

Magaly Rohé
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**THE UNEXPECTED AFTERMATH OF BLOODSHED
IN MADRID**

It's time to crack down on public lying

By Yvan DAISINFAUX

THE aftermath of the train bombings in Madrid and especially the declarations of Jose Maria Aznar, the former Prime Minister of Spain, after the attacks on the Spanish capital go some way to reminding governments of how risky it is to hide the truth to the people. Although politicians' lies are made common place nowadays, their discovery is rarer and their sanction as in that applied by the population to the conservative Partido Popular is even more unusual.

191 people were killed and about 600 injured by a string of powerful explosions which rocked three Madrid train stations on Thursday 11 March 2004 with just days to go before Spain's general elections¹. Immediately, Spain's Foreign Minister, Ana Palacio, instructed Spain's diplomatic missions abroad to assert publicly that the Basque separatist group ETA, and ETA alone, was responsible for the attacks². On the same day, Interior Minister Angel Acebes said it was 'absolutely clear that the terrorist organisation ETA was seeking an attack with wide repercussions'³.

¹ For a map of the attacks, see The BBC News Uk Edition (12 March 2004). Madrid train attacks [Online]. Available: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/spl/hi/europe/05/madrid_bombings/html/1.stm. [Accessed 2005, October 2].

² For the authentic declarations of Ana Palacio read 'Palacio instruye a los embajadores para defenderla tesis de la autoría de ETA', 2004, *La Vanguardia*, 13 March, p.3.

³ 'Spain says ETA responsible for Madrid train blasts', *Reuters News*, 11 March 2004.

Meanwhile, Aznar telephoned all major news organisations to assert that ‘the terrorist group that is so well-known in our country’ was responsible⁴.

One could say that in such a sensitive situation, government has to act quickly, no matter if some procedures are not respected⁵. There is thus no reason to condemn any misinterpretation of the events. It is for example the opinion of the Spaniard Isabel Fernandez Galiano who declares that Aznar’s handling of the situation was ‘perfectly appropriate as it gave what everyone was expecting: an identifiable perpetrator’⁶.

However, there are proofs of government deception and political manipulation. It is undeniable that what the Spanish government lied. Indeed, the action of the Spanish government abides by the three major criteria which distinguish a lie from another statement expressing something that did not happen but might have⁷.

The first criterion is the falseness of government premature assertions that ETA had to be blamed for the attacks whereas there was no claim of responsibility. A few hours after the events, the leader of the banned Basque separatist party Batasuna had denied that the armed Basque group carried out the train attacks⁸. A videotape found on Saturday night in which al-Qaida reportedly claimed responsibility and further investigations finally dispelled any doubt⁹.

The second condition is the intention to deceive the population. Here again, the fact that Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar initially blamed the Basque separatist group

⁴ Aznar’s says are cited in the article: Ham, A (2004), ‘The voices of the silenced’, *Eureka Street*, May, pp. 13-15.

⁵ The changes of government actions implied by situations of emergencies and crises are mentioned in Chapter 1 of the book of Paul H. Weaver (2005), *News and the culture of lying*, New York: Free Press.

⁶ Isabel Fernandez Galiano is a Spanish teacher originally from Madrid currently living in Strasbourg, France. I wrote her an e-mail asking what she thought about the aftermath of Madrid attacks. She underlies that Aznar’s reaction can not be condemnable as the Spanish population has very often to deal with ETA, thus it is understandable that the government thought about it at first.

⁷ The theory applied here was elaborated by Coleman and Kay in 1981. In *Deceit, Delusion and Detection* published in 1996 in London, W. Peter Robinson analysed this theory and compared it to other lying theories. The three major criteria found by Coleman and Kay analysing limited sample of people’s judgments about possible lies are: false or true, intention to deceive or no intention, and success or failure of deception. The theory distinguishes between a lie and a counterfactual.

⁸ Paul H. Weaver argues that journalists and officials often work together in order to ‘fabricate an alternative reality that is covered in the media’ (Weaver, Paul H., 1994, *News and the culture of Lying*, New York, p.1). It is confirmed reading articles such as ‘At least 60 die in Madrid train blasts’, 2004, *Dow Jones International News*, 11 March. After relating the denial of responsibility claimed by ETA, the article describes this terrorist group and its previous attacks, without mentioning any alternative hypothesis. It obviously made ETA’s declarations lose credibility and reinforced the official statements.

⁹ ‘5 arrested in blasts on Madrid trains ; Videotape claims al-Qaida was behind terror attacks, 2004, *The Seattle Times*, 14 March.

ETA for the rail attacks, even as evidence mounted of an Islamic link, questions the intentions of the government. Would it be to preserve its own interests (the government of Mr Aznar was one of the strongest supporters of the war in Iraq, despite the opposition of 90% of the Spanish people) or to prevent a wave of fear among a population far more used to dealing with ETA, it is fair to say that ETA was a more ‘acceptable’ perpetrator than al-Qaida to all parties.

The final condition between truth and falsity is the success or failure of deception. The numerous demonstrations held in the days following the discovery of the tape demanded explanations for Mr Aznar’s hiding the fact that violent Islamism was a current threat for Spain¹⁰.

The failure of deception has even had worse consequences. Jose Maria Aznar’s People’s Party lost the general elections of Sunday March 14 in favour of the Socialist Party led by Jose Luis Zapatero despite the fact that the Popular Party had led in opinion polls by three to five points a week before the elections. The unexpected turnout of 62.9% of voters by mid-afternoon also demonstrates that the results were clearly influenced by the frustration of the lack of information the Spanish population was receiving about the circumstances surrounding the terrorist blasts¹¹.

Armed with this information, it is hardly questionable that Jose Maria Aznar’s declarations constituted a lie, more precisely an institutional lie as made on behalf of large groups¹². But what is atypical is how this institutional lie backfired on the Spanish government¹³. And it is actually the first time a single terrorist attack has had a direct affect on the outcome of an election in a leading western country.

If the so-called ‘war on terror’ is often presented as a struggle for democracy, then governments should start paying attention to their words and offer more transparency to their electorates.

¹⁰ For images of these demonstrations, watch the videos of the French TV programme “C dans l’air” of March 12 2004, available on request.

¹¹ Read ‘Furious votes oust Spanish government’, 2004, *The Guardian*, 15 March.

¹² This definition of an institutional lying can be found in the article of Martin, B 2003-2004, ‘Telling lies for a better world?’, *Social Anarchism*, No. 35, pp. 27-39. Brian Martin opposes this type of public lying (lying in the public sphere) to individual lying.

¹³ The concept of backfire is defined in the following article of Martin, B 2005, ‘The beating of Rodney King: the dynamics of backfire’, *Critical Criminology*, in press, as an act which recoils negatively on the attacker. If we consider that a lie is an attack to democracy and transparency, then Mr Aznar’s declarations are attackers and as a perpetrator, the Spanish Prime Minister can be seen as a liar and attacker.

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LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

GPO Box 2522, Wollongong, NSW
e-mail: letters@theshackledindependent.com.au (no attachments)

Erroneous Terrorist Accusations

YOU are a lazy thinker, Yvan DAISINFAUX. As a former member of the Spanish government, let me tell you that the assumption that ETA, or some faction of it, was planning a significant strike on the eve of a general election, was more than plausible. Only 10 days before the attacks, our police and intelligence services had indeed intercepted a van with half a tonne of explosive south of Madrid, with two suspected ETA members on board.

Furthermore, the material which was used, the type of attacks and the context all led us to believe that this terrorist group was responsible¹⁴.

Please also keep in mind that ETA tried to assassinate Mr Aznar in April 1995. So can you really blame the former Prime Minister for thinking spontaneously of this terrorist group?

Spanish people are well known for their gut reactions. I left Spain a year ago in order not to live through this again. But I am very disappointed in **your** inability to critically and objectively analyse sensitive issues such as this one.

Mariano Acebes¹⁵

Sydney, NSW

¹⁴ A relevant article about the clues and precedents leading to accuse ETA is at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/3501364.stm>.

¹⁵ Mariano Acebes questions the real intention to deceive of the Spanish government. This criteria seems crucial to him in order to claim that the declarations of Mr Aznar were lies.

YOUR piece “It’s time to crack down on public lying” (October 24) is very interesting but not so surprising. What is the point of democracy if not choosing someone you trust? Were I a Spanish voter, I would also have voted for Jose Luis Zapatero. I’m more worried by other countries which have re-elected acknowledged liars than by those which punished them.

John Poynting¹⁶

Cowra, NSW

I totally agree with your main idea: Aznar lied to his population and was eventually punished.

But don’t you think it would have been enough to say that the speeches of the Spanish government were lies because they gave a false impression to its citizens?

Carleen Goodwin¹⁷

Coffs Harbour, NSW

¹⁶ John Poynting implicitly refers about George W. Bush who lied to his country in order to wage war in Iraq.

¹⁷ Carleen Goodwin’s definition of lie is broader: the false impression given is enough to recognise a lie.

MADRID BLOODSHED DIALOGUE

The following takes place at dinner between 6 p.m. and 7 p.m.

Jim (whispering): Hey, did you hear that Katie lied and pretended to be sick to get a special consideration for her marketing assignment?

Yvan: Well it's not a lie as long as nobody has discovered it...

Jim: Bullshit, of course it's a lie!

Yvan (smiling): I'm glad you say that, actually. I'm working on my major assignment, you know for my Media, War and Peace subject. I've read this funny theory about lies. It seems that one of the criteria to recognise a lie is the success or failure of deception¹⁸. That's why I just told you that about Katie. But don't worry; you're not the only one who thinks that this criterion is irrelevant: for some other guys, we should only focus on the speaker's mind, no matter what's the reaction of his audience is afterwards¹⁹.

Jim: So hypocritical! How can you tell it's a lie if you don't consider the two persons interacting and the context?

Yvan: I think those two theories have their disadvantages but the first one seems much more logical to me.

Jim: Why do you find so important to know how to define a lie anyway? I don't really care whether words constitute lie or not, what I usually wonder is whether it was acceptable or not and this is up to everyone I guess.

Yvan: You have a point here. Well I agree with you to some extent. The thing is that I found interesting to look at the theories of lies trying not to think of morality and ethics as we usually do and basically apply the criteria enunciated and look if it works.

Jim: Fair enough. But what the hell does it have to do with media, war and peace?

¹⁸ Coleman and Kay (1981), already cited.

¹⁹ It is referenced here to one of the five approaches to definitions of a lie (Robinson, W. P 1996, *Deceit, Delusion and Detection*, London, pp.29-39). Named 'True Statements and Deviations From Them', this theory created by Bradac, Friedman, and Giles in 1986 use the four following parameters to measure a lie or another form of deception: intention, accuracy, relevance and accountability, all based on a speaker point of view.

Yvan: I'm trying to apply this theory to the terrorist attacks in Madrid last year. Does it ring a bell to you?

Jim: Yeah I've heard of it. But why this particular event? It's not topical anymore. If I were you, I would've chosen the recent Bali Bombings.

Yvan: I don't know, I was also thinking of the Bali bombings but they are too fresh in mind and I didn't want to hurt the feelings of Pras and Indah²⁰ bugging them with questions. And although it's been more than a year since Madrid has been attacked, this seemed worth talking about to me. It's not just about the event itself but more the institutional lying and its outcomes that I wanted to study here.

Jim: I see... Or if you absolutely wanted to use your theories of lying, why not the lie of G.W. Bush for the war in Iraq²¹?

Yvan: I was looking for something a bit more original than Iraq 'cause it's currently the first thing people think of when asked for public lying. I still wanted a controversial example though. And what I found good about Madrid is that it could be linked to another theory, the backfire theory because Aznar lost the general elections two days after his lie, punished by his citizens. Our lecturer wrote an article about it that we did in class in the beginning of the sessions.

Jim (laughing out loud): I see: you're using your lecturer's theory to get a good grade, aren't you?! No, I'm just making fun of you. Actually I guess I understand what you mean. Aznar's ass got kicked, right?

Yvan: Yes he kind of had a slap in his face. But the backfire idea is not all about that. Two conditions have to be respected: the perception of injustice and communication to receptive audience²². Plus, according to a similar theory about 'political jiu-jitsu', the backfire affects three groups: the grievance group, the attacker group and third parties²³.

²⁰ Indonesian friends living in International House, University of Wollongong, NSW, Australia.

²¹ It is difficult to know here which lie is talked about. It is probably either the fact that in 2003, G.W. Bush's administration pretended Iraq was holding Weapons of Mass Destruction with no tangible proof or that it didn't reveal it had supplied Saddam Hussein's regime with weapons in the 1980's.

²² To know more about backfire in the context of withholding of information and more specially censorship, have a look at the article of Sur Curry Jansen and Brian Martin, 'Exposing and opposing censorship: backfire dynamics in freedom-of-speech struggles', *Pacific Journalism Review*, Vol. 10, No. 1, April 2004, pp. 29-45.

²³ Sharp, G 1973, *The Politics of Nonviolent Action*, Porter Sargent, Boston. pp. 657-703.

Jim: Ok so let me think... The grievance group here is ETA which was wrongly accused, isn't it?

Yvan: I believe so.

Jim: The attacker group is obviously the Prime Minister Aznar and third parties the general public. As they felt themselves betrayed and as ETA was probably angry at the government as well, they used the elections as a way to communicate their deception.

Yvan: Yes, and to me the general public was the group which was the more affected because Aznar got what he deserved and ETA was cleared of all suspicion, whereas the population didn't trust its politicians anymore.

Jim: Sure. Now we know who lost the most, let's look at who benefited from the backfire. How scary it is to see how al-Qaida indirectly influenced the results of the elections!

Yvan: I know! However some people still argue we can't be 100% sure Aznar lost because he first said that ETA was responsible, although it was quickly clear it was al-Qaida. Others don't even think he lied to its population. I'm trying to make it clear that he was lying so that the evidence the population turned against him sounds even more obvious.

Jim: I remember I read an article saying that the Spanish population usually cares a lot for domestic policy in the elections. A direct attack to the security of the country would obviously influence them then. If I can find it I'll lend it to ya.

Yvan: Thanks.

Jim: No worries, mate.

(Blank... Jim seems to be miles away)

Yvan: Sorry if I'm bothering you with my project...

Jim (now awake): No, no, I'm trying to find other examples of politicians who lied and lost the elections but nothing comes up. You're doing Political Sciences, give me some!

Yvan (laughing): Funnily enough I couldn't think of any either. I have some examples of electors globally disappointed by politicians' promises like the American people

who did not re-elect George Bush Senior. But it was more part of the political game. It's much more difficult to find such a direct connection between a specific event and elections following. And look recently, all the accusations towards Bush or Blair and finally they both were re-elected. That's ridiculous!

Jim: You're right. Hmm it seems much more unusual than it looks at first sight. And interesting as well... But wait a minute, I see the link with war or at least with violence 'cause you talk about terrorism but what about the media? Are you using some or what?

Yvan: Waow that's good to see someone interested in my project! Well I'm analysing the declarations of Aznar and of the other members of his government, which is to me a first media. The events have also been related plenty of times in the newspapers, on TV, radio, and so on.

Jim: How did you get all this?

Yvan: Well most of them are newspapers from the database of the Library. I also saw that a TV programme made one subject about Madrid bombings so I asked them to send me their video through e-mail. I was quite surprised to see they actually did it! What was interesting too is that there were a lot of newspaper articles but I couldn't really find books analysing this event. So you said it's not topical anymore but it seems still recent enough that people don't feel like analysing those events with hindsight.

Jim: I guess it was a good exercise to select a variety of sources from different media.

Yvan: Of course, but at the same time difficult to sort all of them! I'm a bit disappointed though. I would have liked to more deeply analyse all the articles I read and see how the news followed and interpreted the declarations of Aznar. We had to read a good book about that²⁴. There was also this article which was not too bad²⁵. But I couldn't mix too many theories; otherwise it would have been too much. It was impossible for reasons of space too.

Jim: Sounds good anyway. How's it going so far?

²⁴ Weaver, Paul H, 1994, News and the culture of Lying. New York: Free Press. 071.3/26

²⁵ Yvan is probably talking about the theory of Karen Cerulo in her book Deciphering violence : the cognitive structure of right and wrong. New York. Routledge. 1998. 189 p. p 39-75.

Yvan: Hmm... The example matches very well with the theory of lying I talked to you about, which makes things quite easy. Hope it's not gonna seem too basic though but I wanted to make it accessible for everyone. I find interesting working on the whole thing but I'm a bit stuck with writing in an Opinion Piece style: I have an obvious lack of style in English you know! But I'm not complaining, my searches went easier than expected and I managed to get in touch with my former Spanish teacher who is originally from Madrid.

Jim: I didn't know you've learned Spanish! Anyway, what did she think about it?

Yvan: She reacted quite passionately actually, but it didn't surprise me much. She's one of those typical tough Spanish women, see what I mean? She said that Aznar did the right thing considering the situation, blablabla. Everything but what I wanted to write! So I'm mentioning it although I don't really agree with her point of view. It annoys me a bit...

Jim: But that's why it's called an opinion piece...

Yvan: You're right. And I think I've collected enough different sources to make my argument sound coherent. At least I hope so.

Jim: Hmm I wish I took arts subjects instead of engineering... What you're doing is gripping!

Yvan: True, true. I'm such in a hurry though...

Jim: I have to go back to work as well. Good luck with your assignment!

Yvan: Thank you, see you later!

Jim: See ya!

P.S.: The repetition of the questions Yvan often asked for has been erased.