Distinguishing Substance from Spectacle in Violent Extremist Propaganda through Frame Analysis

Authors : John Hardy

Abstract : Over the last decade, the world has witnessed an unprecedented rise in the quality and availability of violent extremist propaganda. This phenomenon has been fueled primarily by three interrelated trends: rapid adoption of online content mediums by creators of violent extremist propaganda, increasing sophistication of violent extremist content production, and greater coordination of content and action across violent extremist organizations. In particular, the self-styled 'Islamic State' attracted widespread attention from its supporters and detractors alike by mixing shocking video and imagery content in with substantive ideological and political content. Although this practice was widely condemned for its brutality, it proved to be effective at engaging with a variety of international audiences and encouraging potential supporters to seek further information. The reasons for the noteworthy success of this kind of shock-value propaganda content remain unclear, despite many governments' attempts to produce counterpropaganda. This study examines violent extremist propaganda distributed by five terrorist organizations between 2010 and 2016, using material released by the Al Hayat Media Center of the Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al Qaeda, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. The time period covers all issues of the infamous publications Inspire and Dabiq, as well as the most shocking video content released by the Islamic State and its affiliates. The study uses frame analysis to distinguish thematic from symbolic content in violent extremist propaganda by contrasting the ways that substantive ideology issues were framed against the use of symbols and violence to garner attention and to stylize propaganda. The results demonstrate that thematic content focuses significantly on diagnostic frames, which explain violent extremist groups' causes, and prognostic frames, which propose solutions to addressing or rectifying the cause shared by groups and their sympathizers. Conversely, symbolic violence is primarily stylistic and rarely linked to thematic issues or motivational framing. Frame analysis provides a useful preliminary tool in disentangling substantive ideological and political content from stylistic brutality in violent extremist propaganda. This provides governments and researchers a method for better understanding the framing and content used to design narratives and propaganda materials used to promote violent extremism around the world. Increased capacity to process and understand violent extremist narratives will further enable governments and non-governmental organizations to develop effective counternarratives which promote non-violent solutions to extremists' grievances.

Keywords : countering violent extremism, counternarratives, frame analysis, propaganda, terrorism, violent extremism

Conference Title : ICCTDS 2018 : International Conference on Critical Terrorism and Defense Studies
Conference Location : Vienna, Austria
Conference Dates : June 14-15, 2018