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This paper examines the phenomenon of organizing global terrorism. Based on the emerging perspective to understand communication as constitutive of organization (CCO), we reconceptualize terrorist organizations as essentially consisting of communicative events. At this, CCO allows for studying the emergence, stabilization, and destabilization of terrorist organizing.
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Communication as Constitutive of Terrorist Organizations

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COMMUNICATION AS CONSTITUTIVE OF TERRORIST ORGANIZATIONS

Abstract

This paper deals with the question how today’s globalized forms of terrorism can be understood in their organizational dimension. Starting from the estimation that existing concepts (e.g., hierarchy, network, or social movement) are limited in comprehending these new forms of terrorist organizing, we propose an alternative perspective on organizations as being more adequate: the communication-as-constitutive of organizations perspective (CCO; Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Based on the CCO perspective, terrorist organizations can be conceptualized as essentially consisting of communicative events which necessitate to become interconnected over time. Keeping in mind this rather ephemeral notion of organizations, CCO points our attention to the constitutive conditions which allow for the emergence and stabilization of terrorist organizing. We finally derive suggestions on how to destabilize the continuous reproduction of terrorist organizing practices.

Keywords

Terrorism; organization theory; organizational communication; communication-as-constitutive of organizations (CCO)
INTRODUCTION

The recent failed bombing attempt of a U.S. airliner by Nigerian terrorist Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab has painfully reminded the world that the global phenomenon of terrorism is not banned and terrorists’ work practice are continuously evolving. The globalized terrorism of today’s time, especially in its version driven by islamistic-fundamentalist, i.e. jihadist ideologies, is characterized by an alarming effectiveness in both spreading fear and in attracting new followers (Greenberg, 2006). Terrorist organizing, however, takes place under extreme conditions: Terrorist groups have to operate under permanent persecution and, therefore, require adapting to a clandestine form while coping with heavy restrictions to communication (Stohl & Stohl, 2008). From an organization theory perspective, we still do not fully understand the phenomenon of terrorist organizing: How do terrorist groups, despite these opposing conditions, nevertheless sustain their existence and manage to coordinate their actions on a global scale?

In this paper, we aim to contribute to current debates on terrorist organizing (Sageman, 2008; Kenney, 2007). We argue that existing concepts in the literature like hierarchies or networks are limited in taking the loose and fluid character of terrorist organizing into account. Instead, we propose to draw on the emerging theoretical perspective which defines communication as the constitutive element of organizations (abbreviated as CCO; Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). The authors of this perspective put forth the idea that organizations essentially consist of interconnected events of communication. By drawing on this literature, we propose a new definition of terrorist organizations. Consequently, CCO enables us to describe terrorist acts as communicative events which gain their organizational character by referring to each other on the level of communication. The CCO perspective furthermore points our attention to the importance of communication media (e.g., mass media or
the internet) for the global reproduction and continuation of terrorist organizing. At this, our paper enriches the classical debate on the symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media (e.g., Brosius & Weimann, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994) by the organizational dimension.

The paper is organized as follows: First, we evaluate the heuristic value of existing concepts in the literature (i.e., hierarchy, network, social movement) and show their limitations in comprehending today’s phenomenon of global terrorist organizing. Second, we introduce the emerging CCO perspective as a potential candidate for enriching the debate on terrorist organizing. Third, we apply the CCO perspective by re-describing terrorist organizing as a communication phenomenon. In this context, we emphasize the particular role mass media and the internet play for the reproduction of terrorist organizing practices. Finally, we conclude with an outlook to potential countermeasures against terrorism which can be derived from the CCO perspective.

THE ORGANIZATIONAL DIMENSION OF TERRORISM:
HIERARCHY, NETWORK, OR SOCIAL MOVEMENT?

Generally, terrorism can broadly be defined as violent acts committed by a private (i.e., non-governmental and non-military) individual or group in the aim to spread fear and, by means of this, to achieve certain political goals. In the following, whenever we use the term terrorism or terrorist organizing, we particularly refer to today’s global forms of terrorististic practices. The most striking example of these new forms of terrorism on a global scale are such terrorist acts which draw on the legitimizing idea of jihad, i.e., the idea to promote a fundamentalist interpretation of Islam by engaging in a fight against non-believers (Sageman, 2008). Therefore, most of our considerations may not apply to more local forms of terrorism (e.g., the IRA in
Northern Ireland or ETA in the Basque country). Keeping in mind Western governments’ limited capabilities to curtail terrorist organizing of the jihadist form, organization theory has equally struggled thus far in conceptualizing these new organizational forms of terrorism. Throughout the literature, there are mainly three concepts discussed for comprehending the organizational dimension of terrorism: hierarchy, network, and social movement. In the remainder of this section, we will discuss each one of these concepts with regards to their heuristic value in comprehending the organizational dimension of terrorism.

In her analysis of the organizational dimension of terrorism Mayntz (2004) argues that terrorist organizations seem to combine features from both hierarchical and network types of organizations: On the one hand, they are characterized by clearly defined leadership, functional integration, and vertical communication – all typical features for hierarchical organizations. On the other hand, they are characterized by a considerable degree of autonomy in planning, quick and flexible reactions to situational exigencies and relatively open and fluid boundaries – all typical network features. This particularly holds true for the terrorist organization labeled as al Qaeda: “In the literature, discussions of Al Qaida [sic] and the new ‘networks of terror’ tend to merge into each other. Descriptions of Al Qaida are characteristically vague with respect to the organization-or-network question” (Mayntz, 2004: 10). Therefore, given the “hybrid character of terrorist organizations” (Mayntz, 2004: 11), Mayntz raises the question if we indeed have to deal with a type sui generis, oscillating between hierarchical organization and network.

Other authors, in contrast, reject any attempts to describe terrorism as hierarchical organizations or networks (e.g., Hoffman, 2004; Jackson, 2006; Corman & Schiegelbein, 2006; Sageman, 2008). They criticize accounts which try to grasp terrorism by help of the network concept (e.g., Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 2002; Krebs, 2002; Carley, 2006) for even being too rei-
fied – given that jihadist terrorist groups appear to operate disconnectedly to a large extent (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006). A classical notion of networks implies that all members of the network are connected somehow, at least indirectly or remotely.

As the jihadist bombings from Madrid (in 2003) or London (in 2005) have shown, however, there has not even been an indirect or remote connection (Beck, 2008: 1574). The groups which had committed the attacks were instead operating autonomously: “There isn't the slightest bit of evidence of any relationship [of the Madrid bombers] with al-Qaeda. We've been looking at it closely for years and we've been briefed by everybody under the sun […] and nothing connects them.” (Scott Atran; cited by Hamilos & Tran, 2007). Corman and Schiefelbein, therefore, conclude: “Today [al Qaeda] is more of an ideal or social movement that is replicated by relatively disconnected groups (as in the case of the Madrid and London bombers) than a network of cells controlled by a ‘mother ship’” (Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006: 4).

The suggestion to grasp global jihadist terrorism as a social movement has found significant resonance in the recent literature (e.g. Snow & Byrd, 2007; Beck, 2008). Based on Benford and Snow’s notion of social movements (Benford & Snow, 2000), Beck stresses that “rather than having a formal organizational structure, transnational movements […] are linked by collective passion for an issue” (Beck, 2008: 1673). This conception of terrorism is also in line with Sageman’s notion of the “leaderless jihad” (Sageman, 2008) in which he describes the global jihadist movement as a disconnected network of largely self-organized groups. Hoffman goes even further when he states that al Qaeda today “has become more an idea or a concept than an organization; an amorphous movement tenuously held together by a loosely coupled transnational constituency rather than a monolithic, international terrorist organization” (Hoffman, 2004: 551f.).
However, from an organization theory perspective, the social movement lens on terrorism remains unsatisfying. Although the authors’ arguments are convincing that the social movement concept may better reflect the loose and disconnected character of global jihadist terrorism, it fails to acknowledge that at least we have to deal here with instances of organizing. Even authors who themselves apply a social movement lens to terrorism emphasize the need for an organizational perspective on terrorism: “[T]o understand suicide bombing, as well as other aspects of the course and character of Islamic terrorist movements, one has to investigate, among other things, the processes of frame articulation and elaboration as organizationally embedded activities” (Snow & Byrd, 2007: 13; own emphasis added).

Taken together, the existing concepts in the literature can be evaluated as being limited in comprehending the organizational dimension of terrorism. Concepts of hierarchy fail to take the flexible and fluid character of terrorist organizing into account. Network concepts, in contrast, are better suitable to account for the dynamic character of terrorist organizing. However, the network term still implies that there is an actual network of individuals who are at least remotely or indirectly connected. For some terrorist acts of the past years, this evidently was not the case (as shown by the examples of the Madrid and London bombings). Moreover, both terms hierarchy and network assume a fixed membership base so that an individual is either a member of the organization or not. Current terrorism organizing practices instead seem to draw on a rather latent membership base. This is where the social movement concept may well fit in: With this concept, terrorist organizing can be described as both flexible and fluid and as characterized by a latent membership base. However, the terrorist movement seems to lack some of the most common characteristics of social movements, the mobilization of the masses. Moreover, the social movement concept is suitable to account for large social collectives but lacks details regarding the organizational aspects of terrorism.
Table 1 summarizes the main implications of the three concepts hierarchy, network, and social movement when used for comprehending terrorist organizing. Given the deficits in their heuristic value, we suggest an alternative theory perspective which centers around the communicative construction of organizations and which allows us to comprehend the loose character of terrorist organizing without fully rejecting the idea that we have to deal here with some form of organization, even if it is an extreme type.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: COMMUNICATION AS CONSTITUTIVE OF ORGANIZATIONS (CCO)

In order to understand today’s global terrorism as an organizational phenomenon, we propose to go beyond the network concept and instead draw on a cross-disciplinary theoretical perspective at the intersection of communication studies and organization theory which defines communication as the constitutive element of organizations (for recent overviews, see Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren, 2009, or Putnam and Nicotera, 2009). According to this perspective, organizations are constituted by acts of communication while, conversely, acts of communication tend to promote the emergence of organizational structures (Taylor & van Every, 2000). As Castor points out, “organizational communication scholars […] are becoming increasingly interested in the communication as constitutive of organizations (CCO) perspective that views organizations as socially constructed through communication” (Castor, 2005: 480). The CCO approach attempts a radical shift in perspective: it rejects the notion that organiza-
tions are constituted by their members (e.g., Lee & Lawrence, 1985: 52). Instead, it adopts a somewhat counter-intuitive and abstract notion of organizations as being constituted by ephemeral acts of communication: “An organization is not a physical structure – a collection of people (or computers), joined by material channels of communication, but a construction made out of conversation” (Taylor, 1993: 22).

The CCO perspective roots in the field of organizational communication, a sub-field of communication studies. Scholarly descriptions of organizational communication as a field commonly draw on three root metaphors of the communication-organization relationship: containment, production, or equivalency (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996). The containment metaphor locates communication as occurring within the boundaries of an organization, which effectively acts as a container (Putnam, Phillips, & Chapman, 1996, 375). In turn, the production metaphor suggests that the organization produces communication in the course of action. The isomorphism metaphor, finally, is most radical in nature as it sets organization and communication on a par: organization is communication (Taylor, 1995). Among the various strands of the CCO perspective as outlined by Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren (2009), it is the work of the Montréal School of organizational communication (e.g., Taylor & van Every, 2000; Cooren, Taylor & van Every, 2006) which leans most towards the isomorphic assumption of the organization-communication equivalency. Accordingly, Taylor defines organizations as nothing less and nothing more than “an interlocking network of communication processes” (Taylor, 2003: 12).

In this paper, we will additionally draw on a second tradition of isomorphic CCO theorizing (not present in the article by Ashcraft, Kuhn, and Cooren, 2009): As Blaschke, Schoeneborn and Seidl (2009) point out in a recent paper, the Montréal School’s approach to organizations shows major similarities to the theory of social systems, as developed by Niklas
Luhmann (1995; 2000) and followers (Bakken & Hernes, 2003; Seidl & Becker, 2006). Just like the Montréal School, Luhmann (2000) defines organizations essentially as consisting of communications. Organizations then are able to stabilize themselves over time by a continuous production and reproduction of communicative acts.

Generally, we can summarize two main shared assumptions of the CCO perspective across the various schools:

First, CCO undertakes a radical shift in perspective by defining communication as the basic element of organizations. This turns our common understanding of organizations inside out: According to CCO, the organization consists of communicative events, rather than of organizational members. In line with this view, it appears to be appropriate to transcend the reified notion of organization as a stable entity and to use the more procedural term of organizing instead (cf. Weick, 1979), which highlights the organization’s necessity to become established and re-established again over time by means of communication.

Second, the CCO perspective underlines the ephemeral and processual character of organizations by defining them as fluid at their core, that is, as an ongoing production of communicative events. This poses the question of how organizations are able to link one event to the next and in this manner to scale up from local interaction to organization (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009). Their perpetuation is seen here as something improbable and critical. Therefore, CCO focuses on the constitutive conditions which enable the organization to stabilize itself over time despite the ephemeral character of communications (McPhee & Zaug, 2000).

In sum, the CCO perspective offers an alternative view to organizations, a processual perspective which reveals the communicational side of organizing. In particular, this view gives scope for an enhanced understanding where conventional notions of organizations fail – for example, in understanding loose forms of organizing such as virtual organizations. Fur-
thermore, the perspective allows for grasping organizations which do not have a fixed body of members. According to CCO, whenever an individual gets involved in a particular type of organizational communication or is acting with reference to an organization, he or she contributes to the social-communicative construction of this organization as a collective actor (Coo- ren, 2006). In consequence, according to this view, no clear-cut distinction between an inside and an outside of the organization can be made. Moreover, the CCO perspective places media and genres of communication right at the center of the organization and reveals how changes in the information and communication media affect the organization as a whole. Framed like this, the CCO appears to be particularly suitable in taking account for the loose, fluid and event disconnected character of terrorist organizing.

APPLYING CCO TO TERRORIST ORGANIZING:
EMERGENCE, STABILIZATION, AND DESTABILIZATION

The Emergence of Terrorist Organizing out of Communication

The CCO perspective can now be readily applied to the phenomenon of terrorism. In the literature on terrorism, there is a long reaching tradition to define terrorist attacks as acts of communication (e.g., Dowling, 1986; Stohl, 1988; Juergensmeyer, 2000; Japp, 2003). As Stohl emphasizes, terrorism needs to be seen “as a process of political communication not simply a destructive or ‘simple’ act of violence” (Stohl, 1988: 4). Dowling confirms: “Too small or weak to obtain a military victory, terrorists are forced to use violence rhetorically” (Dowling, 1986: 13). With the term “performance violence”, Juergensmeyer (2000) suggests to grasp terrorist events as performative speech acts (cf. Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969). Performative speech acts differ from constative speech acts in that the action a sentence describes is
performed by the sentence itself. In consequence, similar to promises or insults, acts of terrorist violence create the state of affairs they relate to by being communicated.

If acts of terrorism are defined as representing communicative events, the question arises how these ephemeral acts of communication are turned into something more stable, an organizational structure which both ensures and facilitates future communicative acts? From the idea that organizations consist of processes of communication it can be derived that the organization's existence will depend on its ability to connect and re-connect communicative events (what it exists of) over time. Organizations most typically ensure this by increasing the likelihood that individuals commit to a particular discourse by means of a fixed membership (by distinguishing between an inside and outside of the organization; Luhmann, 2000: 390).

Luhmann (1981) generally emphasizes the improbability of the perpetuation of communication. However, among all organizations, the continuous existence of terrorist organizations appears to be particularly unlikely given that they have to operate under extreme circumstances and heavy restrictions to communication (Stohl & Stohl, 2008). Seen from the CCO perspective, the terrorist act itself, especially if it adapts to the form of suicidal attacks, can be defined as an act of “ultimate communication” (Japp, 2003: 72). It destroys the involved persons in the very moment of being executed. Or, even in its non-suicidal form, the likelihood that the same person can commit follow-up terrorist acts is at least significantly diminished by measurements of persecution or imprisonment. In other words, terrorist communication requires “a steady influx of participants who are willing to die for a cause” (Beck, 2008: 1568).

Nevertheless, terrorist organizations obviously are able to overcome these extreme challenges by attracting new followers who commit to these (ultimate) acts. Apparently, they rely on a different form of membership than conventional organizations do: They are able to
draw on a latent pool of potential organizational members which do not become actual organizational members until they commit to a communicative act of terrorism. The terrorist act itself, being an instance of communication, may then serve as a role model for future acts of a similar kind. This “contagious character” of terrorist violence (Holden, 1986) draws on the fact that violence is understood trans-culturally in its immediacy and physicality by “the power of example” (McCormick, 2003: 479; cf. Tarde, 1912).

Taken together, given that organizations need to attract typically the same human agents contributing to the continuation of communicative processes, the global jihadist terrorism needs to be considered as a particularly improbable organization. How is it then possible that the terrorist act as a communicative phenomenon and terrorist organizations as communicative entities are able to transcend their fundamental inherent improbability? This points us to taking a closer look on the constitutive and stabilizing factors which enable terrorist organizations to nevertheless persist over time. We will elaborate on this question in a next step of the analysis.

**The Stabilization of Terrorist Organizing Over Time**

The CCO perspective puts into question how organizations, if defined as consisting of something as ephemeral as communication, are able to stabilize themselves over time. With regards to this question, authors in the tradition of the Montréal School emphasize the importance of *non-human agency* for the emergence of organization out of communication, i.e., the capability of non-living objects of all kinds, e.g., texts or other artifacts, to act and to make a difference (Cooren, 2004; 2006; cf. Orlikowski, 2007). Texts are seen here as “a conceptual scaffolding made up of words, phrases, turns of speech, metaphors, anecdotes, all of which are there because of the distillation, stored in language in the memory of participants, of their
personal and collective history of previous interactions” (Taylor, 1999: 26). With this definition, the authors of the Montréal School refer to the “staying capacity” of texts (résistance; Derrida, 1988) or their “distanciation” (Ricoeur, 1981), the capability to transcend space and time. While circumstantial factors may vary, texts remain impressively robust over time by becoming detached from their authors’ intentions and the context of their creation. Accordingly, if organizations are defined as ephemeral communicative entities, texts come to play a crucial role for their stabilization.

Transferred to the special case of terrorist organizations, the emphasis on texts as a constitutive element of organizations reminds us of the extensive literature which deals with mass media reports as a precondition for sustaining the existence of terrorism. Dowling (1986) points out that mass media reports on terrorism play a double constitutive function for terrorist organizations as they both address “outsiders” (the wider public they aim to terrify) and “insiders” (sympathizers they want to seduce by a rebellious role model). The effects on “outsiders” are well explored in the notion of a symbiotic relationship between terrorism and the media (e.g., Brosius & Weimann, 1991; Weimann & Winn, 1994; Corman, Trethewey & Goodall, 2007). Without the coverage by mass media, it is argued here, terrorists would lack the platform to achieve their main targets: “Terrorism without its horrified witnesses would be as pointless as a play without an audience” (Juergensmeyer, 2000: 139). Or, as DeLillo puts it, terrorism is “the language of being noticed” (DeLillo, 1991: 157).

However, the effects on “insiders” are largely under-examined, particularly in their organizational dimension (cf. Mayntz, 2004). We aim to fill in this void by proposing that media reports on terrorist acts may affect sympathizers in a twofold way and, with this, help to stabilize terrorism organizationally. We basically distinguish here between the stabilization
of the organization as a communicative entity and the stabilization of the communicative practices which constitute the organization:

**1) Stabilization of the terrorist organization as communicative entity:** Media reports contribute to the *construction of terrorist organizations as a collective actor*. In the coverage of recent terrorist attacks, the media tend to ascribe every attack committed by jihadist activists to al Qaeda as the one and only and all encompassing terrorist organization (Snow & Byrd, 2007: 119). Consistently throughout the scholarly literature (e.g., Hoffman, 2004; Stohl & Stohl, 2007), in contrast, the global jihadist movement is described as involving a broad and heterogeneous variety of terrorist groups the recurrent instead of a monolithic body al Qaeda. Independent from a direct correspondence with social reality, the media’s recurrent and coherent references to the al Qaeda label facilitates the social construction of its organizational identity. This, in turn, appears to result in self-reinforcing dynamics so that it becomes easier for follow-up attacks to explicitly refer to al Qaeda as a collective actor (cf. Stohl & Stohl, 2008) and, with this, to re-stabilize its existence repetitively.

This argumentation can be further explicated by help of an example provided by Taylor and Cooren:

> When Columbus proclaimed Cuba to be Spanish territory (‘In the name of the King of Spain’), it was Columbus who was the actor but the actant was Spain, and Columbus was acting as an agent for a principal, the Crown […]. This is how the many voices of a collectivity become, institutionally, the *one* voice of an organization […]. As soon as one acts for another, an organizational link is on its way to be created. And when the ‘other’ is a collective […] other, an organization is thereby constituted as an entity. Such entities have, however, *no existence other than in discourse*, when their reality is created and sustained. (Taylor & Cooren, 1997: 428f.; emphasis in original)

Thus, for Taylor and Cooren (1997) the constitutive moment of an organization occurs as soon as an abstract *actant* gains the concrete status of an *actor*; in their example, when
Spain or the Crown is acknowledged as a collective entity and the human agent acts on behalf of it. The organization’s inception, however, happens to take place exclusively on the level of communication and has no existence beyond communication. This social-constructivist perspective on organizations may also help to comprehend the particular character of jihadist terrorism in its organizational dimension. By means of media reports, al Qaeda is continuously stabilized as a collective and accountable actor which facilitates that human agents can act on behalf of it and maintain its discursive reality. In the terms of Giddens (1984), every follow-up act depends on the given structure but contributes to the structure’s reproduction by being executed, at the same time. Of course, we need to mention that it can be in the interest not only the media but also of other parties (e.g., governmental actors) to construct al Qaeda as one addressable actor and to mask the variety and complexity behind it (cf. Jackson, 2006: 253) which may additionally explain the especially wide dissemination of the al Qaeda label.

(2) Stabilization of the communicative practices which constitute the organization: We assume that media reports contribute to the institutionalization of the terrorist act as a genre of communication, an established and recurrent communicative practice. This assertion links back to the concept of framing which has its origins in the social psychology of Goffman (1959): "Framing is the process by which a communication source, such as a news organization, defines and constructs a political issue or public controversy" (Nelson, Oxley & Clawson, 1997: 221). When news media report on terrorism, they inevitably also provide a frame of reference by embedding the terrorist act in a particular context (e.g., George W. Bush’s or FOX News’ framing of the “war on terror”). The recurrent character of frames facilitates the identifiability of a particular type of terrorist acts (e.g., aircraft hijacking or kidnapping) and its reproducibility by means of “contagion” (cf. Weimann & Winn, 1991; Pape, 2003). Terrorist acts then provide a role model for how a terrorist act can be realized organizationally by illuminating the horizon of potential terrorist organizing practices and giving it a concrete
form. This feature of media reports of terrorism furthermore raises the question to what extent even fictional depictions of terrorism (such as in the TV series “24”) may trigger similar effects by imagining (not-yet-realized) terrorist acts and ultimately by giving them a reproducible format. CCO enables us to describe terrorist acts as communicative events which gain their organizational character by referring to each other on the level of communication (i.e., citing each other) but without requiring the persons conducting these acts to be members of the same formal organization. Thus, the social-communicative construction of al Qaeda as collective actor may have effects independent from its correspondence with social reality, e.g., that its mere existence and publicity promotes imitative terrorist acts which again re-stabilize the collective actor (Stohl & Stohl, 2008).

Furthermore, mass media reports on terrorism can foster the organizational learning capabilities of terrorist groups by providing a rich source of information relevant to them. Thus, depending on the detail level of disclosure, the media coverage can serve as a knowledge management backbone for the global terrorism movement. This estimation particularly holds true for professional investigative journalism. In the aftermath of terrorist attacks, journalists aim for reconstructing the underlying processes which have led to these terrible events. In the course of this, their reports also reveal strategies, “best practices”, or the decision processes underlying the execution of terrorist acts as well as governmental and military reactions to them. These effects of course are presumed to be additionally promoted by computer-mediated communication like the internet (for a recent overview, see Weimann, 2008), especially by the advent of private publishing forms such as Weblogs or online videos shared via YouTube. Furthermore, media coverage is of course only one of several potential information resources for terrorist groups or sympathizers, next to personal contacts or training camps.
The potential knowledge management backbone function of mass media reports in the aftermath of terrorist acts for the organizational reproduction of terrorism may become clearer if we compare it to efforts of knowledge management in business firms (for an overview, see Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2005). It would be very costly for business firms to employ large numbers of professionals who are in charge of reconstructing and reflecting on the decision processes of a past project, what mistakes were made, and exploring the reasons why it was successful or failed (Schoeneborn, 2008). In the case of terrorism, exactly this seems to be the case: For terrorists and their sympathizers, professional journalism fulfills an external service provider function by revealing all the details of a past “project” and making them accessible to other remote groups. Lucky for them: The media’s services are provided almost free of charge as their provision is driven by media-inherent interests to distribute their publications to the biggest audience possible. Consequently, the media may facilitate terrorist organizations’ abilities to learn from mistakes (cf. Edmondson, 1996) as well as to employ adaptive strategies (cf. Tyre & von Hippel, 1997).

Destabilization by Reparadoxification

The results of the theoretical analysis raise the question how to curtail the facilitative function of mass media reports for the organizational reproduction of terrorism (cf. Cohen-Almagor, 2005). As Dowling points out, “some suggest that the news media should agree that no coverage will be given to terrorist spectacles. After all, these advocates reason, if the media gave birth to these terrorists, they can be eliminated by reverting their actions” (Dowling, 1986: 22). This corresponds with Laqueur’s assertion that “the real danger facing the terrorist is that of being ignored” (Laqueur, 1978: 62). Juergensmeyer adds that “without being noticed, in fact, terrorism would not exist” (Juergensmeyer, 2000: 139). The underlying assumption of these appeals is that acts of violence may have “contagious” effects – as expressed by the as-
sertion: “News of sensational violent crimes often prompts similar incidents” (Brosius & Weimann, 1991: 63).

The idea to prevent a repetition of violent acts by restricted media coverage has found application in fields beyond terrorism, for instance, in practices of suicide prevention. In the “Viennese Experience” (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998), local news media in Vienna agreed not to report whenever an individual committed suicide in the public transport system. In effect, the model led to a significant decrease of suicide rates by minimizing their media-driven contagiousness. Similar measurements have also been applied with regards to terrorism. In Russia, for instance, in the aftermath of the terrorist acts in Beslan in 2004, “numerous bills have been debated in the Duma on the issue of limiting the activities of and the reporting by the mass media […]” (Simons & Strovsky, 2006: 190). According to most observers, however, the censorship measurements applied by the Russian government caused more harm than benefit by significantly undermining trust and credibility of the Russian media system (Harraszt, 2004).

The Beslan example highlights the important alarm function mass media fulfill in modern societies (Frey, 2006: 3). Thus, a ban of media coverage on terrorism would fundamentally undermine this function. Dowling (1986) furthermore argues that there are two main reasons which prohibit stopping any media coverage on terrorism: First, a stop would inevitably lead to an “escalation of horrors”. Terrorists would feel challenged to increase violence so that their acts cannot be ignored by the media: “Perhaps the biggest problem with such a voluntary ban is that it very quickly would become a battle of wills between the determined terrorists and the reluctant complying media” (Dowling, 1986: 22). Second, even if there is no media coverage on terrorist events there would be non-mediated, alternative ways to spread information and rumors about these events, particularly in the today’s age of the Web 2.0,
featuring real-time messaging services such as Twitter (cf. Weimann, 2008). In effect, panic among the public may even increase (Bassiouni, 1982: 22).

Given this dilemma situation, we suggest to approach the question of how to curtail the contagious effects of news media reports on terrorism by drawing on the theoretical framework guiding this study, the CCO perspective. In his theory of social systems, Luhmann (1992; 1995) conceptualizes communication as the basic element of all social systems. Thus, when it comes to organizations, Luhmann identifies a more specific type of communication which is unique in its potential to let organizational structures emerge: the communication of decisions (Luhmann, 2000). According to this view, the first and foremost function of organizations is to assure the continuous re-production of decisions out of decisions. Decisions, in turn, are understood as communicative acts which process distinctions between theoretically indefinite, but practically constrained alternatives.

Generally, the necessity to interconnect decisions to each other is based on a paradox: the paradox of the undecidability of decisions (cf. von Foerster, 1992; Derrida, 2002). Luhmann’s understanding of this paradox is best described by von Foerster’s assertion: “Only questions that are in principle undecidable, we can decide” (von Foerster: 1992: 14). In other words, questions which have only one answer, i.e., questions which can only be decided in one way, cannot enforce the communication of decisions and, consequently, let organizations emerge: “[…] if a decision can be reached through absolute deduction, calculation, or argumentation [it does] lead to a final closure or fixation of contingency without simultaneously potentializing alternatives. […] So-called rational decisions are not decisions at all” (Andersen, 2003: 246). Thus, what we have come to call decisions in everyday language does not necessarily correspond with the notion of the term in social systems theory. Here, the defining aspects of decisions are their inherent undecidability and contingency.
Luhmann’s social systems perspective then enables us to observe system-inherent strategies of organizations to *deparadoxify* themselves (cf. Czarniawska, 2001; 2006). As Andersen points out: In relation to decision communication it is essential for organizations to make decisions look decidable: “Decision communication is able to deparadoxify itself by basically *making freedom look like restraint*. In a certain sense, organizational communication through the form of decision consists of nothing but continual attempts to deparadoxify decisions. The way they do is an empirical question” (Andersen, 2003: 249; emphasis in original). As Nassehi puts it: “If there were any secure knowledge on how to decide, there would not be a choice. To have the choice means *not to know what to do*. This is the main problem of organizations as social systems, consisting of the communication of decisions to perform strategies to make this problem invisible” (Nassehi, 2005: 186; emphasis in original).

This conception can now be transferred to the issue of an intertwined relationship between terrorism and the media. Terrorist acts, being characterized by the usage of massive violence, can be interpreted as measures to *deparadoxify* the inherent undecidability of decisions. The deparadoxification of decisions, however, is itself paradoxical by nature: “Every decision communicates that there are *alternatives* to the decision – otherwise it would not be a decision – and it simultaneously communicates that since the decision has been made, there are *no* alternatives – otherwise, again, it would not be a decision” (Seidl, 2006: 146; emphasis in original). The same holds true for terrorist acts: On the one hand, in their opposition to existing states of the world, they represent an explicit selection from other alternatives in form of a negation. On the other hand, in their radicalness, they communicate that there has not been any alternative, they represent a clear-cut and destructive decision. In this context, mass media reports which promote a visibility of terroristic decision processes allow for connectivity of decision communication over space and time. Particularly, reports in the aftermath of terroristic events which highlight the organizational dimension of terrorism, what alternatives
where considered, and what decisions have been made by terrorists to accomplish their targets, can then represent a constitutive condition for other groups to connect to these events with follow-up decisions on similar terrorist activities.

Following the aim to curtail terrorism, our study implies to engage instead in a *reparadoxification* of news media reports on terrorism. Applying the strategy of reparadoxification would mean to re-introduce ambiguities to mass media reports on terrorism. This can be realized, for instance, by illuminating terrorism’s inherent contingencies and contradictions, e.g., by referring to single groups or small organizations rather than to label them as all belonging to an overarching franchise organization named al Qaeda: “It must be made known that several terrorist groups *could* be responsible for a particular terrorist act” (Frey, 2006: 3; cf. Frey, 2004: 127f.) in order to avoid the media’s tendency “to greatly oversimplify matters of terrorism” (Wieviorka, 1993: 48). With this, strategies of reparadoxification can help in complicating individuals’ commitment to the al Qaeda movement. Thus, within the range of recommendations on how to curtail terrorism (cf. Clegg, 2008), our study suggests that the media can complicate terrorism’s reproduction by avoiding too clear-cut and under-complex coverage on terrorist events and instead commit to a reparadoxification of news media reports on terrorist acts.
CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

This study has dealt with the question how today’s globalized forms of terrorism can be understood in their organizational dimension. Starting from the estimation that existing concepts (e.g., hierarchy, network, or social movement) are limited in comprehending terrorist organizing, we have argued that an alternative perspective on organizations can prove to be more adequate: the communication-as-constitutive of organizations perspective (CCO; Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). The CCO perspective conceptualizes organizations as consisting of interconnected events of communication. Accordingly, terrorist organizations can be described as consisting of loosely interconnected acts of “ultimate communication” (Japp, 2003), i.e., terrorist acts. Keeping in mind this rather ephemeral notion of organizations, the CCO perspective points our attention to the particular constitutive conditions which allow for the emergence and stabilization of organizations out of communication.

As we argued above, the jihadist terrorism movement’s apparent ability to globally coordinate actions gives reason to investigate mass media reports on terrorism (e.g., by newspapers, TV, and also on the internet) as one constitutive condition for the organizational reproduction of terrorism. As argued above, media reports facilitate the connectivity of terrorist communication in a twofold way: (1) Media reports on terrorism contribute to the communicative construction of the terrorist organization (e.g., al Qaeda) as a collective actor, (2) they frame recurrent genres of terrorist acts which facilitates their repetition and variation, and they serve as a resource of rich and detailed information on the organizational preconditions of a terrorist act, i.e., the processes of preparation and execution. The media are therefore stuck in an insoluble dilemma: They have to report on terrorist acts in order to fulfill their alarm function for democratic societies, on the one hand, but potentially facilitate follow-up acts of a similar kind. With the idea of reparadoxification (cf. Czarniawska, 2001), one strategy has been presented which can be applied to diminish mass media reports’ facilitative function for
the organizational dimension of terrorism. The new aspects yielded by the applying CCO to terrorist organizing are summarized by table which compares them to the previous concepts of hierarchy, network, and social movement.

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Insert Table 2 about here

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Finally, we also need to mention significant limitations of this study: First, the analyses presented in this paper are limited to the global jihadist terrorism of recent years and do not apply to more local forms of terrorism (e.g., the IRA in Northern Ireland or ETA in the Basque country). Second, the study concentrates on only one of several potential constitutive conditions for the organizational reproduction of terrorism, i.e., mass-media reports on terrorist acts, but ignores other important aspects such as religious belief systems or certain patterns of socialization (Juergensmeyer, 2000; Pape, 2003; Gambetta, 2006). Third, the study has remained entirely on a conceptual level. Therefore, we would like to point out some potential paths for a further empirical investigation of terrorist organizing based on the CCO perspective: Of course, the empirical investigation of issues of terrorism is generally restricted due to the clandestine nature of terrorism and characterized varying degrees of accessibility as a field or research (Brannan, Esler & Strindberg, 2001). In the aim to nevertheless develop a proposal how to empirically substantiate our study, we need to distinguish here between the two main dimensions involved: The media coverage on terrorism on the one hand, and the effects these may cause on “insiders” (Dowling, 1986) for the reproduction of terrorist acts, on the other hand. On the level of media coverage, a combination of quantitative and qualitative textual analysis would allow for tracing the organizational cues contained in mass media reports on terrorism and their development over time (cf. Holden, 1986; Crelinsten, 1989). On the
level of effects on sympathizers, a meta-analysis of existing field studies on terrorism (e.g., Jackson et al., 2007a; 2007b) would allow for evaluating the general importance of mass media reports in terms of organizational learning for terrorist organizing.

Taken together, our conceptual study contributes to existing debates on the organizational dimension of terrorism (e.g., Mayntz, 2004; Corman & Schiefelbein, 2006; Jackson, 2006; Snow & Byrd, 2007; Sageman, 2008) by adding CCO as a new perspective to the debate. The CCO perspective is advantageous in that it allows for transcending the hierarchy-or-network debate by emphasizing the loose and ephemeral character of terrorist organizations. This conception of terrorist organizations comes closer to a notion of jihadist terrorism as a social movement (cf. Snow & Byrd, 2007; Beck, 2008) but without neglecting the organizational aspects of terrorism. At the same time, the study directly relates to the emergent debates on the CCO perspective (Ashcraft, Kuhn & Cooren, 2009; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009) by showing how the application of this theoretical perspective can make a difference in our understanding of organizations operating at the extreme. In this respect, it can be fruitful to apply the perspective also to similar forms of organizations which share with terrorism aspects like self-recruiting and rather loose coordination, e.g., the anti-globalization movement or the processes underlying the collaborative creation of the online encyclopedia Wikipedia. Last but not least, the study shares an aspiration expressed by Stohl and Stohl: “Undoubtedly, understanding the emergence, maintenance, and dissolution of terrorist networks will also provide insights into less destructive and more constructive types of organizing” (Stohl & Stohl, 2007: 119).
REFERENCES


**TABLE 1**
Comparison of Existing Concepts (Hierarchy, Network, Social Movement) Regarding Their Comprehension of Terrorist Organizing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Social Movement</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Organization as stable entity</td>
<td>Organization as dynamic entity</td>
<td>Organization as process, held together by shared frame or issue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>Centralized or decentralized</td>
<td>Decentralized (i.e., leaderless)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Membership base</strong></td>
<td>Fixed, clear distinction between inclusion and exclusion</td>
<td>Fixed, but with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>Latent membership base</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Top-down, along hierarchical lines</td>
<td>Flat communication, along network edges</td>
<td>Bottom-up, emerging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countermeasures</strong></td>
<td>Eliminate the top</td>
<td>Eliminate central network nodes</td>
<td>Diminish power of framing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Evaluation: Conceptual Shortcomings</strong></td>
<td>Fails to take flexibility and fluidity of terrorist organizing into account</td>
<td>Inappropriate for some terrorist acts (Madrid; London) by assuming at least remote or indirect connection between network members</td>
<td>Terrorism lacks mobilization of masses; limited focus on organizational dimension</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2
Comparison of CCO with Existing Concepts (Hierarchy, Network, Social Movement) Regarding Their Comprehension of Terrorist Organizing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Hierarchy</th>
<th>Network</th>
<th>Social Movement</th>
<th>Organization as Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Ontology</strong></td>
<td>Organization as stable entity</td>
<td>Organization as dynamic entity</td>
<td>Organization as process, held together by shared frame or issue</td>
<td>Organization as process, held together by reproducible communicative practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Leadership</strong></td>
<td>Centralized</td>
<td>Centralized or decentralized</td>
<td>Decentralized (i.e., leaderless)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Membership Base</strong></td>
<td>Fixed, clear distinction between inclusion and exclusion</td>
<td>Fixed, but with permeable boundaries</td>
<td>Latent membership base</td>
<td>Latent; membership constituted by executing particular communicative acts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Top-down, along hierarchical lines</td>
<td>Flat, along network edges</td>
<td>Bottom-up, emerging</td>
<td>Flat, emerging, self-reproducing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Countermeasures</strong></td>
<td>Eliminate the top</td>
<td>Eliminate central network nodes</td>
<td>Diminish power of framing</td>
<td>Diminish reproductive potential (e.g., by repara-doxxification)</td>
</tr>
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<td><strong>Evaluation: Conceptual Shortcomings</strong></td>
<td>Fails to take flexibility and fluidity of terrorist organizing into account</td>
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<td>Unclear definition of what specifies communication as being organizational</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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