

# ‘Oscillation’ with a Terrorist’s Mindset

## Transportation, Identification, and Narrative Assimilation in the Process of Political Radicalization

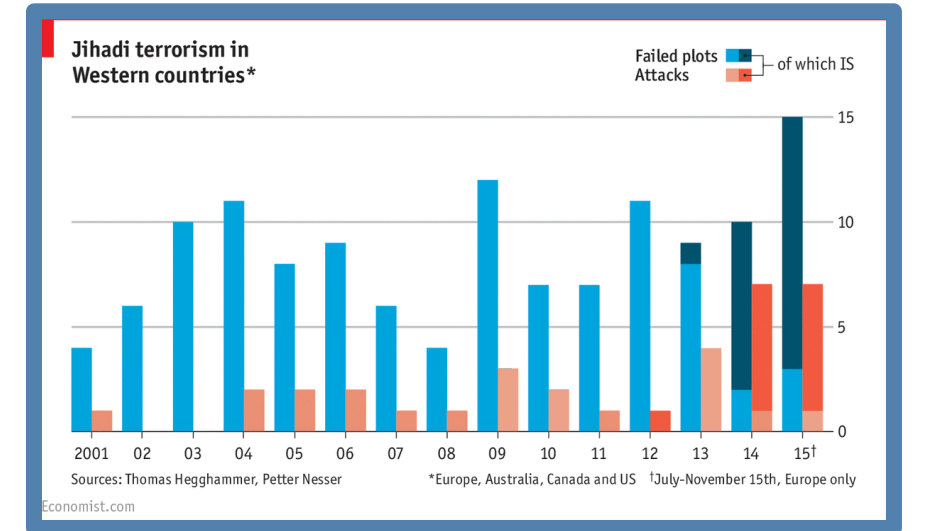
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### 1 Terrorist Attacks in the West & Foreign Fighters



Acts of terrorism are among the most frequent topics making headlines today. According to the Global Terrorism Index, the number of deaths from terrorism increased by 80 per cent in 2014, 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 civilians.

Even more scary is how appealing terrorist movements seem to be. Especially ISIS grew large by successfully recruiting ‘foreign fighters’ (Bartoszewicz, 2013). According to estimates, 25,000-30,000 joined the ‘jihad’ in Syria and Iraq since 2011. (Institute for Economics & Peace, 2015)



### 2 Mechanisms of Isolation, Narrativation, and Radicalisation

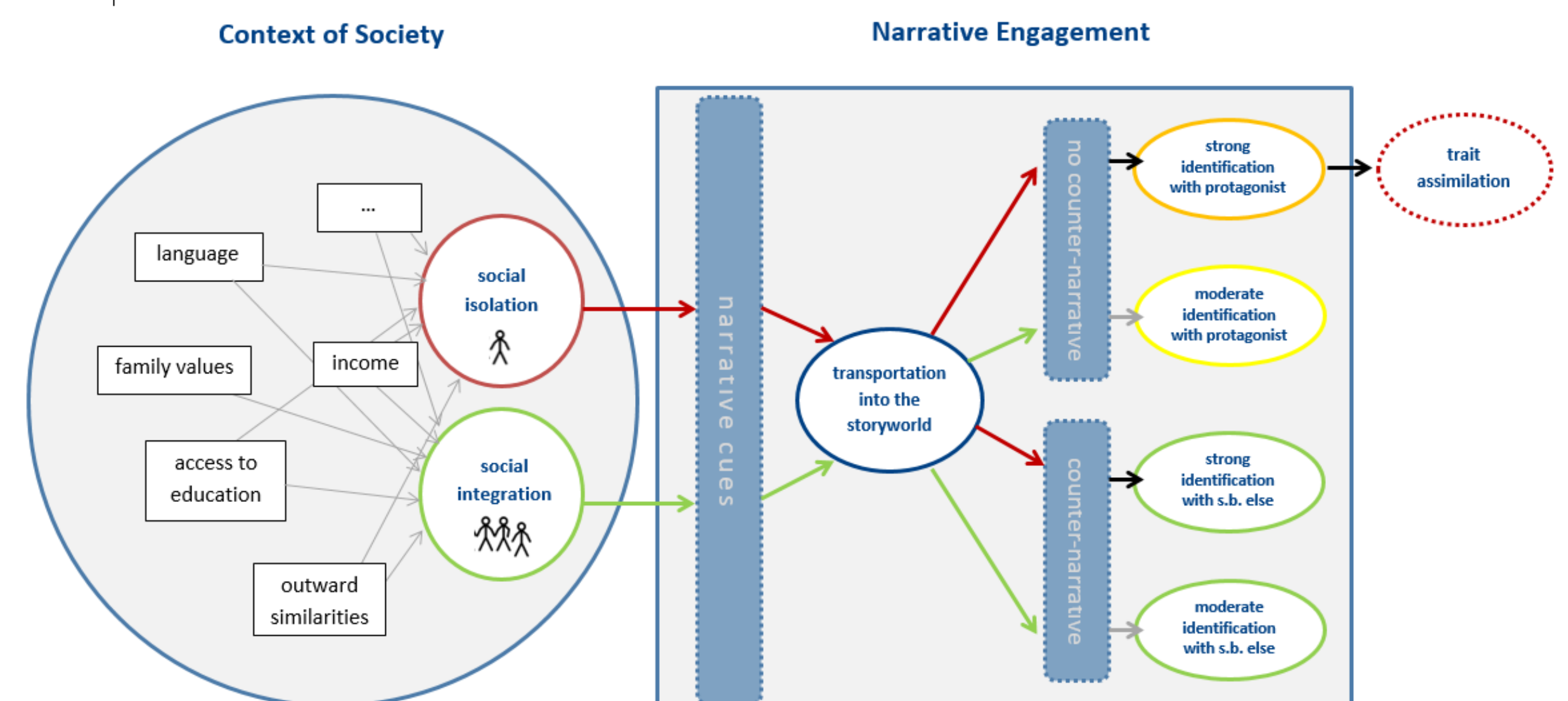
Recent studies investigating the process of terrorist radicalization (for an overview see Borum, 2011) stress the role of evaluated emotions during radicalization and identify the need for sense-making, interpretation, identification, and belonging as primary motives to turn to a terrorist organization (Ilyas, 2013; Kruglanski et al., 2014; Precht, 2007; Venhaus, 2010).

In light of this active search for identity, ‘mainstream’ (news) media might unintentionally be just as dangerous as terrorist propaganda. We particularly see a high threat in narrative content, specifically reportages: Because as the ‘collective narrative assimilation hypothesis’ (Gabriel & Young, 2011) states, narratives are a mode of sense-making that targets our social selves. We easily assimilate to the identities portrayed out of our need to belong. There is ample evidence that vivid narratives facilitate ‘transportation’ (Green & Brock, 2000) into the story world and that transported recipients identify more easily with the characters in the story which in turn inhibits counter-arguing to the world views expressed in the story and makes the recipients adopt the (fictitious) characters’ reasoning (de Graaf et al., 2012), or even their mental abilities (Appel, 2011)

or physical traits (Gabriel & Young, 2011).

Terrorism researchers themselves emphasize the potentially fatal power of narrations, particularly when no additional ‘counter-narration’ is told that offers alternatives to an identification with terrorists (Leuprecht et al., 2010). So, even if a report condemns terrorist actions, vulnerable recipients might still pick up latent terrorist sentiments if the mode of presentation offers perceptual cues and insights from the terrorists’ perspective.

Hence, we argue that the mechanisms of narrative assimilation operate easiest on individuals who feel particularly deprived about fundamental social needs and isolated or even alienated because they encounter too many obstacles in the society they live in (like language barriers, diverging personal values, difficult access to education etc. which is nowadays unfortunately particularly the case for the many youths with migrant background that western societies fail to integrate)..



### 3 The Case of ‘Deso Dogg’

‘Deso Dogg’ is a rather infamous German-Ghanaian hip-hop artist, whose biography gained quite a lot of public interest:

- was born Denis Mamadou Gerhard Cuspert, later called himself Abou Maleeq or Abu Talha al-Almani.
- 2010: contract to the Berlin al-nur mosque
- quit his career to join the IS
- 2012: Egypt → 2013: Syria
- 2014: presumed dead
- very active on YouTube (spreading hate speech and salafist nasheeds)
- August 2016: FBI disconfirms death



→ case provides us with interesting print and TV reports that try to make sense of his development my different means

### 4 Hypotheses / Research Questions

In the first phase of the research project we are not concerned with the mechanisms of narrative assimilation, yet. We merely wanted to explore the coverage on Denis Cuspert's radicalization across different media. Accordingly, we formulated rather broad guiding question:

**RQ1: How narrative is the media coverage on Denis Cuspert? / To what degree can we identify specific narrative features?**

**RQ2: Do the sampled reportages offer successful counter-narratives?**

If this holds true that the reportages on Cuspert bear a lot of specific narrative cues, we can evaluate the effects of isolated features on 1) narrative assimilation and 2) latent terrorist radicalization by testing directed hypotheses.

**H1: Subjects exposed to highly narrative reports identify more with a terrorist protagonist.**

**H2: Subjects exposed to highly narrative reports will have a greater increase in latent terrorist sentiments.**

**H3: Both effects will be greater for subjects relatively isolated in our society (e.g. youths with migrant background).**

**H4: The presence of counter-narratives will prohibit or even reverse effects on latent terrorist sentiments.**

### 5 Method

- **phase 1: content analysis of reportages on Deso Dogg**
- 3 written reports from online newspapers (from *Spiegel online*, *Der Tagesspiegel*, and *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*)
- 2 TV newscasts (aired on the German-speaking TV channels *RTL* [Radio Television Luxembourg, as a contribution to the show *Spiegel-TV*] and on *ZDF* [*Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*, as part of the *heute journal*])
- adaption of Mayring's (2000) coding scheme for qualitative analyses → transferred previously formulated operational definitions of exploratorily chosen narrative features ('action sequences', 'story world attributes' and 'story points') to it and filled in examples and coding rules
- adaption of Fields'(1988) transcription sheet for broadcasts: assessing information on what each speaker says, vocal inflections and/or relevant facial expressions, short descriptions of the scene, and one for the analytical units the content analysis is meant to investigate (here: the three narrative features)
- **phase 2: online field experiment**

### 6 Preliminary Findings

- overall agreement on narrative text passages: Cohen's K = .61
- each of the narrative features was coded ~30 times across all reports
- huge overlap in the narrative categories per content unit
- reports vary fairly in the degree of narrativity (which could not be attributed to the modality of the medium )
- story world attributes were easiest identified in audio-visual material (transporting the viewer literally into Cuspert's world [e.g. into his former gym or record studio]),
- written reports show a stronger preference for story points (e.g. the explicite interpretation of emotional significance of events), but also feature relatively many descriptive/narratively ‘empty’ units

Category	Spiegel (932 words, 19 units)	Tagesspiegel (1217 words, 22 units)	FAZ (1764 words, 18 units)	RTL (7.55 min., 37 units)	ZDF (1.37min., 15 units)
Actions	4	3	10	10	5
Story World attributes	1	1	6	17	8
Story Points	6	7	13	7	1
‘empty’	11	12	4	5	5

**Summary:** A large amount of the coverage on Cuspert's radicalization indeed relies on highly narrative techniques that – though framed as as explicitly anti-terrorist - promote an “osillation” (Collier, 2015) with his mindset. Furthermore, with only one exception all of these reports lack a successful counter-narrative to offer anti-terrorist alternatives for identification.

### 7 Prospect

- design for an 4x2x2 within-subject online field experiment to test the actual effects of different degrees of narrativity in these reports
- chose to use two of the reports (Spiegel online and RTL) as blueprints to create different stimuli by editing out the parts previously identified to contain the narrative features and the counter-narrative. (in sum 12 different stimuli)



- 2-wave data collection
  - disguised as two distinct market research studies, one evaluating advertisements and one judging a news website prior to its launch
  - first wave: evaluation of 10 advertisements and "some personal questions" about the subjects → main aim is to assess each participant's latent terrorist/radical sentiments prior to exposure to narrative reports on Cuspert
  - second wave: evaluation of a mock-up online news page we created that randomly contains one of the different versions of the reports → aim is to assess experiences with the narrative content and to collect post-exposure terrorist sentiments).
- onsite data collection: logged using *Piwik*
- survey measures:
  - latent terrorist sentiments; assessed with the Activism Intentions Scale (AIS) and the Radicalism Intentions Scale (RIS) (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009; McCauley, 2012, 2013) that enable us to differentiate violent radicalization from non-violent forms of political mobilization.
  - transportation, identification, & assimilation (de Graaf et al., 2012, Gabriel & Young, 2011, Green & Brock, 2000)
  - controls: loneliness (Hughes, 2004), thematic interest, need for affect (NfA) (Appel, Gnambs, & Maio, 2012), need for cognition (NFC, Bless et al., 1994), need for entertainment (NEnt, Brock & Livingston, 2004), and demographics (incl. parents' nationality/migration background)
  - distractors: evaluations of the advertisements and the mock-up page (how informative and entertaining they judge it, how they like the design and how easy they find navigating the rubrics, how likely they would buy a corresponding product)
  - manipulation checks: questions about selected articles subjects viewed (which will contain the version of the report on Cuspert)
- experimental design is currently under review for ethical clearing because of
  - concealing of true purposes
  - assessing migrant and religious background (→ concerns about 'racial profiling')

