



Connections. Perspective. Insight.

**Volunteerism**  
The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community



**Keyboard Roundtables**

Vol III, Issue 4, July-Sept 2003

This is an authorized reprint of an article that appears online at:  
<http://e-volunteerism.com/quarterly/03jul/03jul-fryar.html>.

May not be reproduced without permission.

## Volunterrorism?

by Andy Fryar

While the recent war in Iraq posed a variety of ethical, moral and humanitarian questions for many of us, it was the headline of the local daily paper that caught my attention and challenged me to confront a potential area of volunteerism with which I am not particularly comfortable.

The headline, emblazoned across the front of the newspaper was clear. It quite simply read:

### **'HIT SQUAD'**

#### **Saddam's volunteer suicide bombers**

*(Adelaide Advertiser, 2 April 2003)*

The story came complete with a full-colour photograph showing a bus full of Iraqi men, on their way to Baghdad, apparently ready, willing and able to blow up both Coalition forces and seemingly themselves.

While I have never been a fan of placing volunteering into a 'box' and labelling it in any specific way, the thought of suicide bombers being branded as volunteers was a stretch, even for my way of thinking.

Yet here it was being used in this very context on the front page of a major daily newspaper. It seems that, regardless of what the broader voluntary sector might think, the paper and its editor had already seen fit to label this group of people as volunteers without so much as a second thought.

Other terrorist groups also seem to have no difficulty in making the claim of being 'volunteers'. Take as one example, the alleged activities of a group called the 'Loyalist Volunteer Force' (LVF), a terrorist group formed in Northern Ireland during 1996, and credited with a significant number of murders. [1]

In presenting this article I would like to take the opportunity to do two things.

Firstly, I'd like to examine how acts of this kind may, in fact, fit within some of the recognised definitions of volunteering and, secondly, I'd like to explain the rationale for my belief that acts of this nature are actually not acts of volunteering at all.

### **The Question of Definitions**

So, is the observation made in the *Advertiser* a valid one? Is it possible to brand the group of men on that bus, and similar terrorist groups, as 'volunteers' simply because their actions are undertaken without coercion or monetary reward?

While definitions of volunteering vary slightly around the world, their basic tenets all appear to be similar, so for the purpose of this exercise, the definition of formal volunteering accepted by Volunteering Australia offers us a good starting point.<sup>[2]</sup> It outlines 'formal' volunteer involvement as an activity which takes place through not-for-profit organisations or projects and is undertaken:

- to be of benefit to the community and the volunteer;
- of the volunteer's own free will and without coercion;
- for no financial payment; and
- in designated volunteer positions only.

In order to examine the question properly, let's explore each of the elements outlined by the Volunteering Australia definition in a little more depth. Allow me also to stress at this juncture that I do not condone in any way, shape or form these acts of violence.

### ***Is terrorism of benefit to the community?***

On the surface, it appears that the effects of a terrorist act do not benefit the community in any way. While on the surface this may seem a straight-forward point, there *are* alternate positions that must be considered in order to examine this question properly.

Firstly, while we may be quick to claim that terrorism does not benefit the community, we must question the viewpoint from which we make these observations. Do we make this judgement only from our own perspective, that of potential victims of a terrorist act? Do we understand the cultural, fanatical and religious differences of those who perpetuate such crimes? Do we understand that our view is polarised by many factors, and do we have the ability to see beyond these?

As an example, consider the following.

While we watched in horror as Iraqi men and women blew up both themselves and allied forces in Baghdad, many thousands of their supporters saw their acts not as one of terrorism, but as one of heroism – an act ridding the world of an evil menace (the allied forces). I am sure these same supporters believe wholeheartedly that the world, and indeed their own community, is a much better place as a result of these actions. There is also little doubt that their belief in the cause they are committed to is steadfast.

Moving away from terrorism for a moment, let's consider a different yet sensitive subject: euthanasia. Euthanasia is a difficult issue because there are two clearly opposing views about the validity of such an action.

Proponents of euthanasia claim that aiding the terminally ill to experience a quick and

peaceful death is of great benefit to terminally ill people, their family and friends. It avoids what may possibly be many months or years of suffering. Volunteers working to have euthanasia legalised believe 100 percent that their actions are justified and make perfect sense.

Opponents of euthanasia, however, have quite a different view. They cite that euthanasia is nothing more than murder and, in many cases, claim that only God has the right to take human life.

The point is this. Regardless of which side of the euthanasia debate you sit on, volunteers working for or against the legalisation of euthanasia believe with equal passion that the *other side* of the argument is flawed and that their position is the one that is the most justified and makes the most sense. It is *their* side of the argument that they believe is of most benefit to the community.

Can we not argue then that terrorist 'volunteers' also perform an act that is of benefit to *their* community? Like the euthanasia debate, not all of the world understands or agrees with their reasoning, however for their *own* community their actions make perfect sense. Let's face it, volunteering definitions usually do not state that the activity has to benefit the *whole* community.

### ***Is terrorism of benefit to the volunteer?***

The 2000 Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) report on volunteering in Australia [\[3\]](#) indicated that three of the four most common reasons people volunteered were:

- helping others or the community
- personal satisfaction
- to do something worthwhile

Even though terrorist bombers enter their work knowing they won't survive the experience, I am almost positive that many of them are conditioned to totally believe in what they are doing. I see no reason why they would not receive one or all of the above benefits from their final tragic act.

Perpetrators of these acts are easily able to justify their actions through the urging and support of their community, through their religious beliefs and through their own fundamentalist thinking on the action. Rather than seeing their deed as one of violence, many of these people view their act as one of ultimate sacrifice and martyrdom. The greatest benefit that results from suicide bombing is that the terrorist will be released into the afterlife to receive the ultimate reward for his or her action. From this perspective, terrorists may anticipate considerable self benefits.

Consider also the following.

Many suicide bombings have either taken place in the Middle East or have been carried out by extremist Islamic groups, emanating from the middle east. The atrocities of September 11, 2001 in New York City and October 12, 2002 in Bali come readily to mind. Yet when we examine the Islamic holy book, the *Qur'an*, we learn very quickly that suicide is actually forbidden, as are other forms of violence. The point must be stressed, therefore, that the traditional Islamic religion abhors these acts of terrorism like the vast majority of citizens and

that such terrorist events are the actions of a very small group of extremists.

So the chances are that the bombers, most of whom are religious extremists, would not view their action as being one of suicide (after all, it's forbidden). So just what are the benefits to this group in carrying out their actions? It is the fact that, according to Islamic tradition, individuals who give their life for an Islamic cause will have their sins forgiven and a place reserved in paradise.

While the terrorists' interpretation of this tradition is greatly flawed, it does lead me to again pose the question of whether or not there are perceived benefits to the 'volunteers' (terrorists) in carrying out their actions? Are there benefits? The promise of forgiven sin and a reservation in paradise sure meets that criterion!**[4]**

***Is the terrorist activity done by the volunteer's own free will?***

Whether the reason for their action is purely intrinsic, religious fanaticism or simply madness, few could argue that these people act of their own accord.

***Is the terrorist activity undertaken for no financial payment?***

Rumours filtering out of Iraq suggest that the families of those men pictured in the *Advertiser* article were actually going to be recompensed for the actions of their loved one once their final act of destruction was over. It is also a well-known fact that terrorist cells the world over are very well resourced financially, so no doubt for many of these groups and individuals there may indeed be some monetary compensation.

While I am unsure of the accuracy of the reports filtering out of Iraq, I do understand that in many other instances of this kind, monetary reward of any kind is not a factor.

Putting aside the notion of 'financial' payment for a moment, we do need to ask the question as to whether the rewards they believe await them in paradise are indeed a form of payment.

***Is it a designated volunteer position?***

While I imagine that no written job descriptions exist for the role of 'terrorist', these tasks are generally the domain of everyday people.

If there was an argument to be made for these roles being designated positions, it may stem from the fact that many of these terrorist cells are very well organised and, as a result, the targets designated to suicide 'volunteers' are well researched, carefully planned, and not very often random.

***So how does suicide bombing measure up?***

As can be seen from the above examples, a slight shift in perspective can certainly make it more understandable to see how 'terrorist volunteers' might meet all of the criteria of formal volunteering. Yet I am quite sure that most readers of this article would still feel uncomfortable accrediting this group with any sort of volunteer 'label'.

**Other Volunteer Characteristics**

So what might be some other factors that can be consider in trying to differentiate terrorism from volunteerism?

### ***Legality***

Clearly murder is not legal.

So does the legality of an activity negate it being considered a volunteer activity?

Consider for a moment the renegade and sometimes 'illegal' activities of activist volunteer groups attempting to gain public awareness for particular issues. For example, it was only several weeks ago that Greenpeace volunteers caused mayhem with the Sydney water police as navy ships left for the Gulf. The actions of Greenpeace were hardly legal.

While many may not agree with all of the tactics these groups use, few would doubt that these are groups who rely heavily on volunteers and voluntary action. Also, although their actions are a long way from suicide/murder, this example does lead us to question whether legality alone is enough of a factor to determine what is or isn't volunteering.

Let's consider also those individuals who sign up for roles with the armed forces. In the USA for example, the American Army refers to itself as the 'all-volunteer' army – not because they are un-paid, but because they are not conscripted.

Why is it OK for the allied forces to use force to kill others (and there were many cases in Iraq where innocent victims were killed), when we so readily frown upon the Iraqi forces using similar force within the same war framework? In the Iraqi conflict, both sides were fighting a sanctioned war. If we can accept that a government decision to declare war absolves soldiers of charges of murder (or, in other words, no longer makes the killing of another soldier murder), could we not argue that the Iraqi strategies were 'just as' legal as an Australian soldier shooting a firearm?

Clearly, considering the legality of an action is not a conclusive strategy in determining whether an activity is volunteering or not.

### ***Volatility of the activity***

One of the stronger arguments *against* terrorist groups being considered volunteers is the fact that the outcome of their action is violent and not at all constructive to building a cohesive and civil society.

Once again, however, the question must be asked as to whether this factor alone can be the element that eliminates the argument of terrorists being 'volunteers'?

Let's take as an example the many civil rights protesters through the ages who have protested, often violently, for causes such as the end of apartheid and the black civil liberties movement in America. Few would or could argue that the end results of the activities conducted by these volunteer activists was not of greater benefit to society, in spite of the sometimes violent actions used to achieve their outcomes.

### **So Just What Is the Answer?**

Given this discussion, we are faced with the fact that 'terrorist volunteers' may indeed meet much of the criteria that is said to define an act of 'formal' volunteering. With uncertainty surrounding the arguments of the legality and volatility of the actions, we may need to face the thought that, just perhaps, those Iraqi men on that bus bound for Baghdad were indeed volunteers!

Before conceding to that conclusion, however, I believe that there are three distinguishing arguments that must be explored which clearly demonstrate good reasons that terrorists are in fact not volunteers, regardless of their ability to meet the criteria defining formal volunteering. These are the concepts of motivation, self-identification (what I might refer to as clarity of volunteering), and moral absolutes.

### ***Motivation***

Having explored the notion that terrorists may fully believe that they are providing a service to *their* community, I personally think deeper values must come into play than simply a motivation to perform a community service.

Murder is murder in anyone's language and murder is wrong. We need no law to dictate that – it is inherent in us.

So I believe that the first fundamental question that we must ask is this: *'Is the voluntary action born out of a desire to achieve something beneficial to the whole community?'*

As already stated, voluntary action will not always be of benefit to everybody and we have many differences of opinion. The question is therefore not one of mutual benefit. Instead, asking the above question helps to determine whether or not the *primary motivation* of the action is an attempt to make the *entire* community a better place for everyone.

One good example might relate to volunteers working in the anti-abortion lobby. The efforts of this group will most certainly not meet the approval of, or be of benefit to, volunteers working in the pro-abortion movement - and vice versa. However, regardless of the side you support in the abortion argument, there can be little doubt that volunteers in both the pro- and anti-movements are motivated by a similarly deep desire to create a better society for everyone.

The same can be said of volunteers who protest, sometimes illegally, against the logging of our rain forests. Clearly, volunteers chaining themselves to a tree in front of a bulldozer is not of benefit to the logging companies and quite often an inconvenience to the police, however, the activists' primary motivation always comes from a desire to perform an activity of long-term benefit for everyone. In their book *By the People*, [5] Susan Ellis and Katherine Noyes describe this as volunteering which is driven by a goal of 'social responsibility'.

No matter which way you look at terrorism, it can *never* be justified as an activity of enduring social responsibility. It is clearly not of benefit to specific parts of the community (the victims and their families) and, more significantly, the actions of terrorists are clearly not motivated with an intent to create a socially-responsible solution to a problem. In fact it is quite the opposite!

An act of terrorism seeks deliberately to divide, destroy and kill for the supposed 'benefit' of only a small section of society.

### ***Self-identification with volunteering***

How can those men pictured on the front page of the *Advertiser* be dismissed as being 'volunteers' simply because their actions do not meet the criteria of being socially responsible? How can it be determined that they are not volunteers when they themselves clearly see themselves as 'volunteering' for a suicide mission? Surely no one held a gun to their heads and made them hop on board!

The answer lies in a not-very-often-explored concept: *Performing an act that is voluntary does not necessarily make you a volunteer.*

Let me give you an example. I venture into the back yard with my son and spend some time kicking a football around. Clearly I am playing football. But am I a footballer? I think not.

To become a footballer in the true sense of the word requires training, commitment, discipline, and most likely membership to a football club. Most importantly, it requires me to *think of myself* as a footballer.

In the same way, the many acts of 'volunteering' that are performed on a daily basis do not necessarily make a person a volunteer any more than my kicking a piece of inflated leather makes me a football star! The point is not to negate the marvellous amount of informal volunteering that takes place, but rather to highlight that being a volunteer is more about a state of mind than a unit of activity.

Returning to the question at hand – those men pictured in that bus had certainly 'volunteered' their services, there appears to be very little doubt about that. We do, however, perform a grave injustice to all volunteers to consider them as being 'volunteers' in the truest sense of the word.

It is a sad reflection that the only time the word 'volunteer' is used in the headlines of daily newspapers these days is when it is used out of context.

### ***Moral absolutes***

Tied in closely with thoughts of social responsibility is the concept of what I call 'moral absolutes'. A *moral absolute* can best be defined as an action that cannot and should not be glossed over with alternate terminology. Moral absolutes usually involve the most serious core values we hold and occur in two ways: by exclusion or by inclusion.

- ***Moral absolutes by exclusion***

Excluding certain phrases from particular concepts is one of the ways that moral absolutes can work.

Imagine your response to the government official who tells you about the new government program where all young people earning a welfare benefit *must* volunteer for three months or they will be ineligible for further welfare assistance. For most people dedicated to volunteerism, the development of such a program would be like waving a red rag in front of a bull, and the standard (printable) response would no doubt be something along the lines of 'you can call this program what you like, but *don't* call it volunteering!' In other words, please *exclude* the term volunteering from this conversation.

While it is not immediately evident where this fictional government program might fit, it is clear where it doesn't.

- ***Moral absolutes by inclusion***

When our core values are transgressed in the most serious ways, there is a need to ensure that certain words and phraseology *are* used, and that the situation is not glossed over by trendy new terms or politically correct garbage. Some ready

examples would include the following

- Child abuse is not 'discipline' – it's child abuse.
- Rape is never 'love' or 'reciprocated sex' – it is rape.
- Child pornography is never about our right to free-will or entertainment.
- Paedophilia is not 'affection'.

It does not matter how the perpetrators of these types of acts or their lawyers try and justify the actions, the moral absolute in each and every case is clear, and cannot be disguised by giving it any other name.

The second fundamental question we must therefore ask is this: *Does terrorism and the actions particularly of 'volunteer' suicide bombers, function at a level where it contravenes our basic core values?* In other words, is it an act that should *not* be glossed over with alternate terminology, by either the perpetrators themselves, their families or the media?

To me it is evident that volunteer suicide bombers clearly operate from the basis of contravening a moral absolute and, as such, a moral absolute that is inclusive: The act of these people is an act of murder. Don't call it martyrdom, don't call it freedom fighting, and please don't call it volunteering! The murder of innocent individuals must never be confused as anything else.

Terrorism and terrorist acts are murder – period!

Murder is the end result of their action, regardless of the motivation and elements of free will involved in the action and, while they may 'volunteer' their services, they are certainly are not performing an act of any enduring social responsibility.

In my opinion they are certainly not to be considered 'volunteers' in any sense of the word.

### **Conclusion**

I hope that I have been able to demonstrate that defining volunteer acts is not always as clear cut as we might think (and would like) it to be. Sadly, too few of us are willing to challenge the conventions that surround our profession. Challenging our beliefs is one of the few things that will ever make our profession any stronger.

I strongly subscribe in all I do to a saying a friend once shared with me. He said: 'You are never truly free to believe anything until you are free not to believe it'.

That may be far too philosophical for the end of an article on terrorism, but it should be a challenge we all take on board.

Finally, I trust that through this article I have allowed you, the reader, the opportunity to ruminate about the various sides to this argument. If you don't agree with my conclusion, that is fine -- just know why you believe in the conclusion you draw for yourself.

Andy Fryar is the founder and owner of OzVPM (Australasian Volunteer Program Management) - a consultancy, training and resource company specialising in volunteerism – particularly as it relates to the Australasian region. His Web site is

[www.ozvpm.com](http://www.ozvpm.com).

Andy is the current President of Volunteering Australia, the peak national body representing volunteerism in his country, and Chairperson of Volunteering South Australia, the volunteerism resource centre for his state.

In 2003, Andy was awarded a 'Centenary Medal' through the Australian government's honours system, in recognition for his services to Australian volunteering.

He has travelled extensively, training at conferences or visiting volunteer programs right around Australia, as well as in Canada, India and the United States of America.

In 1999, he was responsible for convening the working party that evolved into AAVA - the Australasian Association for Volunteer Administrators – Australia's first professional association for volunteer managers.

Andy has been involved in the editorial process for several Australian books on volunteering, and is a co-author of *Volunteer Management: an essential guide* (2nd edition) – Australia's premier guidebook to volunteering.

He also currently serves on the editorial committee of the *Australian Journal of Volunteering*.

In 2000, Andy was honoured to be invited to join the editorial team of e-Volunteerism for which he serves both as a Convening Editor of the Keyboard Roundtable feature section and as Manuscripts Developer.

He has been employed as a Volunteer Manager since 1991 and, in addition to the above, continues to be involved in the day-to-day operation of a volunteer program in the city of Adelaide, South Australia, where he is employed as the Executive Officer of the Lyell McEwin Regional Volunteer Association.

In his spare time Andy enjoys being a husband to his wife Kerri, and a dad to his five small children (which includes two sets of twins!).

---

## Footnotes

[1] For more information see <http://library.nps.navy.mil/home/tgp/lvf.htm>.

[2] Taken from the Volunteering Australia Web site (<http://www.volunteeringaustralia.org>)

[3] *Voluntary Work* (2000), Australian Bureau of Statistics, Publication 4441.0

[4] Source: <http://islam.about.com>

[5] Ellis, S & Noyes, K (1990), *By the People: A History of Americans as Volunteers*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 3.

---

***e-Volunteerism***: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteerism Community  
ISSN: 1531-3794

Copyright © 2003, Articles may not be reproduced without permission.

Home: <http://www.e-volunteerism.com>

Energize's *Free* Website: <http://www.energizeinc.com>

Online Bookstore: <http://www.energizeinc.com/bkstore.html>

**Administrative Office:**

Energize, Inc., 5450 Wissahickon Ave., Philadelphia PA 19144

Phone: 215-438-8342, Fax: 215-438-0434, E-mail: [info@energizeinc.com](mailto:info@energizeinc.com)



Connections. Perspective. Insight.

**Volunteerism**  
The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community

## What are the advantages of becoming a subscriber to *e-Volunteerism: The Electronic Journal of the Volunteer Community*?

As a **SUBSCRIBER**, you can:



**Research** your own virtual library of volunteer management information. You will have access to the complete archive of all the articles in every past issue—that's hundreds of items, with new ones added each quarter.



**Keep up** on timely and important topics in your profession. We send you e-mail notifications when new articles or issues are posted—freeing you from taking time to check for and research new information.



**Participate** in discussions surrounding specific volunteer management topics. Respond to all or parts of an article and read the responses of other subscribers.



**Print** out any articles for your personal use to read at home or bring to a meeting or training session.



**Listen** to recorded interviews. “Sit in” on some of the fascinating conversations between editors of *e-Volunteerism* and a diverse group of people in the volunteer world— and we mean WORLD.

**You can't go wrong with a subscription to *e-Volunteerism*.  
You can only increase your knowledge and improve your volunteer program.**

Subscribe online now with a credit card and get immediate access:

<http://e-volunteerism.com/subscribe.html> .

Yes, you can choose to pay using an **INVOICE**, too.

Questions? E-mail [info@energizeinc.com](mailto:info@energizeinc.com) .