Governmental Crisis Communication and Media Relations under Terrorist Threat

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

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

This article represents a multidisciplinary analysis of terrorism in terms of social disruption and crisis followed by recommendations for governmental communication strategies. Most crisis researchers 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 from 2000 to 2004.
Characteristics of Modern Terrorism

Terrorism is not a new phenomenon. However, the characteristics of modern terrorism transformed it into a significant 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 and of itself as 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 admits it’s success as its own represents the recruiting base for terrorists. The largest key group of terror is the victimised group which sees 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 authorities of a terrorised country in a way advantageous to terrorists. 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.

The information revolution and the creation of cyberspace provided terrorist organizations with unprecedented mechanisms for 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 of using external communications to broadcast audio, video and text content to large audiences (Thomas, 2003). In the case of such notorious organizations as Al-Qaeda and similar groups, the messages are usually duplicated by traditional media. The Internet also gives terror groups the possibility to launch disinformation campaigns within the community in the guise of independent opinions using tools of ‘mass self-communication’ (Castells, 2009), such as blogs, forums and social networking websites.

1See Figure 1 for the scheme of the above description.
Globalisation produced the phenomenon of international terrorism characterised by multinational recruits, bases situated in different countries, and terror acts prejudicing the world community. There is also a process of consolidation and integration of terrorist organisations 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. In addition, modern terrorism has a tendency to increase religious motivation rather than a political one. This is the matter emerging from the ideology of so-called 'Islamic extremism (fundamentalism)' or 'jihadism.' This subject requires special attention because the use of these terms is not only a factual mistake, but also one involving the blunders in 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 unpredicated 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 and calling them that way in antiterrorist rhetoric haloes them instead of condemning them which means talking the same language as terrorist propagandists.

Sociologists study terrorism from different perspectives one of which opens the view on terrorism as an alternative way of social control 'from below' through fear, conflict and victimization of society (Black, 2004; Chriis, 2007). The goal of terrorism is usually the destabilisation or even the demolishing of existing mechanisms of social control (informal values and formal regulations) and of social structure in general. The governments should use the means of communication on various levels of social disruption 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 of the authorities, a wish to change the state system or leave the country. Communication of the state on this level should be aimed at forming patriotism, civil consciousness and confidence in government. Since political confidence is based on both affective and cognitive factors, it is important to combine image making with efficient news making and a response to disinformation. Communication channels are 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 an adequate perception of reality, panic, apathy or spontaneous aggression. The level can be protected from any manipulation in general by forming strong ethical values, reviving cultural heritage and improving the people's educational level through mass-media, special events, offline and online libraries and other institutions. As far as 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 itself (the Russian anti-terrorist campaign had a motto that terrorism has no nation and no religion). As for general measures, it ought to be
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 obtained when the complexity of the three previous levels is under control. The loss of governmental control on this level can lead to a 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.

**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. It ‘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 for existence. It can be based on a real event, on a rumor or a willful disinformation. The objective and subjective sides are interconnected, so the crisis extends to both, which explains 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 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 (Wyntr, 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 theory 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. This is why counterterrorist crisis communication is so important.

Most crisis researches classify terrorism as a form of crisis of malevolence which happens ‘when some outside actor or opponent employs extreme tactics
to attack the organization' (Coombs, 2007). Otto Lerbiinger (2012) emphasizes that 'terrorist acts committed against governments are the clearest expression of malevolence, with the September 11, 2001, attack on the twin towers of World Trade Center 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 colleague Lori A. Peek and Jeannette M. Sutton (2003) argue that terrorist attacks should be studied as a unique crisis type that includes characteristics of both categories and also some unprecedented traits. The question is crucial because different types of crises need different response strategies especially regarding communication and media relations. In conflict-type situations, mass media's interest is higher. Conflict makes a thrilling story that explains why the press shows both sides of a conflict and depicts their positions. Conflict-type crises disconnect 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), and reconnect society in mutual grief, as well as providing volunteer help. The 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 and emerge as economic, social and political processes over time (Shrivastava, 2005). Deaths, injuries and other physical disruptions are the consequences of terror acts. However, 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, which explains the need for the design and development of special systems for terrorism crisis communications.

The crisis life cycle includes several stages that require special kinds of crisis communication and media relations strategies. For our purposes, the three-staged approach advocated by crisis communication expert W. Timothy Coombs (2007) was chosen.¹

¹See Figure 2 for the diagram of governmental crisis communication and media relations during the three stages of a terrorism crisis lifecycle.
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

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
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detection and extermination of terror manipulation threats on different social levels using mass media educative tools. Physical crisis prevention requires an evaluation of the risks of terrorist attacks and informs the community about them. Communication should be designed to cause alert, not panic. The primary steps of crisis preparation include creating a crisis management team and a crisis communication plan. Governmental crisis communication’s and agency crisis team. 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 spokespersons needs to go through media rehearsals, especially practicing answering tough questions about hypothetical terror acts even when under time constraints and in lack of data.

A 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, as well as media and expert community members to develop a consensus on communicational strategies. A special loyal terrorism-reporting press pool should be created. Joint media/government trainings are also 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) are an example. Paul Shrivastava (2005) argues that ‘the public itself needs to be trained in first-response strategies’ as well.

The crisis-event stage exists once a crisis is triggered. It can be characterized by threat, urgency, uncertainty, time compression, stress, lost of control, escalation of events, crisis perception, violation of expectations, focus of attention and 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 involves making a statement as quickly as possible. A crisis creates an information vacuum that can be filled by any kind of information no matter if it is provided by official sources or not. Public attention is focused on the crisis and media have deadlines to report their information. ‘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.’ The 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 maintain itself as 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. Authorities should avoid giving unverified information, especially about victims or guilty parties. A mistake can provoke the loss of reputation and amplify the crisis. This is what happened after the terror act of 11 March 2004 in Madrid where the government initially accused the ETA Basque organization, but the information was revealed to be false. Another example is the Beslan school hostage crisis. Getting an 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. The first step involves setting up the coordination center to elaborate a strategy and control the information flows between different agencies to help authorities speak with one voice. In Russia such an inter-agency crisis communication structure was designed to face different types of crises that 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 official information flows in the counterterrorist operation’s area. This included: primary information monitoring, analyses and data sent to the top coordination center; the revelation of disinformation threats and manipulation; primary crisis communication; and 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 top and two regional coordination centers at 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: arguing with
counterterrorist operations; condemning terrorists; gaining support from
different target groups; managing the reputation of the authorities and of the
Russian military forces; responding to disinformation and manipulation.

The second step involves cooperating with the media. Designating a crisis
media center for constant press conferences, briefings and interviews with the
spokesperson and other newsmakers should be designated priority. The space
should be equipped with all the necessary conveniences, such as computers,
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 during a crisis should represent a partnership and two-way
communication. By showing concern and helpfulness, media control will be
exercised in a soft, not so noticeable way. One of the means of soft control is
giving exclusive materials to loyal journalists. Refusing to disclose 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 journalists with which the organization communicates to get
feedback from them. The media can not only be a transmitter of organization
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 terrorists and of verbal
designations, for example, not calling terrorists rebels. During the terrorist
crisis in Russia, such cooperation helped to refrain from the negative and
unpopular war terminology (the terms 'counterterrorist operation' and
'stableization 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:
live interviews with terrorists that leave no possibility of editing them; secret
details about counter-terror or hostage release operations (during the 2002
Nord-Ost siege the terrorists got the information about the operation from TV);
imintimidating details that can provoke massive panic, fear and victimization
(savouring the tragic facts, showing killed or injured in details).

Finally, establishing a hotline that provides direct communication to the
public by phone, e-mail and a specially created Internet site; communicating
with other concerned organizations; elaborating joint communications
strategies; consistently monitoring information flows, not only those of the
traditional media, but from the Internet and social media as well, as giving
immediate feedback and correcting disinformation make up additional steps at
this stage.

The role of the post-crisis stage should not be underestimated. Mistakes
during this phase can make the crisis relapse and become chronic. 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 are
priceless for future cases. Follow-up crisis communications should include the report about crisis response measures and the results of the investigation of the further speculations or rumours. The required governmental activity for handling this type of situation should be highlighted. Terrorism crises fade, but do not vanish. Since they are responsible for 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 also be thoroughly analyzed at this stage. Evaluation data comes from crisis records, stakeholder feedback, organizational performance measures, Internet comments, and media coverage (Coombs, 2007). The primary methods used for analysis include: content-analyses of external and internal documents, media coverage and Internet comments; as well as surveys, interviews and focus-groups with 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 for the future. Once this is completed, the crisis communication circle returns to the pre-crisis stage.

Bibliography


