


## CHAPTER 89

### Information management and crisis: reflections on communication in the case of “Brazilian terrorists” – Rio 2016 Olympics

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#### ABSTRACT

The objective of this article is to carry out a critical analysis of the information management process based on the case of the “Brazilian terrorists”, which took place in parallel with the preparations for the Rio 2016 Olympic Games. of information management in critical situations, the article aims to analyze the conduct of Brazilian authorities to protect their interests without affecting the relationship of trust with society, mainly through planning for the treatment and dissemination of information.

**Keywords:** Communication. Information management. Network society. Crisis management. Information.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of information defended by BARRETO apud XAVIER and COSTA (2010) is defined as "a significant structure with competence and intention to generate knowledge in the individual and in his group, enabling his development and well-being". This view corroborates the ideology in which information fulfills a physicalist bias, in the sense of information as a thing ( *information-as-thing* ) by Buckland; a cognitivist bias, recognizing the importance of the individual and his psychic interaction in managing information and generating knowledge; and its social bias, which assesses the environment in which the knowing individual interacts.

SILVA and JUSTAMAND (2021) remind us that the coexistence with information through the media is an intrinsic process and serves as an extension of our senses. “We have moved from a community society, in which everyone knows each other and knows the information among themselves, to a joint-stock company”. This stage we are in, for the authors, is conditioned by urbanization and the process of massification of the media, which produce information and tend to guide themes of common interest.

It is inferred, then, that this process - the production of information and, therefore, of knowledge and its dissemination - has a natural flow, which often occurs in the unconscious of everyday social life. However, there is a condition that it be handled by whoever, having privileged access to certain information, cuts it off and promotes partial access.

Managing this flow is a major challenge in our age. Scholars note that since the 20th century, with the strengthening and rapid dissemination of Digital Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), there has been the possibility of a disorderly production and dissemination of an exponential amount of new content. This factor generates an overload of information, which makes it difficult to handle the so-called “strategic” information.

Figura 1 - Montage with cover of the newspaper "O Estado de São Paulo" of July 17, 2007. On the left, original cover and on the right, fictional cover edited by the authors.



1. Airplane explodes killing 176 in Congonhas; Biggest accident in the country’s history; TAM’s airplane couldn’t stop on the wet runway and exploded against a building; The airbus was coming from Porto Alegre
2. Deposit stroke by TAM’s airplane contained radioactive material from IPEN; 125 Iodine seeds were at the place; The material belonged to a research group from the Nuclear Research Institute in SP; IPEN didn’t declare its position about the fact.

Such reflection becomes even more relevant when communicating – which for CASTELLS (2015) is to share meaning through the exchange of information – in crisis situations, which put the image of corporations and organizations at risk in society. In a hypothetical condition – as illustrated in the image above – that would involve the Institute for Energy and Nuclear Research (IPEN) in Brazil, what information should be brought to the public to maintain order and stability without exposing information considered critical by the institution?

Seeking this forecast involves a series of variables that go through economic interests, social stability and maintenance of credibility, variables that do not allow impromptu actions in the treatment of information and in its management. For this article, we seek to cut an episode of recent Brazilian history, in order to analyze the communication strategies adopted with the public and their implications.

## 2 OBJECTIVE

To make a critical analysis of information management during the Rio 2016 Olympic Games by the Brazilian State. To analyze, based on what was published in the media, the actions carried out during the “Brazilian terrorists” episode, based on concepts and recommendations from manuals in the area, especially from the IAEA, and from the Law on Access to Information in Brazil. Propose actions that bring improvements in the management of information in crisis.

### 3 METHODOLOGY \_

The proposal of the article will be made in the model of a case study, with a direct approach and bibliographic base. Such choice is justified in the intention of registering, examining and correlating facts or phenomena. For this, concepts of information management guides and other documents in the area will be opposed to the statements and behaviors of the authorities and others involved in the case under analysis, seeking to counter this communication reaction to the theoretical aspects of information management and the guidelines perceived in the manuals .

### 4 DISCUSSION

In 2009, Brazil won the right to host the Games of the XXXI Olympiad, a competition that would take place for the first time in South America. Among the many preparations to promote the sporting event were security-related measures. This topic gained greater relevance months before the start of the Rio 2016 Games, due to terrorist attacks that took place on the European continent, especially in France and Belgium.

The occurrences opened precedents for the inference that the Olympics were a potential target of this type of action, combining the global context of the attacks with an increase in the adhesion of Brazilians to the ideology of the Islamic State. In April 2016, the Brazilian Intelligence Agency (Abin) confirmed that the risk of attacks in the country had increased due to migratory facilities and the increased use of the internet as a mechanism for action. The Agency also confirmed the authenticity of a profile on a social network where Frenchman Maxime Hauchard, a member of the Islamic State, said that Brazil would be the organization's next target.

On the first day of July of that year, Abin's concern was no longer with attacks of great sophistication and logistical complexity, but with the so-called “lone wolves”<sup>1</sup>. At the time, the Agency indicated that it was focused on monitoring individuals who showed radicalization behavior by ideologically aligning themselves with the Islamic State. The disclosure was also supported by the discovery of a communication channel in Portuguese for the exchange of information about the terrorist group in a messaging application, this factor being interpreted “as a door for Brazilians to be radicalized”.

At the same time, a consulting firm specializing in actions by extremist groups on the internet reported that the Islamic State (IS) and other jihadist groups were inciting their followers to promote terror in Rio de Janeiro. They offered specific advice on how to attack using drones with small explosives, traffic accidents or through the use of poisons and medicines.

The fact that Abin exposed this data generated strong criticism from the Secretary of Public Security of Rio de Janeiro at the time, José Mariano Beltrame. “When we have investigations of important things to do, we don't talk. People show results. In my view, it should not have either confirmed or disconfirmed.”

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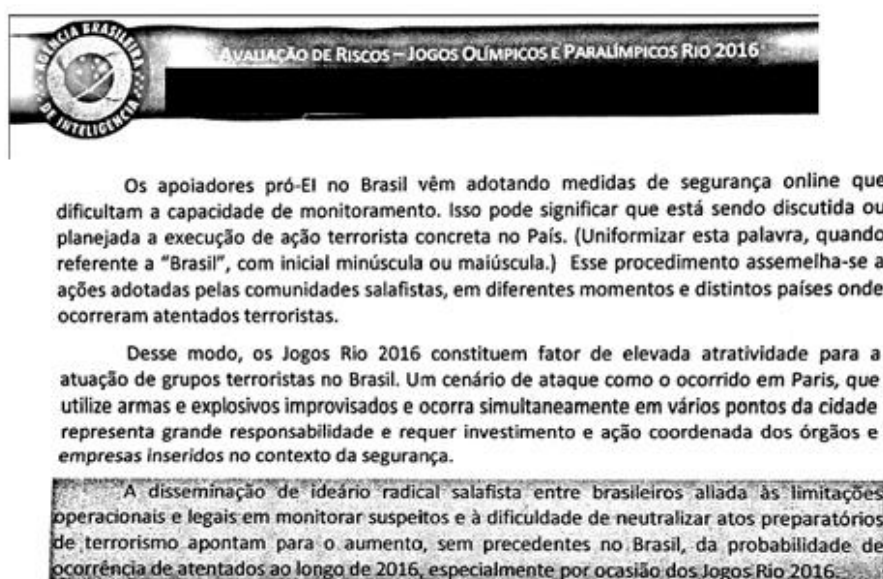
<sup>1</sup>A “lone wolf” is a terrorist who acts alone, at the time and place he deems convenient.

The lack of consensus was not only in the handling of disclosures between Brazilian authorities involved in security issues. On July 8, 2016, the then Defense Minister declared that “no intelligence agency in the world has traced the possibility of a terrorist attack during the Olympics”, contradicting the reports and information released by Abin.

The contradiction gained new life when an official report by the French government's intelligence agency disclosed that the Islamic State terrorist faction had planned attacks on the French delegation during the Games. Reported by the press in July, the information had been given by General Cristophe Gomart in May, during the session of a parliamentary commission. According to him, there were indications that a Brazilian could have been behind the planning of these attacks, and the identity of this individual was not clear.

Almost thirty days earlier, Veja magazine had already named one of the priority targets of Brazilian surveillance in the fight against the threat of terrorism in the national territory. It was Ismail Abdul Jabbar Al-Brazili – or, simply, “The Brazilian”. According to the report, he was one of those responsible for supplying the propaganda channel with texts in Portuguese (released by Abin days later), in addition to being a Brazilian fighter for IS. The report also included excerpts from a reserved report authored by Abin and distributed to the authorities involved in the Games' security scheme.

Figure 2 - Copy of Abin's report published by Veja Magazine in 2016



The IS supporters in Brazil have been adopting new online security measures that make it difficult to monitor them. It might mean that the execution of a concrete act of terrorism in the country is being discussed or planned. (Unify this word when referring to “Brazil”, with capital or small initial.) This process is similar to the actions adopted by the Salafi community in different moments and countries where terrorist attacks occurred.

This way the Rio 2016 games establish a factor of high attractiveness for the actions of terrorist groups in Brazil. An attack scenario like Paris, which use improvised guns and bombs and happen simultaneously at different points of the city represents great responsibility and demands investigation and coordinated actions by companies and agencies present in the security context.

The dissemination of radical Salafi ideology among Brazilians allied to the legal and operational limitations in monitoring suspects and the difficulty in neutralizing preparatory acts of terrorism point to an unprecedented increase in the probability of attacks occurring throughout 2016 in Brazil, especially due to the Rio 2016 game

On the 21st of July another state authority enters the scene. The then Minister of Justice, Alexandre de Moraes, announced that the Federal Police had launched Operation *Hashtag*, carried out simultaneously in 10 Brazilian states. It resulted in the arrest of 10 Brazilians suspected of preparing terrorist acts for execution during the Olympics.

According to him, the intelligence service proved that the arrested group went from simple comments on messaging apps to, in fact, "preparatory acts" for the attack. At the time, the minister did not detail what exactly supported this certification. He also stated that the members had sworn an oath of loyalty to IS over the internet, that the group had exchanged messages commemorating attacks in France and the United States and that one of them had contacted a website in Paraguay to purchase an AK 47 rifle.

Commenting on the arrests, the then Defense Minister, Raul Jungmann, said that the group of prisoners was amateur and that they had no direct contact with IS. According to him, they were people with no tradition for the practice of terrorism and without any evidence that could be used as preparation or history of action. Even so, he stated that the group would have to pay a very high price, "because a preparatory act can be up to eight years in prison. For terrorism you go up to 30 years in jail. The penalties are tough. And here, a warning to anyone who wants to follow this path: we are monitoring, especially social networks, all of them, in this regard".

On July 22, an 11th suspect turned himself in to police, who confirmed they had received an FBI alert<sup>2</sup> about suspects who were detained in Brazil. In common, they all had a devotion to the Islamic religion and the use of false names on the internet, in addition to the fact that some of them knew each other, which could reinforce the thesis of a possible articulation for carrying out a terrorist action.

On the same day, Sheikh Ahmad Al-Khatib was coerced by the Federal Police to testify about his proximity to two of the arrested suspects who had been his employees in the past. Owner of a furniture factory and responsible for the NGO Núcleo Islâmico Livro Aberto, he and his family had cell phones, computers and tablets confiscated by the police. In his words, the two suspects were Islamic State sympathizers, but he was skeptical of the possibility of both participating in terrorism. For him, the action of the police was hasty. "If they were called to testify, they would go of their own free will," he said.

An analysis of the information management procedures adopted by the State bodies that were related to the event and their possible alignment with the theoretical ideal of communication indicate that controversies marked this process. One of them is the fact that the Minister of Justice called a press

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<sup>2</sup>The Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) is the equivalent of the Federal Police of the United States. According to JORDÃO (2017) in this episode, the FBI basically "informed the PF about the virtual profiles of nine people who were, according to the American agency, propaganda for IS on media such as Facebook, Twitter and Google Plus. Upon provocation by the FBI, Deputy Guilherme Torres, from DAT, ordered his agents to carry out an initial search in open sources, to identify these profiles. In the following three days, police officers would deepen information on four of the suspects named by the FBI, in addition to expanding the list of investigated".

conference to detail an operation that was under judicial secrecy. Apparently, the disclosure of the arrests was made at an inappropriate time.

“ Started 15 days before the start of the Games, and a week after the attacks in Nice, France, with extensive news coverage, Operation Hashtag found public opinion already sensitized to the topic of terrorism” stressed JORDÃO (2017). Furthermore, the typification of the crime presented had very fragile bases that were not confirmed. JORDÃO recalls that one of the evidences for the arrests was the attempt to buy a rifle by one of the suspects.

The evidence, it turned out later, referred to an email actually sent to a store in Paraguay, but in 2015, and not on the eve of the Olympics, as Moraes suggested. The purchase did not materialize. The minister would rush once again to the press conference by wrongly attributing the leadership of the alleged cell to a suspect detained in Paraná, Levi Ribeiro Fernandes de Jesus, 21 years old – a fact that was not proven in the PF investigations.

The operation also had three ostensible phases in the month of August, during the Games, and away from the press spotlight. In total, another 15 people had temporary arrest decreed, of which eight were denounced by the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) and became defendants. The thesis that there was a planned attack on the Olympics, however, was never confirmed.

The MPF prosecutor, Rafael Miron, recalls that there were exchanges of messages and a very strong intention to do so, but no facts. “ In reality, conversations mostly revolve around discussions about IS, commemorations of attacks in Europe and effective methods of communication.”

The complaint signed by the prosecutor contains several images and more than 60 excerpts of dialogues or sentences extracted from the conversations intercepted between the group of suspects, seven of which contain some kind of mention of the Olympic Games. The most extreme of them points to the intention to contaminate Rio de Janeiro's water resources <sup>3</sup>.

When arrested, these Brazilians suspected of terrorism did not carry chemical materials, explosives or weapons. Eight of them were denounced by the Federal Public Ministry (MPF) based on articles 3 and 5 of the Anti-Terrorism Law. Leonid El Kadre de Melo was the only one to answer for the fifth article (carrying out preparatory acts of terrorism), in addition to being appointed – after Levi Ribeiro – as the leader of the group. Leonid was the oldest of the group and the only one with a criminal record (he served time for murder). He was on parole and was with his brother, Valdir Pereira da Rocha, when they were both arrested.

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<sup>3</sup>survey carried out by JORDÃO (2017) indicates that “the idea of an attack that would poison the waters of Rio is, to say the least, unreal. The Guandu Water Treatment Station, located in Nova Iguaçu (RJ), is responsible for supplying 85% of the water in the city of Rio de Janeiro, serving 9 million locals. From there, 3.6 billion liters of water come out per day. Poisoning a source of this magnitude would require, according to experts consulted by Pública, 90,000 liters of chemical solution capable of causing toxicity, or something like six medium-sized water trucks”.

Leonid's temporary detention <sup>4</sup>was revoked in September 2016, after the Federal Public Ministry deemed his participation in the episodes secondary. His brother Valdir was not so lucky. An inquiry by the Civil Police of Mato Grosso indicates that he was beaten to death by about 20 inmates at the Várzea Grande Public Prison. The reason for the lynching was “the fact that he was a terrorist”, a condition not accepted by the “code of ethics” of the criminal world.

## 5 CONCLUSION

The case of Brazilian “terrorists” shows a series of dissonances when we analyze the information management process in opposition to theoretical assumptions. One may question, for example, the responsibility of the authorities when coining the term “terrorism” to name those still suspected of a crime that, in the course of the facts, was not confirmed. In doing so, considering that at the time of the announcement there was still an investigation in progress and under judicial secrecy, there is an anticipation of fundamental steps to maintain transparency (in the sense that the information disclosed is true) and openness (in the meaning to reveal only what is essential).

By opting for early disclosure, the principle of maintaining a sense of social stability was put at risk, as the possibility of panic in the population was increased. The promotion that Brazilians were aligned with terrorist groups and with the possibility of carrying out extreme acts – although this possibility was far from happening in practice –, may also have impacted the decision of foreigners to go to Rio de Janeiro to follow the games.

Although at the time the mayor of the city, Eduardo Paes, had a positive assessment of this factor with data that pointed to the visit of 1.17 million tourists, 410 thousand from abroad, a report by Euromonitor shows that these numbers were timid<sup>5</sup>. The observation is that the major sporting events in Brazil (the 2014 World Cup and the 2016 Olympics) did not place the country on the Latin American tourism route. There are certainly many factors that can influence this issue and the feeling of security is inevitably relevant.

Finally, the disclosure by the authorities that there were “terrorists” in Brazil, even if their methods were ineffective in carrying out extremist acts, could create a problem that does not exist insofar as it programmed the communication network of the society and generated a new node of influence. People

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<sup>4</sup>In 2017, “Leonid El Kadre de Melo was convicted under Article 5 of the Anti-Terrorism Law, referring to 'recruitment for the purpose of committing acts of terrorism'. He was sentenced to 15 years, 10 months and 5 days in prison, the longest sentence of all. Recruitment, according to the judge, took place through virtual means, and in 'the frequency with which he addressed others and his frequent insistence that they form a terrorist cell in the state of Mato Grosso'. He was charged with the crime of recruiting 'encouraging, recruiting', 'individuals and organizing people with the purpose of forming an ISIS action group in Brazil to carry out acts of terrorism'. In his sentence, the judge notes that this type of crime (recruitment) is of 'anticipated consummation', that is, it is not necessary to 'effectively go to the place where they were called'”. In addition to him, eight other defendants were convicted on the basis of article 3 for “promotion of terrorism” and “criminal association”.

<sup>5</sup>According to the report, Brazil had a “modest” annual growth of 3% in the number of foreign arrivals between 2012 and 2017, against almost 6% in Costa Rica, 8% in Mexico and 10% in Chile and Colombia.

seeking notoriety, unhappy or otherwise, could be influenced by media coverage and be induced to commit crimes that perhaps were not even planned.

The conduct of this case also shows that there is no more room for improvisation in communication policies. The establishment of the network society makes it clear that the information management process needs to be professionalized by the authorities, bodies, and entities that need to be prepared to protect their assets, their power, and their ability to influence their partners and society.

If the culture used to be reactive, of action after the establishment of the critical fact and its consequences, the current panorama of a society that is quickly permeated by the speed of flow of information, requires that these actors (authorities, companies, and public entities) are previously prepared to condition their processes and establish doctrines that are capable of pragmatizing the methods to be used and protecting their image and reputation.

History demonstrates that the Olympics took place in Rio without any act of terrorism. An analysis of the way in which the information was managed, however, indicates that there is an opportunity to re-evaluate the communication and publicity procedures of sensitive factors related to crisis situations.



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