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A link between radicalisation models and extremist propaganda

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the relationship between extremist propaganda and the process of radicalisation. Two theories of the radicalisation process are explored which include a linear approach and a non-linear approach. The Dabiq magazines published by ISIS were analysed qualitatively to understand the possible link between propaganda and radicalising future ISIS fighters. The findings found that the Dabiq magazines were in line with Sageman's radicalisation process which is non-linear. All of the magazine issues contained various aspects that fit into the four stages of Sageman's model which suggests that ISIS is attempting to radicalise future enlistments by using multiple methods within the Dabiq issues.

Background

Jihadist groups such as ISIS and Al Qaeda are targeting Muslims to be recruited into their organisations. As this continues, a threat is being posed against Western nations since they have noticed an increase of foreign fighters travelling to Middle Eastern countries, such as, Syria and Iraq to support these terrorist groups. Previous studies have investigated the characteristics of propaganda magazines that ISIS and Al Qaeda use to target Muslims, as well as the characteristics of foreign fighters who join these groups (Ingram, 2017). Each of these magazines uses a variety of techniques to persuade individuals from Western regions, including reoccurring themes of persuasion are present including ingroup strategies and fusing identity.

Radicalisation is a process of encouraging people to take positions that aim to achieve political or social changes against members of an out-group. This process has been theorised to develop in two different paths, namely a linear or a nonlinear process. A linear process of radicalisation simply builds from a ground stage and evolves through different stages until the individual becomes radicalised and legitimises terrorism whereas the non-linear process involves several factors that all interplay with one another at the same time, leading to the individual becoming radicalised (Ingram, 2017; King & Taylor, 2011; Moghaddam, 2009). Twenty-seven issues of *Dabiq* and *Inspire* were analysed in a case study to observe how each magazine radicalises its audience towards action, by gaining their support

using their strategies of manipulation. The case study analysed whether if *Inspire* and *Dabiq* emphasised value, dichotomy, or crisis-reinforcing messages in their content. The study's primary focus was on the content of *Dabiq* and *Inspire* to investigate if the magazines explicitly stated content that are related to ingroup identity construction, outgroup identity construction, solution construction, perception of crisis construction, and operational guidance (King & Taylor, 2011)

A combination of mechanisms that motivate radicalisation pathways that can lead to violent extremism were identified through Fuzzy-set/qualitative comparative analysis (fs/QCA), which is an analytic technique that uses Boolean algebra to as a comparison tool for qualitative studies. These radicalisation pathways included personal and community crisis, psychological and physical vulnerability, psychological and materialistic rewards, recruitment, group biases, communicating group norms, and cognitive frame alignment. Fifty-six (31 violent and 25 non-violent) individuals who were radicalised in the United States between 1960 and 2013 were observed through fs/QCA. The results of the fs/QCA analysis determined the complexity of which combination of pathways predicts violent outcomes. However, the most common conditions that can lead to a psychological shift to violence were the individual's cognitive-frame alignment and community crisis. The cognitive frame alignment is the learning process an individual goes through to establish a radical belief, which eventually builds the belief in the effectiveness of violent approach to achieve the desired political

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changes. While the community crisis refers to a feeling of instability due to the feeling of danger and difficulty within a community which could evoke the pursuit of significance and purpose (Jensen et al., 2020). This incorporates the theory of social identity where an individual has a separate identity based on the group to which they were affiliated. Certain groups (e.g. Jihadists) influence an individual's cognitive framework due to the heavy impact they can have on the social self. Such groups can be a source of pride and self-esteem, thus encouraging the person to invest and commit more into the group and therefore radicalise into their extremist ideology (Al Raffie, 2013).

Radical groups tend to be extremely dissatisfied with current laws and politics that makes them strive for changing them, which could potentially lead them to use a violent approach. Radical groups perceive themselves as superior and perceive out-groups as a threat to their goals. The strong belief of the efficacy of violence makes radical groups embrace violent methods to address their concerns. Radicalisation is a process that can happen to 'normal' people; however, these individuals share similar characteristics that make them more vulnerable to be an easy target for radicalisation. The study suggests that there are certain characteristics that increase the vulnerability of individuals to embrace a radical belief system. Responding positively to radicalisation may be a consequence of aspects of life dissatisfaction. A feeling of insignificance or loss of status encourages individuals to seek ways of gaining status and power. Radical groups take advantage of these individuals' perception of self-worth and try to offer them a value that compensates for their sense of personal failure and this is where extremist propaganda, like the Dabiq magazines, come into play in the radicalisation process (Doosje et al., 2016).

Individuals supporting terrorist organisations may perceive radical groups as an alternative community that promises them an opportunity to be a part of something greater than themselves, which gives them a sense of responsibility towards a larger community (Darden, 2019). Further, western Muslims often experience discrimination in Western countries which can be perceived as a threat because of the larger non-Muslim community, this can lead them to chase for a feeling of in-group belongingness (Lyons-Padilla et al., 2015). Studies have been investigating the psychological factors that predict positive attitudes towards radicalisation. A questionnaire was presented to 131 Dutch Muslim high school students. The study suggested that perceived injustice and perceived ingroup threat are associated with adopting a radical belief system and violent behaviour intention, both of which are aspects of

radicalisation. Participants reported an agreement to a feeling a disconnection to the mainstream culture/religion of the Netherlands, which indicate perceived injustice and group threat, which could lead to using violent action to compensate for their disregarded words (Doosje et al., 2013).

Radical groups motivate their members to be loyal to their group and try to strengthen the ties between individuals. Individuals are most likely to follow the norm of their ingroup (Doosje et al., 2013). According to several studies focusing on conformity and radicalisation, pre-radicalizers have a strong tendency to match their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours to social norms due to social pressure, and agreeing to the majority of a group, in this case, terrorist groups (Guadagno et al., 2010; Klausen et al., 2016; Mastors & Siers, 2014). People who conform are often seeking social acceptance and a desire to be 'liked' which is the prominent role of extremist propaganda (Klausen et al., 2016).

Using violence against out-group is a radicalisation strategy to have individuals write or videotape a testament, which makes it harder for them to withdraw. This strategy indicates that radical groups use authoritarian approach (Klausen et al., 2016; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2008; Rinehart, 2009). In support of this, two of the key strategies in propaganda magazines is using tactical language to manipulate the reader and to attract individuals who have similar religious beliefs. Positive attitudes towards the content of *Dabiq* can be influenced by the characteristics of the individual. This was supported by a study using articles from *Dabiq* and *Inspire* as science fiction tales, without presenting the actual source to the participants, and suggested that Individuals with higher religiosity and authoritarianism showed more positive attitudes towards *Dabiq*. When analysing the results with the contextual analysis, they found that the Dabiq uses more religious and authoritarian language than does Inspire. The use of this type of language in combination with an individual's religiosity makes them more susceptible to be more responsive to such messages because similar characteristics form similar beliefs (Vergani & Bliuc, 2018).

The researchers used the computerised text analysis program Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), and Recursive Inspection of Text (RIOT). LIWC is used to measure the degree to which a text uses different categories of vocabulary, which has 80 categories including language (articles, personal pronouns, verbs, etc.) and psychological dimensions (affect, negative and positive emotions, social processes, cognitive mechanism, etc.). Similarly, RIOT is used to measure meaningful language indices as obtained from text files, which

includes 37 dictionary scales. Previous studies have used both software programs for the purpose of examining language in different contexts for radicalisation including Dabiq, Twitter, and other sources (O'Halloran et al., 2019; Vergani & Bliuc, 2018). ROIT and LIWC were used to analyse the language used in ISIS and *Dabiq* that are related to religiousness and authoritarianism.

An analysis of 22 issues of the online propaganda magazines *Inspire* and *Dabiq* showed that the word 'they' and 'others' was occurred 1486 times in *Dabiq*, and occurred 2215 times in *Inspire*. In addition to other words representing non-Muslims, such as 'disbelievers' and 'apostates' (Lorenzo-Dus et al., 2018). The use of such systematic language creates an atmosphere where the individuals being targeted feel belonging, while segregating themselves from anyone outside that group. This is a phenomenon known as in-group and out-group. Members of an in-group use terms such as 'we' and refer to the out-group as 'they' or 'them', as coincided in the magazines. In-group members tend to have strategic use of language in order to maintain superiority and favourability over those who are not within the group (Ingram, 2016; Rubini & Semin, 1994).

Methodology

Research questions

The current study's primary goal was to determine if the propaganda issued by ISIS corresponds to a radicalisation model. The two radicalisation models chosen were developed by Moghaddam or Sageman. These were chosen because Moghaddam's model is linear and progressive, while Sageman's model is non-linear and emergent (Rubini & Semin, 1994). From this, the research question for this study was as follows: Which radicalisation model, linear or non-linear, does the propaganda by a radical group, such as ISIS, correspond to more?

Research design

This study used a directive content analysis on 15 issues of the Dabiq magazines produced and distributed by ISIS. The directive content analysis method was used because the two radicalisation models chosen guided the analysis of the documents to initially make codes of the text and then develop themes from those codes. This method was deemed the best way to analyse the data due to the lack of research on these particular magazines. The directive content analysis allowed for the researchers to develop themes that were found throughout the magazines which can then be analysed with the two

different processes of radicalisation in mind. The themes were independent of the radicalisation models and were later analysed with the two radicalisation models to compare/contrast the likeness of the themes.

Procedures

The qualitative data in this study was analysed utilising the framework analysis in which the thematic analysis was used, as briefly described above. Further, the study's methodology was based on the grounded theory approach that explores data with the intention of comparing it or proving an already stipulated theory. In this, case, the two theories being compared with the data are the two radicalisation theories (linear and non-linear). The analysis was conducted by the researcher manually and with the use of NVivo software for word frequency analysis. Whereas the framework analysis in exploratory grounded theory is a complete outline of the data analysis process, thematic analysis is one part of the framework analysis that provided the best option for the investigation of the data. This was important for this study for several reasons. The first being that the theories being referred to linear and non-linear have not been thoroughly explored through radical propaganda. The second being that is important for the study to have an open-ended analysis of the data which can be applied to the two theories. Thirdly, the process of analysis in this type of framework allows the researchers to follow five steps that are important for understanding the data and interpreting the data. These five steps of the framework analysis were as follows: Familiarisation, identifying themes, indexing, charting, and mapping and interpretation. Shared themes were identified throughout the data. The primary investigator and a research assistant separately developed codes and themes and then compared these findings to develop the final themes discussed in the next section (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Creswell & Clark, 2011; Srivastava & Thomson, 2009; Yin, 2009).

Results and discussion

Fifteen Dabiq magazines were analysed and there were four themes that were developed throughout this analysis. These themes were developed because of the analysis conducted by both researchers. In a content-driven analysis such as this, each researcher conducted their own analysis and then came together to compare their results. A thematic map was then created in which both researchers discussed and decided on the most suitable themes for the results. The four themes developed were Injustice, Justification, Connecting Actions to Experience, and Call to Action.

Injustice

The injustice theme was developed due to several items and codes throughout the Dabiq magazines that were of the portrayal of perceived wrong doings by the West towards Muslims in general and, oftentimes, Sunni Muslims. However, some quotes within the Injustice theme are not always aimed towards the West, such as '… rush O Muslims to your state. Rush, because Syria is not for the Syrians, and Iraq is not for the Iraqis'. This is speaking solely about the territory and how the fact that Syria and Iraqi have taken the land from the rightful owners, which is ISIS. Another quote in the same issue points out that '… the Safawi forces executed a number of Muslim prisoners' which is have several meanings within the Injustice theme. The first meaning is the term 'Safawi' which is a pejorative term used by Sunni extremists towards the Shi'a and the fact that Dabiq refers to the prisoners executed as 'Muslim' while both Shi'a and Sunni are both Muslim, implying that the position of ISIS is that Shi'a are not 'true' Muslims and are thus killing future ISIS members.

Many quotes from the Dabiq magazines portray the West as evil doers and often have stories directly relating to a situation with the West as an act of undeserved injustice towards Muslims. Some quotes use direct actions taken by the coalition such as '… have killed nine Muslim women three days ago by striking a bus transporting them from Sham to Iraq' (Issue 4), which directly connects the coalition, led by the West, of injustice from the ISIS perspective. The Dabiq magazines also use the acts of coalition member states who act within their own country against extremism to enforce the injustice among protentional ISIS followers. An example comes from the crackdown in Saudi Arabia where ISIS used the strict legal enforcements of radicalisation and supported injustice with '… called the executions a warning to Muslim youth against turning to what he calls "extremism"' and '… advised that people be wary of anyone who is angry with the executions'. Dabiq follows this with the quote that the '… "scholars" have broken their oaths with Allah and with the Muslims' referring to the religious scholars in Saudi Arabia who denounce the extremism of ISIS and the followers of ISIS.

Every issue of Dabiq makes use of these quotes and directly relates them to the injustice in which ISIS feels from not only those in the West but also from various groups around the Middle East. This is an important point and relates to Sageman's first point of radicalisation which is the 'sense of moral outrage'. The Dabiq magazines use these quotes to build on the acts already committed by individuals and groups who are against the underlying beliefs and ideas of ISIS to develop aggression and the potential for violence among potential ISIS members. It was found that distributive and procedural injustices combined does lead to aggression in those who perceive injustice. This fits with the findings of this theme in which quotes were used that both showed how Muslims with similar thoughts and ideologies as ISIS are facing both an injustice and lack of land (quote one from above) and the lack of due process (those ISIS believers who were executed). The combination of both types of injustices within every Dabiq issue could lead to aggression and potentially lead vulnerable individuals to radicalise (Scheuerman, 2013). This theme is suggested to also align with Moghaddam's second step in the linear model 'Perceived options to fight unfair treatment'. However, while there are certainly options to fight, this more closely fits with the below theme 'call to action'.

Justification

The justification theme was developed through several codes used in the magazines to justify the actions of terrorist groups towards the outgroups who do not follow their path of extremism. ISIS uses out of context Quran versus in a manipulative way to justify their violent actions towards non-Muslims or even Muslims who, in their perspective, are not Muslim enough. In the first issue of Dabiq, the justification of ISIS actions is immediately addressed with the line 'The spark has been lit here in Iraq, and its heat will continue to intensify – by Allah's permission – until it burns the crusader armies in Dabiq'. This directly addresses the justification of their action by connecting it to their perception that Allah is granting them permission. In fact, of all the statements identified within this theme, all but a few were directly related to ISIS's view of Islam.

In issue 3, 'The Call to Hijrah', there is a lengthy segment that was identified within this theme that instead of referring to religion, they mentioned their actions were justified because of the James Foley incident in where they executed him and blamed it on the US by saying 'All that Obama had to do was release our Muslim brothers and sisters from their prisons'. This goes against the norm of speaking with religious intent and placing blame solely on the US administration for failing to act. On the other hand, in issue 4 'The Failed Crusade', there is a segment which focuses on the US airstrikes and uses pictures of the aftermath to seemingly justify the acts and mission of ISIS. The segment reads 'The crusaders justify such actions [airstrikes] for themselves under the pretense of

"collateral damage" while denouncing others for "terrorism'". The photos used to support their argument are of women and small children who were victims of the airstrikes. The same strategy could be said to be used in the western media which often shows civilians who are victims of ISIS and other terrorist groups.

Issue 9, 'They Plot and Allah Plots' has an entire section devoted to justifying the enslavement and sex trade of the Yezidi community. This is different compared to other issues which focus on justifying violent acts through war. In the section called 'Slave-girls or Prostitutes?' there are multiple verses from the Quran explaining why this act of enslavement is just and one interpretation saying 'The rights hand's possession are the female captives who were separated from their husbands by enslavement. They became lawful for the one who ends up possessing them even without pronouncement of divorce by their harbi [non-Muslim] husbands'. This a interpretation of several verses from the Quran and is used to justify the enslavement and forced marriage of the Yezidi, and other, women and children. To justify this act is an effort to thwart the media's portrayal of their acts and to further support possible recruits who are not only interested in fighting but also seeking brides.

The justification throughout all of the Dabiq issues is key for recruitment. For an individual who is thinking about joining a radical terrorist group such as ISIS, there has to be some justification or reasoning behind the mission of the group. The Dabiq magazines do this many times throughout and while most points to religious reasoning, there are several instances where the magazines portray the acts of the US and the coalition as reason enough. The second aspect of Sageman's radicalisation model is the frame used to interpret the world. By giving enough justification to the reader throughout the magazine, Dabiq is consequently shaping the perspective of the reader to fit the ISIS narrative. This aligns with Sageman's 'Frame used to the interpret the world' since the framework ISIS is presenting to interpret the world is through their perspective and justifying their actions due to the Westerner's, and Western-backed Middle East governments, actions against them. It also fits in with Moghaddam's second step of radicalisation which is 'perceived options to fight unfair treatment' with the goal of justifying the mission of ISIS to fight. However, it seems that because that all the issues have many instances in justifying ISIS's mission, there is a strong push for making sure the readers understand the events taking place through the ISIS perspective, making it more of an emergent (Sageman's theory) goal instead of a linear process as Moghaddam posits.

Connecting actions to experience

This theme was analysed based on both Moghaddam's and Sageman's proposed step of relating the terrorist acts to their own experiences. It is clear throughout the Dabiq magazines that ISIS is making the case for their terrorist activities based on experiences that Muslims have faced from both Western and allied forces. This is apparent in the quote from issue 5 Remaining and Expanding '. . . they ordered their palace scholars and media channels to increase the severity of their campaign against the Islamic State, but to no avail, for Allah, will complete His light, even if the disbelievers despise such'. Essentially, they are connecting the expansion of ISIS to the experience of the allied forces increasing the anti-ISIS rhetoric and explaining that their efforts will not hinder them.

Further, ISIS published articles by John Cantlie, a British war photographer who was captured by ISIS, which support the expansion of ISIS throughout the Middle East. This can be seen in Issue 5 where an article is published with a quote from Cantlie is focused on, reading '. . . If I were the US President today I'd probably switch off my cellphone, lock the oval office doors, and go play golf instead. The war against the Islamic State just isn't going to plan at all'. Using a Westerner for propaganda asserting that ISIS is winning the war connects and supports the actions and experience of the fighters within ISIS and may provide the necessary motivation for non-fighters to join the ISIS cause.

Being that issue five's title is 'Remaining and Expanding', clearly shows that ISIS is attempting to connect the actions of the allies and the experience of radical Muslims. As stated above, this would be an attempt for interested parties to gain the motivation to join the 'winning' fight of ISIS. Again, we see in the very first page of issue 5 that ISIS uses a verse from the Quran to connect the actions of ISIS's mission to their experience of their religion. The verse reads '. . . sent His Messenger with guidance and the religion of truth to manifest it over all religion, even if the mushrikin despise such'. The entire forward of issue five then relates ISIS' actions to this verse and connects the mushrikin to Jews, the West, and the 'allies of cross'. While it is a part of the connecting actions to their experience, it could also be justifying their actions which further demonstrates that the goal of ISIS propaganda is to radicalise individuals through a non-linear method, as Sageman proposed.

Action

This final theme of the analysis directly corresponds to Moghaddam's 'the terrorist act' and Sageman's 'Mobilization through networks'. Both steps are the final steps in their theories of radicalisation but while Moghaddam's is linear, Sageman's is nonlinear. The Dabiq magazines continue to suggest that the radicalisation method within the propaganda is used for a nonlinear radicalisation process because all themes related to Sageman are apparent throughout each and every issue of Dabiq. This theme is throughout all issues of Dabiq and the goal is to highlight the action that ISIS has taken against the allied forces.

For instance, in issue 9 'They Plot and Allah Plots', there is an entire section devoted on highlighting the actions by ISIS and includes their successful attacks on the 'Sahwah', the 'capture of the 4th Regiment Base' in Baghdad, and their successful campaign in the Anbar province of Iraq, amongst others. Highlighting the successes of the Islamic State's fight against their enemies would further gain support other individuals who are contemplating joining the group. Further, in issues 12 'Just Terror' and 15 'Breaking of the Cross', other sections focus on highlighting the Islamic State's successes. With issue 15 being the last issue of Dabiq, ISIS had spread and grown since previous issues. The section in issue 15, entitled 'Islamic State Operations' focuses on ISIS' global success such as in the Philippines, Iraq, Syria, Somalia, Bengal, Egypt, West Africa, America, France, and Germany. Focusing on the global successes and thus spread of ISIS reiterates that they are promoting their strengths, further supporting and influencing possible recruitment of future fighters.

Conclusion

The research on radicalisation has increased in the past couple of decades but few have focused on what propaganda's influence has on the process. While extremist propaganda can come in many forms, the magazines are unique in that they relate to the process of radicalisation directly. This would seem that the main goal of the magazines, in comparison with other forms of propaganda such as videos, is to radicalise and motivate potential members. From the analysis conducted on the Dabiq magazines, it seems that this form of extremist propaganda aligns more towards Sageman's non-linear, emergent radicalisation model. This is apparent by the researchers due to all the Dabiq issues containing many different types of propaganda-related examples including injustice, justification, connecting actions to experience, and action. In order for propaganda to follow a linear model of radicalisation, it would almost have to be a step-by-step guide to become an extremist. The non-linear model makes the most sense in this regard because as the target audience reads the issues, they are confronted with many different aspects of the radicalisation process according to Sageman. While previous studies have looked at the language being used in extremist propaganda, the current study took another approach and focused on the content of the propaganda. This study is one of the few that has analysed extremist propaganda through the lens of two different radicalisation models. This novel analysis is important in the field of terrorism and radicalisation because it introduces new techniques and possibilities for future research to focus on other mediums of propaganda such social media which has become more common for extremists.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on contributors

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