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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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## Considerations on the input of mass media in the spread of terrorism

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### Abstract

The XXI<sup>st</sup> century has brought along the increase of problems and security threats with which the international society must constantly fight. The beginning of the XXI<sup>st</sup> century can be considered a reference point in the development of the terrorist phenomenon. 11th of September 2001 was the date when the international community defined its priorities and came together against this phenomenon, which remains an important topic, directly proportional to the vulnerabilities of modern society. It presents itself as a complex phenomenon, with very violent manifestations against targets that usually cannot defend themselves. The increasing development of technology and the widespread use of mass media ensure the longevity of the terrorist phenomenon, which will become an increasing challenge in the future. 9/11 was the clear evidence of the ability to use the information system to achieve strategic objectives. Nowadays, technology and information are much more developed and more accessible than two decades ago. Mass media is the most active agent of spreading disinformation, propaganda and terrorist manipulation.

*Keywords: terrorism, media, internet, radicalization, communication.*

### 1. The global dimension of terrorism

On the international agenda, a series of problems have arisen and are rapidly developing that present, directly or indirectly, risks, dangers and threats to the national security of each state, but also on international level. Terrorism is a phenomenon that is increasingly perceived and increasingly difficult to control, due to the unpredictability of the actions, the states not being prepared for the attack and, respectively, the way of managing them. Thus, terrorism becomes a global threat, because “it no longer presents itself only as a violent crime, as a criminality, as an atypical reaction, often in desperation to a certain evolution of political and social systems, but becomes a major problem of human society as a whole, another, particularly virulent side of social life, a violent, primitive action, but at the same time, dynamic and complex, symmetrical, in a way, to the evolution of social systems towards performance, balance and relative stability” (Atanasiu, Stancila, 2014, p. 13), as research shows.

According to a study conducted by two Dutch researchers at the University of Leiden, Alex Schmid and Albert Jongman (1988, p. 5), who examined 109 definitions given to terrorism, the term “violence” was included in 83.5% of definitions and “political purposes” in 65%, while 51% contained the term “terror” and “fear”, 47% - “threat”, 17% - “intimidation” and only 6% - “criminal”. But the study only demonstrates one perception of terrorism, meaning that what for one person means terrorism, for another is the struggle for national expression and liberation, as other specialists explain: “terrorist groups generally describe themselves as national liberation movements, as fighters against social, economic, religious or imperialist oppression, or as a combination of all this. On the other hand, in an explainable attempt to discredit terrorism, politicians have presented the terms “terrorists” and “freedom fighters” as contradictory” (Chaliand, 2018, p. 29).

Within the George C. Marshall European Centre for Security Studies, a more recent definition of terrorism has been formulated, which means the calculated use of violence or the threat of violence used to induce fear, in order to coerce or intimidate governments or societies in order to achieve political, religious or ideological goals (Ferchedau-Muntean, 2001, p. 34). All the definitions of terrorism include three common concepts: the use of violence, political objectives and the induction of fear among the population. According to Bruce Hoffman, “terrorism is a theater” (2006, p. 174), or a show presented to a large audience to gain attention, highlight a

message and seek a favorable response to the actor. In this context, it is an asymmetrical and perverse spectacle, a fact highlighted by the deployment of forces and means used.

## **2. Terrorism and media. A symbiotic relationship**

The increasing use of modern communication instruments and their manipulation by terrorist organizations have led specialists in the field to reconceptualize modern terrorism within the framework of communication theory. The media has played a crucial role in the development of the phenomenon of terrorism, being more than an intermediary, while transmitting information about terrorist acts to the global public. It is probably the most active agent for spreading terror, disinformation, manipulation of public opinion, terrorism becoming a camouflaged act of communication for the whole world, because there is no terrorism without communication, and this success has been provided both by news channels and by the multitude of services that the Internet provides. It can be asserted that “for terrorists, the media is a transformation tool that offers endless possibilities for communication and expansion. The power of terrorism lies not in the acts of individuals, but rather in social networks that allow safe coordination within organizations. (...) Thus, the media allows terrorist groups to become regional and even global actors. The dissemination of videos on the internet allows terrorists to rely less on traditional media to convey their messages to the general public”(Seib, Janbek, 2011).

Communication is at the heart of terrorism. The publicity of terrorist acts is the most effective method of installing terror. Due to the convenience and accessibility of YouTube, Facebook and Twitter platforms, terrorist groups are increasingly using social media to convey and spread their message.

At the same time, the media also becomes the channel through which terrorists recruit new members, with the main target of the psychic manipulation of the general public. "Advertising terrorism (ad-terrorism) is a form of this phenomenon that is directly related to modern communication and information technologies that allow real-time dissemination of information in audio-video formats through the media. Thus, advertising terrorism is increasingly exploiting the psychological side of public opinion based on the media effect." ((Atanasiu, Stancila, 2014, p. 40) The perpetrators also know that uploading a video to YouTube can get a very large number of views, thus guaranteeing their international attention. For example, the main achievement of Al Qaeda at 9/11 was not that it killed several thousand people, but the fact that it managed to terrify a whole world through the reports and images broadcast on all television channels, and that it changed the way of life of many people for decades to come. It can be said that journalists and cameras have become "friends of terrorism", because terrorist attacks are no longer aimed at killing as many people as possible, but want publicity.

Developments in the field of information technology and media have made the terrorism-media report based on mutual interest. Cristian Delcea (2006, p. 53) defines ad-terrorism as "the advertising or publicity of terrorism, a form of communication, made through the media, by terrorists, with the intention of persuasion and terror. It is an effective weapon of manipulation and intimidation, used by the leaders of terrorist groups, who use the media, sending a message of terror both to innocent people and to the governments of NATO and EU states that are against them".

There are three techniques used by ad-terrorism: manipulation, propaganda and image marketing. Terrorist propaganda is constantly moving to new platforms and the amount of information is increasing. YouTube, being a huge platform, is widely used by terrorists, uploading videos of acts of violence against civilians for millions to see. In addition, despite the fact that several states are in territorial or religious conflict, the phenomenon called "radicalization" appears, where more and more individuals engage in the terrorist phenomenon. Moreover, many terrorist organizations have their own websites and various social media profiles to attract supporters. For example, Al-Qaeda used the Al Jazeera television station to publicize its kidnappings, interviews of terrorist leaders, etc. Also, terrorist organizations use other means to disseminate their activities: "Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula currently publishes Inspire, an online magazine aimed at disseminating its messages, and ISIS publishes Islamic State News." (Atanasiu, Stancila, 2014, p. 42).

## **3. The Internet - a great advantage for modern terrorism**

Modern terrorists take advantage of the fruits of globalization and modern technology - especially the most advanced communication technologies - to plan, coordinate and execute attacks. They no longer have to rely only on the mass media to spread their propaganda. Instead, they can use the Internet to fulfill and even surpass the functions of mass media. They are no longer restricted to a specific territory, nor are they politically or financially dependent on any state (except for a few). Furthermore, all the social platforms engaged in global communication allow for a fast spread of information of low or questionable quality, and, as some analyses explain, “fake news is a real global danger, and the development of social media and the emergence of artificial technology is increasingly amplifying this phenomenon” (Stanescu, 2022, p. 148).

However, websites are only one of the services the Internet provides to terrorists. There are many other facilities on the net - e-mail, chat rooms, e-groups, forums - that are increasingly used by terrorists. Thus, for example, Yahoo became one of the ideological bases of operation of Al Qaeda. It used several of Yahoo's features, including email, chat, and most importantly, Yahoo Groups, dedicated to a particular topic, through which group members could discuss the topic, post relevant articles and multimedia files, and establish a meeting place for those with similar interests. Creating such a group was free, fast and extremely simple. Thus, using Yahoo groups, Al Qaeda supporters spread hatred towards non-Muslims, ensuring that their victories go down in history through excessive media coverage, like 9/11 (Weinmann, 2008, p.76).

Ariel Lieberman, in the work "Terrorism, the Internet and Propaganda: A Deadly Combination" (2017) listed nine ways in which the Internet has changed the way propaganda is spread. First, social media allows terrorist groups to deliver unlimited content directly to websites, unfiltered. Second, social media provides terrorist organizations with an effective way to recruit new members and spread their ideology with minimal effort. Physical geography is no longer a barrier to communication between terrorists and recruits, and they can create profiles on Twitter and other social media platforms, and if they are deleted, they are quickly replaced by others. Thirdly, social media "lowers the access barrier" to terrorist propaganda. For example, a person may click on a link posted by a friend and inadvertently land on a jihadist forum. Moreover, smartphones have made it possible for anyone to have constant access to the Internet at any time and in any place. Fourth, Internet postings are not regulated as news sources, and therefore terrorists can post inaccurate information with almost no oversight. Fifth, terrorists can use anonymity to their advantage, hiding their true identity, and thus avoiding capture by law enforcement. Sixth, terrorists can gain knowledge of social media so that their messages prevail in search results. On Twitter, for example, they use certain hashtags, which makes their posts appear higher in search results. Seventh, the Internet enables multidirectional communication between terrorists and recruits, that is, one-to-one communication allows terrorists to create propaganda specifically tailored for certain types of individuals. Eighth, terrorist groups can use social media to seek out and target individuals who may be particularly vulnerable to their ideology, portraying the organization as the solution to their problems. And finally, encryption allows terrorists to maintain private communication networks without law enforcement surveillance, because encrypted communications cannot be accessed by law enforcement.

#### **4. The increasing risk of radicalization**

Radicalization is a phenomenon that exemplifies how the media becomes a weapon for those engaged in war. In media reports, government statements and military doctrines, radicalization is invariably linked to the rise of the Internet and fears that this medium offers the potential for sowing and transmitting the message of terror. The messages used are not simple narratives, but they are carefully manufactured to achieve a psychological influence with gradual effects. The way in which they will be received is influenced by several factors, among which we list: education, age, occupation, relational environment, method of approach, etc. (Topor, 2019, p. 24).

In the years since the September 11, 2001 attacks on the US, the term "radicalization" has emerged as part of a discourse to describe the process by which individuals come to hold ideas considered extreme or radical and advocate or commit violence in the name of those ideas. This "new" type of terrorism does not have a certain well-defined goal. If the "old" terrorism used violence to achieve political/religious goals and had concrete demands, thus reaching an end point, this "new" terrorism produces a form of expressive violence that is little more than anger, frustration, and it signifies the desire to return to a mythical and glorious past. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime (2012, p.6) states that radicalization "primarily refers to the indoctrination process that often accompanies the transformation of recruits into individuals determined to act with violence based on extremist ideologies. The process of radicalization often involves the use of propaganda, communicated in person or via the Internet. The length of time and effectiveness of propaganda and other persuasive means used differ according to individual circumstances and relationships.

#### **5. Assessment of the media involvement in the 9/11 attacks**

Mass media has been a very important factor in the "development" of terrorism, and we can observe this fact in the situation of the attacks on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. The fact that Al Qaeda chose precisely New York, perhaps the most developed city in terms of mass media, was not a mere coincidence. Bin Laden knew for sure that this event would be widely broadcast, even years after the attack. And he was right, for 9/11, in addition to being the bloodiest terrorist attack in history, was the most publicized, making the phenomenon of terrorism and its consequences known to everyone, thus going down in history as the attack that changed the perception of terrorism, changed and traumatized lives around the globe, because this attack was not just against Americans, but for the whole world to see.

There is no doubt that terrorism must be reported, in order to make it known to the whole world. However, the way events are framed and the extent to which the issue is addressed is also very important. As most terrorist attacks, especially 9/11, indicate, the architects of the attacks largely exploited the mass media for the benefit of their operational efficiency, intelligence gathering, recruitment, fundraising and propaganda. The mass media's duty to present the world with important national/international news and Al Qaeda's desire to assert its authority, promote violence, and sow terror among the population were completed on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. It was the most publicized event in history because, for a few days, television in the United States stopped every show and focused on the events of September 11. Furthermore, "considering that the media is talking ever since 9/11, our memories of the attacks are solidified. As a society, we have come to think we need to talk about it all the time" (Law, 2011, p. 64). The problem was the way the mass media covered this issue. In general, the media portrayed 9/11 with sensational headlines, repeating the same images every time. There was a "mutual aid", with news channels, radio, internet etc. as messengers of terrorists and the ideas they wanted to convey. But the media didn't just convey the message of the terrorists, but also manipulated public opinion, induced panic among the people, instigated Americans to perform acts of violence against Muslims, used war propaganda, created as much as possible conspiracy theories, as if the attack had come from the Americans, to later blame on Al Qaeda, even though it claimed responsibility for the attacks from the beginning.

From the 9/11 moment to the US bombing of Afghanistan, American mass media was actively involved in intensifying the war fever, changing the headlines from "America is under attack" in "America Strikes Back" or "America's New War", until it took any military stance. The mass media has drawn a rather obvious line between the Good-United States and the Bad-Terrorists.

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