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Terrorist Groups: Using Internet and Social Media for Disseminating Ideas. New Tools for Promoting Political Change

Abstract

Terrorism is one of the essential problems of our times. Most commonly, terrorist organizations have their origins in social movements that presume that they cannot reach their goal of promoting political change other than through violence. This paper deals with the use of the Internet, and especially social media, by terrorist groups. Social media seem to be an essential part in the groups' strategic communication concepts. They do not only use it for the groups' internal organization but mainly for the dissemination of ideas to a broader public. If the government wants to counteract terrorist movements, it also has to counteract their use of social media. Therefore, theoretical concepts of terrorism as communication, PR and propaganda will be presented as well as results of case studies in order to show the interconnectedness of terrorism and social media.

Key words: (counter-)terrorism; social media; social movement; political change through violence; recruitment; Internet.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the use of social media has been intensely discussed and researched in communication science (cf. for example Deans, 2009; Taddicken, 2011; Weißensteiner & Leiner, 2011). However, within this field the use of social media (and the Internet in general) by terrorist groups has been neglected.¹ This article aims at further closing this gap by presenting theoretical considerations on the basis of literary research as well as a first explorative qualitative analysis. We will try to find an answer to the following research question: Can the strategic communication endeavours of terrorist groups via the internet and esp. social media be perceived as public relations? The effort is of political and normative relevance, assuming that more effective counter-terrorist strategies could be developed if the knowledge about Internet activities of terrorist groups is increased and expanded.

In the first part of the article, I will concentrate on definitions of the "t-word" (Nacos, 2007, p. 8), then describe the use of social media in contrast to relying on traditional mass media reporting and subsequently investigate the advantages and disadvantages for different stakeholders. Finally, I will present the results of a case study on the matter at hand.

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2. Defining terrorism

Terrorist groups can be understood as social movements² using violence as a tool of creating public fear. The word “terror” has its origin in the Latin word “terror, terroris” which means “scare” or “fright”. “In its origins, the term usually meant violence carried out by a government or a ruling order, rather than, as later, the actions of antigovernment rebels” (Jenkins, 2003, p. 27). The latter perception evolved during the 19th century when Russian anarchists like Michail A. Bakunin fought against the Tsarist regime.

Today numerous definitions of terrorism exist and despite the heterogeneity one can deduce a common pool of characteristics that seem to be inherent in the phenomenon “terrorism”. One of these characteristics is the political purpose of the terrorists’ actions. Historian Laqueur, for example, describes terrorism as the use of covert violence by a group for political purposes (cf. Laqueur, 1982, p. 100). Schmid and Jongman had a look at 109 definitions of terrorism and at the words used in them. The terms “violence”, “force”, “political”, “fear” and “threat” appeared most frequently (cf. Schmid & Jongman, 1988, p. 5). Martin, too, scrutinized various definitions of terrorism and concluded by adding the following list: “The use of illegal force, Subnational actors, Unconventional methods, Political motives, Attacks against ‘soft’ civilian and passive military targets, Acts aimed at purposefully affecting an audience” (Martin, 2006, p. 47). Like Martin, in this paper I too will concentrate on understanding terrorism as violence of a social group to further political objectives; the violence is ultimately (but not necessarily physically) directed against a certain power that also has more military strength at its command than the group.

3. Terrorism and public relations

Public relations can be defined as “planned – or managed – communication” (Hunt & Grunig, 1994, pp. 5-6) or “*management of communication between an organization and its publics*” (Grunig & Hunt, 1984, p. 6) which comprehends strategic communication techniques. Crenshaw already in 1998 stated that “terrorism can be understood as an expression of political strategy” and “may follow logical processes” (1998, p. 7). As we will see in the following, terrorists seem to be quite good strategic communicators. Hence, it is not surprising that some researchers have spoken of the “terrorists’ public relations”. Rada (1985) for example calls both the PR-media and terrorists-media relationships symbiotic. The reason for this is that the media are dependent on the “messages” delivered by public relations offices as well as have to report on the “messages” delivered through terrorist attacks. At the same time, the terrorists and public relations utterly depend on the media to distribute their messages. If we define PR as communication for the attainment of (political) goals, we should not be surprised to see that terrorist groups, in this respect, act similar to “normal” businesses and/or (N)GOs. Both want to win the public over to their causes without any payment.

But of course there is also a big difference between terrorists and “normal” public relations: “Both share the objectives of commanding attention, delivering a message, and influencing opinion [...], what ultimately separates the two is the social responsibility of the practitioner and the social utility of the end. Terrorism seeks legitimacy through self-definition, and not through the mandate of society” (Rada, 1985, p. 26). An enterprise which does not seek the support and acceptance of society or breaks common rules will not be successful

in public relations in a traditional sense. “Is not terrorism, after all, simply a public relations campaign, albeit sinister in intent? Terrorism aims, sometimes through violence but more often through coercion and fear, to influence opinions and behavior of specific publics. Public relations, likewise, seeks to influence the opinions and behavior of target groups but through information and persuasion as opposed to coercion” (Rada, 1985, p. 26). Both PR and terrorist groups are in need of (self-created) events or information to generate media content.³

We will now have a closer look at the relationship between media content and terrorist reaction/feedback. Interestingly, almost all terrorist groups deem the coverage very important and evaluate articles and newscasts. A proof of that is, for example, that the GAM terrorist movement attacked journalists after negative coverage. FARC instead invited news reporters into the Colombian hinterland to get an own (of course manipulated) picture of the situation. The German RAF was very professional and even created press clippings. Also in this way, terrorist groups show signs of PR professionals. In addition, professional communication guidelines exist. Most times, terrorists follow a certain manifesto by the founder or other historic person, which does not only contain political norms, goals, and advice, but also rules for communication. The IRA Green Book for example states that members are not allowed to talk to anybody about IRA activities, not even to one’s own family. The Tamil group LTTE even had their press offices in London and an own unit, called the “Nitharsan unit” to take pictures and video material for propaganda purposes. These were shown, for example, in youtube video messages. Addressees of such clips are on the one hand “enemies” that shall get scared in the face of the demonstrated strength, on the other hand potential supporters within and without the resp. country. As will also show the case studies, high importance has to be attributed to the groups’ diaspora regarding international public relations campaigns and fund-raising. The diaspora will propagate a negative image of the opponents / government of their home state to the public in their country of residence. They act as extended arm of the groups’ PR/propaganda central and sometimes the web presences are controlled from their whereabouts. The Internet enables the groups “to frame their actions and their ideologies in the manner of their choice without the intervention of government or media censors and gatekeepers.” (Tekwani, 2004, p. 9) This positive framing of a product (in this case immaterial) is one of the core concepts of successful PR.

4. The goals of terrorist groups

Terrorists want to gain resonance in the public sphere of a certain state or they even desire to have their problems recognized by an international audience. The distributed messages mirror the group’s ideology as well as self-image. Therefore, public relations-like communication seems to be a useful instrument. Previous to Internet times, this goal could only be achieved with the help of mass media which act as a transmitter of the terrorists acts and political demands. Nacos describes this “mass-mediated terrorism” as “political violence against noncombatants/innocents that is committed *with the intention to publicize the deed, to gain publicity and thereby public and government attention*” (Nacos, 2007, p. 26).

Today, it is also possible to gain publicity via social media. The “Social Media Guide” defines social media as “user generated content that is shared over the Internet via technologies that promote engagement, sharing and collaboration” (<http://thesocialmediaguide.com>). Alby (2007) emphasizes the content of social software which is aimed at communicating with

various network stakeholders who in turn can enrich the conversation through their own comments or links. The focus is on the “community” aspect, in contrast to traditional media where the focus was on the “distribution” aspect. “Different from traditional web applications that allow only *passive* information viewing, these web 2.0 sites offer a platform for users to *actively* participate in and contribute to the content/service provided” (Zhao et al., 2011, p. 3). Platforms and formats labeled “Social Media” differ from other forms of online communication as to be based on social software technology. Social software “is simply being leveraged to support and facilitate the creation and maturation of relationships between individuals, otherwise known as social networking. The value of social software lies in its ability to do two things. First, it helps to cross traditional barriers that keep individuals from creating relationships. [...] Second, social software assists people to better leverage their existing relationships in order to find knowledge.” (Burkhardt, 2009, p. 3); other authors prefer the expression “social web”, cf. Schmidt, 2011, p. 24) The technological level can thus be distinguished from the level of individual usage (cf. Michelis’ model of social media-levels in Michelis & Schildhauer, 2012, pp. 19-23).

Social media offer the possibility of reaching a wide audience in all parts of the world, and of networking and establishing contacts – an essential part of PR efforts. They can play a crucial role for the groups’ self-organisation as they offer anonymous interchange and volatility. The terrorists can also use it as a propaganda tool to distribute their ideas of political change. The terrorists thus do not have to rely only on the effect of their deed: “An important objective of many terrorist attacks is the creation of the *propaganda of the deed*, that is, the act itself carrying messages” (Picard, 1993, p. 13).⁴ If the terrorists can also demonstrate by their use of social media that they have a large number of supporters, the government will be under a great deal more pressure to react. Surely, there is also a downside of social media and the use of the Internet as a communication channel in general – that will be reflected in the next chapter.

In former times, terrorists had to rely completely and exclusively on the traditional media to communicate their causes; while today they can post their demands autonomously via Internet newsgroups, upload propaganda videos on YouTube⁵ and so on. “The use of terror serves not primarily the purpose of fighting, injuring or destroying the opponent. Rather, its primary purpose lies in the conveying of messages to the target audience(s)” (Bockstette, 2008, p. 8).

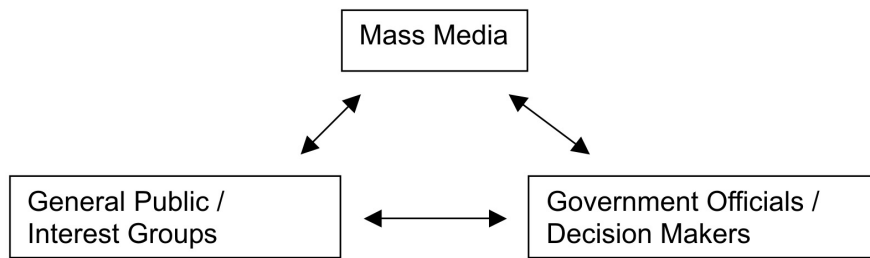
Changing patterns of communication have created new opportunities for all social movements and thus also for terrorist groups. Traditional mass media have not ceased to be important, but since new technologies are converging communication channels, the communication strategies combine a variety of media and the groups gain access to a broad field of communication platforms.

5. Terrorism: Stakeholders and their mutual relationships

Nacos states that “terrorists are particularly successful in exploiting the links between the mass media, public opinion, and governmental decision making” (Nacos, 2007, p. ix). She advances the “thesis of the media’s centrality in the calculus of terrorism” (Nacos, 2007, p. 7) – the same applies to every PR department of “normal” businesses that wants to make the media to accept their press releases. Furthermore, Nacos is sure: “most terrorists calculate the

consequences of their deeds, the likelihood of winning entrance – through the media – to what I call *The Triangle of Political Communication*” (Nacos, 2007, p. 15; see Figure 1).

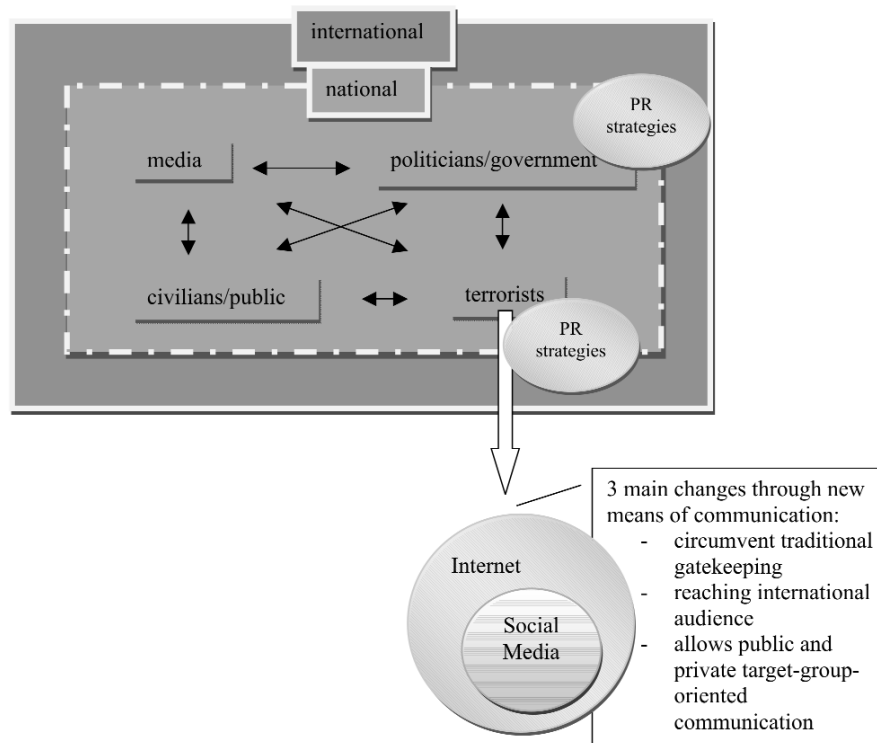
Figure 1. The Triangle of Political Communication.



Source: Nacos, 2007, p. 15.

This triangle surely has to be adapted as the terrorists form part of and also imminently influence the relationship of the stakeholders. Terrorists communicate internally within their respective group (as every other group of stakeholders does, too) and they communicate directly or indirectly (via the terror act) with political actors, the public and the media (see Figure 2). PR techniques are applied by politicians as well as terrorists in direction of all the other stakeholders.

Figure 2. Stakeholders' rectangle of communication.



Source: own depiction.

We should not forget that today public awareness on an international scale is very important for the terrorists, especially for separatist movements.⁶ That is why there are two fields encompassing the rectangle. In most cases, terror acts happen on a national level dealing with intrastate conflicts. But reaching political change or at least having the problem included in the political agenda of the respective government is much facilitated if an international audience is watching and perhaps even likewise pressuring for change – for example to grant more rights or autonomy to an ethnic group. The possibility to present their causes to an international audience is now much easier for the terrorists since the Internet offers a great variety of worldwide opportunities and access from everywhere on earth.

In the inner-Internet-circle, the social media form an important part of the terrorists' communication strategy. They can and – as the case studies will demonstrate – to a certain extent really do employ tools like social network sites (Facebook), micro-blogs (Twitter), photo- and video-sharing platforms (Flickr, Youtube), blogs, chat rooms and the like, to enhance and optimize their interpersonal, inner-group, national and global communication. Oftentimes, virtual and non-virtual communication takes place synchronously. The rectangle indicates politicians, civilians and media as the terrorists' primary target groups. But it is not only the "antagonists" or opponents that should be informed of certain events and the insurgents' causes. The terrorist groups also want to share their information with the ones at their side, with members of their group, potential recruits, with the social class or minority they think they represent as well as with other (competing or supporting) social movements. And these last-mentioned target groups are oftentimes excluded from media coverage as the media usually tend to support the status quo of a political landscape. In this context, social media offer an excellent alternative and provide space for communication between obscure marginal groups giving them the possibility to establish a public or private (password-protected) sphere using virtual meeting rooms for discussion and for sharing pictures, videos and documents (cf. for example Gendron, 2006; Bockstette, 2008). How exactly terrorist groups make use of the Internet will be explained in the following.⁷

6. Terrorists' use of the Internet and of the social media

"If one would realize the nature of the Internet and the nature of terrorism, he could not find anything surprising in the fact that these two phenomena are highly compatible with each other [...], the Internet is probably the most flexible, and universal tool the terrorists ever had at their disposal" (Bolechów, 2006, p. 33).

Following Bolechów, advantages of the Internet are the scarcely regulated access and the possibility to do without conventional communication channels which are coined by "primary definers" like the ruling politicians. Further benefits include interactivity, feedback, flexibility, low costs despite the wide reach, the largely anonymous nature of the Internet, and, last but not least, a locally decentralized, peripheral network structure which is easily accessible from all parts of the world while remaining relatively invisible. One could also add uncomplicated and cheap development and maintenance of the website, the possibility to communicate the same content simultaneously in different languages as well as to combine multimedia tools. Documents can be shared via file-sharing-platforms or file-uploading-services. Not only written but also visual and oral information can form part of the groups' PR

instruments, too, and can be exchanged via social media, for example on YouTube or using VOIP-applications. The World Wide Web makes it quite easy to achieve public effects while operating in secret. A video can be uploaded anonymously on YouTube and reach a wide forum⁸; a video leaked to a broadcasting station would be subject to the editors' gatekeeping. This antagonism of illegal secret operations and pursuit of public recognition is inherent in the terrorism macro-system. Of course, the Internet can also be used as a weapon, as in the case of cyber-terrorism or illegal data mining. The groups can try to undermine diplomatic and military operations by sowing counter-propaganda or disinformation and by gathering intelligence information, thus trying to control their own as well as counter-terrorism efforts.

Harkening back to the communication-rectangle in the upper part, we stated that PR activities emanate from both terrorist groups and governments. However, there is an essential difference in the outcome: One of the main goals the groups pursue with their social media activities is "to arouse fear and helplessness among the public, a tactic commonly referred to as psychological warfare." (Qin et al., 2006, p. 5) Governments, instead, try to arouse public approval and want the society to accept or even legitimise their behaviour (cf. Rada, 1985, p. 26: "mandate of society"). Qin et al. had a look at terrorist/extremist groups' web pages and the contents and state that "dynamic Web sites and forums provide snapshots of terrorist/extremist activities, communications, ideologies, relationships, and evolutionary developments." (Qin et al., 2006, pp. 4-5) They compared the terrorists'/extremists' use with that of U.S. government agencies and conclude: "The results showed that terrorist/extremist groups adopted similar levels of Web technologies as U.S. government agencies. Moreover, terrorists/extremists had a strong emphasis on multimedia usage and their Web sites employed significantly more sophisticated multimedia technologies than government Web sites. We also found that terrorist/extremists seem to be as effective as the U.S. government agencies in terms of supporting communications and interaction using Web technologies." (Qin et al., 2006, p. 14)

Creating their own websites allows the terrorists to state their causes from their own points of view, using their own terms and labels such as, for example, "freedom fighter", "revolutionaries" etc. One can provide ordinary text, movies, audio files or even interactive content, all for download, enabling worldwide viral dissemination of all kinds of materials (cf. Rötzer, 2004, p. 2). From propaganda slogans to instructions on how to make a bomb – the Internet is open for creating publicity as well as serving as a multifunctional non-hierarchical inner-group communication channel. Above all, the organisations – like any other business – use their web presence to present themselves and their ideology in a positive way. Most separatist movements, for example, try to legitimize their deeds by stating that the authoritarian oppressive regime does not leave them any other choice but to resort to violence (cf. Waldmann, 2005, p. 96). Terrorists more and more commonly utilize the Internet not only as an internal communication tool, but as an "advertising platform, distance university, and virtual terror camp" (Schäuble⁹, 2008, p. 10; own translation). Theveßen (2007, p. 61) even compared the role of the Internet for Islamic fundamentalist terrorism to a "University of Jihad". As noted earlier, it is practically effortless to put radical pamphlets or internal (technical) instruction / training material online and on these grounds social media definitely play an important role for the groups' self-organisation. However, the Internet – as far as literature testifies (Waldmann, 2005) – is not an appropriate tool for recruiting significant numbers of novices. Typically, new members are won via personal face-to-face persuasion, but the Internet surely has a motivating catalytic effect (cf. Waldmann, 2005, p. 98; Gendron, 2006).

As stated before, social media and the Internet in general do not have an exclusively positive potential for the terrorist groups' communication flow. A great disadvantage surely is that social media cater to very fragmented audiences. Thus, terrorists do not reach a universalistic audience but rather people who have themselves selected a certain page or share group. Of course, the preoccupation with the matter presented on the web page or within the virtual group can be quite cursory.

7. Case studies: method and results

Because of the permanent updating of online content, online information is not a very easy to handle research object. Many Internet sites, especially in the field of terrorism, go offline some days or weeks after they have been accessed and in some cases a profound analysis could not be conducted. But should that be a reason to stop research on the PR-like use of social media by terrorists? We do not think so. Permanent updating and renewal are obvious characteristics of social media. Hence, I will present the results of analyses conducted in two master seminars (summer term 2009 and winter term 2010/2011)¹⁰, keeping in mind that it is a selective inventory in a permanently changing process as it concerns evanescent material and multilingual sources.

7.1. Data collection

The method applied was an exploratory and qualitative approach of data collection and document case study analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Flyvbjerg, 2006). We selected the terrorist groups' websites by either already knowing the respective www-address from literature or by typing in the group's name in "Google" and then examining the respective pages.¹¹ A list of social media sources was collated from literature (e.g. Schmidt, 2011; Deans, 2009) and adapted to each single case. We scrutinized various social media tools in order to find out how the terrorist groups make use of them. We also included information from the groups' own websites from which they communicate to different stakeholders like politicians, the diaspora, recruits and so on. If no appropriate site was found, we switched to sites from the diaspora (e.g. in case of LTTE tamilnation.org and tamilnet.com) or political arms, e.g. Sinn Féin in the case of IRA. The sample included seven terrorist groups with religious, separatist or social-revolutionary motivation or ideology. Whether a social movement could be classified as a "terrorist group" or not was decided along the criteria of Elter (2008, pp. 24-25; own translation), which describe the characteristics of the actors, the terrorist organisations, and not only the phenomenon "terrorism". According to Elter, terrorist groups

- do not have the legitimacy of a state and do not have any legitimate political power;
- do not have a mass base;
- have political, ideological or religious motives and pursue long-term objectives;
- operate as illegal clandestine organisations or as a network of individual cells;
- have different organisational structures at different times in their history;
- typically have hierarchical structures but, at the same time, are divided into functional groups for specific tasks – such as the preparation of individual attacks;

- primarily focus on physical violence (which also aims to create psychological effects) and dramatic events that are intended to ensure propagation through mass media, reach the public and have a long-lasting shock value;
- therefore pursue the goal of triggering a spiral of escalation, and influencing opinions and actions;
- do not, however, aim at occupying a territory – in a military sense – for longer periods;
- always have an enemy defined by themselves;
- do not exclusively target this enemy during their actions but consciously plan – or at least tacitly accept – the deaths of innocent victims;
- draw on both the ‘propaganda of the deed’ and the ‘propaganda of the word’ – they admit responsibility for violent actions;
- have a logistics system as well as sources of financing;
- typically have a group of supporters and/or sympathizers.

Our sample of terrorist groups covers diverse communities, cultures and ethnological backgrounds from all parts of the world. In a first approaching step, we tried to use the scheme of categories provided by Shultz (1978, p. 11) and gather enough information about the respective groups in order to comply with the following classification: causes, environment, goals, strategy, means and form of organisation. What the groups have in common is that they do not communicate arbitrarily but in a target-group oriented way, which is a typical characteristic of public relations campaigns. The use of their communication tools is strategic and accurately planned. The terrorist groups’ main goal is to defeat their enemy (in most cases a certain regime) not militarily, but mentally.

Another methodological tool concerned our understanding of PR activities. Texts, pictures, videos etc. from terrorist groups can be considered as public relations, or in a broader sense: strategic communication, when the following criteria are met:

- positive communication of the group’s ideology and action in order to ameliorate the organisation’s reputation (can even include manipulation or deception of the audience);
- trying to influence the public’s perception of the organisation through impression management (cf. Merten, 2009, p. 56);
- semantic and visual elements having a touch of “propaganda” (the aim of both PR and propaganda is persuasion, hence no strict division is possible¹²);
- communication can be considered as networking of the organisation to its environment and stakeholders (cf. Szyszka, 2009, p. 135).

In order to decide whether information was manipulated, omitted or added, we compared the data given with facts from literature and detected exaggerated and descriptive/judgmental words resp. text passages.

7.2. Data interpretation

For the description of the cases and the data interpretation process we relied on the concept of “document case study analysis” (for the different types of case studies cf. Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, pp. 55-60)¹. As written above, the case study design started with an explorative beginning, followed by a collection of adequate data and sources (among other things by snowball sampling and information-oriented selection) and was narrowed to analytical core categories: use of language, pictures, sound (if existent). In order to give some recent examples, I will now present selected results for three groups (*Sendero Luminoso*, *Gerakan Aceh*

Merdeka and *Euskadi ta Askatasuna*) and their use of language and pictures on two social media tools: facebook and twitter (see table 1).

Table 1. Use of social media tools by terrorist groups.

	<i>Sendero Luminoso</i>	<i>Gerakan Aceh Merdeka</i>	<i>Euskadi ta Askatasuna</i>
Facebook	<p><i>language</i> phrases of unification (“nosotros somos muchos”, “unamonos a la fureza [sic] de la revolucion”), trying to convince with “facts” / referring to theses of Lenin, Stalin, Zedong</p> <p><i>pictures</i> hooded, armed people, weapons, logos, flag, wounded people, illustrated links to youtube videos</p> <p>– <i>communication style</i> offensive, violent, iconic, demonstration of strength,</p>	<p><i>language</i> words of war / battle (“pemimpin”, “pasukan”, “hari ke menangan”, “pejuang”) and religion (referring to muslim proudness, pork eaters)</p> <p><i>pictures</i> training camp, uniforms, weapons, logo, victims, hooded figures, crowd</p> <p>– <i>communication style</i> pugnacious, martial, menacing, proud, demonstration of decisiveness / strength / unification</p>	<p><i>language</i> intimidation (“puede acabar en muerte”), address directly (“a los pilicias [sic] locales de murcia”), referring to political decisions, phrases of unification (“euskal presoak, euskal herrira”)</p> <p><i>pictures</i> flag, logo, Basque landscape</p> <p>– <i>communication style</i> offensive, iconic, demonstration of identity / Basque nationalism</p>
Twitter	<p><i>language</i> intimidation, provocation (“keiko [Fujimori] te dejastes derrotar por el simple cachaquito”), threat (“tenemos una nueva oportunidad de vengarnos”)</p> <p><i>pictures</i> hooded man in front of microphones wearing shirt with SL-logo</p> <p>– <i>communication style</i> offensive, violent, threatening, partly directly addressed to politician (“keiko”)</p>	<p>— (no account)</p>	<p>— (account deleted)</p>

Source: own depiction (referring to data collected on October 2nd, 2012).

As we did not have enough resources to update material for all groups, I will now present the results of the first two case studies phases. We will treat each single group separately and – due to limited space – highlight only the main examples of the groups’ use of social media. Afterwards, I will summarize and compare the results in the conclusion. Of course, one has to keep in mind the restrictions of the case studies: They are only a first exploratory step; and there have been language limitations despite the international student group’s assistance in making it possible to evaluate content in seven languages (spoken more or less fluently).

ETA (Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, Basque Homeland and Freedom; Spain; separatist movement; founded in 1959): ETA is very active in the Internet space. Even the Basque newspapers like Gara that were said to be related to ETA and therefore closed down several times had to switch to Internet publication in order to react more promptly to their social and political surroundings. ETA uses blogs and online videos that arouse patriotic feelings, quoting songs about Basque soldiers. The Etxarras are portrayed as heroes during military training, fighting for the “just cause” of an autonomous Basque country. In another video, you could

see masked men preparing a bomb. ETA also thinks of the international public in the web, offering subtitles in English and/or French. For some months in 2009, ETA could also be followed on Twitter.

IRA (Irish Republican Army; Northern Ireland; separatist, religious motivation; founded in 1919): The IRA has a quite hierarchical structure that includes a “Director of Publicity”. That alone shows the importance the group attributes to the topic. At the beginning of the Internet era, the IRA used the web to communicate via email and used USB sticks to exchange information quite secretly. Now in times of social media, the scope of the IRA’s Internet activities has developed much further. Even though it is doubtful that the IRA itself uploaded videos on their ideology and activities on YouTube, these videos have reached a large audience and helped recruit new sympathizers. The magazine “An Phoblacht” is available on the web and vehemently advances the cause of the Northern Irish separatists. One can also connect to it via Facebook or read its tweets via Twitter.

Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path; Peru; social-revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist-Maoist ideology; founded in 1970): Sendero Luminoso continues to exchange relevant intergroup information in interpersonal communication settings like conferences or congresses where the movement’s progress is evaluated (cf. Barnhurst, 1991), but they also have accounts on social network sites (SNS) and communicate via, for example, Facebook. They use YouTube to upload propaganda videos and run webpages containing SL-sympathetic content. As Sendero Luminoso was a terrorist organisation that for a long time operated in secret and avoided contact to all media (in contrast to other groups that published press releases etc.) because it considered the media to be part of the feudal and bourgeois system they wanted to fight, the new technologies now offer a welcome possibility to communicate directly from group to stakeholder, while continuing to avoid direct media contact. Internet communication is apt to reach the target-group of students, distributing propaganda to convince them to become leftist rebels. The Quechua-speaking, and sometimes illiterate, Peruvian *campesinos* in remote rural zones are still more easily contacted via radio frequencies or by direct oral communication or wall paintings.

FARC-EP (Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia – Ejército del pueblo, Revolutionary armed forces of Colombia – People’s army; Colombia; social-revolutionary, Marxist-Leninist ideology; founded in 1964): On its websites, FARC provides information about the history of the organisation, its founders, leaders and revered personalities like Ché Guevara. Similar to most terrorist groups’ websites, FARC rhetorically tries to legitimize their acts and to portray the government as the evil oppressor of the people. FARC has posted many links on its sites so that people interested in the topic can easily navigate to other web spaces of, for instance, close social movements or citizen bloggers. Thus, a network structure is established which is also used for recruitment and fundraising. The information is usually available in various languages in order to reach a global audience. Internal and external information can be exchanged in an almost uncensored manner. However, to reach the national rural audience living in the jungle, FARC still communicates via traditional radio emissions. Furthermore, FARC also made propaganda videos and even invited European film-makers to shoot their documentaries in the jungle. Most of the videos can be seen on YouTube.

GAM (Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, Free Aceh Movement; Indonesia; separatist movement; 1976-2005): GAM was not very active in the use of social media but rather relied on traditional media to gain publicity and support. They attacked journalists who reported in a critical manner about their actions. GAM issued brochures and press releases to communicate their statements through the international media because they needed international awareness to

push their cause – the separation from Indonesia. We wondered why they did not make use of the Internet for that purpose, as it would have made direct communication to international media, to the Aceh diaspora, as well as to potential recruits much easier, especially during the time of coverage restrictions imposed by the Indonesian government. In the 2012 data sampling they were active on Facebook (see above), but not on Twitter.

LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam; Sri Lanka; separatist movement; 1976-2009): LTTE is a true master in online communication, employing numerous tools like websites, forums, social networks and blogs. They even tried to create an “online-nation”, a virtual state of all Tamils, sharing their opinion on Internet platforms.¹³ All the LTTE’s online efforts have helped the organisation gain international public awareness, attract the media, and propagate their causes. Social media were (and are still) used to recruit new members, to fundraise and to justify the terror attacks. Tekwani (2004) provides a list of PR materials naming for example “text-articles of historical analysis, accounts of the struggle, biographies of martyrs, descriptions of the majority Sinhalese’s acts of oppression and discrimination. It is also done using graphic visual imagery” (Tekwani, 2004, p. 4). Even the LTTE radio station “Voice of Tigers Radio” was linked to many Tamil websites (cf. Tekwani, 2004, p. 6). As the Tamils have an enormous diaspora, they benefited from the possibility to publish their web content in different languages like Tamil, French and English. The so-called LTTE Nitharsan Unit provided propaganda material intended above all for Internet purposes. One of the LTTE functionaries stated the importance of entering the “blogosphere” (cf. Nacos et al., 2011, p. 27) because thus he could keep in contact with members that otherwise would not have the opportunity to “talk” to him. He used the blog primarily to share opinions and focus on intergroup aspects. In contrast to this, official websites were used to issue political statements for the target group of the Sri Lankan government. Political change was induced by all communication platforms. A deeper analysis of the distributed content shows that the LTTE fighters were portrayed on pictures and videos as brave, united and dedicated to the cause, a depiction which would make the intergroup circle or diaspora members feel proud of them. However, other videos could be found on YouTube: pictures of the Tamil landscape with emotional soft music chosen to encourage people to admire the land’s beauty and want to protect it. LTTE’s Nitharsan Unit was also good at storytelling, e.g. providing video footage of how Tamils were killed by Sinhalese, but neglecting to show how they had provoked them beforehand. Furthermore, LTTE was active on Facebook and Twitter, having quite a number of followers. Blogs like www.eelam.com offer a substantial amount of possible postings, e.g. to Facebook, del.icio.us, [digg](http://digg.com), [StumbleUpon](http://StumbleUpon.com), [buzzup](http://buzzup.com), [BlinkList](http://BlinkList.com), [myspace](http://myspace.com), [mixx](http://mixx.com), [LinkedIn](http://LinkedIn.com), [reddit](http://reddit.com) or furl.net. The Tamil’s websites are quite well interlinked and hosted from various servers in different countries. At www.eelamweb.com you could donate to the Tamil’s cause and even buy products such as flags, videos or CDs. Tekwani lists even more PR material sold by online stores like “posters, cards, audio and video tapes, flags and T-shirts” (Tekwani, 2004, p. 7). Taken all in all, LTTE certainly knows how to use the web and especially social media to communicate with various kinds of target-groups.

Al Qaeda (“The Basis”; Arab world / Afghanistan; religious (Islamist) / jihadist motivation; founded around 1988): All al Qaeda’s material found in the web follows the purpose of creating an anti-Western atmosphere. Al Qaeda makes extensive use of all Internet and especially social media features; in fact, their existence is almost limited to a “virtual network”. Al Qaeda (and their media production company as Sahab) benefit from the technological convergence that the Internet allows in that everyone can become a TV producer. When used for

internal communication, e.g. knowledge transfer and educational purposes, al Qaeda shows, for example, videos of training sessions or offers instructional manuals. Video statements of al Qaeda's leader(s) are directed to internal as well as external audiences. The group furthermore runs newsgroups and discussion boards to distribute and discuss information with members and sympathizers. The group's online magazines, however, were not very successful. Al Qaeda's use of social media and the Internet in general is so immense and professional that not all aspects can be highlighted here. Gendron (2007) assesses al Qaeda's sophisticated media strategy as *the* crucial element for the sustained existence of the movement. Bockstette (2008) analyzed the strategic management techniques of jihadist terrorists¹⁴ and concluded: "The mass media and especially the Internet have become the key enablers and the main strategic communication assets for terrorists and have ensured them a favourable communication asymmetry. With these assets, terrorists are able to compensate for a significant part of their asymmetry in military might" (Bockstette, 2008, p. 5). He points out jihadist terrorist groups' extensive use of new media and video messages.

"The frequency, quality and style of the video messages are getting more and more professional and the techniques used are increasingly sophisticated. The media rhetoric is mainly built around the visual component" (Bockstette, 2008, p. 13).

But even though the terrorists oftentimes rely on the Internet – to recruit and persuade people, they also apply "face-to-face methods utilizing prayers, speeches and sermons in mosques and Koran schools" (Bockstette, 2008, p. 18).

8. Discussion

Summing up the findings, we conclude that the strategic communication endeavours of terrorist groups via the internet and esp. social media, in our opinion, can be perceived as public relations – but a terrorist act cannot be perceived as a PR event, because then (as stated in part 3), the "social utility of the end" (Rada, 1985, p. 26) is missing.

The studies have shown that terrorist groups use a vast amount of social media tools for their PR-like communication. One has to assume that parallel to the progressive possibilities of social media communication, the use of them by terrorist groups has increased. Social media offer almost real-time and target-specific communication. We have not conducted similar studies in earlier years, but literature supports the thesis that most of the movements have shifted from using static websites to using "online forums and blogs as a more secure way of disseminating their propaganda material. These forums offer access to files stored on free storage sites" (Bockstette, 2008, p. 18). YouTube, Facebook and Twitter are frequently used by the analyzed terrorist groups (except GAM). In the future, it will be necessary to see the development of Google+, of what relevance it will be approximately two to five years from now. Another shortcoming of the text is that we only had look at the internationally most common social media applications. In further studies one should specialise on applications on a national or even regional level. To name an example: In the Basque country, besides Facebook, Tuenti belongs to the "two leading networks" (Fernández & Benito 2011, p. 89). And, of course, further research should expand on more detailed categories as it is obvious that ETA's and all the other groups' use of online/social media can hardly be portrayed sufficiently in one short paragraph as this gives only anecdotal evidences.

In a second step, we will then have to have a look at what we can learn from the analysis on a more general or even theoretical level. Can we deduce a typology of terrorist organisations according to their online/social media use? How would it relate to established typologies, i.e. do separatist organisations – sometimes having a longer history than religious groups – use the internet differently? Do organisations with a strong centre differ from ones which have a more loose/network cell structure? What role do the organisations' country/regional contexts play, considering that some operate in environments where internet access is widely established (e.g. ETA in Spain) whereas others operate in rural areas in Peru, Colombia etc.? The answers to these questions remain research desiderata.

Until now, we can conclude that, just as in their many other activities, also in their social media announcements the terrorists quite simply follow their two main goals (cf. Gerrits, 1992, p. 36): demonstration of their own strength and exhibition of vulnerability of the authorities. However, the possibility of confusing the political agenda has increased with the new web applications. Online tools and especially social media have revolutionized the terrorists' communication. They now act more offensively, managing independently and strategically their flow of content to various actors, but at the same time working more anonymously and at a global range which had not been the case in pre-Internet times.

What does this mean in terms of practical consequences? In a nutshell: Only if we know about the recent communication and use of social media tools of terrorists, will we develop counter-(PR-)strategies. Intelligence services already have begun to build bogus Internet sites, log in to newsgroups or join discussion boards in order to gather information. Only through knowledge about the multiple communication tools and adequate reactions can political upheaval be prevented.

Rezumat: Terorismul este una dintre problemele importante ale lumii în care trăim. De cele mai multe ori, organizațiile teroriste își au rădăcinile în mișcări sociale care admit că nu-și pot atinge scopul, acela de a promova o schimbare politică, decât prin violență. Acest articol analizează folosirea Internetului și în special a *social media* de către grupurile teroriste. *Social media* par să devină o componentă esențială a comunicării startegice folosite de aceste grupuri. Ele folosesc aceste instrumente cu precădere pentru a disemina ideile lor către publicul larg, și nu neapărat în vederea unei mai bune organizări interne. Guvernele care urmăresc să contracareze mișcările teroriste trebuie să contracareze și folosirea *social media* de către aceste grupuri. Această lucrare prezintă aspecte teoretice referitoare la terorism și comunicare, terorism și PR, precum și terorism și propagandă. De asemenea, sunt discutate studii de caz pentru a demonstra relația dintre terorism și *social media*.

Cuvinte-cheie: (contra-)terorism; *social media*; mișcări sociale; schimbare politică prin violență; recrutare; Internet.

Notes

¹ A recent example for the use of social media is a four minute video uploaded on YouTube in which a Salafî Muslim threatens a journalist who had reported critically about the Salafî movement in the Rhine-Main-area (cf. Beucker, 2012). It was deleted by the YouTube parties in charge shortly after apparition.

² Reasons for the evolvement of social movements are given by Klandermans & Tarrow (1988), using both resource mobilization theory and new social movement approach. Della Porta (1988) describes how social movements can be understood as a precursor of terrorist groups.

³ And sometimes it is quite useful to be near to the relevant media, as Laqueur states (cf. Laqueur, 1982, p. 133): The rural guerrilla in the 1960s often times moved to the big cities to commit their crimes because the media then would be nearer and thus faster in coverage. In the big cities, the terrorists could always rely on the presence of journalists, photographers, TV cameras and consequently a big audience.

⁴ "Terrorism is the exercise of violence or the threat of violence against an unarmed and/or unsuspecting population to coerce it to meet the demands of the aggressor" (Biernatzki, 2002, p. 5). And: "[T]he political terrorist's victim is symbolic. A victim is chosen who is representative of a target group that is strategically involved in the terrorist's political goals" (Schaffert, 1992, p. 44).

⁵ Or the Islamic counterpart Islamtube.com.

⁶ In order to substantiate this statement, one might mention the Tamil demonstrations and sit-down protests in European cities like Berlin in 2009 or the announcements of Hasan di Tiro, GAM-leader, from his Swedish exile. Both resulted in media attention.

⁷ Important publications on the issue have also been made by Weimann (2006; 2007) and Theveßen (2007).

⁸ Even though it might be deleted after some time, as happened with the Salafi video mentioned in footnote 1.

⁹ Schäuble at that time officiated as Minister of the Interior. His statement has to be reflected on from that normative perspective.

¹⁰ Data collection passed in May and June 2009, in November and December 2010 as well as on October 2nd, 2012.

¹¹ It remains obvious, that the authenticity of the web pages could not be entirely ensured. For us, characteristics like very extremist content, concealment of website credits as well as the fact, that some pages were offline again after a few weeks, made us incorporate the respective site in the data pool. In further studies, a more reliable method to identify and delete faked websites should be developed.

¹² Pfau and Wan (2006, p. 102) define public relations "as a form of strategic communication, in which persuasion plays an integral role".

¹³ "A case study is a detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 54).

¹⁴ An extensive overview of the use of "new media and communication technologies to build a Tamil nation and a Tamil national identity on the World Wide Web" is provided by Tekwani (2004).

¹⁵ Torres, Jordán and Horsburgh (2006) take into account not only Internet but also traditional media in their analysis of "the Global Jihadist Movement Propaganda".

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