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ICUREZZA TERRORISMO SOCIETÀ

Security Terrorism Society

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL - Italian Team for Security, Terroristic Issues & Managing Emergencies



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Mapping a Telegram-centred Accelerationist Collective

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Abstract

This paper aims to map the accelerationist collective known as Terrorgram and reconstruct its basic morphological characteristics through propaganda study and social network analysis. The core of the study focuses on digital ethnography within Telegram platform, and it is aimed at the recognition of narratives, communication objectives, techniques and strategies. And finally, a Social Network Analysis (SNA) is implemented, identifying actors and subgroups involved in pro-violence online propaganda within the the digital ecosystem.

Il presente lavoro si propone di mappare il collettivo accelerazionista noto come Terrorgram e di ricostruirne le caratteristiche morfologiche di base attraverso lo studio della propaganda e la social network analysis. Il nucleo dello studio si concentra sull’etnografia digitale all’interno della piattaforma Telegram ed è finalizzato al riconoscimento di narrazioni, obiettivi comunicativi, tecniche e strategie. Infine, viene implementata una Social Network Analysis (SNA) che identifica gli attori e i sottogruppi coinvolti nella propaganda online pro-violenza all’interno dell’ecosistema digitale.

Keywords

Accelerationism, right, propaganda, terrorgram, terrorism

1. Introduction and methodology

Within the extremist digital ecosystems in particular on telegram the popularity of terrorgram is well established and especially its impact in conducting attacks is now proven. with this paper we propose a study that through content analysis and social network analysis attempts to provide as much information as possible on the functioning of this actor. Starting from the assumption that terrorism is communication (Lombardi 2016), the study of communicative and social processes within terrorist communities becomes crucial in the perspective of terrorism prevention. In this sense, digital ethnography proves to be the ideal tool to analyze and reconstruct digital communities and processes within them. The study and analysis of communicative processes makes it possible to grasp the relationships between the different actors within the digital ecosystem; once the relationships are analyzed, it is possible to decode the interpretive keys of the organization and the type of terrorist phenomenon it enacts.

On Telegram, the network of the different media actors was reconstructed by snowball effect and by keeping open sources monitored to expand the ethnographic research to other groups or organizations. Within the Telegram groups and channels, it was possible to access other channels using the befo-rementioned snowball effect as extremist Telegram groups tend to filter and share information from other reliable channels. Subsequently, the information, data and materials collected from the Telegram groups and channels during the observation sessions were stored through the “*Chat Export*” feature of Telegram and in the form of screenshots, a typical method of capturing the object of study and information flow of digital ethnography. The combination of the snowball effect and data collection via data scraper brought hundreds of channels and groups to our attention. Many of these did not have features that identified them as media actors with their symbology and community and were therefore excluded. Table 1 is the result of the data collection after making the selection. Finally, during the observation phase, it emerged that in some cases the same group possessed a digital infrastructure with multiple channels and chatrooms. In these cases, an attempt was made to reconstruct the set of channels and chatrooms as much as possible, focusing however on the channels engaged in the dissemination of propaganda and recruitment Following the observation phase within the ecosystem, relational data were collected to conduct a social network analysis. Assuming that channels used by extremist groups are connected through the platform features and that the

most common link between channels is the so-called “*forward and mention*”, we based our SNA on this type of connection¹. When talking about mentions we intend posts within a channel that contain mentions of another channel (presence of “*t.me*” links or simple text mentions). The final phase of this research aims to reconstruct the network of actors who have been weaponizing anti-system propaganda, and consequently, the links that interest us are those that show the relationships between the various components². A social network was established by linking any actor to another actor’s production house if he had been mentioned or forwarded.

2. Observation and Content Analysis

The Terrorgram is a self-called collective of channels and chatrooms involved in spreading dissident ideas, glorifying terrorism, calling for violence, spreading extremist ideological material and demonising minority groups.³ The collective operates as a loose network without having any formal affiliation with a specific group but well connected with several extremist organizations such as The American Futurist (closely linked to James Mason and ex-AWD members)⁴, Ouest Casual (French extreme-right pro violence group) Ukrainian volunteers battalions and Russian mercenaries.

Our observations started on 2019 with the Terrorwave channels. A set of channels that owns the Terrorwave brand which in turn are responsible for publishing and archiving (a preventive measure in case of channel closure) the material produced. Moreover, given its extensive activity as a media house it does not incorporate a single ideological strand, but its production takes a cross-cutting position the only common thread in the material produced is the emphasis on the pro-violence aspect.

The choice to analyze Terrorwave channels as an initial move to study the Terrorgram is based on the following observations:

- this sub-community is the first promoter of group activities
- is the most productive and resilient actor
- embodies the aesthetic, ideological and content elements of the terrorgram

¹ Stephen P. Borgatti and Daniel S. Halgin, ‘On Network Theory’, *Organization Science* 22, no. 5 (2011): 1168–81, <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781849807630.00024>.

² Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust, *Social Network Analysis: Methods and Applications*, Structural (USA: Cambridge University Press, 1994).

³ Jacob Davey et al., ‘A Taxonomy for the Classification of Post-Organisational Violent Extremist & Terrorist Content’, 2021.

⁴ ‘What Is Siege Culture?’, accessed 24 October 2022, <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/comment/what-is-siege-culture/>.

Terrorwave is thus an extremist online sub-community that posts hyper-stylized images of far-right attacks and violent incidents, using a refined aesthetic to make the violence more appealing. Many of these actors intersperse links from mainstream media with propaganda produced by far-right terrorist groups. From 2019 to 2021 the Terrorwave community published several banners containing multiple links from other channels, referred to as “Terror Telegram”, “Friends of Terrorwave Refined” and finally Terrorgram. In this case, it is interesting to point out how the snowball-effect was facilitated by the publication of such posts to such an extent that a large part of the community could be accessed through a single publication.

Militants, terrorists, soldiers and scenes of decades-old conflicts in Northern Ireland, Chechnya, Balkans and middle east are regularly repurposed for Terrorgram propaganda. The focus of these visual motifs relies on what is perceived as an attractive without an ideological affiliation of the militants. Terrorgram graphics include jihadists, criminals, militia, paramilitaries and nationalist terrorism. The celebration of terrorism and militancy distinguishes Terrorgram from the far-right ecosystem, appealing to those most attracted to violence.

In this particular case, the Terrorwave channel made several posts as a result of the many shutdowns it suffered. In doing so, in addition to reconnecting the community with other channels, it provided a re-grouping procedure of its members. The posts and especially the images created ad hoc to with the link-lists are products of their own making, a fact that denotes the use of their own graphic style and a propensity toward community retention. It should be remembered that the Terrorwave channel is also a media house with its own notoriously high-quality production. Through constant propaganda production of excellent graphic quality has managed to reach more than 5,000 user members. Three channel closures were detected during the observation. Nevertheless, the channel demonstrated excellent resilience and was able to reactivate and regenerate, at least in part, its community. As influential as broker channels are, they are constantly facing an efficiency/security trade-off⁵.

The Terrorwave channels have founded the foundations of Terrorgram and enabled its development as a collective. Between 2021 and 2022 the Terrorwave channel network becomes almost entirely a system of historical archives (figure 1). The eco-fascist ideological current has distinguished itself and created its own identity within the community similarly the more neo-Nazi one has oriented propagandist production on the dissemination of precepts of literary works including *Siege* by James Mason. After this experi-

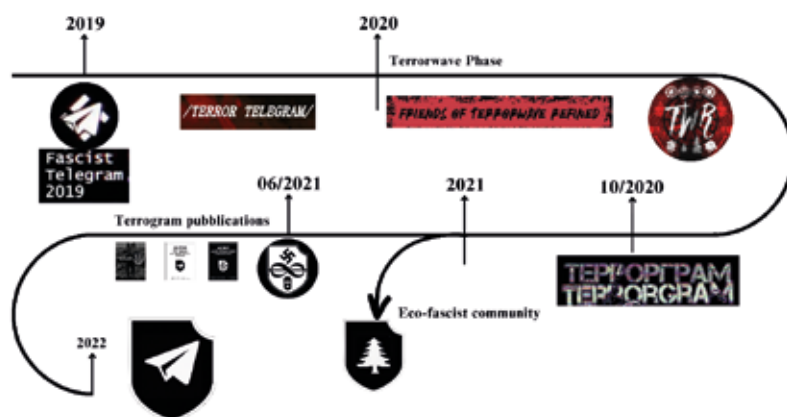
⁵ Carlo Morselli, Cynthia Giguère, and Katia Petit, ‘The Efficiency/Security Trade-off in Criminal Networks’, *Social Networks* 29, no. 1 (January 2007): 143–53, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socnet.2006.05.001>.

ment in 2021, Terrorgram becomes the promoter of a series of propaganda products that summarize its work thus far. Those works takes the form of a collection of various propaganda products resulting from the work of a variety of authors. In particular the last one published in July 2022, mentions the work of about 100 authors who are defined as members of Terrorgram. This propaganda can be described as ideological infographics that present the Terrorgram's goals and objectives and simultaneously providing the (scarce and unsystematic) information to achieve them. Nevertheless, the visual-motifs and symbologies used are well recognizable in all contributions:

- Online accelerationist symbology (Terrorwave, fashwave and meme)
- Neo-Nazi symbology
- Atomwaffen Division symbology
- Eco-fascist symbology
- Video game subculture with direct reference to the video game Minecraft
- White supremacist symbolism and language
- Survivalism.

Figure 1

Terrorgram timeline



3. Ideologies and narratives

The Terrorgram consists of a complex system of highly diverse and pulverized platforms, organizations, media houses, and users within different digital and geographic contexts. Even from the perspective of political instances, there are different types of extremism related to different ideologies. This level of ideological differentiation is integrated within the far-right community, and

despite the inherent differences, such an arrangement does not undermine the formation of more structured (and therefore more dangerous) collaborations or networks. The described set-up has been christened with the expression “ideological bazaar”; that is, a digital environment composed of actors with different ideological sets that often converge but are not always related⁶ within which information, media products, ideological opinions, and expertise are exchanged. Although the amorphous⁷ and multi-ideological environment makes specific profiling difficult, it is nonetheless possible and imperative to distinguish certain ideological macro categories (Ebner 2018) in order to recognize and analyze key actors.

The common ideological is a justification of violence (particularly terrorism) as self-defense against perceived deadly threats to the white race. From the latter current, we deduced the categories pro-violence and accelerationism. In summary, the starting categories developed to orient the observer within the digital ecosystem are as follows:

- White supremacism;
- Anti-Semitism
- Anti-immigration;
- Eco-fascism;
- Accelerationism;
- Neo-Nazism;
- Ethnonationalism

As suggested by the expression “ideological bazaar,” the media ecosystem of the far-right is extremely vibrant; the large number of actors and ideological commonalities drive organizations to share and relay material through their channels (Telegram channels or chatrooms). These mechanisms lead to mutual influence and the creation of collaborative networks. The pro-violence nature of the collective has even led the network to express positions of support for the Jihadism,⁸ the North Korean ideology known as Juche⁹ and for the anti-system perspectives typical of the no-vax fringes.

During the 2020, Terrorwave channels and published several call-to-action post that, in addition to its anti-social pro-violence content, rides the me-

⁶ Julia Ebner, ‘Counter-Creativity. Innovative Ways to Counter Far-Right Communication Tactics’, in *Post-Digital Cultures of the Far Right*, ed. Maik Fielitz and Nick Thurston (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2018), 169–82, <https://doi.org/10.14361/9783839446706-012>.

⁷ J M Berger, *THE ALT-RIGHT TWITTER CENSUS (VOX-Pol Network of Excellence)*, 2018).

⁸ Moustafa Ayad, ‘Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures’, *Islamogram: Salafism and Alt-Right Online Subcultures*, 2021, 39.

⁹ Juche is the founding ideology of the North Korean dictatorship, which represents a state model that some bangs of the alt-right are inspired by. The militarist spirit and anti-Western approach are the major points of contact between the Juche and the alt-right.

dia wave of the recent Covid-19 pandemic. This kind of narrative it was used for inciting armed resistance against the black and Jewish population in the United States, citing the Viet Cong. And secondly the disease was depicted as purificator of inferior races and the weakest.

In 2020 we observed the first propaganda depicting the “Saints” of Terrorgram. This process is interesting because it combines the martyrdom of a symbolically relevant and evocative character with the attribution of epithets related to Christian culture such as Saints or Knights of religious orders¹⁰. The “sanctification” is a socio-digital practice that, in the case of an accelerationist, supremacist or neo-Nazi attack, sees the members of the collective engaged in the search for elements attesting to the ideological and operational affinity with the narrative core of the Terrorgram in order to sanctify the attacker. The sanctification of a terrorist entails his entry into the pantheon of terrorist-saints that are taken as models by the Terrorgram. Among these we can identify some who, by their history and modalities, can be considered as founders of the ideological core of the Terrorgram and therefore we define them as founding saints: Brenton Tarrant, Theodore Kaczynski, Anders Breivik, Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh and Dylan Roof.

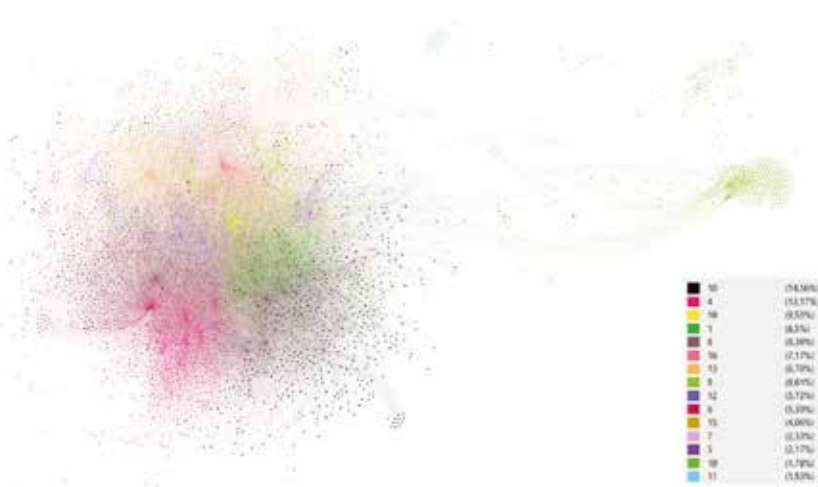
4. Social Network Analysis

As previously discussed, to identify the role of actors within the digital ecosystem and at the same time integrate the results of ethnographic observation, a SNA was conducted placing the media actors as nodes and the forwarded post or post containing a mention, as links. By data scraping 3600 media actors were identified ($n = 3600$), in some cases data includes several channels of the same media actor and 16870 edges. Using the forward and mentions technique we infer that the link between nodes will have a direction and intensity. The measures considered by SNA are pagerank and the modularity classes. Looking at the graphical and numerical outputs we can infer the extent of the role of key players of the Terrorgram.

Concerning the modularity classes the network is color-coded based on each node’s modularity class, and the edges are correspondingly coloured (figure 2). The modularity score of the Terrorgram is found to be 0.68, which indicates the presence of distinct communities within the network. As Newman and Girvan stated elevated modularity scores are indicative of greater community structure in a network.

¹⁰ Ari Ben Am and Gabriel Weimann, ‘Fabricated Martyrs: The Warrior-Saint Icons of Far-Right Terrorism’ 14, no. 5 (2020): 18.

Figure 2



In particular, Table 1 shows the distribution of the five main different modularity classes. The size of each community is expressed as a percentage of the total nodes in the network. The modularity class measure provides a further understanding of the community clustering and an initial pro filiation. Combing the social network and the content analysis conducted within the Terrorgram we were able to classify the network.

Table 1

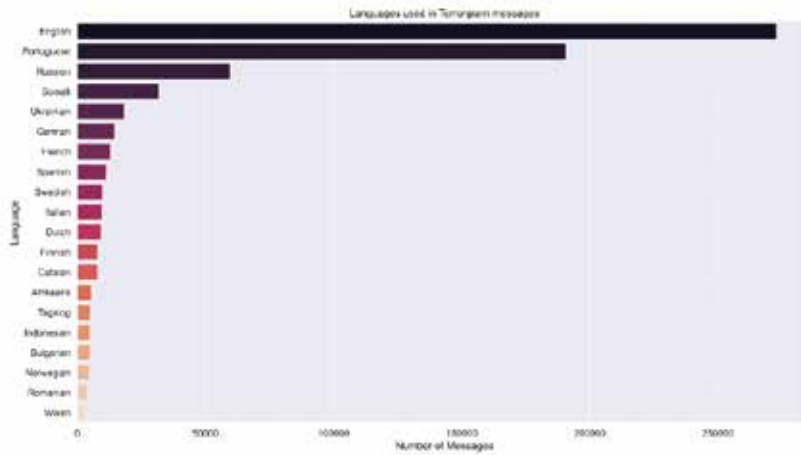
Modularity class	Share of nodes	Role
10	14,56 %	Organizations linked to Terrorgram
4	12,17 %	Terrorgram official channels
18	9,53 %	Neonazi and white supremacist channels
1	8,5 %	News and information sharing
8	8,35 %	Ecofascist Terrorgram channels
16	7,17 %	European national socialist
13	6,78 %	Terrorgram Sud America
9	6,61 %	Pro-Ukrainian channels
12	5,72 %	Memes and shitposting
6	5,39 %	Archiving and discussion
15	4,06 %	White suprematism
7	2,33 %	Pro-violence and survivalism
5	2,17 %	Anti-BLM channels
19	1,78 %	Ukrainian pro-Tarrant community
11	1,53 %	Terrorgram archive

Clusters identified with 4, 11, 8 and 13 have been identified as Terrorgram official channels. Specifically, the cluster 4 is composed of the Terrorwave channels-net and all its recovery apparatus. It is interesting to note that the languages and root culture is strictly connected within the community. Although we can speak of official Terrorgram channels, it is necessary to draw attention to the extremely pulverized and international nature of the network. This permeability of the network to ideologies to subcultures of violence also allows it to develop in different geographical contexts. This is the case with clusters 19, 13, 9, 16, and 10.

Such clusters although they have varying degrees of interconnection with the Terrorgram core have a specific culture and geographic connotation. For example, 19 and 9 represent a Ukrainian linguistic core that is very close to the Terrorgram but quite distinct. The same goes for class 13, which represents the entire Terrorgram section of South America. From the study of the material, we also found that they are mainly Brazilian and Argentine actors. Similarly, it is interesting to note that channels and organizations related to the U.S. context are concentrated in cluster 10. The fact that this cluster represents the largest class of the ecosystem is explained by the fact that within it is presents a large part of the terrorist organizations that constitute the stylistic and ideological legacy of the Terrorgram in particular among all AtomWaffen Division. With it is found a galaxy of actors (organizations and individual supporters) imitators who revive its propaganda. Finally, class 16 reports the existence of a large group of European actors. This label was chosen on the basis of their characterization as actors defending white and Aryan Europe. In fact, this cluster is composed of a plurality of actors with different languages and subcultures, but the Terrorgram is the ecosystem that has generated becomes the technical-ideological glue that allows these actors to expand, contaminate each other and increase their audience.

The following is the linguistic analysis conducted by analysing messages from within the Terrorgram ecosystem. The presence of the Somali language is partially explained by the sharing of jihadist propaganda by some actors. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the presence of jihadist material is not uncommon and unwanted. This is because the ideological bazaar expands the platform of users who can avail themselves of such material even if they are not jihadists, just be interested in the material.

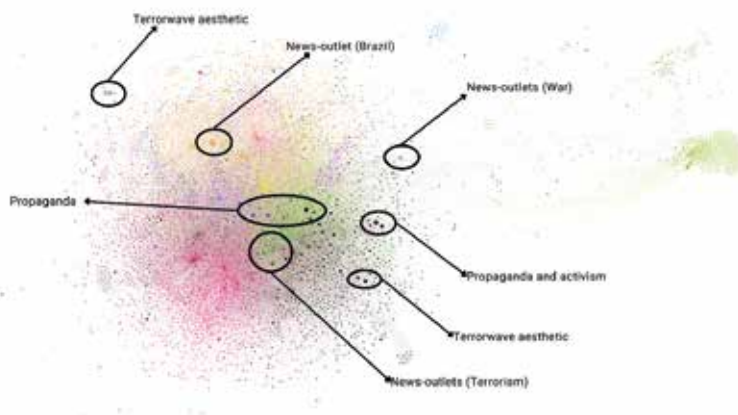
Figure 3: chart edited by Blacklight software



Regarding the cluster numbered as 11, 5 and 7 we have noticed that although these classes have different links with the Terrorgram core, they have similar characteristics in the management of the dissemination and archiving of materials. Those actors possess a communication oriented towards the formation of a cultural asset, nevertheless the type of manuals that could potentially contribute to the formation of an inter-collaborative operational legacy. as far as the Terrorgram is concerned, the existence of channels specifically focused on paramilitary training and manuals is fundamental. Furthermore, it is possible that the set of multiple actors on the Terrorgram could have constituted a pro-violence operational-cultural sharing system capable of enabling an ever-increasing number of organizations or individual actors to carry out organized attacks. Finally, during the observation, collateral activities connected to the weapon and training provider were detected. These activities refer to two actors and have been considered as secondary activities; nevertheless, they are extremely interesting for the understanding of the community.

The second measure launched in this paper is the PageRank. The PageRank algorithm measures the importance of each node within the graph, based on the number incoming relationships and the importance of the corresponding source nodes. The underlying the popularity of the actor within the network. from the calculations that have emerged, the most popular nodes are media actors from different network compartments. in particular, actors engaged in the production of propaganda and actors involved in the dissemination of news related to terrorist attacks and war events are distinguished. Regarding propaganda-producing channels such actors are a combination of historical Terrorgram channels and new initiatives.

Figure 4



5. Conclusions

Through the information gathered, it was possible to hypothesize that, although the extreme right does not have a centralized structure, capable of systematizing and hierarchising the propaganda apparatus, the set of different organizations and actors immersed in the ideological-cultural bazaar have spontaneously set up various networks and collaborative systems based on ideological proximity and specific skills. The network behaves like a community made up of different players within which they exchange information, propaganda content, media products and various services. It is therefore the role of the individual actor that determines his relative position within the Terrorgram. Based on the observations and evidence obtained, it was possible to categorize and model the digital ecosystem. According to these discoveries, the Terrorgram has diversified on the basis of specific roles defined not by a central authority but by the intertwining of skills and needs of the channels relating to the organizations.

The concept of a social network refers to the net composed of different kinds of links between people, organizations, and communities. Due to this, the social network analysis (SNA) is useful to study how such relationships are structured, their differences in terms of the nature of the link (strong or weak ties, structural holes) and the role of the actors. Interactions between the digital context and the relationship shaped by the type of social media platform have also been investigated. The position in the network of a specific actor, such as a mediatic house or propaganda channel can provide information about its influence and activities in the whole network. For example, actors

who occupy broker positions, that link other nodes who would not otherwise be connected, have been found to have a greater influence on the network in terms of radicalization and dissemination of propaganda. Given this, analysis of the positions occupied by the different actors in extremist networks appears to be a promising way to identify producers and spreaders of terrorist propaganda¹¹.

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¹¹ Mehmet Nesip Ogun, 'SOCIAL NETWORK THEORY AND TERRORISM', *Clinical Medicine* 07, no. 01 (2020): 9.

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La Rivista semestrale *Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società* intende la *Sicurezza* come una condizione che risulta dallo stabilizzarsi e dal mantenersi di misure proattive capaci di promuovere il benessere e la qualità della vita dei cittadini e la vitalità democratica delle istituzioni; affronta il fenomeno del *Terrorismo* come un processo complesso, di lungo periodo, che affonda le sue radici nelle dimensioni culturale, religiosa, politica ed economica che caratterizzano i sistemi sociali; propone alla *Società* – quella degli studiosi e degli operatori e quella ampia di cittadini e istituzioni – strumenti di comprensione, analisi e scenari di tali fenomeni e indirizzi di gestione delle crisi.

Sicurezza, Terrorismo e Società si avvale dei contributi di studiosi, policy maker, analisti, operatori della sicurezza e dei media interessati all'ambito della sicurezza, del terrorismo e del crisis management. Essa si rivolge a tutti coloro che operano in tali settori, volendo rappresentare un momento di confronto partecipativo e aperto al dibattito.

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