Thought Contagion Theory and Terrorism in the Media

Luke Howie
School of Political and Social Inquiry
Monash University
and
Australian Homeland Security Research Centre
Luke.Howie@arts.monash.edu.au

Abstract:
Terrorism continues to cause fear and anxiety far beyond the cities where it occurs. Amongst the variety of theories that attempt to explain this is that offered in thought contagion theory. Many people living in Australia's major cities believe that terrorism poses a significant threat. This is despite no significant act of terrorism ever occurring on the Australian homeland. Australians have witnessed terrorism occur in New York, London, Madrid, recently Mumbai and, of course, twice in Bali. The possibility of it occurring here has lead to public fear and anxiety, increased stress, and a culture fuelled by a national security obsession. The mass media and the ease with which people stay informed and communicate with one another means the threat posed by terrorism is reinforced daily. For the media consuming public terrorism is a popular concept. As such, fear of terrorism in Australia is intense, held by many, and is likely to continue to be a social problem in the foreseeable future. This paper discusses thought contagion theory and its importance in understanding the threat of terrorism. Analysis of popular media is conducted and the role of perception leaders as contagion thought creators is examined.

The threat of terrorism has significant consequences in many parts of the world. Devastating attacks carried out in New York and Washington, Bali and Jakarta, Madrid, London, and Mumbai have created fearful populations in the world's major cities. Whilst many agree that it is reasonable for people living in already targeted cities to be fearful of terrorism, is it less reasonable for people in distant cities to feel intense fear and dread from the threat of terrorism? In Australia terrorism is only a remote possibility yet politicians, the media, and the public often argue that terrorism poses an immediate

threat. It has lead to discrimination and racial violence, excessive fear and dread, and a changing national culture (see Howie 2005; Howie 2006). One explanation of this is provided by thought contagion theory and it is an area of growing research interest. Thought contagion theory is defined as a self-spreading thought, idea, attitude or belief that is reinforced through its instantiation in other people (Lynch 2002). In this paper thought contagion theory is examined as an explanation of perceptions of the terrorist threat held by people in Melbourne. The literature discussing thought contagions and their relationship to terrorism perceptions is examined and an example of these concepts in action in Melbourne is presented. Finally, a media source in Melbourne is analysed following the second Bali bombings. It is argued that the terrorist threat is exaggerated in the media and creates inproportionate threat perceptions amongst media consumers.

Thought Contagion Theory and Terrorism

Thought contagions range from large scale beliefs to small scale rumours. These ideas spread throughout society at varying rates depending upon societal factors and do so without conscious effort from thought 'hosts'. In this way the thought acts similarly to infectious disease. Thought Contagion Science (2003), a research unit devoted to the study of the phenomenon, describe thought contagions as 'beliefs or ideas that "program" for their own spreading – ultimately affecting whole societies'. Contagions can be rumours and myths, or religious and other commonly held beliefs. Conflicting and contradictory thought contagions jostle for evolutionary supremacy in mainstream thought (survival of the fittest contagion thought). Thought contagions appear in widely held fashion beliefs, cultural trends, and perceptions of public dangers and fears. It also has enormous application in the understanding of mass hysteria and propaganda arguing that mass opinion is formed through a number of avenues including centralised belief engineering institutions. The mass media is enormously influential in this capacity (Chomsky 1987-8: 1-4). The media transmits messages through such a medium to large numbers of people (Marsden 1998: 2). These messages, however, are rarely impartial and always distorted (Herman and Chomsky 1994).

Lynch (2002: 290-291) claims that ideas pass through a population via three factors; 'transmissivity, receptivity, and longevity'. Transmissivity refers to the ease with which the thought can be transmitted (is it easy to explain), receptivity is how receptive non-hosts are to the thought (will it be understood), and longevity refers to how long a thought is maintained (does it 'strike a chord'; is it easy to remember) (Lynch 2002). The ideas that are transmitted the most from hosts to non-hosts 'out-populate' other thoughts over a period of time (Lynch 2002: 291). These popular thoughts form new ideas and new combinations of ideas in 'hosts'. Thought contagions are more attractive when they interact well with already held thoughts. If they seem logical, understandable and 'real', if it sounds about right, the thought has contagious appeal. Those that don't fade and die (Lynch 2002). As such, popular thought contagions 'sit well' with rational and 'well informed individuals' (Lynch 2002: 291-293). It is intriguing to note that truthfulness is not a requirement of a thought's supremacy, in fact, truthfulness would likely cloud an otherwise contagious concept.

Terrorism as a contagious thought spreads excessive fear amongst populations throughout the world (Clutterbuck 1975; Dobkin 1992: 18-22; Weimann & Winn 1994). Clutterbuck (1975: 147) argues that the media communicates the notion that terrorism can be an effective tool through which grievances can be aired and retribution carried out. In this way terrorism is encouraged and advanced by a media that offers opportunities for terrorists to conduct propaganda campaigns. According to Clutterbuck (1975: 147), 'The television camera is like a weapon lying in the street. Either side can pick it up and use it'. Some experts argue that terrorists spread contagious thoughts via the media to create a 'Theater of Terror' (Weimann & Winn 1994) and spread fear to gain publicity and legitimacy for their cause (Dobkin 1992: 18). Similarly, journalists and media owners sell newspapers and mesmerise the population when they accentuate the threat (Chomsky 1987-8: 1-4; Marsden 1998, 2-10, 2003: 1-7; Daniels 1999: 26).

Fear is a frequent result of contagious beliefs in terrorism. According to Dennis (2001: 1), around 60,000 residents in the United States will die from pneumonia, 40,000 in road accidents, and 30,000 will commit suicide in a given year. A tiny fraction will die, even if the given year was 2001 when the World Trade Centre was attacked, in incidents relating to terrorism (Dennis 2001: 1; Stephen 2003: 3). The popular news stories, of

course, are about terrorism and more press is subsequently devoted to these issues. This media attention gives the public a skewed perception of how great the threat of terrorism is. Dennis (2001: 2) states;

> Knowledge of the public world is mostly mediated by broadcast news institutions that are in the business of making money and shaping political perception by routinizing the non-routine (major and minor forms of disaster and violence) into temporal/visual formats.

Yet, as Bloom (2001: 1-2) exclaims; 'Where's the danger? Further hijackings? Unlikely. Massive anthrax attack? Very unlikely. Intercontinental ballistic missles? Extremely unlikely. Chemical, nuclear? Possible, but at this time in the realm of the unthinkable'.

> What we have to do is arm ourselves with defence mechanisms that mitigate against intense fear. The first and best one is what we call 'reality testing.' What is really happening? There was the initial insult of 9/11, in which some of their plans were thwarted, and nothing since. Words keep emanating from the government and the media to be alert and watchful, but that does not tell us much. Our reality-testing tells us that nothing much more has happened. Countless sports events have transpired without ill-effect and countless tall buildings are still standing. (Bloom 2001: 2).

The Werther Effect

The 1774 novel by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, is widely cited as evidence of the effect of thought contagion on society (Marsden 2003: 1-2). Not long after the book was published an epidemic of suicides swept across Europe with many discovered to have read Goethe's novel in which the main character, Werther, commits suicide (Marsden 1998: 1; 2003: 1-2; Phillips 1974). This lead to the book being banned in many regions (Marsden 2003: 2). Durkeim (1952: 141) later commented that 'No fact is more readily transmissible by contagion than suicide'. In addition to the suicides, the book sparked an unusual fashion trend among men in the late 17th century who began wearing blue jackets, shirts with wide and open necks and yellow pants to emulate the books lead character (Marsden 2003: 2).

A study conducted by Phillips (1974) developed several conclusions based on his study of the Werther effect. Among these were an large increase in suicide rates for ten days following the media reporting a suicide, an increase in suicides following a fictional account of suicide depicted in entertainment media, an increase in car accident fatalities

followed the reporting in the media of a deliberately crashed motor vehicle related suicide and the age of the suicide victims in some instances corresponded closely to the age of media reported suicide victims (Marsden 2003: 1). Similar examples of mass suggestion are reported throughout history none as relevant to the present discussion as the mystery sickness in the Virgin Blue terminal at Melbourne airport in 2005.

Contagious Terrorism Strikes Melbourne

February 21, 2005, Melbourne, a city sometimes portrayed in the media as being under a constant threat of terrorism, appears to have succumbed to mass suggestion. Fifty-seven people became sick and the Virgin Blue terminal was closed during eight hours of uncertainty and terror for those involved (Smith & Milovanovic 2005; AAP 2005). Staff, passengers, and security personnel suffered multiple symptoms including dizziness, nausea, vomiting and breathing problems. In the subsequent investigation, including chemical detection devices and procedures used by first responders, no cause for the phenomenon has been found except for reports that there was a strange smell in the terminal causing at least one person to fall ill. Two months following the unexplained 'leak' at Melbourne Airport, ABC television's *The 7.30 Report* conducted their own investigation.

According to Gordon (in Ewart 2005), when asked what could explain this event; 'It sounds like mass hysteria, in that people actually developed real symptoms in response to something that wasn't there…In the post September 11 climate airports, it seems, are dealing with a heightened sense of anxiety'. Mass panic spreads quickly in any environment.

> Look, I think people seeing people collapsing, fainting, probably vomiting, seeing emergency services in protective clothing would make anybody nervous and encourage them to seek reassurance and I think that's probably a contributing factor to the number of people that presented to ambulance officers (Esplin in Ewart 2005).

September 11 has made Australian's more security conscious particularly amongst people who use air, rail, or bus transport; institutions that have all recently been the targets of terrorists. According to Moore-Wilton (in Ewert 2005), wherever people congregate a

vulnerability to terrorism is created. Public perceptions of the threat of terrorism make it likely that this scenario will be repeated in other places.

The Media as Contagion Creator

On October 1, 2005, bombs were detonated in the tourist districts of Kuta Square and Jimbaran Bay in Bali killing 26 people including four Australians (Wilson & Dunn 2005: 3). In the following week the *Herald Sun* ran daily stories about the attack, a variety of opinion editorials from the state's perception leaders, and generally discussed the threat Melbourne faced from terrorism. The *Herald Sun* is a newspaper of considerable importance to Melbourne. It is, by far, the cities most read paper (see Fairfax 2006). Even a casual glance at the editions from Monday October 3 until Friday October 7 leaves the reader pondering what the damage would be should a bomb be detonated in Melbourne.

The colourful front cover of the Herald Sun on October 3 reads 'Moment of Terror' and shows a severely injured victim in hospital (Herald Sun 2005a: 1). For fifteen pages the reader can examine journalistic material and colour photographs of the devastation, the injuries and the likely perpetrators. The media have an important role to play during events of national significance and certainly this reaction is to be expected and is the duty of media providers. On page 18 is the popular 'Vox Pop' section where everyday Australian's are asked their opinion of issues that affect them. On October 3 the Vox Pop question reads 'Do you support the proposed new anti-terrorist laws such as the power to detain people without charge for 14 days?' (Herald Sun 2005b: 18). The verdict is a resounding four out of five support the laws. Monday was a day to deal with the issues. The Vox Pop introduced a potential direction for the debate. Yet as the week progresses the issues and debate degenerate into terrifying predictions and contagion creation of an alarming nature.

The coverage continues throughout the week with the status of the investigation and of those injured or missing. Yet the threat to Melbourne continues to be emphasised. In Tuesdays edition (October 4) a question is posed to readers who can choose to respond via a phone vote. The question is 'Is Australia at greater risk of a terror attack in light of the Bali bombing?' and the results are published in Wednesday's edition (October 5). A

puzzling question perhaps considering Indonesia is, and has been for most of its modern history, a hazardous place to live. An attack against Australian interests in Indonesia is hardly analogous to an attack on the Australian homeland. Despite this, of the 472 *Herald Sun* readers who responded to the poll, 59.7% percent believe Australia is at greater risk (Herald Sun 2005c: 19). Further, at the top of the same page is a quote from assistant police Commissioner Simon Overland; 'At some stage we will have an attack here. This is an incredibly difficult thing to stop' (Overland in Herald Sun 2005d: 19). In case the Herald Sun readers were not convinced that Australia is a target, Andrew Bolt's (2005: 23) editorial warns 'There's one reason we can't negotiate with Islamist terrorists – the only outcome they'll accept is our total and utter destruction'. Scared yet? Well what about this. 'The leaders of these terrorists say we must submit to Islam or die. Peace is not possible. Any of us may be killed because we are infidels' (Bolt 2005: 23).

Conclusion

In this paper thought contagion theory is examined as a possible explanation for heightened perceptions of terrorism amongst Melbournians. The literature on thought contagion theory is surveyed and its importance to understanding perceptions of terrorism is discussed. The incident in 2005 at the Virgin Blue terminal is presented as evidence of the thought contagion of terrorism at work and, finally, the reporting of terrorism in the *Herald Sun* in the week after the second Bali bombing is analysed. Terrorism, when it occurs, sells newspapers and media consumers tune into television and radio programs. It receives far more attention than the destruction it causes; affecting people far beyond the violence gives terrorism its power. Thought contagion theory is an interpretation of this process. Its sensationalised display in the media spreads the idea that terrorism is an immediate danger to the Australian homeland. Melburnians' perceptions are changing and discrimination, stress and anxiety are becoming increasingly part of life in a big city. The cultural impact may prove to be devastating. Contagious thoughts need no truthful basis as they spread from the media to the public. The media produces material in a format that achieves the best ratings and attracts advertisers. This can sometimes stand in opposition to imperatives of accuracy and create heightened levels of fear and uncertainty disproportionate to the threat terrorism poses.

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