

# Terror porn – the risk of copycat decapitations

In March 2005 *The Psychologist* published an article warning of the risk of copycat suicide attacks spreading to the West.

We remember this partly because we authored the article, but mostly because four months later London experienced the '7/7 bombings' – a coordinated series of suicide attacks killing 56 people and injuring 700 more.

Fast forward nearly a decade, and we have another prediction using the same media psychology we used in the original article: *The high-profile sensationalist, graphic and instructive media coverage of recent beheadings by terrorist groups means it is only a matter of time until the trend spreads here.*

Beheadings make for compulsive and effective 'terror porn'; used for centuries for their visual and emotional impact, beheadings are now proving to be effective in attracting big audiences in traditional and online media. Given that the strategic goal of terrorism is to maximise media attention, beheadings are thus proving themselves to be a remarkably effective tactic. At a psychological level, any at-risk individual doubtful of the effectiveness of terrorism in garnering media attention will have doubts allayed by the sensationalist

blanket news coverage afforded ritualistic beheadings.

Moreover, media reports of ritualised beheadings provide an easy-to-follow 'script' and instructive how-to information that makes emulation easier. It's far easier to behead someone than build a bomb, and the script of a suited victim on his or her knees in a live recording is simple to follow.

We also know from the psychology of media influence that 'differential identification' can play a key role; if we identify with protagonists in media stories, we may be more likely to emulate them. The madness of 'Jihadi John' as a soundbite and news story is that it normalises terrorists and terrorism. The media is effectively saying you too could be a terrorist.

Few people would suggest censoring terror porn from our screens; the public have a right to know, digital media makes censorship a practical impossibility, and the media industry has an economic imperative to attract audiences. Further, there is little evidence to suggest that the media could be a cause of terrorism; the risk is simply that sensationalist coverage becomes a contributing factor in its spread.



To mitigate this risk, we need to balance the right to know with the desire to be entertained. There is no reason why media coverage of recorded beheadings should be sensationalist, graphic or instructive. And there are good psychological reasons for it not to be. As psychologists, we should be working collaboratively with broadcasters, press and other media professionals to urgently draw up better guidelines for responsible reporting of terrorism. The psychology is simple, evidence-based and theoretically informed. It is time to use it – before copycat decapitations become a reality.

**Paul Marsden**

London

#### Reference

Marsden, P. & Attia, S. (2005). A deadly contagion? *The Psychologist*, 18(3), 152–155.