

## Crisis Communication in Terrorist Attack Contexts: Case Study The Imlil Terrorist Attack

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### ملخص

شهد المشهد الإرهابي العالمي تحولات جوهرية عميقة، تجلّت في تصاعد حدة الأعمال الإرهابية من حيث الخسائر البشرية، إذ ارتفعت أعداد الوفيات بنسبة 22% لتبلغ 8,352 حالة وفاة خلال عام 2023 وحده. وفي الوقت ذاته، يعاني نحو 85.7% من الناجين من اضطراب ما بعد الصدمة، مما يكشف عن الأثر النفسي والاجتماعي البالغ الخطورة الذي يُخلفه الإرهاب على المستويين الفردي والجماعي. وقد أضافت الثورة الرقمية بُعداً جديداً لهذه التعقيدات، من خلال ضغط الجداول الزمنية للتطرف وتسريع مسارات التحوّل إلى العنف، فضلاً عن الانتشار الواسع للمعلومات المضلّة المؤدّة بالذكاء الاصطناعي التي باتت تُعيد تشكيل ديناميكيات الأزمات بصورة غير مسبوقة.

وعلى الرغم من تصاعد هذه التهديدات وتشعّب تداعياتها، لا تزال الأطر النظرية الشاملة التي تجمع بين النظريات الكلاسيكية في التواصل الأزمات والواقع الرقمي المعاصر تفتقر إلى التطوير الكافي. في مواجهة هذه الفجوة المعرفية، تطوّر هذه الدراسة إطاراً نظرياً متكاملاً يوحد خمس نظريات متكاملة ومتضافرة: نظرية التواصل الأزمات الطيفي (SCCT)، ونظرية تواصل المخاطر، ونظرية وضع الأجندة والتأثير الإعلامي، ونظرية الصدمة الاجتماعية والذاكرة الجماعية، ونظرية بناء المعنى.

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يُبيّن هذا الإطار أن الفعالية الحقيقية للتواصل في أزمات الإرهاب تستوجب عناية متزامنة ومتوازنة بعدة محاور: حماية المصادقية المؤسسية، وإدارة تصورات المخاطر لدى الجمهور، والتنافس الفاعل على أطر تأويل الأحداث، وتيسير التعافي من الصدمات الجماعية، وبناء السرديات المضادة، وذلك عبر أربع مراحل زمنية متكاملة: ما قبل الأزمة، ومرحلة الذروة الحادة، والمرحلة الانتقالية، وما بعد الأزمة. كما يُلقي الإطار الضوء على ديناميكيات التفاعل بين أطراف متعددة داخل بيئات التواصل الشبكية، مع معالجة التحديات الرقمية كالتضخيم الخوارزمي وانتشار المعلومات المضللة.

يقدم الهجوم الإرهابي الذي وقع في جبال الأطلس المغربية في ديسمبر 2018، والذي راح ضحيته سائحان إسكندنافيتان، اختباراً تجريبياً لمقترحات الإطار المتكامل. إذ يجسد هذا الهجوم السمات المميزة للإرهاب المعاصر: منفذوه أفراد تطرفوا ذاتياً عبر الفضاء الرقمي دون انتماء تنظيمي عضوي، مما يعبر عن ظاهرة «الوميض إلى الانفجار» التي تمكن التقنيات الرقمية من تسريعها.

كشف تحليل الاستجابة الحكومية المغربية عن مواطن قوة وإخفاق في آن واحد؛ فقد أبدت السلطات كفاءةً عملياتية واضحة تجلّت في سرعة الاعتقالات وصياغة خطاب يميّز بين الإرهابيين والقيم الوطنية. غير أن التوازن بين الشفافية والأمن العملياتي ظل تحدياً ماثلاً، لا سيما مع الانتشار الفيروسي للمقطع المصور للجريمة رغم جهود حذفه، مما جسد مفهوم «الإرهاب الرقمي» الذي يمتد أثره النفسي ليطال جمهوراً موزعاً جغرافياً بالصدمة. كذلك كشف تباين التأطيرين الإعلاميين الدنماركي والنرويجي لذات الحدث عن تعقيد الاستجابات متعددة الأطراف في البيئات الشبكية.

**الكلمات المفتاحية:** التواصل الأزماتي، الإرهاب، الاتصال في الأزمات الظرفية، اتصال المخاطر، الإعلام الرقمي، مكافحة الإرهاب، التحول الرقمي، تأطير وسائل الإعلام، المرونة المجتمعية، المعلومات المضللة، إدارة الطوارئ، التماسك الاجتماعي، استراتيجيات الخطاب المضاد.

## **Abstract**

The global terrorism landscape has undergone profound transformations marked by escalating lethality (22% increase in deaths to 8,352 fatalities in 2023), severe psychological impacts (85.7% PTSD among survivors), and digital revolution reshaping crisis dynamics through compressed radicalization timelines and AI-generated disinformation. Despite these escalating threats, comprehensive theoretical frameworks integrating classical crisis communication theories with contemporary digital realities remain underdeveloped. This study develops an integrated framework synthesizing five complementary theories: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Risk Communication Theory, Agenda-Setting and Media Framing Theory, Social Trauma and Collective Memory Theory, and Meaning Management Theory. The framework demonstrates that effective terrorism crisis communication requires simultaneous attention to institutional legitimacy protection, risk perception management; media frame contestation, collective trauma healing, and narrative construction across four temporal phases. The analysis illuminates complex multi-actor dynamics within networked communication ecologies while addressing digital challenges including algorithmic amplification and misinformation proliferation.

**Keywords:** Crisis Communication, Terrorism, Situational Crisis Communication, Risk Communication, Digital Media, Counter-Terrorism, Digital Transformation, Media Framing, Community Resilience, Misinformation, Emergency Management, Social Cohesion, Counter-Narrative Strategies

## **Introduction**

The global terrorism landscape has witnessed profound transformations, characterized by escalating lethality despite a decline in incident frequency. Terrorism-related deaths rose by 13% to reach 7,555 fatalities in 2024—a decrease from 2023. Meanwhile, attacks decreased by 3% to 3,492 incidents. The geographical epicenter of

terrorism has shifted from the Middle East to the sub-Saharan Sahel region in Africa, which now accounts for more than 51% of global terrorism deaths, representing a tenfold increase since 2019 (Global Terrorism Index 2024) .

Beyond the direct physical destruction, terrorism inflicts deep psychological trauma: 85.7% of survivors suffer from persistent post-traumatic stress disorder, while “digital terrorism”—the widespread dissemination of graphic violence via social media—extends indirect psychological trauma across geographically dispersed populations, fundamentally disrupting social cohesion and collective identity(Farber, 2024; Psychiatric Services, 2024).

Crisis communication constitutes an indispensable pillar of effective terrorism response, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism for operational coordination, psychological reassurance, narrative control, and social cohesion maintenance. During acute crisis phases, transparent communication enables coordinated multi-agency responses while countering misinformation proliferation in digital environments (Office of Justice Programs, 2024).

Three core messages must be strategically conveyed—resolute determination against terrorist intimidation, demonstration of decisive governmental competence, and explicit commitment to comprehensive victim support (CORDIS, 2009). Ultimately, communication efficacy depends less on technical proficiency than on pre-existing trust relationships cultivated through consistent transparency, demonstrated empathy, and authentic stakeholder engagement in both crisis and non-crisis periods (PRSA, 2024).

The contemporary communication landscape has undergone radical transformation through digital technology convergence and globalization, fundamentally altering terrorism crisis dynamics. Social media platforms have democratized content creation, rendering geographic borders irrelevant and accelerating information dissemination to create “flash-to-bang” compression wherein radicalization-to-

violence timelines dramatically shorten (D'Arco, 2024). This shift manifests in "lone wolf" terrorism proliferation: of 113 North American attacks (2007-2023), only 15 linked to known organizations, with lone actors executing violence based on "salad bar ideology"—eclectic assemblages cherry-picked online (D'Arco, 2024).

Crisis communication has transformed from unidirectional broadcasting to networked, multi-directional ecologies wherein institutional authority competes with micro-influencers, citizen journalists, and malicious disinformation actors (Gammarano et al., 2024). The Westgate Mall attack (2013) exemplified this challenge: while Kenya's Interior Ministry utilized Twitter for stakeholder communication, inaccuracies and inconsistencies plagued governmental responses, illustrating persistent tensions between rapid response imperatives and accuracy requirements in high-velocity digital environments (Kimotho & Nyarang'o, 2019).

## **The Study Problem**

Against this backdrop of escalating threats, profound societal impacts, and radically transformed communication dynamics, comprehensive theoretical frameworks integrating classical crisis communication theories with contemporary digital realities remain critically underdeveloped. Existing models inadequately address AI-generated disinformation, algorithmic content amplification, micro-influencer dynamics, and the compressed timelines characterizing current threat landscapes. This paper develops an integrated theoretical framework for crisis communication in terrorist attack contexts, synthesizing Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Networked Crisis Communication Theory, and emerging insights on digital media ecosystems to address three research questions: How do digital transformations reshape crisis communication effectiveness? What theoretical integration best explains contemporary terrorism crisis communication? How can frameworks inform evidence-based policy and practice to enhance community resilience and minimize psychological trauma while maintaining operational security?

## **Objectives of the Study**

The present study sought to achieve the following objectives:

**Construct a comprehensive theoretical framework** that synthesizes classical crisis communication theories (including Situational Crisis Communication Theory, Image Restoration Theory, and Risk Communication Theory) with contemporary digital media paradigms (including Networked Crisis Communication Theory, Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model, and Micro-Influencer Impact Model) to provide a holistic understanding of crisis communication dynamics in terrorist attack contexts across pre-crisis, acute-crisis, and post-crisis temporal phases.

**Systematically examine how digital media ecosystems**—including social media platforms, algorithmic content curation, AI-generated disinformation, encrypted messaging applications, and micro-influencer networks—have fundamentally transformed crisis communication effectiveness, credibility dynamics, information dissemination velocity, and the structural relationships between governmental authorities, traditional media gatekeepers, and diverse public stakeholders during terrorist crises.

**Identify and analyze the critical success factors** and contemporary challenges that determine crisis communication effectiveness in mitigating trauma, maintaining social cohesion, and supporting community resilience during terrorist attacks. Success factors include transparency, spokesperson credibility, message consistency, rapid response, stakeholder engagement, and pre-existing trust. Contemporary challenges encompass misinformation proliferation, compressed response timelines, lone-actor terrorism, digital terror amplification, and cross-platform extremist communication

**Develop theoretically grounded, evidence-based recommendations** and strategic guidelines for governmental authorities, emergency management agencies, communication professionals, and policymakers that address: (1) optimal communication strategies across crisis phases. (2) Mechanisms for balancing transparency imperatives with operational

security requirements. (3) Approaches for countering misinformation and maintaining narrative control in decentralized digital environments. (4) Frameworks for building institutional credibility and pre-crisis trust; and (5) multi-dimensional support systems that integrate crisis communication with psychological intervention, community resilience building and long-term societal recovery processes.

## **Methodology**

This study employs a systematic theoretical synthesis methodology that integrates three interconnected analytical approaches to construct a comprehensive framework for understanding crisis communication in terrorist attack contexts. The theoretical framework validated through case study analysis of governmental communication responses to selected high-profile terrorist attacks, enabling empirical examination of how crisis communication principles operate in diverse real-world scenarios.

## **Systematic Literature Review, Conceptual Analysis, and Theoretical Synthesis**

The first stage involved a rigorous systematic literature review following established protocols for theoretical research. Major academic databases—including Web of Science, Scopus, Communication & Mass Media Complete, and Political Science Complete—were systematically searched using predetermined combinations of key terms: “crisis communication,” “terrorism,” “social media,” and “digital transformation.” This process yielded approximately 150 peer-reviewed sources published primarily between 2015 and 2025, representing current scholarly discourse on digital crisis communication. The corpus was supplemented by seminal foundational works that established core theoretical frameworks and authoritative reports from international organizations (UN, NATO, DHS) providing practitioner perspectives and policy insights. Articles selected based on theoretical relevance, methodological rigor, and contribution to understanding crisis communication dynamics in terrorism contexts.

The second stage employed conceptual analysis to systematically deconstruct and map relationships between key theoretical constructs. This process involved examining the definitions, dimensions, and interrelationships of central concepts including transparency, credibility, trust, narrative control, digital terror, communal trauma, and networked communication. Each construct analyzed across three temporal dimensions—pre-crisis preparedness, acute crisis response, and post-crisis recovery—and multiple communication environments, including traditional media channels, social media platforms, and encrypted messaging applications. This multi-dimensional mapping revealed how theoretical concepts operate differently across contexts and crisis phases, enabling nuanced understanding of their explanatory power and limitations.

The final stage integrated insights from multiple theoretical traditions to construct a unified analytical framework. Six major theoretical perspectives examined; Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Image Restoration Theory, Risk Communication Theory, Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT), Social-Mediated Crisis Communication Model, and Micro-Influencer Impact Model. Through iterative theoretical triangulation, convergences and complementarities across frameworks were identified. Where theoretical contradictions emerged, meta-theoretical analysis was employed to reconcile divergent perspectives and extract higher-order principles. This integrative process produced a cohesive framework that synthesizes classical crisis communication principles with contemporary digital communication dynamics, providing both theoretical depth and practical applicability for understanding crisis communication in terrorist contexts.

## **The Escalation of Terrorist Attacks and Their Societal Impact**

The global terrorism landscape has witnessed significant transformations in both intensity and geographic concentration over recent years, with empirical data revealing disturbing trends in attack lethality and spatial distribution. According to the Global Terrorism Index

2024, terrorism-related deaths increased by 22% to 8,352 fatalities in 2023, representing the highest mortality rate since 2017 (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). Paradoxically, this escalation in lethality occurred alongside a 22% reduction in the total number of terrorist incidents, declining to 3,350 attacks, thereby resulting in a 56% increase in the average number of casualties per attack—the most lethal rate recorded in nearly a decade.

The epicenter of global terrorism has undergone a notable geographic shift from the Middle East toward the Sahel region of sub-Saharan Africa, which now accounts for over 50% of all terrorism-related deaths worldwide, representing a tenfold increase since 2019 (Vision of Humanity, 2025). This spatial reconfiguration further evidenced by the expansion of terrorist activity across 66 countries in 2024, the highest geographical dispersion since 2018, with the Islamic State and its affiliates maintaining operations across 22 countries and remaining the world's deadliest terrorist organization despite a 17% reduction in attributed deaths.

Moreover, over 90% of terrorist attacks and 98% of terrorism-related fatalities occurred in conflict zones during 2023, underscoring the intrinsic linkage between armed conflict and terrorist violence, while the lethality rate increased by 26%, indicating a qualitative shift toward more devastating attack methodologies (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

## **The Pivotal Role of Communication in Terrorist Crisis Management**

Strategic communication in the aftermath of terrorist attacks must pursue several interconnected objectives: preventing copycat violence, preventing reciprocal violence, disrupting terrorist propaganda, denying perpetrators media amplification, avoiding community polarization, and building social cohesion (Ruipérez, 2024).

Achieving these objectives requires a balanced approach that simultaneously addresses the needs of victim communities (trauma and fear), perpetrator communities (avoiding collective stigmatization), and the broader public interest (maintaining social stability and democratic values). Failure to maintain this balance risks amplifying the very propaganda effect terrorists seek through their actions (Ruipérez, 2024).

The imperative nature of these objectives becomes evident when examining the profound impact of terrorist attacks on affected populations. The psychological and social ramifications of terrorism extend far beyond immediate casualties, generating profound and enduring trauma at both individual and collective levels that fundamentally disrupts the social fabric of affected communities. Research examining victim impact statements reveals that 85.7% of terrorism survivors experience persistent psychological trauma, while 71.4% report cascading effects on families and communities, manifesting in phenomena ranging from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and major depressive disorder to pervasive anxiety and existential disorientation (Farber, 2024).

The psychological impact transcends direct victims, affecting emergency responders, witnesses, and broader populations through what scholar's term "communal trauma"—defined as the erosion of social cohesion and the rupture of communal bonds that ordinarily sustain collective identity and resilience (Erikson, 1976; National Institute of Justice, 2024). This collective vulnerability is exponentially amplified through contemporary digital media ecosystems, whereby the instantaneous global dissemination of graphic violence creates what researchers describe as "digital terror," extending psychological harm across geographically dispersed populations who experience vicarious traumatization through exposure to violent imagery on social media platforms (Psychiatric Services, 2024).

Studies conducted in Pakistan demonstrate that exposure to terrorism-related content through social media correlates with elevated depressive symptoms and diminished life satisfaction, though perceived online support networks may partially mitigate these adverse effects

(Vision of Humanity, 2025). Furthermore, terrorism's unique capacity to generate widespread fear and uncertainty—what the Institute for Economics & Peace characterizes as its “uniquely disturbing psychological and social impact intended to traumatize the whole of society”—distinguishes it from other forms of violence, as its effects ripple through multiple dimensions of social existence, including economic security, institutional trust, intergroup relations, and fundamental perceptions of safety and social order (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

The long-term recovery trajectory for victims and affected communities necessitates comprehensive, multi-dimensional support systems encompassing physical, psychological, social, and financial assistance, yet most Member States lack the requisite resources and capacity to adequately address these medium- and long-term needs, resulting in profound consequences for survivors' rehabilitation and societal reintegration (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2024).

Communication constitutes a foundational pillar in the effective management of terrorist crises, functioning simultaneously as a mechanism for operational coordination, psychological reassurance, narrative control, and social cohesion maintenance. During the acute phase of a terrorist attack, rapid and transparent communication enables coordinated responses among first responders, law enforcement agencies, and governmental authorities while providing vital safety instructions to affected populations and countering misinformation proliferation in contemporary digital media environments (Office of Justice Programs, 2024).

The SAFE-COMMS project emphasizes that recovery from terrorist attacks fundamentally depends on carefully planned communication strategies targeted at three primary audiences: media institutions, the public and internal employees of affected authorities, noting that only through advance preparation can effective counter-terrorism communication strategies dovetail within wider crisis management frameworks (CORDIS, 2009).

The United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism framework delineates three temporal stages—pre-crisis preparedness, acute response, and post-crisis recovery—with particular emphasis on the criticality of the first hours when mass communication can either mitigate or exacerbate public panic (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2023).

Transparency and credibility emerge as cardinal principles, with empirical research demonstrating that public trust in governmental institutions fundamentally shapes crisis messaging effectiveness, as populations are more likely to comply with safety guidance when they perceive communication as honest, timely, and consistent (Structural Equation Modelling Study, 2025). However, transparency necessitates delicate calibration, as the Boston Marathon bombing response illustrates: law enforcement provided regular updates while strategically withholding tactical details that could compromise operational security, thereby establishing an ethical framework balancing information provision with security imperatives (JGPR Academy, 2025).

Contemporary digital ecosystems further complicate this challenge, as traditional media gatekeepers no longer monopolize information dissemination; authorities must navigate landscapes where social networks, citizen journalists, and malicious actors simultaneously compete to shape narratives, compelling crisis managers to view media and public as partners rather than adversaries (CORDIS, 2009).

The credibility of crisis communication depends on interrelated factors including message clarity, perceived spokesperson authority and integrity, internal consistency across channels, emotional tone balancing reassurance with realistic threat assessment, and feedback mechanisms transforming communication from unidirectional broadcasting into dialogic engagement (Structural Equation Modelling Study, 2025). Designated spokespersons—typically senior executives or subject matter experts—must embody credibility, maintain composure under pressure, and communicate consistently across platforms, as their authority directly influences public trust formation throughout crisis trajectories (PRSA, 2024).

Core messaging should strategically convey three themes: resolute determination that “we will not allow terrorists to spread fear,” demonstration of decisive competence through “we know what we are doing,” and explicit commitment to comprehensive victim support while highlighting terrorist inhumanity (CORDIS, 2009).

Contemporary challenges amplified by digital information velocity, wherein misinformation and conspiracy theories propagate rapidly through social media platforms, necessitating proactive counter-messaging strategies that debunk false claims and maintain narrative control through consistent, evidence-based communication (JGPR Academy, 2025). The Department of Homeland Security emphasizes critical information sharing between federal, state, and local partners, recognizing that effective terrorism response requires coordinated intelligence dissemination and standardized reporting processes across intelligence and emergency management enterprises (Department of Homeland Security, 2019).

Ultimately, communication efficacy in terrorist crisis management depends not merely on technical message dissemination proficiency but on cultivating pre-existing trust relationships through consistent transparency, demonstrated empathy, and authentic stakeholder engagement, as public willingness to accept crisis guidance fundamentally depends on credibility capital accumulated through sustained commitment to honest, responsive communication practices in both crisis and non-crisis periods (PRSA, 2024).

## **Strategic Media Practices in Counteracting Terrorism’s Psychological Impact**

Media institutions possess sophisticated practices enabling them to counteract the “shock wave” generated by terrorist activities through strategic communication approaches that minimize psychological trauma while maintaining informational integrity. These practices constitute a critical component of the broader crisis communication ecosystem, particularly in contemporary digital environments where information dissemination velocity amplifies both constructive and destructive messaging potential.

First, media contributes to crisis management by exercising deliberate editorial judgment in selecting terminology, imagery, and framing strategies that avoid inducing mass panic while providing essential safety information. Research demonstrates that linguistic choices and visual presentation significantly influence public psychological responses: sensationalist terminology and graphic imagery can amplify fear and anxiety levels beyond proportional threat assessments, while measured language and contextual framing enable rational threat evaluation (Altheide, 2017; Nellis, 2009).

Media institutions serve as critical gatekeepers guiding social media-connected audiences who increasingly encounter unfiltered, often manipulated content through networked digital platforms. In an era characterized by proliferating alternative information sources and AI-generated disinformation, traditional media's role in providing verified, contextual information becomes increasingly vital for maintaining informed public discourse during security emergencies (Vision of Humanity, 2025; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

Second, media coverage should strategically highlight security and judicial agencies' competent crisis site management, thereby generating victim confidence in law enforcement capabilities and institutional resilience. This communication function aligns with Risk Communication Theory's emphasis on demonstrating institutional competence as foundational for maintaining public trust during crises (Peters et al., 1997; Wray et al., 2008). By highlighting coordinated multi-agency responses, professional emergency management, and systematic investigative processes, media coverage reinforces public perception that security institutions constitute reliable protective mechanisms against terrorist threats. Such messaging proves particularly critical during acute crisis phases when uncertainty peaks and populations seek reassurance that authorities maintain situational control and possess requisite capabilities for both immediate response and long-term threat mitigation (CORDIS, 2009; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2023).

Third, coverage should emphasize terrorism victims' human dimensions—including demographic profiles, casualty numbers, and particularly vulnerable populations such as children and women—to construct powerful, emotionally resonant messaging that reinforces societal condemnation of terrorist violence while fostering collective empathy and social solidarity. This approach draws upon Social Trauma Theory's recognition that collective healing requires acknowledgment of shared loss and communal suffering (Alexander, 2012; Erikson, 1976). However, such coverage must navigate delicate ethical boundaries: while humanizing victims serves legitimate purposes of honoring losses and mobilizing collective support, excessive focus on individual trauma narratives risks secondary traumatization among audiences and potential exploitation of victim suffering for sensationalist purposes. Media practitioners must therefore calibrate victim-centered coverage to balance commemoration with dignity, empathy with restraint (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Bonetto et al., 2018).

Fourth, media should exercise restraint in disseminating statements and threats issued by terrorist organizations claiming responsibility for attacks, recognizing that uncritical amplification of terrorist messaging serves perpetrators' strategic objectives of maximizing psychological impact and public fear. Terrorism fundamentally constitutes Propaganda through action wherein violent acts function as communication vehicles designed to attract attention, demonstrate capacity, and spread ideological messages.

Fifth, media vigilance requires critical evaluation of content disseminated by terrorist organizations and extremist groups through digital platforms, refusing to accept such sources as credible without rigorous verification and contextual analysis. The proliferation of terrorist-operated websites, social media accounts, and encrypted messaging channels has created unprecedented opportunities for direct-to-audience propaganda dissemination bypassing traditional editorial gatekeeping (D'Arco, 2024).

Research on lone-wolf terrorism demonstrates that individuals increasingly self-radicalize through online consumption of extremist content, with perpetrators assembling ideologically eclectic “salad bar” justifications for violence drawn from diverse digital sources (D’Arco, 2024). Media institutions must therefore develop sophisticated capabilities for identifying manipulated content, verifying source authenticity, and providing critical contextual framing when reporting on extremist communications, thereby serving as trusted intermediaries helping audiences navigate information environments saturated with deliberate disinformation and propaganda (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

### **Transformations in Communication Environment: Social Media and Globalization**

The contemporary communication landscape has undergone radical structural transformations driven by the convergence of digital technologies and globalization processes, fundamentally altering the dynamics of crisis communication in terrorist contexts and creating unprecedented challenges for traditional crisis management frameworks. Globalization and technological advancements have dramatically changed the mechanisms through which terrorists socialize ideas, form virtual communities, and inspire action, as new technologies such as social media platforms and encrypted messaging applications have effectively lowered barriers to entry, rendered geographic borders increasingly irrelevant, and diminished the significance of conventional terrorist organizational hierarchies and ideological frameworks (D’Arco, 2024).

The expansion of social media has democratized content generation and circulation, expediting the propagation of information, misinformation, and disinformation in manners that fundamentally disrupt conventional gatekeeping paradigms. These platforms facilitate instantaneous worldwide dissemination, whereby localized terrorist incidents rapidly evolve into international media phenomena generating cascading psychological reverberations throughout geographically dispersed communities.

Research examining international broadcasters' terrorism coverage on YouTube—including Al Jazeera English, BBC News, CNN, DW News, and Sky News—reveals the emergence of what scholars characterize as a “homogenizing, globalized media marketplace,” wherein surprisingly limited differences exist between Western and non-Western outlets in their coverage patterns, largely attributable to the standardizing effects of globalization on journalistic practices and news production despite significant variations in political, cultural, and societal contexts (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

The velocity of information dissemination in digital environments has compressed crisis communication timelines. Researchers identify this as “flash-to-bang” acceleration. The temporal distance between radicalization exposure and violent action has dramatically shortened. This facilitated by online ecosystems saturated with extremist content. Memes mainstream violent ideologies to reach new audiences, particularly women and youth. Search algorithms enable violent extremists from diverse global locations to efficiently locate content aligned with their ideological predispositions (D'Arco, 2024)

Social media platforms have fundamentally transformed the structural relationship between crisis communicators and publics, shifting from unidirectional broadcasting models to networked, multi-directional communication ecologies wherein traditional institutional authority competes with numerous alternative information sources including citizen journalists, micro-influencers with specialized expertise and highly engaged follower bases, and malicious actors deliberately spreading disinformation (Gammarano et al., 2024).

Case study analysis of the 2013 Westgate Mall terrorist attack in Nairobi demonstrates that Twitter emerged as the Interior Ministry's preferred platform for stakeholder communication during the crisis, yet the ministry's social media response was plagued by inaccuracies and inconsistencies that further compromised governmental reputation, illustrating the persistent challenge of balancing imperatives for rapid response with requirements for accuracy and consistency in high-velocity digital

The rise of “lone wolf” terrorism exemplifies the profound impact of digitalization on terrorist operational models, as data from North America indicates that of 113 terrorist attacks occurring between 2007 and 2023, only 15 maintained linkages to known terrorist organizations, with lone actors increasingly executing attacks based on ideologically eclectic “salad bar” assemblages of ideas cherry-picked during online browsing until deciding to undertake violent action against locally available targets (D’Arco, 2024). This transformation reflects what 1984 the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) leader Louis Beam prophetically envisioned as “leaderless resistance” enabled by computer technologies—a strategic vision that remained technologically infeasible during his era but has become operationally viable through contemporary digital infrastructure, as today’s terrorists possess unprecedented technological tools facilitating decentralized, networked violence (D’Arco, 2024).

The networked nature of contemporary crisis communication is further theorized through Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT), which posits that crisis communication in the digital age operates within complex, interconnected networks rather than through linear, hierarchical processes, with Eriksson (2024) emphasizing the critical role of network gatekeepers—including micro-influencers and platform algorithms—who exert substantial influence over information flow within digital networks and consequently shape public perception and crisis response trajectories during terrorist events.

## **Conceptual and Theoretical Framework**

### **Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT)**

Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by W. Timothy Coombs, represents one of the most influential and empirically validated frameworks for understanding organizational crisis communication (Coombs, 2007; Coombs & Holladay, 2002). The theory posits that crisis communication effectiveness depends fundamentally on matching response strategies to crisis types based on attributed responsibility and reputational threat levels. SCCT classifies crises along

a continuum of responsibility attribution, ranging from victim crises (minimal responsibility) through accidental crises (low responsibility) to preventable crises (high responsibility) (Coombs & Holladay, 2008). Each classification carries distinct reputational implications and necessitates specific communication strategies.

The theory identifies three primary response strategy clusters: denial strategies (attacking the accuser, scapegoating, or denying crisis existence), diminishment strategies (excusing through external factors or justifying through minimization), and rebuilding strategies (offering compensation, expressing genuine apologies, or demonstrating corrective action) (Coombs, 2015). Strategy selection depends on three critical factors: initial crisis responsibility, crisis history (whether the organization has experienced similar crises), and prior relational reputation with stakeholders (Coombs, 2007). Organizations with positive pre-crisis reputations and no crisis history can employ less accommodative strategies, while those with negative reputations or crisis histories must adopt more accommodative approaches to protect legitimacy and maintain stakeholder support.

The application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory to terrorist attack scenarios reveals both analytical utility and theoretical complexities. Such attacks generally constitute “victim crises” in which governmental entities possess limited causal culpability, given that these incidents originate from malevolent external agents rather than institutional shortcomings or dereliction of duty.

When applied to terrorist attack contexts, SCCT presents both explanatory power and conceptual tensions. Terrorist attacks predominantly constitute “victim crises” wherein governmental authorities bear minimal causal responsibility, as attacks result from malicious external actors rather than organizational failures or negligence (Crijns et al., 2017). This categorization theoretically enables governmental entities to adopt less accommodative postures, concentrating predominantly on bolstering tactics such as referencing prior competence and reaffirming dedication to public security.

Nevertheless, governmental responses routinely exceed minimal accommodation, substantially deploying rebuilding strategies encompassing sympathetic expressions, commitments to victim assistance, and assurances of corrective security interventions—responses conventionally reserved for preventable crises bearing elevated responsibility attribution.

This paradox reflects unique dimensions of terrorism crisis communication: governments function simultaneously as crisis victims and crisis managers, experiencing attacks while bearing responsibility for security system failures that enabled attacks. The Boston Marathon bombing (2013) exemplifies this duality: while the terrorist act itself constituted a victim crisis, subsequent revelations about intelligence failures and security lapses shifted partial responsibility attribution toward authorities, necessitating more accommodative communication strategies including acknowledgment of shortcomings and commitments to improved intelligence coordination (JGPR Academy, 2025). Furthermore, SCCT's institutional reputation protection focus aligns with governmental imperatives to maintain legitimacy, public trust, and confidence in security capabilities—objectives that extend beyond traditional corporate reputation management to encompass societal stability, democratic governance credibility, and national resilience (Avraham, 2013).

Despite its theoretical contributions, SCCT exhibits significant limitations when applied to terrorism contexts (Hargie & Irving, 2016). First, the theory's organizational-centric orientation prioritizes institutional reputation over broader community welfare, psychological recovery, and social cohesion—dimensions central to terrorism crisis management but peripheral to corporate crisis communication. Second, SCCT inadequately addresses the complex political, security, and ideological dimensions characterizing terrorism crises, wherein communication serves not merely reputational functions but also counter-narrative purposes against terrorist propaganda, community resilience building, and prevention of secondary psychological trauma (Matusitz, 2013).

Third, the theory's static conceptualization of responsibility attribution fails to account for dynamic shifts occurring throughout extended crises as new information emerges, investigative findings accumulate, and public perceptions evolve—a particularly salient limitation given terrorism's typically protracted crisis trajectories encompassing immediate response, investigation, legal proceedings, and long-term recovery (Seeger et al., 2003). Fourth, SCCT's prescriptive strategy-matching framework inadequately captures the improvisational, adaptive, and contextually contingent nature of actual terrorism crisis communication, wherein authorities must simultaneously address multiple audiences (victims, general public, media, international community), balance competing imperatives (transparency vs. operational security), and navigate rapidly evolving digital information environments resistant to centralized control (Ulmer et al., 2011).

## **Risk Communication Theory**

Risk Communication Theory examines the processes through which institutions and governing bodies convey information regarding potential dangers, threats, and ambiguities, thereby facilitating informed judgment and protective action among impacted populations. The theory emerged from public health, environmental hazards, and technological disasters research, examining how individuals perceive, interpret, and respond to risk information (Lundgren & McMakin, 2018). Central to the framework is the distinction between objective risk and perceived risk.

Research demonstrates that perceived risk often diverges substantially from objective measures. This occurs due to multiple cognitive and affective factors. These include dread (fear of catastrophic consequences), control (ability to mitigate exposure), familiarity (previous experience with hazards), and voluntariness (choice in risk exposure) (Sunstein, 2003).

Effective risk communication must address two dimensions simultaneously. It should provide accurate probabilistic information. It must also acknowledge and respond to the legitimate psychological concerns that shape how people perceive risk.

The theory identifies three primary communication functions. First is care communication, which builds trust and demonstrates concern for affected populations. Second is consensus communication, which reaches agreement on risk definitions and management approaches through stakeholder dialogue. Third is crisis communication, which provides actionable guidance during acute emergencies (Peters et al., 1997).

Trust emerges as the foundational element determining communication effectiveness. Source credibility, competence perceptions, and demonstrated empathy critically influence whether audiences accept and act upon risk messages (Wray et al., 2008).

Risk communication principles prove particularly relevant to terrorism contexts wherein authorities must communicate about ambiguous, evolving, and psychologically salient threats while managing collective anxiety and preventing both complacency and panic (Altheide, 2006, 2017). Terrorism presents distinctive risk communication challenges: attacks are intentional rather than accidental, adversaries actively seek to maximize psychological impact beyond physical harm, threat probabilities remain inherently uncertain given adaptive adversary behaviors, and public dread of terrorism often exceeds objective likelihood due to catastrophic potential, perceived uncontrollability, and involuntary exposure (Nellis, 2009; Sunstein, 2003).

Effective terrorism risk communication requires calibrating messages across temporal phases. During heightened threat periods, communication should emphasize vigilance and reporting suspicious activities. However, it must avoid inducing paralyzing fear.

Immediately post-attack, authorities should provide safety information and correct misinformation. They must offer reassurance while acknowledging legitimate concerns. During extended recovery, communication should maintain appropriate caution. Yet it must not normalize excessive security anxieties that erode quality of life (Seeger et al., 2018; Wray et al., 2008).

The theory highlights critical tensions in terrorism communication. Authorities must warn populations about potential future attacks to enable protective actions. However, they must avoid threat exaggeration that amplifies terrorists' psychological impact.

They must demonstrate competence and control to maintain public confidence. Yet they must also acknowledge genuine uncertainties inherent to counterterrorism.

Finally, authorities must encourage community reporting and vigilance. At the same time, they must prevent stigmatization of particular ethnic, religious, or cultural groups (Powell, 2011; Croft, 2006).

## **Agenda-Setting and Media Framing Theory**

Agenda-Setting Theory, pioneered by McCombs and Shaw (1972), posits that media institutions exert substantial influence over public priorities by determining which issues receive coverage (first-level agenda-setting), how those issues are portrayed (second-level agenda-setting or attribute agenda-setting), and how disparate issues connect in public consciousness (third-level or network agenda-setting) (McCombs, 2014; McCombs & Reynolds, 2009). The theory's fundamental premise—"the media may not tell us what to think, but they are stunningly successful in telling us what to think about"—has received extensive empirical validation across diverse contexts, demonstrating strong correlations between media attention and public issue salience (Iyengar & Simon, 2000).

Media Framing Theory extends this foundation by examining how issues presented: frames constitute "selection and salience" processes wherein communicators emphasize certain aspects while deemphasizing others, thereby shaping how audiences understand and evaluate phenomena (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Four key framing functions include problem definition (what the issue is), causal attribution (what caused it), moral evaluation (is it right/wrong), and treatment recommendation (what should be done)

(Price et al., 1997). Different frames activate distinct cognitive schemas, values, and emotions, consequently producing divergent interpretations and policy preferences even when factual content remains constant (Iyengar, 1991).

Agenda-setting and framing mechanisms fundamentally shape societal reactions to terrorism, exerting influence upon public fear intensities, policy endorsement, intergroup perceptions, and enduring cultural narratives. Terrorist acts inherently possess high news value—dramatic, unexpected, conflictual, proximate—ensuring extensive coverage that elevates terrorism prominence on public agendas even when objective risk remains statistically minimal compared to other mortality causes (Altheide, 2006). Research documents predictable framing patterns: episodic frames (focusing on specific attacks and perpetrators) dominate over thematic frames (examining structural causes, historical contexts, or systemic factors), potentially limiting public understanding of terrorism's roots while emphasizing punitive responses over preventive approaches (Iyengar, 1991; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008).

War frames depict terrorism as military threats requiring armed responses; criminal frames emphasize law enforcement and judicial processes; and victim frames foreground human suffering and community resilience—each frame activating distinct emotional responses and policy preferences (Powell, 2011; Gerhards & Schäfer, 2014). The “homogenizing globalized media marketplace” phenomenon means international broadcasters increasingly employ similar frames despite diverse cultural contexts, standardizing global terrorism discourse around particular narrative templates (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024). Social media fundamentally disrupts traditional agenda-setting, democratizing frame contestation as diverse actors—authorities, journalists, activists, extremists, citizens—simultaneously compete to define attacks' meanings, with algorithmic amplification potentially privileging emotionally resonant frames over factually accurate ones (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

## **Social Trauma and Collective Memory Theory**

Social Trauma Theory examines how catastrophic events generate collective psychological wounds that transcend individual experiences, fundamentally disrupting communities' social fabric, shared meanings, and collective identity (Erikson, 1976; Alexander, 2012). Kai Erikson's seminal conceptualization defines collective trauma as occurring when community members share a violent experience that fundamentally alters their sense of self, damages the bonds linking people together, and impairs the prevailing sense of community. Unlike individual trauma focused on personal psychological sequelae, collective trauma emphasizes communal dimensions: shared loss, collective mourning, disrupted social networks, and damaged cultural narratives that ordinarily provide meaning and coherence (Hirschberger, 2018).

Collective Memory Theory, developed by Maurice Halbwachs and extended by contemporary scholars, examines how groups construct, maintain, and transmit shared understandings of past events through commemorative practices, narrative repetition, and symbolic representations. Halbwachs explicitly positioned his theory against purely psychological frameworks, particularly rejecting Freudian conceptualizations that treat the unconscious as a repository for all past experiences where forgetting—not remembering—requires active work through repression and “screen memories” (Olick, 1999). By appropriating psychological terminology while fundamentally reorienting it toward social processes, Halbwachs established that memory is constructed and maintained through collective frameworks rather than individual cognitive mechanisms, thereby providing a crucial lens for understanding how communities collectively process and assign meaning to traumatic events ( . Jeffrey K. Olick and Joyce Robbins) .

Communication plays dual roles in collective trauma: it can either facilitate healing through providing coherent narratives, enabling collective mourning, and reconstructing meaning; or it can compound trauma through sensationalist coverage, repeated exposure to graphic content, and polarizing narratives that fragment communities (Seeger &

Sellnow, 2016). Effective post-attack communication supports social healing by: acknowledging collective loss while emphasizing community resilience; providing factual information that reduces uncertainty and fear; offering opportunities for communal commemoration; and constructing narratives that affirm shared values without demonizing entire groups (Bonetto et al., 2018; United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2024).

## **Meaning Management and Narrative Construction Theory**

Meaning Management Theory conceptualizes crisis communication as fundamentally concerned with constructing, maintaining, and reconstructing shared meanings that enable collective sense-making and coordinated action (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Crises constitute meaning voids wherein established interpretive frameworks prove inadequate, generating uncertainty, confusion, and competing explanations that organizations must address through deliberate meaning management efforts (Weick et al., 2005). Stories fulfill essential roles in how we understand the world. They simplify intricate realities into digestible accounts, create continuity across time by connecting what has happened with what is happening and what might come, offer ethical structures that separate protagonists from antagonists, and galvanize groups toward action by spotlighting dangers and potential remedies.

Terrorism fundamentally entails narrative contestation. Multiple actors advance competing interpretations of terrorist events. Terrorist entities construct narratives depicting violence as warranted responses to perceived injustices. Governmental authorities formulate counter-narratives accentuating criminality, barbarity, and illegitimacy. Media institutions frame occurrences through distinctive interpretive frameworks. Impacted communities forge collective narratives centered upon resilience, bereavement, and recuperation.

Effective governmental communication requires actively managing multiple narrative dimensions. Causal narratives must explain attack origins without legitimizing grievances. Responsibility narratives should clearly attribute culpability to perpetrators.

Victim narratives must honor those harmed while avoiding perpetual victim identity. Resilience narratives should emphasize community strength without minimizing trauma. Prevention narratives must outline protective measures without inducing paralysis (Braddock & Horgan, 2016; Silverman et al., 2016).

Counter-narrative strategies prove essential: authorities must contest terrorist propaganda claiming attacks serve legitimate causes, challenge extremist identity narratives that recruit adherents, and provide alternative stories emphasizing shared values, peaceful conflict resolution, and civic inclusion (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). Digital environments amplify narrative competition: decentralized social media enables diverse actors to propagate competing stories simultaneously, algorithmic systems may privilege emotionally resonant narratives over factually accurate ones, and echo chambers reinforce particular interpretations while insulating audiences from alternative perspectives (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

## **Theoretical Integration**

These five theoretical frameworks developed independently across different scholarly traditions. However, they offer complementary insights that collectively illuminate terrorism crisis communication's multidimensional nature. SCCT provides foundational understanding of reputation-focused organizational responses. It also explains strategy-matching logic. Risk Communication Theory addresses threat perception and uncertainty management. It further examines trust-building imperatives.

Agenda-Setting and Framing theories reveal media's power in shaping public priorities and interpretations. Social Trauma Theory highlights collective psychological dimensions. These dimensions require healing-oriented communication. Meaning Management theory emphasizes narrative construction as central to collective sense-making (Ulmer et al., 2011; Seeger et al., 2003).

An integrated framework synthesizing these perspectives recognizes that effective terrorism crisis communication must simultaneously: protect institutional legitimacy, manage risk perceptions and enable protective actions, contest media frames while providing authoritative information, facilitate collective healing from trauma, and construct coherent narratives that maintain social cohesion while delegitimizing violence (Liu et al., 2023). This integration transcends any single theory's limitations, offering comprehensive understanding that informs evidence-based practice addressing contemporary terrorism communication challenges.

## **Integrated Theoretical Analysis**

### **Integration across the Temporal Dimension**

The temporal dimension of terrorism crisis communication reveals fundamental tensions between competing imperatives that evolve across crisis phases (Seeger et al., 2003). During the pre-crisis phase, authorities must balance preventive communication that raises awareness without inducing persistent anxiety or "security fatigue" wherein populations become desensitized to repeated warnings (Wray et al., 2006). This tension becomes particularly acute in today's threat landscape, marked by high but dispersed risk levels, where maintaining proper vigilance without normalizing fear remains an ongoing challenge. Risk Communication Theory proves especially relevant here, as authorities must adjust their messages to address perceived threat levels, not just objective ones. Public risk perceptions—shaped by dread, perceived control and familiarity—often differ significantly from statistical realities.

The acute crisis phase (0-24 hours) presents qualitatively distinct communication challenges. Temporal pressures intensify dramatically during this period. Authorities must disseminate life-saving information rapidly while maintaining accuracy. This creates significant tension. The tension exacerbated by incomplete information, evolving situations, and intense media pressure for immediate updates (Seeger et al., 2018).

SCCT's strategy-matching framework encounters significant limitations during this phase. Terrorist attacks theoretically constitute "victim crises" permitting less accommodative strategies. However, governmental responses frequently adopt highly accommodative approaches. These include extensive sympathy expressions and corrective action promises. This reflects authorities' dual roles as both victims and security guarantors (Coombs, 2015).

The Boston Marathon bombing (2013) exemplifies these dynamics. Initial messaging focused on immediate safety guidance and perpetrator apprehension. However, subsequent revelations about intelligence failures necessitated more accommodative strategies. These strategies acknowledged security lapses (JGPR Academy, 2025).

The immediate post-crisis phase (days to weeks) marks a critical transition wherein communication shifts from crisis response to recovery facilitation. Social Trauma Theory illuminates this period's distinctive requirements: communication must facilitate collective mourning and meaning-making processes while avoiding trauma amplification through repeated graphic imagery exposure or sensationalist coverage (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Alexander, 2012).

Research on September 11 attacks demonstrates that vicarious traumatization extended far beyond directly affected populations, with national-level psychological impacts persisting months post-attack (Silver et al., 2002; Galea et al., 2002). Effective communication during this phase balances acknowledgment of collective loss with emphasis on community resilience, providing information that reduces uncertainty while offering opportunities for communal commemoration (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2024).

The extended recovery phase (months to years) involves fundamentally different communication functions centered on narrative construction and collective memory formation. Meaning Management Theory proves especially relevant as authorities, media, and communities engage in ongoing contestation over attack meanings, lessons learned, and appropriate responses (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

This period characterized by the formation of competing national narratives—some fostering societal recovery through emphasis on shared values and collective resilience, others intensifying social divisions through retaliatory narratives and the demonization of external groups. Communication strategies must support community resilience building while extracting and disseminating lessons learned to enhance future preparedness—functions extending well beyond traditional crisis communication timeframes (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2023; CORDIS, 2009).

### **Interaction among Different Actors**

Contemporary terrorism crisis communication unfolds within complex multi-actor ecosystems wherein governmental authorities, media institutions, affected communities, and digital publics simultaneously compete to define attack meanings and appropriate responses (Eriksson, 2024). Traditional hierarchical communication models wherein authorities exercise dominant narrative control have eroded substantially, displaced by networked communication ecologies characterized by multiple competing information sources (Liu et al., 2023).

Networked Crisis Communication Theory (NCCT) provides essential analytical frameworks for understanding these dynamics, emphasizing network gatekeepers—including micro-influencers and platform algorithms—who exert substantial influence over information flow within digital networks (Eriksson, 2024; Gammarano et al., 2024).

The relationship between governmental authorities and media institutions proves particularly complex, characterized by simultaneous cooperation and tension. Authorities depend on media channels for rapid information dissemination yet frequently clash with media imperatives for dramatic coverage, exclusive information, and critical questioning that may undermine official narratives (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2014). Agenda-Setting and Framing theories illuminate media's substantial power in shaping public priorities and interpretations: episodic frames focusing on specific attacks and perpetrators typically dominate over thematic frames examining structural causes, potentially

limiting public understanding while emphasizing punitive over preventive responses (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Iyengar, 1991).

The “homogenizing globalized media marketplace” phenomenon means international broadcasters increasingly employ similar frames despite diverse cultural contexts, standardizing global terrorism discourse around particular narrative templates (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

Social media platforms fundamentally disrupt traditional communication hierarchies, democratizing narrative contestation while introducing new challenges. The Westgate Mall attack (2013) demonstrated both opportunities and risks: while Twitter enabled rapid official communication, governmental social media responses suffered from inaccuracies and inconsistencies that further compromised credibility (Kimocho & Nyarang’o, 2019).

Digital environments enable diverse actors—citizen journalists, activists, extremists—to propagate competing narratives simultaneously, with algorithmic amplification potentially privileging emotionally resonant content over factually accurate information (Freelon & Wells, 2020). This fragmentation creates “information cacophonies” wherein authoritative voices struggle to achieve salience amid numerous competing sources (Liu et al., 2023).

Affected communities constitute critical yet frequently overlooked actors in terrorism crisis communication. Communities serve not merely as passive information recipients but as active meaning-makers who construct collective narratives about attacks, develop resilience strategies, and transmit collective memories (Hirschberger, 2018).

Effective communication requires genuine dialogue rather than unidirectional messaging, acknowledging community voices and incorporating local knowledge into response strategies (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2023). The failure to meaningfully engage communities—particularly those facing stigmatization post-attack—can compound trauma, deepen social divisions, and undermine long-term recovery efforts (Bonetto et al., 2018).

## **Building Trust between Media and Communities**

The relationship between media institutions and affected communities in terrorism crisis contexts represents a critical yet frequently underexamined dimension of effective crisis communication. Significant progress has been achieved in recent years through initiatives promoting collaborative journalism models wherein media organizations engage communities as active partners rather than passive information sources (Hargie & Irving, 2016 & Mitroff, 1993; Smith, 1990; Hart et al., 2001).

However, substantial gaps persist that undermine trust-building efforts. Media institutions continue to struggle with balancing commercial imperatives favoring sensationalistic coverage against ethical obligations to minimize harm and avoid amplifying terrorist propaganda. Community members frequently report feeling exploited by journalists seeking dramatic narratives while lacking sustained engagement during extended recovery phases.

The digital transformation has further complicated these dynamics, as social media enables communities to bypass traditional media gatekeepers, sometimes disseminating misinformation while claiming authentic local perspectives that media organizations lack. Research examining post-attack coverage in tourism-dependent communities like Imlil demonstrates that media framing can inflict collective economic trauma extending beyond direct casualties, yet few established mechanisms exist for communities to meaningfully influence coverage decisions affecting their recovery (Kimothe, S. G., & Nyarang'o, C. N. (2019).

Bridging these persistent gaps requires institutionalizing community participation in editorial decision-making processes, developing shared protocols for trauma-sensitive reporting, establishing feedback mechanisms allowing communities to voice concerns about coverage impacts, and creating accountability structures that extend beyond immediate crisis phases to encompass long-term recovery narratives. The evolution from extractive journalism models toward genuine community partnership represents an essential but incomplete transformation in contemporary terrorism crisis communication.

## **Contemporary Challenges in Digital Environments**

Digital transformation has fundamentally reshaped terrorism crisis communication, introducing novel challenges while amplifying existing tensions. The “flash-to-bang” compression—wherein radicalization-to-violence timelines have dramatically shortened—reflects how digital technologies enable rapid ideological consumption and operational planning without extensive organizational involvement (D’Arco, 2024). Data from North America indicates that of 113 terrorist attacks between 2007-2023, only 15 maintained organizational linkages, with lone actors increasingly executing attacks based on ideologically eclectic “salad bar” assemblages encountered online (D’Arco, 2024).

This transformation complicates preventive communication: traditional counter-radicalization messaging targeting organizational recruitment proves less effective against decentralized, self-initiated violence (Braddock & Horgan, 2016).

Artificial intelligence and synthetic media present emerging challenges that existing theoretical frameworks inadequately address. Terrorist groups increasingly employ AI-generated content for propaganda dissemination, while generative AI enables rapid production of sophisticated disinformation that traditional fact-checking struggles to counter (Vision of Humanity, 2025). The 2024 Global Terrorism Index highlighted AI-generated disinformation as among the most significant emerging threats to effective crisis communication, as synthetic content can rapidly spread through social networks before verification occurs (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024). These developments necessitate theoretical extensions incorporating algorithmic communication dynamics and automated content generation into crisis communication frameworks (Liu et al., 2023).

Platform-specific communication strategies require differentiated approaches recognizing distinct user demographics, content formats, and algorithmic logics across social media platforms. Research demonstrates that terrorism coverage on YouTube elicits substantially

different audience reactions compared to text-based platforms, with video content producing more intense emotional responses (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

Echo chambers and filter bubbles create fragmented information environments wherein different population segments consume divergent narratives with minimal cross-exposure (Tucker et al., 2018). This fragmentation undermines shared situational awareness essential for coordinated crisis response, as different communities may operate from fundamentally different understandings of attack causes, appropriate responses, and threat levels (Tucker et al., 2018). Research indicates that social media algorithms may inadvertently amplify divisive content over unifying messages, potentially deepening societal fractures precisely when cohesion proves most critical (Freelon & Wells, 2020).

### **Case Study: The Imlil Terrorist Attack (Morocco, December 2018)**

On December 17, 2018, the bodies of two Scandinavian tourists—Louisa Vesterager Jespersen (24, Denmark) and Maren Ueland (28, Norway)—were discovered near the village of Imlil in Morocco's Atlas Mountains, approximately 10 kilometers from Mount Toubkal, North Africa's highest peak. The women, university students studying outdoor recreation and nature guidance, had been hiking independently when four Moroccan men who had pledged allegiance to ISIS in video-recorded days before the attack killed them. The assailants, aged 25-33, had spent months planning various terrorist scenarios—including storming resorts, vehicle attacks, and suicide bombings—before settling on targeting tourists in the remote mountain region (Washington Post, 2019). Moroccan authorities described the perpetrators as “lone wolves” who acted on their own initiative without direct coordination with ISIS leadership, exemplifying the “flash-to-bang” compression and leaderless resistance dynamics discussed in contemporary terrorism literature (Al Jazeera, 2018; D'Arco, 2024).

The attack represented Morocco's first terrorism incident targeting tourists since the 2011 Marrakech café bombing that killed 17 people,

and occurred in a country that had been largely spared militant attacks due to efficient security services that had dismantled 57 terrorist cells between 2015-2018 (Outside Online, 2022; Arab Weekly, 2019). The incident's impact extended beyond immediate casualties: it threatened Morocco's vital tourism industry, which constitutes an essential component of the national economy, and fundamentally altered the character of Imlil, a small village of 10,000 residents dependent on adventure tourism revenue (France 24, 2018).

## **Crisis Communication Response**

The Moroccan government's crisis communication response demonstrated several characteristics consistent with the integrated theoretical framework's predictions regarding temporal phases, multi-actor dynamics, and contemporary digital challenges.

**Acute Crisis Phase (0-72 hours):** Moroccan authorities initiated rapid law enforcement responses, with the first arrest occurring within 24 hours after police discovered an ID card left at the crime scene (Wikipedia, 2024). By December 20—three days post-attack—authorities had arrested four primary suspects, demonstrating operational competence that SCCT identifies as critical for maintaining institutional legitimacy during victim crises (Coombs, 2015). Government spokesman Mustapha El Khalfi immediately condemned the incident as a “terrorist, criminal act” that “does not fit with the values and traditions of Moroccan people,” employing the narrative construction strategies identified in Meaning Management Theory to distinguish terrorist actors from national identity and cultural values.

Nevertheless, the acute phase illuminated substantial transparency-security tensions documented within Risk Communication Theory. Moroccan authorities reportedly instructed Imlil residents not to speak with journalists, reflecting concerns about narrative control but potentially undermining the transparency imperatives that build public trust (France 24, 2018). This approach created information voids that media organizations filled through alternative sources, including local

residents speaking anonymously and international security experts offering analysis—dynamics consistent with Networked Crisis Communication Theory’s emphasis on multiple competing information sources in digital environments (Eriksson, 2024).

**Digital Terror Amplification:** The crisis demonstrated severe challenges from “digital terror” as a graphic video purporting to show the beheading of one victim rapidly circulated on social media platforms, with Danish intelligence services subsequently authenticating the footage (Wikipedia, 2024; Arab Weekly, 2019). This digital dissemination extended vicarious traumatization far beyond directly affected populations—precisely the phenomenon identified in contemporary terrorism literature wherein 85.7% of survivors experience persistent PTSD while digital exposure creates cascading psychological impacts across geographically dispersed populations (Farber, 2024; Psychiatric Services, 2024). Moroccan authorities struggled to control video dissemination, highlighting the limitations of content removal strategies that fail to address underlying narratives in decentralized digital environments—a challenge central to contemporary crisis communication frameworks.

## **Multi-Actor Communication Dynamics**

The crisis response exposed intricate multi-stakeholder dynamics wherein governmental entities, international collaborators, media establishments, and impacted populations contested the construction of attack narratives within networked communicative landscapes.

**International Coordination:** The Danish and Norwegian governments dispatched officers to Morocco to assist investigations, with Prime Ministers from both countries publicly addressing the attacks. Danish Prime Minister Lars Løkke Rasmussen characterized the killings as “politically motivated and thus an act of terror,” emphasizing that “there are still dark forces that want to fight our values” and “we must not give in”—rhetoric consistent with resilience narratives that Social Trauma Theory identifies as either facilitating collective healing or

potentially reinforcing revenge narratives depending on implementation (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016; Croft, 2006). Norwegian Prime Minister Erna Solberg adopted more measured framing, noting that “terrorism is not the only lead being investigated,” reflecting divergent national approaches to crisis communication that Agenda-Setting Theory demonstrates can activate distinct cognitive schemas and policy preferences even when factual content remains constant.

**Local Community Impact:** Imlil residents experienced the attack as collective trauma affecting the entire village’s economic survival. As one local guide stated, “You would rather hurt yourself than hurt a tourist, because if you hurt a tourist, you hurt everyone” (Outside Online, 2022). This articulation reveals how terrorism’s psychological impact extends beyond direct victims to encompass entire communities dependent on tourism, validating Social Trauma Theory’s emphasis on disrupted social fabric and damaged communal bonds (Erikson, 1976; Hirschberger, 2018). Moroccan media reported that residents feared discussing the incident, with some crying and expressing profound distress—responses consistent with collective trauma’s manifestations including shared loss, disrupted networks, and compromised sense of safety (Alexander, 2012).

**Media Framing:** International media coverage predominantly employed episodic frames. These frames focused on specific attack details and perpetrator profiles. They did not use thematic frames examining structural causes or counterterrorism policy effectiveness.

This is precisely the pattern that Agenda-Setting research documents as potentially limiting public understanding. It emphasizes punitive over preventive responses (Iyengar & Simon, 2000; Papacharissi & Oliveira, 2008).

Coverage emphasized the “amateurish” and “improvised” nature of the attack. Norwegian security expert Thomas Hegghammer noted, “Everything about this case seems improvised and opportunistic. I don’t think this is ordered from Daesh leadership” (Al Jazeera, 2018).

This framing potentially undermined public threat perception. Simultaneously, it provided reassurance about organizational terrorist capabilities. This illustrates the complex balancing act Risk Communication Theory identifies. Authorities must warn populations while avoiding panic induction (Sunstein, 2003; Wray et al., 2008).

## **Long-Term Communication and Policy Adjustments**

The extended recovery phase demonstrated how communication shifts toward narrative construction and institutional reform consistent with Meaning Management Theory's emphasis on ongoing contestation over attack meanings and appropriate responses (Weick, 1995; Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010).

**Security Policy Communication:** Moroccan authorities implemented mandatory guide requirements for all foreign hikers on Mount Toubkal trails, established four checkpoint systems requiring passport verification and guide credential confirmation, and prohibited tent camping in mountain areas (Outside Online, 2022). These measures were communicated as demonstrating decisive governmental competence—one of the three core messages SCCT identifies as essential during terrorism crises alongside resolute anti-terror determination and victim support commitment (CORDIS, 2009; Coombs, 2015). However, the policies generated tensions: while reassuring tourists through visible security presence, they simultaneously signaled persistent threat levels and potentially normalized security anxieties that Risk Communication Theory warns can erode quality of life during extended recovery periods (Seeger et al., 2018).

**Tourism Industry Messaging:** Moroccan tourism authorities faced delicate communication challenges balancing transparency about security improvements with avoiding threat amplification that could deter visitors—precisely the calibration that the Boston Marathon bombing response exemplified through providing regular updates while withholding tactical details (JGPR Academy, 2025). Local guides and hospitality providers emphasized Morocco's overall safety record and

the attack's exceptional nature, attempting to reconstruct collective narratives emphasizing resilience and normalcy (Outside Online, 2022).

**Commemorative Practices:** Both Denmark and Norway held national funeral ceremonies attended by Prime Ministers and featuring Moroccan diplomatic representation, demonstrating the ritualized collective mourning processes that Social Trauma Theory identifies as essential for social healing. Vigils occurred in multiple Moroccan cities including Rabat, Marrakech, and Imlil, providing opportunities for communal commemoration that Collective Memory Theory emphasize as constructing shared understandings affirming values without demonizing entire groups.

## **Analytical Insights and Theoretical Implications**

The Imlil case validates several core propositions of the integrated theoretical framework while illuminating contemporary crisis communication challenges:

**Lone-Wolf Terrorism Communication Challenges:** The attack exemplified the "lone wolf" terrorism proliferation that characterizes contemporary threats, with perpetrators self-radicalizing through online content without formal organizational ties—the "salad bar ideology" phenomenon wherein ideologically eclectic assemblages are cherry-picked during online browsing (D'Arco, 2024). This transformation fundamentally complicates preventive communication: traditional counter-radicalization messaging targeting organizational recruitment proves less effective against decentralized, self-initiated violence (Braddock & Horgan, 2016). The case demonstrates how digital technologies enable compressed radicalization-to-violence timelines, with perpetrators moving from ideological consumption to operational execution within months without extensive training or coordination.

**Digital Terror's Amplification Effects:** The graphic video's viral dissemination validated concerns about "digital terror" extending psychological harm across geographically dispersed populations

experiencing vicarious traumatization (Psychiatric Services, 2024). Moroccan authorities' inability to prevent video circulation despite rapid response efforts demonstrates the limitations of content removal strategies in decentralized digital environments—a challenge requiring theoretical extensions incorporating algorithmic amplification dynamics and platform-specific communication strategies (Liu et al., 2023; Tucker et al., 2018).

**Economic Vulnerability and Collective Trauma:** The case powerfully illustrates how terrorism attacks tourism-dependent communities inflict collective trauma extending beyond direct casualties to encompass entire economic ecosystems. Imlil residents' fear that "if you hurt a tourist, you hurt everyone" reveals terrorism's capacity to disrupt social fabric precisely as Social Trauma Theory predicts, generating cascading effects through economic insecurity, damaged communal bonds, and compromised collective identity (Erikson, 1976; Hirschberger, 2018).

**Transparency-Security Tensions:** Authorities' reported instructions limiting resident media engagement exemplifies the persistent tension between transparency imperatives that build public trust and operational security requirements—the delicate calibration that Risk Communication Theory emphasizes as central to effective crisis messaging (JGPR Academy, 2025). While understandable from security perspectives, such restrictions potentially create information voids filled by alternative sources, undermining the credibility capital essential for crisis communication effectiveness.

**Multi-Actor Coordination Complexity:** The case demonstrated successful international coordination between Moroccan, Danish, and Norwegian authorities, validating frameworks emphasizing multi-stakeholder collaboration in networked crisis communication ecologies (Eriksson, 2024). However, divergent national framing approaches—Denmark's emphatic terrorism characterization versus Norway's more cautious investigative framing—illustrate how different actors within coordinated responses may activate distinct cognitive schemas and emotional responses among respective populations (Entman, 1993; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007).

The Imlil attack thus provides empirical validation for the integrated theoretical framework's core propositions while highlighting areas requiring continued theoretical development, particularly regarding lone-wolf terrorism communication strategies, digital terror mitigation approaches, economic vulnerability dimensions in tourism-dependent regions, and cross-national coordination mechanisms for managing attacks affecting multiple countries' citizens in third-party locations.

## **Conclusion**

This theoretical paper developed a comprehensive integrated framework for understanding crisis communication in terrorist attack contexts by synthesizing five complementary theoretical traditions: Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), Risk Communication Theory, Agenda-Setting and Media Framing Theory, Social Trauma and Collective Memory Theory, and Meaning Management and Narrative Construction Theory (Coombs, 2015; 2000; McCombs, 2014; Alexander, 2012; Weick, 1995).

The framework demonstrates that effective terrorism crisis communication requires simultaneous attention to multiple dimensions that single-theory approaches inadequately capture: institutional legitimacy protection (SCCT), risk perception management (Risk Communication), media frame contestation (Agenda-Setting), collective trauma healing (Social Trauma), and narrative construction (Meaning Management) (Ulmer et al., 2011; Seeger et al., 2003). The synthesis reveals that terrorism crisis communication operates within fundamentally different parameters compared to conventional organizational crises, necessitating multi-dimensional communication strategies addressing security coordination, psychological trauma mitigation, social cohesion maintenance, counter-narrative dissemination, and long-term community resilience building—roles extending well beyond traditional public relations functions (United Nations Office of Counter-Terrorism, 2023; CORDIS, 2009).

The analysis revealed critical temporal dynamics wherein communication strategies, actor configurations, and success criteria shift substantially across four distinct crisis phases: pre-crisis preparedness, acute crisis response (0-24 hours), immediate aftermath (days-weeks), and extended recovery (months-years) (Seeger et al., 2003; Wray et al., 2008). During the pre-crisis phase, the primary challenge involves maintaining vigilance without inducing “security fatigue,” requiring calibration of messages to perceived rather than merely objective threat levels while establishing credibility capital through sustained transparency (PRSA, 2024). The acute crisis phase presents qualitatively distinct challenges requiring rapid information dissemination while maintaining accuracy, with governmental responses frequently adopting highly accommodative approaches despite terrorist attacks theoretically constituting “victim crises”—reflecting authorities’ dual roles as both victims and security guarantors (Coombs, 2015; Seeger et al., 2018).

The immediate post-crisis phase shifts toward recovery facilitation, requiring trauma-sensitive communication that balances acknowledgment of collective loss with emphasis on community resilience (Seeger & Sellnow, 2016), while the extended recovery phase centers on narrative construction and collective memory formation wherein authorities, media, and communities contest attack meanings and appropriate responses (Weick, 1995; Croft, 2006).

The framework illuminated complex multi-actor dynamics wherein governmental authorities, media institutions, digital publics, and affected communities simultaneously compete to define attack meanings within networked communication ecologies resistant to hierarchical control (Eriksson, 2024; Liu et al., 2023). Traditional hierarchical communication models have eroded substantially, displaced by networked ecologies characterized by multiple competing information sources including citizen journalists, micro-influencers, and malicious disinformation actors (Gammarano et al., 2024).

The research demonstrates that effective contemporary crisis communication requires authorities to navigate three interconnected

tension zones: government-media relations characterized by simultaneous cooperation and conflict (Gerhards & Schäfer, 2014); centralized official messaging versus decentralized social media dynamics wherein algorithmic amplification privileges emotionally resonant content over factually accurate information (Freelon & Wells, 2020); and top-down communication versus bottom-up community meaning-making, as affected communities serve as active narrative constructors rather than passive information recipients (Hirschberger, 2018). The “homogenizing globalized media marketplace” phenomenon means international broadcasters increasingly employ similar frames despite diverse cultural contexts, standardizing global terrorism discourse around particular narrative templates that may inadequately reflect local contexts and community needs (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

Contemporary digital transformation fundamentally reshapes terrorism crisis communication through four critical challenge domains:

First, the “flash-to-bang” compression—wherein radicalization-to-violence timelines have dramatically shortened—enables rapid ideological consumption and operational planning without extensive organizational involvement, with data indicating that of 113 terrorist attacks in North America between 2007-2023, only 15 maintained organizational linkages (D’Arco, 2024).

Second, artificial intelligence and synthetic media present emerging challenges as terrorist groups employ AI-generated content for propaganda while generative AI enables rapid production of sophisticated disinformation that traditional fact-checking struggles to counter (Vision of Humanity, 2025; Institute for Economics & Peace, 2024).

Third, platform-specific dynamics require differentiated approaches recognizing distinct user demographics, content formats, and algorithmic logics, as terrorism coverage on video platforms elicits substantially different audience reactions compared to text-based platforms (Rothenberger & Hase, 2024).

Fourth, echo chambers and filter bubbles create fragmented information environments wherein different population segments consume divergent narratives with minimal cross-exposure, undermining shared situational awareness essential for coordinated crisis response while social media algorithms may inadvertently amplify divisive content over unifying messages (2018; Freelon & Wells, 2020).

The Imlil terrorist attack in Morocco's Atlas Mountains (December 2018) provides compelling empirical validation for the integrated framework's core propositions. The case exemplifies contemporary terrorism's defining characteristics: lone-wolf perpetrators self-radicalized through online content without formal organizational ties, demonstrating the "flash-to-bang" compression wherein digital technologies enable rapid ideological consumption and operational planning (D'Arco, 2024; Al Jazeera, 2018).

The Moroccan government's response illustrated both the framework's predictive power and its practical challenges: authorities demonstrated operational competence through rapid arrests and clear narrative framing that distinguished terrorist actors from national values, yet struggled with transparency-security tensions as reported instructions limiting resident media engagement created information voids filled by alternative sources. The graphic beheading video's viral global circulation despite content removal efforts validated concerns about "digital terror" extending vicarious traumatization across geographically dispersed populations, while the attack's devastating impact on Imlil's tourism-dependent economy empirically confirmed Social Trauma Theory's emphasis on collective psychological wounds disrupting entire communities' social fabric and economic security (Psychiatric Services, 2024; Erikson, 1976; Outside Online, 2022).

The divergent framing strategies employed by Danish and Norwegian governments—emphatic terrorism characterization versus measured investigative framing—demonstrated how coordinated international responses may nevertheless activate distinct cognitive

schemas among different populations, underscoring the complexity of multi-actor crisis communication in networked ecologies (Entman, 1993; Iyengar, 1991).

The integrated framework generates evidence-based strategic recommendations for crisis communication practitioners, policymakers, and emergency management professionals. Authorities should prioritize pre-crisis trust building through sustained transparency, demonstrated empathy, and authentic stakeholder engagement in non-crisis periods, recognizing that communication efficacy during acute crises depends fundamentally on accumulated credibility capital (PRSA, 2024). Phase-appropriate communication strategies tailored to each temporal phase's distinctive requirements should replace generic crisis response protocols, while multi-platform communication capabilities address platform-specific dynamics and fragmented media ecologies (Seeger et al., 2003; Liu et al., 2023). Proactive counter-misinformation mechanisms require pre-positioned rapid response capabilities developed through partnerships with platform providers, fact-checking organizations, and trusted community influencers (JGPR Academy, 2025).

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