Terrorism and (Mass) Communication: From Nitro to the Net

Maura Conway

School of International Relations
University of St. Andrews
Fife KY16 9AL
Scotland

conwaym@tcd.ie

Author Bio. Maura Conway is a PhD candidate in the Department of Political Science at Trinity College Dublin, Ireland, and a teaching fellow in the School of International Relations at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Her research interests are in the area of terrorism and the Internet. She has published in *First Monday*, *Current History*, the *Journal of Information Warfare*, and elsewhere.

Terrorists are not limiting themselves to the traditional means of communication; they increasingly employ the new media to pursue their goals. The terrorists of today, like those of yesteryear, are keen to exploit mass media, particularly the Internet, while also recognizing the value of more direct non-verbal communication channels encapsulated in the idea of 'propaganda by deed.'

Introduction

In their seminal contribution to the study of terrorism and the media, *Violence as Communication* (1982), Alex Schmid and Jenny De Graaf point out that before technology made possible the amplification and multiplication of speech, the maximum number of people that could be reached simultaneously was determined by the range of the human voice and was around 20,000 people. In the nineteenth century, the size of an audience was expanded twenty-five to fifty times. In 1839 the *New York Sun* published a record 39,000 copies; in 1896, on the occasion of President McKinley's election, two US papers, belonging to Pulitzer and Hearst, for the first time printed a million copies. William McKinley paid a high price for this publicity. In 1901 he was killed by an anarchist, Leon Czolgosz, who explained his deed with the words: 'For a man should not claim so much attention, while others receive none.'

Historically, access to the communication structure was intimately related to power. With the growth of the press, and later television, a situation arose that gave unequal chances of expression to different people. This connection between power and free expression was summed-up by A.J. Liebling who observed that 'Freedom of the press is limited to those who own one.'

Terrorism and Mass Communication

Terrorism has always been about communication. In fact, it has been claimed that without communication there can be no terrorism. The Russian terrorists of the late

nineteenth century were as anxious to communicate directly with the outside world as their modern counterparts. In the late nineteenth century, the *Narodnaya Volya* (People's Will) engaged in a public relations campaign the aim of which was to enlist the sympathies of European society by acquainting it with the domestic policies of the Tsar's government. The *Narodnik's* efforts met with a high level of success. The famous letter to Tsar Alexander III, which took a week to write, justifying the assassination of his father - the terrorists most celebrated act - seemed calculated to woo Western liberal sentiment. Karl Marx certainly understood and approved, declaring the letter one of 'cunning moderation.' Vera Figner, one of the group's luminaries, used similar language saying that its great 'moderation and tact…won the sympathetic approval of all Russian society.'

The letters publication in the West produced a sensation throughout the European press. Even the most moderate and conservative newspapers and journals expressed their approval of the demands of the Russian Nihilists finding them, according to Figner, 'reasonable, just, and such as had in large measure been long ago realized in the daily life of Western Europe.' It is striking that the letter contained no mention of the terrorists' revolutionary aspirations! Several months later, when US President Garfield died of wounds sustained in an assassination attempt, *Narodnaya Volya*, wrote an eloquent letter to the American people, condemning the assassin and taking the opportunity to reiterate that its own aims were identical with those of most Westerners: that the *Narodniks* believed terror to be abhorrent in democratic societies always.

Nobel's invention of dynamite – a mixture of nitroglycerine and silica - in 1867 was the technological breakthrough that ushered in the era of modern terrorism. The economy of means afforded by the use of dynamite ensured that terrorist bombings proliferated. High levels of illiteracy in nineteenth century Europe imposed serious limitations on conventional text-based propaganda. Conversely, 'propaganda by deed' could show, as the French anarchist Paul Brousse explained lucidly at the time, 'the weary and inert masses…that which they were unable to read, teach them socialism in practice, make it visible, tangible, concrete.' When the anarchist Albert Parsons was arraigned for his alleged involvement in the Haymarket bombing in Chicago in 1886, he insisted in court that dynamite 'made all men equal and therefore free.' However, while modern terrorists may still seek to convey a message through their propaganda of the deed, they must also – like the *Narodniks* - employ written and spoken language in an effort to legitimise, rationalise and, ultimately, advertise their actions.

Terrorism and IT

Each new advancement in communication technology has resulted in new opportunities for terrorists to publicize their positions. From Marxist revolutionaries such as Brazil's Carlos Marighela's advice to his comrades to use photocopying machines to produce large numbers of pamphlets and manifestos to Hizbollah's establishment of its Al Manar television station in the early 1990s. With the invention of the Internet however, terrorists are, for the first time, equal communication partners in the electronic agora.

In the space of thirty years, the Internet has metamorphosed from a US Department of Defense command-and-control network consisting of less than one hundred computers to a network that criss-crosses the globe: today, the Internet is made up of tens of thousands of nodes (i.e. linkage points) with over 105 million hosts spanning more than 200 countries. With a current estimated population of regular users of over 600 million people, the Internet has become a near-ubiquitous presence in many world regions. That ubiquity is due in large part to the release in 1991 of the World Wide Web. In 1993 the Web consisted of a mere 130 sites, by century's end it boasted more than one billion.

Media have for decades been attributed with considerable significance in processes of cultural and political transformation. The Internet is daily heralded as a new media technology of enormous and increasing significance; it is the first many-to-many communication system and the instrument of a political power shift. The ability to communicate words, images, and sounds, which underlies the power to persuade, inform, witness, debate, and discuss (not to mention the power to slander, propagandize, disseminate bad or misleading information, engage in misinformation and/or disinformation, etc.) is no longer the sole province of those who own or control printing presses, radio stations, or television networks. Every machine connected to the Internet, from expensive laptop computers to lowly mobile phones, is potentially a printing press, a broadcasting station, a place of assembly. And in the twenty first century, terrorists are availing of the opportunity to connect.

It is the unmediated nature of the Internet, in conjunction with high levels of connectivity, which renders it a communications medium unlike any other. There is a tendency in newspapers and on television for the primary sources of political information to be those who represent authority or who are members of the existing power structure. The British scholar Stuart Hall distinguishes between these 'primary definers' (e.g. politicians, police spokesmen, government officials), and what he calls 'secondary definers' (e.g. political or social activists, 'reformers,' terrorists) who reside outside the existing power structure. The latter are used much less frequently by the media than are primary definers, according to Hall. So while modern terrorists can manipulate the media into devoting newsprint and airtime to their activities, political claims, and demands, the media in turn manipulates the terrorists by almost invariably abbreviating, distorting or even transforming their messages. Journalists and TV presenters achieve this by playing up the violent spectacle at the expense of analysis, in order to attract consumers, thus undermining the terrorists' claim to legitimacy by depicting them as merely violent - oftentimes irrational and perhaps even psychotic - and therefore not political. With the advent of the Internet, however, the same groups can disseminate their information undiluted by the media and untouched by government sensors.

Terror Net

In 1998 it was reported that 12 of the 30 terrorist organizations identified by the US State Department had their own websites. Today, a majority of the 33 groups on the same list maintain an official online presence. Researchers are still unclear whether the ability to communicate online worldwide has resulted in an increase or a decrease in terrorist acts. It is agreed, however, that online activities substantially improve the

ability of such terrorist groups to raise funds, lure new faithful, and reach a mass audience. The most popular terrorist sites draw tens of thousands of visitors each month.

Hizbollah, a Lebanese-based Shi'ite Islamic group, established their collection of websites in 1995. They currently manage three such sites: one for the Central Press Office, another to describe its attacks on Israeli targets, and the last Al Manar TV for news and information. All three may be viewed in either English or Arabic. The Central Press Office site contains an introduction to the group, press cuttings and statements, political declarations, and speeches of the group's Secretary General. One may also access a photo gallery, video and audio clips. The information contained in these pages is updated regularly. In the event that one would like to find out more, contact information, in the form of an e-mail address, is provided. In a similar vein, Hamas' web site presents political cartoons, streaming video clips, and photomontages depicting the violent deaths of Palestinian children. The online home of the Tamil Tigers (LTTE), a separatist army in Sri Lanka best known for the 1991 assassination of former Indian Prime Minister Rajiv Ghandi, offers position papers, daily news, an online store - for sale are books and pamphlets, videos, audio tapes, CDs, and the Tamil Eelam flag - and free e-mail services. Other terrorist sites host electronic bulletin boards, post tips on smuggling money to finance their operations, and provide automated registration for e-mail alerts. A majority of the sites are designed to inspire sympathy among Web surfers, especially liberal Westerners. The language of human rights is prominent, while mention of the violence perpetrated by the groups is either ignored or justified in terms of the violence first perpetrated against them by the forces of the state or others.

The Internet and 9-11

Recently, Islamist Web sites have come under renewed scrutiny as possible venues for information pertaining to planned al-Qaeda attacks. There is no official al-Qaeda site, but many sites sympathetic to Bin Laden's stated beliefs and objectives are freely accessible. These - mainly Arabic-language - sites are generally viewed as unreliable sources of information however, as they are for the most part bulletin board systems where anybody can post an anonymous message. Having said that, intelligence officials had warned of possible attacks in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia prior to the November 2003 bombing after analyzing postings on Islamist Web sites in conjunction with other forms of Internet chatter.

The abilities of intelligence officials to eavesdrop on e-mail and phone calls, was supposed to help prevent attacks such as those that occurred in New York and Washington from ever coming to successful fruition, but they did not and, as a result, assumptions about the role the Internet can play in fighting terrorism are being revised. Investigators are now turning to Internet tools in their investigation as never before. What role did the Internet play in the investigation of the 9-11 attacks? Importantly, what could be done online to track the group depended in large part on what the group did online. In a briefing given in late September 2001, FBI Assistant Director Ronald Dick, head of the United States National Infrastructure Protection Center (NIPC), told reporters that the hijackers had used the Net, and "used it well."

In the immediate aftermath of the attacks federal agents issued subpoenas and search warrants to just about every major Internet company, including America Online, Microsoft, Yahoo, Google, and many smaller providers. It is known that the hijackers booked at least nine of their airline tickets for the four doomed flights online at least two to three weeks prior to the attacks. They also used the Internet to find information about the aerial application of pesticides. Investigators are said to have in their possession hundreds of e-mails linked to the terrorists in English, Arabic and Urdu. The messages were sent within the United States and internationally. According to the FBI, a number of these messages include operational details of the attacks. Some of the hijackers used e-mail services that are largely anonymous - Hotmail, for example - and created multiple temporary accounts. A number of them are known to have used public terminals, in libraries and elsewhere, to gain access to the Net, whereas others used privately owned personal or laptop computers to do so.

In two successive briefings, senior FBI officials stated that the agency had found no evidence that the hijackers used electronic encryption methods to communicate on the Internet. This has not prevented politicians and journalists repeating lurid rumours that the coded orders for the attacks were secretly hidden inside pornographic Web images, or from making claims that the attacks could have been prevented had Western governments been given the power to prevent Internet users from employing encryption in their communications. Although many e-mail messages sent to and from key members of the hijack teams were uncovered and studied, none of them, according to the FBI, used encryption. Nor did they use steganography, a technique which allows an encrypted file to be hidden inside a larger file (such as a '.jpeg' or '.gif' image, or an '.mp3' music file). Evidence from questioning terrorists involved in previous attacks, both in America and on American interests abroad, and monitoring their messages reveals that they simply used code words to make their communications appear innocuous to eavesdroppers.

Conclusion

Terrorism and communication are intimately linked. Josef Goebbels, Hitler's Minister of Propaganda, once said: 'We do not talk to say something, but to obtain a certain effect.' Terrorism entails the use of violence for effect, 'speaking with action' rather than words. The meaning of terrorist acts is not always clear, however. An integral part of most terrorist activity, therefore, is the explanation later provided in written and oral forms. This is the major function of many terrorist Web sites. Terrorists may also use the Net to engage in intra-group communication and to raise funds. The major question for many counter-terrorism officials currently is whether or how Bin Laden, if he is alive, is communicating with his operatives. He is unlikely to have access to the Net. Some officials believe that he is using couriers to deliver hand-written messages to associates in Pakistan. Whether these messages will find their way onto the Net, only time will tell.