

# Mass-Media Theater

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*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<sup>1</sup>

## The Psychology 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 scare.” During the 1793 French Revolution, the Reign of Terror resulted in the execution of 17,000 people, all conducted before large audiences and accompanied by sensational publicity, thus spreading the intended fear among any citizens with the temerity to object.

Modern terrorism can be understood in terms of the same production requirements as any theatrical engagement: meticulous attention paid to script preparation, cast selection, sets, props, role-playing, and minute-by-minute stage management. And just like compelling stage plays or ballet performances, the media orientation of terrorist activity requires careful attention to detail in order to be effective. The victim is, after all, only



Al-Qaida broadcasts over its own media outlet, the Voice of the Caliphate.

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“the skin on a drum beaten to achieve a calculated impact on a wider audience.”<sup>2</sup>

Paralleling the growth in technology-driven opportunities 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.<sup>3</sup>*

The most powerful, violent, and perfectly choreographed performance of the modern “theater of terror” was the September 11, 2001, strike on America. That November, Osama bin Laden discussed the Twin Tower attacks, referring to the suicide terrorists as “vanguards of Islam” and marveling that “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.”<sup>4</sup> But bin Laden’s most important target audience was not the American public, but rather the inhabitants of Muslim countries. The attention conferred on him by both the mass media and political leaders elevated him to a leading global figure.

In her 2003 study, Brigitte Nacos argued that bin Laden revealed that he considered terrorism as, first and foremost, a vehicle to dispatch messages—“speeches” in his words—and he concluded that Americans, in particular, had heard and reacted with



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An image from a videotape posted on an Islamic Web site in September 2004, in which terrorists threaten to behead a kidnapped Western hostage.

the proper psychological impact to the intended 9/11 communication. “There is America, full of fear from north to south, from west to east,” he said. “Thank God for that.”<sup>5</sup>

By striking hard at America, Nacos argues, the terrorists took control of the global agenda, through the mass media, and changed the discussion from grieving over the thousands murdered to global exploration of their own grievances. The perpetrators had achieved, perhaps, their most important media goal: publicizing themselves, their causes, their grievances, and their demands.

The targets chosen for that event were symbols of American wealth, power, and heritage. According to a manual used in al-Qaida’s training camps, publicity was—and most probably still is—an overriding consideration. Thus, jihadists were advised to target “sentimental landmarks” such as New York’s Statue of Liberty, London’s Big Ben, and Paris’ Eiffel Tower because their destruction would “generate intense publicity.”<sup>6</sup>

The advances in communication technology put the events of September 11 into the record books as the most watched terrorist spectacle ever.

### The Terrorist Production

One of the most influential theorists of modern terrorism was the Brazilian Carlos Marighela, whose “Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla” became a global terrorist sourcebook. He wrote:

*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. ... 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.<sup>7</sup>*

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism has led several scholars to reconceptualize their studies: “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).”<sup>8</sup>



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A member of the Arab commando group that seized and killed 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team during the 1972 summer Olympics in Munich, Germany, stands on the balcony of the Olympic village quarters where the hostages were being held.

Ralph Dowling suggested applying the concept of “rhetoric genre,” arguing that “terrorists engage in recurrent rhetorical forms that force the media to provide the access without which terrorism could not fulfill its objectives.”<sup>9</sup>

Some terrorist activities have so become what J. Bowyer Bell has called “terrorist spectacles”<sup>10</sup> that they can best be analyzed as “media events.” Hezbollah’s attacks on Israeli targets, for example, are 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.

It is clear that terrorists plan their actions with the media as a major consideration. They select targets, location, and timing according to media preferences, trying to satisfy criteria for newsworthiness, media timetables, and deadlines. They concoct and prepare visual aides—such as film, video clips of attacks and forced “confessions” of hostages, taped interviews, and allegiance declarations of perpetrators of violence—while also offering professional press and video news releases.

Modern terrorists feed the media, both directly and indirectly, with propaganda disguised as news items. They also monitor the coverage, closely examining the reports of various journalists and their media organizations. The terrorists’ pressure on reporters takes many forms—from open and friendly hosting to direct threats, blackmail, and even intimidating murders.

Finally, terrorist organizations operate their own media—from television channels (Hezbollah’s Al-Manar and al-Qaida’s Voice of the Caliphate), news agencies,

newspapers and magazines, radio channels, and video- and audiocassettes to, most recently, Internet Web sites.

## The New Arena: Terror on the Internet

Postmodern terrorists are taking advantage of the fruits of globalization and modern technology to plan, coordinate, and execute their deadly campaigns.

No longer geographically constrained within a particular territory, dependent politically or financially on a particular state, these terrorists rely on advanced communication capabilities, including the Internet, to advance their murderous agenda. In 1998, less 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 Internet. Today, all active terrorist groups have established at least one presence on the Internet, with our monitoring from 1998 to 2007 revealing over 5,000 terrorist Web sites, online forums, and chat rooms.<sup>11</sup>

Terrorism and the Internet are related in two ways. First, the Internet has become a forum for both groups and individuals to spread messages of hate and violence and to communicate with one another, their supporters, and their sympathizers, while launching psychological warfare. Second, both individuals and groups have tried to attack computer networks in what has become known as cyber-terrorism or cyber-warfare. At this point, however, terrorists are using and benefiting from the Internet more than they are attacking it.

Computer-mediated communication is ideal for terrorists: It is decentralized, cannot be subjected to control or restriction, is not censored, and allows free access to anyone who wants it. The typical, loosely knit network of cells, divisions, and subgroups of modern terrorist organizations finds the Internet both ideal and vital for inter- and intra-group networking.

Web sites, however, are only one of the Internet’s services to be hijacked by terrorists; there are many other facilities such as e-mail, chat rooms, e-groups, forums, and virtual message boards.

Many of these Web sites are used for psychological campaigns against enemy states and their military forces. They post horrifying footage of hostages and captives executed (often by primitive beheadings), and military personnel assassinated in the field by snipers, shot down by shoulder missiles, or their vehicles blown up by roadside

or suicide bombers. The messages, verbal and graphic, attempt to demoralize and scare the enemy or to create feelings of guilt, doubt, and inner dissension, while delivering a threatening message to various governments and their populations. “We don’t care who we kill,” they say, “and none of you can be protected.” They gain their power from the reaction to fear.

## The Rhetoric of Terrorist Propaganda

One common element in terrorist Web sites is the justification given to the use of violence. A useful theory guiding this analysis has been Albert Bandura’s theory of “moral disengagement,” although not developed specifically for terrorists,<sup>12</sup> who, like criminals, attempt to disengage or distance themselves from their horrific use of violence, by the following methods:

- **Displacement of responsibility**—This involves distorting the relationship between one’s actions and the effects of those actions, and/or blaming the victim or circumstances for violent actions and innocent deaths.
- **Diffusion of responsibility**—This is done by segmenting duties, where each individual action by itself is fairly benign, but the totality is harmful. Group decisions can also be used to diffuse individual responsibility for an action.
- **Dehumanization of targets**—Committing violence against innocents is easier if they are not perceived as fellow, individual humans. One can minimize the brutality imposed on others by focusing, instead, on the impersonal character of the attacks and the targets’ symbolic meaning, and by naming and viewing the victims as less than human—vermin, dogs, and so forth. Osama bin Laden, for example, bestializes Americans as “lowly people” perpetrating acts that “the most ravenous of animals would not descend to.”
- **Euphemistic language**—This includes making injurious conduct respectable and reducing personal responsibility by referring to it in impersonal terms. For example, al-Qaida always refers to the 9/11 events as attacks on symbols of American power and consumerism, never to the murder of some 3,000 men, women, and children.
- **Advantageous comparisons**—Reprehensible conduct is masked by comparing it to other, more injurious behavior. Again, the deaths of innocent

people, including children, in the 9/11 attacks during peacetime are compared to the U.S. atomic bombing of Japan to end World War II, in which hundreds of thousands were killed, but the United States was never the aggressor, not even in victory.

- **Distortion of sequence of events and attribution of blame**—Disregarding facts or distorting the consequences of a violent action on fellow citizens by arguing that a terrorist attack was only a retaliatory action or defensive measure against a previous provocation of the enemy allows terrorists to reduce personal feelings of guilt. The victim gets blamed and others are accused of bringing about reprehensible actions, as when kidnapped hostages are beheaded because their governments failed to meet terrorist demands.

An analysis of the rhetoric used on terrorist Web sites reveals that the most popular moral disengagement used is “displacement of responsibility.” Violence is uniformly presented as a necessity to deal with an oppressive enemy, and all ensuing murder and destruction is attributed to others. The prime agency for jihadists engaging in terror, for example, is displaced to Allah, thereby attempting to sanitize murder and mayhem while glorifying “martyrdom.”

Another rhetorical structure found on terrorist Web pages is the attempt to legitimize any members of any anti-establishment group as freedom fighters and anyone who speaks against them as “the real terrorist.”

Finally, some of the sites of violent terrorist organizations are replete with the rhetoric of nonviolence, with messages claiming “love of peace,” and support for a diplomatic solution. This mix of images and arguments is presented to reach all available audiences.

## The Challenge Ahead

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism presents a tough challenge to democratic societies and liberal values. The threat is not limited to media manipulation and psychological warfare; it also includes the danger of restrictions imposed on the freedom of the press and expression by those who try to fight terrorism.

How should democratic societies respond? This is an extremely sensitive and delicate issue since most of the rhetoric disseminated is considered protected free speech under the U.S. Constitution or similar laws in other Western societies.

New technologies carry a paradigm shift: They empower individuals over states or societies through free access to information and mass communication. The Internet's beauty as a mass medium is in its liberal, free, and unregulated nature. Is misuse of it one of the unavoidable prices of democracy? We should be looking for a proactive compromise that will minimize its abuse by terrorists while maintaining democratic freedoms. ■

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*The opinions expressed in this article do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the U.S. government.*

#### Endnotes

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