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Rhetoric in the Mass Media: Terrorism or Freedom of Speech?

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Abstract

Terrorism is a widely debated topic on social media networks such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter. This is due to the fact that a high percentage of users rely on sites such as Twitter and Facebook as a news source for developing stories and information. In a study conducted in 2015 by Pew Research Center, in association with the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, research found that 63 percent of Facebook users and 63 percent Twitter users depend on these social networks for their news, which is a substantial increase from 2013.¹ This paper presents a rhetorical analysis of terrorism within the framework of social media. This focus is on the widespread rhetoric of terrorism disseminated through social media and the effects on users' para-social relationships and physiological responses to these messages. Social cognitive theory and the role it plays in social media will be discussed further.

Introduction

Their eyes are heavy with fear. They have surpassed the thoughts of despair and denial of their lingering death. They have accepted their gruesome fate. They patiently wait as the world watches through the eyes of a camera lens. In the middle of an unknown desert, they are past the point of begging for their lives. They wait on their knees for their public execution to begin and end. In their final breaths they face the media spotlight as friends, family members, and a powerless nation watch the horrific beheadings. This is an act of terror in the last living moments for journalists such as James Foley and Steven Sotloff. Every step of the way to their deaths they are followed by the shadow of a camera that invokes public humiliation and causes their last moments on earth to go viral. The airwaves are used as a tactic for terrorists to infiltrate fear, hopelessness, and condemnation to our free nation as well as others.

The practice of rhetoric dates back to the ancient Greeks who ruled their city-states with the art of persuasion and power of tone. Throughout history, the persuasive art of speaking became the vital heartbeat of society, whether it is politicians who are trying to gain the public's votes, journalists reporting acts of terrorism, or soldiers returning home reliving flashbacks of raw encounters with fate; rhetoric is ubiquitous.

Rhetoric, displayed in all cultures, has transformed greatly with the advances in technology. Online newspapers and apps such as CNN, NBC, FOX, NPR, BBC, and more display photos and videos on their latest developing stories to build their readership and maintain a level of interest among them. Social media sites including Facebook and Twitter are examples of this transformation from typical written posts to a more multimedia approach. For example, social media has made vast strides in use of rhetoric through the creation of easy-to-upload images, live video clips, and links to external blogs. This allows just about anyone to effortlessly share personal thoughts, biased opinions, and perspectives. News and current events especially have grown to become more visually in depth within our society, thus evoking parasocial relationships, galvanic responses, and impacting cognitive thought processes. According to journalists Michael Barthel, Elisa Shearer, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Amy Mitchell, Twitter is soon to release a news feature called "Project Lightning," which allows anyone, Twitter users or not, to view tweets, images, videos, and any live events as they unravel, therefore making the site and feeds more accessible instead of exclusive. Facebook is also mirroring Twitter's actions with the "Instant Articles" project that allows media companies to publish their news stories directly on Facebook.²

The question of why these social media sites are successful in engaging users can be answered by para-social relationships. Parasocial relationships are when the consumer feels a close bond or connection with a "superior" or iconic figure. Author Ralph Hanson, in his book *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World*, states, "Research shows that people learn more from people they identify with and

¹Barthel, Michael, Elisa Shearer, Jeffrey Gottfried, and Amy Mitchell. "The Evolving Role of News on Twitter and Facebook." Pew Research Centers Journalism Project RSS. 14 July 2015.

²Ibid.

pay more attention to political commentators they agree with than ones they dislike.”³ For example, there are many users on Twitter who publicly worship and promote ISIS through tweets, because the terrorist group is able to connect to the younger generation. Recently, the FBI caught three teenagers at O’Hare International Airport in Chicago. The teenagers were about to embark on a trip to Syria to join ISIS after frequent communication via Twitter and Kik. Apparently, these boys felt a connection and growing relationship to the ISIS militants over a lengthy period of communication. Their parents were stunned that their children were communicating with militants from Syria and planned on leaving their home to join what the militants referred to as their “safe haven.”⁴ It is evident that it is easier to captivate younger minds with these radical ideals of ISIS, especially when they are saying statements such as, “the best way to die is defending your beliefs” and “extreme measures are needed now to restore virtue and righteousness in the world.” Adolescents are leaving assuring careers to become medics for ISIS. They are doing this because in their perspective they’re “helping.” Young athletes who have worked rigorously to be physically fit have quit their teams to become suicide bombers with no regard for the hard work they had put in to maintain their athletic bodies. According to NPR correspondent Shankar Vedantam:

A recent survey of ISIS social media found their foreign followers are often adolescents or young adults. Atran says recruiters often spend hundreds of hours showing young people how the problems they see in the world and in their own lives are connected to larger problems that ISIS is fighting.⁵

As some would assume, the pose of physical threats are powerful, yet others would say the mental stigmas could be traumatizing. Just three to five days after September 11, 2001, a national survey of U.S. adults revealed that they consumed an average of eight hours of television watching the unraveling attacks on New York City’s Twin Towers. The adults who consumed this media had a substantially greater reaction of stress and anxiety than those who did not follow the media’s reports. Pulitzer Prize-winning composer of “On Transmigration of Souls” John Adams spoke briefly on the emotions of the citizens after September 11, 2001:

Modern people have learned all too well how to keep our emotions in check, and we know how to mask them with humor or irony. Music has a singular capacity to unlock those controls and bring us face to face with our raw uncensored feelings. This is why during times when we are grieving or in need of being in touch with the core of our beings we seek out those pieces which speak to us with that sense of gravitas and serenity.”⁶

Galvanic responses are physiological signs from media images that can inspire fear, enjoyment, loathing, happiness, and other emotions. Adams infers how incredibly distraught and defeated the nation felt after the attacks. He describes how music, which is inspired by grief, could help the remaining victims move forward in peacefulness and tranquility. Although it is almost impossible to dismiss these mental stigmas, these galvanic responses conceived from rhetorical terrorism can also be temporarily relieved with positive forms of media.

Social media is used as an outlet for freedom of speech; however, in recent events it has become an outlet in provoking terrorism as well. Note, if it is not the founders and CEO of Facebook or Twitter to blame for the ability of expressing rhetoric responses then who is to blame? Mark Zuckerberg, creator and CEO of Facebook, is adamant about having the power and freedom to express perspectives on pressing issues arising in the public. His post on Facebook made this very clear, “I’m committed to building a service where you can speak freely without fear of violence.”⁶ Terrorists launch attacks not just for the physical results but also to instill a lasting image of fear within people. Their true message is not the attack itself but what it leaves behind, which is fear and questions of why and what more is to come.

³ Ralph Hanson. *Mass Communication: Living in a Media World*. Washington, DC: CQ Press, 2011.

⁴Laura Sydell. “Pro-ISIS Messages Create Dilemma For Social Media Companies.” NPR January 29, 2015. Accessed January 30, 2015. <http://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2015/01/29/382435536/pro-isis-messages-create-dilemma-for-social-media-companies>.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

#FreedomofSpeech?

This analysis is to explore and gain a better understanding of the effects of rhetoric used through social media by terrorists and where the line is drawn between terroristic rhetoric and freedom of speech. They understand that our nation is much more impressionable through high volume social media use. Terrorist rhetoric easily attains the spotlight on the social media stage due to accessibility and freedom of use. The advances in prevalent social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have multiplied users and created a mass audience that is subjected to collective terrorism on a daily basis. Twitter's online website has 284 million monthly active users and 500 million tweets are sent per day. Twitter supports more than 35 languages and 77 percent of those accounts are outside the United States. Few terrorist organizations had web use knowledge in 1998 but today almost all terrorist organizations have functioning websites. Besides social media sites, these organizations reach out to followers through chatrooms, forums, and official websites. It is evident from these statistics that terrorists are utilizing the channels of social media to recruit followers to support their destructive efforts. They understand that our world is much more susceptible through social media use. The easy access to social media sites and users makes terroristic rhetoric much more attainable. Also, the use of visual communication in social media has allowed terrorists to attract a larger target audience. Their websites utilize colorful, well-designed, arresting graphic content to draw the viewer in. "These sites appear designed to appeal particularly to a younger, computer-savvy, media-saturated, video game generation."⁷ The terrorists are also using Twitter to find locations when the British military intelligence disclosed that terrorists were using Google Earth's aerial footage to strategize an attack on British bases in Basra.⁸

The problem is whether these users are abusing their freedom of speech to terrorize global citizens or call for action. The internet is a vessel for carrying messages and images of terrorism to innocent people. There are many domains in which terrorists use rhetorical acts to infuse others with their terror tactics,

Hacker has identified three distinct types of terrorists: criminals, who are motivated by the possibility of monetary gain; crazies, who seek personal glory, to overcome massive insecurity, or to wreak revenge on a world that scares them to death; and crusaders who practice terrorism in the sake of political perspectives.⁹

The crusaders are the terrorists who have caused the biggest impression with use of threatening rhetoric in social media. According to J.M. Berger, in the fall of 2014 there were 45,000 ISIS supporters on Twitter. The advantage of publicly promoting their radical Islamic group is the "free" invitation for more followers to reform and join al-Qaeda. Using sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube are ways for terrorists to manipulate the minds of users therefore promoting and creating para-social relationships between these two entities.

In addition, the connection between terrorists and their provocative use of social media is that not only does it reinforce their radical ideals and beliefs but the publicity of their terror threats are providing a pathway to become a part of their idolized clan. Through social learning theory, individuals gain understanding and make meaning by observing the behaviors of others and the consequences that follow after. Due to the fact that ISIS is still able to tweet their obscene behavior, followers may believe that what ISIS promotes and preaches is acceptable. "ISIS supporters do not spring from the womb fully radicalized ... a path is required between recruiters and the vulnerable."¹⁰ The vulnerable, in this case, are the millions of social media users who are subjected to this use of rhetoric. Not only is it the mere fact that terrorists can publicly tweet to millions of followers, but the rate at which they post these penetrative ideas make it easier for users to access since they are placed higher in the search results. In addition to the terrorists' excessive posting, ISIS in

⁷ Ibid.

⁸Marie Wright. "Technology and Terrorism: How the Internet Facilitates Radicalization." The Forensic Examiner. June 30, 2011. Accessed January 30, 2015. <http://www.theforensicexaminer.com/archive/winter08/7/>.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

particular uses computer-controlled Twitter accounts to automatically send out tweets regarding ISIS and the al-Qaeda.¹¹ This aggressive approach is just another way for terrorists to gain notoriety and form these types of para-social relationships and galvanic responses of terror and anxiety. The question is what are these terrorists truly after with their strategic and clever rhetorical devices that they intentionally place in social media? The answer: to provoke fear and gain more members with every click.

Last year, the Parisian satirical weekly newspaper *Charlie Hebdo* was attacked by three gunmen. A total of 17 people were killed, including a police officer who was shot in the head while surrendering. A video of the police officer being executed went viral hours after the shooting. *Charlie Hebdo* had a reputation for publishing controversial cartoons satirizing the Islamic faith, which was the terrorists' motive behind the attack. Through media use, the terrorists were able to construct a plan of who to kill for the sake of their religion's reputation.

This is yet another example of the vicious cycle of threatening rhetoric used to provoke terrorism and freedom of speech. Since the attack, French police officers were advised not to use their social media accounts and to carry their weapons at all time, for concern of terroristic threats that were made to officers recently. However, the citizens of Paris refuse to remain silent and are expressing their thoughts and strength via social media posting hashtags such as #JeSuisCharlie, which translates to "I am Charlie." This form of social media formed another kind of para-social relationship between the citizens of France, and their beloved publication. It is admirable to say that the media has ignited the citizens of Paris to use their freedom of speech to respond to the attacks. The citizens have collectively united as a culture to display their nationalism by preaching positive messages that they are not afraid. Four million people poured onto the streets of France creating the biggest rally in the city's existence. They held signs that said "not afraid," candles, flowers, and cards for lost loved ones. The emotional response and image of an abundance of French citizens standing side by side in despair is an incredibly moving moment in time. Fifty world leaders came to show support to the people of France.

Today, the *Charlie Hebdo* attacks are far from forgotten. There are still people experiencing galvanic reactions even a year after the attack that left 17 people dead. One of the more infamous cartoonists, Renald Luzier, also known as "Luz," is quitting his long-time career at the *Charlie Hebdo* offices. He was one of the few who survived the attacks that left 17 of his co-workers dead although physically he is okay, mentally he is left with sleepless nights over the lost work of his co-workers and petrifying flashbacks. Not only is Luzier ending his once-beloved career, but another key contributor, columnist Patrick Pelloux, is also resigning from his position in the office after the deadly mass shooting. The magazine has made some changes as well. The offices have been moved and additional security officials have been hired to work around the clock to ensure the safety of staff members. Employees are escorted to and from work each day to ensure their safety. The staff members' lives that once were filled with laughter and pushing the political satire envelope now entail working in the darkness where the curtains are always drawn.

Now the argument can be made here that *Charlie Hebdo* is just as much at fault for tittering on the line of freedom of speech and using rhetoric to provoke an unethical response; however, *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons are for satirical purpose only. The magazine has attributed many cartoons that are forms of freedom of expression. They are meant to tread on someone's toes but not to reinforce support of aggression and terrorist threats/attacks. In NPR's Arun Ruth interview with religious scholar Reza Aslan, Mr. Aslan says that not all Muslims are offended by *Charlie Hebdo's* political satires. Aslan understands that *Charlie Hebdo's* cartoons are meant to push the boundaries of state and religion and for those who are Muslim who cannot bear the sight of these cartoons and the way Muhammad is characterized, "then they don't belong here." That is the difference between freedom of expression/speech and abusing that freedom with use of rhetoric terrorist threats.

Conclusion

The increased use of mass media's rhetoric in conjunction with promoting terrorism and fear will continue to penetrate society. As a critical evaluator of social media, users are practicing their freedom of speech at a rapid rate. The lack of censorship or involvement from big media outsources, like Facebook and Twitter, will only lead to more radical messages toward recruitment and the spreading of terrorism across the global virtual airways. Using rhetoric as a form of terrorism over social media will only leave citizens in despair and fearing for their lives increasing galvanic responses of anxiety, sweat, and tears. Open wounds will continue to sting with the salty remarks that social media continues to leave tattooed on the minds of many. Para-social relationships will develop between radical

¹¹ Jessica Hamblen. "The Effects of Media Coverage of Terrorist Attacks on Viewers." National Center for PTSD. June 30, 2004. Accessed January 30, 2015. http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/va/fs_media_disaster.htm.

groups and vulnerable minds. Thus, the possibility for future atrocities still lingers and dangles among the tweets and viral videos. However, if nationalism continues to prevail through the use of social media, then countries and society stand a chance against terrorism and their voices will loudly reverberate within the wired network of social media. It is crucial that countries that have been attacked by acts of terrorism continue to stand united and not falter to the manipulated hands that terroristic rhetoric evokes. Those subjecting themselves to social media can either succumb to the hollow promises of these savages or simply rise above the terrorists' recruitment efforts and look toward the airways of nationalism... believing in freedom of speech again. Thus, in the words of John Ashcroft, "There is no priority higher than the prevention of terrorism."

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