

The Strategic Communication Power of Terrorism: The Case of ETA

by César García

Abstract

This conceptual article analyzes the use of strategic communication by the terrorist group ETA, whose goal (for a period of 60 years) was to gain independence for the Basque region from Spain. It argues that the use of strategic communication management techniques, including assassinations and kidnappings, was successful in generating fear and led to political change. It created a spiral of silence whereby people who opposed not only terrorism but Basque nationalist ideology were less willing to express their ideas even under a democratic regime. This case study shows ETA's social and political fabric supported the fear strategy almost as much as its criminal activity.

Keywords: ETA, strategic communication, Spain, Basque, terrorism

*“None of his companions made a gesture to defend him.
Nobody made a commentary,
expressed a reproach, responded to the insult.
The group was disaggregating. It used to happen.”*

(Fernando Aramburu, *Patria*)

Introduction

The Basque Country is considered part of a group of regions that some have called “imagined communities,”[1] while others have called them “stateless nations.”[2] Catalonia, Quebec, and Scotland are other examples of these. Each has a very strong sense of identity which has influenced efforts to become independent nation-states and a resulting tension between nationalist and non-nationalist communities.[3]

ETA (*Euskadi ta Askatasuna*, translated as “Basque Homeland and Freedom”) is a terrorist group that demanded an independent Basque nation-state in Northern Spain and Southern France. Founded in 1958, it is currently inactive after the announcement of a ceasefire in 2011. During its existence, this terrorist group killed more than 800 people and used street violence and intimidation on a daily basis to scare those opposed to Basque nationalism. Both the European Union and the United States listed ETA as a terrorist organization on their watch lists.[4]

Although finally defeated by the Spanish police and now almost extinct, ETA has been able to project internally (within the Basque territory and in Spanish society as a whole) as well as globally, the perception of a problem in the Basque region thanks to the communicative nature of terrorism.[5] For decades, the continuous and extensive presence in the media of the violence of ETA and its satellite organizations proved effective in generating the public perception that there was a conflict between Basques and the rest of Spaniards that needed to be solved by political means.

Llera and Leonisio (2017) argue that fear is a strategic tool of asymmetric war used by terrorist groups to influence opinions, attitudes and social behaviors of the society terrorists want to divide. This asymmetric war is also a fight for the control of the public space that intensifies in the case of regions or territories involved in nation-building processes, such as the Basque region, where identification with the nationalist community constitutes an ethnic division.[6] Abrahms suggests that terrorism's effectiveness in generating terror translates into the surge of a spiral of silence.[7] This public opinion phenomenon can be described as the fear of individuals to express their opinions in a group or social context when they feel in the minority, afraid of being stigmatized, isolated or repressed by the hegemonic majority.[8] Spencer and Croucher argue that due to ETA killings of non-nationalist politicians, non-nationalist segments of Basque society saw their freedom of expression as well as their subjective identity restrained out of fear of being identified as “bad Basques.”[9]

Unlike several modern terrorist groups, the communicative nature of ETA and its capacity to generate fear was not restricted to killings, kidnappings or extortion, or even to a sophisticated creation of media productions or use of the internet (most of ETA's life span took place pre-internet). Instead, ETA's strategic communication apparatus was articulated through a social support apparatus (called by many the Basque National Liberation Movement) comprising a number of organizations with a strong presence in the public sphere. Dominguez points out that ETA appendices such as the youth branches, the newspaper (called *Egin* first, *Gara* later), a trade union (LAB), anti-nuclear power plant movements, feminist platforms and other "civil organizations" all served as potential sources of terror.[10] This ancillary aspect of public relations or propaganda used for terrorist purposes has been relatively ignored by the strategic communication academic literature which - particularly after September 11 - has been focused mostly on the use of digital communication by international terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda or the Islamic State.[11] However, although some attention has been paid to the activities of the IRA (Irish Republican Army) [12], collaterally ETA itself [13] and social-revolutionary groups such as the Red Army Faction [14], 'old-fashioned' European-style pre-digital era terrorism style in general has received little academic attention in the strategic communications literature.

Theoretical Framework

Terrorism has been defined in a number of ways. Schmid and de Graff consider it a combination of violence and persuasion.[15] Amis describes it as "political communication by other means." [16] Nacos calls it "political violence against non-combatants/innocents that is committed with the intention to publicize the deed, to gain publicity and thereby public and government attention." [17] Matusitz describes the role of mass media as a key facilitator of "essentially a message." [18] However, Gerrits notes that the spread of terrorists' information goes beyond mass media, including gatherings, pamphlets or brochures. [19] Although no definition of terrorism gets full international approval, all of them show similarities when it comes to its symbolic nature, its communicative dimensions, the creation of a climate of fear in order to influence audiences, and its asymmetric character, among other factors. [20]

Likewise, it is not always clear whether terrorism is a form of propaganda, public relations, or both. Terrorists attempt to influence the public agenda and change the course of public opinion. They also try to build relationships with their own constituencies, although this is more a primary focus of terrorism than public relations or propaganda. Fawkes notes the challenges of establishing borders between public relations and propaganda. [21] Rothenberg accepts that terrorism is "propaganda of the deed," meaning that although terrorism often fails in a military sense it is still successful in terms of media coverage. [22] Other authors, such as Nacos and Schmid, make clear that the existence of violence (or the lack thereof) constitutes the dividing line between what can be considered terrorism or mere communication. [23]

So far, ETA has not received much attention for its communication strategy. There are a number of analyses about ETA, but mostly focusing on its organizational aspects, its political doctrine and their social consequences. [24] Spencer and Croucher studied the spiral of silence generated by terrorist violence in the Basque Country. [25] García analyzed the role of ETA in a study about the use of strategic communication to build the Basque nation, but only as a part of a larger nationalist conglomerate. [26] There are more recent documents on certain aspects such as the impact of ETA's terrorist activity on Basque public opinion and the interpretive framework and story-telling propagated by ETA after the cease-fire. [27] It did not help their dissemination that these studies are not focused specifically on the topic of propaganda and that they have not been published in English.

The topic of terrorism in the field of communication has, however, attracted in recent years the attention of a growing number of scholars in the field of communication. There are several articles particularly about the growth of ISIS and its postclassical terrorism model, based on the 'propaganda of the deed' paradigm and the sophisticated use of internet and global media infrastructures to project ISIS as a global threat. [28] By comparison, terrorist organizations such as IRA or ETA - claiming territorial issues, recruiting terrorists in their region and operating locally - have seemed less appealing as an object of study, perhaps even a thing of the past. However, the fact that a terrorist group can be considered dormant does not mean the political

ends of the organization are not well alive. Indeed, in the case of ETA, a number of supporters and/or satellite organizations continue to generate fear through the occupation of the public sphere or by exerting different forms of low intensity violence in the Basque country.[29] An added element that has not been emphasized enough in the academic literature on communication and terrorism is that often terrorism can be presented in *softer* versions. This is the case of ETA, whose social and political fabric is almost as important as its criminal activity. This article has as an objective to fill the academic void about ETA from a communication perspective.

Methodology

The following can be considered a case study that uses a historical-critical method to investigate how, over the course of more than five decades, a terrorist organization was able to generate fear, and therefore change political attitudes among its audiences through the use of a variety of propaganda actions and communication strategies. The approach is holistic and considers that killings, kidnappings, extortions and other types of physical violence are part of the communication function as well as demonstrations of operational capabilities across a variety of civil organizations occupying the public sphere.

The case of ETA, and the Basque case as a whole, is difficult to compare within the context of regions that, with a high degree of autonomy, have spent long periods in a nation-building process, such as Catalonia or Flanders. The Spanish Basque region is the only place among Western democracies with a terrorist group supported by a significant part of the population (around 15 per cent of Basques still vote on average for what used to be ETA's political arm). This circumstance makes the Basque case very unique as a region with a combination of democracy, economic development, ethnic cleavage and violence. If anything, the ethnic and violent components of ETA make it comparable to cases of other, less developed territories.

Analysis of ETA's Creation of a Spiral of Silence

Strategy

During the Franco era, and at the beginning of Spain's transition towards democracy, ETA followed the "revolutionary war" model based on a spiral of action-reaction-action: 1) ETA (or the 'masses' managed by ETA) implement a provocative action against the system; 2) The repressive apparatus of the Spanish state comes down hard on the masses; 3) The masses react in two opposing and complementary forms: with fear and by rebelling. Then the moment is ripe for ETA to act, reduce fear and increase rebellion.[30]

Taking into account these premises, for ETA it was a strategy of 'the worse the better'.[31] ETA's violence had as its main purpose to provoke the Franco dictatorship. ETA, through its killings, wanted to generate as much police repression as possible – not among ETA militants but among the Basque citizens in general, so they would join ETA's "revolutionary war." There were two conditions *sine qua non* to accomplish this goal: ETA's organization structure would be able to withstand the police response, and the Basque population as a whole would support the revolutionary war.

The approval of the Spanish Constitution in 1978 made things even more difficult for ETA. It meant the devolution of the self-government that the Basque Country had enjoyed before the Spanish Civil War and before the enactment of the Statute of Guernica in 1979. Indeed, it helped *de facto* the integration of moderate nationalism into the constitutional consensus.[32] Gurr notes that gaining autonomy tends to erode the cohesion of communal groups and reduce their fighting capacity.[33] This is what happened in the Basque Country following the transition to democracy, where only 15 percent of the electorate supported ETA, with the most radical sector being outside the Constitutional consensus.[34] In this situation, ETA saw violence as the only way to activate the action-reaction-action spiral, break the social consensus about self-government and gain popular support.

The void left by the BNP (Basque Nationalist Party) in civil society after accepting the Spanish legal framework

was filled by ETA.[35] The generator of propaganda would thus not only be the group perpetrating killings (ETA), but also its social support apparatus (MLNV, Basque National Liberation Movement). MLNV includes the social and political movements of a number of Basque nationalist organizations pursuing the creation of a Basque nation-state, Euskal Herria, based on the *abertzale* (patriot) and socialist left. All of these organizations share the practice of revolutionary methods and even violence with ETA.[36]

It is important to emphasize the role of BNP at least as an indirect ETA propagandist. The use of public communication techniques were an essential part of the BNP communication management while in power for more than three decades. Through the control of the public media apparatus, the BNP framed issues, manufactured stories, and built slogans to achieve general Basque nationalist goals. The highly ethnocentric and nationalistic discourse used by the Basque public media has been strongly propagandistic.[37] Arregui, a former Counselor for Culture and the spokesman for the regional Basque government, held the BNP responsible for terrorism due to (among other factors) its sharing of the political aims of ETA, and due to its discrediting and undermining the Spanish laws.[38]

Structure of ETA

ETA's apparatus of propaganda was based on the existence of numerous satellite organizations that operate in the public sphere in a number of areas: political (HB), union (LAB), youth (Jarrai), feminist (Egizan), ecologist (Eguzki), student (Ikasle Abertzaleak), internationalist (Askapena), media and culture (Egin and Egin Irratia), human rights (Senideak, Gestoras Pro Amnistía) and recreational (Herriko Tabernas), as well as a number of organizations committed to the protection of the Basque language and culture. Its purpose is the creation of a counter society that contradicts the larger, official and legal society.

Media Use

We can differentiate between ETA's own media and sympathetic media. ETA owned its own communication apparatus. For internal purposes, ETA had *Zutabe* (a Basque word meaning pillar or column), an internal bulletin where ETA communicated its strategies, threats and political demands to its militants and supporters. It also served as a threat instrument since it was used to attack those considered to be enemies of the *Basque cause*, including entrepreneurs, athletes and journalists, who for various reasons, did not share ETA's goals.[39]

The main media service is (still) *Gara*, first called *Egin* before that outlet was closed by a judicial order in 1998, together with the radio station *Egin Irratia* in 1998. *Egin* and then *Gara* supported the views of ETA and Herri Batasuna (ETA's political arm). ETA sent press releases to *Gara* immediately after their killings which the rest of the Spanish media echoed later. ETA also announced ceasefires through its own newspaper. As with *Zutabe*, *Egin* stories served to identify the enemies of ETA.

Other Techniques: Socialization of Pain and Occupation of the Streets

Jowett and O'Donnell argue that "propaganda is too complex to limit its techniques to a short list." [40] Indeed, most scholars do not disagree with Goebbels' conception of propaganda as the use of any available resource to conquer the masses. Among them, there are two methods that, beyond perpetrating killings to achieve media resonance, allowed ETA to generate fear in all layers of Basque society, thereby affecting the political, economic and social life as well as the ordinary behavior of individuals and groups. These two methods are, in ETA's own terminology, *the socialization of pain* and the '*occupation of the public space*'.

During 1998-99, the nationalist front strategy was accompanied more and more by street violence (*kale borroka*). According to ETA's strategy, the street violence *socialized* the pain suffered by the imprisoned Basque fighters among the Basque population.[41] This trickle-down violence, whereby an urban bus or a cash machine could be set on fire, was effective in making all sectors of Basque society feel ETA's presence. Until 1998, ETA generated a high level of street violence and killed a broader set of targets - mainly police, military and politicians, as well as others. After 1998, the growing emphasis on street violence was not simply the result of a shift in strategy. It was also a reflection of the logistical weakness of ETA due to effective counter-terrorism actions by the Spanish government and the active collaboration of French authorities, which began during the 1980s that forced the

organization to opt for less risky operations.[42] In other words, and also for tactical purposes, ETA tried to dress up as a strategic decision what was in reality a result of its organizational limitations.

ETA's *socialization of pain* was not restricted to traditional public disorder but also consisted of extortion and intimidation of broader targets. For example, in 2001, ETA members organized mass mailings in which 18,000 letters were sent to private persons who were asked to contribute *voluntarily* to the association for families of ETA prisoners.[43] Other techniques of intimidation had as their main purpose the occupation of the public sphere, for example forcing shopkeepers to display posters in their windows or proprietors of newspaper stands to give prominent placement to ETA-linked newspapers, booklets and pamphlets.[44] Trying to gain popularity among the working-class to become a sort of armed arm of the working-class, ETA also made use of violence related to other social conflicts, such as killing alleged drug traffickers, or attacking the construction of nuclear power plants or roads in natural preserve areas.

Because of its symbolic power, the main propaganda technique of ETA, besides its crimes, has been its supporters' occupation of the streets. Bennett, Segerberg and Walker note that local physical occupations and protest activities, in which core participants show unity for a cause, still attract significant media attention and generate adherents through the dissemination of images, videos, websites and other media artifacts. [45] Marches have been one of the key street manifestations of the ETA terrorist and separatist movement. These marches highlighted the opposition of radical Basque nationalism to Spain's political transition: "Self-determination, amnesty and expulsion of Spanish police forces regarding objectives; blood, votes and street protests regarding means. These principles never changed." [46]

Perhaps the most memorable ETA demonstration was the dubbed "Freedom March" (Marcha de la libertad) of 1977. It was inspired by Mahatma Ghandi's Salt March for India's independence (1930) and the Washington DC march for work and freedom led by Martin Luther King, Jr. (1963). The event lasted more than 45 days and traversed more than 1,870 km in the Basque Region and in Navarre. Casquete describes the symbolic power and the communicative capacity of ETA conglomerate marches and street protests:

"...the demonstration embodied the Basque people in movement, which made the nation not something imaginary, but a tangible, visible, strong mass of comrades. It was a nation when walking, turning to express in the street its own claims and to stifle those of the enemies, was a relevant mission that the circumstances demanded of each combative *abertzale* [Basque patriot]. The constant repetition of the manifestations, together with the pressure against those of the political rivals, got at times, outwardly, to evidence its strength in the public space." [47]

Fernández Soldevilla and López Romo noted that the "ETA marches became a part of the public space", limiting the manifestation of a Spanish-Basque identity to anonymous voters and the visualization of this segment of society to the presence of Spanish police forces.[48] A number of public servants decided to step down from elected positions in the face of these public manifestations. Furthermore, the mass presence reflected in this type of street protests served as a mechanism of control for ETA supporters who had been permanently on call or to justify their absences.[49]

Effects and Evaluation

There is evidence that ETA's terrorism generated a spiral of silence effect in Basque society. Llera and Leonisio describe how fear became part of everyday reality, "fear of physical (sometimes irreversible) damage or destruction of property, but also social marginalization or emptiness, including stigmatization as *Spanish*." [50] A number of scholars argue that non-nationalist Basques saw their freedom of expression limited because of the violence.[51]

Some data confirm the effect that the social climate of violence and the linguistic imposition may have had on the presumably non-nationalist portion of the Basque population. The first has to do with demographics

over the past 25 years. A 2007 survey showed that since 1992 more than 200,000 people – about 10 percent of the total population – had moved away from the Basque Country, though this is the region with the second highest income per capita in Spain.[52] A second survey from 2010 indicated that some 16 percent of the Basque population said they would be willing to leave the Basque Country if they were offered the same living standards elsewhere.[53]

As tables 1 and 2 suggest, the impact of ETA has been profound in terms of public opinion. During the 1985-2010 period, ETA's terrorism was the main concern of Basque citizens, fluctuating between 72 percent and 45 percent.[54] ETA's attacks pressured a significant percentage of Basques towards a position in favour of entering into political negotiations with the terrorists under any circumstance, although the majority position was to negotiate with them only in the case of ETA giving up the armed struggle.

Table 1: Opinion about Negotiation with ETA, 1996-2014 (%)

	1996	1999	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014
Never	11	7	14	18	16	19	12
If ETA ceases violence	42	39	39	50	49	43	45
Always	34	45	37	27	33	34	40
No response	13	9	10	5	2	4	3

Source: Euskobarómetro, temporary series.

Table 2: Evolution of the felt freedom regarding talking about politics in the Basque Country, 1997-2014 (%)

	1997	1999	2002	2005	2008	2011	2014	2017
With everybody	35	36	34	34	35	46	54	51
With some people	40	41	44	40	43	37	33	38
With almost nobody	16	13	12	19	14	10	9	11
With nobody	8	8	9	6	7	6	3	0
No response	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	0

Source: Euskobarómetro, temporary series.

Conclusion

The case of ETA demonstrates that terrorism can be a powerful communication tool. Indeed, its activity provoked many Basques to be afraid of taking part in politics. Only after ETA's dissolution in 2011 or during the truces did this feeling reach lower levels on a par with the rest of Spaniards. A second characteristic is that the communicative impact of terrorism in divided societies - like the Basque society, where there are ethnic cleavages - tends to be asymmetric. Not all of the society's members feel intimidated in the same way. Those who share the goals but maybe not the means of the terrorists (such as BNP supporters) barely felt coerced in their freedom to participate in politics, while those who oppose Basque nationalism as a whole and who felt Spain was their community of reference, indicated a high level of fear towards getting involved in politics. For example, 63 percent of those who voted for the Spanish Socialist Party (PSOE) and 79 percent of those who voted for the Spanish Popular Party (PP) expressed fear in voicing their opinions, while only 37 percent of BNP voters or 28 percent of those who voted for ETA's political branches expressed such a fear.[55] Likewise, there was more fear to express political thoughts among those who reported feeling 'Spanish' or 'more Spanish than Basque' than among those who felt 'more Basque than Spanish' or only 'Basque'. The proportion went from 56 percent in the first case to 36 percent in the second case.[56]

In sum, freedom to participate in politics was seriously affected in the Basque Country, creating a disadvantage

for non-Basque nationalist parties in elections in the Basque region. This freedom was not affected exclusively by ETA's crimes, extortion and kidnappings but also by the rest of the social, cultural and political conglomerate of Basque radical nationalism. The ecosystem created by civil activism and other satellite organizations mobilized by terrorism (and which agreed to its methods) supported the strategy of fear almost as much as ETA. Indeed, although ETA has been defeated by the Spanish government, the terrorist group is still alive thanks to storytelling that is constantly recreated by activist politicians who shared ETA's original goals. The same goes for a number of civil and satellite organizations who still have an active presence in the Basque public sphere. The case of ETA raises the question of how long the communicative power of terrorism can linger after the actual violence has come to an end and the terrorist organization has been disarmed and officially defeated.

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Notes

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