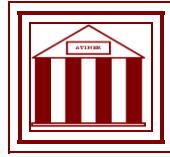# Athens Institute for Education and Research
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Governmental Crisis Communication and Media Relations under Terrorist Threat

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Abstract

The dramatic societal changes such as globalisation and information revolution transformed terrorism into a huge security challenge at the turn of the millennium. Though 9/11 is usually perceived as the dividing line, Russia has started experiencing a large-scale terrorism-provoked societal crisis several years before the notorious date.

Today's widespread global terrorism is a product of informational age because terror is a communication act, a means to transmit messages to the authorities through the mass media and the key audiences. The terrorists use the potential of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009) in the new social media that enables them to broadcast a large amount of data which can be also widely republished by the traditional media. Content analyses of the mass media show that journalists are often responsible for provoking panic, victimization and collective stress within the community (Altheide, 2002, 2009). That is why media relations are one of the most important actions in anti-terrorist policy.

The paper represents multidisciplinary analysis of terrorism in terms of social disruption and crisis followed by recommendations for governmental communication strategies. Most crisis researches classify terrorism as a crisis of malevolence and a conflict-type crisis. Crisis management expert Paul Shrivastava (2005) qualifies terrorism crisis as a particular crisis type that needs special research and response strategies. The article gives examples of crisis communication and media relations of the Information Policy Department of the Presidential Administration of Russia during the Chechen terrorist threat crisis during the years 2000-2004.

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Characteristics of Modern Terrorism

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. However, the characteristics of modern terrorism transformed it into a huge security challenge to national states as well as to the global community at the turn of the millennium. Terrorism can be defined as violence that consists in itself a threat of more violence designed to cause social disruption, panic and victimization within the community for the purpose of political change. One of the world's most renowned counter-terrorism experts Brian Jenkins (1974) calls terrorism 'theater' because the show itself is the weapon, not the bombs. Terror acts do not reach their aims if they do not become notorious. Terror is a communication act, a means to transmit messages to the authorities. Terror acts are usually widely broadcasted because they represent an ideal media product depicting sensation, conflict, alarm and grief. The target audience of terror is the authorities. There are also several key groups in the audience of terror communications.

One of the key groups is a sympathizing group that can be divided in two subgroups. The major subgroup does not support terrorists' methods but find their aims justified. By pointing at so-called objective reasons of terror acts (for example the right of national self-determination) they socially legitimize terror through general values. The other subgroup which totally identifies itself with terrorists and realizes their success as its own represents the recruiting base for terrorists.

The largest key group of terror is the victimised group which sees the terror as a threat to life and wellbeing. These people are the object of victimization that causes either destabilizing social behaviour leading to social disruption like panic or violence or joining the sympathizing group in their demand of concessions to terrorists.

There is also a special key group of international governments and transnational organizations that can influence the authorities of a terrorised country in a way advantageous to terrorists.

See Figure 1 for the scheme of the above description.

Major factors that influenced the characteristics of terrorism at the turn of the millennium are connected to the drastic changes such as technical progress in general, information revolution and globalisation.

Information revolution and the creation of the cyberspace provided terrorist organizations with unprecedented mechanisms of information monitoring (from open resources as well as from closed ones by hacking them), money collecting, recruiting all over the world and creating ramified networks of internal communications with the possibility of staying anonymous and external communications by broadcasting audio, video and text content to large audience (Thomas, 2003). In case of such notorious organizations as Al-Qaeda and similar groups the messages are usually duplicated by the traditional media. The Internet also gives terror groups the possibility to launch disinformation campaigns within the community in the guise of independent opinions using the tools of 'mass self-communication' (Castells, 2009) such as blogs, forums and social networking websites.

Globalisation produced the phenomenon of international terrorism characterised by multinational recruits, bases situated in different countries, terror acts prejudicing the world community. There is a process of consolidation and integration of terrorist organizations that are ideologically similar.

Today's terrorism is aimed at mass mayhem among the civilian population. Random choice of victims and widespread broadcasting of the crime make the victimization total: no country and no person can feel absolutely safe from a possible terror act.

Modern terrorism has a special tendency of increasing religious motivation as compared to political one. The matter is the emerging ideology of so-called 'Islamic extremism (fundamentalism)' or 'jihadism'. The subject needs special attention because the use of these terms is not only a factual mistake but also one of the blunders in the antiterrorist communication policy. Instead of dividing terror ideology from Islam as its distortion, the use of these concepts mistakenly puts terrorism in the bosom of Islamic religion. That is the unpremeditated input that some political leaders (Netanyahu, 2001), scholars (Bockstette, 2008) and journalists (Cullison, 2012) make into the propaganda of terrorism among the ignorant and easily influenced members of the Muslim community. However, there exist profound studies of the incompatibility of Islam and terrorism from the perspective of Islamic law and history that can be used in the antiterrorist communication among Muslims (Capan, 2004).

The misconceptions are generally connected with two Islamic terms: *'jihad'* and *'shahid'*. The term *'jihad'* is wrongly translated as the 'holy war' though there is no such a conception in Islam (war cannot be holy, it can only be justifiable when defensive). *'Jihad'* means 'righteous zeal on the way of God' that can be manifested in many ways. 'Big *jihad*' means self-perfection, 'small *jihad*' can mean defensive war that is regulated by norms prohibiting killing of civilians. *'Shahid'* means a martyr that was killed heroically for a righteous aim. Suicide is proclaimed a sin as well as killing innocent people (Capan, 2004). Thereby suicide bombers are literally not *'shahids'* on *'jihad'* and calling them that way in antiterrorist rhetoric haloes them instead of condemning which means talking the same language as the terrorist propaganda.

Sociologists study terrorism from different perspectives. One of them is the view of terrorism as an alternative way of social control 'from below' through fear, conflict and victimization of the society (Black, 2004; Chriss, 2007). The goal of terrorism is usually destabilisation or even demolishing of the existing mechanisms of social control (informal values and formal regulations) and of the social structure in general. There are four levels of social disruption and its prevention. The governments should use the means of communication on these levels to oppose a manipulation of any kind, including terrorism.

The first social level concerns an individual as a citizen. Any intervention on this level can cause either political extremism or, on the contrary, political apathy. Terror acts can form distrust to the authorities, a wish to change the state system or leave the country. Communications of the state on this level should be aimed at forming patriotism, civil consciousness and confidence in the government. Since political confidence is based on both affective and cognitive factors it is important to combine image making with efficient news making and response to disinformation. Communication channels are the media, mass culture, educational institutions, social and cultural organizations, especially for young people.

The second level of social disruption is aimed at an individual as a personality. Manipulation on this level can cause serious harm. Terrorists can provoke uncontrolled mass fear paralyzing and hampering adequate perception of reality, panic, apathy or spontaneous aggression. The level can be protected from any manipulation in general by forming strong ethical values, revival of cultural heritage and improving the people's educational level through mass-media, special events, offline and online libraries and other institutions. As far as the terrorism in particular is concerned people should be informed of all its psychological threats and manipulation mechanisms. Ways of personal and mass psychological rehabilitation after terrorist acts should be established.

The third social level concerns groups (social, ethnic, religious and so on) and group behavior. Terror activity can cause hostility between groups if some of them are victimized and others are associated in mass consciousness with terrorists. This can lead to conflicts, violence, genocide, separatism and other social convulsions that represent serious threats to national security. The government needs to argue away the terrorists' activity in favor of any social group except for themselves (the Russian anti-terrorist campaign had a motto that terrorism has no nation and no religion). As for the general measures, it is necessary to favor comprehensive dialogue between groups and create a consolidating ideology that should be pluralistic and based on fundamental values, open for any positive innovation but protected against manipulation.

The forth social level is the society itself. The control on this level is gained when the complex of three previous levels is under control. The loss of governmental control on this level can lead to total demolition of a social structure manifested most often in revolutions and civil wars. That is why it is necessary to take preventive measures especially against terrorists' manipulation.

2. Governmental Crisis Communication under Terrorist Threat

Crisis is an unpredictable 'perceived disruption' (Boin, 2005) of a social unit which threatens its integrity, reputation or survival, 'challenges the public's sense of safety, values or appropriateness' (Sapriel, 2011) and requires immediate action under the circumstances of uncertainty, urgency and increased attention. A crisis can have either an objective or a subjective reason. It can be based on a real event as well as on a rumor or a willful disinformation. The objective and subjective sides are interconnected so the crisis extends on both. That is why from the sociological point of view a crisis can be studied from two main paradigms which represent its two different sides: objective disruptions (structural functionalism) and subjective perceptions (symbolic interactionism).

From the point of view of structural functionalism crises are 'disruptions of normality' which happen 'when the institutional structure of a social system experiences a relatively strong decline in legitimacy, as its central service functions are impaired or suffer from overload' (Boin, 2005). From the subjective symbolic interaction perspective a crisis exists in a symbolic field of collective perceptions. 'We can only speak of a crisis if the actors in question perceive the situation as a crisis' (Boin, 2005) and 'stakeholders will react to the organization as if it is in crisis' (Coombs, 2007), no matter how serious or not the objective disruption is. Crisis can be based not only on a real accident but also on a rumor or a willful disinformation that can cause real damage because of the stakeholders' actions (Wynter, 1993). That is how the objective and the subjective sides of a crisis are interconnected.

If we take a terror act as an example of this objective-subjective concept we can see that it strikes only once in the objective field (deaths, injuries, economic losses, etc.) but it can strike over and over again in the subjective field with every rumor, every new conspiracy version or new piece of information about governmental security failures. The creeping effects of terror crises can cause further socio-political disruptions such as conflicts, protests and so on. That is why counterterrorist crisis communication is so important.

Most crisis researches classify terrorism as a form of a crisis of malevolence which happens 'when some outside actor or opponent employs extreme tactics to attack the

organization' (Coombs, 2007). Otto Lerbinger (2012) emphasizes that 'terrorist acts committed against governments are the clearest expression of malevolence, with the September 11, 2001, attack on the twin World Trade Center towers as the prime example'.

In a distinction between consensus and conflict types of crises American sociologist Enrico L. Quarantelli (2002) considers terrorism a classic conflict-type crisis. However, his colleagues Lori A. Peek and Jeannette M. Sutton (2003) argue that terrorist attack should be studied as a unique crisis type that includes characteristics of both types and also some unprecedented traits. The question is crucial because different types of crises need different response strategies especially concerning communication and media relations. In conflict-type situations mass media's interest is higher. Conflict makes a thrilling story that is why the press shows both sides of a conflict and depicts their positions. Conflict-type crises disconnect the society and provoke anti-social behavior while consensus crises create public consensus on returning to normalcy as soon as possible (though there can be mutual accusations or different opinions, the views are not contrary), rejoin the society in mutual grief and further volunteer help. Negative psychological impact of conflict crises is higher. Terrorism is not a typical conflict-type crisis because it can also follow the scenario of a consensus-type crisis. Symbolic interactionist David L. Altheide (2002, 2009) shows in his analysis how the mass media content frames crises and puts terrorism into a conflict paradigm through 'war programming'.

The world's renowned crisis management expert Paul Shrivastava (2005) qualifies terrorism crisis as a particular crisis type that needs special research and response strategies. Terrorism 'crises evolve end emerge as economic, social and political processes over time' (Shrivastava, 2005). Deaths, injuries and other physical disruptions are the consequences of terror acts. But the consequences of terror crises are wider and include social disruption, political setbacks, economic/financial losses, war responses, environmental degradation and damage to reputation and image. That is why the design and development of special systems for terrorism crisis communications is needed.

Crisis life cycle include several stages that require special kinds of crisis communication and media relations strategies. In this paper we use the three-staged approach advocated by crisis communication expert W. Timothy Coombs (2007). See Figure 2 for the diagram of governmental crisis communication and media relations during the three stages of a terrorism crisis lifecycle.

1. The pre-crisis stage means crisis prevention and preparation before it emerges. Terrorist crisis prevention includes prevention of both psycho-social and physical crisis manifestations. Psycho-social crisis prevention means detection and extermination of terror manipulation threats on different social levels using the mass media educative tools. Physical crisis prevention necessitates evaluation of the risks of terrorist attacks and informing the community about them. Communication should be designed to cause alert, not panic.

The primary step of crisis preparation is creating a crisis management team and a crisis communication plan. Governmental crisis communication's characteristic feature, especially when terrorism is concerned, is that a crisis team should be inter-agency. It is necessary to facilitate internal information flows and communication over bureaucratic barriers. 'As the ample disaster and emergency literature shows, coordination and cooperation requires (after the central authority lays out a meaningful mission and exercises oversight) frequent drills, exercises, simulations, and meetings where diverse agencies get a chance to see each other's point of view,

establish personal contact, and build trust' (Perrow, 2011). One of the important functions within a crisis team is the role of a spokesperson that needs to be carefully selected and thoroughly trained to communicate with the media and the stakeholders. A spokesperson should be competent and trusted and have good communicative skills. During the pre-crisis period spokesperson needs to go through media rehearsals, especially practicing answering tough questions about a hypothetical terror act under time pressure and lack of data.

Crisis plan should include basic organizational and communicational crisis measures, communication channels, draft communication strategies and comments, exact contact information.

It is important to foster alliances with other concerned organizations, the media and expert community and to develop consensus communicational strategies. There should be formed a special loyal terrorism-reporting press pool. Joint media/government trainings are useful: 'exercises such as those conducted by George Washington University and the Technology Institute in Holon, Israel, which bring together government officials and media representatives to simulate government response and media coverage of mock terrorist incidents' (Perl, 1997). Paul Shrivastava (2005) argues that 'the public itself needs to be trained in first-response strategies' as well.

2. The crisis-event stage after a crisis is triggered can be characterized by: threat, urgency, uncertainty, time compression, stress, lost of control, escalation of events, crisis perception, violation of expectations, focus of attention, external interferences. The are several important rules of crisis communication that can be shortened into a motto: 'Be first, be right, be credible' (Reynolds, 2002).

The first crisis communication rule is to make a statement as quick as possible. A crisis creates an information vacuum that can be filled by any kind of information no matter provided by the official sources or not. The public attention is focused on a crisis and the media has deadlines to report about. 'If the crisis team does not supply the initial crisis information to the media, some other groups will, and they may be ill informed, misinformed, or motivated to harm the organization. The information void can become filled with rumor and speculation, not facts' (Coombs, 2007). Otto Lerbinger (2012) emphasizes that 'the first hours or, in quick-moving crises, minutes after a crisis event, are of critical importance for an organization to gain control over the reporting of the event – not only in describing what happened but in framing the event.' Silence and 'no comment' phrase make the media and the public think there is something to hide. No need to wait until all the facts are available (it can never happen). During the first news-cycle of a crisis it is enough to generally explain the crisis event and what the organization is doing to normalize the situation.

It is important to dominate the information field during a crisis. The government needs to stay the primary news source with any occasion possible to show that it keeps the situation under control. It is necessary to explain threats, risks and give recommendations to the community to prevent panic and victimization.

The authorities should avoid giving unverified information, especially about the victims or guilty. A mistake can provoke reputational losses and amplify the crisis. This is what happened after the terror act of 11 March 2004 in Madrid of which the government initially accused ETA Basque organization but the information revealed to be false. Another example is the Beslan school hostage crisis. Getting unverified and wrongly understated number of hostages from the republican authorities was interpreted by some media as an intention to hide the truth by reducing the scale of the event.

There are several communicational tasks during a crisis:

1) Setting up the coordination center to elaborate the strategy and control the information flows between different agencies to help the authorities to speak with one voice.

In Russia such an inter-agency crisis communication structure was designed to face different types of crises, mostly terrorism provoked. During the years 2000-2004 it was coordinated by the Information Policy Department (officially established in March 2001, before that – the staff of the Aide to the President) that developed crisis communication strategy for different governmental structures involved in crises and established cooperation with other concerned organizations, the media and experts.

Apart from the main center, the exceptional case of the counterterrorist operation in the Chechen Republic of Russia required the creation of two more regional coordination centers: civil headquarters based on the interim Republican Administration and military headquarters based on the joint forces in the Northern Caucasus. The regional coordination centers were responsible for: coordination of all the official information flows in the counterterrorist operation's area; primary information monitoring, analyses and sending the data to the top coordination center; revealing the threats of disinformation and manipulation; primary crisis communication; field media relations. Thereby, the crisis communication's organizational structure during the terrorism crisis in Russia was pyramid-shaped with the Information Policy Department on the top and two regional coordination centers in the base. This was done to make the structure steady.

The government created a strategic multi-functioned communicative construction that consisted of a number of interconnected ideologemes and followed different objectives: argumentation of the counterterrorist operation; condemnation of the terrorists; gaining support of different target groups; managing the reputation of the authorities and of the Russian military forces; responding to disinformation and manipulation.

2) Cooperating with the media. Crisis media center for constant press-conferences, briefings and interviews with the spokesperson and other newsmakers should be designated. The place should be equipped with all the necessary conveniences such as computers, Internet, local phones, cafes, free snacks where a journalist could get help and information. If there is a need to report the events from the ground, press tours should be organized. It is also important to be omnipresent in the news-field by constantly sending press-releases and other data to the journalists.

Media relations under a crisis should represent partnership and a two-way communication. By showing concern and helpfulness, the control of the media will be exercised in a soft, not noticeable way. One of the means of soft control is giving exclusive materials to loyal journalists. Refuse to disclose the information without giving reasons should be avoided.

Besides the pool of loyal journalists prepared to report a crisis event during the pre-crisis stage, it is important to create a base of all the journalists that the organization communicates with during a crisis and to get feedback from them.

The media can be not only a transmitter of the organization's news but also a source of helpful information to the organization, in particular about the rumours and hostile newsmakers.

During a terrorism crisis the government and the media should cooperate to exercise joint control of interpretations (to avoid following the interpretation of the terrorists) and of verbal designations (for example, not calling terrorists rebels). During the terrorist crisis in Russia such a cooperation helped to refrain from the negative and

unpopular war terminology (the terms 'counterterrorist operation' and 'stabilization of the situation in the Northern Caucasus' were used instead) and to avoid calling terrorists 'Islamists', 'Wahhabis' or 'Islamic extremists'.

The distribution of the following information should be strongly restricted: interviews with terrorists in direct leaving no possibility to edit them; secret details about the counter-terror or hostage release operations (during the 2002 Nord-Ost siege the terrorists got the information about the operation from the TV); intimidating details that can provoke massive panic, fear and victimization (savouring the tragic facts, showing killed or injured in details).

3) Establishing a hotline that provides direct communication to the public by phone, e-mail and specially created Internet site.

4) Communication with the other concerned organizations, elaborating joint communicational strategies.

5) Constant monitoring of the information flows, not only the traditional media but the Internet and the social media as well, giving immediate feedback and correcting disinformation.

3. The post-crisis stage's role should not be underestimated. Mistakes during this phase can make the crisis relapse and become chronicle. And on the contrary, skilful postcrisis communication favours the organization's reputation and promotes its activities and capabilities in crisis management. The post-crisis prompt analysis of the crisis communication and its results is priceless for future cases. Follow-up crisis communications should include the report about the crisis response measures and the results of the investigation of the terror act. The situation should be clear for the public and the media to avoid further speculations or rumours. The activity of the government to handle the situation should be highlighted. As far as terrorism crises fade but do not vanish causing many psychosocial consequences, it is important to launch a public education campaign in mass media to reduce creeping post-crisis effects and resist terrorist manipulation.

Governmental crisis communication should be thoroughly analyzed. 'Evaluation data comes from the crisis records, stakeholder feedback, organizational performance measures, Internet comments, and media coverage' (Coombs, 2007). The primary methods are: 1) content-analyses of external and internal documents, media coverage and Internet comments; 2) surveys, interviews and focus-groups with the stakeholders, including members of the crisis team, representatives of partner organizations, and families of the victims. The data collected is used to modify the crisis communication plan. The crisis communication circle returns to the pre-crisis stage.

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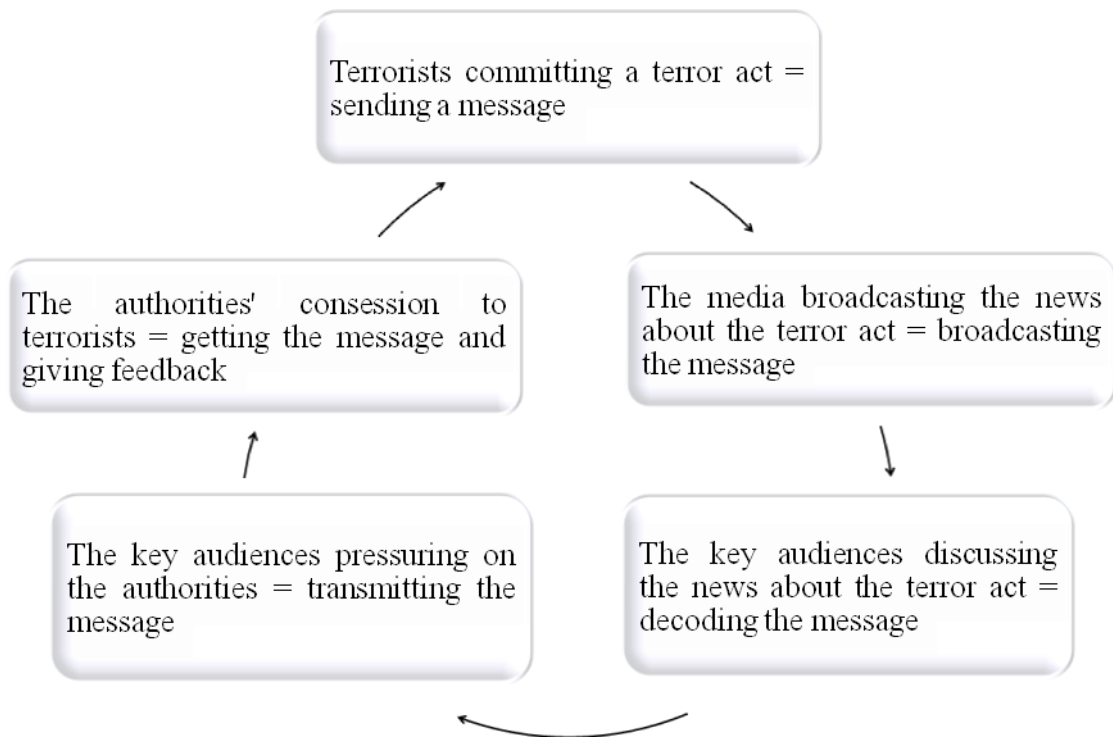
Figure 1. Communication Circle of Terrorism.

Figure 2. Governmental Crisis Communication and Media Relations during the Three Stages of a Terrorism Crisis Lifecycle.

1. Pre-crisis Stage
1) Crisis prevention:
- elimination of the social disruption threats
- mass education against terrorist manipulation
- terrorism risk communication
2) Crisis Preparation:
- forming a crisis team and an inter-agency communication system
- developing a crisis communication plan
- creating draft communication strategies and comments
- choosing and training a spokesperson
- fostering alliances with other concerned organizations, the media and experts
- development of consensus recommendations for communicational strategies with the loyal media, experts and other concerned organizations
- trainings with the media, concerned organizations and the community

3. Post-crisis Stage

- data collection and analysis of the crisis response
- follow-up communications: crisis response measures report, investigation results
- promotion of the activities and capabilities of the agency
- modifying the crisis communication plan
- launching a public education campaign in mass media to reduce creeping post-crisis effects and resist terrorist manipulation

2.Crisis-event Stage

- responding quickly, being first, right and credible
- setting up the coordination center, coordination of the information flows, speaking with one voice
- designating crisis media center, cooperating with the media
- establishing a hotline to communicate directly to the victims and other community members
- committing to continued communication to the media and the public, dominating in the news field
- explaining threats, risks and giving recommendations
- monitoring the information flows, giving immediate feedback, correcting disinformation