



Why Communication and Performance are Key in Countering Terrorism

In this Research Paper, ICCT – The Hague Research Fellow Beatrice de Graaf emphasises the importance of effective communication and performance in the fight against terrorism and the fear it aims to induce. Essentially, terrorists and states are conducting ‘influence warfare’, a battle to convince and persuade the different target audiences to rally behind them. In this battle of perceptions, the different government agencies need to be aware of the often implicit and unwittingly produced ‘stories’ they tell to counter those narrated by the terrorists. It is crucial to take in consideration the fact that combating terrorism is a form of communication, as much as terrorism is itself.

Introduction

Counter-terrorism strategies, and in fact security policies in general, may be framed and communicated in a variety of ways. In my study *Theater van de angst*¹, I identified five central rhetorical and communicative aspects that increase the level of social mobilisation pertaining to incidents of terrorism. Questions that provide answers about the level of mobilisation are: Is the issue being politicised? Is it framed as a national security or even national identity issue? Is the threat extended to a broader circle of perpetrators and sympathisers? Is the threat linked to existing fears or historical experiences? Does the discourse contain inflammatory or securitising aspects? As will be elucidated in this paper, positive answers to these questions enhance the so-called ‘performative power’ of counter-terrorism strategies – the degree to which these strategies serve to mobilise and capture public and political attention – and thus provide for conditions that affect the state of national anxiety and fear about the issue.

Without doubt, communicating about terrorist threats and the ensuing measures is paramount for a government that wants to maintain the trust and confidence of its citizens. The ‘need for closure’ – the desire for conclusive knowledge as opposed to enduring confusion and ambiguity² – is especially prevalent in the case of terrorism incidents, as they invoke a high level of insecurity and fear amongst the population. When the authorities are not willing or able to communicate, citizens will fill in that space themselves, possibly with all kinds of conspiracy theories, thereby again contributing to a climate of fear or even polarisation. Hence, on the one hand, authorities have to quench the population’s thirst for knowledge once an incident occurs, but have to keep the level of performative power of their counter-terrorism strategies and communication as low as possible so as not to aggravate anxiety and fear on the other hand.

Terrorism is communication; it aims to create fear and anxiety within a society. Communication is therefore also key in devising successful counter-terrorism strategies. In determining the right balance between the need for knowledge and the

¹ De Graaf (2010a)

² Van Hiel & Mervielde (2003)



need to keep the ‘performativity’ of counter-terrorism policies low, it is important to pay attention to the discourse relating to the threat, to the unified approach of all actors involved and to the specific audiences that are being targeted. Although governments may attempt to keep the level of anxiety low, certain media, oppositional parties or individual citizens might feel inclined to inflate the discourse and the fear in society; especially in the current era of real-time social communication.³ Pre-empting and preventing this requires a multidimensional approach to communicating counter-terrorism measures.

In this paper, such a multidimensional analysis of the performative power of counter-terrorism measures in Western countries is offered. This analysis helps us to assess and measure not only the short term, but also the long term and macro-sociological effects of counter-terrorism activities and strategies. In doing so, this paper also enables better insight in the way terrorists sometimes profit from or consciously use counter-terrorism activities to justify their actions and to enhance the levels of fear in society, and helps us to understand how the unwittingly sent messages by counter-terrorists often interfere with their intended communicative purposes. The performative power of counter-terrorism policies is an important factor in discussing and evaluating the effectiveness of such measures; it may very well be the way in which the process is conducted, rather than the possible outcomes of that process, that matters most.

Why it is so difficult to assess the effectiveness of counter-terrorism policies?⁴

Starting with the million dollar question: How do we know what really works in the fight against terrorism? The answer to this question seems critically important, but might be less vital than one would think. It is important because a lot of money is being spent on counter-terrorism, even to the extent that governments may begin to outspend themselves. A second reason is that people want to know where we stand in the fight against terrorism: are we making any progress towards victory? Or are we losing? If governments are not able to establish

whether their measures are successful, they may play into the hands of terrorists. But it still remains essentially impossible to formulate a definite solution for determining policy effectiveness. There are a number of reasons for this.

Firstly, there is the difficulty of defining the nature of the problem of terrorism itself; what is it exactly, what causes it? Subsequently, defining the objectives of counter-terrorism policies seems tricky; what do terrorists want, what do governments want to prevent from happening? Is the aim to take away the fear of ‘our own people’ or to win over hearts and minds of ‘the others’? Then there is the question of what to measure; arrests, killings, prevented attacks, decrease in number of new recruits, convictions, increased social resilience, public opinion? Context and timing also play an important role; what works in the Netherlands, might not be useful in the US, and what worked 3 years ago, might not work now. And finally, we have to ask ourselves: Do we measure results in terms of improvements of the existing situation or do we try to establish whether a government is approaching more or less an ideal democratic society, in which there are few reasons left for violent opposition? This question brings the ethical and the political component into the equation: What political choices are we willing to make? Furthermore, society and its representatives, i.e. politicians, have to decide how many people can be kept simultaneously under surveillance, before turning itself into a police, surveillance, data or intelligence state or alternatively taking the risk of losing sight of some potential terrorists. How much freedom are we willing to trade in for an increase in the level of security?

Such dilemmas demonstrate unmistakably that the question of effectiveness of counter-radicalisation and counter-terrorism policies cannot be addressed in a value-free vacuum and can never be raised without addressing ethical considerations.⁵ There is no such thing as effectiveness at any cost – at least not in a democratic society where the rule of law is applied. Measuring the effectiveness can, therefore, never be a question of simple arithmetics.

³ See for instance Weiman (1983) and Nacos & Torres-Reyna (2007)

⁴ For a longer version of this argument, see De Graaf & De Graaff (2010)

⁵ See for instance Chalk (1995), Meggle ed. (2005) and Honderich (2003)



Performativity matters

However, the abovementioned obstacles in measuring the effectiveness of counter-terrorism policies should not lead to the conclusion that we cannot and should not try to assess the consequences of governmental policies. The issues outlined above suggest that it is not necessarily the policy measures and their intended results as such, but much more the way in which they are presented and perceived that determine the overall effect of the policy in question.

The key question is therefore really: What do counter-terrorism policymakers want? They set the agenda with respect to the phenomenon of terrorism, define it in a certain way and link it to corresponding measures. Subsequently, they execute these measures, behind closed doors, and with tacit permission of the public – or, conversely, they feel forced to ‘market’ their measures first, in order to generate a substantial level of public and political support or to live up to political or public pressure demanding visible actions to be taken against the (perceived) threat.

The way in which policymakers *perform*, or in other words carry out the *process* of countering terrorism, can have more impact than the actual arrests being made (or not being made). This is the so-called ‘performativity’ of counter-terrorism, or its ‘performative power’.⁶ Performativity in this context indicates the extent to which a national government, by means of its official counter-terrorism policy and corresponding discourse (in statements, enactments, measures and ministerial remarks), is successful in ‘selling’ its representation of events and its set of solutions to the problem, as well as being able to set the tone for the overall discourse regarding terrorism and counter-terrorism – thereby mobilising (different) audiences for its purposes.⁷

There is a difference between threat assessment and threat perception, and there are other players in the field apart from official state actors. In this paper, however, the focus is on attempts by governments to persuade public opinion of the legitimacy and accuracy of its threat assessment. In

terms of developing counter-terrorism policies, this is particularly relevant because counter-terrorism officials – and academics and advisers – can exert influence particularly in this field.⁸

The presentation of counter-terrorism measures (via statements, enactments, activities, expressions made by cabinet members) sets the tone for the political and public debate. Government statements and memoranda are not mere texts: they create reality. This is certainly the case when the presentation and definition of new policy dovetails with existing threat perceptions in the population (on communism, immigration or new religions for instance); when they tune in to historical experiences (such as previous conflicts, attacks or major disasters); if they depict the alleged terrorist threat as alien, radically ‘different’ and fundamentally hostile; or if they succeed in promoting terrorism as a central issue in a political game or campaign (by portraying the opposition as being ‘soft on terrorism’ or by presenting themselves as the nation’s saviour from evil).⁹ When these implicitly or explicitly formulated representations of ‘threats’, ‘enemies’ and ‘security’ are accepted by the majority of the population, political and social conflicts can be heightened. Consensus subsequently gives way to polarisation, acceptance of the limitations of civil liberties and stigmatisation of radical ideas. Hence, counter-terrorism measures clarify which radical ideas are still tolerated, what level of sympathy with revolutionary terrorists is still permitted and which infringements on civil liberties are accepted for the sake of national security.

As to leave no doubt: a high measure of ‘performative power’ is *not* equivalent to effective, decisive or successful policy (if such qualities are at all measurable); it rather relates to the visibility and the mobilising power of the applied strategies. In the Netherlands up until the 1990s, for example, the security agencies predominantly kept their activities behind closed doors, made no public announcements about their actions and did not try to involve the population in their efforts. During that period, the level of performative power remained low, although the security services achieved many

⁶ This is the adaptation of the concept ‘performance’ or ‘performative power’ as introduced and described in J. Butler and J.L. Austin’s discourse analysis and theory. See Austin (1982), Couthard (1985) and Butler (1997)

⁷ This concept is set out in greater detail in De Graaf (2010a) and its forthcoming English translation De Graaf (2011)

⁸ See the introduction and conclusion in Forest ed. (2009)

⁹ L. Hansen (2006) applied the method of discourse analysis and ‘framing’ of ‘the other’ to foreign security politics as a threat to the domestic community. Partly continuing Hansen’s example, De Graaf (2010a) effectuates a conversion to domestic security policies



successes in undermining and debilitating domestic extremism and terrorism.

Evaluating the performative power of counter-terrorism

The reason for stressing the importance of paying attention to the process and the performance of counter-terrorism is the fact that research points to a distinct relation between the performative power of counter-terrorism instruments and the arc of violence carried out by terrorist movements. In *Theater van de angst*, I isolated 14 factors that enhance the performative power of counter-terrorism activities and plotted them against the number of terrorist attacks and casualties in four countries: the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the United States.¹⁰ The research was restricted to the 1970s due to the availability of comprehensive data both on terrorist attacks and the measures undertaken to counter them.

The performative power of counter-terrorism is in the first place defined by answering the question whether terrorism is identified by the afflicted government as a political problem and correspondingly put on the political agenda. If so, was the issue given the highest priority and did it become the heart of political struggles in a country? In other words; was the question politicised?

Secondly, it is relevant whether terrorism was defined as directly threatening public safety and security, in other words, whether the 'subjective insecurity' connected to this threat was high. If terrorism is presented as a containable, low-impact problem, the performativity of counter-terrorism policies usually remains lower.

A third aspect that determines the performative power is the matter of defining the circle of terrorist perpetrators. How broad or narrow do governments define the threat of terrorism? To what extent do they include not only obvious offenders, but also sympathisers, supporters or even apologists of terrorism in their target group? Related to this issue is the extent to which the terrorist threat is discursively linked to existing threats, fears and rifts in society, such as the fear for civil strife, for chaos, for immigration, etc.

A fourth set of questions establishes the extent to which the counter-terrorism measures have a mobilising impact on society. A fifth element points to the manner in which the 'battle' against terrorism is conducted: is it presented as relentless against the broad circle of terrorists and their sympathisers, or is there some attempt to address the grievances or the objectives of the protests by the broader movement from which the terrorists in certain cases stem? Taken together, 14 aspects – related to activities undertaken by the counter-terrorism authorities – may be distinguished that affect the performative power of counter-terrorism policies.

Aspects pertaining to politicisation of counter-terrorism

1. More attention for counter-terrorism is generated when political leaders personally and explicitly express themselves on the issue, rather than leaving this to lower level authorities. When counter-terrorism has a high priority, and is demonstrated as such by the highest possible political authority (e.g. in a presidential speech), the level of performative power is correspondingly higher.
2. When counter-terrorism becomes the central issue in electoral campaigns or is employed to demonise the political opponent, the issue is politicised and the performativity increases.
3. When the perceived personal risk is high and counter-terrorism officials feel directly threatened themselves (for instance because colleagues have previously been the target of terrorist actions), the performative power increases as well, since the sense of urgency of the threat is higher.
4. The resonance of terrorist violence and the extent to which the public is prepared to accept counter-terrorism measures is also amplified when the issue has national priority over other issues (such as financial crises, environmental hazards, etc.). On the contrary, if new crises from a completely different policy field emerge, attention from terrorism might drift away, and the performativity decreases.

Aspects pertaining to discursive framing of the terrorist threat

5. When the threat is expanded to include not only the specific terrorist offenders, but also sympathisers and the broader terrorist constituency, the threat demarcation becomes

¹⁰ De Graaf (2010a)



broader and more urgent, which also fuels the degree of performativity.

6. When war rhetoric is used or the tone of the discourse grows more militant, the performative power increases.

7. When counter-terrorism officials or politicians refer to historical experiences of (civil) war, chaos and violence, existing or slumbering fears are invoked and the persuasiveness of counter-terrorism policy and the severity of the threat are enhanced.

8. The explicit refusal to 'talk to' terrorists – not wanting to enter into negotiations with them, for instance, or not offering them exit-strategies or re-integration programmes – also keeps the level of performative power high.

9. When no shared tradition, culture or overlap of values exists between the terrorists and those countering their actions and counter-terrorism policies explicitly capitalise on this mental distance, the discourse will be increasingly irreconcilable and intransigent. In such a case, the performative power is high: society rallies against political violence, the (alleged) terrorist sympathisers feel antagonised.

Aspects pertaining to mobilisation efforts in the struggle against terrorism

10. Counter-terrorism officials can also explicitly and directly mobilise the population. By placing fugitive terrorists on a 'Ten Most Wanted' list and initiating raids or witch hunts, the population becomes directly involved in counter-terrorism. This increases the visibility of the measures and demonstrates the government's decisiveness, but also increases the level of performance of counter-terrorism policy.

11. Deploying special units that are generally trained for a higher spectrum of violence than regular police units to investigate, prosecute or arrest terrorists adds more drama to the situation, which leads to an increase in the performative power.

12. The introduction of new anti-terrorism legislation also increases the performative power, since it establishes new legal categories, new offences and new types of perpetrators in the counter-terrorism discourse.

13. The introduction of new legislation – such as a 'gag law', data mining provisions or a law on control orders – that is not specifically aimed at terrorism also gives counter-terrorism policy a supplementary boost, since new laws affect the

tone of the discussion, attract media attention and affect the terrorist's constituencies.

14. Major 'terrorism trials' – trials that involve national or regional prosecution officers (or Grand Juries) trying well-known individuals or entire groups – often serve to generate a dynamic and mobilising power (such as solidarity campaigns, hunger strikes, protest demonstrations, acts of revenge, etc.). Hence, the performativity of counter-terrorism increases.

Some tentative findings

In *Theater van de angst*, I applied this framework to the situation in the Netherlands, Italy, Germany and the United States in the 1970s.¹¹ The source material used in this research included government archives, media sources and interviews. The research indicated that a positive connection exists between the way in which counter-terrorism in those countries was 'performed' and succeeded in mobilising the population on the one hand and the course and level of the terrorist violence on the other.¹²

The first relation was rather clear cut: when the number of incidents and victims was high, the ensuing counter-terrorism measures unfolded a large performative power, and had a great mobilising impact. This is not a surprise: terrorist actions create havoc, are usually reported all over the media, and trigger social fear and political responses. Interestingly, there was however a second relationship that points in the reverse direction. On the basis of the studied material, it is possible to formulate the hypothesis that the performative power of counter-terrorism policy sometimes also influences the course of violence. In other words, when counter-terrorism strategies had a high level of performative power and when they demonstrated a substantial potential to persuade and mobilise the public – as was the case in the United States, Italy and West Germany in the 1970s – the ensuing terrorist violence also increased. Conversely, after a certain amount of time, a decline in this performative power preceded, either visibly or less visibly, a decrease in the number of terrorist incidents.

¹¹ De Graaf (2010a)

¹² The underlying argument, sources and data can be found in De Graaf (2010a) and its forthcoming English translation



This second link can be interpreted in different ways. Of course, the decrease of terrorist attacks could be a direct result of counter-terrorism efforts. Nevertheless, measures often have a delayed effect: it takes some time before new competences (better investigative methods, intelligence operations, etc.) really start to undermine a terrorist movement's capacities. However, it still is remarkable that a high level of mobilising efforts went hand in hand with a continuing radicalisation of potential new terrorist recruits and with a succession of new terrorist incidents. There must thus be another explanation for this link. I would argue that the end of a cycle of terrorist violence can partly be ascribed to a decrease of political and public relevance attached to terrorism and counter-terrorism – and not solely the other way around. It appears that, in certain cases, terrorists abandon their violent course of action when they notice that terrorism fails to move public and political sentiments or when they have become unable to regroup due to a lack of recruits, sympathisers or supporters.

Contrary to what many people assume in their first response to terrorist actions, it became evident whilst studying the cycle of terrorism and the responses to it in the 1970s and the 1980s in the countries mentioned above, that a visible increase of power, responsible authorities or measures did not automatically lead to a more effective form of counter-terrorism. In the middle and long run, opting for 'punctual' crime prevention, reserved language and a certain level of secrecy constituted the most valuable contribution to the restoration of societal peace. This was the case in the seventies and for a large part it still is today, even though the speed of communication has increased, the activities of intelligence and security services are much more spotlighted and withholding information has become considerably less expedient.

It is furthermore remarkable that a lack of measures, manpower and instruments and a weak implementation power did not always work out unfavourably. The low level of performative power of counter-terrorism policy in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s took the sharpest edge away from a number of radicalisation tendencies. The interaction between counter-terrorism strategies and terrorist activity did depend on a number of factors over which counter-terrorism officials had but little control: the initial preparedness of terrorists to commit violence, the existing fears and dominant public discourses and the political

debates on threats to national security. Nevertheless, even in a state of polarisation, governmental action could have a moderating effect, as demonstrated by the German Interior Minister Gerhart Baum who singlehandedly took off the heat in 1979 when he joined former RAF member Horst Mahler in an appeal for more deliberation and less polarisation – until then unimaginable.¹³ The monopoly of violence and access to national media and population are still among the government's most crucial prerogatives, particularly in the struggle against terrorism. In short, there are better alternatives for politicians than maintaining policies or continuing to enact new ones that aim to demonstrate state power or to mobilise the society at large.

Contemporary context

Of course, the decades of the 1970s and 1980s differ from today's era of 'global jihad'. Compared with the relatively nationally oriented terrorist groups that attacked societies in previous decades, and the correspondingly nationally developed and implemented policy strategies to respond to that violence, it is more difficult for governments to control their performance in the global struggle against Jihadist terrorism post-9/11. They face a terrorist threat that – in its narrative and its ideology at least – is more global than it ever was. This makes it much more difficult for governments to stick to their own national approach. The performance of any Western government has become inextricably linked to the international struggle against terrorism since 2001. Foreign 'injustice frames' that inspire new waves of radicalisation at home are being imported from abroad by local radical movements. Israeli bombings in Gaza, for example, can serve extremist movements in Amsterdam or Antwerp – thus replacing national-level, more immediate causes or injustice frames by international and much more unpredictable and incalculable ones.

Secondly, governments have to deal with independent global media and autonomous citizens that are continuously producing their own narratives through the internet or other real time communication instruments, such as the blogosphere and Twitter. Today, the performativity of counter-terrorism strategies seems much higher

¹³ The interview was published in *Der Spiegel*, No. 53/1979. For the extended version, see Jeschke & Malanowski (1980)



given the speed of communication means, the influence of new media and the global discourse on the 'war against terrorism'.

Furthermore, in the struggle against Jihadist terrorism, the mental distance between radical Islamists on the one hand and the open, democratic societies of 'the West' on the other is often viewed as much larger than the conflict between anti-imperialist, left wing or ethno-nationalist groups in the 1970s and 1980s. Global discourse on terrorism has become much more inflammatory and more militant since 9/11 as compared to previous decades. Moreover, the public threat discourse pertaining to Jihadist terrorism has not restricted itself to radical fractions, but has been generalised to include the Muslim community as a whole. In this context, several more potential and actual signifiers have affected counter-terrorism, fuelling the legends of injustice, oppression and discrimination that feed support for a radical ideology. Consequently, de-radicalisation policies in the West are often forced to compete against a public moral panic that is difficult to confront.

However, the same mechanisms that applied to the struggle against terrorism in the 1970s and 1980s could also provide solutions today. Whether we deal with terrorist organisations with an extremist left-wing, ethno-nationalist or religious background, in all cases it is of paramount importance that both government and its constitutive organs refrain from fanning public discourse on terrorism. In relation to the radical movement that should be countered, it is crucial to identify existing signifiers and corresponding legends in time, and to anticipate potential new ones continually. In close cooperation with organisations that represent the terrorists' constituencies, the governments should facilitate strategies that aim at combating those legends by means of 'neutralisers' or 'counter-narratives' and, in doing so, isolate the 'entrepreneurs of violence'.¹⁴

This is as relevant today as it was in the 1970s. Only recently, British Foreign Secretary Miliband identified such a 'signifier' that fuelled the performative power of counter-terrorism strategies in a negative way: with their 'call to arms' in the years following '9/11', the US and UK governments had mobilised the public against a joint enemy and had proclaimed a state of emergency that

warranted extreme measures. This armed persuasiveness and effective national mobilisation had nevertheless not manifested itself as a blessing, but rather as a curse to Western societies:

'The call for a "war on terror" was a call to arms, an attempt to build solidarity for a fight against a single shared enemy. But the foundation for solidarity between peoples and nations should be based not on who we are against, but on the idea of who we are and the values we share. Terrorists succeed when they render countries fearful and vindictive; when they sow division and animosity; when they force countries to respond with violence and repression. The best response is to refuse to be cowed.'¹⁵

Conclusion

Essentially, terrorists and states are conducting 'influence warfare', a battle to convince and persuade the different target audiences to rally behind them.¹⁶ In this battle of perceptions, the different government agencies – in the areas of police, justice, intelligence and social services – therefore need to be aware of the often implicit and unwittingly produced 'stories' they tell to counter those narrated by the terrorists. It is crucial to take in consideration the fact that combating terrorism is a form of communication, as much as terrorism is itself.¹⁷ Terrorists receive and interpret these messages, try to distort them and subsequently use them to fuel sentiments of oppression and injustice. Before governments issue their own counter-narrative to oppose these myths – which is demanded frequently¹⁸ – they are forced to render an explanation of their unintentional and implicit messages.¹⁹

In the discussion on the effectiveness of counter-terrorism, this paper attempts to problematise a mere technical and short-term assessment of

¹⁵ Cited in The Guardian (2009). See also NRC Handelsblad (2009)

¹⁶ See the introduction and conclusion in Forest ed. (2009)

¹⁷ Casebeer & Russell (2005)

¹⁸ See suggestion in *Transnational Terrorism, Security & the Rule of Law. Theoretical Treatise on Counter-terrorism Approaches*, p. 18 and pp. 24-5

¹⁹ See also De Graaf (2009) and De Graaf (2010b)

¹⁴ Demant & de Graaf (2010), see also Kessels ed. (2010)



counter-terrorism measures and instead draw attention to an often neglected field: the relationship between performance of counter-terrorism efforts and terrorist activity. It has become apparent that high visibility and mobilising powers are not by definition positive concepts in relation to counter-terrorism. In general, a low level of performative power has a more rapidly neutralising effect on radicalisation and political violence than large scale, public counter-terrorism efforts. Unless governments pay careful attention to the effects of their policies, the struggle against terrorism can be likened to shooting at a mosquito with a canon, thereby creating considerable collateral damage, while the real target may still be pestering us. Given these caveats and uncertainties, it has become apparent it is not so much the effects and outcomes of counter-terrorism policies upon which we should focus, but the practices or the performance by the government in the process of countering terrorism.

This requires a change of mind that should not only come from politicians and officials. It also requires that the public at large will change its attitude *vis-à-vis* the risk and threat of terrorism. This demands a completely different government policy than we have seen in some of the Western countries following 9/11 – and for that matter in countries across the globe. It implies that governments refrain from measures that only increase anxiety among their citizens and lessen their resilience. Governments should empower themselves by putting more faith in their citizens again. After all, a public that shrugs its shoulders over terrorist deeds is the best method to show terrorists that at least their means are not effective.²⁰ Only when governments succeed in neutralising public fears and shatter the myths and half-truth of repression the terrorists are spreading, they will manage to take the wind out of the sails that keep them floating.²¹

²⁰ Mueller (2005), p. 497

²¹ Sageman (2004), p. 176 and Gunaratna (2007)

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