

# Europe in the age of sad narratives: Terrorism, media representations and fear in Italy and beyond

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The phenomenon of terrorism requires a transdisciplinary analysis related to fields such as international law, social science, political science, and psychology. Among these analyses is also that of media mechanisms that generate insecurity among the general public. Considering recent tragic events, the centrality of the media and information systems in moments of crisis and emergency is clear (Morcellini 2003, Chomsky 2011, Silei 2015).

Sixteen years after the attack on the Twin Towers, the most “spectacular” terrorist attack in the history of the West, precisely because it was carried out by Western society itself, we find ourselves faced with a situation of exasperation (Morcellini 2003; Chomsky 2011). From the Twin Towers event, up to the recent attacks in Europe, terror strategies seem ever more refined and subtle in the use of the dynamics and language of contemporary media. Terrorism itself starts from the basic idea that the maximum effect must be obtained with minimum effort, a goal easily achieved through the use of the media. In this way, terrorist violence is opposed to war as traditionally understood since conventional warfare requires huge resources, while obtaining fewer results (Morcellini 2003).

Over time, terrorists have understood the importance of using television, prime time and the need to reach an increasing number of individuals through the manipulation of media. Hence the perception of the terrorist as a showman or a super entertainer whose primary objective is to obtain a large audience that is both spectator and amplifier of his deeds (Bowyer Bell 1978; Jenkins 1980; Schlesinger 1994; Laqueur 2017).

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It is above all in newspapers and on television that Islamic terrorism has penetrated into our lives. From a research conducted on the most famous Italian and French newspapers after the attack in Paris in 2015, the paradox concerning the interest of citizens in being informed, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, of being protected by news media in consideration of the responsibilities of information professionals (Ugolini, Fanara 2017), emerged. Although not a new phenomenon, terrorism today uses the media, television and the Internet as its main battlefield, and, in doing so, globalized it by transforming executions and every attack into a bloody and spectacular horror series, punctuated by episodes that are repeated on a frequent and regular basis (Diamanti 2017).

The Senegalese educator and former UNESCO General Director Amadou-Mathar M'Bow affirms that “these are just some of the potential areas from which either the best or the worst can arise. The result will be positive only if we resist the temptation to enslave the mass media to narrow interests, to turn it into new instruments of power, justifying attacks on human dignity and exacerbating the already existing inequalities between and within nations” (Amadou-Mathar M'Bow 1982; 1980: p. 14). This power is in the hands of professionals who, whether individual journalists or broadcasters, have the duty of completeness, objectivity and impartiality every time they convey a message to the audience. The symbolic violence unleashed by the terror strategies threatens almost all those “platforms” of happiness and social and individual balance, implementing through propaganda and special effects, which are so dear to the Western consumer habits; an almost “pedagogical” action and transformation of the attitudes and behaviors of the public submitted to the media bombardment (Galtung 1968; Bourdieu, Passeron 1970; Gallino 2004; Boltanski 2000).

### **Fear and insecurity in Europe**

The European insecurity agenda in media confirms an alignment trend of the narrative on global challenges, particularly on the issues of terrorism and immigration. In 2017, in Italy, Spain, France, Germany, and the UK, global insecurity ranks at the top of news programs. Thus, in 2017 a convergence of the European media narrative on the same areas of global insecurity was confirmed (Fig. 1).

	All 5 channels	Italy	Germany	UK	France	Spain
Crime	36.4%	36.6%	18.2%	26.3%	17.2%	56.6%
Terrorism / new wars	16.2%	13.9%	27.3%	13.2%	19.0%	16.9%
Immigration	12.0%	13.9%	54.5%	10.5%	15.5%	2.4%
Health problems	11.7%	5.9%	0.0%	28.9%	22.4%	4.8%
Destruction of the environment	10.3%	23.8%	0.0%	0.0%	5.2%	3.6%
Mistrust in politics / corruption	7.2%	5.9%	0.0%	0.0%	6.9%	13.3%
Worsening of living conditions / loss of work / impoverishment	4.5%	0.0%	0.0%	13.2%	12.1%	1.2%
Road accidents	1.7%	0.0%	0.0%	7.9%	1.7%	1.2%
BASE: % ANXIOTIC NEWS ON THE TOTAL OF SERVICES	13.8%	3.9%	0.0%	18.0%	14.6%	11.6%

**Figure 1. Insecurity agenda in the main European public news programs<sup>2</sup>**

The sources of insecurity seem to have moved from our daily lives, to our ability to control our borders. And when tragic events that generate fear and anguish occur within our borders, absent prevention strategies feed our sense of insecurity. Faced with the multiplication of new emergencies and tensions, we feel besieged because we cannot give them a name or a face. In reference to the responsibilities of the media, in particular television and with it the professional skills of the information that operate within, a quotation from Hans George Gadamer summarizes the importance and weight of the daily media narratives characterized by high relative load of related social responsibilities quite accurately: “When you take a word from your mouth you must understand that you have not taken an instrument that you can throw aside if it does not work, but you are tied to a direction of thought that comes from afar and extends beyond you.”

On the European side, the map of issues that concerns European citizens is first highlighted in countries such as Germany, the UK and France, where citizens’ fears are more marked by the combination of immigration/terrorism. In the last year public opinion has moved more towards terrorism in Germany. Following the attack in Berlin in 2016, terrorism became a priority for 25% of the population (from 11% before the

2 Italy: RAIUNO; Spain: RTVELa1; UK: BBC ONE; France: FRANCE2; Germany: ARD1) (Prime Time Edition, 1st-21st January 2017, comparison, % overall anxiogenic news. Sources: Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza, Osservatorio di Pavia for Fondazione Unipolis, (2.120 news)

attack). In France as well terrorist apprehension remains widespread (20%), while in the UK it diminished (9%)<sup>3</sup>. Comparing 2016 and 2017, terrorism became a much more urgent emergency in countries that had suffered serious terrorist attacks in the period immediately preceding them, such as in Germany and in France (Fig. 2).

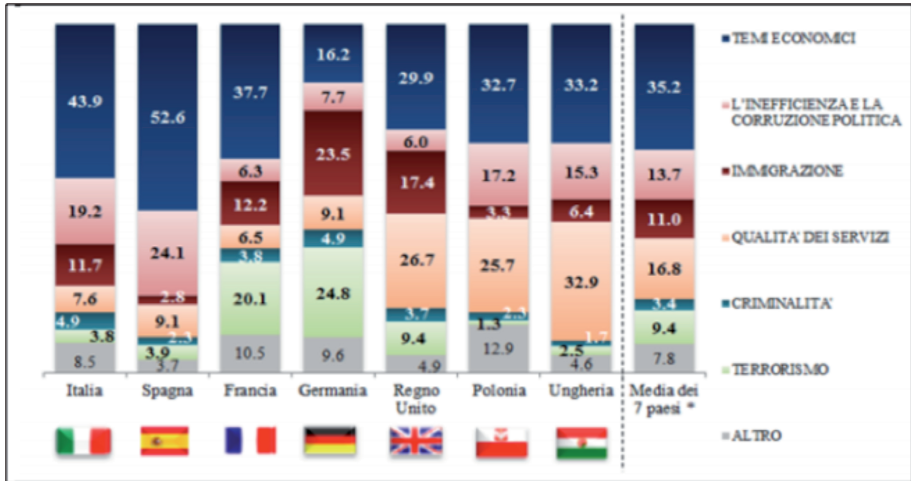


Figure 2. Priorities and emergencies according to citizens in Europe<sup>4</sup>

### The Italian Case

An analysis of the fears surveyed in the Italian context encourages a comparison with the issue of security as dealt with on television shows. In 2007, the depiction of anxiety-inducing events on Italian prime time newscasts were related to reporting on crime, deterioration in living conditions, environmental disasters, terrorist attacks, and health problems. Ten years later, the map of fears remains the same, but with a slightly different geography. There are two main areas of change: a decline in anxiety narratives and the appearance of a new area of insecurity. In ten years, potentially anxiety-inducing news reports fell by 8 points (from 28% to 20%): an average of 6 news items in 2007 and 4 in 2017. The first data recorded over the years show the predominance of crime in the media insecurity agenda: within news on crime, “crimes of passion” became serialized and criminal facts persevered, ten years later, at the top

3 It is noteworthy that, at the time of the survey, Great Britain had not yet suffered some of the most important attacks that occurred within its territory during 2017, such as that occurred in Manchester on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017 during the concert of Ariana Grande.

4 “Which are, in your opinion, the two most important problems that your country has to face at the moment?”, % values of the first choice. Source: Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza, Demos & Pi poll for Fondazione Unipolis, January 2017 (Number of cases: 7000).

of the insecurity agenda of Italian news coverage. However, in 2017, the space dedicated to anxiety-inducing crime stories drops significantly: 15% less compared to 2007. Another fact of continuity with the past is the representation of the threat of Islamic terrorism: the protagonists change, but the fears evoked remain the same. In 2007 it was Al Qaeda, the video messages of bin Laden and the killing of political leader Benazir Bhutto in Pakistan by Islamic terrorists, while in 2017 it was the attack in Istanbul, commemorations in memory of the attacks in Paris and Berlin, and the threat of Islamic extremists in Europe and in Italy. The degree of alarmism increases as a result of the proximity and risk of jihadist infiltration in Western societies (Fig. 3).

	TEN YEARS LATER	
	2007	2017
	6-26 October	1-21 January
<b>Crime</b>	60.10%	45.40%
<b>Terrorism / new wars</b>	4.40%	17.20%
<b>Immigration</b>	2.30%	16.70%
<b>Health problems</b>	6.50%	10.70%
<b>Destruction of the environment</b>	3.20%	6.90%
<b>Mistrust in politics / corruption</b>	–	2.30%
<b>Worsening of living conditions / loss of work / impoverishment</b>	<b>20.60%</b>	0.80%
<b>Road accidents</b>	2.90%	–
<b>BASE: % ANXIogenic NEWS ON THE TOTAL OF SERVICES</b>	28.30%	20.00%

**Figure 3. Ten years later the news insecurity agenda in Italy<sup>5</sup>**

### The research

The debate on old and new terrorism has evolved in conjunction with the adaptation to the media logic. The last terrorist events are recalling the theory of the clash of civilizations (Huntington, 2000) according to which the pre-existing world order is reshaping a de-westernization trend. In fact, terrorism becomes a pretext to accentuate the conflict between different religions, especially between those religions considered as elements of western culture in the collective imaginary and Islam, despite both groups of belief systems sharing several common traditions.

5 TG1, TG2, TG3, TG4, TG5, STUDIO APERTO. First Evening Edition, 2007-2017 comparison, % overall anxiogenic news. Source: Osservatorio Europeo sulla Sicurezza, Osservatorio di Pavia for Fondazione Unipolis, (base on 5804 news).

In this context, we are witnesses to the clash between European and Islamic values. Religious fundamentalism refers to an ideological perspective found in most major religions and is currently associated with variant forms of extremism and religiously motivated acts of violence, including terrorism. This exacerbates the difficulties in identifying narrative strategies capable of contributing to an understanding of the complexity of these phenomena, which affect media representation and risk perception. In light of the above, our goal is to describe the different representations of terrorism-Islam starting from the analysis of two 2017 terrorist attacks: the first in Manchester and the second in Barcelona.

The Manchester attack occurred on 22 May at the Manchester Arena at the end of pop singer Ariana Grande's concert. A 22-year-old Libyan Terrorist, Salman Abedi, was indicated as the suicide bomber who carried it out. With 23 deaths and 250 injured, this was the worst attack in the United Kingdom since the 2005 attack in London. It was also significant with regard to the age of the victims who, as soft targets, were all children. The attack in Barcelona occurred on 17 August in the pedestrian area of the Rambla, the main street of Barcelona, by a truck running into pedestrians. The driver, identified as Younes Abouyaaqoub, escaped and was tracked down and killed on 21 August. This attack involved three Catalan cities (besides Barcelona, including Cambrils and Alcanar), in which 16 people died and a further 120 were wounded. This attack also stands out because victims were of 34 different nationalities. In both cases terrorism targeted places of entertainment and social life, which are emblematic of a Western lifestyle, as was the case of previous attacks in Istanbul, Berlin, Nice, etc.

The corpus we analyzed consists of Italian current affairs TV programs broadcast on major mainstream networks (for the public service broadcasting RaiUno, RaiDue, RaiTre<sup>6</sup> and for the commercial networks Canale 5, Rete4, Italia Uno<sup>7</sup>), during the week after the attacks.

The main questions we sought to answer:

1. What are the ethical values used in the TV shows in relation to the issue of terrorism?
2. What are the main narratives developing within the journalistic services of the two different types of media companies?
3. How are the discourses around European and Islamic values characterized?

6 Rai Uno, Rai Due and Rai Tre are the mainstream public service channels, born in 1954, 1961 and, respectively, 1979. Currently, like all European mainstream channels, these networks also register a progressive aging of viewers. The age range 25-34 is less attracted by Rai channels (Auditel).

7 Canale 5 involves a more generalist audience (families) while Italia1 is addressed to a more youthful target and Rete 4 is historically addressed to an older audience (Auditel).

The analysis was based on the prevalence of the following general variables: program identification data; TV presenting; guests, structure, themes and contents; additional information on the topics; attitude to the themes; language; keyword; movie and studio features; comments on the installation, mixing and directing techniques; concluding remarks. These variables were systematically identified through the use of a form covering them.

## Results

Following the analysis of the schedules of the aforementioned networks, it was possible to select the current affairs programs that featured the attacks in Manchester and Barcelona. Concerning Rai – the Italian Public Service Broadcaster (PSB) *UnoMattina* / Morning on One, *La vita in diretta* / Live Life (RaiUno) and *Agorà* (RaiTre<sup>8</sup>) and *Porta a Porta* / Door to Door (RaiUno<sup>9</sup>) the analysis in relation to the Manchester attack was taken into consideration as a corpus. For the privately-owned television broadcaster *Mediaset*, we focused on *Pomeriggio Cinque* / Afternoon Five<sup>10</sup>, *Matrix* (Canale 5) and *Dalla vostra Parte* / At your side (Rete 4<sup>11</sup>). In relation to the Barcelona attack, the only programs that could be taken into consideration were those offered by the PSB, that is to say *Uno Mattina estate* and *La vita in diretta estate* (RaiUno). All these programs have been taken into consideration for the high ratings and for their relevance in the public debate. The difference in the number of programs taken into account is due to the summer break, especially for *Mediaset*.

Focusing on content, the description of events is characterized by a framework consisting of three main elements: first of all, the description of the attack and its modalities; second, the identikit of victims and attacker; third, a switch from hard to soft news through focus on the identity and lives of the victims, the attacker, and people who have a more or less intimate relationships with the protagonists of the event.

The analysis of the headlines used in the programs to contextualize the two events show a strong use of terms such as “massacre”, “terror”, “teenage massacre” and “attack” that stoke a feeling of insecurity, anxiety and fear, as well as producing alarmist tones. This is true both for the PBS and *Mediaset* alike, who show no real differences in this regard. (Fig. 4)

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8 Day time Italian current affairs programs.

9 Prime-time Italian current affairs program.

10 Day time Italian current affairs programs.

11 Prime-time Italian current affairs program.

Rai	Mediaset
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Terrorism: massacre at Manchester Concert (Uno Mattina)</li> <li>• Manchester the massacre of the innocent (Uno Mattina)</li> <li>• 22.33, terror in Manchester (La vita in diretta)</li> <li>• The Teenage Massacre (La vita in diretta)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Manchester: Chronology of the Attack (Pomeriggio 5)</li> <li>• The massacre at the concert (Pomeriggio 5)</li> <li>• The massacre of kids (Dalla vostra parte)</li> </ul>

**Figure 4. Main words used in the headlines of the Italian current affairs programs<sup>12</sup>**

Each program tends to maintain its own narrative style, also in relation to the content that follow and/or precede the news of the attack (commemoration at Capaci, Trump’s visit to Rome, meeting of G7 leaders, etc.). However, an element echoing fear and insecurity directed towards the viewer was also identified. This is manifest in the most frequently used terms in the shows (Fig. 5).



**Figure 5. The most used words in the Italian current affairs programs<sup>13</sup>**

Continuing with the analysis, we notice that there are some peculiar elements that characterize the storytelling of some of the programs. In particular, in *Dalla Vostra Parte*, the distinction between “us” and “them” is stressed, focusing on the clash of civilizations (meant as “race” and/or “religion”) and the topic of terrorism is often linked to the matters, challenges and dangers allegedly presented by immigration.

<sup>12</sup> Source: own elaboration.

<sup>13</sup> Source: own elaboration.



In the case of Manchester, the traditional elements used for the framing of the terrorist attacks (alarm/security, clash of civilizations, immigration, lack of integration) are linked to the peculiarity of the targets of the attack.

Above all, the analysis highlights how the PBS is more focused on returning the informational/explanatory side of the events, while *Mediaset* seems to be more sensationalistic as already suggested in previous studies and research on immigration and crime news on TV (*Carta di Roma* Observatory 2017; Gavrila 2019).

## **Conclusions**

What has been said so far allows us to advance some proposals to work on the relationship between media and communication; the need for a transdisciplinary dialogue in relation to terrorism on a global level. The proposed solutions focus on four main points: Communication and its industrial and propagandistic power, also considering its ability to foster symbolic violence (Galtung 1968; Bourdieu, Passeron 1970; Gallino 2004; Boltanski 2000). There is the need to manage the effects of media storytelling on such complex topics in order to counteract the logic of emergency and of sensationalism at any cost.

Given that politics and its (national and supranational) institutions have strategic functions, it is necessary to develop a transnational training project for law enforcement personnel and communication operators involving the network of law enforcement Schools, international journalistic agencies, and European universities. The need is to reinterpret international geopolitics in view of understanding such recent trends in expansive and borderless imperialistic politics, be they economic, cultural, or religious, in order to take care of the weakest and most exposed members of the community, such as children, elderly, the less informed and more vulnerable, as both subjects and audiences of communication (Gavrila 2017).

Terrorism has also produced a “communicative hypertension” that rapidly transforms into the social diffusion of uncertainty. Thus, an education for security and a strategic role in this regard is necessary with regard to communication professionals for the management of information necessary to prevent the gradual worsening of post-event trauma both at national and transnational levels. With this in mind law enforcement agencies at the transnational level are also to be considered as points of reference for specific actions in order to ensure a coherent response (Gavrila 2017). All this must be coupled with activities linked to institutional comprehension, interpretation, and elaboration of the most appropriate strategies for dealing with the various crises, including communicative ones. In order to protect society itself, the media needs to be well

aware of the effects of their reporting on public opinion in respect to both European and Islamic values (Ugolini, Fanara 2017).

Risk is felt even more at times such as the present with a Europe overburdened by extremism, inadequate bureaucracies for the management of emergencies and complexity, call for sudden responses and far-sighted common policies. Institutions no longer seem adequate to meet public expectations and only the intrinsic optimism of the Gramscian definition of crisis allows us to catch a glimpse of new hopes and prospects. “The crisis is the moment when the old world order dies and a new world must be conquered, against resistance and contradictions” (Gramsci 1930).

In contemporary society, integration is systematically eroded and questioned by individualism and national interests. This process has less clear rules and appears as the cultural outcome of the process of estrangement that is often nourished by the representations provided by the entire communication system, and by the mainstream media in particular. This applies to individuals and extends to the life of communities, nations, and continents. “Individualization is, at the same time, the cause and effect of autonomy, freedom and personal responsibility, but has as its reverse, the degradation of older solidarities, the atomization of people, self-centeredness and, basically, what could be defined as Ego metastasis” (Morin 2005: 43). By extending Morin’s metaphor for the last difficult years of the European Community, we have hope that the nationalist and divisionist metastases are curable.

However, the complexity of the European context and the cracking up of institutions makes it more difficult to imagine a recipe for exiting the crisis. The solutions are hard to find without focusing on the continuous search for strategies aimed at building a new Europe and taking into account the monitoring of real processes, research data, critical observation of reality, and socially shared storytelling at national and international level.

Traditional media and, above all, digital environments become strategic allies, real experiential spaces, which allow experimenting with communicative strategies and alternative models of a functioning of society, similar in some ways to the ideal of traditional communities, based on lived experience, trust and the sense of belonging.

Addressing certain issues with the appropriate language and avoiding the tendency to give them excessive qualitative and quantitative relevance and to colonize the palimpsests, leads to avoiding more generated fear, more social disadvantage, especially among the most vulnerable segments of the population, such as the elderly and children / adolescents (Kruglanski *et al.* 2014).

This is a choice of politics of communication and of cultural politics usefully oriented to a different type of empowerment of citizenship, which is without a doubt interesting to follow also in Italy, in order to contain the excesses of catastrophism and negative communication, which tend to deprive people of a clear view of the future. The relationship between communication and crisis/emergency has indeed been so central to the national and international debate for decades, that we may talk about traumatic or miraculous effects of communication phenomena (Perniola, 2009).

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