Can media 'story-tell' us into terrorists?

The unintended effects of narrative ISIS coverage on political radicalization

Sadly, hardly anyone would argue that terrorism is the most frequent topic making headlines in the last years. According to the Global Terrorism Index [1], the total number of deaths from terrorism increased by 80 per cent in 2014 compared to the prior year, making it the largest increase in the last 15 years. In total 32,685 people were killed, including an offset by a 172 per cent increase in the deaths of private citizens.

But probably the scariest fact is that, terrorist organizations, that cast so much sorrow upon thousands of innocents, are strangely appealing to young people. Especially ISIS grew large by successfully recruiting young 'foreign fighters' from the west (Bartoszewicz, 2013). According to current estimates, between 25,000 and 30,000 left their homes since 2011 to fight in Syria and Iraq. (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015).

Our study presents a framework according to which this odd development is not only attributed to the intended effects of terrorist propaganda but also to unintended effects of 'mainstream' media via mechanisms of narrative engagement. A multi-phase study to test this assumption is outlined.

Collective Narrative Assimilation & Imbalance of ISIS coverage

It is well-known that ISIS has a very sophisticated propaganda machinery that produces all kinds of media (ranging from regularly edited journals through broadcasts to video games) and that they infiltrate meeting places of young muslims (such as mosques) and very successfully social networks (Charvat, 2010) to spread these materials.

Yet, recent studies and models of the process of terrorist radicalization (for an overview see Borum, 2011a, 2011b) state that 'pull factors' like these are only half of the elements that foster decisions for terrorist actions. The other half consists of 'push factors' (or what Kruglanski et al., 2014 would call "the motivational component" of radicalization) that make a person actively turn to a terrorist organization (Horgan, 2009; Kruglanski et al., 2014; McCauley and Mosalenko, 2008; Precht, 2007; Venhaus, 2010).

So it can be assumed that prior to getting in contact with propaganda media, most individuals learn about ISIS through the 'mainstream' (news) media which in turn makes it reasonable to investigate their potential as 'push factors'. We particularly see a high threat in narrative media content, specifically reportages:

[1] Issued by the Institute for Economics and Peace, the index is based on data from the Global Terrorism Database (GTD) which is collected by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism. The GTD is considered to be the most comprehensive dataset on terrorist activity globally and has codified over 140,000 terrorist incidents and provides a detailed analyses of the changing trends in terrorism since 2000, for 162 countries.

Humans as 'story-telling animals" (Fisher, 1984) are naturally drawn to narratives and as the 'collective narrative assimilation hypothesis' (Gabriel & Young, 2011) states, they are a mode of sense-making that targets our social selves. We turn to them and we easily assimilate the collective identities portrayed out of our need to belong. Terrorism researchers themselves emphasize the power of narrations, either in the process radicalization or deradicalization: "Narratives are essentially 'compelling storylines which can explain events convincingly and from which inferences can be drawn'" (Leuprecht et al., 2009). Yet, the effects of non-fictional narratives (though there is no compelling argument why they should not be equally or even more powerful than fictional narratives) remain largely unexplored (Appel & Richter, 2007).

Realizing that journalists face the problem that they can barely produce vivid narratives on ISIS without using original footage from the terrorist, we recognize the potential danger associated with collective narrative assimilation. Narrative formats might be indirectly beneficial to ISIS by further spreading their populist rhetoric. Due to the subtlety of populist discourse we want to repeat de Graaf's (2009) concerns that narrative messages can be more complex than expected and might even completely contradict the intended interpretation. Additionally, we would argue – in line with experts from the field of terrorism research – that narration is probably most dangerous, when no additional 'counter-narration' is told that offers alternatives to identification with terrorists (Leuprecht et al., 2009, 2010). So, even if the evaluation of a report is clearly anti-terrorist, recipients might still pick up latent terrorist sentiments via the mechanisms of narrative persuasion, which we now explain in more detail.

Narrative Reception & Persuasion

The notion 'narrative persuasion' is encountered frequently in disciplines such as health communication (Green, 2006), entertainment-education (Moyer-Gusé & Nabi, 2011), or cultivation research (Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008) and is attributed to the mechanisms explaining the fact that there is indeed plenty of evidence that stories have effects on beliefs and attitudes (e.g., Appel & Richter, 2007; De Graaf, Hoeken, Sanders, & Beentjes, 2012; Green & Brock, 2000). Narrative persuasion is commonly modelled as a multi-step process, beginning with a recipient being mentally swept away form his current situation and 'transported' (Green & Brock, 2000) into the story world. A highly transported recipient then identifies more easily with the characters in the story [some studies show that this identification reaches as far as to a mental adaption to physical traits (Gabriel & Young, 2011) or mental abilities of the characters (Appel, 2011)] which inhibits counter-arguing to the world views expressed in the story, which in turn facilitates persuasion.

Yet, it is unlikely that we abandon our life experience entirely during narrative reception. The audience is not always experiencing the story world via a character, but instead alternates between

identification and spectatorship (Oatley, 1999; Busselle & Bilandzic, 2008). Collier (2015) suggests that narrative reception "entails a frequent oscillation between the narrative and real world". The reader does not always 'simulates' events that happen to the characters but by integrating own bits of autobiographical memory gets a feeling of what it would be like to be the character and gives rise the evaluation of felt emotions and to alternative interpretations of the world.
Interestingly, there is a vast number of qualitative studies investigating the radicalization process of terrorists that reveal motives that fit perfectly to these models of narrative processing: Almost all of the studies stress the role of evaluated emotions during radicalization and the terrorists' need for sense-making, interpretation, identification and belonging. (Hegghamme, 2006; Horgan, 2009; Ilyas, 2013, Precht, 2007; Sageman, 2008; Venhaus, 2010)

Investigating Narrative Influence on Radicalization and Mobilization

Our talk presents preliminary findings from the first phase of a research project that aims at testing this catalyst function of narrative features on terrorist sentiment latency. We will provide the audience with an exploratory qualitative content analysis of print, online, and TV reportages on the German-Ghanaian hip-hop artist Deso Dogg (born Denis Mamadou Gerhard Cuspert) who quit his career in 2010 to join the IS fighters in Syria and is presumed dead since 2014. It can be shown that – though framed as explicitly anti-terrorist – much of the coverage on Cuspert's radicalization relies indeed on narrative techniques that facilitate talking his perspective[2] and trigger 'oszillation' with the mindset of this terrorist. Additionally, almost all of these reports lack a successful counter-narrative to offer anti-terrorist alternatives for identification.

Based on these findings, the talk will outline the next phases of the project: quantifying the qualitative findings, classifying the reportages into strongly and weakly narrative coverage, and finally conducting a within-subjects experiment to test the effects of exposure to high vs. low degrees of narrativity on transportation and identification with Cuspert as mediators and changes in the (implicit) terrorism latency as the outcome variables.

The core problem here will be the operationalization of terrorism latency[3]. McCauley and his colleagues came forward with an instrument that does not only validly assesses radicalization but

[2] e.g. through subjective camera shots, relating 'unfortunate' decisions to past events (a technique similar to what is called 'naturalization' by narratologists, e.g. Culler, 1975; Fludernik, 1996), providing plastic information about the setting/Cuspert's world

[3] Most approved scales that assess criminal sentiments in general are not applicable because they are designed to test chances of resocialization and exclusively target former criminals/prisoners (e.g. Taylor, 1968). Moreover, terrorism research itself oddly seems to focus more on state-measurements of terrorism (Özdamar, 2008). Due to the observation that radical sentiments do not always result in terrorist actions (Borum, 2011a; McCauley, 2013 McCauley & Moskalenko, 2014). and that terrorists were found to have rather different psychological traits and biographies, some researchers even doubt that it will ever be possible to properly profile a terrorist (e.g. Rae, 2012).

also differentiates violent radicalization from non-violent forms of political mobilization (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; McCauley, 2012, 2013). We will present the two sub-scales but also explain why they need to be slightly altered for the purpose of our experiment.

To conclude the talk, we would like to discuss the possibility of future studies for international comparison. We are particularly interested in gathering example cases from France, Belgium, Great Britain, and Northern America that may resemble the Cuspert coverage or differ from it. To emphasize: We are open to collaboration.

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