Ethics, Decision-Making, and Risk Communication in the Era of Terroredia: The Case of ISIL

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ABSTRACT

Terrorism today is one of the most frequent global severe stress situations. The advanced and widespread new media and information technologies as well as modern tactics of terrorism make the public of any nation in exposure, directly and indirectly, to uncertain potential acts of terrorism. The relationship between terrorists and media personnel has grown widely influential, and has been described recently by the term terroredia, in which the public is the main target of both terrorism and the media. Both responsibility and rationality are fundamental weights for the effectiveness of risk communication during times of terrorism. This paper critically analyzes how policymakers in several Western countries have communicated to the public, through the media, the risk of terrorist attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against their individuals and societies. The study uncovers that rationality and responsibility are lacking in Western media decision-making regarding the risk of ISIL’s potential activities.

KEYWORDS

Communication, Decision-Making, Ethics, Information, Media, Public Safety, Rationality, Responsibility, Risk, Terroredia, Terrorism

INTRODUCTION

Risk is a status related to a severe stress situation for which exposure and uncertainty are fundamental elements. One does not face any risk when unexposed to that situation or when is certain about the situation’s information. A simple example is that someone is at the risk of having a disease when exposed to factors that may or may not cause the disease; however, two equally risk-free cases are when: unexposed to any related factors and therefore does not get the disease; or exposed to factors that certainly cause the disease and therefore gets it. Positive chances to eliminate the factors that certainly lead to experiencing a severe stress situation exist during the status of risk and before it is too late (i.e., dealing with the negative consequences of the situation).

Terrorism today is one of the most frequent severe stress situations around the globe. People in every corner of the universe have the risk of experiencing the consequences of terrorism. The advanced and widespread new media and information technologies as well as modern tactics of terrorism make the public of any nation in exposure, directly and indirectly, to uncertain potential acts of terrorism. This global risk, rooted in exposure and uncertainty, is communicated to the public mainly through the media.

Communication plays a significant role in eliminating and managing the risk before a status becomes a situation. Therefore, risk communication differs from communication of a severe
stress situation, such as crisis communication. Risk communication is distinguished from crisis communication, in theory and practice, mainly for relying heavily on the principle of involving the public in risk assessment, decision-making, and management (Infanti et al., 2013). Risk communication “is based on ongoing projections and calculations of the potential for future harm”, while crisis communication “is a spontaneous and reactive process, often occurring in unexpected emergency situations” (Ibid, p. 5).

Several theorists have investigated decision-making performances under conditions of stress or uncertainty (e.g., Eid & Fyfe, 2009; Nicholson, 1997; Snyder & Diesing, 1977). Terrorist threats require effective decision-making that is both ethical and rational (Eid, 2008). However, there are significant gaps in research on effective decision-making regarding counterterrorism (e.g., George, 2003; Lebow, 1987) and its impact on the public (Lee & Lemyre, 2009).

This paper questions the effectiveness of media performance during times of terrorism through the examination of their decision-making processes in terms of rationality and responsibility. It critically analyzes how policymakers in several Western countries—mainly in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the United States—have communicated to the public, through the media, the risk of terrorist attacks by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) against their individuals and societies.

RISK COMMUNICATION AND PUBLIC SAFETY

The term “risk” involves a focus on potential harm (e.g., Burgess, 2010; Etkin & Ho, 2007). It is considered “a frame that creates contexts which bring together an ‘object of risk’ (a hazard or source of potential harm), an ‘object at risk’ (a target of potential harm) and an evaluation (implicit or explicit) of human consequences” (Mairal, 2008, p. 42). Risk “represents the possible occurrence of a harmful event that has some known likelihood of happening over time” (Comfort, 2005, p. 338). Risk inevitably involves emotional and intuitive responses, which impact the deliberation process of how to deal with, or mitigate risk (Roeser, 2010). Responses to risk can be intuitive, affective, and irrational or deliberative and rational; however, intuition tends to dominate over deliberation, which can lead to either an overestimation or an underestimation of one’s potential risk—in which both are dangerous.

Risk is often perceived as generalized, ambiguous, and vague (Van Asselt & Vos, 2008), tied to social uncertainty (e.g., Brännmark & Sahlin, 2010; Briggs & Stern, 2007), and involves both facts and societal values (e.g., Hansson, 2010; Millstone & Van Zwanenberg, 2007). Research demonstrates that risk is always uncertain, but that the public and officials alike typically reject the idea of uncertainty. Uncertainty is the central condition in the processes of risk perception and risk communication (Sellnow & Sellnow, 2010). Where there is worry about a potential risk, certainty is always sought out as a way to reassure oneself. However, simply perceiving uncertainty may diminish one’s relative faith in the risk information they are given.

Indeed, effective risk communication is “a discourse in uncertainty” (Briggs & Stern, 2007, p. 610). Due to the complex nature of risk communication as being socially embedded within different interest communities (e.g. academics, interest groups, governments, and the public), uncertainty about risk is “both many-sided and unavoidable” (Strydom, 2008, p. 5). Risk communication aims to acknowledge and communicate with the public about uncertainty, and to circumvent uncertainty among the public regarding risk, in order for risk communicators to gain the public’s trust, which is paramount in risk perception, public decision-making, and advocacy for action.

Trust is essential for risk perception (Löfstedt, 2010) and successful risk communication (Blennow, 2008). The credibility of the policymakers’ risk communication depends on “past levels of transparency and how previous incidents have been managed, especially if things have gone badly wrong” (Freedman, 2005, p. 380). The usual role of government is “to protect its citizens from harm”; hence, public policies and government actions are “designed to anticipate risk, prepare citizens to manage risk, and assist them in recovering from damaging events” (Comfort, 2005, p. 336).