From Terrorist to Persona: Para-Social Interaction and the ETA Website

by Yotam Ophir and Gabriel Weimann

Abstract

The great virtues of the Internet - ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, and fast flow of information, among others - have been exploited by terrorist groups. Consequently, the Internet has become a useful and effective platform for terrorist organizations and their supporters. Applying para-social relationships theory, this study examines the ways terrorist groups utilize the Internet to gain sympathy and support for their appeals and goals. The case of ETA's website (ETA - Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, an armed Basque nationalist and separatist organization), dedicated to Basque prisoners imprisoned in Ireland and fighting extradition to Spain, is used as an illustrative example of the applicability of the para-social theorem. The various tactics adopted for establishing and promoting para-social relationships between media characters and the audiences as revealed in Basque terrorist video clips on YouTube are analyzed.

Introduction: Terror on the Internet

The face of modern terrorism is decidedly different from the phenomenon in the past, not least because of increasing use of the Internet as a means of facilitating terrorist activities. The Internet has expanded the terrorists' theater of operation, allowing them to bypass the traditional media gatekeepers through the use of the cyberspace infrastructure. Although the presence of terrorist groups on the Internet is a relatively new phenomenon, the growth of such activity has exploded in recent years. In 1998, few terrorist organizations maintained websites; today, almost all active terrorist groups have established at least one form of presence on the Internet; many use various online platforms: *Facebook*, *YouTube*, chatrooms, forums, *Twitter*, and official websites.[1]

Recent scans of terrorist presence on the Internet revealed thousands of websites serving terrorists and their supporters.[2] Growth in the use of the Internet by terrorist groups is due to its key characteristics: ease of access, which facilitates the possibility of reaching massive, worldwide audiences; the absence of any effective regulation or censorship; rapid and "always on" flow of information; low cost; anonymity of communication; and a multimedia environment. The rapid proliferation and increased sophistication of terrorist websites and online forums point to the growing popularity of the Internet for terrorism campaigns. They also indicate a vast pool of sympathizers that such organizations are aiming at and, in some cases, have managed to attract.

Many terrorist groups, among them al-Qaeda, have undergone a transformation from strictly hierarchical organizations with designated leaders to affiliations of semi-independent cells that have no single commanding hierarchy.[3] Through the use of the Internet, these loosely interconnected groups are able to maintain contact with one another and with their followers and

supporters. Radical terrorist organizations have demonstrated an ability to harness online platforms for offensive operations, as well as for propaganda, fund-raising, and recruiting purposes.[4] Despite the multiplicity and diversity of terrorist websites, they share a number of key characteristics, among them often being notable for their colorful, well-designed, and visually arresting graphic content. In this respect, these sites appear designed to appeal particularly to a younger, computer-savvy, media-saturated, video-game generation.

Although this alarming side of the Internet has received extensive attention from counter-terrorism agencies, the media and some researchers, the empirical evidence gathered has merely been descriptive; what has been lacking is a theoretical framework or conceptualization. Communication theories have seldom been applied to the emerging phenomenon of online terrorism, thus creating a theoretical void in this area. This article is an attempt to demonstrate the applicability and utility of bridging between mass communication theory and the use of the Internet by post-modern terrorist practitioners. One of such theories is the conceptualization of para-social relationships. The case of ETA (ETA - Euskadi Ta Askatasuna, an armed Basque nationalist and separatist organization) website, dedicated to Basque prisoners incarcerated in Ireland and fighting extradition to Spain, is used as an illustrative example of the applicability of the para-social theorem.

Para-social Relationships

Para-social interaction theory has been used to describe the one-sided relationships that can develop between a media user and the media being consumed.[5] Used to understand the process by which individuals form attachments to media personae, [6] the theory may also help explain the behavior of those consumers who use Internet-based content. The term "para-social relationships" was introduced by Donald Horton and Richard Wohl in 1956 in order to describe the illusion of face-to-face relationships between television consumers and the performer (character or actor).[7] Since Horton and Wohl introduced the concept, para-social interaction developed into a popular field of Communication Science.[8] According to Rubin and Rubin, a television viewer experiences emotional feelings and operates heuristics loaned from his or her own experience in real social contacts.[9] Even though such one-way relationships are based on the illusion of interaction via the media rather than on actual social encounters, a bond of intimacy is created, and many viewers feel they really know the media character. As opposed to real-life relationships, however, para-social relationships are one-sided and symbolic.

The persona with which the viewer is making a connection might be considered a friend, a consultant, a comforting person, or even a role model for this individual. Viewers tend to experience their relationships with media characters with differential strength and in different ways. Some studies have shown that these differences depend, in part, on gender and social class. [10] Other studies, using the same connection-models, have found a connection between viewers' para-social relationships and their childhood relationships, mainly with their parents. [11] The existence of strong para-social relationships between viewers and the program's characters increases the viewers' affection for, and loyalty to, the television show or program, thereby raising the viewers' potential to absorb its content in greater detail.[12]

Horton and Wohl claimed that the viewers' part in the process of television consumption consists of an active response component. That is to say, the active dimension of the media-consumption process can strengthen connections between a viewer and the production's personae. The viewers then feel as though they "know" the persona and understand its motives. In effect, the persona is being judged with the same tools the viewer uses for assessing friends and family. However, since the persona is crafted by the program producer, it is not likely to surprise viewers; therefore his or her behavior can more easily be expected.

Horton and Wohl also described several basic strategies that the production team uses in order to create intimacy between the viewer and the persona. The most common strategy is the duplication of face-to-face gestures and environments. An example is "small talk" between the characters. Another example is the characters' speaking directly to the viewer. Intimacy can also be formed with the help of technology, such as the Subjective Camera view (i.e., a shot from a character's point of view) or the use of close-ups.

Para-social relationships are established by means of several production manipulations and techniques. As noted by Horton and Wohl, the persona that is presented to the viewer duplicates the nuances of appearance and the gestures of real interpersonal interaction in order to imitate ordinary social behavior. Sometimes the character is seen as engaging with others in the production. Yet "….often he faces the spectator, uses the mode of direct address, talks as if he were conversing personally and privately. The audience, for its part, responds with something more than mere running observation; it is, as it were, subtly insinuated into the program's action and internal social relationships".[13] Virtual intimacy and casualness may be seen as key features in para-social relationships Studies have shown that the exchange of messages most frequently occurs between a source and a receiver when they are alike and similar.[14] Higher levels of homophily (i.e., "love of the same", the tendency of individuals to associate and bond with similar others) have been linked to greater identification with television characters, which in turn is sometimes extended to the desire to be like or to behave like the character.[15] Cohen suggested that attraction was the foundation of para-social interaction;[16] others, however, argued that it is grounded not only in attraction but also in perceived similarity and empathy.[17]

The persona offers a continuing relationship, based on sharing its history and past experiences, which may give additional meaning to the present performance. The viewers then come to believe that they know the persona more intimately and profoundly than others do and that they can understand his/her actions, motives and values. In order to ease the personification and identification processes, the persona is often introduced as good tempered and sincere, "real" and "warm." The publicity campaigns built around these performers usually try to emphasize the sympathetic aspects of their personality and behavior. The audience is expected to respect and support the personae's struggle for recognition and success. Perse and Rubin connected para-social relationships to uncertainty reduction theory.[18] This theory was proposed to predict and explain relational development (or lack thereof) between strangers. The theory explains how individuals seek to reduce uncertainty between each other during initial interactions, based on self-disclosure. Perse and Rubin's study supported the hypothesis that attributional confidence will relate positively to para-social interaction. Other studies have found that the use of media is motivated by a desire to reduce uncertainty about social behavior.[19] Indeed, a persona's behavior usually stays predictable and avoids causing any surprises to the viewer, therefore

reducing uncertainty and increasing the illusion of intimacy. Another means of ensuring para-social interaction is based on technology: close-ups that create the illusion of intimacy and face-to-face interaction, fluid camera movements that increase realism and even soundtrack music that is used to intensify interaction.[20] For example, television close-ups allow viewers to read an actor's non-verbal gestures, enabling the persona to create a two-sided relationship illusion through scripted reactions to anticipated viewer comments.[21] Understanding and responding to a persona is not left entirely to the experience and intuitions of the audience. The model of para-social interactions sees the audience as a kind of coaching system that guides the viewer in the appropriate ways to react to and answer the persona. According to Horton and Wohl, the experience does not end with watching the program: viewers may continue to analyze and judge a persona's behavior and actions when discussing the program's content with other people.

Finally, para-social interaction relies on the use of personification and the illusion of personal bonding. This attribute is very relevant to mass-mediated terrorism: Terrorist events are frequently presented in the media through personal framing.[22] The personification of such events categorizes the participants according to dramatic roles, such as "the good" (i.e., the authorities or the victims), "the bad" (i.e., the terrorists) and "the spectacular" (i.e., "terror celebrities," such as Carlos the Jackal, Leila Khaled and, more recently, Osama Bin Laden and Ayman Al-Zawahari).[23] Thus, from the para-social perspective, terrorists greatly desire the personification of an event. For them, the optimal personal framing presents the terrorists as devoted heroes, victims of the authorities' atrocities and freedom fighters while their enemies are presented as villains, criminals, the "real terrorists."

Para-social Relationships in the Age of the Internet

Although most literature has focused on para-social interaction as a television and film phenomenon, new communication platforms, and in particular the Internet, have provided new dimensions to such interactions. The Internet is, in fact, often used for creating and maintaining social relationships, some of which are para-social.[24] In 1998, Eighmey and McCord observed that the presence of para-social relationships constituted an important determinant of website visitation rates.[25] "It appears," the researchers stated, "that websites projecting a strong sense of personality may also encourage the development of a kind of para-social relationship with website visitors."[26] Hoerner, explaining that websites may feature "personae" that host visitors to the sites in order to generate public interest, proposed a method for measuring the use of para-social interaction on the Internet.[27] Personae, in some cases, are nothing more than the online representations of actual people, often prominent public figures, but sometimes, according to Hoerner, they are the fictional creations of the sites' webmasters. Personae, he said, "….take on many of the characteristics of a [real-life] companion, including regular and frequent appearances, a sense of immediacy…and the feeling of a face-to-face meeting".[28]

Using the para-social Interaction (PSI) scale developed by Rubin, Perse, and Powell,[29] Hoerner modified it to more accurately assess para-social interactions on the Internet, specifically to gauge participants' reactions to a number of different websites and, more generally, to determine whether or not para-social interaction theory could be linked to Internet use. Hoerner's study concluded that "the literal, mediated personality from the newscast or soap

opera of the past [around which the original PSI-scale was framed] is gone. The design metaphor, flow of the web experience, and styles of textual and graphic presentations of the information all become elements of a website persona and encourage para-social interaction by the visitor/user with that persona".[30]

Such a theory of para-social interaction may be useful for understanding how terrorists try to attract and seduce online audiences. To demonstrate the applicability of this theory, we will analyze the Basque terrorist (ETA) group's campaign on YouTube.

ETA's Campaign

Euskadi Ta Askatasuna ("Homeland and Freedom") is an armed Basque nationalist separatist organization. Founded in 1959, ETA has evolved from a group promoting traditional Basque culture to a terrorist faction whose aspirations, as outlined in its 1995 publication, *Democratic Alternative* (Euskal Herriarentzako Alternatiba Demokratikoa, original Basque text), is to force the governments of Spain and France to agree on the following: (a) recognition of the Basques' right to "self-determination and territoriality"; (b) acceptance of the principle that the Basque citizenry form a "unique subject" in order to make its own decisions about the future of the Basque country; (c) amnesty for all members of the organization, whether prisoners or self-imposed exiles; and (d) respect for "the results of the democratic process in the Basque country." The group has been designated as a terrorist organization by both the Spanish and French authorities, as well as by the European Union as a whole and the United States.

Over its more than 50 years of existence, ETA has been responsible for killing 829 individuals, injuring thousand, and undertaking dozens of kidnappings (for a list of ETA's attacks and victims, see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ETA_attacks). Its violent actions included the assassination of a Spanish prime minister, Carrero Blanco, in 1973, and the murder of 13 citizens in a coffee shop in Madrid in 1974. The Herri Batasuna party was established as the political wing of ETA in 1978, but was declared illegal at the beginning of the 21st century by the Cortes (Spain's parliament). ETA's most lethal terror attack took place in Barcelona in June 1987, when 21 people were killed and 45 others injured by the explosion of a car bomb near a supermarket. All the victims in this event were Spanish citizens. In recent years, ETA has been critically weakened by numerous raids by security forces that led to multiple arrests among its leadership. The organization's terrorist activity has declined in recent years and came to a total halt in 2010 after the unilateral declaration of a cease-fire.

In the course of its history, ETA's targeting expanded from military- and police-related personnel and their families to a wider circle, including businessmen, politicians, judges and prosecutors, journalists, university professors who publicly criticized Basque separatism, and private and public properties considered valuable assets of Spain, especially railroads, tourist sites, industries, and shopping malls. All these objects were targets of ETA's campaign of killings, bombings (often with car bombs), anonymous threats, extortion, blackmail, kidnappings and armed robberies.

Since its establishment, ETA has made extensive use of the mass media to spread its message. Like most terrorist organizations, it gained ample amounts of mainstream press coverage

following its attacks. In addition, the organization operates its own media outlets: pamphlets, posters, murals, newspapers (both electronic and print), web-streamed radio, and websites. ETA has often used pamphlets to address the Basque people directly and indirectly to send a message to the government and to the Spanish people.[31] Simultaneously, ETA sent to the Spanish and international press communiqués describing its point of view, declaring a ceasefire, or warning of coming attacks. ETA operates its own newspapers either directly or through sympathizers and supporters, including *Euskal Herria*, *Gara*, *Egunero*, and *Le Journal du Pays Basque*. *Gara* is considered to be operated directly by ETA. The organization also runs an online radio station and distributes propaganda films, video clips, and television clips. In recent years, many of these videos were posted online, mainly on YouTube.

ETA on the Internet

ETA's fluctuating online presence has included websites, one being *Euskal Herria Journal,* a magazine-formatted site, and another being *Basque Red Net*, a collective of writers who declare themselves radicals.[32] The newspaper *Gara*, which is targeted by the Spanish government, now has an online presence. A major online outlet is the *Euskal Herria* Journal, which is published online in English, with some documents in Basque, French, and Spanish. The website presents itself as a factual and professional journal espousing Basque culture, history, and independence. It argues that Navarre is the seat of the Basque country, and maintains that the Spanish and French Basque regions constitute occupied sovereign Basque territory which should be independent. In the "history" segment, the objective is clearly to show Spanish and French transgressions and to stress the long history of the Basque people and their existence in the region before other European cultures came into being. The segment on repression details actions taken by the Spanish and French governments against the Basque people in general and ETA in particular, such as the outlawing of the Basque language, the operating of Spain's Antiterrorist Liberation Groups (GAL - which the journal labelled "death squads"), and the conduct of "Spain's Dirty War" (a paramilitary campaign against ETA sanctioned by the Spanish government). Despite this site's mainly cultural, ideological, and informative character, *Euskal Herria* Journal was supporting ETA, its goals and activities - including violent actions. Recently, the Journal has gone offline and is no longer accessible.

In recent years, ETA's online presence has declined, but ETA supporters continue to maintain websites that focus mainly on campaigns for releasing Basque "political" prisoners held by the Spanish government. These sites also deal with the violation of human rights in Spanish prisons. Some of the sites are only in Spanish, but most of them offer English and French versions for purposes of addressing international public opinion. Some of the sites call for re-establishing Batasuna's legal status; some try to convince visitors to sign petitions and participate in protests, while still other websites deal directly with cases of prisoner torture. An example of the last type is the website Stoptortura (http://www.stoptortura.com*/)* which contains picture galleries of wounded prisoners, often giving close-ups of the open wounds. ETA supporters also use online social networking— Yahoo! Groups, Facebook, Twitter, and blogs—to raise interest and support for their causes.

Finally, ETA propaganda is posted on YouTube. Its videos include items showing ETA members practicing with weapons, assembling and detonating bombs, and handling guns; they also issue formal ETA announcements of ceasefires by masked spokesmen. Montages of ETA symbols and of other video scenes are set to prideful music. A search of YouTube for "Euskadi Ta Askatasuna" yields over 150 video clips, mostly devoted to ETA's propaganda. One of the websites presenting these videos is the "Don't Extradite the Basque" site used for our case study (http://www.dontextraditethebasques.org/).

Website Case Study: "Don't Extradite the Basque"

This site is one of many websites supporting ETA and dealing with members of the organization held prisoner in jails. The site's headline is "Stop Spanish political persecution against the Basque country." Its key objective as presented on the site is to prevent the extradition of two ETA members, Inaki de Juana and Arturo Benat Villanueva, from Ireland. The Spanish authorities want Juana, who had already served 21 years in Spanish jails, on charges of "glorifying terrorism." Originally condemned to 3,000 years in jail for 25 murders, De Juana was released in August 2008. Villanueva, charged with "membership in a terrorist organization," faces a possible 14-year jail sentence for his political activism.

Since this site is targeting Western public opinion, it is only in English and does not even have a Spanish version. The site suggests several ways of contributing to the struggle: donating money, signing a petition, joining a *Facebook* group, following postings on *Twitter*, among others. Although focusing mainly on just two prisoners, the site also updates visitors with information about other Basque prisoners detained either in Spain or elsewhere. It should be noted that the site does not present itself as supporting ETA or as an official website of the organization. The homepage is designed in a minimalistic way, based on the Basque flag's colors – red, green, black, and white. It presents iconic images of the two wanted men (painted only with a green outline of their faces) against the background of what looks like blood stains. The text, in bold fonts, accuses the Spanish government (under the title, "Stop Spanish Persecution against the Basque Country"). The homepage offers several buttons leading to detailed information: Home, News, Profiles, Context, Campaign, Support, and Contact. An additional, large button enables visitors to sign a petition online.

The site is clearly attempting to activate visitors and does so in various ways. As in the case of reality-TV viewers, who are expected to vote for their favorite participant/competitor to enable that individual to move to the next stage, or "survive" the selection, so, too, does the ETA website promote personal support by signing a petition that will "save" the prisoner. A second way to act is to donate money by filling in the online donation form, paying through credit card or PayPal account. Finally, there is interactive activation: surfers are directed to the campaign's *Facebook* and *Twitter* pages. Joining these platforms allows the visitor to add comments, photos, and links to the "wall" as well as to invite friends to join.

Analysis: The Sites

Two video-clips are related to www. dontextraditethebasques.com, one for each prisoner. Both clips are about five minutes long and can be found in the profile pages of the site or directly through the *YouTube* search engine. Villanueva speaks English, while De-Juana talks only in Spanish, but the video of the latter contains subtitles in English, as well. There is a thematic resemblance in the backgrounds of the two videos, both scenes combining pastoral scenery with the prison motifs of a brick wall and barbed-wire fence. This contradiction between the prison and pastoral motifs contributes to the dramatic nature of the video interviews. Both videos contain monologues, allowing the prisoner to face viewers and address them directly. These monologues give the viewer the illusion of a face-to-face interaction with the prisoners. In this way, and especially in the close-ups that are employed, the viewer is able to constantly observe and judge the persona's appearance, voice, conversation style, and gestures.

Informality is constantly emphasized in the clips. The two men, wearing civilian clothes, speak in casual language; Villanueva is even introduced in the headline by his nickname, Beñat (meaning "strong" or "brave" in Basque). This informal address is also used in the website, where the links to the profiles of the two prisoners declare, "read Inaki's profile" or "read Arturo's profile," mentioning only their first names and so creating the illusion of intimacy and familiarity. In order to reduce uncertainty among viewers and to increase confidence, the prisoners share their personal history, describing the injustice of the Spanish government. Villanueva argues that he was sentenced to 12 years only for participating in legitimate political activity. He also mentions other "characters" - "political activists" who were arrested with him and he praises the kindness of the community of west-north Ireland. At the end of his video, Villanueva, addressing the residents of "21st century Europe," tries to motivate viewers to join the campaign, whether through its website or a radio program, or by participating in a blog. He asks the viewer to gather information and to "spread the word." As photos from Basque rallies are being shown in the background, Villanueva ends his video by calling for activism for the benefit of the Basque country and also for freedom and democracy.

De Juana also tells his story, accompanied with photos of his arrest. He connects his punishment to the Franco regime's law system and defends his "innocent" political work. De Juana accuses the Spanish justice minister, who allegedly said that he would make up new charges to keep him in jail, using two published articles supporting terrorism as incriminating evidence. He talks about his hunger strikes, which ended in "deals"' made with the Spanish government (the video contains photos of the thin, hunger-striking De Juana tied to a hospital bed and connected to a feeding machine). After these hunger strikes, his sentence was shortened to 3 more years instead of 13. De Juana then describes the suffering of his family members; he claims that attacks were made against his home and his wife, causing them to leave the Basque country for Dublin. He argues that after he left Spain, the government framed him once again for a "terrorist" letter that he had not written and for participating in a political event - a charge he denies. The Spanish government, he contends, is looking for new ways to keep him imprisoned in order to satisfy the families of terror victims.

By exposure to such moving personal stories, viewers are led to believe that they know the persona more than others do and, therefore, can better understand his values, motives, and actions. As Horton and Wohl suggested, the experience does not end with watching the clips.[33] YouTube's platform allows the viewer to respond to the clips by sharing opinions in the

comments area or by clicking on the "Like" button. The videos contain links back to the website, enabling the viewer to become active in various ways. As part of its coaching of the audience, the website directs viewers to a "Support" page, which suggests additional ways of affecting the prisoners' fate in a positive fashion, while highlighting the urgency of taking action immediately. These active options include joining a support group, mobilizing labor or student unions to join the campaign, protesting in front of the Spanish embassy in Dublin, writing letters to the Irish embassy (the address of which is found on the website), writing to newspapers, informing friends and relatives about the campaign, and participating in events. These are all means of increasing the visitors' involvement and perhaps strengthening their para-social relationships with the personae.

Another para-social technique used to reduce viewers' uncertainty and increase familiarity is the repetitive use of graphic icons on the website. The prisoners' faces are digitally processed and become "cartoonized" icons (in the style of "vector art"). The faces are outlined, as mentioned, in green color, representing the positive and the innocent (and the Irish), as opposed to the use of red, representing the Spanish government. These graphic icons, showing the prisoners smiling and looking harmless, appear again and again, both on the website and in the Facebook group. After clicking on a prisoner's graphic icon, the visitor is directed to a personal profile page, which provides a short biography of the prisoner relating his active political history, the unjust Spanish oppression he has suffered from, and the amount of time he spent in prison. These biographies emphasize the cruelty of the Spanish government, which is doing its best to keep the men in prison as long as possible, even though they only participated in legitimate political action. These pages construct a personal and emotional story that can increase familiarity with the persona, who is described as a hero of the Basque people.

Analysis: The Video Clips

The profiles also contain video clips - one for each prisoner, showing recorded monologues. These clips allow the audience to experience a virtual interaction with the prisoners. The background of both videos contrasts pastoral motives (meadows and trees) dramatically with prison elements (barbed- wire fence, brick walls). Both prisoners seem well tempered, "real," and warm; they wear casual clothes – raincoats and t-shirts—and talk calmly. Villanueva is even seen playing soccer in the jail yard; but symbolically, he kicks a ball outside the prison walls and, hence, erodes the formality of the interview.

These clips may be analyzed as promoting para-social relationships when one uses the strategies introduced by Horton and Wohl and their followers:

- They contain *a replication of informal, direct gestures*: "Most characteristic is the attempt of the persona to duplicate the gestures, conversational style, and milieu of an informal face-to-face gathering.[34] As in a fiction TV series, the clips provide the viewer with a sense of an ongoing, evolving plot. The monologues certainly appear to be more like a friend-to-friend conversation than a plea made by a dangerous terrorist.

- The clips are *characterized by a designed informality*[35]: Among the many elements of informality that the ETA videos display is the use of the prisoners' first names ("Arturo" and "Inaki") and even the nickname of one of them.

- The *line between the characters and the audience is eradicated* [36]: Although the conversation with the persona is actually a one-way monolog, the video clips allow the visitor to hear the story in a personal way from the first-person point of view.

- *Technical devices are exploited to create illusions of intimacy* [37]: Intimacy in these clips is achieved by the constant use of close-ups.

Another element of para-social interaction is the personification of an event, a process, or a case. [38] The ETA videos transform the legal case of extraditing terrorists into personal stories: The "bad guys" in this story, as expected, are the Spanish government ministers, who are described as eroding freedom, justice, and the rights of the Basque people. The "good guys" here are the Basque people, presented as suffering from the allegedly cruel regime. The "spectaculars" are the two prisoners, who have become sort of oppressed Basque "celebrities" and represent the troubles and distresses of the Basque people. The viewer's constant exposure to the prisoners' iconic pictures turns them from human beings into characters. The personification process also transforms the focus from ETA's murderous history to storytelling of a more human and accessible nature, whose aim is to soften the Western world's public opinion toward the Basques.

Conclusion

In an attempt to demonstrate the usefulness of communication theories when analyzing terrorist communication, the present article presented an illustrative case that introduces the notion of para-social interaction. This conceptualization of media content and its bonding with audiences is clearly useful when analyzing various terrorist materials, including the thousands of videos posted by terrorist groups on online platforms, such as *YouTube*. Although para-social interaction is not a new concept, it is a theory that has not yet been applied to the study of terrorist communication. Given the important role of online communication for modern terrorism, the search for theoretical frameworks that will explain how audiences are targeted, attracted, influenced, and activated has become rather vital.

The case study demonstrated the applicability of the concept of para-social interaction to an analysis of ETA's *dontextraditethebasques.org* website. Almost all the features of the para-social strategy were revealed in the videos produced by ETA. The video clips on its website have the effect of transforming convicted terrorists into personae in a manner that promotes familiarity, sympathy, informality, and even (virtual) interaction. However, it seems unlikely that the site's operators are familiar with such theories, and it is more probable that the various para-social techniques were used intuitively. Yet, these video clips were produced by professionals and we can assume that they are aware of the well-documented success of television series based on para-social interaction. This case study is, as stated above, only an illustrative example; it is hoped that it will encourage future studies along these lines in order to broaden the theoretical scope of the conceptualization presented.

The original notion of para-social interaction emerged in the television era, and most of the literature has focused accordingly on the use of para-social relationships in television and movies. The new communication platforms, especially the Internet, necessitate a new look at such interactions. Over a decade ago, Hoerner argued that websites may feature "personae" that attract visitors in order to generate public interest.[39] Personae, in some cases, are nothing more than the online representations of actual people, often prominent public figures, but sometimes, as the study showed, they are the fictional creations of a site's webmasters. Personae take on many of the characteristics of a real-life companion, including regular and frequent appearances, a sense of immediacy, and the feeling of a face-to-face meeting. The case of "terrorist personae" takes this notion one step further, highlighting the potential for virtual social interaction—and consequent attraction—on online platforms.

Cole and Leets presented three relational development theories that may offer some insight into the formation of para-social relationships in online communication.[40] The first is the *uncertainty reduction* theory, which suggests that relationships develop over time through a process of increasing certainty. As uncertainty decreases, liking increases, and "relationships" are developed. The second is *personal construct* theory: this theory suggests that viewers of media figures develop a sense of "knowing" them because viewers apply their interpersonal construct systems to the para-social context.[41] Third, *social exchange* theory offers explanatory value to the process of para-social interaction by connecting intimacy and relationship importance to a cost and reward assessment, in which a para-social interaction with a media personality would have a high reward and low cost exchange. It is clear that terrorist websites and video clips attempt to apply all three relational development theories: (a) they provide selective, one-sided, but very rich information for *uncertainty reduction*; (b) they try to create virtual intimacy and informality between audiences and the terrorist personae, thus applying the notion of *personal construct*; and (c) they offer "rewards" (such as contributing to a just cause, forming a sense of community, and gaining (self-) importance) in exchange for very little cost (e.g., just sign the petition, join our *Facebook* page) - all in accordance with *social exchange* theory. These three perspectives, we suggest, provide useful insights not only when explaining the formation of para-social relationships in "conventional" online communities but also when examining terrorist or criminal communications.

About the Authors: **Yotam Ophir** *is a graduate student at the Department of Communication, University of Haifa, Israel.* **Gabriel Weimann** *is Full Professor of Communication at the University of Haifa and author of seven books on mass communication, including three volumes on terrorism and the media.*

Notes

 [1] See for example, Bruce Hoffman, "The Use of the Internet by Islamic Extremists", Testimony presented to the US Congress' House of Representatives, Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence, May 4, 2006; Gabriel Weimann, *Terror on the Internet: The New Arena, The New Challenges* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2006); Gabriel Weimann, "Terrorist Facebook: Terrorist and online social networking". In: M. Last and A. Kandel (Eds.), *Web Intelligence and Security* (Amsterdam: NATO Science for Peace and Security Series, 2010):

19-30; and Gabriel Weimann, "New terrorism and new media: mass-mediated terrorism", in *Terrorism Research & Analysis Consortium* (TRAC, 2012), available at: http://www.trackingterrorism.org/

[2] Weimann 2012.

[3] Marc Sageman, *Leaderless Jihad: Terror Networks in the Twenty-First Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

[4] Weimann 2006.

[5] See for example, Mark Levy, "Watching TV News as Para-social Interaction", *Journal of Broadcasting*, 23 (1979): 69-80; Tim Cole and Laura Leets, "Attachment Styles and Intimate Television Viewing: Insecurely Forming relationships in a Para-social Way", *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 16 (1999): 495-511; Jonathan Cohen, "Para-social Relations and Romantic Attraction: Gender and Dating Status Differences", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 41 (1997): 516-529 and Jonathan Cohen, "Defining Identification: A Theoretical Look at the Identification of Audiences with Media Characters", *Mass Communication and Society*, 4 (2001): 245-264.

[6] In psychology, *persona* (plural; *personae*) refers to an aspect of an individual's personality as shown to, or perceived by, others.

[7] Donald Horton & Richard Wohl, "Mass Communication and Para-social Interaction: Observation on Intimacy at a Distance". *Psychiatry*, 19 (1956): 215-229.

[8] David Giles, "Para-social interaction: A Review of the Literature and a Model for Future Research", *Media Psychology*, 4 (2002): 279-305.

[9] Alan Rubin & Elizabeth Perse, "Audience Activity and television News Gratifications", *Communication Research*, 14 (1987): 58-84.

[10] Cohen 1997.

[11] See for example, John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. I. Attachment* (New York: Basic Books, 1969); John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. II. Separation* (New York: Basic Books, 1973); John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss: Vol. III. Loss* (New York: Basic Books, 1980); John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Parent-Child Attachment and Healthy Human Development* (New York: Basic Books, 1988); and Cindy Hazan & Philip Shaver, "Romantic Love Conceptualized as an Attachment Process", *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 52 (1987): 511-524.

[12] Rubin & Perse 1987.

[13] Horton & Wohl 1956, 215.

[14] Everett Rogers & Dilip Bhowmik, "Homophily-Heterophily: Relational Concepts for Communication Research", *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 34 (1970): 523-538.

[15] Keren Eyal & Alan Rubin, "Viewer Aggression and Homophily, Identification, and Para-social Relationships with Television Characters", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 47(2003): 77-98.

[16] Cohen 2001.

[17] Alan Rubin, Elizabeth Perse & Robert Powell, "Loneliness, Para-social Interaction, and Local Television News Viewing", *Human Communication Research*, 12 (1985): 155-180; and Rebecca Rubin & Alan Rubin, "Attribution in Social and Para-social Relationships", in V. Manusov & J. H. Harvey (Eds.), *Attribution, Communication Behavior, and Close Relationships* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001): 320-337.

[18] Elizabeth Perse & Rebecca Rubin, "Attribution in Social and Para-social Relationships", *Communication Research*, 16 (1989): 59-77.

[19] See for example, Alan Rubin & Rebecca Rubin, "Interface of Personal and Mediated Communication: A

Research Agenda", *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2(1985): 36-53.

[20] Horton & Wohl 1956.

[21] Perse & Rubin 1989.

[22] Gabriel Weimann, "Media Events: The Case of International Terrorism", *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 31(1987): 21-39.

[23] Alex Schmid & Janny de Graaf, *Violence as Communication. Insurgent Terrorism and the Western News Media* (London: Sage, 1982); Alexandra Colen, "Paris Hilton Terrorism", *The Brussels Journal*, available at: http://www.brusselsjournal.com/node/3673 (2008); Paul Cornish, "The Age of 'Celebrity Terrorism'", *BBC News*,

Available at: http://news.bbc.co.uk/go/pr/fr/-/2/hi/south_asia/7755684.stm (November 30, 2008); and Gabriel Weimann & Conrad Winn, *The Theater of Terror* (New York: Longman Publications, 1994).

[24] Nanda Kumar & Izak Benbasat, **"**Para-Social Presence and Communication Capabilities of a Web Site", *e-Service Journal* (Fall 2002), available at: http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/eservice_journal/toc/esj1.3.html

[25] John Eighmey & Lola McCord, "Adding Value in the Information Age: Uses and Gratifications of Sites on the World Wide Web", *Journal of Business Research* 41 (1998): 187-194.

[26] Ibid. 188.

[27] John Hoerner, "Scaling the Web: A Para-social Interaction scale for World Wide Web Sites", in: D. Schumann and E. Thorson **(**Eds.), *Advertising and the World Wide Web* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1999): 135–147.

[28] Ibid. 135.

[29] Rubin, Perse & Powell 1985.

[30] Hoerner 1999, 136.

[31] Robert Clark, *Negotiating with ETA: Obstacles to Peace in the Basque Country, 1975-1980* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1990).

[32] On ETA's websites, see Yariv Tsfati & Gabriel Weimann, "www.terrorism.com: Terror on the Internet, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 25(2002): 317-332 ; and Weimann 2006.

[33] Horton & Wohl 1956.

[34] Ibid. 217.

[35] Ibid. 216.

[36] Ibid. 217.

[37] Ibid. 218.

[38] See for example, Tilo Hartmann, "Para-social Interactions and Para-communication with New Media Characters", in E.A. Konijn, S. Utz, M. Tanis, & S.B. Barnes (Eds.), *Mediated Interpersonal Communication* (New York & London: Routledge, 2008):177-199; and Christoph Klimmt, Tilo Hartmann & Holger Schramm, "Para-social Interactions and Relationships", in: J.Bryant & P. Vorderer (Eds.), *Psychology of Entertainment* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2006): 291-313.

[39] Hoerner 1999.

[40] Cole and Leets 1999.

[41] For example, Perse & Rubin 1989.