



# (Counter-)Terrorism as Performance <sup>1</sup>

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The choice of labelling something 'unlawful' and 'terrorist' differs with place, time and party. As a researcher, it is of course of practical use to accept some of the essential elements of the phenomenon of terrorism as a starting point for academic debate. American terrorism expert Bruce Hoffman has stressed that terrorism is both a tactic and a strategy, aimed at the 'deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence or the threat of violence in the pursuit of political change'.<sup>2</sup> These elements return in the academic consensus definition formulated by Alex Schmid:

Terrorism refers on the one hand to a doctrine about the presumed effectiveness of a special form or tactic of fear-generating, coercive political violence and, on the other hand, to a conspiratorial practice of calculated, demonstrative, direct violent action without legal or moral restraints, performed for its propagandistic and psychological effects on various audiences and conflict parties.<sup>3</sup>

However, in practice, it is simply impossible to construct an all-inclusive, universally applicable definition of terrorism.

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<sup>1</sup> This text has been extracted and modified from Beatrice de Graaf, *Evaluating Counterterrorism Performance: A Comparative Study* (London/New York: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p. 43, and also chapter 1 as a whole.

<sup>3</sup> A.P. Schmid, *Handbook of Terrorism Research* (London: Routledge, 2009).



It is a political affair, and therefore an 'essentially contested concept'.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, the evaluation of counterterrorism becomes a dubious business. For the Russians, 'counterterrorism' has an essentially different meaning than it has, for instance, in the European Union. With regard to the causes of terrorism – another crucial element in understanding how to counter the phenomenon – here too opinions differ greatly.

Given these essential epistemological doubts as to who or what can and should be labelled terrorist in a given time and space, it is safe enough to conclude that the act of branding something or someone as terrorist is an act of communication. Alex Schmid and Janny de Graaf wrote their seminal work on *Violence as Communication* in 1982, stating that terrorist violence should be distinguished from ordinary violence because of its communicative character.<sup>5</sup> And terrorism expert Brian Jenkins argued, as early as 1975, 'Terrorism is theatre'.<sup>6</sup> Peter Waldmann added to these observations with his statement that most terrorists explicitly want theatre, since they are bent on provoking state power.<sup>7</sup> However, counterterrorist reactions are a means of communication and identification as well, and these reactions to a large extent determine the social impact of terrorist actions, especially if we consider this in the broader socio-political context and over a longer period of time.

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<sup>4</sup> William E. Conolly, *The Terms of Political Discourse*, 3rd ed. (Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 10; See also Alex Schmid, 'Terrorism: The Definitional Problem', *Journal of International Law* 36.1 (2004), pp. 375-420.

<sup>5</sup> Alex P. Schmid and Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication: Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: SAGE, 1982), p. 175.

<sup>6</sup> Brian M. Jenkins, 'International Terrorism: A New Mode of Conflict', in David Carlton and Carlo Schaerf (eds.), *International Terrorism and World Security* (London: Croom Helm, 1975), p. 16.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. P. Waldmann, *Terrorismus: Provokation der Macht* (Hamburg: Murmann Verlag, 2005); Richardson, *What Terrorists Want* (New York 2006).

As Schmid, Waldmann and others have abundantly made clear, social impact is not something that governments can engineer all by themselves. On the contrary, social impact is first and foremost a question of media coverage. Public opinion is mostly influenced by the media and the gripping images of dramatic terrorist attacks that are disseminated through them. As Altheide put it: The modern 'entertainment format, the use of visuals, emerging icons of fear, slogans, and especially the emphasis on the fear frame and "evil" provide many examples of how these attacks [of 9/11] contributed to the expansion of the discourse of fear into more attempts at social control'.<sup>8</sup>

Nacos and Torres-Reyna demonstrated that the news media's portrayal of Muslims and their religion grew more negative, unfair and stereotypical after two years (after a remarkable short-lived increase in more thematical and reflective reporting during the immediate post 9/11 months).<sup>9</sup> Terrorist attacks thus do not only contribute to fear in society at the time of the incident, they also – through the media – succeed in changing public attitudes for a longer period of time. In this process, moreover, mass media are not just mere transmitters of the terrorist message: 'While the terrorists may write the script and perform the drama, the "theatre of terror" becomes possible only when the media provide the stage and access to a worldwide audience', and select from the terrorist events the

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<sup>8</sup> Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 2002), pp. ix-x.

<sup>9</sup> Brigitte L. Nacos and Oscar Torres-Reyna, *Fuelling Our Fears: Stereotyping, Media Coverage, and Public Opinion of Muslim Americans* (Lanham et al.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), p. 101.

'dramatic features of a good story' that best resonate with the public, as Gabriel Weimann had already noted in 1983.<sup>10</sup>

It is however not only the media that contribute to the making of a 'Theater of Terror' (Weimann), the authorities play an essential role as well. Governments, and their executive instruments, may not be the providers of the imagery, but they can affect the social impact of terrorist attacks all the same.<sup>11</sup> They still monopolise the use of violence and they are the ones citizens turn to in times of national crises. Moreover, they often fuel these crises and use them to further their own political and military agendas.<sup>12</sup> They amplify the 'moral panic' in society with military metaphors ('we are at war') or, on the contrary, exert a moderating influence by underlining and appealing to the social resilience in a society. Recall how immediately after the London bombings of 7 July 2005, British Prime Minister Tony Blair did exactly this: 'Terror will not win, we will not be intimidated'.<sup>13</sup>

Official counterterrorism measures have a communicative effect that goes beyond these explicit and intended instruments. Communication not only succeeds when intended: every counterterrorist action, even when carried out at local street level, can have a bearing on the 'war of influence' between the terrorists and the state. Utterances and speeches can have a profound effect as well, conveying to society or even the world 'what we stand for'.

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<sup>10</sup> Gabriel Weimann, 'The Theater of Terror: Effects of Press Coverage', *Journal of Communication* 33.1 (Winter 1983), pp. 38-45, at 38 and 45.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. F. Furedi, F., *Invitation to terror: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown* (New York/London: Continuum, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Altheide, *Terror Post 9/11*, especially chapter 7, 'Terrorism Programming'.

<sup>13</sup> 'Blair says "Terror will not win"', *BBC News*, 7 July 2005.

Terrorists know this even better than governments. Significantly enough, in advance of American President Barack Obama's visit to Egypt, Osama bin Laden, through Al Jazeera, warned the Arabic world that the United States was still demonising Muslims. With this message, al-Qaeda's leader tried to neutralise (from his perspective) the threatening effects of the dialogue and cooperation that Obama offered the 'Muslim World'.<sup>14</sup> After all, with his offer, the American President undermined the efforts the *jihadists* were undertaking to mobilise their supporters. In this 'influence warfare', both the terrorists and Western democracies are waging a battle to convince and persuade the different 'target audiences' to rally behind them.

The concept of 'influence warfare' was brought to the fore only recently, by amongst others, James J. Forest. Ten years after 9/11, with two exhaustive wars going on and numerous incidents of Western abuses of civil liberties disclosed (keywords 'Gitmo' or 'Abu Ghraib') it is obvious that the struggle against terrorism also involves the fight to shape perceptions as well.<sup>15</sup> Not only including the explicitly formulated strategic communications, but also involving the images and stories unwittingly produced through various counterterrorism instruments,<sup>16</sup> like the myth connected with 'Gitmo' that the 'West' is waging a 'crusade' against Islam.

Before governments state their own central narrative against such myths, as is often advocated by counterterrorist experts

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<sup>14</sup> 'Osama bin Laden rains on Obama's Parade', *New York Daily News*, 4 June 2009.

<sup>15</sup> See James J.F. Forest (ed.), *Influence Warfare How Terrorists and Governments Fight to Shape Perceptions in a War of Ideas* (Westport, Conn.: Praeger Security International, 2009), introduction and conclusion.

<sup>16</sup> See Walter D. Casebeer and James A. Russell, 'Storytelling and Terrorism: Towards a Comprehensive "Counter-Narrative Strategy"', *Strategic Insights*, 4.3 (2005), pp. 1-16.

in recent years,<sup>17</sup> the authorities should become fully aware of the messages they often inadvertently propagate – messages that could be exaggerated by terrorists and their sympathisers. It is this ‘performative power’ of the whole range of explicit, implicit, wittingly and unwittingly initiated counterterrorism activities staged by official authorities that changes society in the long run, often in a much more profound fashion than the act of perceived terrorism is able to achieve. Using ‘counterterrorism performance’ as a guiding concept makes it possible on the one hand to maintain distance from the technical questions about counterterrorism effectiveness that are epistemologically or empirically almost impossible to answer. On the other, dealing with counterterrorism performance allows us to credit the communicative aspect of counterterrorism, the interrelation of terrorist actions and counterterrorist reactions, and the social drama or cultural trauma generated by them. The role of the mass media has been given abundant attention, as have the mechanical aspects of combating terrorism. However, the role of the government in ‘marketing’ counterterrorism, in constructing social reality, and affecting the social impact of terrorism, has often been understudied.

In October 2008, American terrorism experts Kruglanski, Crenshaw, Post and Victoroff stated that it was time to replace the ‘war on terror’ metaphor with a different description, since this image simplified the terrorism issue considerably and, rather than produce effective policy, fuelled resentment and rancour.<sup>18</sup> They argued that counterterrorism policies do not concern objective measures alone, but their framing and presentation as

<sup>17</sup> See suggestion in Anon., *Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law, ‘Theoretical Treatise on Counterterrorism Approaches’*, 19 October 2007. Deliverable 10, Work package 6, pp. 18, 24–25; See also National Coordinator for Counterterrorism (ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives* (The Hague: NCTb, January 2010).

well. After all, the ‘warfare’ metaphor creates political urgency. By declaring war, even metaphorically speaking, certain public expectations are raised; this is accompanied by corresponding drastic security measures. Consequently, the social climate can be subject to radical change. It is not just the terrorists who invoke their combatants, counterterrorism officials also help to shape the adversaries they combat. Counterterrorism is a form of communication, as is terrorism. Communicating antiterrorism measures involves the construction of ‘enemy’ imagery as well as a reproduction of the native culture’s values and principles.<sup>19</sup>

Political scientist Lene Hansen has, as exponent of the *Copenhagen School* in *Security as practice*, demonstrated that security politics is to be considered a process of *agenda setting* and *framing*. Confirming a characteristic group identity in relation to outsiders and enemies is more relevant to this than genuine, physical power relations. When applied to counterterrorism, this means that the struggle against terrorism is not merely one against bombs and grenades, or additional laws and better security checks. More is at stake – preserving a nation’s ‘individuality’ in relation to ‘the alien’ in particular. When this is the case, i.e., when terrorism becomes urgent on a national level, the *Copenhagen School* speaks of a process of ‘securitisation’. This denotes that when governments succeed in depicting something or someone as a threat to national security, they are provided with the legitimacy and the possibility to employ exceptional measures – which naturally does not fail to affect the group of people targeted by these measures. ‘Securitisation’ is therefore an intersubjective process,

<sup>18</sup> Arie Kruglanski, Martha Crenshaw, Jerrold Post and Jeff Victoroff, ‘The Psychology of “The War on Terror” and Other Terms for Counterterrorism’, *Scientific American Mind*, 15 October 2008, pp. 58–65.

<sup>19</sup> Cf. P. Norris, M. Kern and M. Just (eds.), *Framing Terrorism: The News Media, the Government and the Public*, (New York/London 2003).

meaning it does not concern an objective threat, but a subjective threat perception accepted by the majority of the population.<sup>20</sup>

This line of thinking was already introduced in 2007, as part of a European research project on 'Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law'. In one of the papers, the contributors identified five approaches to counterterrorism in the academic literature up to that point: the 'Policy Perspective', the 'International Relations Perspective', the 'Hard Power versus Soft Power' model, the 'Communications Perspective' and the 'Economic Perspective'.<sup>21</sup> The 'Communications Perspective' to the study of counterterrorism was attributed to, most notably, Casebeer and Russell. In 2005, they argued that counterterrorism officials engage in communicating narratives, even without being aware of them.<sup>22</sup>

Since effectiveness of short term, concrete counterterrorism measures is hard to assess and given the fact that the social impact terrorist attacks generate in the mid and long term is a much more fundamental issue, we can conclude that the way governments contribute to this impact through the presentation of new measures, and by communicating their values, norms and strategies is at least as important in addressing the terrorist question. Performance matters, not just the terrorist's, but also the authorities' performance. 'Performance' or 'performative power' is introduced and ex-

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<sup>20</sup> See Lene Hansen, *Security As Practice: Discourse Analysis and the Bosnian War* (London: Routledge, 2006); See also Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, *Regions and Powers: The Structure of International Security* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>21</sup> *Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law, 'Theoretical Treatise on Counterterrorism Approaches', 19 October 2007. Deliverable 10, Work package 6.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16-20; Casebeer and Russell, 'Storytelling', pp. 1-16.

plained in Judith Butler and J.L. Austin's discourse analysis and theory.<sup>23</sup> Butler describes the performative power of 'excitable speech' – like insults or hate speech – as 'not only a ritual practice: it is one of the influential rituals by which subjects are formed and reformulated'.<sup>24</sup> Here, performance pertains to communication, not only in a textual or verbal sense, but also in an action-oriented, act-like form of communication, as has been elaborate more recently by Erika Fischer-Lichte in her seminal work on 'the performative turn' in writing history.<sup>25</sup>

Applied to counterterrorism measures this means that their performative power lies in the repetition, the visibility, the authority with which they are proclaimed and the venue of power attributed to them. President Bush, proclaiming a 'War on Terror' has the authority to turn that metaphor into a reality; even more so, the utterance (or 'speech act') per se already is the beginning of a war, since he was supreme commander of the United States Armed Forces. Thus, the performative power of counterterrorism can be defined as the extent to which the national government, by means of its official counterterrorism policy and corresponding discourse (in statements, enactments, measures and ministers' remarks) aims to mobilise public and political support and in the last instance, wittingly or unwittingly,

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<sup>23</sup> J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1962); Malcolm Coulthard, *An Introduction to Discourse Analysis* 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1985); Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> Butler, *Excitable Speech*, p. 160.

<sup>25</sup> Fischer-Lichte, 'Notwendige Ergänzung des Text-Modells', *Frankfurter Rundschau*, 23 November 1999, p. 20; *Theater als Modell für eine performative Kultur: Zum performative turn in der europäischen Kultur des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Universitätsreden 46), Saarbrücken 2000; Cf. also Jürgen Martschukat and Steffen Patzold (eds.), *Geschichtswissenschaft und 'performative turn': Ritual, Inszenierung*.

assists the purported terrorists in creating social drama. 'Social drama' is used here in line with Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici who adapted this concept to the Italian government's handling of the abduction and death of statesman Aldo Moro. She, in turn, draws on Victor Turner and Paul Ricoeur to define 'social drama' as a moment of social transformation where society is threatened, a crisis is at hand, more and more protagonists are drawn in, and divisions already extant in society are invoked and aggravated.<sup>26</sup>

Counterterrorism measures are a way of communicating to the audience what society should look like, what constitutes a collective threat, what actions are considered legal and what is defined alien and hostile. Counterterrorist strategies thus are strategies of social control, as Crelinsten has stated as well.<sup>27</sup> These strategies come with costs attached. Laura K. Donohue, amongst others, laid the ground work for assessing the costs of different counterterrorist instruments. Donohue characterises the adoption of new powers and counterterrorist laws as a spiral within which special institutional interests are embedded and creep into the everyday (criminal) realm. This function of creeping and institutional engraving of counterterrorism measures in a society's fabric brings with it all kinds of political, social and economic costs, not in the least a loss of legitimacy, infringements on civil liberties, or a loss of credibility in the security domain.<sup>28</sup> As will become apparent through performative acts, such as

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<sup>26</sup> Robin Erica Wagner-Pacifici, *The Moro Morality Play: Terrorism as Social Drama* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 8–9. She quotes: Paul Ricoeur, 'The Model of the Text: Social Action considered as a Text', *New Literary History* 5 (1973), pp. 91–117; Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, vol. 1 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984); Victor Turner, 'Social Dramas and Stories about Them', *Critical Inquiry* (Autumn 1980), pp. 141–168.

<sup>27</sup> Crelinsten, *Counterterrorism*, p. 219.

<sup>28</sup> Laura K. Donohue, *The Cost of Counterterrorism. Power, Politics, and Liberty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 24.

this New World Summit as organised and staged by Jonas Staal, is how identities of terrorists and counterterrorists are being constructed and how norms and values of justice and injustice, of acceptable behaviour and deviance are collectively suggested, created, confirmed or discarded. National governments and international governments can put militant activist on the 'black list' of terrorism, thereby externalising them from the normal rule of law and attributing to them the category of 'enemies of the state'. Purported terrorists can also present their story as an alternative way of justice seeking, as a strive for a more just society, thereby justifying their violence as 'counter-violence' to perceived oppression and 'state terror'.

In performing or narrating these stories and identities, both suspected terrorists and counterterrorists tune into the expectations and fears of the population and try to mobilise them by breaking through the 'fourth wall' that separates the targeted audience from the stage on which they are performing. The act of ascribed terrorism should be considered a performance in the category of 'simultaneous dramaturgy', developed by Brazilian dramaturgist Augusto Boal: 'a technique designed to involve spectators in a scene without requiring their physical presence onstage.'<sup>29</sup> A terrorist act as performance undertakes the attempt to 'demolish the wall that separates actors from spectators. Spectators feel that they can intervene in the action. The action ceases to be presented in a deterministic manner, as something inevitable, as Fate'.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, this type of performance has a thoroughly open character, that allows both the protagonists and the spectators to create and (re-)write the script as

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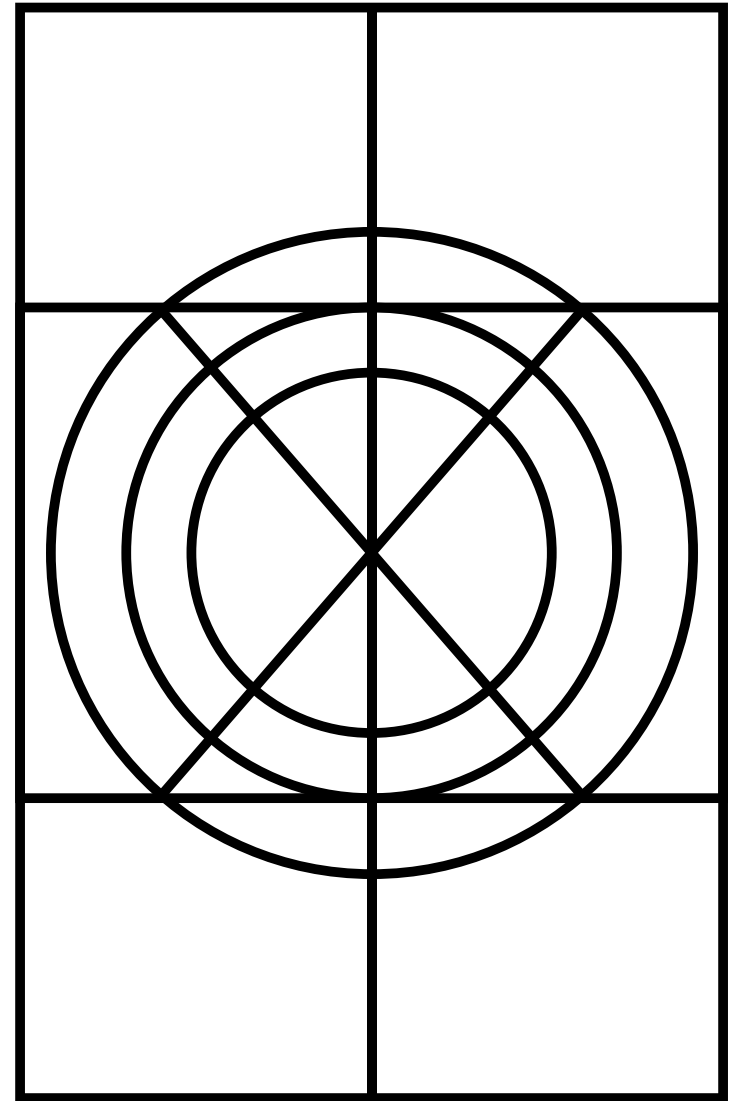
<sup>29</sup> Cf. Elizabeth Bell, *Theories of Performance*, p. 208.

<sup>30</sup> Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985), p. 134.

it unfolds. This model of performance helps us to discuss the question whether and to what extent the interplay of terrorist attacks, purported preparations or perceived radicalisation on the one hand and the public, media and political reactions thereupon on the other, and embedded within the historical context of socio-cultural configurations and collective action repertoires, succeeds in breaking up traditions, undermine social norms and values and helps to bring about new ideas of justice and injustice.

In rehearsing these stories and playing out identities of activism, state responses and collective indignation, in a performative act such as this New World Summit, we can contribute to the critical debate on (counter)terrorism, identify the different strategies that are acted out, and expose the political struggle that lies behind the framing and defining of someone or something as terrorism. In this sense, we will be able to unpack and overcome the – often – too simple dichotomy of terrorism and counterterrorism, and try to reflect on our own role as ‘spect-actors’ to the theatre of terror.

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