Title: Taking Hoaxes Seriously: Characteristics of Terrorism Hoaxes and their Perpetrators

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Research Question:
What can existing literature and available data tell us about terrorism hoaxes (i.e. those incidents that are believed to be acts of serious terrorism, but do not actually involve any real risk of harm)?

Importance:
Terrorist hoaxes do not result in death or harm to people or property, but they do impose costs on governments and their populations in terms of inducing fear and draining financial resources. Because the costs of falsely identifying a serious attack as benign may be high, emergency responders and security services must treat hoaxes as legitimate terrorist attacks until there are definitively uncovered as hoaxes. A deeper understanding of hoax activity is essential to developing a means of early differentiation between hoaxes and serious attacks.

Research Findings:
Existing literature on hoaxes is sparse and fragmented, lacking even a clear or consistent definition of the term. Almost any type of serious terrorist activity can be hoaxed, and it is important to consider hoaxes in relation to their serious counterparts, and not as alternative "tactics" on their own. ITERATE (transnational events) and the *Monterey WMD Terrorism Database* (CBRN events) are the only publicly-available, cross-national datasets that code for hoaxes, and both suffer an extreme under-reporting. ITERATE also suffers some confusion with respect to incident and weapon type coding that becomes clear when hoaxes are emphasized.

CBRN hoaxes were most prevalent from the late 1990s to the end of the 2000s, primarily in North America, whereas transnational hoaxes occurred predominantly between the late-1970s and mid-1990s, with less geographic concentration. The majority of CBRN hoaxes are biological (usually anthrax, delivered by mail/letter/package), even though actual CBRN uses are far more likely to involve chemical agents. While the vast majority of hoaxes are committed with unknown or unclear motives, hoaxes are nearly twice as likely to support single-issue (predominantly anti-abortionist) terrorism than all other motives combined. Most terrorist groups who perpetrate hoaxes also commit a range of serious terrorism acts, adding credibility to their activities.

Implications:
In addition to theoretical contributions (for radicalization models and economic approaches to terrorism), a deeper understanding of hoaxes can refine coding in large-*n* terrorism datasets; and can contribute to understandings of serious terrorist activity inasmuch as hoaxes may be perpetrated: while terrorist groups are accumulating resources and planning to conduct serious terrorist acts; to gain tactical intelligence for—and to practice dry-runs of—planned serious attacks; as a function of an incomplete radicalization to violence, or of a group's (ideological) aversion to more severe degrees of violence; or, as a an element of a group's mixed-strategy-informed attack profile.