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# Terrorism threat in Belgium: The resilience of Belgian citizens and the protection of governmental reputation by means of communication

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### ABSTRACT

In November 2015, the terrorism threat in Belgium confronted both citizens and the government with a situation characterized by high uncertainty. In this context, a national survey was conducted among 805 respondents, with three purposes. First, this case study aimed to explore how Belgians deal with the threat by examining if they change their behavior in public places and seek information about the threat. Second, we investigated why people seek and process information about the terrorism threat based on three determinants, namely their level of involvement with the threat, the expert efficacy of the government, and attitudes towards mass media communication. Finally, this study elaborated on perceived governmental efficacy, researching how governmental reputation is affected through institutional trust and governmental responsibility. The results show that the terrorism threat leads citizens to be more alert in public places and participate less in mass events. Moreover, one fifth stopped traveling by public transport. It was found that Belgian citizens also searched for information several times a day, mostly via traditional media such as television and radio. Furthermore, based on structural equation modelling, we found that information seeking and processing behavior is determined by the cognitive assessment of the risk. This cognitive risk assessment is in turn positively influenced by risk involvement and perceived governmental expert efficacy. However, if the mass media are seen to focus too much on drama and sensationalism then the perception of risk decreases, and this in turn reduces information seeking behavior. In addition, results show that a perception of governmental expert efficacy is able to increase trust and decrease the level of governmental responsibility, which is in turn beneficial for governmental reputation. The implications of these findings are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

The majority of Belgians consider terrorism to be the most important challenge for internal security within the European Union (Eurobarometer, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Several incidents in Belgium have confirmed the validity of this concern. The terrorist attacks

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<sup>1</sup> The Eurobarometer is a barometer used to measure the attitudes of Europeans towards security conducted in March 2015. Results showed terrorism is the highest-ranked challenge in Belgium (65%) followed by organized crime (45%), cybercrime (37%), management of the EU's external borders (34%), and natural and man-made disasters (30%).

in Paris in November 2015 were coordinated from within Belgium. Moreover, Salah Abdeslam, a terrorist involved in the Parisian terrorist attacks was arrested in the capital city Brussels. Hence, terrorism has formed a significant threat in Belgium, characterized by some unique features that determine it as a risk management issue. It produced significant uncertainty in two different ways, namely the likelihood that a terrorist attack will take place and the extent of its consequences (Kunreuther, 2002). Consequently, terrorism became a main concern for Belgian citizens and a top priority of the Belgian federal government.

Unfortunately, the government could not prevent the terrorist attacks that took place, four months after the attacks in Paris, in Brussels Airport and in the metro station in Maalbeek at the heart of the capital city of Belgium. This case study however was conducted before these attacks, in the context of a terrorism threat that formed a unique challenge for both the government and Belgian citizens, who must deal with a very uncertain situation. Unlike other types of crisis, terrorism forms a relatively new threat because it is often unknown who exactly the enemy is. Hence, the threat is constantly evolving and hard to assess (Gray & Ropeik, 2002; Innes, 2006). In this context, it is possible that Belgians will change their behavior in public places by avoiding public transport for example (Nellis, 2009) or engaging in information seeking and processing behavior. The latter enables citizens to reduce their feelings of uncertainty and increase their feelings of control (Ford, 2004; Kievik & Gutteling, 2011). Hence, by seeking and processing information about the threat, Belgian citizens try to form a resilient community that is able to bounce back after a possible terrorist attack (Carpenter, 2015).

Resilience is important to consider in the context of terrorism threats as a terrorist attacks are not always preventable. However, the government and other authorities can provide information to citizens in order to anticipate threats, minimize the vulnerability of citizens, and help them to recover from attacks when they occur (Patin, 2015). In this process, communication is of crucial importance as it can reduce damage and loss of life, and minimize rumors and misinformation (Longstaff and Yang, 2008; Norris, Stevens, Pfefferbaum, Wyche, & Pfefferbaum, 2008). The mass media also play an important role in this process and should do so responsibly, as sensationalizing information about risk rather than providing structural messages can hinder response and recovery (Frisby, Veill, & Sellnow, 2014).

In contrast to other studies, which primarily focus on how organizations deal with risks or crises (Liu & Fraustino, 2014), this case-study takes the perspective of the public. Namely, by investigating how citizens cope with a terrorism threat. More specifically, we will first examine to what extent Belgian citizens change their behavior in public places because of the threat and seek information about the threat. Second, this case study will elaborate on information seeking and processing behavior by investigating the factors that trigger this behavior. More specifically, we will analyze how the level of involvement with the terrorism threat, governmental expert efficacy, and attitudes towards mass media communication influence the cognitive and affective responses of people and subsequently their information seeking behavior. Hereby, we will gain insights in what drives information seeking and processing behavior of people towards the risk, which is crucial for improving risk and crisis communication (Slovic, 1987; Rogers, Amlôt, Rubin, Wessely, & Krieger, 2007; Lee & Lemyre, 2009).

Moreover, this case study investigates the impact of the attitudes towards the mass media and perceived governmental efficacy on the cognitive and affective assessment of the risk. In doing so, the study sheds light on a so far indecisive topic, namely how communication is able to form the cognitive and affective perceptions of people and hence their information seeking and processing behavior (Griffin, Yang, Ter Huurne, Boerner, Ortiz, & Dunwoody, 2008). For example, in the Risk Information Seeking and Processing (RISP) model (Griffin, Dunwoody, & Neuwirth, 1999), beliefs about mass media coverage of a risk are referred to as *relevant channel beliefs*. However, research on the impact of these beliefs remains exploratory (Griffin et al., 2008), and is often inconclusive with regards to the impact on information seeking and processing behavior, and whether positive or negative beliefs result in more or less information seeking and processing (Griffin, Powell, Dunwoody, Neuwirth, Clark, & Novotny, 2004; Griffin et al., 2008; Yang, 2012). Hence, it is important to clarify the impact of perceptions about mass media coverage in the context of the terrorism threat. Nevertheless, besides the mass media, the government and its representative experts (i.e., ministers) are crucial communicating actors during a terrorism threat. Therefore, we will also investigate the impact of governmental expert efficacy on information seeking and processing behavior.

Finally, we have to recognize that the terrorism threat is not only challenging for Belgian citizens, but also for the Belgian federal government and its experts, who have the delicate task of communicating information about the terrorism threat whilst avoiding interruptions to the investigations of police services. Therefore, the third aim of this study is to investigate how governmental communication affects its reputation; this is a very important asset for the government as it reflects the level of public approval towards their actions (Watson, 2007). In particular, we will research the mediating roles of institutional trust (Ter Huurne & Gutteling, 2008; Liu, Bartz, & Duke, 2016) and governmental responsibility (Coombs, 2007), which are both important factors in a context of high uncertainty.

First, in order to get a better understanding of the context of the terrorism threat in Belgium, the following paragraphs give a short overview of the facts related to this.

## 2. Situational background of the terrorism threat in Belgium

On the 15th of January 2015, the Belgian federal police were able to neutralize a terrorist cell of Islamic State located in the Belgian city Verviers. The terrorists were organizing an attack against the Belgian police services (Eeckhaut, Vanhecke, & Tack, 2015). Furthermore, on the 13th of November 2015, terrorists conducted the worst attack against France since World War II. In Paris, the capital of France, 129 people died and 352 people were injured, 99 with injuries that were life threatening.

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