

In the aftermath of an attack, everyone claims a piece, except the terrorists

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Terrorism is not a successful communication strategy. After an attack, the attention quickly shifts from the terrorists to authorities and citizens. This is what Jeanine de Roy van Zuijdewijn argues in her dissertation:

The aftermath: meaning-making after terrorist attacks in Western Europe. "A year after an attack there is hardly any attention left for the message of the terrorists."

For her dissertation (defense on Wednesday 1 September at 4:15 pm), De Roy van Zuijdewijn investigated the aftermath of four jihadist attacks in Western Europe. These were the attacks in Brussels (Zaventem airport and metro in March 2016), Nice (boulevard in July 2016), Berlin (Christmas market December 2016) and Manchester (concert hall May 2017). "Terrorism research focuses mainly on the attackers themselves, who they are and why they commit attacks. Hardly any attention is paid to the aftermath; what happens after such an attack and what role do societies play in affecting the impact of terrorism? With my research, I hope to give the initial impetus to look more closely at the effects after an attack," explains the Ph.D. candidate.

In her thesis, the researcher and lecturer at ISGA focuses on two important actors: the authorities and the citizens. She looked at how these two groups use frames, rituals and symbols as part of the meaning-making process; in other words, the way groups interpret attacks and give meaning to them.

De Roy van Zuijdewijn studied the first day, the first week and the first year after the attacks. "The four attacks in the four countries are somewhat comparable in terms of background and ideology of the attackers. I also wanted to understand these countries culturally and speak the languages. So I conducted the research in four languages and a year later I attended all four commemorations. I spoke with survivors, you really see how it affects people rather than relying only on secondary literature. It was sometimes quite intense. Of course, as a scholar you have to keep your distance, but I think that this certainly adds something to my thesis."

Going along with the rhetoric of terrorists

The research provides thorough insight into how the process of meaning-making evolves after an attack. De Roy van Zuijdewijn: "What you see is that authorities were afraid that the population would not react in the right way, but the cases showed that authorities actually went along more closely with the rhetoric of the terrorists than citizens did. Like in France, where the population called for restraint, but the government actually imposed extremely strict measures they found necessary in such an exceptional situation."

According to the researcher, there are two lessons for policymakers and authorities. "Have faith in citizens, trust that they will find a way to deal with the situation. And second: be more aware of your own role in the meaning-making process. Pull together and learn from each other. I have seen so many differences in the way societies coped with and commemorated attacks. Sometimes it was completely unclear who did what. For instance, In Brussels, everyone just organized something. In France it was very top-down, people could come and wave their flags and that was it. In Manchester, people really pulled together during the commemoration. That immediately gave a feeling of solidarity and was part of a strong story of resilience."

The most important conclusion drawn by De Roy van Zuijdewijn is that, fairly soon after an attack has been carried out, the attention shifts to citizens and authorities. As such, terrorism is not a successful [communication](#) strategy. "There is no long-term attention for the message of terrorists. What the research also shows is that widespread solidarity or polarization, the assumed automatic responses after attacks, did not occur in such a binary fashion. That is why I also argue for looking at issues from different disciplines. In my opinion, scientists still operate too often within their own frameworks. I have brought all kinds of disciplines together, terrorism studies, sociology, crisis management,

in order to be able to connect all these insights."

De Roy van Zuijdewijn is happy that the job is done and looks forward to the defense. "It was very interesting, but also difficult. Especially in the last year, in the midst of the pandemic, alone behind the laptop. Normally you find support from your colleagues when you get stuck. A quick chat in the corridor or at the coffee machine. Now I was sitting at home and I tried all kinds of things to stimulate my own creativity. I put up a whiteboard and bought a 30-meter roll of paper to draw on the floor like some kind of detective. I'm glad it worked out and I'm looking forward to the defense, especially now that there will be 50 guests, I'm really happy about that."

More information: The Aftermath: Meaning-making after terrorist attacks in Western Europe. [www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/e ... ks-in-western-europe](http://www.universiteitleiden.nl/en/e...ks-in-western-europe)

Provided by Leiden University

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