direct threats, blackmailing, and even killings of journalists. The lynch-style execution of two Israeli soldiers as well as the execution of Palestinians suspected of collaboration with Israel were taped but not broadcast or printed by news organizations as a result of a massive campaign of threats by Palestinian terrorists. Finally, terrorist organizations operate their own media, including television channels (Al-Manar of the Hezbollah), news agencies, newspapers and magazines, radio channels, video and audio cassettes, and, recently, terrorist Web sites on the Internet.

The New Arena: Terror on the Internet

Postmodern terrorists are taking advantage of the fruits of globalization and modern technology—especially the most advanced communication technologies—to plan, coordinate, and execute their deadly campaigns. No longer geographically constrained within a particular territory, nor politically or financially dependent on a particular state, they rely on advanced communication, including the Internet. The story of the presence of terrorist groups in cyberspace has barely begun to be told (Weimann, 2004, 2006a). In 1998, fewer than half of the organizations designated as foreign terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department maintained Web sites; by the end of 1999, nearly all these terrorist groups had established their presence on "the Net." Today, all active terrorist groups have established at least one form of presence on the Internet. Our scan of the Internet in from 1998 to 2007 revealed thousands of Web sites, online forums, and chat rooms serving terrorists and their supporters. Paradoxically, the very decentralized network of computer-mediated

communication that U.S. security services created out of fear of the Soviet Union now serves the interests of the greatest foe of the world's security services since the end of the cold war: international terror. In the late 1990s, a dozen terrorist movements made their first appearance on the Net (Tsfati & Weimann, 1999, 2002). However, the number of terrorist sites grew rapidly, with more and more groups appearing on the Net: From a dozen terrorist Web sites in 1998, the number grew to 2,300 in 2003 and to more than 5,300 at the end of 2006 (Weimann, 2006b). This should come as no surprise: The more severely the interests of a minority group have been ignored, the more attractive the Internet will be for them. Terrorism and the Internet have been related in two ways. First, the Internet has become a forum for both terrorist groups and individual terrorists to spread their messages of hate and violence and to communicate with one another, their supporters, and sympathizers and even to launch psychological warfare against their enemies. Second, individuals and groups have tried to attack computer networks, including those on the Internet—what has become known as cyberterrorism or cyberwarfare. At this point, terrorists are using and abusing the Internet and benefiting from it more than they are attacking it.

The Advantages of the Internet for Modern Terrorism

The network of CMC is ideal for terrorists-as-communicators: It is decentralized, it cannot be subjected to control or restriction, it is not censored, and it allows access to anyone who wants it. The structure of modern terrorist organizations is making CMC more important and useful for them. The loosely knit network of cells and divisions and subgroups, typical to modern terrorists, all make the Internet an ideal and necessary tool for intergroup and intragroup networking. Al Qaeda, for example, has shown itself to be a remarkably nimble, flexible, and adaptive entity mainly because of its decentralized structure. The rise of networked terrorist groups is part of a broader shift to what Arquilla and Ronfeldt (2001, 2003) have called "netwar." Netwar refers to an emerging mode of conflict and crime at societal levels involving measures short of traditional war in which the protagonists are likely to consist of small, dispersed groups who communicate, coordinate, and conduct their campaigns in an "Internetted" manner and without a precise central command.

It is easy for terrorists to set up a Web site. Take, for example, al Qaeda's first long-lasting Web site, alneda.com. In the case of this site, al Qaeda members created a fictitious organization, the Center for Islamic Studies and Research, a bogus street address in Venezuela, and a free Hotmail e-mail account to contact Emerge Systems, a Web hosting company in Malaysia. The group then wired $87 to a Malaysian bank to pay for the cost of the Web site for a year. According to former CIA counterterrorism chief Vince Cannistraro (as cited in Kelly, 2002), "Internet communications have become the main communications system among al Qaeda around the world because it's safer, easier and more anonymous if they take the right precautions, and I think they're doing that." But al Qaeda operatives now are urging their members to

use caution on the Internet. Just before alneda.com was pulled off its server, it warned its members that the FBI, CIA, and Customs Service were probably monitoring the site. It promised to e-mail members the new address of the Web site after it was in operation. It also told them they could find the address in chat rooms on other terror sites, such as Hamas's qassam.net. "We strongly urge Muslim Internet professionals to spread and disseminate news and information about the jihad through e-mail lists, discussion groups and their own Web sites," said a statement on azzam.com in 2002. "The more Web sites, the better it is for us. We must make the Internet our tool."

Web sites are only one of the Internet's services used by modern terrorism; there are many other facilities on the Net—e-mail, chat rooms, e-groups, forums, virtual message boards—that are used more and more by terrorists. Thus, for example, Yahoo has become one of al Qaeda's most significant ideological bases of operation. It uses several facets of the Yahoo service, including chat functions, e-mail, and, most important, Yahoo Groups. Yahoo Groups are electronic groups (e-groups) dedicated to a specific topic whereby members of the group can discuss the topic, post relevant articles and multimedia files, and share a meeting place for those with similar interests. Creating a Yahoo Group is free, quick, and extremely easy, and several terrorist groups and their supporters have used several Yahoo Groups. Very often, the groups contain the latest links to other Web sites, serving as an online directory, and are sometimes the first to post communiqués to the public. Thus, by using Yahoo Groups, al Qaeda supporters chronicle the terrorist group's victories, disseminate hatred of non-Muslims, and provide multimedia jihad frenzy for sympathetic viewers and other al Qaeda members.

Who Are the Online Terrorists?

These advantages have not gone unnoticed by terrorist organizations, no matter what their political orientation. Islamists and Marxists, nationalists and separatists, fundamentalists and extremists, racists and anarchists: All find the Internet alluring. Today, all active terrorist organizations maintain Web sites, and many maintain more than one Web site and use several different languages. As the following illustrative list shows, these organizations and groups come from all corners of the globe:

- From the Middle East: Hamas (the Islamic Resistance Movement), the Lebanese Hezbollah (Party of God), the Al Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, Fatah Tanzim, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PLFP), the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Kahane Lives movement, the People's Mujahedin of Iran (PMOI—Mujahedin-e Khalq), the Kurdish Workers' Party (PKK), the Turkish-based Popular Democratic Liberation Front Party (DHKP/C), and the Great East Islamic Raiders Front (IBDA-C), which is also based in Turkey.
- From Europe: The Basque ETA movement, Armata Corsa (the Corsican Army), and the Real Irish Republican Army (RIRA).

- From Latin America: Peru's Tupak-Amaru (MRTA) and Shining Path (Sendero Luminoso), the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN-Colombia), and the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC).
- From Asia: Al Qaeda, the Japanese Supreme Truth (Aum Shinrikyo), Ansar al Islam (Supporters of Islam) in Iraq, the Japanese Red Army (JRA), Hizb-ul Mujehideen in Kashmir, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in the Philippines, the Pakistan-based Lashkar-e-Taiba, and the rebel movement in Chechnya.

Target Audiences for Online Terrorists

Whom do the Internet terrorists target at their sites? Are they appealing to current and potential supporters, to the international community, or to their enemies? An analysis of their contents indicates an attempt to approach all three audiences. Reaching out to supporters is evinced from the fact that the sites offer appropriate items for sale, including printed shirts, badges, flags, and video and audio cassettes. The slogans and text at these sites or portions of the site also appeal strongly to the supporter public. Of course, the sites in local languages target these audiences more directly than do the English and other-language versions. These pages include much more detailed information about recent activities of the organizations and elaborate in detail about internal politics and relationships between local groups. But an important target audience, in addition to supporters of the organizations, is the international "bystander" public and surfers who are not involved in the conflict. This is evident from the presentation of basic information about the organization and the extensive historical background material (with which the supporter public is presumably familiar). Most of the sites offer versions in several languages to enlarge their international audience. The sites make use of English and other languages in addition to the local language of the organization's supporters. Judging from the content of many of the sites, one might also infer that journalists constitute another bystander target audience. Press releases by the organizations are often placed on the Web sites. The detailed background information might also be useful for international reporters. One of Hezbollah's sites specifically addresses journalists and invites them to interact with the organization's press office via e-mail.

Approaches to the "enemy" audiences are not as clearly apparent from the content of many sites. However, in some sites, the desire to reach this audience is evident by the efforts to demoralize and scare the enemy or to create feelings of guilt. The organizations try to use their Web sites to change public opinion in their enemies' states, to weaken public support for the governing regime, to stimulate public debate, and, of course, to demoralize the enemy. The Internet is used by terrorists to post scary footage of executions, beheadings, fatal snipers, and deadly bombings to frighten the enemy's troops. They also use the Net to deliver threats and messages to enemy governments and enemy populations. A Saudi radical Muslim group, the

Brigade of the Two Holy Mosques, sent a threat in December 2003 to the House of Saud and its subjects: "We are warning anyone who cooperates with the authorities or gives the tyrants information leading to the arrest of one of the mujahedeen. He will be liquidated" (as cited in Spencer, 2003). The next day, a man identifying himself as Daleel Al-Mojahid (meaning "guide for the jihad warrior") and claiming affiliation with the Taliban and al Qaeda issued his own warning to those participating in the previous weekend's Loya Jirga council in Afghanistan:

> We . . . assure you and send you our coming news that we will start killing all the (Loya Jerga) council that is due to start elections, we have sent them all messages warning them that if any of them show up in the elections they will be killed directly on our hands. (as cited in Spencer, 2003)

Both of these threats were delivered through the Internet. More than a year later, in June 2004, al Qaeda posted an alarming threat to Americans and Western airlines through a warning to Muslims:

> We are hereby renewing our call and warning to our Muslim brothers against associating [mingling] with the Crusaders: Americans, Westerners, and all the Polytheists in the Arab Peninsula. Muslims must keep away from them, their residences and compounds, and all their means of transportation. . . . We do not wish for any of our Muslim brothers to bring it upon himself, and allow his killing by keeping company with the enemy that must be fought. (as cited in Site Institute, 2004)

This statement was issued by "al Qaeda of the Arabian Peninsula" on an Islamic Web site known to be an Al Qaeda mouthpiece and on several Arabic-language jihad forums (Site Institute, 2004).

The Rhetoric of Terrorist Sites

One of the common elements in terrorist Web sites is the justification given to the use of violence. A useful theory guiding our analysis of the terrorist cyber rhetoric has been Albert Bandura's (1999, 2002, 2004) theory of selective moral disengagement. This general theory of the rhetorical attempt of communicators to disengage or distance themselves from their own use of violence was not devised for terrorist discourse but, as we demonstrate here, is a useful analytic tool to examine terrorist rhetoric. The fact that terrorists need to justify their aberrant behavior in terms of fulfilling some higher societal need can be understood in the context of social cognitive theory; how they justify this behavior can be understood in the psychological concept of moral disengagement. Social cognitive theory attempts to explain how individuals who are engaged in aberrant behavior can justify their activities. According to this theory, people generally tend to refrain from behaving in ways that violate

their moral standards. People do not usually engage in harmful conduct until they have justified, to themselves, the morality of their actions. Over the centuries, much destructive conduct has been perpetrated by ordinary, decent people in the name of righteous ideologies, religious principles, and nationalistic imperatives. Adversaries sanctify their militant actions but condemn those of their antagonists as barbarity masquerading under a mask of outrageous moral reasoning. Each side feels morally superior to the other. For moral disengagement to function, the theory suggests seven practices:

- Displacement of responsibility: A set of dissociative practices operates by distorting the relationship between the agent's actions and the effects of the actions. Blaming the victim or circumstances is another effective method that decreases responsibility. With displacement of responsibility, individuals view their actions as arising from social pressures and are, therefore, not responsible for their actions. The action can be ascribed to compelling circumstances and therefore is not a personal decision.
- Diffusion of responsibility: Personal responsibility can also be obscured by diffusion of responsibility. This can occur by segmentation of duties, where each segment by itself is fairly benign, although the totality is harmful. Group decisions can be used to diffuse the responsibility.
- Dehumanization of targets: People find violence easier if they do not consider their victims as human beings. Minimizing the victimization caused by one's action is possible by highlighting the impersonal character of the attacks, by focusing on the targets' symbolic meaning, and by stripping the victim of human attributes. Dehumanization results in the victim's being viewed as subhuman and not as a person with feelings and qualities.
- Euphemistic language: According to the theory, language plays an important role in shaping an individual's perception of his or her actions. Reprehensible conduct first can be masked by euphemistic language, and in some cases, it can allow the conduct to be seen as respectable. Euphemistic language is used widely to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it. For example, al Qaeda always refers to the 9/11 events as attacks on symbols of American power, wealth, and consumerism but never to the killing of some 3,000 people. Euphemizing is an injurious weapon. People behave much more cruelly when their violent actions are given a sanitized label than when they are called aggression.
- Advantageous comparisons: Reprehensible conduct can be masked by comparison to other, more injurious behavior. The advantageous or palliative comparison is more effective when more flagrant activities, especially those performed by the "enemy" or "other" are used in the comparison (e.g., comparing a symbolic attack on military posts by terrorists to the mass murder conducted by a strong and well-equipped army).
- Distortion of sequence of events: Moral responsibility can be minimized by disregarding or distorting the consequences of an action (i.e., arguing that the terrorist act was only a reaction to a former action of the enemy, the government, the army, etc.). Ignoring the detrimental consequences of the actions, as in selective inattention or through cognitive distortion, reduces the feelings of guilt.

- Attribution of blame: The last set of disengagement practices focuses on the recipients of the acts. Dehumanization of the victim, or stripping the victim of human attributes, results in the victim's being viewed as subhuman and not as a person with feelings. In moral disengagement, by attribution of blame, perpetrators view themselves as victims who have been provoked. The perpetrator's actions now become construed as defensive or retaliatory. The victim gets blamed and accused of bringing the actions upon themselves.

The analysis of terrorist Web sites' rhetoric reveals that all these methods are used, especially with regard to the use of violence. The most popular theme is the displacement of responsibility. Violence is presented as a necessity foisted on the weak as the only means with which to deal with an oppressive enemy. The blame is thus attributed to others (U.S. president, the Zionist nation, the corrupted West, the infidels). This is often accompanied by the use of diffusion of responsibility. As Bandura himself suggests, Islamic extremists mount their jihad, which is construed as self-defense against tyrannical, decadent infidels who despoil and seek to enslave the Muslim world. Bin Laden portrays his global terrorism as serving a holy imperative. In his Web sites, he argues, "We will continue this course because it is part of our religion and because Allah, praise and glory be to him, ordered us to carry out jihad so that the word of Allah may remain exalted to the heights" (as cited in Ludlow, 2001). Through the jihad, they are carrying out Allah's will as a "religious duty." The prime agency for the holy terror is displaced to Allah. Bin Laden bestializes the American enemy as "lowly people" perpetrating acts that "the most ravenous of animals would not descend to." Terrorism is sanitized, as he says, "The winds of faith have come" to eradicate the "debauched" oppressors. His followers see themselves as holy warriors who gain a blessed eternal life through their "martyrdom" (as cited in Ludlow, 2001).

Another rhetorical structure related to legitimizing the use of violence is the demonizing and delegitimization of the enemy. The members of the movement or organization are presented as freedom fighters, forced against their will to use violence because a ruthless enemy is crushing the rights and dignity of their people or group. The enemy of the movement or the organization is the real terrorist, many sites insist, and "Our violence is dwarfed in comparison to his aggression" is a routine slogan. Terrorist rhetoric tries to shift the responsibility to the opponent, displaying his brutality, his inhumanity, and his immorality. The violence of the "freedom" and "liberation" movements is dwarfed in comparison with the cruelty of the opponent. The texts in terrorist sites rely on sanitizing language. Through the power of sanitized language, even killing a human being loses much of its repugnance. Bombing missions are described as "servicing the target," in the likeness of a public utility. The civilians the bombs kill are linguistically converted to "collateral damage." Al Qaeda's attacks on 9/11 are presented as attacks on symbols of American power, on towers and buildings, thus ignoring the death of thousands of innocent civilians. This also serves the tactic of advantageous comparison, as Bandura (2002) argues,

Terrorists see their behavior as acts of selfless martyrdom by comparing them with widespread cruelties inflicted on the people with whom they identify. The more flagrant the contrasting inhumanities, the more likely it is that one's own destructive conduct will appear benevolent. (p. 105)

The terrorists' fifth rhetorical tactic, according to Bandura's (1999, 2002, 2004) list, is to emphasize "their own" weakness in contrast to the state, army, and so on. The organizations attempt to substantiate the claim that terror is the weapon of the weak. As noted earlier, despite the ever-present vocabulary of "the armed struggle" or "resistance," the terror sites avoid mentioning or noting how they victimize others. On the other hand, the actions of the authorities against the terror groups are heavily stressed, usually with words such as *slaughter*, *murder*, *genocide*, and the like. The organization is constantly being persecuted, its leaders are subject to assassination attempts, its supporters are massacred, its freedom of expression is curtailed, and its adherents are arrested. This tactic, which portrays the organization as small, weak, and hunted down by a power or a strong state, turns the terrorists into the underdog. This tactic relates also to the distortion-of-sequence tactic, when terrorists present their actions as reactions to prior attacks and violence applied by their enemies. A good example of this rhetoric is found on the Chechen Web site. An article posted on the Chechen rebels' Web site Kavkaz-Tsentr (www.kavkazcenter.com/) in late 2003 has justified attacks by suicide bombers in Russian cities as being the Chechen people's right to self-defense. It said that those were attacks on "the enemy's backyard," not acts of terrorism. The Chechens have endured pain and suffering for 12 years, and now "the time has come to die together," the article said. The following is from the Web site's text:

The actions of the martyrs cannot be justified, say assorted public figures and heads of state who send telegrams with condolences to [Russian President Vladimir] Putin. For the sake of justice, we should say that not all countries send their condolences to the murderers. Still, there are a lot of those who mourn and condemn. According to their logic, the Chechen nation must die magnanimously and in silence, without disturbing the respectable appearance of the "civilized world" and without hindering the Kremlin butchers' killings. The Chechens do not have the right to stain with their blood streets of the Russian cities which are bases of the aggressor's army. You want to shed blood in Chechnya—please, as much as you want. But only Chechen blood. But shedding blood of the occupiers is terrorism. Russian tank driver, with intestines of Chechen children on its caterpillar track, and the pilot of a low-flying warplane shelling a bus with women and infants are just unscrupulous about the use of force. A Chechen fighter firing at an armored column or a Chechen widow blowing herself up together with the pilots who have murdered her children are terrorists and cannot be justified. . . . The Chechen nation has the right to die but no right to defense.

Finally, some of the terrorist sites are replete with the rhetoric of nonviolence, messages of love of peace, and support for a nonviolent solution. Although these are

violent organizations, many of their sites claim that they seek peaceful solutions, diplomatic settlements, or arrangements reached through international pressure. Terrorist rhetoric on the Internet tries to present a mix of images and arguments in which the terrorists appear as victims forced to turn to violence to achieve their just goals in the face of a brutal, merciless enemy devoid of moral restraints.

Conclusion

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism presented a tough challenge to democratic societies and liberal values. The threat is not limited to media manipulation and psychological warfare launched by terrorists; it also includes the danger of restrictions imposed on the freedom of the press and freedom of expression by those who try to fight terrorism. However, terrorist exploitation of the Internet seems to make the challenge even tougher. As this study reveals, terrorist organizations and their supporters maintain thousands of Web sites, exploiting the unregulated, anonymous, and easily accessible nature of the Internet for various purposes. How should democratic societies respond? Challenging terrorist use of the mass media and especially of the Internet is an extremely sensitive and delicate issue, because most of the rhetoric disseminated is considered protected speech under the First Amendment or similar laws in other Western societies.

This is not the place to discuss a definitive answer to terrorist exploitation of the Internet, but two conclusions are to be stated. First, we must become better informed about the uses to which terrorists put the Internet and better able to monitor their activities. Journalists, scholars, policy makers, and even security agencies have tended to focus on the exaggerated threat of cyberterrorism and paid insufficient attention to the more routine uses made of the Internet (Weimann, 2004, 2006a). Those uses are numerous and, from the terrorists' perspective, invaluable. Hence, it is imperative that security agencies continue to improve their ability to study and monitor terrorist activities on the Internet and explore measures to limit the usability of this medium by modern terrorists.

Second, although we clearly must defend our societies better against terrorism, we must not in the process erode the very qualities and values that make our societies worth defending. The Internet is in many ways an almost perfect embodiment of the democratic ideals of free speech and open communication; it is a marketplace of ideas unlike any that has existed before. Unfortunately, the freedom offered by the Internet is vulnerable to abuse from groups that, paradoxically, are themselves often hostile to uncensored thought and expression. The use of advanced techniques to monitor, search, track, and analyze Internet communication and contents carries inherent dangers. Although such technologies might prove very helpful in the fight against cyberterrorism and Internet-savvy terrorists, they would also hand participating governments, especially authoritarian governments and agencies with little public accountability, tools with which to violate civil liberties domestically and abroad. It does not take

much imagination to recognize that the long-term implications could be profound and damaging for democracies and their values, adding a heavy price in terms of diminished civil liberties to the high toll exacted by terrorism itself.

The new communication technologies and especially the Internet carry a paradigm shift: They empower the individuals over states or societies. They do so by allowing for free access to information, to mass media, to communities, to alternative sources. Indeed, governments and states do employ these technologies for their purposes, but the power shift is more from central, monolithic, and hierarchical structures to individuals and groups. The Internet's beauty as a mass medium is in its liberal, free, and unregulated nature. These advantages, as this study reveals, are also being abused by modern terrorists. Is this one of the unavoidable prices of free democratic media? We should be looking for a proactive compromise that will minimize the abuse of the Internet by both terrorism and counterterrorism.

If an elastic band is overstretched, it will eventually snap back with a sharp sting to the hand that forced it. Similarly, intensifying repression of civil liberties and exploitation of privacy are far more sinister in the long run than the threat of terrorism, international or domestic. We should recognize that terrorism has been around for hundreds of years and is not likely to go away. Modern societies, it appears, will have to learn to live with some terrorism, which leads to the issue of trade-offs. A Harris poll conducted in October 2001 found that 63% of Americans favored monitoring of Internet discussions and chat rooms, and 54% favored monitoring cell phones and e-mail. In 2003, Viscusi and Zeckhauser conducted a study to examine people's willingness to sacrifice civil liberties in an effort to reduce terrorism risks. They tried to outline the basics of the civil liberties–versus–terrorism risk trade-off. Because the desired balance between these conflicting concerns depends in large part on individual attitudes, the researchers surveyed a sample of Americans for their willingness to trade safety for civil rights. According to the study's report, the findings reveal a willingness to sacrifice some civil liberties for increased security: In the public's view, the optimal level of civil liberties, in practice, is not necessarily always the fullest extent of those liberties: Americans are willing to trade a degree of civil liberty for other valued benefits, prevention of terrorism. The optimal level of civil liberties varies according to circumstances. For example, we would not normally tolerate having every car driving along a roadway stopped and inspected, but we would be more understanding if a serial killer were on the loose. Thus, a more realistic way to protect the Internet, to prevent its abuse by terrorists while at the same time protecting civil liberties, is to look for the "golden path," that is, the best compromise. The 12th-century Jewish philosopher Rambam termed the golden path "the Right Path," a balance between two diametrically opposed extremes. Finding such a path means that we will have to accept both some vulnerabilities of the Internet to terrorism and some constraints on civil liberties, but the underlying guidelines should be to minimize both sorts of ills by looking at the trade-offs between securing our safety and securing our liberties.

Some will argue that we must give up some freedoms to enjoy the ones we cherish the most. Amitai Etzioni, author of *The Limits of Privacy*, argues in his essay "On Seeking Middle Ground on Privacy vs. Security" that it is wrong to define counterterrorism surveillance tools such as Carnivore, Magic Lantern, and others as good or evil:

> As with all technologies, the proper question is how it will be used. For instance, if evidence about a suspected terrorist is presented to a court of law, Magic Lantern should be allowed to decode the suspect's messages. But if it is installed at the discretion of every cop on the beat, the rights of many innocent people could be violated. (Etzioni, 2002, p. 2)

Proper guidelines are key, and if these are not established, then such measures will usurp a large part of our liberties. Surveying the public, argues Etzioni, may well be unavoidable in the post–September 11 world, but he also warns that retaining information about innocent conduct by innocent people poses a massive threat to privacy.

Let us conclude by stating that avoiding any search for compromises and best trade-offs may have disastrous consequences: Terrorist use of the Internet will grow; it will become more sophisticated and more manipulative. This, in turn, may lead to harsher counterterrorism measures enforced by terror-stricken governments and security agencies, as noted in Timothy Lynch's (2002) warning:

> Government officials typically respond to terrorist attacks by proposing and enacting "antiterrorism" legislation. To assuage the wide-spread anxiety of the populace, policymakers make the dubious claim that they can prevent terrorism by curtailing the privacy and civil liberties of the people. Because everyone wants to be safe and secure, such legislation is usually very popular and passes the legislative process relatively smoothly during times of trouble. . . . This cycle of terrorist attack followed by government curtailment of civil liberties must be broken—or our democracy will eventually lose the key attribute that has made it great: freedom. (p. 1)

Notes

1. The quotes are taken from the translations of a videotape, presumably made in mid-November 2001 in Afghanistan. Available from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/nation/specials.

2. Bin Laden's statement is available from http://www.guardian.co.uk./waronterror/story/0,1361,565069,00.html.

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