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Communication and (Un)Inspired Terror: Toward a Theory of Phatic Violence

Piotr M. Szpunar

Department of Communication, University at Albany, Albany, NY 12222, USA

Terrorism has long been theorized as a communicative act. Absent in the array of theories is an adequate consideration of violence committed by third parties (e.g., lone wolves), individuals with no clear link to any group. Often, this complex mediated phenomenon is reduced to the “inspired” reproduction/transmission of a message. For a more nuanced understanding, I develop a theory of phatic violence centered on relation/mediation rather than information/intentionality. The violence of the ambiguous third party, in the first instance, produces a phatic exigency through which bonds might be created or sustained. Any subsequent communion (or its denial) with a group is the result of a mediated ritual process, one that is structured by and regenerates the bonds of antipathy that define the war on terror. Forefronting antipathy in phatic communication enables new understandings of dispersed violence and the horror of the war on terror.

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Communicative concepts are regularly deployed to make sense of terrorism, analytically and politically.¹ A decade ago [Stohl and Stohl \(2007\)](#) critiqued the U.S. government’s use of the network metaphor in its counterterror efforts, arguing that a lack of boundary specificity—the absence of a distinction between a network as an organization and a group’s ability “to network”—produces a sense of insecurity even in victory. In recent years, an increased concern about what I call third parties, individuals equally unknown to authorities and terrorist organizations, has only exacerbated this issue.² Whereas al-Qaeda has long been pictorialized as a network of nodes connected by clear edges, visual representations of ISIS or the so-called “Islamic State”—by the group itself and the media—contain no connecting lines, no links or edges proper (Figure 1). Instead, the nodes float in the ether of “inspiration” among drifting lines of flight and radicalization occurs not through dedicated channels but manifests through the global communication networks that

Corresponding author: Piotr M. Szpunar; e-mail: pszpunar@albany.edu;

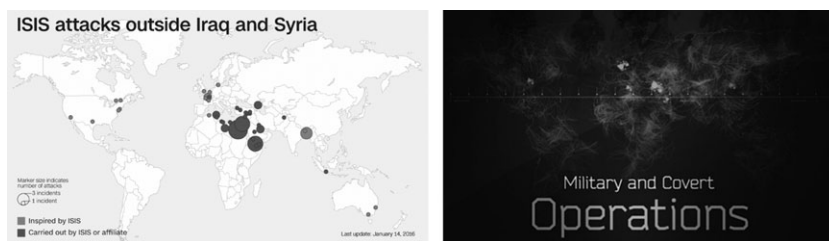


Figure 1 Mapping ISIS. Sources: Lister, 2015; Rumiya 3, p. 42.

structure everyday life. Thus, in lieu of clear ties, authorities, reporters, and pundits—in line with discourses of radicalization—run off in search of motive, intent, and inspiration, all in an effort to find out what an assailant was “trying to say.” This understanding of dispersed violence is steeped in the notion of terrorism as a communicative act positioned within a game of means and ends; it is a mode of message transfer, “propaganda by deed” (Laqueur, 1987) however crude, “distorted,” or “failed” (Habermas, 2003; Pattwell, Mitman, & Porpora, 2015). The third party becomes part of a terror network when intentions and messages are matched, occasionally backed by a chance exchange of pledge and claim.

The application of the “propaganda by deed” approach to third parties positions media as conduits of messages and intents and, as such, does not fully capture the mediated nature of dispersed violence or its relational function in the war on terror. The absence of clear links in Figure 1 suggests both the import of mediation in dispersed violence and the need to think deeply about relationality in the context of global conflict. Without either, the significance and gravity of contemporary diffuse violence cannot be fully understood. To fill this gap, I develop a theory of *phatic violence*. Centering a theory of violence on phatic communion/communication—which consists of those utterances, gestures, and actions concerned with relation and “ties of union” over information exchange (Malinowski, 1923)—shifts the initial focus from information and intentionality (on the part of the assailant) to relation and mediation. This provides the basis for a more nuanced theory that, rather than speculating on motive or intent, is concerned instead with how the third party’s relation to a terrorist group is or is not communicatively constituted and how this affinity (as terrorist), or lack thereof (as lone wolf), is simultaneously mediated by and sustains the (racialized and shifting) adversarial relations that define the war on terror.

I develop a theory of phatic violence in three parts. First, I identify implicit and explicit uses of phaticity in historical accounts of insurgent terrorism and how these have been erroneously superimposed onto contemporary forms of dispersed violence. In contrast to the insurgent, the third party is equally unknown to ISIS and its adversaries, and as such, their liminality must be adequately considered. The theoretical intervention here is, indeed, exclusively concerned with ambiguous

incidents in which there is no clear link between an assailant and a terror group. Thus, to illustrate the theory I use the case of the Pulse nightclub shooter, Omar Mateen, who pledged allegiance to ISIS and supplement it with two incidents in which the assailant gave no pledge, but ISIS nevertheless took credit. One was uncritically confirmed (Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel's 2016 truck attack in Nice) while the other was dismissed outright (the 2017 Las Vegas massacre carried out by Stephen Paddock), signaling the import of mediation in linking third parties to ISIS.

Second, I situate critical media theories of violence (Baudrillard, 2002; Cavarero, 2011; Devji, 2005) within phatic culture (Miller, 2008) to highlight the non-informational dimension of violence and its ontological inseparability from mediation. From there, I recover an underdeveloped function of phatic communication, namely, its role in creating and sustaining "bonds of antipathy" (Malinowski, 1923).

Third, I situate bonds of antipathy within the ritual view of communication (Carey, 1989; Couldry, 2003; Rothenbuhler, 1998) and argue that the third party's act is not, in the first instance, one of affinity, but rather, one that produces a "phatic exigency," an urgency through which bonds might be established or regenerated. At the core of this exigency is a metalingual question—"Is it terrorism?"—which, in turn, invites and triggers the ritualized articulation of racial scripts and representations concerning terror. Tracing out this process moves us beyond the confused exhortations of pledge and claim. Instead, analyzing this ritual process provides a more critical understanding of the relational, discursive, and representational mechanisms through which the third party is constituted and normalized as either an "inspired" terrorist (Mateen and Lahouaiej-Bouhlel) or an "uninspired" lone wolf (Paddock), and how both outcomes simultaneously regenerate and are underwritten by bonds of antipathy.

While phatic communion is the result of "mere" or "aimless" words (Malinowski, 1923), its application to violence does not minimize the gravity or intensity of violence, nor does it suggest that it is without political effect. Rather, it highlights the horror of the contemporary war on terror *pace* Cavarero (2011). No longer a means to an end, phatic violence as a concept reveals how violence is normalized *into* (and regenerates) a brutal cycle of terror and counterterror. As such, I conclude by considering the analytic and ethical implications of phatic violence for thinking through the cyclical machinations of the late war on terror.

Phatic commun(ica)tion and terror

The phatic function of language designates those utterances (and gestures) that are primarily concerned with the establishment, maintenance, or termination of relations over and above message transmission. There are two dominant ways in which phaticity has been theorized vis-à-vis communicative phenomena, marked by its attachment to communion and communication, respectively. The first epitomized

by the phrase, “Nasty weather isn’t it?”; the second by “Can you hear me?” While by no means mutually exclusive, the deployment of phaticity to make sense of terror has certainly been used in ways that forefront one inflection over the other.

Anthropologist Bronisław Malinowski (1923) coined the term phatic communion. It conveys the pragmatic idea of “communion [i.e., a relation of recognition] achieved through speech [*phatos*],” a phenomenon observable in face-to-face interaction (Laver, 1975, p. 216). Scholars have since extended the phatic to nonverbal gesture, physical action, and digital text (Frosh, 2011; Laver, 1975; Miller, 2008). Malinowski (1923) also stresses the sociability of such utterances (*phatikos*; “affirming”). He asks and answers in the same breath, “Are words in Phatic Communion used primarily to convey meaning, the meaning which is symbolically theirs? Certainly not!” (p. 315). Instead, its main social function is to create “ties of union (...) by a mere exchange of words.” (p. 315). In short, it is a conceptualization that forefronts sociability and group cohesion, it is a mode of communication that is generative, fostering identity and identification.

Given its non-informational and generative dimensions, violence can certainly be (and has been) considered phatic in this sense (Whitehead, 2004; Žižek, 2008). Though not explicitly so, the identity-inflected notion of the phatic is an essential part of accounts of terrorism circa the 1970s. Fromkin’s “The Strategy of Terrorism” (1975) illustrates how violence works phatically in the context of ethno-nationalist and insurgent movements. In the case of the Irish, while certainly sending a message to the British, terror rallied “popular support to their cause” (p. 868). Here, violence maintains or strengthens intra-group bonds, often by producing heroes.

Linguist Roman Jakobson (1960) provides a different inflection in his notion of the “phatic function.” His structuralist formulation, which omits “communion,” was later dubbed “phatic communication” (Senft, 2009). Like Malinowski, Jakobson (1960) forefronts relation over information. But phatic utterances are for him those “primarily serving to establish, to prolong, or to discontinue *communication*” (p. 355, emphasis added). He also diverges from Malinowski by basing his formulation not on face-to-face interaction, but on a model of communication that includes “contact,” a physical channel through which two individuals might communicate. His definition of the phatic function quoted above continues, “to check whether the channel works (...) to attract the attention of the interlocutor or to confirm his continued attention” (p. 355). His examples, therefore, include those spoken over—and thus affected by—“the wire.” Jakobson’s inclusion of “psychological connection” in “contact” is not bestowed the significance or inflection of Malinowski’s communion. In effect, his structuralist variant of the phatic emphasizes not cohesion but connection and channel.

The channel-oriented inflection of phaticity is central to Schmid and de Graaf’s *Violence as Communication* (1982). Also focusing on insurgent violence from 1968–1979 their analysis is set against the background of mass broadcast media. Building on the media imperialism thesis they stress two characteristics of mass media: elite control and the nature of the news. The former excludes voices from

participation and debate. The latter favors the spectacular. Together, they create an environment in which violence becomes the only instrument available to the weak with which to gain entry into the circuits of mass communication. In this formulation, phatic violence works primarily to establish or maintain a channel of contact between adversaries.

The changing media landscape at the turn of the millennium facilitated the scattering of terrorist groups into diffuse networks. This is a key point of the “new terrorism” discourse (Hoffman, 1999; Laqueur, 1999) and the so-called war on terror—defined here as a non-dyadic asymmetrical security assemblage that mobilizes militaries, security forces, and civilians against shifting threats (e.g., from al-Qaeda to ISIS to others) who, in turn, exploit its structure for their own gain. Recently, there has been increased focus on individuals with no clear ties to groups. These third parties are given various names. The most prominent has been “lone wolf,” the application of which depends much on an assailant’s perceived identity, reflecting the deeply racial structure of the war on terror documented in media scholarship and beyond (Alsultany, 2012; Badiou, 2005; Kumar, 2012; Semati, 2010; Volpp, 2002). Critical voices illustrate well that the category is largely applied to white men (Bayoumi, 2017; King, 2017). While the term has been used in administrative terrorism research on jihadists (e.g., Ganor, Hoffman, Mazel, & Levitt, 2017), applied to cases of violence thought to be “inspired” by ISIS, like that of Omar Mateen (e.g., Byman, 2017), and used in regard to ISIS regularly enough that the group sees the need to actively counter the lone wolf narrative in its propaganda (“Just Terror Tactics,” 2016, p. 12), there are nevertheless starkly different connotations and consequences in its use across contexts. In cases involving white men (like Stephen Paddock) the focus becomes an assailant’s mental state and he remains “lone.” Jihadists, on the other hand, thought to never truly work alone (e.g., Byman, 2017), are marked as “inspired” terrorists through reductive representations of Islam and Muslim culture. This racialized distinction is institutionalized in the government definition of “homegrown violent extremist”—a third party whose only tie to a terror group is their supposed commitment to a foreign ideology (see Szpunar, 2018a)—and further perpetuated through theories of radicalization that explain violence through theology or culture (Patel, 2011). The latter are peddled by so-called “terrorism experts” who circulate between think tanks, government agencies, news programs, and courtrooms, promising to make legible the “Muslim mind” (Kumar, 2012).

At the core of the racialized narratives of radicalization endorsed by experts is—at times implicit, at times explicit—a certain notion of phaticity centered on the intent of the assailant. Former CIA agent and prominent terrorism commentator, Marc Sageman (2008) argues:

The explanation for their behavior is not found in how they think, but rather in how they feel. All these perpetrators dream about becoming Islamic heroes in this war against Islam, modeling themselves on the seventh-century warriors

who conquered half the world and on the mujahedin who defeated the Soviet Union in Afghanistan in the 1980s. (p. 226)

Here, the desire for identification, recognition, and communion (Malinowski/Fromkin) takes center stage and the channel-oriented inflection of violence (Jakobson/Schmid and de Graaf) recedes into the background. This is due to the way that digital media are theorized in security discourse (see [Arquilla & Ronfeldt, 1996](#)). Thought to democratize communication and provide unlimited channels of connection, the logic here, however problematic, is that without the structural obstacles of mass media groups could freely express their grievances, rendering channel-oriented phatic violence obsolete. Thus, even the violence of the third party—accounted for through reductive notions of inspiration and underwritten by message- and ends-oriented notions of terrorism as a communicative act in which media is strictly an instrument of transmission—is considered an intentional phatic acting out for recognition, for a place in the network through a replication of a group's message (for this sort of intent/strategy approach to phaticity and terror, see [Kailemia, 2016](#)).

The case of Omar Mateen is exemplary of popular and official accounts of how such a union is achieved. Mateen killed 49 at a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida in June 2016. From inside the club he called 9-1-1, “I pledge my allegiance to (unidentifiable name) on behalf of the Islamic State (...) Call me Mujahideen, call me the Soldier of God” (“[Transcript](#),” 2016). Mateen subsequently made demands and gave reasons for his actions: “You have to tell America to stop bombing Syria and Iraq. They are killing a lot of innocent people. What am I to do here when my people are getting killed over there? You get what I'm saying?” (“[Transcript](#),” 2016). ISIS later claimed Mateen as one of its soldiers.

The case, however, is not as straightforward as it may seem. Perhaps most glaring are Mateen's scrambled allegiances. During his 9-1-1 call he praised individuals connected to al-Qaeda and Jabhat al-Nusra. ISIS's antagonism with both are well documented (see [Winter & Ingram, 2016](#)). Mateen had even once, long before the incident, claimed to coworkers that he had joined Hizbullah, a Shia group in Lebanon and ISIS adversary. Thus, questions surfaced regarding Mateen's mental state, drug use, and closeted sexuality—the latter rumor, based on a problematic, well-worn war on terror discourse that deploys notions of deviant sexuality to mark individuals as terrorist ([Alsultany, 2012](#); [Weber, 2017](#)) has been largely debunked.

Yet, various U.S. media pundits, “terrorism experts,” and government officials, even those who have acknowledged the incongruities, list Mateen's attack as one “inspired” by ISIS ([Callimachi, Lai, & Yourish, 2017](#); [Winter & Ingram, 2016](#))—a designation that etymologically suggests ISIS breathed life into or animated Mateen. For its part, ISIS claims that a pledge of allegiance washes away one's past transgressions (“[Foreword](#),” 2014, p. 3). In effect, the shared discourse of radicalization and inspiration accommodates incongruities: for authorities, it provides a

racialized shortcut to circumvent inconsistencies, one that ISIS, in turn, packages as “devotion.” In either case, they share an assumption about the inspirational quality of ISIS propaganda, despite a lack of clarity concerning its consumption and its place among a plethora of other factors, psychological and otherwise. The inspired narrative is made all the more problematic by the even more ambiguous incidents that are—or, significantly, are not—absorbed into its shared discursive space, namely, instances in which no pledge is given, but ISIS nevertheless stakes claim. Two cases are illustrative. In July 2016, Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel drove a truck through a crowd of people celebrating Bastille Day in Nice, France, killing 86. He is widely listed as “inspired” by ISIS (e.g., [Callimachi et al., 2017](#)). On October 1, 2017, Stephen Paddock gunned down concertgoers in Las Vegas; 58 were killed and over 500 injured. Here, ISIS’s claim in lieu of a pledge was treated as laughable, a bad joke signaling the group’s desperation ([Smith, 2017](#)); Paddock, a white man, remains a lone wolf.

Highlighting the equivocal nature of cases like Mateen’s, and the incongruities of inspired communion in general, is not intended to suggest that dispersed violence is not phatic. Rather, the point is that popular narratives of inspiration do not adequately capture the phatic complexity of such violence and ignore its mediation altogether. The problem stems from the conflation of the real telluric partisan (e.g., ethno-nationalist/insurgent) and the global partisan, to use and adapt Carl Schmitt’s (2007) terminology. That is, the formulation of phatic communion implicit in Fromkin’s (1975) analysis of a context in which fighters are known members of a group is problematically superimposed onto a scenario in which the third party is equally unknown to ISIS and its adversaries. The contextual difference is elided in the inspiration narrative by relying on a presupposed mental (i.e., psychopathological) or cultural/theological affinity between assailant and group present before an incident. Therein, violence is positioned as the result of an intentional (dyadic, not dialogic) message exchange/consumption that is simply reproduced in the act itself. By contrast, the fact that both ISIS and its adversaries are made aware of the third party through media already suggests the importance of mediation in the phatic construction and regeneration of affinities and antipathies. Hinted at in Schmid and de Graaf (1982) this process becomes all the more necessary in a conflict that lacks a designated battlefield and enemies proper. In short, the constitution or denial of communion exceeds two parties.

Recuperating the richness of phaticity for making sense of dispersed violence, recovering its subtle contours that move us beyond the dyadic structures of radicalization steeped in psycho(patho)logical and racist assumptions of intentionality and presumed affinity—while avoiding reinforcing contemporary securitization efforts—requires the development of a different approach. Here I propose a media approach to phaticity in which considerations of identification and channel are inseparable and in which the latter is a mediator rather than a mere instrument. It is an approach that does not ignore discourse or representation but begins with how media are integral to structuring violence. Thus, before turning to the phatic

weight of violence committed by any third party and the ritual process of mediation it triggers, I develop the notion of “bonds of antipathy” (Malinowski, 1923, p. 314) by situating mediated violence within “phatic culture” (Miller, 2008), forefronting its non-informational dimension. This denaturalizes the presupposed antipathies of the inspiration narrative by contextualizing dispersed violence in what Devji (2005) calls an environment of “global media effects,” one in which no single actor can exert complete control over the effects of an act. Therein, the antipathies of the war on terror require iterative and ritual, that is, phatic regeneration—antipathies which I will later show simultaneously structure and are sustained through the mediated affirmation (or not) of the ambiguous third party’s affinity to a terror group. This is not the localizable milieu of the insurgent.

Antipathies in phatic culture

Miller (2008) argues that contemporary mediated culture is increasingly dominated by phatic communication. Building on Anthony Giddens and Zygmunt Bauman, he posits that in a world in which identity is “less bound by history, place, and tradition” (p. 388) belonging is replaced by a continuous oscillation between integration and disintegration (see also Wittel, 2001). As such, digital technologies “sustain social interaction through pervasive (but non-informational) contact and intimacy” (Miller, 2008, p. 395). Certainly, digital technologies have widely been referred to as predominantly phatic (e.g., Wang, Tucker, & Rihll, 2011) and various studies have examined the workings of phaticity in the context of computer-mediated communication (e.g., Frosh, 2015; Kulkarni, 2014; Schandorf, 2013). Phatic culture, however, is not limited to the machinations of digital and social media; rather, it permeates social relations. And, phatic communication is not simply performed through media, but is a vital “communicative dimension of modern media systems” (Frosh, 2011, p. 386). For instance, Frosh (2011) demonstrates how televisual connectivity phatically integrates a form of distant yet ethical proximity into the “background of everyday life” (p. 387).

While certainly experienced in vastly disparate ways depending on how one is marked (e.g., as “us” or “other”), since 2001 a significant part of the background of everyday life has been the war on terror. Often, the relationship between media and terrorism, therein, has been limited to an instrumental one. That is, media or “the media” have been conceptualized as a tool that terrorists hijack in order to send a message, create a brand, or infect/inspire others. This approach, however, relies on the logic of means and ends and situates terrorists on the margins of civilization. Various media scholars and philosophers have theorized the relationship between violence and media in a more productive way, not limited to message transfer. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, Baudrillard (2002) asserted that the attacks were seemingly curated for continuous replay, a mixture of “the white magic of the cinema and the black magic of terrorism” (pp. 29–30). Devji’s (2005) analysis of media and martyrdom illustrates a similar relationship. He argues that

James Bond films and reality television, rather than traditional Islamic teachings, inform the structure and ritual of suicide bombing; more than a mere influence, jihad is the “offspring of the media” (p. 88). This point is not synonymous with the oft-repeated claim attributed to Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s: media is the oxygen of terrorism. Thatcher’s claim was largely strategic, diverting attention away from geopolitics. Devji’s (2005) notion differs significantly in that media are neither thought to be a “cause” of terror, nor limited to mere instruments of transmission. As such, those labeled terrorists are not simply posited as barbarians who have learned to use the master’s tools. Rather, violent “fundamentalisms” and equally the violence of counterterrorism are epistemologically and ontologically inseparable from contemporary media. This has been most sharply theorized in analyses of the form, content, and movement of the image in relation to violence.

The link between image and violence signals for Chow (2006) a far-reaching phenomenon, one in which the world is captured as not just any image, but as *target*. That is, not only does the image define conflict and violence, but the logic of conflict, of targeting, is a central component of the image’s currency in contemporary politics. Targeting is a shared practice not limited to non-state actors. Giroux (2006) similarly illustrates how terror and its media logic are integral to the state’s consolidation of power. Cavarero (2011) identifies a formal parallel in the acts of suicide bombing and the drone strike; the latter presented to publics in sterile form, behind pixelated video and the veneer of collateral damage. Here, the war on terror becomes what Devji (2005) calls an exchange of images, visible in the shared use of orange jumpsuits by the United States and ISIS to dress their prisoners.

As a “mode of address” expressed through the targeting logic of the image, that is, as a “right to kill” (Giroux, 2006, p. 30), violence is primarily non-informational. Of course, as Frosh (2011) notes, “connectivity requires particular representations” (p. 387), and the image as target is surely inflected with (racialized) representations of threat—a point I return to below. Nevertheless, a non-informational notion of violence permeates media theories of terror. In an environment of global effects over which no one actor can exert complete control, violence exceeds any intentionality of message exchange, as a demand, an ultimatum, and so on (Devji, 2005). Similarly, for Baudrillard (2002) terror is without ideology (i.e., without message). This line of thinking crescendos in the work of Cavarero (2011) who classifies violence that does not belong “to the logic of means with respect to ends” as horror (p. 41). A global mode of violence that belongs to the “realm of the eye” (p. 17), horror, unlike terror, occurs at a distance. It is “casual,” occurring anytime, anywhere (p. 75). As a mediated phenomenon it is rendered “distant yet near” (p. 73). Herein, “shock becomes a structuring principle” and violence primarily functions to organize global and domestic relations (Giroux, 2006, p. 25), both allegiances and antipathies. In other words, these non-informational conceptualizations of mediated violence, across their differences, suggest that in a global space that lacks a defined battlefield through which to locate or localize allies and foes, violence works phatically and keeps the war on terror machine “humming” (Scollon, 1985). Each subsequent

act does not alter the situation or provide actionable information that might change the cyclical course of the war on terror. Indeed, very few terrorist attacks change the game so to speak, particularly those committed by third parties. But this does not render such violence without political effect; through it the war on terror is reaffirmed, sustained, and potentially expanded.

The relation suggested in theories of mediated terrorism points to an undeveloped dimension of the phatic function more generally. Following Malinowski (1923), scholars have historically maintained that phaticity foregrounds “positive relational goals” (Coupland, Coupland, & Robinson, 1992, p. 215) or diffuses “potential hostility” (Laver, 1975, p. 220). This perspective survives today in Miller (2008) and elsewhere. Frosh’s (2011, 2015) theorizations of televisual and digital media link the phatic to the ethical. Žižek (2008) illustrates how even violence can indicate a desire for belonging. He identifies the 2005 uprisings in the *banlieues* of Paris as an attempt to gain recognition and membership in the French nation by those placed outside of it.

There is, however, nothing explicit in Jakobson’s (1960) formulation of the phatic function that strictly limits it to positive relations, particularly if communication takes the place of communion. While he includes “psychological connection” in his definition of “contact” Jakobson leaves open the character or inflection of that connection. Certainly, it is not too far flung a proposition that this connection can be potentially hostile and that communication need not depend on rapport. Malinowski (1923) admits as much and recognizes the potential creation of “bonds of antipathy” through phatic exchange, even if incidental within a flurry of affirmation and consent (p. 314). Schmid and de Graaf (1982) hint at exactly this type of relation in their channel-oriented notion of phatic violence: it establishes contact between adversaries. Moving beyond Schmid and de Graaf, in recovering the bonds of antipathy from the margins of Malinowski and Jakobson—one suggested in critical media theories of terror—this contact is not channel-oriented in any instrumental sense but involves a mediated communion of sorts. Certainly not a community as it is normatively understood. Rather, the resulting relations are best conceptualized in the way Devji (2005) understands ethics through violence: as “perverse,” as an adversarial making common that goes beyond a shared channel. What bonds of antipathy suggest is that the assertion, “instrumentality is not the only source of [violence’s] meaning” (Whitehead, 2004, p. 58), is not limited to intra-group matters. Conflict requires recognition among adversaries and violence creates, sustains, and can end hostilities. Given the self-effacing, shifting, and asymmetrical nature of both recognition and the battlefield in the war on terror the phatic function of violence is all the more integral.

Bonds of antipathy, it should be noted, are sustained through a variety of actions, utterances, and representations not limited to the image (e.g., violence, propaganda, tweets, film, television, and reportage). All of these actions differ in kind and intensity and an act of mass killing is not equivalent normatively or otherwise to, say, a tweet denouncing the West or ISIS. Moreover, some are intended

to buttress these bonds (e.g., the shared use of orange jumpsuits) while others are appropriated into the war on terror frame. For instance, al-Qaeda and U.S. officials both tried to position the Arab Spring as a favorable effect of their respective efforts (e.g., [al-Awlaki, 2011](#)). Ultimately, what connects these is not intent, that is, the reductive idea that a large swath of humanity thinks in a particular way and has some shared conspiratorial goal, but that they are mediated into the relational structure of the war on terror. What leads one to undertake violence instead of another mode of expression undoubtedly has complex psychological dimensions to it. However, the point here is that reducing dispersed violence to psychology or racialized notions of inspiration brackets its mediated nature, as well as political considerations more broadly. In this regard, critical theories of terrorism productively move us away from message transfer and an assailant's intent. They set the stage for examining dispersed violence as a mediated phenomenon—both by technology and discourse/representation—that functions phatically, regenerating bonds of antipathy. However, while these theories certainly acknowledge the dispersed nature of contemporary violence, the focus remains predominantly on defined entities, however decentralized the network. That is, none explicitly deal with figures that appear outside of an identifiable grouping. Certainly, in a global war without delineated battlefields and in which the boundary between citizen and soldier is blurred (whether in the communiqués of al-Qaeda or the “If You See Something, Say Something” campaign) there is no “outside” of the war on terror. Nevertheless, what requires explanation is how communion is achieved (or not) between the third party and an entity like ISIS (whether as quasi-state, network, or movement) and how this mediated process is simultaneously underwritten by and sustains broader bonds of antipathy, however asymmetrical, momentary, and shifting.

The third party, phatic exigency, and the metalingual question

Shifting from transmission to mediation, relation, and bonds of antipathy brings us squarely into the ritual view of communication ([Carey, 1989](#); [Couldry, 2003](#); [Rothenbuhler, 1998](#)). Concerned with “the maintenance of society in time” ([Carey, 1989](#), p. 16) and its various boundaries ([Couldry, 2003](#)), the ritual view of communication focuses on the symbolic construction of reality and relations through “the voluntary performance of appropriately patterned behavior to symbolically affect or participate in the serious life” ([Rothenbuhler, 1998](#), p. 53). Phatic communication is part of this ritual practice and is itself ritualized ([Jakobson, 1960](#); [Laver, 1975](#); [Rothenbuhler, 1998](#)). In terms of explaining the communion of third party and terror group the dyadic structure found in [Schmid and de Graaf \(1982\)](#) and many others is clearly lacking. [Laver \(1975\)](#) asserts that the “prime function of phatic communion is the communication of indexical facts about the speakers' identities, attributes, and attitudes, and that these indexical facts constrain the nature of the particular interaction” (p. 217). But if we take the ambiguity of the

third party seriously, without the reduction of inspiration the assailant's "indexical facts" are equally unknown to ISIS and security forces. This is evident in Mateen's scrambled allegiances. Moreover, a dyadic approach cannot account for why, in the absence of a pledge, some communions are recognized (Lahouaiej-Bouhleb) while others are not (Paddock). Given the indeterminate nature of dispersed violence, affinity cannot be presupposed. Rather, it is mediated and constructed through the ritual maintenance of bonds of antipathy. This process begins in the fog of violence, with what I call—"actuated by the demon of terminological invention" (Malinowski, 1923, p. 315)—a *phatic exigency*.

In Devji's (2005) world of mediated global effects al-Qaeda's violence produces an ethical exigency over and above any demands or actionable messages. This exigency is itself a phatic opening that calls forward a response in the form of universal witnessing; it works through media and is fundamentally inseparable from media in form, content, and indeterminable effect. In the act of the third party there is a parallel exigency on a socio-political plane, one that creates an opening through which communions and bonds of antipathy might be created and/or sustained. This notion updates scholarly thought on ritual communication, terror, and media.

Across different approaches to ritual, terror, and media (e.g., Katz & Liebes, 2007; Rothenbuhler, 2010) what remains constant is the basic idea that terror disrupts a society's security. But, the function or quality of this disruption has been left unattended. Given that various scholars have convincingly shown how, in an age of perpetual war, strategies of preemption (Massumi, 2015) and premediation (Grusin, 2010) prime populations affectively (and cognitively) in an effort to sustain the constant base level of anxiety necessary for biopolitical security practice, the notion of disruption requires rethinking. While a full exploration is beyond the scope of this article, the notion of exigency, as simply an urgent need or demand, begins to move away from simplistic accounts of disruption vis-à-vis security. Exigency, as more agnostic than disruption, aligns with Couldry's (2003) call to avoid assuming too much order and address the complex "interaction between order and disorder" (p. 15).

In the context of dispersed, third party violence, the closure of the phatic exigency is achieved in making what is distant near—in its mediation. In the previous section, I outlined the non-informational function of violence, a relationality expressed in and through images (e.g., orange jumpsuits). As such, media are integral to this process. Zelizer (2016) illustrates how invisible war is rendered legible in and through the news media. That is, it is through (Cold War-era) journalistic conventions that most individuals come to know the conflict with ISIS; most will never experience a terrorist attack nor will they watch a beheading video online. To be clear, media are not mere instruments of message transmission but also mediators—even if the "secret security source" ISIS cites in claiming assailants as its own is clearly the news media (Szpunar, 2018b). This is further evident in how ISIS structures its pledge of allegiance. With precursors in pre-Islamic civilization,

the pledge of allegiance in Islamic thought—*bay'a* (*bay'āt*, plur.)—has changed much over time in form, function, and required participants (Anjum, 2012; Marsham, 2013). ISIS's formulation, rather than returning to some mythic past iteration, is fully contemporary. Effectively democratized (i.e., anyone and everyone is required to give it rather than just elites or designated electors) and de-territorialized (e.g., one's location is irrelevant), its form reflects the logic of the contemporary global media technologies on which it depends (see Szpunar, 2018b, pp. 238–239). Whether spray-painting walls, pinning notes to victims' bodies, or scattering leaflets at the site of an attack (“Just Terror Tactics,” 2016), the form of *bay'a*, much like the actions of al-Qaeda before it (Devji, 2005), are inseparable from media—designed for, and required to be captured by, media.³

The journalistic conventions and technological grammar of contemporary media, however, often cannot procure a satisfactory response to a phatic exigency alone. In Mateen's case, the form of his violent act only compounded its ambiguity. That is, violence aimed at America's LGBTQ communities and mass shootings, in general, are hardly indicative of what is, at least officially, deemed terror in the United States. Nor are such modes of attack exclusive to ISIS. Thus, while in phatic communication “content is not king” (Miller, 2008, p. 395), “connectivity requires particular representations” (Frosh, 2011, p. 387). While I have focused largely on images, Chouliaraki (2006) notes the intimate tie between mediation and discourse, image and language. While a full application of Chouliaraki's “analytics of mediation” is beyond the scope of this article, a starting point in articulating the link between phaticity and discourse/representation lies in the question at the core of the phatic exigency: “Is it terrorism?” This is not an informational question. As a discursive materialization of the media logic of targeting (Chow, 2006), it is a metalingual question about a shared or common code of communication. As Lyons (1977) points out, the phatic and metalingual functions of language are closely tied; utterances aimed at confirming that the parties involved are “speaking the same language” are vital for establishing relations. Adversaries, particularly those without a delineated battlefield require a common code. However, relations are not always neatly packaged in matching jumpsuits. Was Mateen's act a hate crime? Yet another mass shooting in the US? The final act of a madman? What language are we speaking? And, who is speaking? The same questions apply to Paddock, Lahouaiej-Bouhlel, and various others. The point here is that the violent act of the third party, in its ambiguity, creates an urgency in the unsettled dust of violence, but one that need not *prima facie* sustain the bonds of antipathy that characterize today's war on terror.

In the fog of the phatic exigency, when the indexical facts of an assailant are ambiguous however momentary this may be, the metalingual question—Is it terrorism?—might be posed by reporter, pundit, expert, official, or eyewitness. While news media await what some have called ISIS's “customary” claim of responsibility (“Terrorist Device,” 2017) what results is a contagious “feedback loop” among various parities—government representatives, police, reporters, and so on—that is not

necessarily strategic but rather “inherent in the process of mediation” (Couldry, 2003, p. 69). What fills this process are not necessarily informational musings, but rather, phatic utterances that are patterned and conventionalized into a “limited set of stereotyped phrases” (Laver, 1975, p. 218). What results is a “profuse exchange of ritualized formulas” (Jakobson, 1960, p. 355). Here, the solitary phrases used above to distinguish Malinowski from Jakobson are misleading. As Jakobson (1960) illustrates, “entire dialogues” can be phatic, that is, primarily non-informational and devoted to the mechanics of relation (p. 355). This is evident in the scenarios in which Malinowski (1923) locates phatic communion (e.g., the conversation between a crew of a ship in the throes of a storm). The ritualized formulas invoked vis-à-vis terrorism often speculate about one indexical fact in particular: the assailant’s identity. The racialized structure of (counter)terrorism discourse and representation is well-documented. Its salience is illustrated by the fact that a lack of pledge did not deter the inclusion of Mohamed Lahouaiej-Bouhlel as an inspired soldier of ISIS—despite the Tunisian man’s history of armed and domestic violence, psychological issues, drug use, and an “unbridled sex life” (Charlton, 2016). In sharp contrast, ISIS’s attempt to claim Stephen Paddock, a wealthy white American and career gambler was sharply dismissed (initially and after an investigation). Indeed, ISIS’s attempt to make up a story about Paddock—his travel abroad and supposed conversion—further demonstrates the centrality of racial representations and discourse in the war on terror. Lahouaiej-Bouhlel required no backstory. It is these racial and ritualized formulas, uttered within a circular and mimetic exchange (Jakobson, 1960, pp. 355–356), that act as a lubricant in the process through which communion is bestowed: one (the third party) is “recognized as a member” (Frosh, 2011, p. 317), violence is “named” (or re-contextualized as) terror (see Couldry, 2003, p. 43), and contemporary bonds of antipathy (which structure recognition and naming) are simultaneously regenerated.

Such exchanges are not void of information. However, the process is indicative of phatic culture, generally, and the mediation of dispersed violence and ritual regeneration of antipathies, more specifically. In this ritual process, a pledge of allegiance (if there is one) is, as a speech act, phatic rather than commissive. Mateen and others are not committing to doing something in the future. Rather, that something is already done or in the process of being done when a pledge is given. More broadly, pledge or no pledge, these incidents rarely procure any insight into the ends and means of the war on terror; they do not change the game. Equally consequential are those instances in which the ritualized process sparked by the phatic exigency of violence ends not with communion but with its denial—with “thoughts and prayers.” These are similarly mediated by the discourses and representations that structure the antipathies of the war on terror, and the absence of achieved communion based on the fact that the identity of the assailant does not fit the racial war on terror mold/stereotype, only further sustains the adversarial structure of the war on terror, marking its boundaries. Regardless of outcome, this process illustrates how phatic communion between the third party and ISIS is not

reducible to intention, psychopathology, or a dyadic exchange of pledge and claim. Rather, *pace* Devji (2005), it is a global effect structured in and through, and surely dependent on, media.

The horror of mere violence

I conclude by more explicitly tying phaticity to horror in order to restate the connection between phatic exigency and mediation, as well as elaborate on the analytic and ethical implications of phatic violence as a concept. Horror belongs to the “realm of the eye” which occurs on a global scale (Cavarero, 2011, p. 17; see also Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018). Third party violence is rendered distant-yet-near (Cavarero, 2011, p. 73) through its mediation. On a technological and institutional level, media shape the form and structure of violent acts (as well as ISIS’s pledge of allegiance) which, along with journalistic practice (Zelizer, 2016), makes invisible (distant) war legible (near). On the level of discourse and representation (both textual and visual) racialized constructs are used to make violence legible/near by naming it terror (or not). Indeed, these work together to respond to the phatic exigency that emerges out of diffuse violence. Revealed is a ritual process through which communion between assailant and terror group (or its denial) is irreducible to the dyadic structure of radicalization narratives. Rather, it is caught up in a complex ritual process of mediation in which an ambiguous incident is accounted for through known boundaries—the racially structured antipathies of the war on terror—which the act is used to simultaneously regenerate.

Malinowski (1923) refers to phatic exchanges as “aimless,” made up of “mere” words; often positioned against “serious” dialogue as “chit chat” or “small talk.” While scholars have acknowledged the social functions of phaticity, its “mere” quality demands analytic and ethical elaboration in the context of violence and death. First, however “aimless,” phatic violence has very real political effects. The mediation of phatic violence regenerates the antipathies of the war on terror which continue to justify violent security practices: drone strikes, sting operations, indefinite detention, and so on. It also, at times, expands these. Rituals rarely reproduce boundaries without any variation, however minute. Horror provides a lens into this process. Horror as mutilation suggests a particular visuality (Cavarero, 2011). The beheading and execution videos produced directly by ISIS certainly reflect this tenet of horror (Chouliaraki & Kissas, 2018). In cases of the third party, however, this process works differently. The incidents of phatic violence above are packaged in ways that ISIS cannot control, and victims are presented in other ways: unidentified/unidentifiable bodies covered in sheets are displayed lying outside of a nondescript, anywhere building (Pulse nightclub) surrounded by cruisers and police tape from the vantage point of a circling helicopter or an eyewitness cellphone. (It is not necessarily the form of violence, but its logic that shifts in the move from terror to horror.) As such phatic violence can function to absorb various forms of visual and discursive representation into war on terror relationality. Thus, as an

analytic, phatic violence further turns our focus to ritual communication in conflict (see [Rothenbuhler, 2010](#)) and its mediated environments, examining, for example, how actors can “appropriate” the process of boundary regeneration and construction to maintain their positionality in the war on terror ([Szpunar, 2018b](#)).

Horror is not of means and ends; it is casual. The mere nature of phaticity aligns with the “casualness” [Cavarero \(2011\)](#) recognizes in contemporary horror. Neither is intended to minimize or sanitize (as mere) the suffering of the war on terror, whether in Iraq, Yemen, Afghanistan, Somalia, France, England, the US, or elsewhere. Rather, on an ethical plane, horror attempts to highlight the inequity suffered by the defenseless. Cavarero’s casualness refers to a process of de-individualization, the reduction of a unique individual into a victim of circumstance (anytime, anywhere, anyone). Indeed, the defenseless individuals in the cases touched on above are indeed victims of circumstance: club patrons, holiday celebrants, and concertgoers. The scattered lines of flight in ISIS’s map (Figure 1) similarly indicate an indifference to (and a lack of strategic significance of) the when, where, and against whom of violence. Cavarero shifts the vantage point of analysis from warrior to victim. Phatic violence further pushes out in the context of the third party, revealing a parallel indifference among adversarial parties concerning the perpetrator. The third party, along with their defenseless victims, are absorbed into the adversarial relations of the war on terror.

Terror moves, horror freezes. Terrorism, as conceptualized in [Schmid and de Graaf \(1982\)](#) and countless others, is considered a particularly heinous form of violence because it violates Kant’s Second Categorical Imperative. That is, it reduces humans to a means through which to send a message to another party. In the context of phatic violence, while the defenseless are not primarily a means to an end, rendering victims into mere abject bodies subject to mutilation retains a function. Playing on Cavarero’s distinction, the movement of terror transmits a message while the petrification of horror at the core of phatic violence sustains the asymmetrical relationality of the war on terror, freezing it within the backdrop (and, for some, the foreground) of everyday life, regardless of whoever is momentarily dubbed “most wanted”—once al-Qaeda, today ISIS, tomorrow ...

Footnotes

- 1 This article does not attempt to resolve the longstanding definitional problem concerning “terrorism,” but instead focuses on entities that have regularly been labeled terrorist, while acknowledging the unequal and racial dimensions of its application.
- 2 Boundary equivocation, in a variety of registers, is a productive element of problematic counterterrorism practice (see [Grusin, 2010](#); [Massumi, 2015](#); [Szpunar, 2018a](#)).
- 3 Whether dispersed violence or its coverage constitutes a “media ritual” *pace* [Couldry \(2003\)](#) is not a simple determination. A few points are worth considering. [Couldry \(2003\)](#) asserts that a process is not a media ritual just because media might be an “obligatory passing point” for that process (p. 47). However, [Devji \(2005\)](#) highlights the deep link between media and terror beyond message transmission. Moreover, like al-

Qaeda, ISIS's "deep mistrust of the mass media is matched by an equally profound faith in the evidence it offers" (Devji, 2005, p. 89), which is to say that terror, in some form, reproduces the "myth of the mediated centre" (Couldry, 2003)

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