

“Terrorism” at Play

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Authors' Note

This writing is part of a digital exhibit that we curated; therefore, it is split into sections that reflect the different dimensions of the display.

Exhibit Front Page - Abstract

Critical theories of vicarious trauma identify this psychic phenomenon as a reaction in the brain cortex to the emotional demand of hearing a traumatic survivor's experience or indirectly witnessing a traumatic incident through oral histories, images, articles, etc. E. Anne Kaplan claims, “Viewers of the media, like therapists working with trauma victims, are often vicariously traumatized” (Kaplan 21). The response to the Marathon bombing was front-page news for media throughout the nation, as well as the world, accompanied by graphic images and first-hand accounts depicting the blood and gore that ensued. These messages were far-reaching, and allowed people to understand and be affected by the event that otherwise would not have. The exhibit explores the idea that the way the United States public responded to the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing and referred to it as ‘terrorism’ inflicted an increased amount of vicarious trauma on countless people who followed coverage and media of the event. Through an analysis of the US response to and classification of the 2013 Boston Marathon as terrorism, paired with an examination of the work of E. Anne Kaplan, Judith Butler, and others, this exhibit claims it is important to examine vicarious trauma through the lens of the Boston bombing because it creates a platform for transformative witnessing and resulting damage. The paper will also examine how people recover from this trauma and move on, much like the community of Boston is in the process of doing.

Part 1- Introduction

Boston has an overwhelming number of avid sports fans, but whether their allegiance and support lies with the Celtics, Patriots and/or the Red Sox, the annual Boston Marathon is and continues to be the most widely viewed sporting event in New England. For 117 years, the starting gun has sounded on the morning of Patriots’ Day approximately 26 miles away from the heart of Boston on Main Street in Hopkinton, Massachusetts. The Boston Marathon is a cherished long-standing tradition that attracts athletes and spectators from near and far.

On April 15th, 2013 two bombs detonated in close proximity to the Boston Marathon finish line on Boylston Street in Boston. The streets were plagued with fear. The events were later labeled by the American government as an act of terror. For the purpose of this exhibit, “terrorism is a tactic used by an individual, group, or state, which employs violence or the threat of violence, that specifically targets civilians, to generate an emotional response in an attempt to compel a third party to act or refrain from undertaking certain action(s)” (Jones). The word “terrorism” has certain associations, implications, and connotations. The media can post the word “terrorism” or an image related to a terrorist attack and the public reaction shifts entirely. Terrorism expert

Mohammed Saleem stated, “The very term ‘terrorism’ is a concept that mystifies rather than illuminates” (Saleem). This quote dictates that terrorism brings out certain feelings in people because there is an unknown factor at play. The exhibit will explore these unknown feelings through the theory of vicarious trauma, which can be argued are increased when the word “terrorism” comes into play. The American public is hypersensitive to the word in the post-9/11 world and its use elevates the trauma felt by the nation after an attack. This exhibit will explore this theory with respect to the 2013 Boston Marathon attacks.

Page 2- Setting the Stage

Boston Marathon

Date: April 15th 2013

Location: Boylston Street, Boston, MA

Type of Terrorism: Domestic terrorism

Weapons used: Two pressure cooker bombs

Casualties: 3 died, 250+ injuries

Bomber Bio: Dzhokar (19) and Tamerlan Tsarnaev - Chechen origin

Oklahoma City Bombing

Date: April 19th 1995

Location: Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building, Oklahoma City, OK

Type of Terrorism: Domestic terrorism

Weapons used: Rental truck packed with explosives

Casualties: 168 died, 650+ injuries

Bomber Bio: Timothy McVeigh - Former US Army soldier

If these events are so similar on paper then why is it that the government responses and the vicarious traumatic effects on the national population are so different?

The Oklahoma City bombing was chosen in order to contextualize the difference in vicarious traumatic effects in the pre- and post-9/11 world. As depicted in the information above, on paper the events appear to share many parallels. Both attacks were forms of domestic terrorism, they took place in cities, and they both employed a weapon that created an explosion. The major

differences between the two events is that Oklahoma City bombing took place before the 9/11 attacks and the Boston Marathon bombing took place afterwards.

Page 3- Discussion of Connotation

September 11, 2001 forever changed the connotations associated with the terms “terrorism, terrorist and terror.” Connotation, the suggested meaning of a word, has the ability to dramatically alter the way in which a situation is perceived based and how the public understands and reacts to the word. (Lockerbie 691) This is not to say that prior to 9/11 the term “terrorism” did not instill fear. However, following the attacks in 2001, former United States President George Bush declared his “global war on terror,” causing the word to take on a whole new meaning. Terrorism moved to the forefront of national and international conversation and concern. As expert Simon Cottle stated, “The US war on terror, as much as its asymmetric enemies, has positioned ‘terror’ at the center of the new world (dis)order—and global new agendas” (Kavoori 20). When “terrorism” became prevalent and recurrent in the political realm post-9/11 it subconsciously altered the feelings that the public associated with the word (Waldron 6). This is because the “Global War on Terror” narrative created an “us vs. them” scenario. To a certain extent this justified the termination of terrorists by any means necessary, which is the mentality embodied by the American public. It’s imperative to recall this shift in mentality while analyzing the differences in traumatic impacts of the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing compared to other terrorist attacks, for example the Oklahoma City bombing, that took place before the 9/11 atrocities.

Page Four - Vicarious Trauma

Vicarious trauma is a topic that is beginning to be more intensely focused on by researchers and experts in the field. Theories identify this psychic phenomenon as a reaction in the brain cortex to the emotional demand of hearing a traumatic survivors’ experience or indirectly witnessing a traumatic incident through images, media stories, and other sources of information (Jenkins and Baird 1). In the past, the idea of secondary or vicarious trauma has been primarily applied to the trauma that therapists of trauma survivors often suffer from as a result of hearing the victims’ stories and vicariously living them (Faldman and Kaal 2). However, academics such as E Anne Kaplan have begun to expand this term, and apply it to the vicarious trauma that people have the possibility to suffer from as a result of media, images, and oral histories circulating the globe. The technology and globalization of our world promotes that “studying vicarious trauma is especially important in an era when global media project images of catastrophes all over the world as they are happening” (Kaplan 87).

When the bombing at the 2013 Boston Marathon took place, news of the tragedy spread like wildfire to people throughout the nation and even the globe. Citizens were in awe and shock over what had transpired at such a historic and widely renowned event. Both news and social media were flooded with information and speculation of who had performed this heinous act of volatility. There was an overwhelming number of comments that mentioned an act of “terrorism” and the perpetrators being “terrorists,” even though it had not been officially labeled as such by a prominent political figure in the American government. People who were not physically present for the attack were at the mercy of media portraying the incident, which determined their

impression of the event because “the regulation of the sphere of appearance is one way to establish what will count as reality, and what will not” (Butler xx).

When United States President Obama first neglected to label the bombing as an “Act of Terror,” it can be speculated that he did so in order to avoid a second wave of panic that would have ensued. In post-9/11 society, people throughout the nation have become severely sensitive to the word “terror” as discussed in the meaning of word connotation. When the bombs detonated in Boston, people immediately reached for their phones and other electronic devices to snap pictures and post accounts to document the events taking place. These images and stories alone proved enough to instill vicarious trauma in those who were not physically present at the event, but following the coverage some other way. If the event had immediately been labeled as a terrorist attack, the connotation that is presently associated with this word would have triggered even more fear and anxiety in those who were following the event, thus leading to an even greater level of vicarious trauma.

Although terrorism was originally left out of the conversation, it came into play when the American government declared the bombing a terrorist attack and increased the terrorism level warning. The image in this exhibit shows front pages from the Boston Herald, the Boston Globe, USA Today, and the New York Post, which each depict gruesome images with the term "terror" present in the headline or rest of the article. Juxtaposing this image is a similar newspaper headline from the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, again containing the word "terror" in the headline. Without a context for when these newspapers appeared, they seem to be extremely similar to one and other. However, the ways in which the Boston Marathon pages were viewed and interpreted in a post-9/11 world, compared to the Oklahoma City newspaper in pre-9/11 society, are very different from one and other. The Boston Marathon bombing was portrayed to outsiders through depictions of the gruesome consequences in an explicit way. With the term "terrorism" added to this depiction, the risk of vicarious trauma significantly increased. Although this may have been the case during the 1995 bombing in Oklahoma City, the vicarious traumatic impact was significantly greater in the post-9/11 world that the Boston Marathon bombing occurred in.

Part 6 - Conclusion

Although the issues of terrorism and vicarious trauma are often associated with the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, the way in which Boston is overcoming these hurdles should not be forgotten. The entire city of Boston, those affiliated with the area, and citizens across the United States were shaken by the act of terrorism. It was difficult for the nation to be posed with a threat that mirrored the language and traumatic effects of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. Despite the fact that the Marathon bombing did not lead to nearly as much structural damage or fatalities that the Oklahoma City bombing did people were without a doubt directly and indirectly affected by the tragedy. In the months following April 15, 2013, Boston has taken strides to bounce back, and as a result, is stronger than ever. Businesses and individuals can be seen sporting the Boston Strong logo, contributing towards the uplifting spirit that fills the entire city. The unity and strength that Boston embodies makes it possible to see the light at the end of the tunnel.

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