Terrorism as Strategic Communication

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An act of terrorism is in reality an act of communication. For the terrorist the message matters, not the victim. [. . .] In our view terrorism can best be understood as a violent communication strategy. There is a sender, the terrorist, a message generator, the victim, and a receiver, the enemy and/or the public. [. . .] Without communication, as we have said at the beginning of this chapter, there can be no terrorism.


Terrorists do not communicate nonsensically; they calculate and follow an intrinsic logic (Crenshaw, 1998). This chapter discusses how far the concept of strategic communication can be applied to terrorist groups. Therefore, it is necessary to review the state of research related to terrorism and strategic communication, before presenting the results of various case studies.

Defining terrorism

The word “terror” comes from Latin “terror, terroris” and signifies “scare” or “fright”. The Latin verb “terrere” means “I scare (sb.)” (Stowasser, 1994, p. 510). Early perpetrators of terrorist deeds were the Zealots and the Sicarii in Antiquity as well as the Assassins in the Middle Ages. Their goal was “a common and long lasting state of fear and uncertainty of the ruling elites” (Heine, 2004, p. 61). The term “terrorism” appeared for the first time in everyday speech during the Jacobin regime: the reign of Maximilian de Robespierre at the end of the French Revolution (1793–1794) was called “régime de la Terreur” because of the mass executions by guillotine. “In its origins, the term [terrorism] usually meant violence carried out by a government or a ruling order, rather than, as later, the actions of antigovernment rebels” (P. Jenkins, 2003, p. 27). This was the case in the 19th century when anarchists Pierre Proudhon and Mikhail Bakunin made a point for the legitimacy to overthrow the Russian Tsarist regime by the help of terrorist deeds. In times of democracy, they argued, terrorist deeds were not acceptable, because of other possibilities of participation.

Keeping this evolution in mind, it can already be stated that terrorism is a heterogeneous and socially constructed phenomenon, which is considered differently depending on the (cultural, linguistic etc.) context. In the following section, relevant definitions of terrorism and common characteristics will be elaborated on. The biggest pool of definitions can be found in political science, for example in the works of B. Hoffman (2007) and B. M. Jenkins (1981), but also social scientists, such
What is terrorism? Historian Walter Laqueur described it as the use of covert violence by a group for political purposes (Laqueur, 1982, p. 100). Normally, terrorism is directed against governments, more seldom against other groups, classes or parties. Schmid and Jongman state: “[T]errorism is a method of combat in which random or symbolic victims serve as an instrumental target of violence” (italics in the original) (Schmid & Jongman, 1988, p. 1). When Schmid and Jongman counted the words in 109 definitions of terrorism, they found that the words “violence,” “force,” “political,” “fear” and “threat” were used most often (Schmid & Jongman, 1988, p. 5).

Also in the 1980s, Signorelli and Gerbner investigated definitions of terrorism and stated a general consensus: “[A] terrorist act is typically defined as one involving violence by, among, or against states or other authorities in order to spread fear and to make a statement, usually political” (Signorelli & Gerbner, 1988, p. xi). This definition includes “terror from above,” that means, violence conducted by a government. Other definitions exclude this explicitly, defining terrorists as subnational actors committing violent deeds against civilians (Richardson, 2007, p. 64). Martin, like Signorelli and Gerbner, also analyzed various definitions of terrorism, settling on the following list of common characteristics: “[T]he use of illegal force, Subnational actors, Unconventional methods, Political motives, Attacks against ‘soft’ civilian and passive military targets, Acts aimed at purposefully affecting an audience” (Martin, 2006, p. 47).

The amount of literature on the topic of terrorism increased significantly in the 1970s and 1980s following more and more terrorist acts that were triggered by the development of more far-reaching and faster media coverage (Alali & Eke, 1991, p. 1). Having in mind the “mass-mediated terrorism,” Nacos defined terrorism as “political violence against noncombatants/innocents that is committed with the intention to publicize the deed, to gain publicity and thereby public and government attention” (italics in the original) (Nacos, 2007, p. 26).

Resonance in public is one of the main goals of terrorists for committing their acts. Furthermore they want to destabilize the political, economic and/or social system they deem illegal or oppressive. Thus,

Terrorism can be briefly defined as coercive intimidation or more fully as the systematic use or murder, injury, and destruction or threat of same to create a climate of terror, to publicize a cause, and to coerce a wider target into submitting to its aims.

Wilkinson, 1990, p. 27

Wilkinson added unpredictability and arbitrariness of the attack as essential characteristics of terrorism (Wilkinson, 1990, p. 28).

Similarly, Picard stated: “[A]n important objective of many terrorist attacks is the creation of the propaganda of the deed, that is, the act itself carrying messages” (italics in the original) (Picard, 1993, p. 13). The message then is that not all people support the state’s status quo, that the authorities do not have everything under control, and that the terrorists’ demands have to be taken seriously.

Miller sustained the notion of propaganda. In his opinion, terrorism is “an instrument of political violence [...]. The propaganda of the deed as a means of creating political change through fear” (Miller, 1982, p. v). Furthermore he stated that “terrorism was then and is now a mixture of propaganda and theatre” (Miller, 1982, p. v). Terrorists want to provoke the government by breaking civil norms and standards without any respect for humanitarian conventions. That is what distinguishes terrorism from war. “It is, after all, one of the outstanding features of terrorism that there is no battle, that one armed organization commits atrocities against unarmed, unprepared civilians who offer no resistance, against neutrals and mere bystanders” (Schmid & Jongman, 1988, p. 13). Bockstette viewed one of the main characteristics of terrorism as exploiting the media to achieve a
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goal. “Terrorism is defined as political violence in an asymmetrical conflict that is designed to induce terror and psychic fear (sometimes indiscriminate) through the violent victimization and destruction of noncombatant targets (sometimes iconic symbols). Such acts are meant to send a message from an illicit clandestine organization. The purpose of terrorism is to exploit the media in order to achieve maximum attainable publicity as an amplifying force multiplier in order to influence the targeted audience(s) in order to reach short- and midterm political goals and/or desired long-term end states” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 8). Bockstette substantiated: “[T]errorism uses a strategy that primarily relies on the symbolic strength of the act. The use of terror serves not primarily the purpose of fighting, injuring or destroying the opponent. Rather, its primary purpose lies in the conveying of messages to the target audience(s)” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 8).

Terrorists systematically and purposefully challenge governments; it is a struggle for power, relying on physical and psychological effects (B. Hoffman, 2007, p. 23). “Terrorism is the exercise of violence or the threat of violence against an unarmed and/or unsuspecting population to coerce it to meet the demands of the aggressor” (Biernatzki, 2002, p. 5). But how do terrorists force the population or at least the government to react or bring about changes? How can they reach a big audience if their bomb detonates locally? The media play a crucial role in the process of distribution of a message. How media forms part of terrorists’ communication strategy, will be examined after a focus on definitions of strategic communication.

Defining Strategic Communication

As there are various classifications for strategic communication, the focus within this chapter will fall on definitions that can be applied to terrorist groups as organizations. The approach taken by Hallahan and his colleagues seems the most fitting one. These authors defined strategic communication as “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfill its mission” (Hallahan, Holtzhausen, van Ruler, Verčič & Sriramesh, 2007, p. 3). In the present case, the organization is a terrorist group. Theoretically speaking, it can be seen as a proper and self-contained communicative entity. “Strategic communication focuses on how the organization presents and promotes itself through the intentional activities of its leaders, employees, and communication practitioners” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 7). These activities can include “a variety of persuasive, cooperative, and coercive instruments” (Gregory, 2005, p. 7). Regarding terrorist groups, coercive and forceful instruments prevail, but instruments of persuasion and co-operation are getting more and more important. “A strategy is a plan for action that sets priorities and uses resources to achieve goals. Strategic logic in any endeavor involves determination of specific goals (ends) and choices among instruments (means) needed to achieve them” (Gregory, 2005, p. 7). Gregory distinguished between discourse logic and instrumental logic to achieve goals. Discourse logic refers to “reasoned discourse on ideas and values with the goal of reaching shared understandings” (Gregory, 2005, p. 39), and instrumental logic includes “advocacy activities that seek to influence opinions, decisions, and actions” (Gregory, 2005, p. 39). For ordinary political or civil groups, norms and values limit the choice of action in the public sphere. The actions of terrorist groups, however, deliberately and intentionally differ from norms and societal values, provoking the government by breaking communication rules and even military fighting conventions. Terrorists often employ their strategies against the existing political system but they also can fight for a specific interest. “At its core, terrorism is a tactic that individuals and groups choose to employ in the service of political goals” (Wright-Neville 2010, p. xi). It is contestable that the term “tactic” suffices to describe the sophisticated protocol of terrorist actions. Following Bockstette’s approach, it should rather be referred to as “strategic communication management.” “Strategic communication management is defined as the systematic planning and realization of information flow, communication, media development and image care in a long-term horizon. It conveys deliberate message(s) through the most suitable media to the designated audience(s) at the
appropriate time to contribute and achieve the desired long-term effect” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 9). From a more general point of view, one should not limit strategic communication to a long-term horizon, but also include short- and midterm goals.

An overall strategy consists of different single tactics, which will be described in the following paragraph. Some of them accord with Bockstette’s (2008, p. 9) scheme of a strategic communication management planning process. The overall goal of the strategy is to state objectives and communicate causes. This can be seen in the light of persuasion (e.g., via violence or physical force and persuasion techniques such as letters claiming responsibility). “Strategic communication is about informational, persuasive, discursive, as well as relational communication when used in a context of an organization’s mission” (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 17). The ultimate goal for which the strategies are applied, is legitimization and finally power. Harmon, summarizing Sendero Luminoso leader Guzmán, speaks of the dimension of “construction” which goes along with the dimension of “destruction” (Harmon, 2008, p. 39).

Most of the time terrorist groups concentrate on one main message and its repetition. The main message sometimes can already be derived from the group’s label, name or branding (e.g. “freedom,” “homeland,” a certain date). Furthermore, the different audiences play a crucial role. It is not only choosing targets, victims, a certain (ethnic or intercultural) public, and recruits that makes different communication strategies necessary. The group also has to think about competitors, analyze their strategy and apply a different one (see for example the IRA (Irish Republican Army) splinter groups in Northern Ireland) (Korstian, 2008). In every case, strategic communication has to be adapted to available human and material resources, such as technical equipment and financial and moral support of the diaspora network. The terrorist groups are in need of efficient structures and talented people to implement their strategic communication concepts. Strategic communication also refers to advertising, product marketing, looking for suitable media for message-transfer, including organizations’ own publications and interpersonal communication. Key questions could therefore be: Which goal? Which channel? Which audience? Which message? And of course, evaluation and feedback also form part of the communication plan.

Regarding the choice of channel, there has been a significant change. “During the 1990s, terrorists communicated with their audience(s) by more traditional means, such as journalist interviews, fax, face-to-face propaganda and even press conferences” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 12). The discovery of TV as a very important channel or stage for transmitting messages had already taken place at the beginning of the 1970s. For example, when in 1972 the Palestinian terrorist group Black September took members of the Israeli Olympic team hostage, millions of viewers watching the Olympic Games turned to watching the hostage taking, thus providing a huge audience for the terrorists. In these times, terrorism was transformed to an international phenomenon. And today, the importance of the Internet in regard to strategic communication should not be underestimated (Rothenberger, 2012).

Stakeholders in the Terrorism Process

If terrorists want to communicate strategically, they have to know about their respective target groups, in terms of the recipients of their (political) messages. In times of mass media, one of the main channels for message distribution is the (online and offline) media. The media do not just mirror the conflict, but actively frame the discussion and assess facts and opinions. The locally limited audience, which witnessed the terrorist act, will be replaced by a dispersed mass audience when the mass media communicate the deed to a broad public. Thus, the media present a stage for the terrorist act, inviting a big audience to watch; the media act as a multiplier and reach the whole (political, societal, etc.) system, which might be scared by the news.

Besides the media and civilians, politicians represent another pivotal target for terrorists. In this rectangle of (inter)national communication between terrorists, politicians or government, and media
and civilians or publics, depicted in Figure 31.1, every stakeholder can communicate uni-, bi- or multilaterally, not forgetting internal communication within the respective group as well as communication to competing groups such as political opponents, rival publishers and competitors from other terrorist groups. Very often, the communication processes take place synchronously; hence, it is the terrorists’ task to attend on multiple relations. The rectangle indicates that the terrorists’ target group is not the people killed in the terror attack, but the wider circle of all the people who share certain attributes—albeit that those people merely belong to the nation that the terrorist group is challenging. “[T]he political terrorist’s victim is symbolic. A victim is chosen who is representative of a target group that is strategically involved in the terrorist’s political goals” (Schaffert, 1992, p. 44). But the target group is not limited to the wider public, the government, and the national majority contradicting the terrorists’ goals; the terrorist group also wants to reach the social class or minority they claim to fight for, as well as competing political or social movements.

The stakeholders have different goals and therefore have to apply different communication strategies. The politicians want to get re-elected, the media strive for a high print run or audience ratings, the civilians aspire to security and wealth, and the terrorists want to change the political status quo and recruit like-minded people. A good example for unsuccessful political strategic communication is the diverging government–media framing in the aftermath of the Madrid bombing in March 2004 (Canel, 2011).

History provides many examples for terrorists’ target-oriented communication, such as sending letters of responsibility to the media or politicians, talking to journalists or providing them with written statements during a kidnapping, and providing internal information via password-protected Internet sites. If the terrorists communicate successfully, they will induce fear and insecurity in society and even change public opinion. This can be done in a two-step flow of action and communication: The terrorist act creates a climate of fear (step one): the government restricts civil rights for security reasons, and the people reject these restrictions and suddenly turn against the government. The destabilization of the social order can even culminate in a societal collapse (Townshend, 2005, p. 25), clearing the way for revolution (step two). Thus, the terrorists have reached their goal via a counter-reaction of the ones in power. The media provide the terrorists with feedback on their success in changing public opinion, because public discussions will be reflected and commented on in the media.

**Terrorism as Label**

One of the main factors determining the audience’s reception of terrorist events is how the group is labeled in the media. As stated above, it is one of the terrorists’ goals not to be called “terrorists” in public, because of the very negative impact of the term, so they call their group something with more positive connotations, like “freedom fighter” or “rebels.” To a large extent, communication is
language. In this respect, terrorists have to be very sensitive if they want to communicate successfully. One of their strategies is to label the group with a term that transmits a connotation of legitimacy.

According to Rapoport (1977, p. 46) the Russian anarchists in the nineteenth century proudly called themselves “terrorists,” and later on Trotsky spoke of the benefits of the “Red terror.” But regarding modern terrorism, these aspects are different:

[T]he first group to describe itself as a terrorist organization was the one widely known as ‘The Stern Gang’ [. . .]. Today, the term has so many abusive connotations that no terrorist will ever call himself one publicly, and he will make every effort to pin that term on his enemy.

Rapoport, 1977, p. 46

Labeling the enemy a terrorist forms part of the strategic communication by means of which a party legalizes its own actions. “It has become an axiom that terrorism describes acts of violence committed by others and that similar violence committed by one’s own nation, or by those with whom one sympathizes, is legitimate violence” (Picard, 1993, p. 3).

Calling someone a terrorist is ascribing to them attributes like inhumanity, delinquency, and lack of political assertiveness:

[T]o label is to call something or someone by a name. Terrorism itself is, after all, a label. [. . .] In discourse, labeling provides quick, shorthand identification for whatever is labeled. Using the word terrorism to identify a violent attack on civilians in a marketplace gives this violence a quick and easily understood name.

Tuman, 2003, p. 32

All political negotiations with terrorist groups are a priori forbidden. From the government’s point of view, it is an asymmetrical conflict against an illegal perpetrator. Jenkins decried using the term “terrorist” just because it sounds dramatic and raises public awareness:

[It] is generally pejorative. Some governments are prone to label all violent acts as terrorism, committed by their political opponents, while antigovernment extremists frequently claim to be the victims of government terror. What is called terrorism thus seems to depend on one’s point of view. Use of the term implies a moral judgment; and if one party can successfully attach the label ‘terrorist’ to its opponent, then it has indirectly persuaded others to adopt its moral viewpoint. Terrorism is what the bad guys do.

Jenkins, 1981, p. 3

Terms that signify (illegal) opposition against a status quo or government include rebel, insurgent, guerrilla fighter, revolutionary, and of course terrorist. Weimann and Winn (1994) studied the meaning of terms used for terror groups and constructed a framework of reference for negotiating this communicational field (Weimann & Winn, 1994, p. 193). Negative labels included such terms as murderers, gunmen, saboteurs, terrorists, criminals or kidnappers. Neutral labels were for example guerrilla, army, underground, separatists, organization or movement. And the “positive” category comprised terms such as freedom fighter, liberation movement, nationalists or patriots.

For an analysis of strategic communication, it is important to understand which terms are used by terrorist groups to label themselves. These terms are primarily in the “positive” category, for example names including the terms liberation, national, people, popular, unity, salvation, democracy and resistance (Weimann & Winn, 1994, p. 193). First and foremost separatist groups like LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) in Sri Lanka or ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna [Basque Homeland
Labels are not limited to oral or written attributions but can also be visual or iconic representations. The terrorist group uses visual symbols and colors that are catchy and memorable and carry a meaning for the causes for their existence: for example, the red star behind the submachine gun of the RAF (Red Army Faction), or the fist and kalashnikov of Hezbollah. The colors also form part of strategic communication, red being the color of social–revolutionary groups, green the color of Islam, black mostly standing for anarchism (Elter, 2008, p. 35). The weapons signify the group’s determinedness and propensity to violence.

Terrorism as Strategic Communication

Not the terrorist act itself, but the continued communication about it, the interpretations and explanations, are the important issues for terrorist groups. Only via this continued communication will the seemingly “senseless” act be given a meaning. “Acts of terrorism are thus symbolic acts designed to carry messages from the perpetrators of the violence to various audiences. [. . .] terrorism is a form of communication [. . .]. In the majority of incidents, the most important element in communication about terrorist acts is not the acts themselves but the meaning assigned to the acts by media, authorities, and the populace” (Picard, 1993, p. 4). Keeping this in mind, it seems obvious that the psychological impact of terrorism by far outnumbers the physical impact of direct violence, because it is the communication about the act (and not only the act as such) that triggers the climate of terror in society; “this impact is more media-created than intrinsic to the act” (Bassiouni, 1982, p. 128). Bassiouni further explains: “[T]errorism is a term used to describe a strategy of violence designed to inspire terror within a particular segment of a given society. [. . .] The very word terrorism has come to acquire an ominous meaning triggering an almost automatic reaction of fear” (Bassiouni, 1982, p. 128). To put it plainly: Terrorism primarily is a communication strategy (Waldmann, 2000, p. 13). That is why terrorists often choose specific spaces of communication and order such as department stores or banks for their deeds. At these locations, an attack is extraordinarily surprising, causes massive disorder and thus raises great fear. Another option is to choose symbolic targets like military facilities or government buildings which represent a certain power and form of government. Destroying the buildings symbolizes destroying part of the opponent’s power.

The media play a key role in the terrorists’ communication strategy because they are the key to public awareness providing a stage and an audience. This media-oriented terrorism gathers strength even as the news and information technologies become faster and more easily accessible—just think of the possibilities the Internet offers. Schmid and de Graaf (1982, p. 53–54) present an extensive list of terrorists’ active and passive uses of news media. Some examples are given in Table 31.1. Of course—as the case studies will also demonstrate—most of the time, the groups do not apply all of these uses.

Harmon (2008, pp. 39–44) uses a more concise list when naming the five most common terrorist strategies which “all meld violence and propaganda in some form to gain public effect” (Harmon, 2008, p. 39):

- Create or further a sense of societal dislocation, fear, and even anarchy.
- Discredit, diminish, or destroy a particular government and replace it with another
- Create economic damage (directly harm property owners or government, oppose existing trade patterns).
- Render damage to the state’s military forces or infrastructure.
- Commit terrorist acts for international effect.
What kind of deed is it that triggers international media coverage and high public resonance? According to news value theory, it is, of course, one with high “news values.” B. Hoffman said that suicide terrorism is first and foremost an instrumental strategy with the goal of publicity at the highest possible price (B. Hoffman, 2007, p. 258). The more horrible the atrocity, the more expansive the media coverage, reaching even a “perverted form of entertainment” (my translation) (B. Hoffman, 2007, p. 272). The terrorists can use the mechanisms of the media system for their own means. The event shall preferably attract attention for a long time. This will be the case only if there is no “noise” disturbing the flow of communication, for example many violent deeds or other important events at the same time. This is why democracies, in which there is a low level of violence, are preferred areas for terrorists to commit their attacks. Psychologically speaking the unexpected event carries the possibility of a high level of fright or paralysis; it charges participants with emotion and triggers spontaneous reactions. Some societies might react to terror attacks with stock market crashes or a collapse in tourist travel to certain regions, as demonstrated by the aftermath of the attacks in the USA, the Philippines and Indonesia. It is part of the terrorists’ strategic communication that the high economic damage should wear down Western democracies and lead to overreactions. The agitator relies on the reaction of the challenged regime for his success. Hardly any governments can withstand the provocation, and rather they will react emotionally, verbally and/or physically to the terrorists’ nondirect communication via violence.

But getting public attention is not the ultimate goal of the terrorists: “[M]ost terrorists are not aiming at publicity for its own sake. The publicity obtained is instrumental and serves the final aim of the terrorist movement” (Gerrits, 1992, p. 32). However, sometimes the midterm goal advances to the main purpose of the terrorists’ strategies. For example, fighting against opponents or freeing prisoners seems to matter more to autonomous and religious terrorist groups than does the (political and organizational) embodiment of, for example, an autonomous Basque Country, or the ultimate caliphate. Gerrits pointed out various psychological strategies and tactics used by terrorist groups to engage public awareness.

The classification depicted in Table 31.2 shows the two main goals of terrorist attacks: demonstration of own strength and exhibition of vulnerability of the authorities (Gerrits, 1992, p. 36). On the one side, the attack has a strengthening, on the other side a demoralizing effect.

Gerrits, who analyzed various memoirs of terrorists, did not consider attacks and media coverage to be the main components of strategic communication:

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**Table 31.1 Insurgent Terrorist Uses of News Media**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Active uses (examples)</th>
<th>Passive uses (examples)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Polarizing public opinion</td>
<td>• Learning new coercive techniques from media reports on terrorism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Making converts, attracting new members to terrorist movement</td>
<td>• Obtaining information about identity and status of hostages</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Demanding publication of manifesto under threat of harm to victim</td>
<td>• Obtaining information on counter measures by security forces</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Linking message to victim</td>
<td>• Identifying future targets for terroristic violence</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Misleading enemy by spreading false information</td>
<td>• Obtaining information about public reaction to terroristic act</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Advertising terrorist movement and cause represented</td>
<td>• Benefiting from media exaggeration of own strength to create fear in the enemy</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Arousing public concern for victim to pressure government to concessions</td>
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Adapted from Schmid & de Graaf, 1982, p. 53–54
Terrorism as Strategic Communication

Terrorists do not depend exclusively on radio, television, and newspapers to accomplish their psychological aims. They spend a great deal of time and energy on other ways of promoting their movements and ideals. Gatherings, as well as self-made brochures, pamphlets, and periodicals, remain important in the dissemination of information on movements and their ideas. The mass media are an important and attractive instrument, but not the only vehicle for terrorist propaganda.

Strategic communication is not limited to the mass media, as can be seen in the case studies. Crelinsten held that it is a necessary attribute of terrorism that an attack should deliver a message: “The victimization must be designed to generate messages to others about the possibility of future victimization, or it is not terrorism” (Crelinsten, 1992, p. 214). Furthermore, he stated: “[I]n this communication model of terrorism, the terrorist act constitutes a sign or a message within a wider political discourse. It is a claim for attention, for recognition as a player in political life and, ultimately, for legitimacy as a valid representative of a particular political cause” (Crelinsten, 1987a, p. 419). Crelinsten challenged researchers with a concept of comprehensive investigation. “To study, for example, the actions of insurgent terrorists in isolation from the reactions of intended and unintended audiences is to ignore a key element of the terrorist phenomenon—its communicative nature” (Crelinsten, 1987b, p. 7). His perspective is based on symbolic interactionism and conflict theory.

In the interactionist paradigm, the meaning of a particular action derives from the social reaction which it evokes. This in turn defines that action in a particular way, labeling it and thereby confining its meaning to a particular interpretation. The conflict approach recognises that groups compete for resources and power and that institutions of social control serve as instruments in such conflicts.

Crelinsten, 1987b, p. 8

Terrorism, as became clear hitherto, is not only ideology but also strategy. Terrorist groups may differ highly in their ideologies, but their communication strategies seem to be very much alike. A very typical form of their communication includes statements of responsibility.

Excursus: Claims of Responsibility

In the field of ordinary crime, the perpetrators normally want to stay unrecognized. In contrast to this, terrorist groups very often publish communiqués or upload video messages to claim their responsibility for a deed. Criminals do not intend to send messages; they are mostly interested in

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Psychological strategies (examples)</th>
<th>Tactics of publicity (examples)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Demonstrating the vulnerability of authorities</td>
<td>Committing violent deeds because of their news value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Demoralizing the government and its adherents and troops</td>
<td>Choosing optimal time and place for action</td>
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<tr>
<td>Winning or increasing public sympathy</td>
<td>Issuing statements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radicalizing the people or polarizing the political situation</td>
<td>Bringing powerful symbols into play</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presenting violent deeds as necessary or heroic</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from Gerrits, 1992, p. 33

Terrorists’ psychological strategies and tactics of publicity

Table 31.2

Gerrits, 1992, p. 59
material value. Terrorists however, want to enhance their symbolic communication and “explain” the act.

In the 1970s and 1980s, European terror groups following Marxist–Leninist ideology, such as RAF (Rote Armee Fraktion [Red Army Faction]) in Germany sent their statements to news agencies or TV channels explaining and trying to legitimize their deeds. Today, terrorist groups no longer depend on traditional media as their transmitter; they can issue their statements via the Internet. This message reaches not the specific target audiences of certain media, but a far-flung, dispersed public.

Some terrorist groups changed their strategy from issuing statements not after the attack happened, but in advance (A. C. Hoffmann, 2008, pp. 241–242). TAK (Teyrêbazên Azadiya Kurdistan [Kurdistan Freedom Falcons]), close to the Kurdistan workers’ party PKK (Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan), over a long period of time used to attack Turkish civilians, quite ignored by the international media. After about 25 attacks, in Spring 2006, they changed their tactic and announced that they were going to target tourists in holiday areas. Of course, the international media promptly reported this, and also broadcast the problems of the Kurds in Turkey in general, before any attack had happened.

There have also been cases of free-riders. In Summer 2009, a few days after an accident in a Russian hydro-electric power plant resulting in 70 people dead, a group of Russian Muslims stated their responsibility for the “attack” in a letter to the Chechen website Kavkaz Center (Ludwig, 2009). The accident had obviously happened without any attack but the group wanted to disseminate fright and fear of further attacks. In this way, strategic communication sometimes results in plain propaganda.

**Terrorism as Propaganda of the Deed**

“Propaganda is a form of communication that attempts to persuade or manipulate opinions or actions of an individual or group toward political, religious, military, economic, or social ends” (Picard, 1993, p. 45). This description shows that strategic communication, in its extreme form, results in propaganda. In other words: propaganda essentially is powerful strategic communication and that is the reason why a closer look at the concept of terrorism as “propaganda of the deed” is required.

By means of their communication (acts, statements etc.) terrorists want to persuade the public of their righteousness.

Propaganda and terrorism are identical insofar as they both seek to influence a mass audience in a way that is intended to benefit the sponsor. But while terror has a singular purpose—inducing fear and uncertainty—propaganda can and does serve every imaginable purpose from religion to politics to commerce.

Tugwell, 1987, p. 409

Who first coined the term of “propaganda of the deed,” cannot positively be identified. It might have been Italian revolutionary Carlo Pisacane (1818–1857), French anarchist Paul Brousse (1844–1912) or nineteenth century German anarchist Johann(es) Most (Elter, 2008, p. 63). In his publication “liberty” Most certainly stated that the right deed at the right time and place would be of more than the literary or oratory propaganda of thousands of agitators (Laqueur, 1978, p. 88).

In any case, coverage of terrorist acts is in no way positive propaganda (Herman & O’Sullivan, 1989). Mostly, journalists report about victims, and dramatize and write “against” the inhumane perpetrators. Most people do not feel attracted by, or positively influenced to support the terrorists’ causes, but rather feel repelled and horrified. The terrorists cannot control the framing of
coverage. The problem is that journalists again and again cover only the media event, the attack. But counterterrorist measures should allow for coverage of the groups’ causes in times of calm, too, so as not to force the group to resort to violence as the main type of communication (Waldmann, 2005, p. 15). Many terrorist groups have founded political arms in order to have the possibility of conducting legal propaganda. But the groups justify their attacks, saying their causes would not have been heard otherwise. Thus, the terror groups compensate for their military and civic participation shortcomings by extensive (violent) propaganda campaigns.

Terrorism is an organized campaign of violence as communication. The terrorists operate in secret until the day of the attack, when they make their causes public in a most massive and powerful way. Terrorists can also use techniques of persuasion in their statements of responsibility or in interviews—for example, repetition of arguments, putting their ideas in a positive context or contrasting them with something negative, association with (positive) emotions (Picard, 1993, p. 41). In return, disadvantageous facts and circumstances will be omitted or trivialized. A characteristic of the terrorists’ propaganda is that they present their causes and (violent) measures as absolutely justified; “because of their belief in their own righteousness, the terrorists can portray their opponents not as simply misguided but as totally evil, as corrupt oppressors” (Wilkinson, 1990, p. 29).

Case Studies: Applying Characteristics of Strategic Communication to Terrorist Groups

Terrorists have plans, and a strategy consists of accurately planned courses of action and communication. Terrorist acts do not take place spontaneously, but are rationally and systematically planned. Terrorists want to defeat their enemy not militarily, but mentally. Wilkinson puts the four main goals of terrorists as follows (Wilkinson, 1997, pp. 56–57):

1. inducing fear and horror by propaganda of the deed,
2. attracting the public’s attention in regard to the groups’—in their eyes—justified causes,
3. weakening and provoking the government or challenged system to employ undemocratic counter measures, and
4. recruiting new sympathizers and raising funds.

In two graduate-level seminars at Ilmenau University of Technology, several case studies were conducted in 2009, 2010 and 2011 to find out more about the strategic communication of several terrorist groups. The research focused on groups with separatist and social–revolutionary motivation. In terms of determining which factors led to the groups being identified as terrorist groups, researchers followed the criteria of Elter (2008, pp. 24–25), who not only demarcated the phenomenon of “terrorism,” but also defined the actors, the terrorist organizations. The approach was qualitative and exploratory. Documents were collected and analyzed, and social media, product sales, political pamphlets, and databases such as the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) (for example Lafree & Dugan, 2007) were looked at, as well as secondary literature.

In the following section some of the results of the case studies are presented, and some points are highlighted in Table 31.3.

In the groups studied here, contact with their respective diaspora seems to be a crucial element in their communication plans. The diaspora have to be informed about the group’s activities and be committed to its causes; they have to get some feedback about what happened to their money, otherwise there would be no more fundraising abroad. The LTTE and IRA have a very strong diaspora. The LTTE was not only dependent on the diaspora’s money but also on actions such as demonstrations of Tamils in Hamburg, Berlin, or Frankfurt in recent years, in which they tried to attract attention to the difficult situation of the Tamils in Sri Lanka.
### Table 31.3 Comparing Strategic Communication of Various Terrorist Groups

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>RAF</th>
<th>IRA</th>
<th>GAM</th>
<th>LTTE</th>
<th>FARC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Motives</strong></td>
<td>Socialist, anarchist</td>
<td>Separatist and religious</td>
<td>Separatist</td>
<td>Social-revolutionary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Short-term goals</strong></td>
<td>Free members</td>
<td>Gain public attention and support</td>
<td>Public support, autonomy</td>
<td>Better conditions for people</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Long-term goals</strong></td>
<td>Change of government</td>
<td>Unify Ireland</td>
<td>Islamic state</td>
<td>Fight US imperialism, Marxist–Leninist state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Diaspora</strong></td>
<td>Left-wing, Stasi, Al-Fatah, bank robberies</td>
<td>NORAID, legal and illegal businesses</td>
<td>Leader in exile (Sweden), resources from international companies, military from Libya</td>
<td>Europe, North America, Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Targets</strong></td>
<td>Embassies, Springer press, representatives of economy</td>
<td>Religious targets (churches), infrastructure, police, army, (civilians)</td>
<td>Javanese government, international businesses</td>
<td>Sinhalese / Muslim civilians, politicians, army</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Nature of main attacks</strong></td>
<td>Kidnappings, shootings</td>
<td>Bombings (cars), shootings</td>
<td>Bombings, burning of schools</td>
<td>Suicide bombings (women), civil war</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Labeling</strong></td>
<td>Urban guerrilla, socialists</td>
<td>Revolutionary army, freedom fighters</td>
<td>Liberation fighters</td>
<td>Liberation tigers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation</strong></td>
<td>Press clippings, professional way of evaluating</td>
<td>Director of publicity?</td>
<td>Attacking journalists after negative coverage</td>
<td>Influencing journalists, Nitharsan Unit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Achievements</strong></td>
<td>Imprisoned, self-liquidation, official dissolution</td>
<td>Public attention, lifted broadcasting ban</td>
<td>Peace agreement, sympathy of East Timor, political party</td>
<td>Defeated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New media</strong></td>
<td>TV, phone, polaroid photos</td>
<td>Propaganda videos, internet, USB-sticks</td>
<td>Not very common</td>
<td>Online-nation, fundraising, social networks, blogs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public perception/coverage</strong></td>
<td>Not much public support (because of violence)</td>
<td>Public is threatened, negative perception</td>
<td>International media: atrocities of Indonesian government; Indonesian media restricted in reporting</td>
<td>Sri Lankan people: negative global; negative, but also negative on Sri Lankan government</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Guidelines</strong></td>
<td>Concept paper on urban guerrilla, Marx`s manifesto</td>
<td>Green Book</td>
<td>East Timor blueprint as example, no SC guideline found</td>
<td>Prabhakaran, Nitharsan Unit directives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>How to do propaganda videos</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Terrorism as Strategic Communication

The targets are nearly always symbolic. Embassies, business or government buildings, banks, military facilities, but also representatives of other ethnic or ideological groups have been attacked. That states the message: You—if you are on “the enemy’s” side—could be next.

The media, utilized to communicate to various stakeholders or to address letters of responsibility, have shifted from traditional to new media, above all the Internet. The analyzed terrorist groups (except the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka [Free Aceh Movement] / (GAM)), frequently make use of Youtube, blogs and forums (Rothenberger, 2012). LTTE even tried to create an “online nation” of all Tamil citizens to advance their cause of separation from Sri Lanka (Tekwani, 2004). The terrorists know exactly which channels to use to address which public. The “Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia” [Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia] (FARC), for example, use radio stations to communicate their causes and propaganda within the rural regions of Colombia, because radio is still the most important medium for the peasants.

The coverage of the terrorist groups and in consequence also the public perception is mainly negative. But in international media the reactions of the respective governments are discussed, too, and, at least in articles about counterstrategies of the Sri Lankan and Indonesian government, journalists have thoroughly criticized the military courses of action.

What about relationships between media content and terrorist reaction? Interestingly, almost all terrorist groups deem coverage very important and evaluate articles and newscasts. GAM terrorists attacked journalists after negative coverage. FARC, on the other hand, offered them their own (of course manipulated) picture of the situation. RAF was very professional and even created press clippings.

Also of interest is whether there exist professional communication guidelines. In most cases, terrorists had followed a manifesto created by their group’s founder or another historic person, which not only contained political norms, goals, and advice, but also rules for communication. The IRA Green Book, for example, states that members are not allowed to talk to anybody about IRA activities, not even to members of their own families. LTTE had their press offices in London and an own unit, called the Nitharsan Unit, to take pictures and capture video recordings for propaganda purposes.

Bockstette (2008), after analyzing the strategic management techniques of jihadist terrorists, concluded that

the jihadist terrorist know (sic) how to apply strategic communication management techniques. The mass media and especially the Internet have become the key enablers and the main strategic communication assets for terrorists and have ensured them a favorable communication asymmetry. With these assets, terrorists are able to compensate for a significant part of their asymmetry in military might. […] They craft their strategies based on careful audience analysis and adapt their messages and delivery methods accordingly, adhering to the fundamental rules underlying any communication or public relations campaign.

Bockstette, 2008, p. 5

Thus, they are able to recruit new members and terrorize their so-called enemy. In order to reach their own followers, the jihadist terrorists also apply “face-to-face methods utilizing prayers, speeches and sermons in mosques and Koran schools” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 18). The more channels the organization has at its disposal, the more multi-faceted strategies it can add to its portfolio. Bockstette names the three primary communication goals of terrorists in which all these activities have a share: “[T]he propagation and enlargement of their movement, the legitimization of their movement and the coercion and intimidation of their enemies” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 5).
Conclusion and Perspectives

The results of the case studies show that the ultimate goal of the group (i.e. legitimization and power) is subordinated to preliminary goals, which include stating objectives and communicating causes. Therefore terrorists use violence and persuasion techniques such as letters claiming responsibility. Strategic communication has to be adapted to the available resources. For instance, if a group has a strong diaspora community, it is easier to apply a greater variety of communication techniques. Of course, technologies like the Internet, which allow illegal groups to circumvent gatekeepers' selection processes, play a major role, but interpersonal communication remains important.

Coming to a conclusion, it can be stated that the concept of strategic communication can be applied to terrorist groups. They can—and should be—treated like professional organizations seeking maximum publicity. Also, communication and terrorism studies could advance their methodological pool and examine the terrorism communication process in greater depth. Path analyses of the distribution and framing of messages, critical discourse analysis of published documents of all parties involved (i.e., politicians, terrorists, nongovernmental organizations or citizens’ groups) as well as media content lend themselves to exploring the field in detail. Moreover, visuals as key elements of persuasion and emotional effects should form part of future research.

Besides their attacks and atrocities, terrorists give much significance to winning people over to their ideas. This is why research and anti-terrorism measures should focus more on this perhaps not so spectacular field of counteraction. “Developing an effective counter strategic communication plan, which exploits weaknesses and contradictions [. . .], is vital in winning the asymmetrical conflict” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 20). Therefore, not only to eliminate the root causes of terrorism, but also to explore the terrorists’ communication strategies, will remain an endeavor for future research. Only if researchers, educators, governments, and other actors know about the hitherto very successful communication strategies of terrorists, will they be able to know how to respond to and counter their rhetoric and actions.

References

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