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*Technological modernity and terrorist propaganda: proposal of a discursive analysis to face the messages of terrorism in the digital age*

**Abstract**

Terrorism is a multidimensional phenomenon where communication, politics and the search for legitimacy play a decisive role. This research work tackles its study from several perspectives. Initially, it approaches the characteristics of technological modernity, where 'the digital' has colossal importance, and critically examines the phenomenology of this present, as well as its socio-political, economic and cultural implications. This creates a vantage point from which to observe the following sections from a better perspective, which examine terrorism from different positions and, finally, proposes a discursive analysis that, by synthesizing the main psychosocial mechanisms used by terrorists in their propaganda, allows us to see their dialectical tricks. The knowledge resulting from this analysis and the lessons learned in this respect constitute a fundamental support for the media and citizens in general, taking into account that the Internet makes it possible for terrorists to massively and globally distribute their messages.

**Keywords**

Technology, terrorism, propaganda, jihadism, social media.

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## Introduction

One of the first actions the Taliban took upon retaking Afghanistan was to hold a press conference where they displayed an arsenal of fine words and conciliatory intentions<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, they are active on social media sharing content according to their interests. The concern for a good image is significant, because legitimacy among Afghans –crucial if the state is to be governed– and among the international community is at stake. Brutalities, such as the assassination of Mohammad Najibullah, are of little interest, at least publicly, although it is worth noting the leak to the media of a report by the Norwegian Center for Global Analyses that states that the Taliban are searching «door to door» for people who collaborated with US and NATO forces<sup>2</sup>.

The Taliban's communication strategy has two fundamental pillars: the projection towards the traditional media (press conferences) and the creation and distribution of its own content (social networks). In the digital age, the opportunity to be fully autonomous in terms of what is generated and disseminated cannot be missed, especially when it has not required costly means for years. Previously, Al Qaeda, and above all the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL)<sup>3</sup>, used the internet as a propaganda disseminator, although each used different strategies. Without going into explanatory details, ISIL advocated violent, bloodthirsty and lurid content, while the Taliban prefer to avoid excesses and portray themselves as the guarantors of security and governance in Afghanistan, at least in the initial stages of their regime; it should not be forgotten that the situation is unstable and could degenerate into scenes of explicit public violence. Perhaps they also want to avoid being removed from some social networks that give them formidable publicity.

From this point onwards, if we want to have a better perspective, we need to read it broadly, knowing as well as possible the current historical context: network time, acceleration, hyper-speed, instantaneity, incessant stimuli... The better we know the pieces of this jigsaw puzzle, the more sense technological modernity acquires. The aim of this research is, on the one hand, to offer this necessary reading of the present in order to explain the relationship between terrorism, legitimacy, communication and digital propaganda. It is a complex task, as it involves drawing on different disciplines, as well as requiring a deep abstraction to fit the pieces of the puzzle together and extrapolate it to the workings of terrorism today. The culmination of this process is a discursive analysis based on psycho-social mechanisms that, like a lens, allow us to visualise terrorist messages and to notice their dialectical tricks, which could help to

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<sup>1</sup> Transcript of Taliban's first news conference in Kabul. *Al Jazeera* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/17/transcript-of-talibans-first-press-conference-in-kabul>

<sup>2</sup> Taliban conducting 'targeted door-to-door visits. UN document' *Al Jazeera* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/8/20/taliban-un-report-afghanistan-door-to-door-revenge>

<sup>3</sup> Also known as Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), Islamic State (IS), Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Daesh.

prevent some individuals from falling into terrorist networks when they become aware of the stratagems used.

### Characteristics of technological modernity

This complex section is addressed mainly by three authors who have scrutinised the modern self and its properties: Alvin Toffler, Paul Virilio and Zygmunt Bauman. They are not the only relevant critics of modernity –Adolfo Vásquez Rocca recalls Sigmund Freud, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Lev Shestov and Franz Kafka<sup>4</sup>– but their choice is due to their excellent rapport: while Toffler acknowledges in *La tercera ola* (*The Third Wave*) (1980) that he focuses less on acceleration and more on the destinies towards which change leads, Virilio, in *El ciber mundo, la política de lo peor* (*The Cyberworld, the Politics of the Worst*) (1997), and Bauman, in *Modernidad líquida* (*Liquid Modernity*) (1999), make a profound deliberation on acceleration and how it affects society. Overall, their contributions are extremely interesting in terms of the digital world around us.

Toffler<sup>5</sup>, in a great exercise of summarising –he himself warns that his writing involves «simplifying, generalising and compressing»– identifies three disruptive changes in human history, which he calls «waves». The first came with the Neolithic revolution and lasted until the mid-17th-18th century, the second was born with the industrial revolution and by the mid-20th century was clearly established, while the third is underway and involves the advent of a society baptised in multiple forms: ‘post-industrial’, ‘super-industrial’, ‘technetronics’ and ‘scientific-technological’. Crucially, he modifies three key aspects: the ‘technosphere’, which encompasses the energy, production and distribution system of a society; the ‘socio-sphere’, or socio-family and work organisation; and the ‘infosphere’, which refers to the production and distribution of information. These ‘inter-wave’ changes generate tensions and conflicts that are captured in the expression ‘super-struggle’. Today, the second and third waves resemble tectonic plates that occasionally collide and wreak havoc.

A society in the first wave uses humans and animals as energy sources, while harnessing natural mechanical energy. It is organised in extended families and, says Toffler, kinship and feudal or tribal loyalty play a strong role. Land is at the centre of life, mobility is low and the pace of life slow. Regarding communication, while face-to-face information exchange is open to all, the «newer systems used to carry information

4 Vásquez Rocca, A. (2017). La influencia de la escuela de Frankfurt en Zygmunt Bauman y Richard Rorty: de la teoría crítica a la modernidad líquida. *Nómadas. Revista Crítica de Ciencias Sociales y Jurídicas* [online], vol. 50, issue 1. Available at: <https://revistas.ucm.es/index.php/NOMA/article/view/52424/50323>

5 Toffler, A. (1980). *La tercera ola*. Bogotá, Plaza & Janés.

beyond the confines of a family or village [are] essentially closed and used for social or political control purposes».

Second-wave civilisation, Toffler continues, «depends heavily on fossil fuels, factory production, the nuclear family, the corporation, general education and the media». Family, feudal or tribal loyalties are blurred by contractual ties. All of this is guided by six interrelated principles: uniformity –for proper industrial functioning one must be understood in the same weights and measures; in this respect, it seems no coincidence that the International Federation of National Standards Associations (ISA), the precedent of the International Standards Organisation (ISO), emerged in 1926, when the second wave was practically implemented–; specialisation –with the extreme of Taylorism, a method of work organisation that studies and eliminates unnecessary movement in order to increase productivity–; synchronisation –punctuality is fundamental to industry; Toffler describes the second-wave school as a place where precision timing, obedience and mechanical, repetitive work prepare the future employee, comparing the school bell, which regulates schedules within the school, to the factory siren–; concentration –grouping people from rural areas into urban centres–; maximisation –the author speaks of a ‘macrophilia’, not only physical (the huge factory), but also in relation to Gross Domestic Product and the need to increase it «even at the risk of ecological and social disaster»–; and centralisation –exemplified in the business or political chains of command that go up to a superintendent who, on the basis of information supplied by the lower echelons, makes decisions and transmits orders. In the dystopian world of *1984*, centralisation is so fierce that domestic repairs have to be authorised by remote committees that often delay the repair of broken glass by two years.

Toffler describes the third wave in which we are immersed as «highly technological and anti-industrial», bringing with it «a genuinely new way of life based on diversified and renewable energy sources; on methods of production that render the assembly lines of most factories obsolete; on new non-nuclear families; on a new institution, which might be called the ‘electronic home’; and on radically modified schools and corporations of the future».

In *The Wealth Revolution* (2006), reviewed by Carmen Otilia Bocanegra Gastelum<sup>6</sup>, Alvin and Heidi Toffler further develop this third wave, which is characterised by replacing «the factors of industrial production: land, labour and capital with knowledge as the primary generator of wealth», affecting «values, beliefs, family structures, political institutions, art, literature, music, education, culture and economics»<sup>7</sup>. Time and space are central to this transformation, the former being particularly problematic, as it can lead to severe crises through the «desynchronisation effect»; a mismatch

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6 Bocanegra Gastelum, C.O. (2009) Reseña de ‘La revolución de la riqueza’ de Alvin Toffler y Heidi Toffler’. *Región y Sociedad* [online], vol. XXI, issue 44, pp. 241-246. Available at: <https://www.redalyc.org/Articulo.oa?id=10204411>

7 *Ibidem*.

between a country's basic institutions –business, civil society, families, trade unions, government bureaucracy and education system– and today's frenetic economic pace.



Image 1. While Toffler speaks of the «electronic home», Adolfo Vásquez Rocca points out that «the proliferation of personal computers in the continent's average households is drastically altering the modes of coexistence or cloistering in personal niches, workstations, or bunkers of solitary entertainment»<sup>8</sup>. The room-office/playroom, which, through the internet, enables communication with the rest of the planet regardless of the walls that separate the individual from the outside world<sup>9</sup>

Alvin and Heidi, explains Bocanegra Gastelum<sup>10</sup>, reject that there is linear progress evolving into «a globally integrated economy and government»; on the contrary, they «see the direction of the states that drive the world economy moving with increasing power towards severe spatial upheavals in labour markets, technologies, currency and people across the globe», which will lead to «an unprecedented, totally new and strange social and economic tomorrow» with China as the superpower<sup>11</sup>. In short, they do not advocate an «end of history», a term developed by authors such as Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Immanuel Kant, Karl Marx or Francis Fukuyama, which can be defined by appealing to Alexandre Kojève and his prophecy about «the replacement of «man proper», i.e. the discontented subject whose actions to change historical conditions produce «wars and bloody revolutions», by man as «an animal who is in harmony with Nature or being as it is given»»<sup>12</sup>.

8 Vásquez Rocca, A., *Op. cit.*

9 Source of Image 1: DON, E. (2020). black flat screen computer monitor on black wooden desk photo. Unsplash [online]. Available at: <https://unsplash.com/photos/LBokKgf8Vrc>

10 Bocanegra Gastelum, C.O. *Op. cit.*

11 For more on international tension in this century, see: Dacoba Cerviño, F.J. (2021). Conflictividad s. XXI: los grandes suben la apuesta. *Spanish Institute for Strategic Studies* [online]. Available at: [http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs\\_analisis/2021/DIEEEA30\\_2021\\_FRADAC\\_Conflictividad.pdf](http://www.ieee.es/Galerias/fichero/docs_analisis/2021/DIEEEA30_2021_FRADAC_Conflictividad.pdf)

12 Niethammer, L., Van Laak, D. and Seigel, J. (1994). Posthistoire: Has History Come to an End? *History and Theory* [online], vol. 33, issue 2, p. 244. DOI 10.2307/2505387. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2505387>

At this point it is useful to talk about acceleration. Paul Virilio<sup>13</sup> attaches enormous importance to speed, to the extent that he states that «it is power itself»:

«The very thing about absolute speed is that it is also absolute power, absolute control, instantaneous, that is to say, an almost divine power. Today, we have put into practice the three attributes of the divine: ubiquity, instantaneity and immediacy; total vision and total power. This has nothing to do with democracy any more, it is tyranny. Multimedia confronts us with a problem: Can we find a democracy of real time, *live*, immediacy and ubiquity? I don't think so, and those who are quick to say so are not very serious.

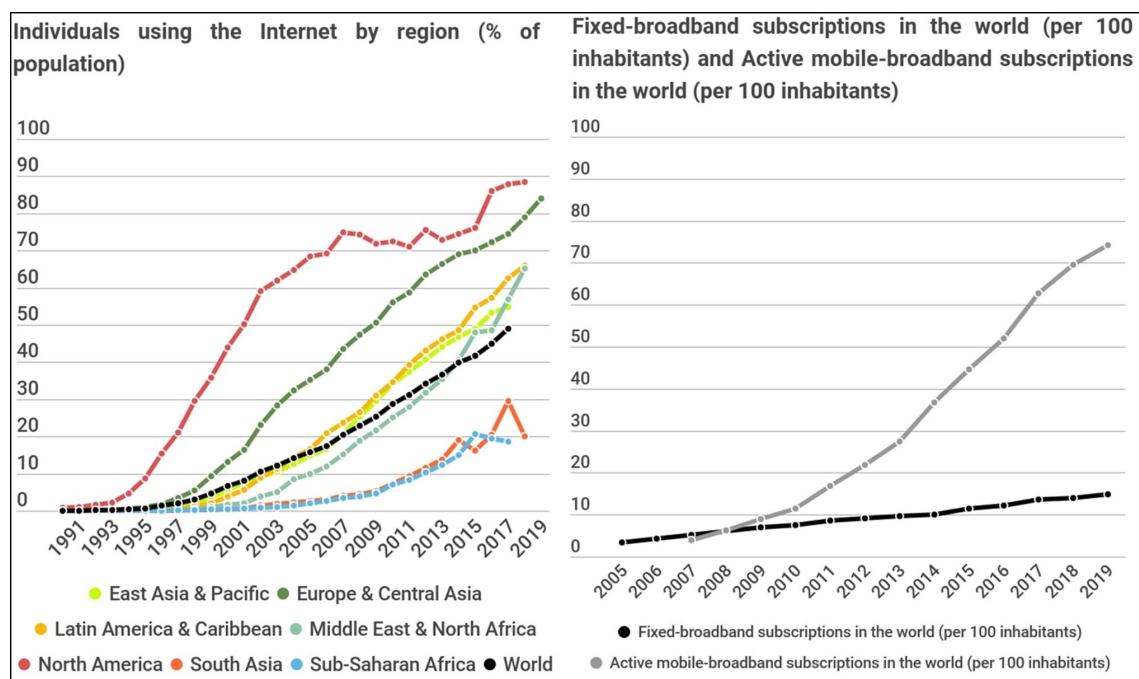


Image 2. Undoubtedly, the internet is the greatest exponent of instantaneity. Its global growth is unstoppable –49% of the global population was using it in 2017, up from 20% in 2007 and 2% in 1997– although there are large inter-regional differences: North America has always led the way and by 2017, 88% of its population was online, compared to 19% of people in Sub-Saharan Africa. It should be noted that there is a greater preference for mobile broadband over fixed broadband<sup>14</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Virilio, P. (1997). *El ciber mundo: la política de lo peor*. Madrid, Ediciones Cátedra. Pp. 18-20. ISBN 84-376-1574-7.

<sup>14</sup> Source of Image 2: Prepared internally based on International Telecommunication Union (ITU) WORLD Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database (2021). API\_IT.NET.USER.ZS\_DS2\_en\_excel\_v2\_2764008.xls. *DataBank | The World Bank* [online]. Available at: <https://api.worldbank.org/v2/en/indicator/IT.NET.USER.ZS?downloadformat=excel> and ITU World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database (2020). ITU\_regional\_global\_Key\_ICT\_indicator\_aggregates\_Nov\_2020.xlsx. *Statistics - ITU* [online]. Available at: [https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ITU\\_regional\\_global\\_Key\\_ICT\\_indicator\\_aggregates\\_Nov\\_2020.xlsx](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/facts/ITU_regional_global_Key_ICT_indicator_aggregates_Nov_2020.xlsx). On the definition of ‘fixed broadband subscriptions’ and ‘active mobile broadband subscriptions’ see: ICT Data and Statistics Division Telecommunication Development Bureau International Telecommunication Union (2019). The ICT Development Index (IDI): Methodology, indicators and definitions. *ITU-D ICT STATISTICS* [online]. Available at: [https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/ITU\\_ICT\\_Development\\_Index.pdf](https://www.itu.int/en/ITU-D/Statistics/Documents/statistics/ITU_ICT_Development_Index.pdf)

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Bauman<sup>15</sup> divides history into two clearly differentiated realities: heavy, solid, voluminous, condensed or systematic modernity and liquid modernity. From there, he develops a rich comparative thesis. The crowning glory of heavy modernity was Fordism, which he describes as «a site of epistemological construction on which the whole worldview was erected and which stood majestically dominating the totality of life experience». Evidenced:

«The Fordist factory [...] was undoubtedly the greatest achievement so far of a social construction tending towards order. It is not unusual for him to establish a metaphorical frame of reference for anyone trying to understand the workings of human reality at all levels».

«The frozen time of the factory routine, together with the bricks and mortar of the factory walls, immobilised capital as effectively as the labour employed».

In contrast to this old world, liquid modernity is light –capital travels light, stopping «almost anywhere, and nowhere takes longer than necessary»– to such an extent that Bauman argues that if the neolithic revolution brought with it sedentarism and the consideration of nomads as inferior, liquidity is the revenge of nomadism against sedentarism. The liquid escapes between the fingers; it is difficult to maintain and constantly changes shape. Heraclitus of Ephesus' concern with incessant change –becoming– is recaptured in the expression «panta rei» («everything flows») and in the appreciation that it is not possible to bathe in the same river twice. Bauman warns: fluidity brings with it the «unholy trinity» of uncertainty, insecurity and unprotectedness, noting that «each of which generates acute and painful anguish in the ignorance of where it comes from». The effects are devastating at all levels: politics «is permanently undermined by the new global powers, equipped with the terrifying weapons of extraterritoriality, speed of movement and evasion/escape capacity»; speed moves to «the top of the list of survival values», although «it does not lead to thinking, nor to long-term thinking»; occupationally «secure jobs in secure companies turn out to be just nostalgic old wives' tales». Nor are there any skills or experiences that, once acquired, would guarantee employment, and if employment is obtained, it is not lasting»; furthermore, because beliefs, values and styles are decontextualised or uprooted, «identities become fragile, temporary and 'expired'», which causes «the weaker, poorly armed individual to seek in association with others the confirmation that allows him to compensate for his individual impotence» (interesting reflection on the recruitment and joining of extremist groups or ideas). Finally, there is a decoupling of time and

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15 Bauman, Z. (1999). *Modernidad líquida*. Fondo de Cultura Económica 2015. ISBN 0-7456-2409-X.

space: 'Far', 'long time', 'near' and 'short time' used to indicate the effort it took for a human being to travel a certain distance, but with electronic speed they have lost their meaning.

Importantly, Bauman, like the Tofflers, shares the belief that there will not be an «end of history», but a turbulent period:

«Progress is no longer a temporary measure, something provisional, which would lead eventually (and shortly) to a state of perfection (that is, to a state of affairs in which everything that had to be done has already been done and no further change is necessary), but a perpetual and perhaps endless challenge and necessity».

On the basis of the above, some necessary considerations should be made. It should not be forgotten that these authors make a huge synthesis to present their ideas. Therefore, they must be read in a generalist way, knowing the vast diversity of the earth; even within a single society there may be technologically disparate regions or segments of the population for many reasons, including a voluntary reluctance to change. Thus, a case-by-case, country-by-country, region-by-region analysis would be appropriate.

In *COVID-19: El Gran Reinicio* (2020)<sup>16</sup>, Klaus Schwab and Thierry Malleret offer an analysis that is very close to the positions seen so far. Both authors argue that today's world has three determining characteristics: 1) interdependence, i.e. the «dynamics of reciprocal dependence between the elements that make up a system», which leads to risks amplifying each other with cascading effects; 2) speed, which they blame either on progress and globalisation, generating a «culture of immediacy», or on the perception of increasingly scarce and therefore more valuable time, leading to a problem of asynchrony between policy makers and citizens; and 3) complexity, which «places limits on our knowledge and understanding of things; hence, the increasing complexity today may literally overwhelm the ability of politicians in particular and decision makers in general to make informed decisions». They go on to give a lengthy account of what the future holds, saying that automation will be a major concern and that «it is inevitable that unemployment will rise around the world». They argue that «the green economy encompasses a range of possibilities, from green energy to ecotourism and the circular economy» and go so far as to argue that «there is no point in trying to restore the *status quo* ante [since] 'hyperglobalisation' has lost all its political and social capital, and defending it is no longer politically sustainable». In any case, they do not claim the «end of history», but predict upheaval. Three key paragraphs are shown below:

«An entire generation across the globe will be determined by economic and often social insecurity, with millions of people waiting to enter the labour market in the midst of a deep recession [due to the COVID-19 pandemic]. This will mark them forever».

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<sup>16</sup> Schwab, K. and Malleret, T. (2020). *COVID-19: el gran reinicio*. Colonia/Ginebra, World Economic Forum. ISBN 978-2-940631-14-8.

«The determining factor of geopolitical instability is the gradual shift in the balance of power between the West and the East in favour of the latter, in a transition that generates tensions and, in the process, global disorder. This is reflected in what is known as the ‘Thucydides trap’: the structural stress that inevitably occurs when a rising power like China rivals a dominant power like the United States.

«In this new and disrupted world, defined by a trend towards multipolarity and intense competition for influence, conflicts or tensions will no longer be fuelled by ideology (with the partial and limited exception of radical Islam), but spurred by nationalism and competition for resources.

Moreover, they are committed to relativism:

In the world of international politics, if two different observers are entitled to their own opinions, that makes them subjective, but no less real and no less valid. If an observer can only understand «reality» according to the colour of the glass of their particular idiosyncrasy, this forces us to rethink the concept of objectivity. It is clear that the representation of reality depends on the position of the observer. In that sense, the «Chinese» vision and the «American» vision can coexist, with many other visions in between - and all of them real!

Both relativism and scepticism are pieces that seem to fit well into the puzzle of a fluid and uncertain world, but they carry risks. As Vicente Caballero de la Torre<sup>17</sup> notes, for some sophists, pioneers of cultural relativism, «reason and truth correspond to what is said and affirmed by the strongest rhetorically or physically, that is, by the one who is able to impose them». Protagoras «held that there is no difference between what things are and what we think they are at any given moment. All opinions are true as far as sensibility is concerned: there is no difference between seeming and being. The point is that some views are more useful than others. Gorgias, the initiator of solipsism, and his three theses are worth mentioning: 1) Nothing exists. 2) Even if existence exists, it is inapprehensible to humans. 3) Even if existence is apprehensible, it certainly cannot be communicated or interpreted to one’s neighbors. Learn the importance of all this in a digital, hyper-fast, post-truth, post-truth world dominated by the «unholy trinity».

To conclude on a mechanistic note, the human being can be compared to a vehicle. For years, machines have been reaching speeds that are unbearable for humans, with undesirable consequences that increase the risk of accidents, such as the tunnel effect. For this reason, the authorities impose limits that restrict the power of the machine *de jure*, so that the driver does not lose too much detail and can react to any eventuality. Analogically, the subject exposed to a multitude of incessant stimuli, such as news, rumours, announcements, truths and falsehoods –which may, moreover, be difficult to verify– is like the driver who adjusts the machine to a speed for which the body

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17 Caballero de la Torre, V. (2018). *Breve historia de la filosofía occidental*. Madrid, Ediciones Nowtilus. ISBN 978-84-9967-948-8.

is not prepared. It will undoubtedly miss details and may not have enough time to notice the dangers.

This review of technological modernity serves as a prism through which to observe the following sections which, focusing on security, and more specifically on terrorism and its relationship to communication and legitimacy, end by proposing a discursive analysis to help confront terrorist propaganda in the age of electronic hyper-speed, which, as examined, will be accompanied by turmoil, disorder and confusion.

## Terrorism, communication and legitimacy

Terrorism<sup>18</sup> attacks symbolic and vulnerable targets in order to increase the psychological impact of its actions and convey a political message<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, the terrorist organises and executes the plans on the basis of a calculated communication strategy. Violent anarchism, which caused the first global terrorist wave in history, reached its zenith in the 1890s when prominent political and state figures, such as Marie-François-Sadi Carnot, Antonio Cánovas del Castillo and Elisabeth of Bavaria (nicknamed Sisi or Sissi), were assassinated by anarchists who moved easily across international borders<sup>20</sup>. This strategy was based on the doctrine of «propaganda by deed», which considered that ineffective oral and written propaganda required insurrectionary actions to achieve the desired goals. Originally these acts were intended to mobilise the illiterate masses of the Italian countryside, but when they failed to get the expected response the anarchists pivoted to individual attacks, attacking the rulers to show the weakness of the state and inspire the masses with self-sacrifice<sup>21</sup>. Today's terrorism, as a continuation of «propaganda by deed», targets state symbols, political opponents and the general public to cause psychological coercion<sup>22</sup>.

18 There is no comprehensive UN treaty on terrorism and no internationally binding definition of the term. However, there is a universal legal framework or regime based on General Assembly resolutions, Security Council resolutions and international legal instruments, which are 19 multilateral conventions and protocols relating to terrorism that in practice have achieved almost universal adherence. For more information on the legal framework against terrorism, see: United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2018). *The Universal Legal Framework against Terrorism*. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* [online]. Viena. Available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Module\\_2/Module\\_2\\_Spanish.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Module_2/Module_2_Spanish.pdf)

19 Gearty, C. (2004). Terrorism and morality. *Whitehall Papers* [online], vol. 61, issue 1, p. 19. DOI 10.1080/02681300408523001. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/02681300408523001>

20 Rapoport, D.C. (2002). The Four Waves of Rebel Terror and September 11. *Anthropoetics* [online], vol. VIII, issue 1. Available at: <http://anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0801/terror/>

21 Miller, M., et al. (2019). Anarchism - Anarchism as a movement, 1870-1940. *Britannica* [online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/anarchism/Anarchism-as-a-movement-1870-1940#ref750483>

22 Merari, A. (1993). Terrorism as a Strategy of Insurgency. *Terrorism and Political Violence* [online], vol. 5, issue 4, p. 227. DOI 10.1080/09546559308427227. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546559308427227>

Cowen<sup>23</sup> compares it to theatre, the difference being that theatre is aimed at a small, private audience, whereas terrorists do not limit their «stagings»; on the contrary, they seek the widest possible publicity.

Terrorism is also a struggle about what is legitimate, that is, what is lawful; what is true, genuine and real; what is in accordance with the law. Each side questions the legitimacy of the other. As Cook<sup>24</sup> notes, left-wing terrorists generally deny the legitimacy of the state and argue that violence against it is morally justified, right-wing terrorists condone violence to maintain order, while a state besieged by terrorism defends its legitimacy while delegitimising its opponent. This scenically violent, highly symbolic and deeply psychological struggle distinguishes terrorism from conventional warfare. In the latter, the critical –but not only– factors are armies, military equipment and territory, whereas resolving a terrorist conflict requires winning over morale and public opinion<sup>25</sup>. In this respect, Hermann Heller<sup>26</sup> expresses:

«Public opinion rooted in principles and doctrines constitutes one of the most substantial bonds of state unity. Especially in democratically governed states, the current situation of power becomes a relatively secure situation of power, a political *status*, thanks to the fact that a common public opinion in the form of a community of will and values has been created between the authority and the subjects.

Terrorism seeks to break the political status quo in order to impose its own through two main means: violence and argumentation. The first seeks a disproportionate state response that inflicts harm on a population prone, for underlying reasons<sup>27</sup>, to take sides with terrorism. It is also a way of delegitimising the state, characterising it as

23 Cowen, T. (2006). Terrorism as Theater: Analysis and Policy Implications. *Public Choice* [online], vol. 128, issue 1/2, pp. 233-244. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30026642>

24 Cook, D. (2003). Legitimacy and Political Violence: A Habermasian Perspective. *Social Justice* [online], vol. 30, issue 3 (93), p. 109. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/29768212>

25 Walker, D.H. (2005). Developing Metrics for the Global War on Terrorism. U.S. *Naval War College* [online]. Newport. P. 10. Available at: <https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=15551>

26 Heller, H. (1934). *Teoría del Estado*. Mexico: Fondo de Cultura Económica 2010. Pp. 225-226. ISBN 978-968-16-5725-3.

27 These underlying causes include: a widespread perception of deprivation and inequality, especially among culturally defined groups, very rapid modernisation with social inequalities, a poor society with weak state structures and a lack of political integration leading a section of the population to believe that the political regime is illegitimate, according to Brynjar, L. and Skjøberg, K. (2004). Causes of Terrorism: An Expanded and Updated Review of the Literature. Kjeller (Norway), Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, FFI/RAPPORT-2004/04307 [online]. Pp. 70-71. DOI 10.13140/RG.2.1.3776.6882. Available at: [https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281274883\\_CAUSES\\_OF\\_TERRORISM\\_An\\_Expanded\\_and\\_Updated\\_Review\\_of\\_the\\_Literature](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/281274883_CAUSES_OF_TERRORISM_An_Expanded_and_Updated_Review_of_the_Literature). If a turbulent future such as the one outlined in the section on the characteristics of electronic modernity were to occur, it is possible that these underlying causes would feed on disorder, increasing the likelihood of violence.

incapable and negligent<sup>28</sup>. This is accompanied by a narrative, a dialectic and a story where the media play a fundamental role. Farnen<sup>29</sup> indicates that terrorism and the media have a symbiotic relationship because of the increased attention, potentially transformable into economic benefits, generated by violent news. Moreover, in the face of a globalised approach, terrorism commits bolder and more spectacular acts to attract attention. Borrego Sevillano<sup>30</sup> comments:

«The internationalisation of terrorism and the emergence of a fundamentalist religious motivation in the structures that drive and justify terrorist groups are two facts that broke the self-limitation of terrorist violence from the 1960s onwards».

But what is the current state of play on terrorism? Which ideology causes more victims and where? Answering these questions is a step that precedes any contribution to their alleviation, while targeting resources towards the most pernicious doctrine is fundamental to an optimal outcome.

### Jihadism, the main driver of international terrorism

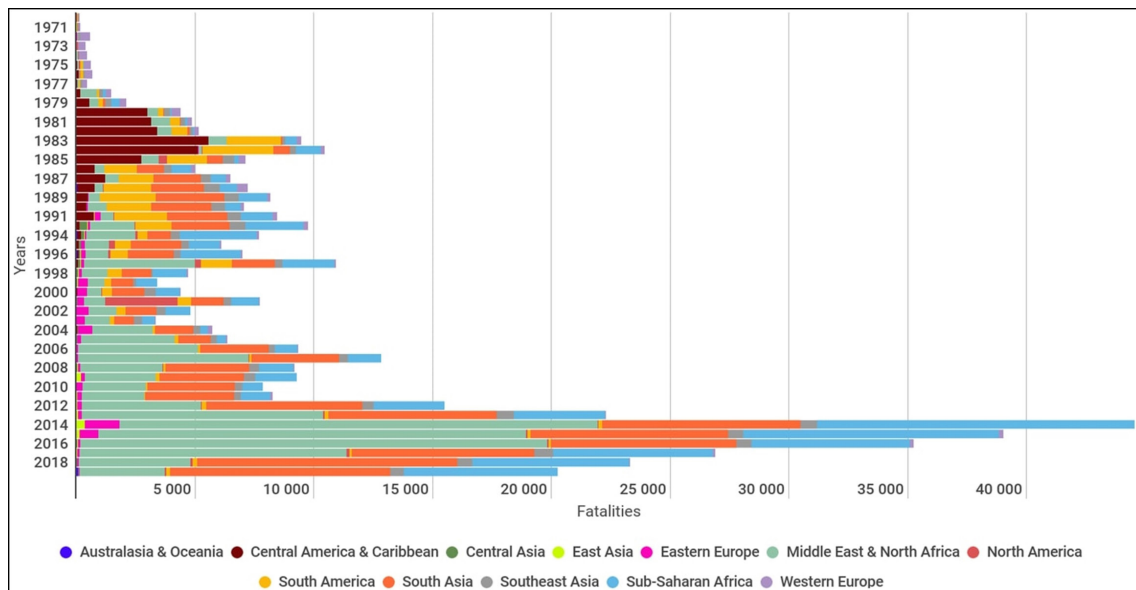
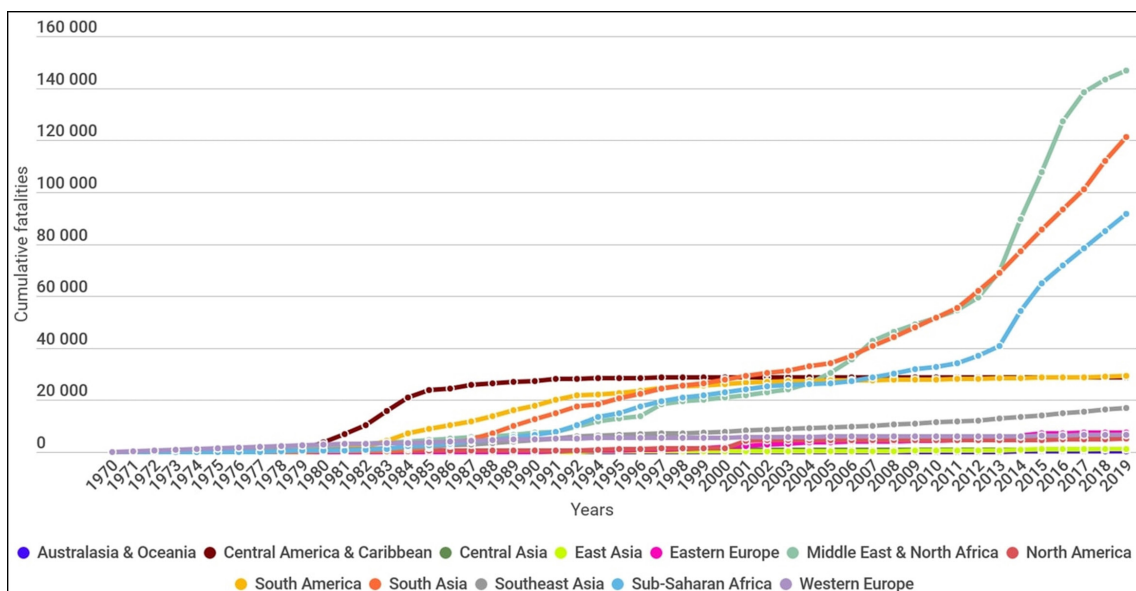
This section follows a methodology of comparison and analysis based on fatalities attributed to terrorism from 1970 to 2019, which includes perpetrators who died as a direct result of attacks. Images 3 and 4 provide this historical perspective<sup>31</sup>.

28 Bueno de Mesquita, E. and Dickson, E. (2007). The Propaganda of the Deed: Terrorism, Counterterrorism, and Mobilization. *American Journal of Political Science* [online], vol. 51, issue 2, p. 377. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4620071>

29 Farnen, R.F. (1990). Terrorism and the mass media: A systemic analysis of a symbiotic process. *Terrorism* [online], vol. 13, issue 2, pp. 99-143. DOI 10.1080/10576109008435820. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10576109008435820>

30 Borrego Sevillano, J.M. (2016). La evolución del terrorismo salafista yihadista internacional. Doble vertiente: propaganda y ámbito de actuación. Estudio de caso: España. In: C. Navajas Zubeldia and D. Iturriaga Barco (eds.). *Siglo: V Congreso internacional de historia de nuestro tiempo* [online]. Logroño, University of La Rioja. P. 559. Available at: [https://publicaciones.unirioja.es/catalogo/online/Historia\\_nuestro\\_tiempo\\_5/pdf/131\\_BorregoSevillano.pdf](https://publicaciones.unirioja.es/catalogo/online/Historia_nuestro_tiempo_5/pdf/131_BorregoSevillano.pdf)

31 The Global Terrorism Database of the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), which is the source used for images 3, 4, 5 and 7, defines a terrorist attack as «the threat or actual use of unlawful force and violence by a non-state actor to achieve a political, economic, religious or social objective through fear, coercion or intimidation». For more information, see: GTD | Global Terrorism Database - START.UMD.EDU (2019). GTD Codebook: Inclusion Criteria and Variables. *START.umd.edu* [online], p. 10. Available at: <https://www.start.umd.edu/gtd/downloads/Codebook.pdf>

Image 3. Terrorism fatalities from 1970 to 2019 (by region)<sup>32</sup>Figure 4. Cumulative terrorist fatalities from 1970 to 2019 (by region)<sup>33</sup>

In the 1970s, Western Europe was the area most targeted by terrorism due to the Northern Irish conflict and the actions of, among others, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), the Official Irish Republican Army (OIRA) and the Ulster Volunteer Force. At the end of this decade, ETA significantly increased its number of assassinations. It is also the time of Palestinian terrorism –Black September, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine– and of the Montoneros in

32 Source of Image 3: Prepared internally based on GTD | Global Terrorism Database (2021). [globalterrorismdb\\_o221dist.xlsx](https://web.archive.org/web/20210828160116/https://gtd.terrorismdata.com/app/uploads/_mediavault/2021/02/globalterrorismdb_o221dist.xlsx). *CHC START* [online]. Available at: [https://web.archive.org/web/20210828160116/https://gtd.terrorismdata.com/app/uploads/\\_mediavault/2021/02/globalterrorismdb\\_o221dist.xlsx](https://web.archive.org/web/20210828160116/https://gtd.terrorismdata.com/app/uploads/_mediavault/2021/02/globalterrorismdb_o221dist.xlsx)

33 Source of Image 4: Prepared internally from *ibidem*.

Argentina. In the 1980s, Central America and the Caribbean became the area hardest hit by the intensification of the Central American crisis, with the activity of groups such as the Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front in El Salvador and several others in Nicaragua – Democratic Force of Nicaragua, Guerrilla Army of the Poor, Democratic Revolutionary Alliance (Alianza Revolucionaria Democrática). From 1985 to 1995 South America became one of the regions hardest hit by Peru's Shining Path, the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia, the 19 April Movement and the National Liberation Army. During this period there was also major action by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam in Sri Lanka (South Asia) and the New People's Army in the Philippines (Southeast Asia). With regard to the Middle East and North Africa, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) was enormously bloody in the early 1990s, while in Sub-Saharan Africa, Hutu extremist attacks in a context of tension over the Rwandan genocide stand out, as well as the actions of the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, especially from 1982 to 1994 and from 1996 to 2002. For its part, Mozambique's National Resistance Movement caused numerous fatalities from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.

Jihadist terrorism took off in the first decade of the 21st century with the attacks of 11 September 2001 – previously notable, without reaching the magnitude of Al Qaeda, were the Shiite Hezbollah and the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). To note the ravages of the second Chechen war (1999-2009), the Taliban insurgency in Afghanistan, especially since 2006 –coinciding with Al Qaeda in Iraq– and the ferocity of Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (Pakistani Taliban Movement) since 2009. The worst came in the second decade with the rise of ISIL and the deterioration of the situation in sub-Saharan Africa, with intense Boko Haram activity since 2011 and Al Shabaab since 2012. Not to mention Al-Qaeda's muscle in the Arabian Peninsula (Middle East and North Africa) since 2013. As a result, 2014 saw a peak of 44,524 deaths from terrorism. Such was ISIL's ferocity that, despite its short existence and lacking the veteran status of Al Qaeda, it is the second terrorist group with the second highest death toll attributed to it (image 5).

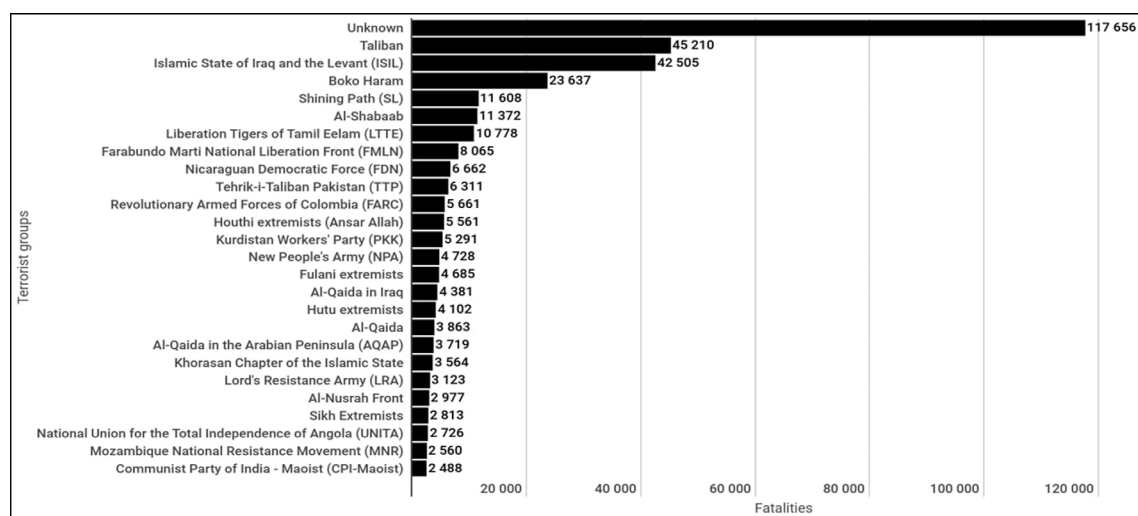


Image 5. The 25 terrorist groups with the highest number of attributed fatalities from 1970 to 2019. The category «Unknown» is included for information purposes<sup>4</sup>

34 Source of Image 5: Prepared internally from *ibidem*.

As can be seen, terrorism is changeable, both in ideology and in the regions that suffer from it («panta rei»). The proposed discursive analysis focuses on jihadism as the main current threat, but can be extended to any other discourse due to its versatility. However, before presenting it, it is useful to review how terrorism uses the internet, within the digital and hypervelocity framework that encompasses everything as if it were ether.

### Jihadist propaganda online 2.0

Terrorists use the internet for various purposes: propaganda, including recruitment, radicalisation and incitement to violence; financing; training; planning, including secret communications and Open Source Intelligence (OSINT); carrying out terrorist acts, taking advantage of the logistical and anonymity advantages of the internet; and for cyber-attacks<sup>35</sup>.

In more theoretical terms, the internet eliminates intermediaries and allows for direct communication with users. The figure of the cybernaut who consumes as well as produces appears. Many websites invite you to do so; for example, Wikipedia allows you to consume content, but also to edit it to enrich or correct it; with YouTube you consume videos created by others, but you can share your own content with the world if you wish. It is a revolution compared to traditional media, which used to be the only media that had the capacity to generate and distribute content massively (and unidirectionally). This is why they were so necessary for a publicity-hungry terrorism, which now has an environment that allows for a vast expansion of its propaganda, including its own «news agencies», such as the ISIL-linked Amaq News Agency, which under a veneer of objectivity attributed attacks and published «scoops» about the terrorist group<sup>36</sup>.

Jihadism has benefited from what is known in marketing as superfans, i.e. those cybernauts who are very loyal to the brand and enthusiastically share what is related to it. One example is Samir Khan, a US citizen born in Saudi Arabia who, from his parents' home in Charlotte (North Carolina, USA), started a major jihadist internet network –reminiscent of Toffler's «electronic home», with the office-room and play-room acquiring the status of a digital home base– consisting of blogs such as *Inshallah.shaheed* and two e-zines: *Jihad Recollections*, launched in 2009, which has the dubious honour of being the first widely known jihadist publication in English, and *Inspire*, launched

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35 United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (2013). Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes. *United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime* [online]. Available at: [https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_Ebook\\_SPANISH\\_for\\_web.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes/Use_of_Internet_Ebook_SPANISH_for_web.pdf)

36 Callimachi, R. (2016). A News Agency With Scoops Directly From ISIS, and a Veneer of Objectivity. *The New York Times* [online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/15/world/middleeast/a-news-agency-with-scoops-directly-from-isis-and-a-veneer-of-objectivity.html>



Image 6. The user @Zabehulah\_M33 claims to be the «official Twitter account of the spokesperson of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, Zabihullah Mujahid». Through this platform the Taliban distribute their propaganda quickly and massively, provided they are found not to be in breach of the rules, which would lead to a suspension of the profile. In this case, a video is broadcast, in which a guy, in the guise of a reporter, interviews a couple of people. On the other hand, note how machine translations help to break down language barriers, despite the inaccuracies. In short, we are talking about fundamental changes in the «infosphere»<sup>37</sup>

in 2010 as one of the media flagships of Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula<sup>38</sup>. Despite his parents' efforts to stop his radicalisation, Khan moved to Yemen in 2009, where he was killed in 2011 along with Anwar al-Awlaki<sup>39</sup> by a controversial drone strike. His story proves that Al Qaeda has been using the internet for terrorist purposes since before the emergence of ISIL. However, the latter group was more effective in spreading its propaganda based on violence, Islamic theology and sectarianism<sup>40</sup>. A review of the death toll attributed to jihadist-inspired extremists<sup>41</sup> –Image 7– confirms this.

37 Source of Image 6: Zabihullah (م ل ل ا ح ی —بذ.) (@Zabehulah\_M33) (2021). *Twitter* [online]. Available at: [https://twitter.com/Zabehulah\\_M33/status/1427126736026836995](https://twitter.com/Zabehulah_M33/status/1427126736026836995)

38 Bunker, R.J. and Bunker, P.L. (2018). *Radical Islamist English-Language Online Magazines: Research Guide, Strategic Insights, and Policy Response. US Army War College - Strategic Studies Institute* [online]., pp. 7, 12. Available at: <https://publications.armywarcollege.edu/pubs/3549.pdf>

39 Brown, R. and Severson, K. (2011). 2nd American in Strike Waged Qaeda Media War. *The New York Times* [online]. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/01/world/middleeast/samir-khan-killed-by-drone-spun-out-of-the-american-middle-class.html>

40 Badawy, A. and Ferrara, E. (2018). The rise of Jihadist propaganda on social networks. *Journal of Computational Social Science* [online], vol. 1. DOI 10.1007/s42001-018-0015-z. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs42001-018-0015-z>

41 A jihadist-inspired extremist is an extremist who is apparently not in contact with the command structure of any group, but is influenced by its propaganda.

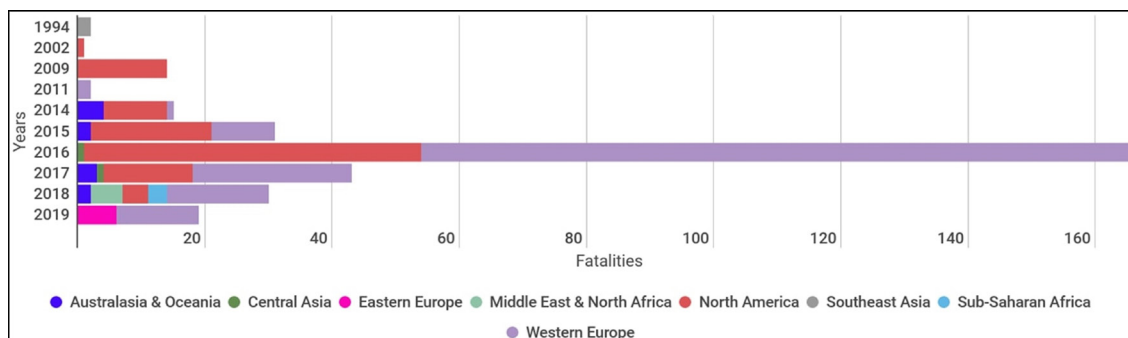


Image 7. Jihadist-inspired extremist fatalities from 1994 to 2019 (by region)<sup>42</sup>

From 1994 to 2013, 34 victims of jihadist-inspired extremists were recorded, most notably in 2009, when commander Nidal Malik Hasan –a follower of Anwar al-Awlaki<sup>43</sup>– murdered 13 people at Fort Hood (Texas, USA). From 2014 to 2019 the number of victims is 304, including 16 from the 2015 San Bernardino massacre, 50 from the 2016 Pulse nightclub massacre in Orlando, 87 from the 2016 Nice attack and 12 from the 2016 Berlin attack.

ISIL's propaganda pressure forced measures to be taken, some of which include: by Twitter, the removal of 360,000 accounts for promoting terrorism from mid-2015 to August 2016<sup>44</sup>; by Facebook, the use of artificial intelligence - including image matching and collaboration between the WhatsApp and Instagram platforms<sup>45</sup>; and by the European Union making it mandatory for data hosting service providers to remove terrorist content or block access to it in all Member States within one hour of receiving the removal order<sup>46</sup>. In Spain, Organic Law 2/2015, of 30 March, which amends Organic Law 10/1995, of 23 November, of the Criminal Code, on terrorist crimes, whose Article 575 «criminalises indoctrination and military or combat training or training in the handling of all kinds of weapons and explosives, expressly including passive indoctrination and training, with special mention of that which is carried out through the internet or communication services accessible to the public»<sup>47</sup>.

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42 Source of Image 7: Prepared internally based on GTD | Global Terrorism Database. *Op. cit.*

43 Brachman, J. (2021). Anwar al-Awlaki. *Britannica* [online]. Available at: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Anwar-al-Awlaki>

44 An update on our efforts to combat violent extremism. *Twitter Blog* [online]. 2016. Available at: [https://blog.twitter.com/en\\_us/a/2016/an-update-on-our-efforts-to-combat-violent-extremism](https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/a/2016/an-update-on-our-efforts-to-combat-violent-extremism)

45 Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism. *About Facebook* [online]. 2017. Available at: <https://about.fb.com/news/2017/06/how-we-counter-terrorism/>

46 Regulation (EU) 2021/784 of the European Parliament and of the Council of 29 April 2021 on combating the dissemination of terrorist content online. *Official Journal of the European Union* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/ES/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32021R0784&from=ES>

47 Organic Law 2/2015 of 30 March 2015, which amends Organic Law 10/1995 of 23 November 1995 on the Criminal Code, on terrorist offences. *BOE* [online]. 2015. Available at: <https://www.boe.es/buscar/doc.php?id=BOE-A-2015-3440>

In order to further explore digital counter-terrorism, the transparency reports of Twitter<sup>48</sup> and Facebook<sup>49</sup> should be mentioned as an interesting source. Those relating to Twitter are organised under three headings - 'Injunctions', 'Twitter Rules' and 'Safety and Integrity' – which in turn contain further subheadings. Facebook's can be classified under four headings - 'Enforcement', 'Legal Requirements', 'Internet Ecosystem' and 'Most Viewed Content Report: What people see on Facebook' - with relevant sub-sections. For a better understanding, see Images 8 and 9.

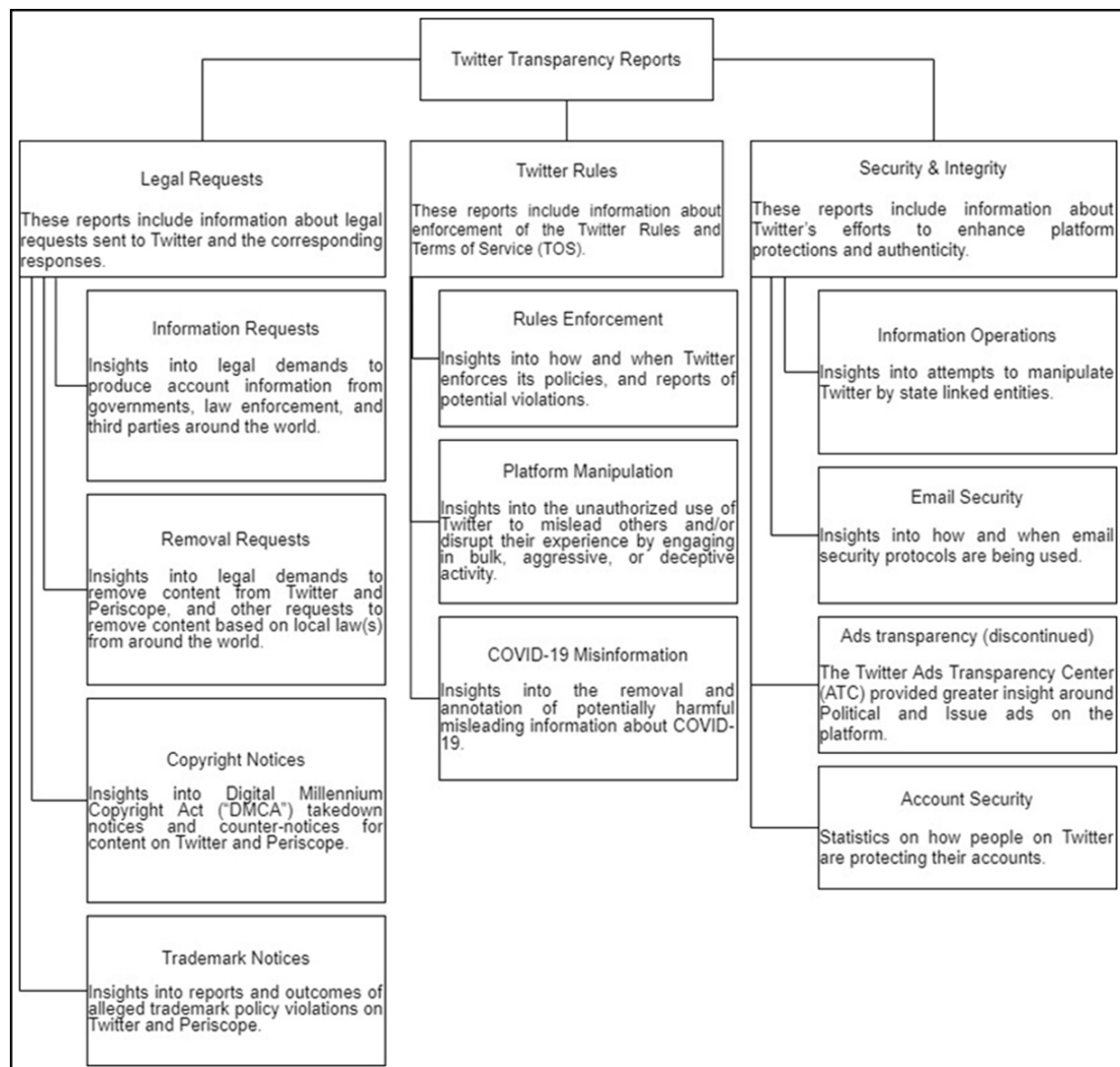
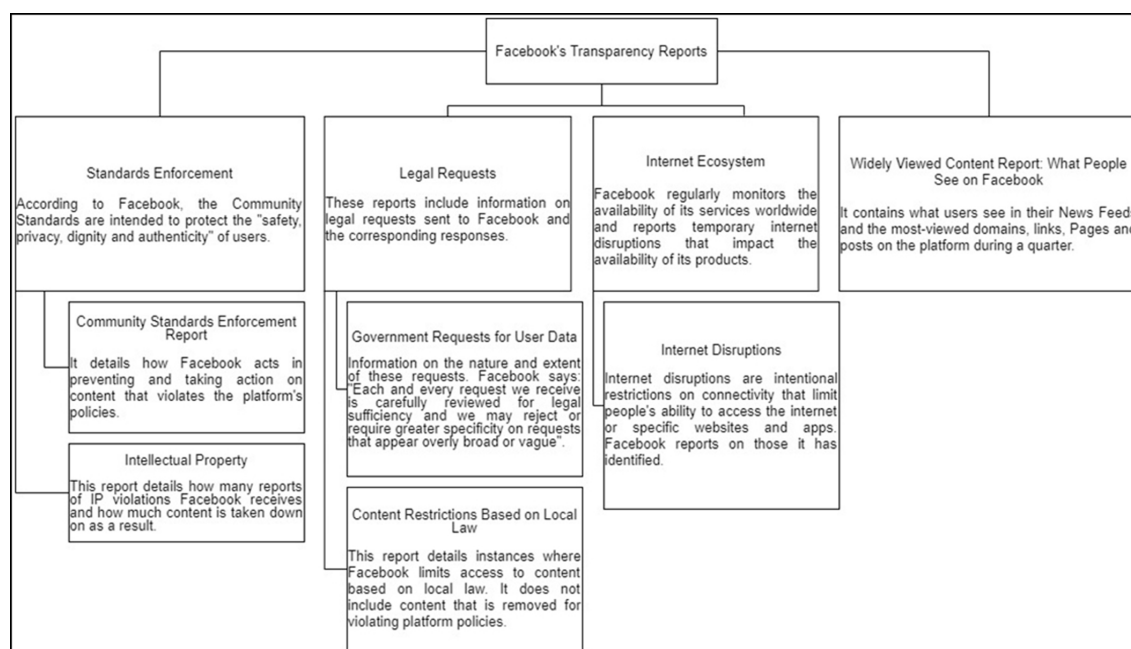


Image 8. Organisation of Twitter transparency reports<sup>50</sup>

48 Overview of reports. *Twitter Transparency Center* [online]. 2021. Available at: [https://transparency.twitter.com/es\\_es/reports.html](https://transparency.twitter.com/es_es/reports.html)

49 Transparency reports. *Transparency Center - Facebook* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://transparency.fb.com/data/>

50 Source of Image 8: Prepared internally based on General description of the reports, *op. cit.*

Image 9. Organisation of Facebook transparency reports<sup>51</sup>

In terms of Twitter content removal requests –which authorities can send from the URL <https://legalrequests.twitter.com/>, with <https://www.facebook.com/records/login> being the equivalent for Facebook<sup>52</sup>– the July - December 2020 report<sup>53</sup> notes that «Twitter received a legal demand from the Colombian National Police because seven accounts allegedly incited violent threats against national security. These accounts were involved in activities related to and affiliated with the Colombian National Liberation Army (ELN) and, as such, were permanently suspended under Twitter's policy against Violent Organisations». On the other hand, the January-June 2020 report<sup>54</sup> specifies that «Twitter received a legal complaint from the Iraqi police regarding 29 accounts allegedly affiliated with ISIS. 27 accounts were suspended for violating the Twitter Rules, but no action was taken against the remaining two accounts, as they did not violate the Twitter Rules». These two cases are paradigmatic: in the first, Twitter suspended all the accounts that had been transferred to it by the Colombian police, while in the second, two accounts were not acted against, despite the Iraqi police's instructions. In relation to Facebook, the report on content restrictions based on French local legislation from

<sup>51</sup> Source of Image 9: Prepared internally based on Transparency reports, *op. cit.*

<sup>52</sup> For more information, see: Law enforcement support. *Twitter Help Center* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://help.twitter.com/es/rules-and-policies/twitter-law-enforcement-support> and Guidelines for law enforcement. *Security Centre - Facebook* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://es-es.facebook.com/safety/groups/law/guidelines/>

<sup>53</sup> Removal requests - Jul. - Dec. 2020. *Twitter Transparency Center* [online]. 2021. Available at: [https://transparency.twitter.com/es\\_es/reports/removal-requests.html#2020-jul-dec](https://transparency.twitter.com/es_es/reports/removal-requests.html#2020-jul-dec)

<sup>54</sup> Removal requests - January - June 2020. *Twitter Transparency Center* [online]. 2021. Available at: [https://transparency.twitter.com/es\\_es/reports/removal-requests.html#2020-jan-jun](https://transparency.twitter.com/es_es/reports/removal-requests.html#2020-jan-jun)

July-December 2020<sup>55</sup> notes that access to three items was restricted for alleged violation of Article 421-2-5 of the Penal Code, which punishes public apology of acts of terrorism<sup>56</sup>. More information and more context is needed on the profiles reported and their motives, but it illustrates how counter-terrorism is exercised on the internet and the power of these platforms. It is noteworthy that perhaps a rigorous and methodologically sound study of these transparency reports could provide relevant information; for example, an increase in requests for removal of terrorism-related content from a particular state could indicate that there is a tendency to threaten that country, suggesting that there is a growing danger to its national security.

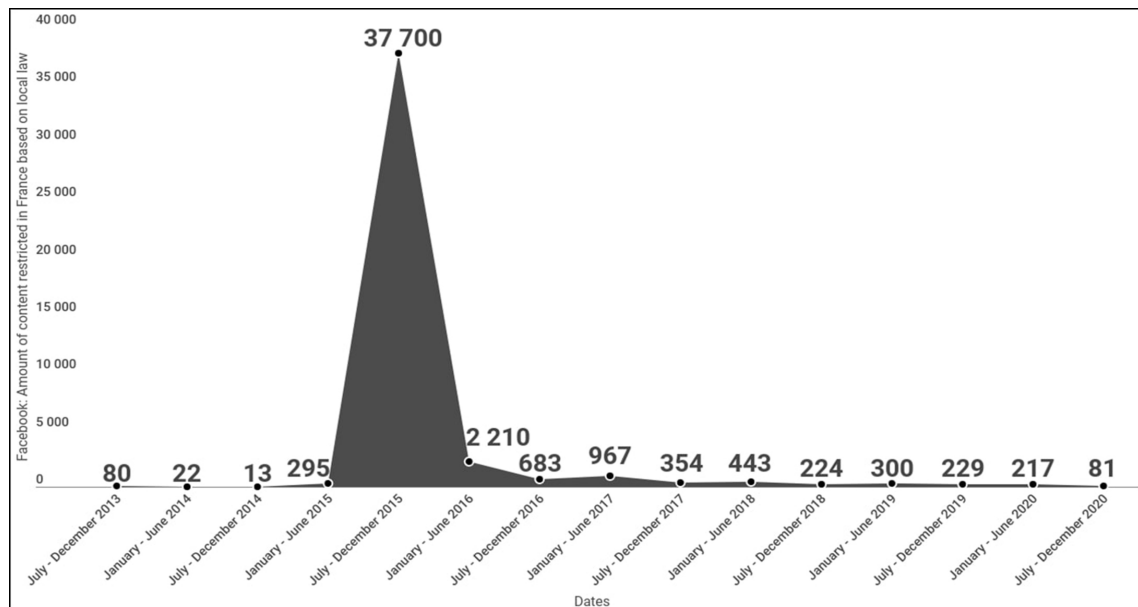


Image 10. Facebook: Amount of content restricted in France by local law. Of particular note is the peak in July-December 2015, which was triggered by terrorism. It is due to the fact that access to an image related to the November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris was repeatedly restricted, which, according to the French Central Office for Combating Crimes Related to Information and Communication Technologies (OCLCTIC), violated French laws related to the protection of human dignity<sup>57</sup>

On the other hand, it is noteworthy that for years jihadism has been stressing the need to use encryption to make investigations more difficult. First of all, however, it must be stressed that encryption on the internet is a thorny issue. One can point to the international declaration of 11 October 2020 signed by the governments of the UK, Australia, Canada, India, Japan, New Zealand and the US<sup>58</sup>, which, while acknowl-

<sup>55</sup> Content Restrictions Based on Local Law - France. *Transparency Center - Facebook* [online]. 2021. Available at: <https://transparency.fb.com/data/content-restrictions/country/FR/>

<sup>56</sup> 'Article 421-2-5 - Code pénal'. *Légifrance* [online]. 2014. Available at: [https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article\\_lc/LEGIARTI00002975573/](https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/codes/article_lc/LEGIARTI00002975573/).

<sup>57</sup> Source of Image 10: Prepared internally based on Content Restrictions Based on Local Law - France. *Op. cit.*

<sup>58</sup> International Statement: End-To-End Encryption and Public Safety. *Office of Public Affairs | Department of Justice* [online]. 2020. Available at: <https://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/international-statement-end-end-encryption-and-public-safety>

edging that strong encryption «plays a crucial role in protecting personal data, privacy, intellectual property, trade secrets and cybersecurity», also states that «end-to-end encryption that prevents lawful access to the content of communications in all circumstances directly affects [law enforcement's] responsibilities, creating serious risks to public safety». It concludes: «While this statement focuses on the challenges posed by end-to-end encryption, this commitment applies to the full range of encryption services available, including device encryption, customised encrypted applications and encryption on embedded platforms». For its part, an EU Council resolution of 24 November 2020<sup>59</sup> states that «the European Union continues to support strong encryption», while calling for «maintaining the possibility for competent authorities in the area of security and criminal justice to lawfully access relevant data for legitimate and clearly defined purposes in the fight against serious and/or organised crime and terrorism».

Having presented the controversy surrounding encryption, it is worth noting that the first issue of *Inspire*<sup>60</sup>, published in 2010, already states that one of the disadvantages of the internet is that «spies pay attention to emails, especially if you are an individual known to have a jihadist mentality»; subsequently, it proposes using a cryptographic programme called «Asrar al-Mujahideen 2.0». Similarly, the fifth issue of the ISIL-linked French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam*<sup>61</sup>, which appeared in July 2015, contains a section entitled *Muslim safety rules* (in French *Les règles de sécurité du musulman*) which urges to follow some advice on the internet, such as the use of a virtual private network (VPN) and the Tor network. It also urges the use of TrueCrypt, an encryption software discontinued in 2014. In the ninth<sup>62</sup> and tenth<sup>63</sup> issue of *Dar al-Islam*, from April and August 2016 respectively, more advice is offered in a section called *Computer security* (in French, *Sécurité informatique*), which explains the Tor network in greater depth and details the Tails operating system, designed to protect against surveillance and censorship. In conclusion, both Al Qaeda and ISIL made a point of recommending some tools to hinder security forces. Consequently, there is some apprehension on the part of at least part of the international community about the extensive use of encryption and the effects it may have on public security; it is a debate that is likely to intensify in the future.

Finally, we are ready to tackle the last section: the proposal of a discursive analysis whose dissemination, both among communication professionals and society in general, would help to examine terrorist propaganda from a methodological prism far removed from emotional charges.

59 Council Resolution on Encryption - Security through encryption and security despite encryption. Council of the European Union [online]. 2020, p. 4. Available at: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-13084-2020-REV-1/en/pdf>

60 How to use Asrar al-Mujahideen: Sending & Receiving Encrypted Messages. *Inspire*. 2010, issue 1, pp. 41-44.

61 Les règles de sécurité du musulman. *Dar al-Islam*. 2015, issue 5, pp. 30-33.

62 Sécurité informatique. *Dar al-Islam*. 2016, issue 9, pp. 38-52.

63 Sécurité informatique - Deuxième partie. *Dar al-Islam*. 2016, issue 10, pp. 38-46.

## Discursive analysis based on psychosocial mechanisms for examining terrorist propaganda

Schmid<sup>64</sup> posits the existence of three realms of reality: the real objective world, the symbolic world –mainly portrayed by the media– and the subjective world, which is a mental product of the individual. The media –and at this point social networks should be mentioned as platforms for dissemination and their users as creators of content– have a considerable influence on the interpretation of reality because the impressions they emit exceed those that a person perceives from his or her immediate environment. ‘Framing’ comes into play, whereby the interpretation of problems, their causes and solutions are determined by how they are formulated. Consequently, news coverage that, deliberately or not, favours the terrorist may contribute to his total or partial victory. Faced with this problem, a state may be tempted to apply censorship. This approach is feasible in authoritarian environments, where there is a great deal of control and few scruples – which is precisely why authoritarian regimes are less vulnerable to terrorism, as they have the ability to act at an early stage without concern for civil rights<sup>65</sup>. However, in addition to being unlawful, censorship in a democracy

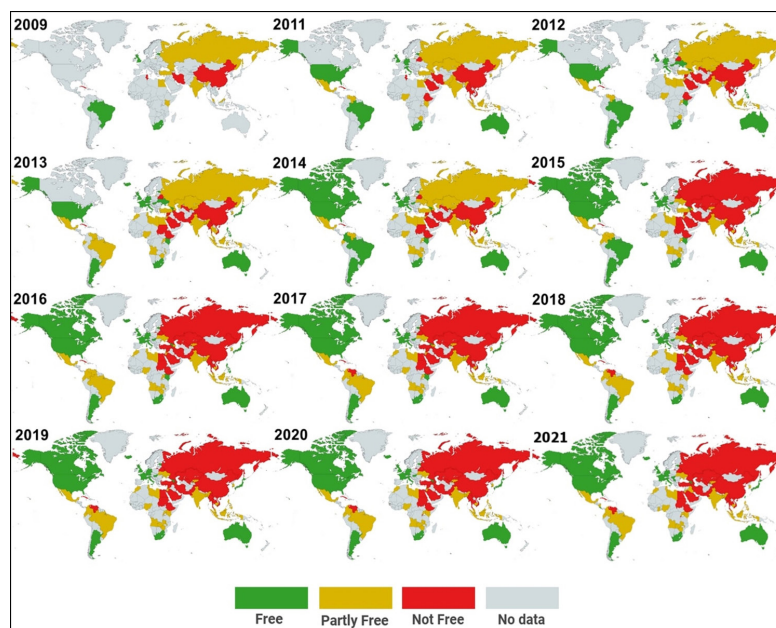


Image 11. Countries with a free, partly free and not free internet, according to Freedom House's Freedom on the Net reports. This categorisation is useful to see how some states choose to further control the network and thus the «infosphere». Doing so, in addition to calling into question the quality of democracy, is technically complex and can lead to contradictory results<sup>66</sup>

64 Schmid, A.P. (2004). Frameworks for conceptualising terrorism. *Terrorism and Political Violence* [online], vol. 16, issue 2, pp. 197-221. DOI 10.1080/09546550490483134. Available at: <https://www.tandfonline.com/action/journalInformation?journalCode=ftpv20>

65 De la Corte Ibáñez, L. (2014). Terrorism, levels of state coercion and types of government. In: De la Corte Ibáñez, L. *La lógica del terrorismo*. Alianza Editorial.

66 Source of Image 11: Prepared internally based on Freedom House's. *Freedom on the Net reports*, accessible from Freedom House, Freedom on the Net | Freedom House. *Freedom House* [online]. Available at: <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net>

is complicated for several reasons: the internet and the spread of smartphones make it virtually impossible to control information that travels in real time; attempts at cover-ups can have the opposite effect, fuelling interest and disclosure of what is being concealed; and censorship erodes the legitimacy of the state and elevates terrorists as «the voice of the voiceless».

Having ruled out censorship as inherently problematic, we propose an interpretative framework for terrorist discourse that helps to grasp its framing and avoid its dialectical traps. The technique has risks, since discursive analysis can degenerate into «summaries, redundant or unjustified comments, analysis of fragmentary and decontextualised quotations or a mere record of linguistic resources extracted from the corpus»<sup>67</sup>, but it also offers great possibilities, as explained below.

This technique is based on a five-category summary of certain psychosocial mechanisms present in terrorism that outline how ideas and actions are presented and justified. These categories –defensive violence, polarisation of violence, attribution of responsibility, self-attribution of responsibility and emotive content– are exemplified by drawing on the Bin Laden manifesto *Letter to America*, originally distributed in Arabic on the radical Islamist forum Al Qalah on 14 October 2002<sup>68</sup>. *The Observer* published it in English on 24 November 2002, which is the version used in this paper<sup>69</sup>. Its interest lies in the fact that it raises and answers two questions addressed to Americans: «Why do we fight and oppose you?» and «What do we call you to do and what do we want from you? In other words, it is a missive whose main function is to justify terrorism<sup>70</sup>. Regarding its structure, Lawrence<sup>71</sup> explains:

«The opinions are presented as detailed answers to specific questions, broken down into paragraphs and sub-sections to highlight the irrefutable logic of jihad [...] Two features distinguish the letter. The first is the succinct but wide-ranging summary of what Bin Laden sees as America's political malfeasance in the Muslim world: in

67 Sayago, S. (2013). Discourse analysis as a qualitative and quantitative research technique in the social sciences. *Moebio Tape* [online], issue 49, p. 3. Available at: <http://www.cintademoebio.uchile.cl/index.php/CDM/article/viewFile/30331/32134>

68 Lawrence, B. (2007). *Mensajes al mundo. Los manifiestos de Osama bin Laden*. Foca Ediciones y Distribuciones Generales S.L. P. 200. ISBN 978-84-95440-90-7.

69 Bin Laden, O. (2002). Full text: Bin Laden's 'letter to America'. *The Observer* [online]. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/nov/24/theobserver>.

70 In issue 15 of *Dabiq*, an ISIL-linked online magazine, published on 31 July 2016, there is an article with the same purpose, entitled «Why do we hate you and fight you?». It has similarities with Bin Laden's manifesto –both call for conversion to Islam, reproach the existence of legal systems not based on Shari'a and describe a sinful society that has fallen into the vices of alcohol, drugs and gambling– but also differences: *Letter to America* exposes a series of grievances that it believes are the result of US foreign policy and, as a result, adopts a mainly defensive position. However, the *Dabiq* text stresses that foreign policy is secondary to the hatred professed, with a predominantly offensive tone. For more information, see: Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You. *Dabiq*. 2016, issue 15, pp. 30–33.

71 Lawrence, B. *Op. cit.*, pp. 200-201.

Palestine, Somalia, Chechnya, Kashmir, Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and not least in Arab countries acting as volunteers. The second is a moral and cultural rejection of American society, which it sees as a cesspool of usury, depravity, drug addiction, gambling, prostitution and environmental destruction [...] This portrait of America follows a call for Americans to convert to Islam. However fantastic the prospect of such a conversion may be [...] the appeal has a practical function in the *umma*. Its purpose is to respond to Muslims who criticised 9/11, arguing that Al Qaeda had not offered Americans an opportunity to convert to Islam before attacking them [...] Another novel aspect is the extent to which it uses the anti-American arguments that are widely circulated in the West itself, in effect accusing the United States of failing to live up to its own rhetoric».

The categories are set out below, along with a description and a contextualised excerpt from *Letter to America*.

1. Defensive violence. It occurs when terrorism is presented as a self-protective reaction to the enemy offensive. The first thing the manifesto cites is verse 39 of Sura 22 (*Al-Hajj* or *Pilgrimage*), which accepts the lawfulness of a defensive contest: «Those (believers) who are attacked are granted permission to fight (against the unbelievers), because they have been wronged and Allah is able to give them (the believers) victory». Lawrence<sup>72</sup> comments on Bin Laden's texts:

«Everything he has written is set within the framework of a reaction against aggression, for which he has ample scriptural support. Islamic jurisprudence distinguishes between offensive warfare (*harb*), a campaign of conquest launched under official leadership against the land of the wicked, and defensive struggle (*jihad*), which all Muslims must wage as an individual obligation when the *umma* is under attack.

Defensive violence is not unique to jihadism, but when contextualised, one can see why Bin Laden uses this psychosocial mechanism: apart from portraying the *umma* as the victim of a grievance, emphasising a defensive position brings his discourse in line with Quranic jihad, as opposed to mere offence, which is more difficult to fit in doctrinally.

2. Polarisation of violence. It happens when violence is focused on a victim, whom the aroused masses perceive as a superhuman and monstrous evil<sup>73</sup>. In *Letter to America*, the US is described as «the worst civilisation human history has ever witnessed», dominated by usury, drugs and immorality. Moreover, it is accused of double standards: «The freedom and democracy to which you appeal is only for yourselves and the white race; as for the rest of the world, you impose your monstrous and destructive policies and governments on them».

72 Lawrence, B. *Op. cit.*, p. 20.

73 Schwager, R. (2002). Religión y violencia. *Proyección: teología y mundo actual* [online], issue 205, p. 159. Available at: <https://dialnet.unirioja.es/servlet/Articulo?codigo=253581>

In this regard, it is worth studying what freedom there was in Sudan and Afghanistan during the period when they hosted Bin Laden. By taking refuge in them, it is understood that he had at least cordial relations with the ruling powers and therefore did not consider them «monstrous and destructive». For this purpose, the scores assigned to the categories «Political Rights» and «Civil Liberties» in Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* reports are used. These scores range from 1 to 7. The further away from 1, the fewer rights and freedoms the country has.

Bin Laden moved to Sudan in 1991 under the guidance of Hasan al-Turabi, a leading Muslim scholar who had already invited him to move in 1989. During his stay he «built up a large and complex network of business and terrorist enterprises»<sup>74</sup> which put the country under heavy pressure. Eventually, regime changes took place and supporters of President Omar Hasan Ahmad al Bashir displaced Turabi's supporters<sup>75</sup>. Bin Laden finally left the African country in May 1996. From 1991 to 1996 Sudan scored the worst possible score –7 out of 7– on both political rights and civil liberties. On the other hand, during Bin Laden's time in Afghanistan (1996-2001), which coincides almost entirely with the Taliban's Islamic Emirate, the country scored the worst possible score –7 out of 7– on political rights and civil liberties.

Bin Laden's discourse is therefore incongruous: it polarises violence towards the US, accusing it of maintaining «monstrous and destructive governments», while he resided for years in two countries with serious problems of rights and freedoms. Although this inference is interpretable as an ad hominem, Walton<sup>76</sup> notes that occasionally ad hominem arguments are valid arguments, as this case appears to be, where objective data exposes an inconsistency between the terrorist argument and the circumstances of its author. It can be said that polarisation is a mechanism that is difficult to dismantle: it is a violent collective experience where aggression is diverted towards a single victim, who is held responsible for any crisis, and it is hoped that with his sacrifice, at last, there will be peace over the threatened community; it is a gregarious instrument, to such an extent that for René Girard «human societies are fundamentally held together by the mechanism of the enemy or by the mechanism of the scapegoat»<sup>77</sup>.

3. Attribution of responsibilities. It occurs when facts are imputed to actors with limited or no competence. *Letter to America* justifies the attacks on the Ame-

74 Comisión Nacional de Investigación (2004). II-S. *El informe: extracto del informe final de los atentados terroristas*. Ediciones Paidós. P. 79. ISBN 978-84-493-1688-3.

75 *Ibidem*, p. 84.

76 Walton, D.N. (1987). The ad Hominem argument as an informal fallacy. *Argumentation* [online], vol. 1, p. 317. ISSN 0920427X. DOI 10.1007/BF00136781. Available at: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/BF00136781>

77 Schwager, R. *Op. cit.*, p. 158.

rican people because, as a constitutional federal republic, they are responsible for everything the state does:

«It is the American people who pay the taxes that fund the planes that bomb us in Afghanistan, the tanks that pound and destroy our homes in Palestine, the armies that occupy our lands in the Persian Gulf and the fleets that ensure the blockade of Iraq. These tax dollars are given to Israel to continue attacking us and penetrating our lands. So the American people are the ones who fund the attacks against us, and they are the ones who oversee the spending through the candidates they elect [...] They cannot be innocent of all the crimes committed».

Yasir Qadhi<sup>78</sup>, theologian and Islamic scholar at the East Plano Islamic Center in Plano (Texas, US), dismantles this reasoning on the grounds that the American people as a whole are not foreign policy experts and it is therefore irrational to attribute responsibility to them<sup>79</sup>. According to a joint report by Gallup, the Council on Foreign Relations and the National Geographic Society<sup>80</sup> based on a survey of 2,486 adults aged 18 and older on the role of the US in the world, geography, foreign policy and demographics, «Americans exhibit considerable gaps in their knowledge of geography and international issues», with evidence indicating that «they are no more informed today than they were 30 years ago, despite increasing educational attainment».

4. Self-attribution of responsibilities. This happens when the terrorist speaks on behalf of others, setting himself up as the spokesperson «of the people», «of the umma», «of the repressed», etc. *Letter to America* uses the first person plural to symbolise a single voice of the entire community of Islamic believers: «Why do we fight and oppose you?», «you have attacked us and continue to attack us», «you have attacked us in Palestine»... Inquiring into the question, there are doctrinal differences within jihadism. Bin Laden, unlike ISIL, was more permissive about what is considered *umma*: according to the National Commission of Inquiry, he «seemed willing to include almost any corner of the Muslim world in the [Al Qaeda] confederation», to the extent that «the relationship between Al Qaeda and Iran demonstrated that divisions between Shia and Sunni did not necessarily pose an insurmountable barrier to cooperation in carrying out terrorist operations»<sup>81</sup>. In contrast, ISIL maintains

78 *Dabiq* issue 14, published on 13 April 2016, singles out several Western imams considered apostates («kufr») and calls for their assassination. Among them is Yasir Qadhi, accused of defending the US legal system to the detriment of Sharia. For more information, see: Kill the Imams of Kufr in the West. *Dabiq*, issue 14, pp. 8-17.

79 Should we listen to Anwar al-Awlaki? - Sh. Dr. Yasir Qadhi. *YouTube* [online]. 2014. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EyYb8GdFqn4>

80 GALLUP, National Geographic Society and Council on Foreign Relations (2019). U.S. Adults. Knowledge About the World. *Council on Foreign Relations* [online], pp. 43-47. Available at: [https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report\\_pdf/NatGeo\\_CFR\\_US\\_Knowledge.pdf](https://cdn.cfr.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/NatGeo_CFR_US_Knowledge.pdf)

81 Comisión Nacional de Investigación. *Op. cit.*, p. 83.

an uncompromising position towards the Shiites. Its precursor, al-Qaida in Iraq, led by Abu Musab al-Zarqawhiri, used a tactical brutality that worried Ayman al-Zawahiri that sectarian atrocities –including attacks during religious processions, on mosques and at Shia shrines– delegitimised them and undermined popular support, and he advised abandoning them: «The mujahedin movement must avoid any action that the masses do not understand or approve of»<sup>82</sup>. Therefore, when one or another jihadist speaks in the name of the umma, they may not be referring to the same set of people.

5. Emotional content. As Costalli and Ruggeri<sup>83</sup> note, insurgent organisations «tend to institutionalise events that can trigger individual emotional responses in order to build their own legitimacy as effective representatives of grievances». In his communiqués, Bin Laden often reminisces about the Soviet-Afghan war, where the USSR was unable to quell the mujahedin insurgency. In *Letter to America*, he says: «If you do not respond, your fate will be that of the Soviets who fled Afghanistan to face military defeat, political decay, ideological collapse and economic bankruptcy». Appealing to a «glorious» past is a source of attraction and morale, but it can be a trap for the terrorist: the war in Afghanistan, like the 1993 battle of Mogadishu, had certain characteristics that differ markedly from other scenarios. Bin Laden's eagerness to repeat these achievements may have led him to underestimate adversaries, such as the Persian Gulf Arab states, with very different particularities.

As can be seen, this discursive analysis is powerful in that it allows us to identify instruments of persuasion that are difficult to appreciate with the naked eye, although it must always be accompanied by a context. It is also flexible: it allows for more categories if they are applied with some precautions, e.g. avoiding redundancies.

## Conclusion

Technological modernity implies substantial and rapid changes in many areas: socio-political, economic, labour and security-related. The Internet, as an exponent of instantaneity, deserves constant monitoring. This analysis certifies that social networks have changed the way we communicate, mainly because the former consumer has gained the role of producer, with the advantages and disadvantages that this entails. Terrorism is no stranger to this scenario and takes advantage of digital platforms to spread its messages and gain followers and legitimacy, among other objectives. Tack-

82 Al Zawahiri, A. (2005). Letter from al-Zawahiri to al-Zarqawi. *Federation Of American Scientists* [online], p. 5. Available at: [https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter\\_in\\_english.pdf](https://fas.org/irp/news/2005/10/letter_in_english.pdf)

83 Costalli, S. and Ruggeri, A. (2017). Emotions, Ideologies, and Violent Political Mobilization. *PS: Political Science & Politics* [online], vol. 50, issue 4, p. 926. Available at: <https://www.cambridge.org/core/services/aop-cambridge-core/content/view/0BA3CAB2F8BoC63ACB764B5709AED13F/S1049096517000993a.pdf/introduction.pdf>

ling it requires joint action by a range of actors, including state authorities and the social networks themselves, accepting that there will occasionally be divergent views, for example, in judging whether a post should be removed. In addition, the debate on encryption and its possible limits has the elements to grow in the future, especially if its criminal use increases and the discussion moves into the public arena.

Nevertheless, it is possible to address digital terrorism by teaching how to interpret and combat its propaganda, since, regardless of the format in which it is presented, it follows psychosocial mechanisms –identified in this paper in five categories– that are noticeable if one is aware of them, although some of these mechanisms are powerful and need to be countered by involving society as a whole, as is the case with the polarisation of violence. At the very least, the proposed path should be explored, considering that terrorists are spreading their messages massively and globally and, moreover, there are multiple warnings of a turbulent and uncertain future that could strengthen hostile actors and (further) disorientate society. In this regard, it is worth remembering that although the intense terrorist wave that caused tens of thousands of deaths in the second decade of the 21st century has subsided, vigilance must not be lowered, as jihadism remains active in structurally weak regions that could become the territories of other ISIL.

In short, «electronic speed» is beneficial in many ways, but its handicaps must be understood and dealt with if it is not to lead to derailment due to speeding. As far as terrorism is concerned, the effect of its abundant propaganda needs to be minimised, with an emphasis on erasing and blocking it, as well as providing intellectual tools to confront it.

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