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### Understanding and Dealing with “Discursive Terrorism”

**Abstract.** Social and political discourse is increasingly and disturbingly, dominated by dismissive and aggressive arguments that exclude the option of genuine dialog and the maintenance of a public sphere. This paper, based on years of empirical study, posits and explores a concept, “Discursive Terrorism” as a verbal parallel to the physical destruction of property and human beings. It has seven bases: naming a disastrous and likely outcome; linking that outcome to a specific group; treating that group as an immutable entity; describing the motivations of the group as solely destructive; reducing the number of possible responses; demanding action to end the threat; naming counteractions as purely defensive; and using simplistic, totalizing labels and actions. The appeal of this approach is that it offers reassuring certainty; it rejects relativism; it equates its subjectivity as objective; it rejects any contradictory information as subjective; it mobilizes followers by belittling the Other while aggrandizing itself; it moves attention to external factors, to discourage reflexivity; it frames messages emotionally, reducing options to defense for survival; it “wins” arguments by reducing discursive complexity and keeping its own agenda control. The results of D.T. are radical reduction of listening, both of opponents and within members; discussion is turned into an exchange of black-and-white assertions; belief in reasoned argument is reduced by apparent D.T. success; most actions that demand cooperation are blocked; short-term views are privileged over long-term planning. Responses to D.T. include use of facts to reduce labels; abandoning some conversational courtesies; increasing confidence within opponents; pointing out silly positions; claiming discursive dominance over the agenda.

**Keywords:** “Discursive Terrorism”, contradictory information, aggressive arguments, external factors, conversational courtesies.

The world has become suffused by information and opinion, changed by globalization’s mixture of culture and tradition, and arranged easier access to knowledge in one minute than previous generations have had in a lifetime. Given these developments, one might imagine and hope that not only tolerance but celebration of diversity would increase.

Unfortunately, the opposite has been the case. Parallel with the growth of political terrorism, and as a much larger phenomenon, groups of “discursive terrorists” have increasingly learned to dominate public discourse and strangle constructive debate. Policy is now often held hostage to irrational anger, based on fear. Communication is increasingly the domain of those who use discourse as a weapon. Considering the obvious destructive impact on political interaction and action of this communication phenomenon, I argue that the world’s community of societies faces no

greater challenge nor need than comprehending and coping with discursive terrorism.

What is Discursive Terrorism and how does it work? Discursive Terrorism comprehensively characterizes and rejects a group or culture identified as the Other, then extends this rejection to physical spheres, through aggressive Speech Acts, legislative attacks, and bombings. Like its physical analog, it uses fear and threats to gain power of an ideology by mobilizing members and neutralizing, intimidating, and confusing opponents. Despite many clear contrasts between physical and discursive terrorism, they share a fundamental perspective: that destroying is easier than creating, and that attacking can place the burden on a hated group to spend resources in defense while making the attacker feel powerful, apparently to dispel underlying senses of powerlessness and angst.

The breakdown of the Soviet Union, for example, led to the emergence of hyper – nationalist groups that polarized not only opinion but debate and action, encouraging a schism that was taking advantage of by those with economic, not ideological, agendas. Of course, this social phenomenon did not arrive *de novo*, but reflected long-held Russian traditions of ideology – based elites.

Strangely and ironically, leading this disturbing evolution is the nation – the United States – that considers itself one of the founders and bastions of the democratic "Public Sphere." Politics in the U.S. has recently devolved, discursively speaking, into the equivalent of a permanent barroom brawl. Given its reduced but continuing political, cultural and economic dominance, America's problems become the world's problems.

This paper will define and propose a conceptual framework for analyzing and, perhaps, dealing with, Discursive Terrorism. This work is based on years of empirical research into "divisive discourse" in the US, beginning with racist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan and "Operation Rescue", which militantly opposes abortions. In turn, my analytical construct was informed

Overview of Discursive Terrorism (D.T.): After conducting research into "rejectionism"-- which characterizes the shift from explaining and defending a positive position to attaching a negative position to the position of the Other – I adopted the term "divisive discourse" to apply this general concept to media characterization of positions in my analysis of two of the most ideological news services in the U.S. However, a new term was needed to address the radical blend of political aggression with identification and rejection of an Other.

This paper will outline the nature, appeal, and results of Discursive Terrorism,

then suggest responses that appear functional in minimizing its effects.

### 1. The Nature of Discursive Terrorism

Based on data analysis, I have identified seven underlying bases of D.T.

First, D.T. posits and inflames fear of a disastrous outcome described vividly as inevitable without active intervention (designed to spark an emotional, totalizing response);

second, it identifies and unitizes a rejected group (which it unconditionally rejects);

third, it treats the Other as a permanent entity, with destructive motivations and incapable of

change and with actions that are automatically unacceptable;

fourth, it blocks dialogical options by asserting the total danger of the Other, to justify its radically-limited menu of attitudinal options for ingroup members;

fifth, it links attitude to action, demanding a physical response while drastically reducing the range of possible and acceptable options;

sixth, actions are always described as defense: the Other is always the powerful aggressor while the D.T. group is always the victim/underdog, forced to respond in the name of weakly-defined but heavily-labeled principles;

seventh, D.T. (like its physical relative) depends on "bumper-sticker" slogans and labels, which are easy to communicate and understand. The downward spiral of attention span strengthens D.T. by making audiences impatient with facts, complex analyses and arguments, etc.

The worldview of the discursive terrorist is therefore reduced to an overwhelming threat, which demands automatic and unquestioning perceptions of, and reactions to, that threat. Ideology shapes perception, which shapes communication, which shapes action. It is no accident that this package of attitudes and actions closely resembles a religious position, like historical struggles between muslims and hindus in India, and protestants and catholics in Northern Ireland. Discursive terror depends on absolutist beliefs. Certainly, the U.S. version of this phenomenon clearly feeds on religious beliefs or quasi-religious ideology by the "True Believer" (Hoffer).

### 2. The Appeal of discursive terrorism:

Although it is impossible to directly observe and analyze the emotional and motivational infrastructure that attracts people to any perspective, it is possible to infer underlying psychological patterns from careful examination of data. The clear meta-pattern is fear of an overwhelming world, which D.T. transforms from "flight" to "fight." Very recent research into the intellectual capacity of people attracted to evangelical political movements clearly confirms this intuition. Simply, D.T. works as "psychic self-defense" by giving automatic confidence, which is not only personally satisfying but rhetorically powerful. The following list outlines the eight central appeals of this form of thinking and discourse.

First, it offers its followers certainty since it reduces every situation – however complex – to the

simplest possible black-and-white dichotomy, epitomized by the statement by President Bush “You’re either with us or against us.”;

D.T. rejects relativism, in favor of an absolutist position which is not open to question, challenge, or even adaptation. D.T. groups refer to religious, natural, or unchallengeable authority as moral imperative;

it equates subjective positions with and objective claims – in effect, saying that the external world does and must exactly conform to the group ideology;

it solidifies its worldview by rejecting any contradictory information, dismissing it as subjectivism;

it offers near-total power by designing every statement to belittle or reduce the enormous but immoral power of the Other, or to increase and confirm the power of the group;

it focuses attention outside of its users, since the problem is always, only and completely caused by the evil intentions of the Other, removes the need to elaborate, face, or justify one’s own position;

it frames its slogans emotionally – which attracts the attention of members and silence opponents using arguments that are almost totally emotional;

it is constantly on the attack, and therefore “wins” its case if an opponent allows the dialog to become terroristic on both sides (by creating a discourse style that fits their goals), but also wins when opponents try to follow traditional norms of “civilized discourse” which is easier to disrupt.

My analysis suggests that much of the appeal of Discursive Terrorism lies in fear of uncertainty and therefore of inefficacy. Some people who feel discomfort at their own weaknesses simply adopt the attributes of aggressive confidence. D.T.’s answer to a world of swirling, endless, ambiguous meanings (both information and interpretations) is aggressive simplification. Its goal is to reduce the physical world to a reflection of the members’ internal world, in which anxiety can be combated with simple, eternal, actionable truths.

### 3. Results of Discursive Terrorism

D.T. leads to a number of effects, many very profound. These are not only discursive but also social, political, economic and military. The super-simplification of an increasingly complex world prevents the capacity to understand and therefore to even attempt to effectively deal with the world. Fear is the central characteristic of D.T., and the natural human response to fear is to shut down analysis, circumspection, empathy and reflection, and to give

power to those who most simply and loudly claim the ability to dispel that fear. Below is six logical and evidentiary consequences of D.T.

D.T. prevents group members from listening to anyone, since the motivations and means of the Other are always and fully unacceptable. Reading the responses to statements and arguments of those rejected, it is very clear that these are based not on what was stated or argued but on imagined and internalized positions that are similarly simplistic;

D.T. effectively prevents its own group members from listening to themselves; since a central purpose of D.T. is to eliminate self-doubt (a hypothesis based on analysis of D.T. statements), the easiest way to achieve this is to simply take all of your positions as an axiom, beyond question;

D.T. shuts out reasoned response, and encourages similarly-manichaeian reactions, resulting in a Social Sphere that is a ping-pong spiral of mutual, enacted rejection and essentialization. D.T. is usually carried out at high decibel levels and with strident tones, which drown out other forms of discourse--especially any that demand consistency and rational thought;

given D.T.’s aversion to offer rational argument, societal belief in rational argument itself becomes devalued. This has the secondary effect of making people feel the futility of offering integrative, practical arguments and information when these will only be answered with simplistic distortions;

any actions that normally require debate, compromise, collaboration, and coordination are simply short-circuited when communication becomes little more than a shouting match. This is very clear in the contemporary U.S., where government functions are almost totally paralyzed by rejectionism. Very few laws are passed now, except those that can be rammed through by one side;

D.T. reinforces the drive to gain short-term power, whatever the long-term costs. Although it has the ultimate goal of maximum control, this is accomplished in one brief exchange after another, each designed to score a singly rhetorical point, and without clear strategic goals except for control over the discursive landscape.

### 4. Responses to Discursive Terrorism

Many current conversations are rendered futile and frustrating because one participant uses facts and arguments while the other uses simplistic emotive slogans. Again, based on my analysis of dialogs in which at least one member uses D.T., it is possi-

ble to counteract its impact to a considerable extent, such as the following five tactics.

First, since D.T. needs to simplify the world, using a small storm of facts and complex explanations can overwhelm the D.T. debater. Facts are anathema to D.T. groups, who have learned to be lazy about factual supporting because they usually keep control with emotive labels. In conjunction with the previous suggestion, fact-supported points need to be raised and emphasized;

the success D.T. depends on opponents following dialogical courtesy – those who believe in dialog imagine that, repeated often enough, courtesy will lead to respect. However, analysis of D.T. shows clearly that courtesy is treated as a welcome weakness and thus as a way to win the impression of an argument, whatever the "objective" factual results;

confidence is a major part of the D.T. armory. To counteract this certainty, opponents must decide on core beliefs that are not open to challenge, and build an argument around these, expressed in simple, clear, confident statements such as "You are simply and totally wrong." Defensiveness and apologetic statements are seen as surrender;

users of D.T. are eager to be taken seriously, part of which is the need to be attacked to fuel the ironic combination of victimhood and importance. Pointing out silliness with open ridicule is bad manners but good rhetorical strategy;

D.T. users depend on maintaining the initiative and controlling the agenda and topic; their opponents need to remove this by deciding what is important or effective to talk about, and quickly shifting the topic to one they want to make.

5. Conclusion: This paper quickly summarizes the very complex communico-social dynamics of Discourse Terrorism, which has apparently not been attempted by any previous author. It might not overstate the importance of this issue to say that the viability of western civilization depends on understanding and dealing with Discourse Terrorism's

dysfunctional and negative but amazingly effective approach to public communication.

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Купер Джон

**«Дискурсивті лаңкестік» анықтамасы және оны меңгеру**

Әлеуметтік және саяси әңгімелесу табиғи диалог пен қоғамды қолдау мүмкіндігін жоятын қорлау және басқыншылық дәлелдерінің көбеюі және қорқынышты әсеріне ұшырайды. Осы мақаладағы «Дискурсивті лаңкестік» ұғымы мүлкті және адамдарды қатар жою ретінде анықталады және зерттеледі. Дискурсивті лаңкестік нәтижесінде қарсыластармен қатар, бір-бірін есту қабілеті негізді түрде төмендейді; талқылау жай ғана жазбаша растамалармен алмасуға айналады; дискурсивті лаңкестіктің көрнекі жетістігі орынды дәлелдерге сенудің азаюына алып келеді; ынтымақтастықты талап ететін көптеген әрекеттер шектеледі; уақытша иландыру пікірлері ұзақ мерзімді жоспарларды басып түседі. Дискурсивті лаңкестікке қарсы тұру шаралары құлақша қағаздарды жою фактілерін қолдануды, сөйлесу этикетінің кейбір ережелерінен бас тартуды, қарсыластарға сенімділікті арттыруды, ақылсыз көзқарастарға назар аударуды, күн тәртібіне дискурсивтік әсер ету талаптарын құрайды.

**Түйін сөздер:** тұрақсыз терроризм, қарама-қайшы ақпарат, агрессивті аргументтер, сыртқы факторлар, диалогтік ілтипат шаралары.

Купер Джон

**Определение и изучение «Дискурсивного терроризма»**

Социальный и политический дискурс попадают под растущее влияние пренебрежительных и агрессивных аргументов, которые исключают возможность естественного диалога и поддержки общественности. В данной статье понятие «дискурсивного терроризма» определяется и исследуется как буквально параллельное физическому уничтожению собственности и людей. В результате дискурсивного терроризма происходит радикальное снижение способности слышать не только оппонентов, но и друг друга; обсуждение превращается в простой обмен письменными утверждениями; очевидный успех дискурсивного терроризма приводит к уменьшению доверия к вескому аргументу; блокируется большинство действий, требующих сотрудничества; временные убеждения преобладают над долгосрочным планированием. Меры противодействия дискурсивному терроризму включают использование фактов для исключения ярлыков; отказ от некоторых правил разговорного этикета; повышение доверия к оппонентам; акцентирование внимания на неразумных точках зрения; требование дискурсивного влияния на повестку дня.

**Ключевые слова:** непоследовательный терроризм, противоречащая информация, агрессивные аргументы, внешние факторы, диалоговые знаки внимания.