

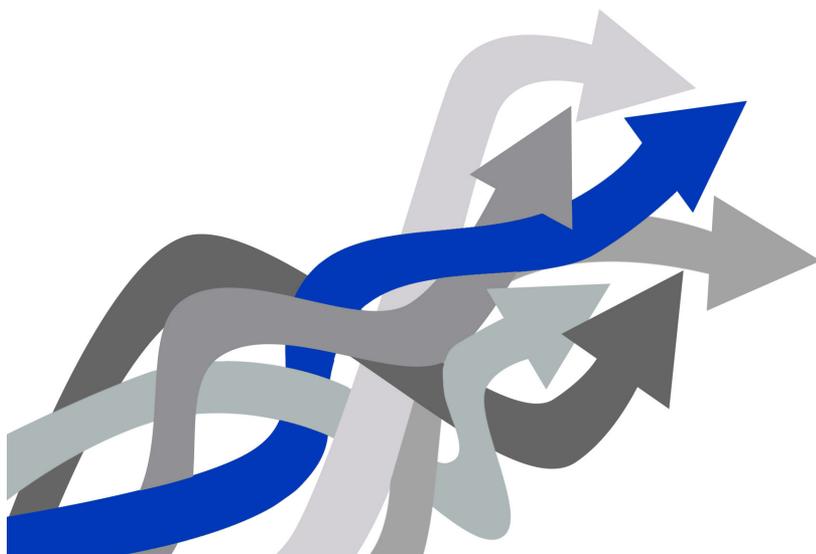


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From Theaters to Cyberspace: Mass-Mediated Terrorism

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From Theaters to Cyberspace: Mass-Mediated Terrorism

Gabriel Weimann

The seed was planted in 1972 in Munich, Germany. I was then a very young man, just released from three years of military service in the Israeli Army. I traveled to Europe and, as a tourist, found myself in Munich in the summer of 1972. The attraction was the Munich Olympics that turned out to be a tragedy: During the event, 11 members of the Israeli Olympic team were taken hostage and eventually killed, along with a German police officer, by the Palestinian terrorist group Black September. Like 800 million others in the world, I was glued to the television screen, watching what started as a dramatic thriller of kidnapping, terrorists and police forces, and ended as a sad and fatal tragedy. The entire world was watching, and I believe that this experience directed me, years later, to study terrorism and the media. Moreover, a decade later, when I wrote my article on the “Theater of Terror” (Weimann, 1983), I applied the metaphor of theater to the case of the 1972 Olympics. Thus, my experience as a spectator in the world audience of the Munich massacre probably led to my work as an academic researcher in the field of mass-mediated terrorism.

Media and Terrorism

From its early days, terror has combined communicative and psychological aspects. Specifically, the word “terror” comes from the Latin word “terrere,” which means “to frighten” or “to scare.” The first use of large-scale terrorism was during the popular phase of the French Revolution. The period from June 1793 to July 1794 in France is known as the Reign of Terror or simply “the Terror.” The upheaval following the overthrow of the monarchy plunged

the nation into chaos and the government into frenzied paranoia. The Revolutionary Tribunal sentenced thousands to the guillotine. Estimates of the death toll range between 16,000 and 40,000. The executions were conducted before large audiences and were accompanied by sensational publicity, thus spreading the intended fear.

Modern terrorists have become exposed to new opportunities for exerting mass psychological impacts as a result of technological advances in communication technologies. They replaced the public executions in Parisian squares with spectacular violent productions performed on the global stages of the mass media. Several academics and journalists have noticed the emergence of media-oriented terrorism. Laqueur said that “the media are the terrorist’s best friends, the terrorists’ act by itself is nothing, publicity is all” (Laqueur 1976: 104), while Nacos noted that “getting the attention of the mass media, the public, and decision-makers is the *raison d’être* behind modern terrorism’s increasingly shocking violence” (Nacos 1994: 8). Government officials have tended to blame the media with terrorists’ success, as the then British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher argued, “Democracies must find ways to starve the terrorists and hijackers of the oxygen of publicity on which they depend.”

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism led several communication and terrorism scholars to re-conceptualize modern terrorism within the framework of symbolic communication theory. As Jenkins concluded in 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” (Jenkins 1975: 4). Karber (1971), a communication scholar, 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), while we

adopted the ‘Theater of Terror’ metaphor to examine modern terrorism as an attempt to communicate messages through the use of orchestrated violence (Weimann 1983; Weimann & Winn 1994).

The Theater of Terror

Several terrorist organizations realized the potentials of mass-mediated terrorism in terms of effectively reaching huge audiences. Our study (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).

Paralleling the growth in technology-driven opportunities for terrorist action were efforts 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 (cited by Dobson and Paine 1977, p. 15).

The most powerful and violent performance of modern terrorism 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 kamikaze pilots 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.” From the ‘Theater of Terror’ perspective, the September 11th 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 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 11th attack introduced a new level of mass-mediated terrorism because of the choices the planners made with respect to method, target, timing and scope. The targets chosen for September 11th, 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’.

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 accessing 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.

The success of media-savvy terrorists in gaining access to the media, achieving publicity and impact raised the question: Why is the stage given? Is there a mutual-benefit symbiosis between publicity-seeking terrorists and drama-seeking media? Terrorist events are often so newsworthy that the media cannot ignore them. The indicators include factors such as: intensity, unexpectedness, unambiguity, scarcity, reference to elite nations and/or elite people, personification and events of negative nature. It is quite clear that many terrorist events are, or preplanned to be, satisfying these conditions. A study by Weimann and Brosius (1991) focused on the newsworthiness of international terrorism. The Research and Development (RAND) Corporation chronology of international terrorism and the coverage given to each terrorist event in the three American television networks and nine newspapers from various countries served as the database. By means of multivariate analysis, the effects of various attributes of terrorist events on media selection and coverage were examined. In general, the level of victimization (amount of fatalities and injuries), the type of action, the identity of the perpetrators, and an attributable responsibility were found to be the best predictors of media coverage.

It is clear that media-wise terrorists are planning 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, the media timetables and deadlines and media access. They prepare visual aids for the media, like video clips of their actions, taped interviews and declarations of the perpetrators, films, PR (Press Release) or VNR (Video News Release). Modern terrorists are feeding the media, directly and indirectly, with their propaganda material, often disguised as news items. They also monitor the coverage, examining closely the coverage of various media organizations. Finally, terrorist organizations operate their own media, from television channels (e.g., Al-Manar, the satellite television of Hezbollah), news agencies, newspapers and magazines, radio channels, video and audio cassettes and, recently, terrorist websites on the Internet.

When New Terrorism Met the New Media

Paradoxically, the most innovative network of communication developed by modern Western societies – the Internet, with its numerous online networking platforms – now serves the interests of the greatest foe of the West, namely international terrorism. The growing presence of modern terrorism on the Internet is at the nexus of two key trends: the democratization of communications driven by user-generated content on the Internet and the growing awareness of modern terrorists of the potential of the Internet for their purposes. The internet has therefore long been a favorite tool of the terrorists. Decentralized and providing almost perfect anonymity, it cannot be subjected to control or restriction, and allows access to anyone who wants it. Large or small, terrorist groups have their own websites, using this medium to spread propaganda, raise funds, seduce, radicalize, recruit and train members, communicate, and conspire, plan and launch attacks. Besides thousands of terrorist websites, modern terrorists rely on chatrooms, e-groups, forums, social networking, and online platforms like YouTube, Facebook, Twitter and more (Weimann, 2006a; 2011c; 2012a; 2015).

The interactive capabilities of the Internet, like social networking sites, video-sharing sites and online communities, allow terrorists to assume a proactive position. Instead of waiting for web-surfers to come across their websites and propaganda materials, terrorists can now lure targeted individuals to the sites. The online social networking provides terrorists with an ideal platform to attract, seduce, teach, radicalize, train and activate individuals all over the world. The Internet has provided terrorists with a whole new virtual realm to conduct their most sinister transactions. As numerous studies have revealed, most of the recent terrorists involved in attacks or planning of attacks were radicalized, recruited, trained and even launched online (Weimann 2012b). The Council on Foreign Relations concluded its report on online terrorism:

Terrorists increasingly are using the Internet as a means of communication both with each other and the rest of the world. By now, nearly everyone has seen at least some images from propaganda videos published on terrorist sites and rebroadcast on the world's news networks... The Internet is a powerful tool

for terrorists, who use online message boards and chat rooms to share information, coordinate attacks, spread propaganda, raise funds, and recruit.

Terrorism has changed its face, and so did the Internet and its platforms. The U.S. House of Representatives Subcommittee on Counterterrorism and Intelligence produced its report on “Jihadist Use of Social Media – How to Prevent Terrorism and Preserve Innovation” (2011). The conclusion included the statement:

For years, terrorists have communicated online, sharing al Qaeda propaganda or writing in online forums dedicated entirely to the prospect of Islamist terrorism. But they have recently evolved with technological changes, utilizing social media sites such as Facebook and YouTube to enhance their capabilities. In the same places the average person posts photos and communicates with friends and family, our enemies distribute videos praising Osama bin Laden. . . These examples highlight the incredible challenge posed by terrorists engaging online. The Internet was designed to ease communication, and it must stay that way. However, we cannot ignore the reality that we have been unable to effectively prevent jihadi videos and messages from being spread on popular social media websites like YouTube and Facebook.

The Terror on the Internet Project

This project is based on a database collected in over 15 years of monitoring thousands of terrorist websites (Weimann, 2006a; 2007; 2008d; 2010a; 2012a; 2015). When we started this research in the late 1990s, there were merely a dozen terrorist websites (Tsfati and Weimann 2002); by 2000, virtually all terrorist groups had established their presence on the Internet, and in 2003 there were over 2,600 terrorist websites. The number rose dramatically, and by August 2013 our archive contained over 9,600 websites serving terrorists and their supporters. Our monitoring of terrorist websites involves tracking them, downloading their contents, translating the messages (texts and graphics) and archiving them according to a preset coding system. The project enjoyed funding from various academic foundations. This project allowed for various content analyses including the following studies (all published in scientific journals):

1. Terrorist online radicalization, recruitment and mobilization (Weimann, 2005a; 2006b; 2007; 2008b; 2009d)
2. Al-Qaeda's reliance on the Internet (Weimann, 2008c; 2008d; 2011b): Monitoring the changes in al-Qaeda's uses of the Net and highlighting the correlation between these changes and the changing character of al-Qaeda structure,
3. The threat of Cyberterrorism (Weimann, 2005b; 2006a; 2006d; 2008e; 2015): Examining the potential for cyber-attacks based on references to such actions in terrorist chatter.
4. The use of new media (YouTube, Twitter, MySpace, Facebook, etc.) by terrorists (Weimann and Vail Gorder, 2009c; Weimann, 2010a; 2010b; 2011b; 2014; 2015). These studies reveal the growing use and sophistication by terrorists of social networking online and the targeted populations.
5. The use of online Fatwas by terrorist (Weimann, 2009a; Weimann, 2011a): These studies revealed how the Internet is used to justify actions and solve inner debates by posting online Fatwas (religious rules).
6. Terrorist debates online (Weimann, 2006c; 2009a): What are the issues debated by terrorists online (including type of action, legitimate targets, use of women and children)?
7. Narrowcasting: Terrorists targeting children and women online (Weimann, 2008f; 2009b; 2015). The growing use of online platforms to target specific sub-populations, a marketing technique adapted by Internet-savvy terrorists.
8. Lone Wolf terrorism and the Internet (Weimann 2012b; 2015): A study on the growing popularity of using the Net for the attraction, radicalization and instruction of Lone Wolf terrorists.
9. Countering online terrorism (Aly, Weimann and Weimann, 2014, Von Knop and Weimann 2008, Weimann 2012a; 2015): An examination of various counter-measures and their efficiency including the first introduction of the concept of "noise" into the model of anti-online terror.

Gabriel Weimann is a Full Professor of Communication at the Department of Communication at Haifa University, Israel. His research interests include the study of media effects, political campaigns, new media technologies and their social impact, persuasion and influence, media and public opinion, modern terrorism and the mass media. He has published nine books over the last three decades, with the latest being Terror in Cyberspace: The Next Generation (New York: Columbia University Press and Wilson Center Press). His papers and research reports (7 monographs and more than 170 publications) have been published in scientific journals and books. He received numerous grants and awards from international foundations and was a Visiting Professor at various universities including University of Pennsylvania, Stanford University, Hofstra University, American University, D.C., University of Maryland, Lehigh University (USA), University of Mainz and University of Munich (Germany), Carleton University (Canada), NYU in Shanghai (China) and the National University of Singapore. He was a Senior Fellow at the United States Institute of Peace (USIP) and the Woodrow Wilson Center, Washington, DC. This article is part of an occasional feature in the Worldviews monograph series on pathways to terrorism studies.

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