Epistemological potential of media-philosophical and socio-communicative theories of terrorism: challenges to humanitarian security

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The article presents a theoretical and epistemological analysis of media-philosophical and socio-communicative theories of terrorism developed by Wolfgang Frindte, Gabriel Weimann, and Brigitte Nacos, with the aim of revealing the mechanisms of media construction of terrorism as a global threat and the role of mass media in shaping public perception of this phenomenon in the context of humanitarian security challenges. It is demonstrated that in the contemporary globalized world terrorism acquires new mediatized forms, forming symbiotic relationships with mass media that amplify the effects of intimidation, propaganda, and the construction of reality through the visualization of violence, repetition of messages, and symbolic codes of fear.

In particular, W. Frindte's theory substantiates the interaction between media constructions (Medien-Frames) and individual interpretations (Individual-Frames), in which the media, through dramatization, emotionalization, and framing, shape the perception of terrorism as an inevitable danger, creating illusory correlations (for example, associating Muslims with terrorism) and a self-reinforcing cycle that legitimizes restrictions on democratic freedoms. G. Weimann's "theatre of terror" theory demonstrates how terrorist acts are planned as symbolic performances designed to maximize media attention, employing communication technologies for propaganda, psychological warfare, and cyberterrorism, thereby generating dilemmas for the media and posing threats to liberal values. B. Nacos's theory of "mass-mediated terrorism" emphasizes that without media coverage terrorism loses its symbolic power, while the media become a key element in the dissemination of fear, recruitment, propaganda, and the legitimization of actions, as exemplified by the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001.

The theories demonstrate that contemporary terrorism functions as a communicative strategy dependent on media influence, with its "effectiveness" measured by informational resonance rather than by the scale of physical violence. It is also established that the media not only transmit information but actively construct images of threat through spectacle, dramatization, and staging, thereby intensifying public fear and challenges to humanitarian security.

Introduction

In the contemporary globalized and largely formalized world, terrorism is acquiring new forms closely linked to media and communication technologies. Stable symbiotic relationships between terrorist acts and mass media are increasingly observed, significantly amplifying the effects of intimidation and propaganda. Equally important is the growing influence of media on the formation of public perceptions of terrorism, particularly through social networks and digital platforms, which function not only as channels for broadcasting terrorist acts but also as distinctive constructors of reality. Within this space, ideological narratives of radical groups are actively disseminated, while images of threats become stereotyped.

Key narratives operate as substantivators of fear and danger, functioning as discursive mechanisms that transform processes, relations, or events into imagined "things," thereby endowing them with autonomous ontological status. Through the visualization of violence

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in the media space, the repetition of messages, and the use of symbolic codes, fear becomes embedded in mass consciousness as a social affect. At the interdisciplinary intersection of philosophy, military studies, political science, and social communications, there emerges a pressing need for a comprehensive and in-depth epistemological analysis to understand the mechanisms through which state and non-state terrorism are disseminated via media and exert influence on public consciousness. Consequently, the humanitarian security challenges posed by terrorism necessitate the study of theories that conceptualize the role of media in the formation of threat narratives and the development of corresponding counter-strategies.

Research methods

The study employs the following methods focused on the analysis of texts and theories: comparative analysis, content analysis of scholarly literature, and discourse analysis. The comparative method is aimed at juxtaposing the key ideas of the selected authors, in particular Frindte's concept of the media construction of terrorism with Weimann's notion of the "theatre of terror" and Nacos's concept of "mass-mediated terrorism." This approach makes it possible to identify both common features – such as the emphasis on spectacle and media amplification of terrorist acts – and distinctive aspects, including differing emphases on the role of the audience or media structures.

The method of content analysis of scholarly literature involves the systematic coding and classification of key concepts, ideas, and examples drawn from the authors' works, with particular attention to media frames, staging, and narratives. Specifically, it focuses on the ways threats are constructed, the use of emotional and symbolic codes (fear, danger, enemy), and the legitimization of certain political and security practices. This enables an assessment of how discursive mechanisms shape public perceptions of terrorism and the related challenges to humanitarian security. The combination of these methods ensures a multilevel analysis of media-philosophical and socio-communicative theories of terrorism, contributing to a deeper understanding of their epistemological potential and practical relevance for countering contemporary threats.

Research Results

In Ukrainian scholarship, the epistemological potential of theories of terrorism and counterterrorism has been explored in a number of publications. In particular, studies by V. Sliusar, I. Vitiuk, I. Kutashev, V. Savitsky, and H. Shpytalenko analyze philosophical and ethical concepts of the seventeenth to early twentieth centuries in the context of terrorism analysis and the development of counterterrorism strategies. These include Hobbes's concept of statist terror, which justifies state violence as a means of maintaining order; Rousseau's notion of the "general will" as a critique of violence through direct democracy; Kant's categorical imperative as an ethical condemnation of terrorism; and Weber's theory of legitimate domination, which explains the motivation of terrorist organizations through an ethic of conviction and charismatic legitimacy (*Slyusar et al., 2025a*).

In another study, V. Sliusar, S. Kostyuchkov, O. Hordiichuk, and V. Kuchmenko analyze theories of terrorism and counterterrorism through the prism of the philosophical-legal and ethical theories of René Girard and Slavoj Žižek, who interpret terrorism not as an accidental or pathological form of violence but as a structurally

conditioned manifestation of contemporary social dynamics (*Slyusar et al., 2025b*). Scholars have also focused on modern socio-psychological theories of terrorism and counterterrorism (*Slyusar et al., 2025c*). In the context of searching for strategies to prevent media-oriented terrorism, particular attention should be paid to the research by H. Tymofieieva, who, based on data from psychological experiments, sociological studies, and various models of news dissemination, substantiates the quantitative and qualitative impact of social media and Internet content on social cohesion during periods of crises and catastrophes and identifies the nature of this influence (*Tymofieieva, 2024*).

The **purpose of this article** is to provide a theoretical and epistemological analysis of media-philosophical and socio-communicative theories of terrorism developed by Wolfgang Frindte, Gabriel Weimann, and Brigitte Nacos, in order to reveal the mechanisms of the media construction of terrorism, its staging as a global threat, and the role of mass media in shaping public perception of this phenomenon.

Research Discussion

The German scholar *Wolfgang Frindte* is known for his interdisciplinary approach that combines psychology, sociology, and media analysis to understand how the media construct images of terrorism and influence public perception. In his view, media constructions and individual interpretations of terrorism form a complex interaction that shapes the perception of terrorism as a global threat, thereby enhancing the impact of terrorists through global staging. The success of terrorism is determined not only by acts of violence themselves but also by the reactions of governments, the media, and society, which unintentionally contribute to terrorism by constructing it as a real and inevitable danger (*Frindte, Haußecker, 2010: 12*). According to W. Frindte, the staging of terrorism consists in presenting terrorist actions and threats not as potential but as actual events requiring immediate response. Various actors participate in this process: terrorists and their sympathizers, victims of terror, politicians, scholars, the public as observers, and the media, which play a key role in selecting, processing, and presenting news.

Media constructions, Frindte argues, are shaped through the selection of topics, emphases, and modes of presentation carried out by journalists, editorial offices, and news agencies, guided by a "philosophy of communication" and audience expectations, including ratings (*Frindte, Haußecker, 2010: 130*). Television, as a source of information, not only informs but also creates its own media reality by focusing on specific aspects of events. After the events of September 11, 2001, media discourse shifted toward the coverage of Islamic terrorism, reflecting the influence of public debates on journalistic practice. The media tend to focus on security measures and the dramatization of events, while historical, social, or cultural causes of terrorism are rarely addressed (*Frindte, Haußecker, 2010: 159*). Private channels employ more dramatization – such as the visualization of victims and emotionally charged language – than public broadcasters, which increases the news value of stories but may hinder deeper understanding.

Media frames – emotionalization, dramatization, and personalization – influence individual interpretations depending on recipients' political views, values, and dispositions, leading to nonlinear effects, such as the rejection of groups not only among right-wing audiences

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but also within the political center, or the "softening" of even non-authoritarian individuals toward accepting restrictive measures due to constant media exposure. Individual interpretations (Individual-Frames) are formed under the influence of media constructions (Medien-Frames), which offer problem definitions, moral evaluations, and proposed solutions, yet remain dependent on recipients' personal beliefs, political and religious orientations, and media preferences. According to the Elaboration Likelihood Model, recipients with high motivation process information more deeply, whereas less motivated individuals resort to simplified conclusions, such as "terrorists must be eliminated."

Media constructions and individual interpretations thus form a dynamic process in which the media shape perceptions of terrorism, while public attitudes, in turn, influence media content. This process reinforces the globalization of the terrorist threat, making it part of everyday perception through the anticipation of danger. Consequently, by focusing on security measures and dramatization, the media contribute to the institutionalization of terrorism as a constant global threat, which may undermine democratic principles through excessive reactions and panic (*Frindte, Haußecker, 2010*).

Empirical studies by W. Frindte confirm the existence of an illusory correlation whereby Muslims are automatically associated with terrorism, despite the fact that approximately 90% of victims of terrorist attacks are themselves Muslims and that the majority of attacks occur in Islamic countries (*Frindte, Haußecker, 2010: 183*). Public support for harsh counterterrorism measures correlates not with fear of terrorism per se, but rather with authoritarian dispositions and Islamophobic stereotypes that are regularly reproduced by the media. It is not fear of terrorism itself that motivates support for such measures, but authoritarian attitudes and prejudices against Muslims. According to Frindte, this ultimately leads to a self-reinforcing cycle in which media representations and individual interpretations institutionalize terrorism as a permanent global threat, thereby legitimizing restrictions on democratic freedoms. In this context, news coverage increasingly emphasizes the protection of the state through stricter laws and military force, transforming the "fight against terrorism" into a universal metaphor for addressing a wide range of crises.

The research of the Israeli expert on cyberterrorism *Gabriel Weimann* focuses on the analysis of the interaction between terrorism and the media, particularly on how terrorist organizations use mass communication to advance their objectives. Weimann is widely known for his concept of the "theatre of terror," which highlights the symbolic and media-oriented nature of terrorist acts. In The Theatre of Terror: Mass Media and International Terrorism, he argues that terrorism is not merely an act of physical violence but a symbolic performance designed to attract maximum attention from the media and the public (*Weimann, Winn, 1994*). His statistical analysis is based on data from the RAND Corporation, which document international terrorist incidents between 1968 and 1986 in terms of operational mode, location and timing of incidents, victims' occupations and nationalities, and target types.

According to G. Weimann, contemporary terrorism relies heavily on mass psychology, a phenomenon made possible by technological advances in communication, particularly the emergence of television (*Weimann, Winn, 1994: 52*). Terrorists continuously refine their communication skills in order to attract global attention. For

example, during the attack on Israeli athletes at the 1972 Munich Olympic Games, terrorists exploited the popularity of international sporting events to draw worldwide attention to the Palestinian issue. They viewed sport as a modern "religion" of the West and television broadcasts as an ideal instrument of influence (*Weimann, Winn, 1994: 112*).

Academic studies of the 1970s emphasized the theatrical craftsmanship of terrorist acts, which were carefully planned to attract media attention. Terrorism is perceived as a form of theatre in which the primary audience is not the victims but the spectators. Terrorists devote significant effort to script preparation, the selection of actors, settings, props, and the meticulous planning of actions. Research on terrorist attacks during the aforementioned period shows an increase in attacks directed at Western countries in order to capture the attention of their audiences. Terrorist acts function as instruments of psychological warfare and persuasion, with victims serving as tools to influence a broader audience. Terrorists coordinate their actions to ensure that they become material for mass communication, including bank attacks, aircraft hijackings, and acts of sabotage, since even media reports about revolutionary actions can serve as powerful propaganda.

In Weimann's view, contemporary terrorism represents a form of symbolic communication in which acts of terror can be compared to rhetorical genres that compel media coverage (*Weimann, Winn, 1994*). Terrorists supply the media with propagandistic materials, often disguising them as news, and closely monitor how their actions are covered. They exert pressure on journalists through friendly interactions as well as through threats, blackmail, and even murder. In addition, terrorist organizations establish their own media outlets, such as Hezbollah's television channel Al-Manar, as well as newspapers, radio stations, and websites. Terrorists carefully plan their actions in accordance with media preferences, selecting targets, locations, and timing to meet criteria of newsworthiness and media schedules. They produce visual materials, including videos of attacks, interviews, press releases, and video news, to enhance their impact. Terrorists may announce suicide attacks in advance, distribute videos of volunteer preparation, and publish post-attack "testaments" featuring symbolic imagery. They also send relatives of deceased terrorists to give interviews and publish attack footage on their websites, glorifying the "heroism" of perpetrators. Continuous media monitoring allows terrorist organizations to assess the effectiveness of their actions.

According to G. Weimann, the most recent attacks in Israel have revealed complex dilemmas for the media, such as determining the threshold for interrupting regular broadcasting, defining the limits of live coverage, assessing the impact of violent images, and ensuring the accuracy of reporting. These challenges raise questions about the establishment of "red lines" in coverage, the criteria for setting them, and sanctions for violations. Commercial broadcasters face additional problems related to suspending advertising during the coverage of terrorist attacks, which requires clear decisions regarding duration and compensation. Journalists are confronted with a difficult choice between their role as citizens and their professional duty, balancing sensitivity toward victims with the necessity of informing the public. Terrorism in cyberspace exploits the advantages of the Internet – such as speed, accessibility, and anonymity – for organizational purposes and propaganda. By 1999, almost all terrorist organizations designated by the United States under the Antiterrorism Act

of 1996 had their own websites, predominantly in English, in order to reach an international audience. These websites typically present the history of the organizations, biographies of leaders, ideological goals, news, and criticism of enemies, while avoiding detailed descriptions of violent actions. They emphasize freedom of speech and political prisoners in order to evoke sympathy within democratic societies. The rhetoric of these websites includes justifications of violence through narratives of "no alternative," demonization of the enemy, emphasis on the weakness of terrorists, and accusations of state brutality (*Weimann, 2004*). Such sites are aimed at supporters, the international public, and even adversaries, with the purpose of demoralizing them and influencing public opinion.

The emergence of media-oriented terrorism poses a serious challenge to democratic societies and their liberal values. The threat lies not only in media manipulation and the psychological warfare conducted by terrorists, but also in the danger of restricting freedom of the press and freedom of expression in the name of counterterrorism. Fear generated by terrorism can be exploited by politicians to promote questionable legislation that undermines individual rights and freedoms. For example, after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, in New York and Washington, the U.S. Congress adopted antiterrorism legislation that expanded law enforcement powers to monitor Internet behavior and electronic mail. As Weimann notes, this involved the controversial Carnivore email surveillance system, which exemplifies the hidden threats that modern terrorism poses to democratic values (*Weimann, 2006: 235*). Weimann concludes that democratic societies can overcome the "theatre of terror" only through open public debate and coordinated rules governing interaction between authorities, security agencies, and the media, rather than through unilateral restrictions on freedom of speech or the Internetv – otherwise, terrorists achieve a double victory.

The American scholar *Brigitte Nacos* argues that terrorism in the contemporary world is not merely an act of physical violence but a communication strategy that depends on the media to disseminate fear and influence public opinion. She introduces the concept of "mass-mediated terrorism," emphasizing that without media coverage terrorist acts lose their symbolic power; thus, one of the central objectives of terrorists is to attract media attention (*Nacos, 2002; 2009; Nacos et al.,2011*). For an operational understanding of terrorism, Nacos proposes defining it through its deliberate goal of achieving publicity, which makes the media an indispensable element of attackers' tactics. Historically, terrorists have sought publicity by using violence as "propaganda by deed" to draw attention to their causes. Even in antiquity, such as with the Zealots in Palestine or the Assassins sect, terrorists selected crowded places and festive days for their acts to ensure rapid dissemination of news. With the advent of the printed press, radio, television, and the Internet, the opportunities for terrorist propaganda have expanded significantly.

Terrorist organizations use the media to achieve several core objectives: *the dissemination of fear, propaganda and recruitment, and the legitimization of actions.*

First, the dissemination of fear is achieved by planning terrorist acts – such as hostage-taking or bombings – with maximum media impact in mind. The attacks of September 11, 2001, represent a classic example: the use of aircraft to strike highly symbolic targets (the World Trade Center and the Pentagon) was designed to produce the strongest possible television effect and global reach, while the constant repetition of catastrophic images intensified fear and anxiety among the population.

Second, propaganda and recruitment are facilitated by the media's ability to convey terrorist ideologies to broad audiences and attract new supporters. Through television, print media, and especially new media (the Internet and social networks), terrorist groups disseminate their narratives, ideologies, and symbols, creating a "virtual environment" in which recruitment and ideological mobilization take place. New media, in particular, significantly lower the barriers to recruiting new members.

Third, legitimization of actions is pursued through media efforts to justify terrorist violence by framing it as a struggle for a particular cause. The media serve as a channel through which this interpretive framework can be imposed on international audiences. Commenting on the attacks of September 11, 2001, Osama bin Laden described them as "speeches" that surpassed all other messages worldwide, emphasizing that terrorism functions as an instrument for transmitting messages intelligible to both Arab and non-Arab audiences (*Nacos, 2002*). He considered the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon successful because they demonstrated the vulnerability of the United States to the actions of weak non-state actors. The 9/11 attacks received unprecedented media coverage, which fully corresponded to the terrorists' objective of capturing global attention.

As B. Nacos notes, the media play a central role in the "triangle of political communication," providing terrorists with access to both the public and governments (*Nacos, 2002*). Terrorist acts are often planned according to the logic of media spectacle, visual impressiveness, and symbolic resonance. The "effectiveness" of terrorism is thus measured not by the number of victims, but by the level of informational impact. In their search for sensational stories, the media sometimes elevate local incidents to the level of national or global events. Competition between traditional mass media and social media further contributes to the spread of sensational and shocking content, as such material attracts audiences and generates profit. Traditional media, as Nacos points out, often amplify content originating from social networks, as occurred in the coverage of ISIS hostage beheadings, which most people learned about through mainstream media outlets.

Conclusion

The analysis of the concepts proposed by W. Frindte, G. Weimann, and B. Nacos demonstrates that mass media not only reflect terrorist acts but also actively participate in constructing images of threat, fear, and security within public consciousness. In the contemporary world, terrorist actions are increasingly designed in accordance with the logic of media spectacle, visual impressiveness, and informational resonance, which significantly amplifies their social and political impact. By framing terrorist acts through dramatization, spectacle, and symbolic staging, the media become active participants in reinforcing the public perception of terrorism as a global and inevitable danger.

In this context, the challenges to humanitarian security necessitate comprehensive strategies for countering media-oriented terrorism. Such strategies should integrate critical analysis of media discourses, ethical responsibility in journalism, and the preservation of democratic freedoms.

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У статті здійснено теоретичний та гносеологічний аналіз медіафілософських і соціально-комунікативних теорій тероризму, розроблених Вольфгангом Фріндте, Габріелем Вейманом та Брігіттою Накос, з метою розкриття механізмів медіаконструювання тероризму як глобальної загрози та ролі мас-медіа у формуванні суспільного сприйняття цього феномену в контексті викликів гуманітарної безпеки. Показано, що в сучасному глобалізованому світі тероризм набуває нових медіатизованих форм, утворюючи симбіотичні відносини з мас-медіа, які посилюють ефект залякування, пропаганди та конструювання реальності через візуалізацію насильства, повторюваність повідомлень і символічні коди страху.

Зокрема, у теорії В. Фріндте обґрунтовано взаємодію медійних конструкцій (Medien-Frames) та індивідуальних інтерпретацій (Individual-Frames), де медіа через драматизацію, емоціоналізацію та фреймінг формують сприйняття тероризму як невідворотної небезпеки, створюючи ілюзорні кореляції (наприклад, асоціацію мусульман з тероризмом) та самопідсилювальний цикл, що легітимізує обмеження демократичних свобод. Теорія «театру терору» Г. Веймана демонструє, як терористичні акти плануються як символічна вистава для максимальної медійної уваги, з використанням технологій комунікацій для пропаганди, психологічної війни та кібертероризму, що породжує дилеми для ЗМІ та загрози ліберальним цінностям. Теорія «масово опосередкованого тероризму» Б. Накос підкреслює, що без медійного висвітлення тероризм втрачає символічну силу, а медіа стають ключовим елементом для поширення страху, рекрутування, пропаганди та легітимації дій (на прикладі терактів 11 вересня 2001 року). У теоріях доведено, що тероризм сьогодні є комунікативною стратегією, залежною від медіавпливу, а його «ефективність» вимірюється інформаційним резонансом, а не масштабом фізичного насильства. Також констатовано, що медіа не лише транслюють, а й активно конструюють образи загрози через спектакль, драматизацію та інсценізацію, посилюючи суспільний страх і виклики гуманітарної безпеки.

Ключові слова: тероризм, медіафілософія, гносеологія, гуманітарна безпека, медіаконструювання, театр терору, медіадискурс, суспільна свідомість.