

“That is what the terrorists want”: Media as amplifier or disrupter of violent extremist propaganda

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Author Biography

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Media as amplifier or disrupter of violent extremist propaganda**

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Introduction

Good morning and thank you for inviting me to speak here today. To help the translators, I have provided the script of my presentation and I will do my best to keep to that script. For the next 45 minutes, I will address the question of whether and, if so, how media reporting may act as an amplifier of violent extremist propaganda aims. While the answer to the first part of this question is clearly yes (media reporting can amplify violent extremist propaganda), the answer to the second half of the question is a little complex.

To achieve these aims we must begin by understanding the broad strategic logic that underpins the propaganda efforts of violent extremist groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda. Drawing on this foundation, we can then examine how media reporting can act as a booster for crucial components of that strategic logic; an amplifier of the desired “effects” their propagandists wish to create. Put simply, my first aim for today is to give some meaning to the statement “that is what the terrorists want”; a line that is used to admonish certain types of media reporting but the exact meaning of which – exactly why the terrorists “want” such reporting and how it benefits them – is rarely clear.

To do this comprehensively, however, requires us to do more than merely consider media reporting about terrorist groups or terrorist incidences. It is necessary for us to consider six broad dimensions of terrorism media reporting – propaganda, perpetrators, victims, communities, government and the media itself – the relationships between them and how reporting on each can amplify or disrupt propaganda aims. It is my belief, indeed my assessment, that in democratic societies it is a free and critically engaged media that is best positioned to undermine violent extremist propaganda (regardless of whether its ideological leanings are to the right, left, religious, nationalist or something else). Just as important in this so-called “War on Terror”, is the

media's role in demanding transparency and accountability for the rhetoric and policy-decisions made by politicians and the actions of security agencies. Of course, we will be drawing out lessons as we go.

A couple of caveats:

- My intention today is to very broadly canvass a range of issues, to present a kind of framework for thinking about terrorism media reporting rather than getting into specific cases as such.
- Also, I approach this subject as someone who has spent more of their career as a practitioner than as a researcher. Even after entering academia in 2014, I have spent much of that time traveling through the Middle East and South Asia to interview civilians, activists and fighters – particularly with media communications actors in the Syrian opposition to Assad – and engaging with practitioners from the government, civil society and private sectors across Europe, North America and closer to home. I am very conscious of the practical urgency of today's subject and the need for all of us in this field to speak critically and bluntly. I have no doubts that during the Q&A you will do the same.

Ultimately, this entire presentation can be distilled to a single point: an independent, assertive, responsible and critically engaged media is *the best weapon* democracies have against violent extremist propaganda. But it is also a weapon that the propagandists of ISIS and Al-Qaeda actively seek to turn against us. To understand how they seek to do this we need to understand the strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda: examine exactly why groups like ISIS, given all their resource disadvantages compared to their enemies (e.g. a superpower like the US), not only use propaganda in their campaign strategies but give it a central strategic role.

The strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda

It has become popular for commentators to explain the appeal of violent extremist propaganda, especially ISIS messaging, by pointing to its slick production value, graphic violence and use of social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Telegram. While these factors should not be dismissed, what is far more important is how the different components of its propaganda strategy fit together in order to harness powerful psychosocial and strategic forces. For violent, non-state political actors, whose adversaries are inevitably stronger by almost any measure, propaganda is afforded a central role in their campaign strategies. Think about that for a moment: words and images carefully combined to create messages are given strategic centrality in the campaign plans of violent extremists not despite their weaknesses but because of it. Dr Craig Whiteside captures this prioritisation perfectly in his historical analysis of ISIS's media units stating that ISIS puts its "best and brightest" into their media units. Much weaker than their state adversaries, groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda use propaganda as a multidimensional tool that is deployed for purposes beyond just recruitment. Violent extremists use propaganda as a "force multiplier" to boost the impact of their actions, a "force nullifier" to blunt the "effects" of their enemies' actions and a powerful means to shape how their target audiences perceive themselves, others and the world more broadly (see Figure 1).

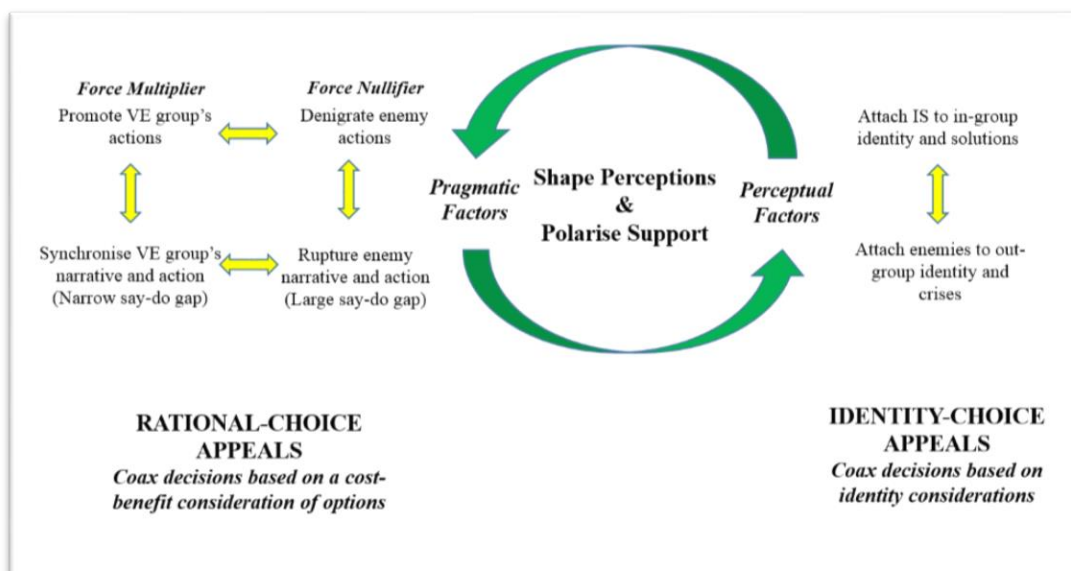


Figure 1: The strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda

Ultimately, the central purpose of violent extremist messaging is to shape the perceptions and polarise the support of target audiences. Violent extremists seek to achieve this via messaging that appeals to both pragmatic and perceptual factors (see Figure 1). Pragmatic factors – a reference to actual politico-military actions in the field (whether governance initiatives or acts of terrorism) – are leveraged in messages that seek to promote the effectiveness of those efforts and to highlight the close synchronicity of their words and actions. Put simply, that they (i.e. violent extremists) are doing what they say; that they have a narrow say-do gap. Violent extremist appeals to pragmatic factors often simultaneously seek to denigrate their enemy's politico-military efforts (i.e. their enemies' actions) and highlight the disparity between what their enemies say and do – which is very important when it comes to convincing target audiences of your credibility and legitimacy compared to your opponents. This type of messaging is designed to compel its audiences to engage in rational-choice decision-making – i.e. decisions based on a cost-benefit balance of options.

Violent extremists also draw on perceptual factors by playing upon identity, crisis and solution constructs to shape how its audiences perceive and judge the conflict and its actors (see Figure 1). The core narrative in this respect is very simple. For Sunni militant Islamists like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, this core narrative goes something like this: We are the champions and protectors of Sunnis (the in-group identity), our shared enemies are evil Others (out-group identities) that are responsible for Sunni crises and so we are the only hope for solving the Sunni malaise. This type of messaging is designed to compel its audiences to engage in identity-choice decision-making, i.e. choices made in accordance with one's identity. For more on these types of appeals I must recommend the great work of JM Berger and Stuart Macdonald.

But, of course, these two types of messaging are rarely disseminated independent of each other. What is most interesting about, for example, trends in ISIS messaging – and I believe that this goes a long way towards explaining not just the seemingly magnetic appeal of its propaganda but its apparent ability to rapidly radicalise supporters towards action – is that ISIS messaging tends

to weave together appeals to pragmatic and perceptual factors (see Figure 1). This may have the effect of aligning its audience's rational- and identity-choice decision-making processes.

More broadly, as Figure 1 illustrates, the strategic logic underpinning violent extremist propaganda is designed to be cyclically reinforcing. The more the actions of the group are seen as effective and the more the actions of its enemies are deemed ineffective (those rational-choice appeals), the more the violent extremists are perceived by supporters to be solving other-induced crises (those identity-choice appeals). The more the group is seen as confronting enemy-induced crises, the more their narrow say-do gap will boost the perceived efficacy of their actions and the more their enemies' say-do gap will seem to grow.

These cyclically reinforcing processes also occur within its two core components. Let's look here first, the identity-choice appeals. This messaging seeks to appeal to and radicalise target audiences by fuelling, for example, this process of cyclical cognitive reinforcement – the cognitive domino effect that triggers self-perpetuating cycles of justification (see Figure 2). It follows that, for groups like ISIS and AQ, the more violent extremists are framed as champions and protectors of Sunnis (the in-group identity), the more their enemies are framed as evil Others (out-group identities) that are responsible for crises and the violent extremists as the only hope for solving that crisis. The result is self-reinforcing cycles of compounding justification. It is this interplay of bi-polar in-group and out-group identities connected to solution and crisis constructs that acts as a “system of meaning” for the supporters of violent extremists; a lens through which to understand the world (see Figure 2).

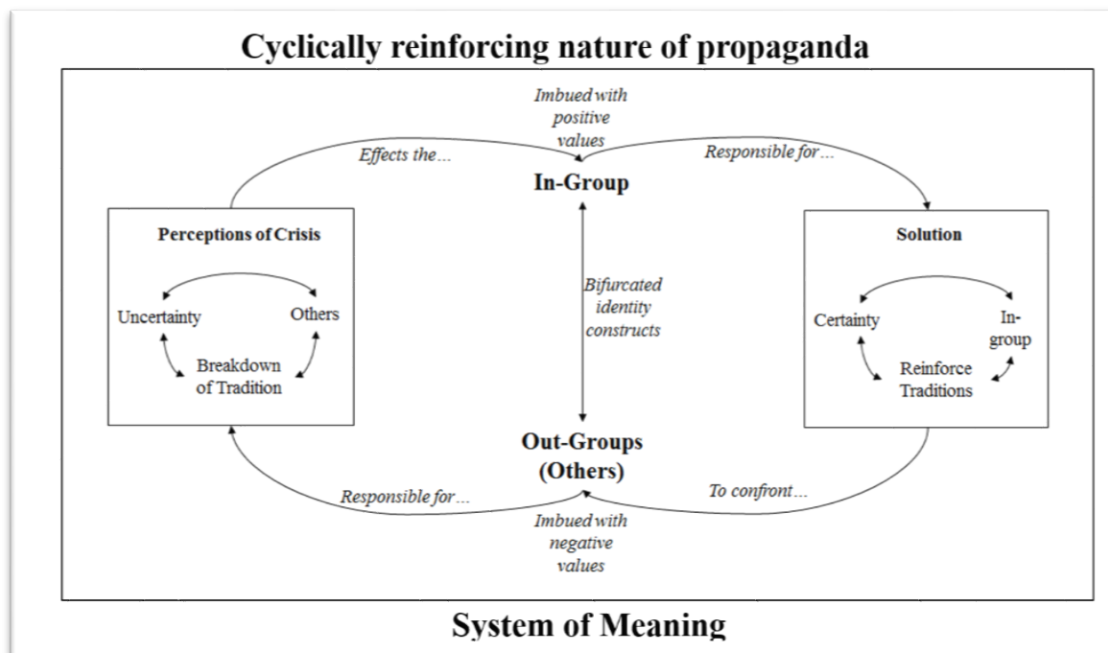


Figure 2: Cyclically reinforcing nature of propaganda

Here is an example of an identity-choice appeal taken from an article titled “Dear American Muslim” in AQAP’s *Inspire* magazine: “... *your belongingness to Islam is enough to classify you as an enemy. As a matter of fact, they look at us as Muslim youth regardless of our appearance and education. They do not consider our citizenship and the childhood we spent in their neighborhoods [sic]. ... Our enemies treat us as Muslims only, nothing more.... We must abide by our religion and stand on our ummah’s side, one treatment one blame.*”

The messaging dynamics I have described are designed to act as a driver of radicalisation. At the most basic level, by exacerbating perceptions of crisis and presenting solutions to that crisis, violent extremists seek to convince their audiences – whether a kid in Paris, a couple in California, young men in Jalalabad or Marawi, or a Syrian rebel – that extreme crisis requires extreme solutions (see Figure 3). Ultimately, violent extremist propagandists deploy this strategic logic because they know that if one issue (perhaps its despair at some global political issue or the dreariness of western life) can catch the attention of a potential supporter, its messaging is so

intimately tied together that it may create cognitive openings for other aspects of its messaging which, in turn, may trigger this self-reinforcing domino effect.

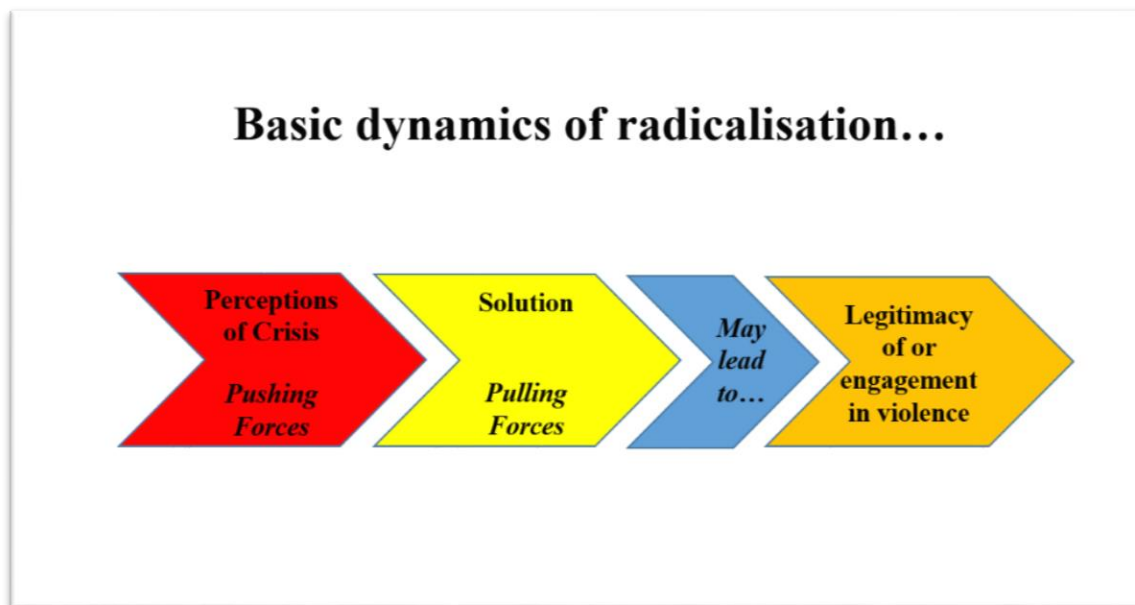


Figure 3: Radicalisation

These dynamics are applicable for understanding this component of violent extremist messaging too: its rational-choice appeals (see Figure 4). Promoting their actions in the field and using messaging to highlight their narrow say-do gap while, often simultaneously, highlighting how the actions of their enemies are ineffective and how their enemies have a large say-do gap, is mutually reinforcing. For violent extremists, this messaging works as a “force multiplier” for their own actions and a “force nullifier” against the actions of their enemies. When ISIS show images of their governance initiatives filling the void left by absent or incompetent authorities or calls for supporters to travel to join their so-called Caliphate rather than engage in so-called Just Terror actions (or vice versa), these are often framed as rational-choice type appeals.

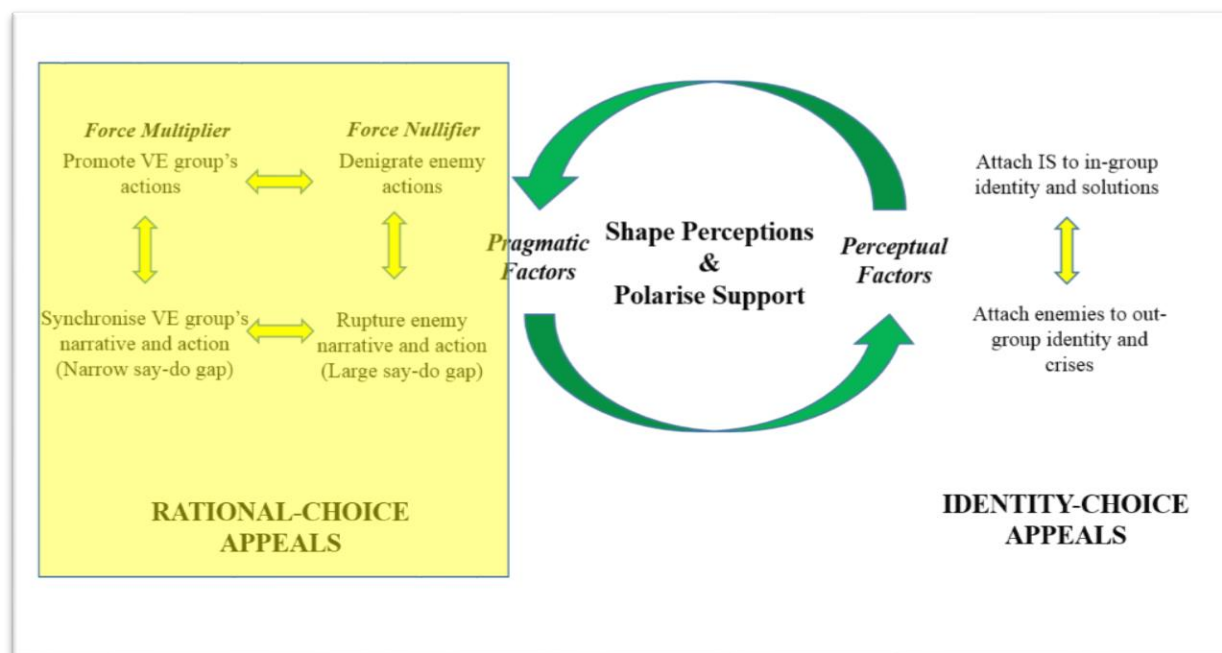


Figure 4: Rational-choice appeals

There is another principle that we must keep in mind that is far too often forgotten or misinterpreted: as the significantly weaker actor by almost any measure (e.g. resources, personnel and technology), terrorists/insurgents engage in actions and deploy messaging that is designed to elicit a response from their stronger adversaries. This is especially pertinent when it comes to understanding violent extremist propaganda strategies in which messages are deployed to elicit enemy responses which creates new opportunities for more messaging. As a member of the Syrian opposition told me in 2014: “The important thing is how you react to Daesh [Islamic State] media. Daesh made a media trap and all of the Western media fell in it. They know the fears and images that the Western media is hungry for, so Daesh give it and the media spreads it. The [Assad] regime wins, too, because now our revolution looks like we are all extremists.” This should not be surprising. We know these groups devote a lot of time to monitoring the media and publishing analyses of that coverage. They watch what academics have to say too. Earlier this year, AQAP’s Arabic language publication named Dr Craig Whiteside and myself when quoting from an article we published with *The Atlantic* on the late-Anwar Al-Awlaki. The point is

that it's only by honestly and calculatingly monitoring your enemy that you learn enough to set traps for them.

By understanding the broad strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda, and keeping in mind that it is a key principle of their strategy to coax their enemies into reinforcing and fueling this logic, we can now start to piece together how media reporting can inadvertently feed it. However, it is also an opportunity to explore how responsible, critical, independent journalism can break it apart. I want to emphasise this point again: responsible, critical, independent journalism can act as a solvent upon this strategic logic. To do so, we need to look at the six dimensions of terrorism media reporting (propaganda, perpetrators, victims, government, communities and the media) to understand both the importance of distinguishing between these dimensions and the importance of understanding their interconnectedness. So let's now look at each, consider how certain types of reporting can fuel the propaganda aims of violent extremists and then draw out some lessons.

Media as amplifier, media as disrupter

We will start with propaganda. You will note that I don't call this dimension "the violent extremist group" because it is essential for everyone to understand that every word, image and action committed by violent extremists in the public domain is propaganda and, therefore, deployed with that strategic purpose.

How can media reporting fuel those strategic aims?

Overall, uncritical media reporting, or even worse, the simple dissemination of violent extremist propaganda – something which "click bait terrorism experts" on social media are particularly guilty of doing – simply acts as informal propaganda wing for violent extremists further boosting the reach of their messaging (see Figure 5). For a more specific example, and this happens regularly, media speculation about who is responsible for a terrorist attack or reporting

unverified claims of responsibility helps to (if inadvertently) boost the “force multiplying”/“force nullifying” aim of violent extremist propaganda (see Figure 5).

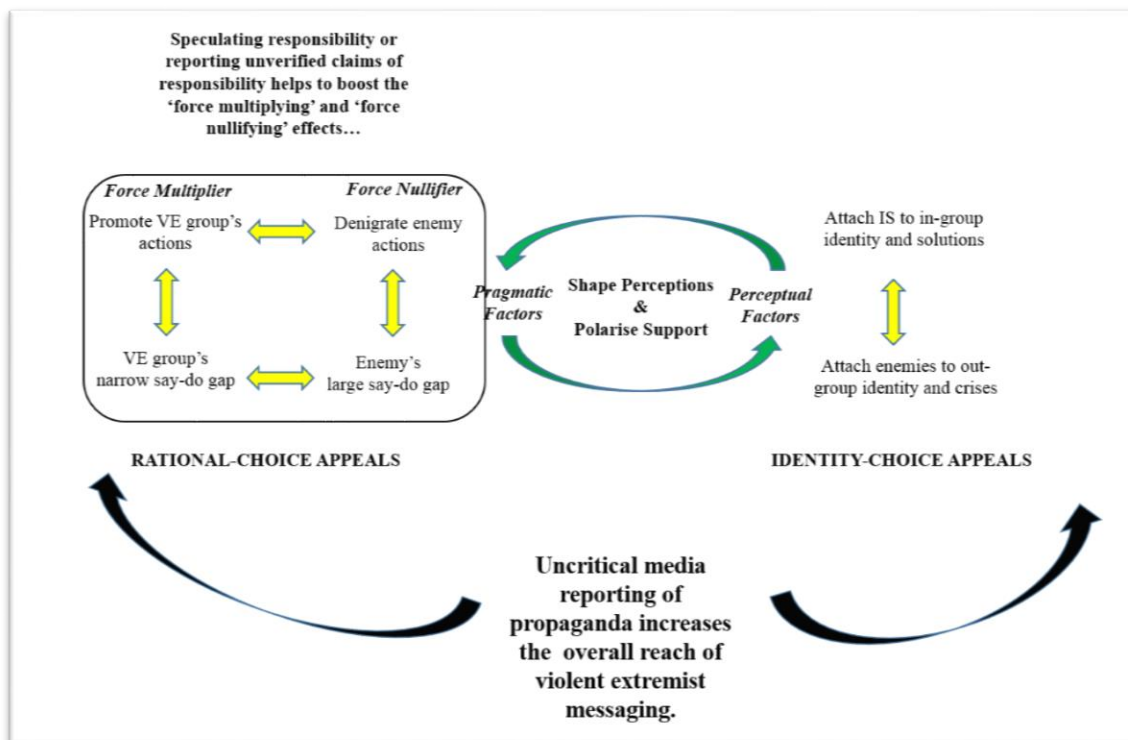


Figure 5: Propaganda reporting

The lessons for reporting any violent extremist action or message should be obvious:

- All propaganda should be critically reported and never taken at face value.
- Reporters or guests saying the words “It is only speculation but...” should be banned by producers and editors. It is irresponsible, lazy and unprofessional.
- Violent extremist propaganda should never be simply disseminated without verification and this includes claims of responsibility for attacks.

The next dimension refers to the perpetrators – these are the violent extremists themselves whether formal members, “lone wolf”/small cell actors or supporters. Media reporting can facilitate violent extremist propaganda aims in two key ways (see Figure 6):

- Sensationalised anti-hero “celebrity” reporting of perpetrators may increase the appeal of violent extremist claims.
- Secondly, media reporting that does not distinguish between the propaganda claims of violent extremist groups and the facts about perpetrators, especially “inspired” attackers, simply reinforces violent extremist claims. Another example of the same principle is the tendency for reporting to describe similar acts of political violence differently dependent on the background of the perpetrators. For instance, when terrorism targeting Muslim communities are framed as “reactionary” actions with the full range of the perpetrator’s potential motivations being explored while attacks by Muslim perpetrators are quickly described as “terrorism” with primacy given to “Islam” as the motivation for the attack, this may work to simultaneously (if inadvertently) reinforce the claims of militant right and militant Islamist propagandists.

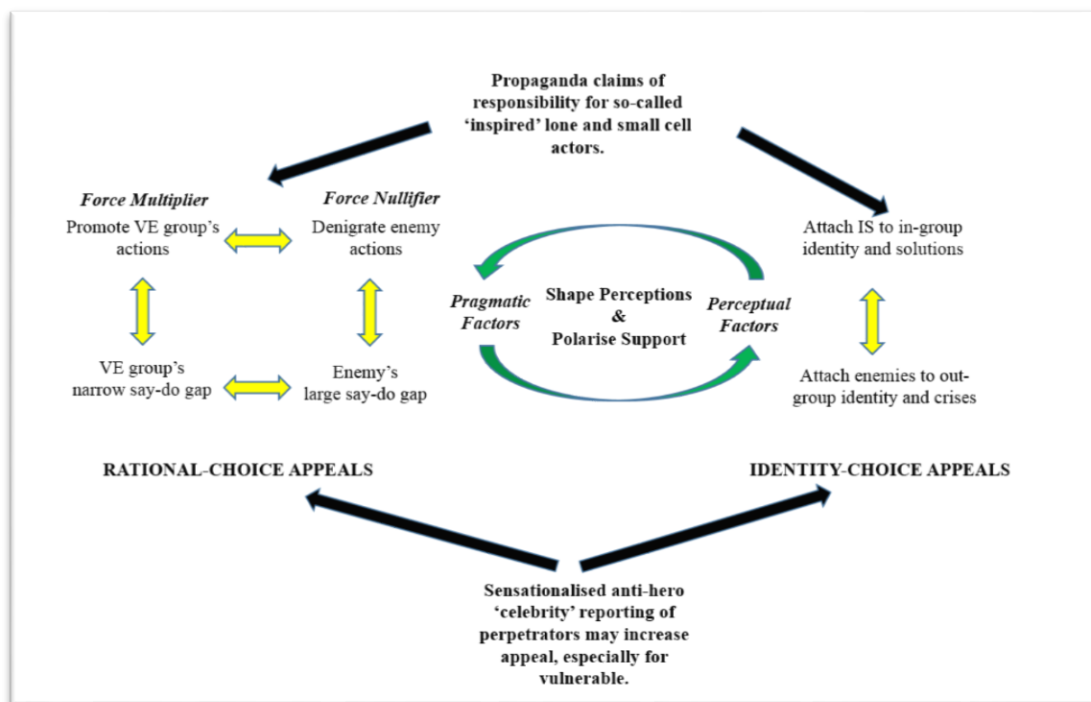


Figure 6: Perpetrators reporting

Key lessons to emerge regarding reporting about perpetrators is the need to distinguish between the propaganda claims of violent extremists and the background of perpetrators. How the media

reports on perpetrators is also a vital consideration. Fixating on perpetrators, showing their name and image (other than in support of law enforcement efforts) partnered by sensationalised stories that risk creating anti-hero celebrity narratives, must be avoided.

Next, victims refers to the casualties of attacks but also to the communities from which the victims and the perpetrators emerge. I would like to highlight three ways that media reporting can feed the strategic logic of violent extremist propaganda (see Figure 7). Focusing disproportionately on perpetrators over victims can work to enhance the overall resonance of violent extremist narratives. More specifically, media reports that loosely tie perpetrators to entire communities (e.g. Muslim communities) can reinforce the bi-polar worldview of violent extremists, while body count focused reports can boost the “force multiplier”/“force nullifier” aims of violent extremist propaganda.

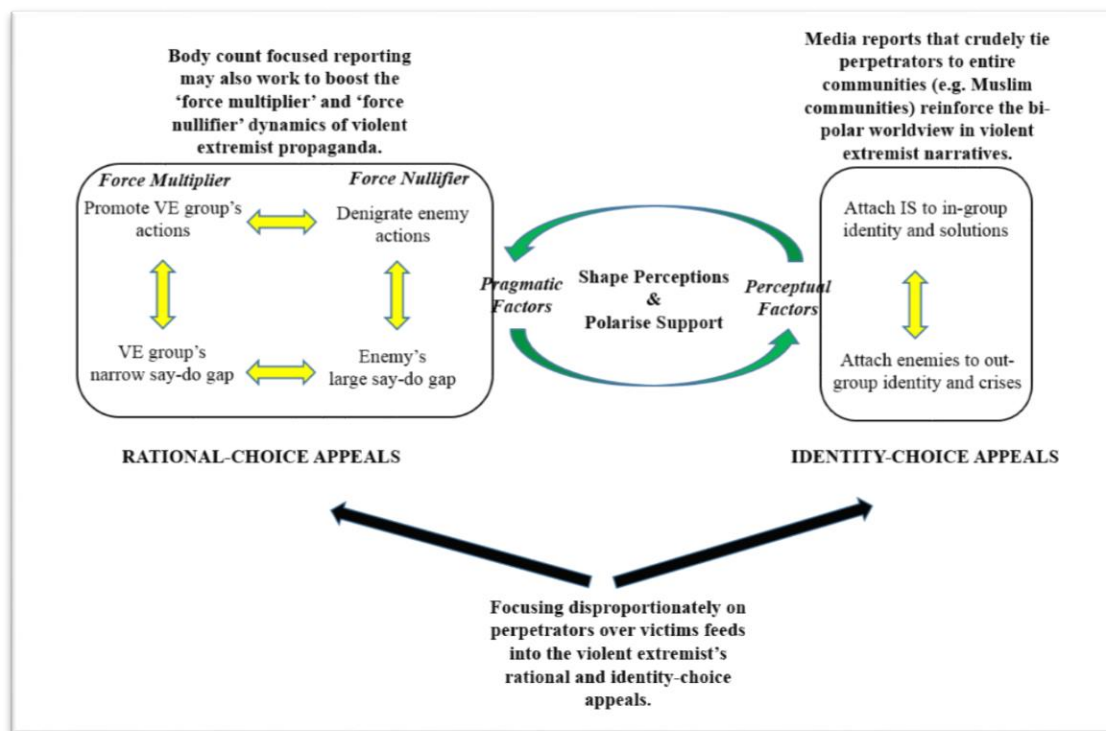


Figure 7: Victims reporting

And so, some clear lessons can be drawn from this:

- Victims, not perpetrators, should be the focus of media reporting.
- Body count reporting must be done sensitively and consistently without using graphic imagery. This means that victims in the Middle East, Africa and Asia should be afforded the same respectful reporting as victims in the West. Although, to be fair, it seems that victims in the West are covered differently dependent on their backgrounds.
- Implicating entire communities as responsible or somehow complicit in the actions of an individual or individuals, without evidence, not only does far more harm than good but is a dishonest unprofessional practice.

Next is media reporting on politicians and governmental spokespeople. Here is an example where the link between media reports and the potential boosting of violent extremist propaganda aims is indirect but the potential impact is still great. For example (see Figure 8), polarising political rhetoric that crudely dichotomises what are actually complex and pluralistic societies works to reinforce the bipolar worldview of extremists. Of course, like everyone in a democracy, politicians have every right to express such views but it is the responsibility of independent, critical and responsible press to demand transparency and accountability from them. This is especially pertinent for rhetoric and policies that seek to degrade our democracies and the freedoms and protections they promise in the name of national security. Politicians often tell us that this “War on Terror” is about protecting our way of life, its freedoms and indeed democracy itself, so I struggle to subscribe to the philosophy that the best way to save something is to kill it. This type of rhetoric, let alone actual policies, crudely reveals a chasm-like say-do gap that our violent extremist enemies are more than happy to hypocritically exploit (see Figure 8).

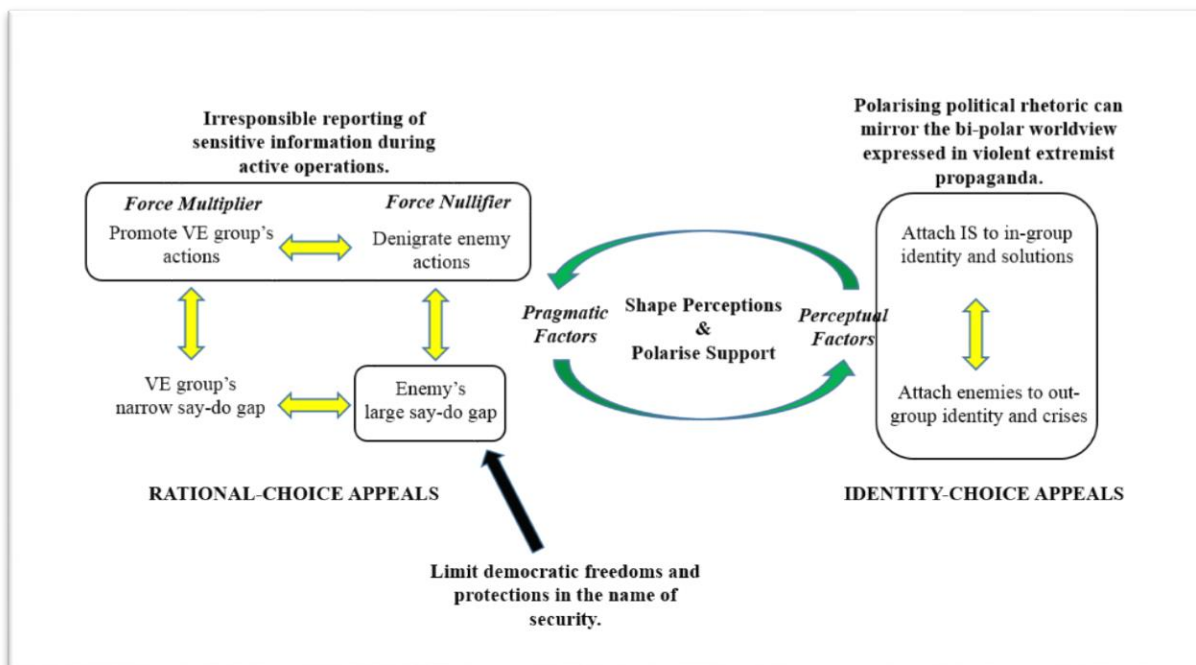


Figure 8: Government reporting

Additionally, irresponsible media reporting during active operations – such as revealing operational details during ongoing investigations – simultaneously hampers the ability of security agencies to do their jobs while potentially helping to make our enemies look more capable and competent than they really are (see Figure 8). Nevertheless, once active operations are complete, it is essential that the media hold those agencies to account for their decisions and actions. The lessons to emerge are clear: be respectful and responsible during active operations but governments must be held to account for their rhetoric and actions, especially when democratic freedoms and protections are under threat or when lives have been lost.

The fifth dimension for today's purposes are communities and it is useful to distinguish between the community in general and specific communities, for instance the communities from which specific victims or perpetrators emerged. I want to take this opportunity to focus on a very specific and particularly destructive trend in media reporting on terrorism issues and it is the tendency to homogenise and securitise Muslim communities living in the West (and beyond). Media reports that crudely homogenise what are in fact complexly diverse Muslim communities

– often with far less in common than shared – into a single monolithic bloc cynically reinforce the bi-polarisation narrative that characterises violent extremist propaganda. Moreover, the securitisation of these communities – i.e. the tendency to perceive every issue in Muslim communities through a security lens of counter-terrorism or counter violent extremism – fuels perceptions of crisis both *within* Muslim communities and *about* them too (see Figure 9). Homogenising and securitising communities is counterproductive and such reporting may tap into populism and be useful for “click bait” purposes but it almost never passes the critical scrutiny (let alone evidence) test.

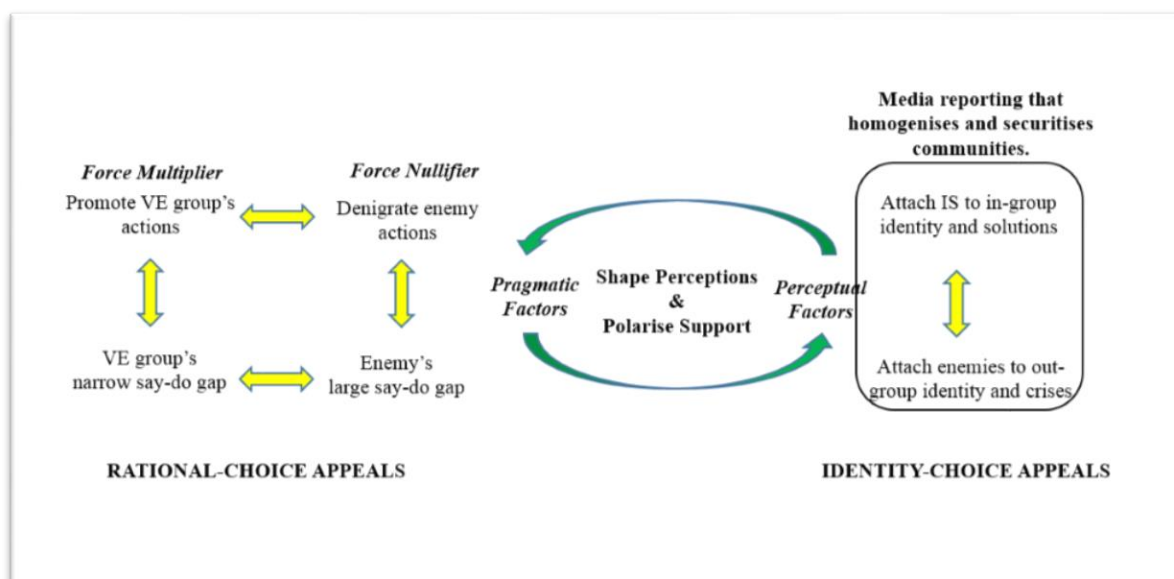


Figure 9: Community reporting

Finally, I want to end with the media itself by exploring opportunities for self-policing not only by editors and producers but across the media landscape. Put simply, journalists can play an important role in keeping other journalists accountable for their reporting. And so, it is in that spirit, that I must put out some warnings on the “terrorism expert industry” that continues to thrive and from which often emerges dubious characters in the aftermath of attacks or the latest propaganda release whether academics, former practitioners or people claiming to speak on behalf of a particular community. The media needs to bring on experts and representatives to

speak on specialist issues, have no doubts, but there are responsibilities that both the journalist and the expert must accept. What is concerning is the speed with which ill-conceived ideas expressed by so-called experts end up shaping strategic-policy debates highlighting the power of the media and thus the need for critical engagement with experts. I must add that Australia has many world class journalists: Sophie McNeil, Yalda Hakim, Caro Meldrum-Hanna, Stan Grant, Matt Brown and the fantastic Peter Grete who will be releasing a book in just a few months that addresses today's topic.

But I want to look at two particular examples from Australia, without naming the individuals, where expert commentary went on to inform serious policy discussions. One was a call for deradicalisation programs to be implemented in elementary schools (students between the ages of 5 and 12) and the other, in the aftermath of the Manchester attacks, calling for single file exits from entertainment venues to prevent mass casualty attacks. Passive uncritical journalism allows for ill-conceived thoughts to become sound bites, which become headlines, which become talking points in the public discourse, which become strategic-policy considerations. Critical active journalism breaks that domino effect at its source.

On the issue of exiting single file from entertainment venues, basic questioning exposes its obvious flaws. How would that practically work? Thousands exiting single file creates choke points inside the venue, doesn't that increase a whole range of additional and much more probable risks? Following the single file exit logic, should spectators enter venues single file too and, if so, wouldn't that create mass gatherings outside the venue? Or perhaps the single file rule should begin from public transport locations with mandatory single file entry and exit onto buses and trains too?

On the issue of deradicalisation programs in elementary schools, here are some questions. Would such programs only apply to Muslim kids? How about white kids or Asian kids? If not, why not? If so, why? Upon what basis would children between the ages of 5 and 12 be identified for

deradicalisation? How would they be deradicalised exactly? What would a 7 year old need to do or say to be successfully deradicalised?

You see, critical questioning is not just about debunking, it's also a means to improve ideas through discussion and debate. As politicians grab for the latest sound bite, it is increasingly journalists who will need to force the critical reflection at the source.

“Inspired” attacks

I want to conclude by looking at a particularly problematic trend in terrorism media reporting on so-called “inspired” attacks – where the perpetrator has had no support or even direct contact with members of the terrorist organisation. These types of attackers are an essential component of ISIS and AQAP strategies, especially as military pressures in Iraq and Yemen build. These groups seek to encourage such attacks to stretch their enemies’ battlefronts from Muslim lands to the streets of the West and create the perception of a global movement. As the legendary Al-Qaeda insurgency theorist Abu Musab al-Suri declared: “The goal of the operations of the Resistance and the Individual Terrorism Jihad is to inflict as many human and material losses as possible... and to make them feel that the Resistance has transformed into a phenomenon of popular uprising against them.” So-called inspired actions promise many of the upsides of a terrorist attack without the downsides of risks and expenses that a “directed” attack requires.

Naturally, there is a prominent propaganda dimension to this strategy. By calling for attacks in the West and disseminating instructional material, groups like ISIS and AQAP are poised to lay claim to attackers who cite their communiqués or mimic their prescribed methods. Such propaganda is an example of *preparatory offensive messaging*: messaging designed to lay a “trap” for one’s adversaries and facilitate future messaging. In the aftermath of “inspired” attacks, misguided media reporting and political rhetoric help to further fuel the jihadist’s publicity boon by presenting skilled propagandists with an opportunity to portray the attack as part of not only a larger politico-military struggle but a global revolution.

As Charlie Winter revealed in *Media Jihad*, ISIS believe that such “media missiles [can] actually be more potent than atomic bombs” and may play a complementary or even substitutionary role for actions in the field. Faced with overwhelming material disadvantages compared to their adversaries, groups like AQAP and ISIS use messaging and action to elicit misguided responses from their enemies that they then exploit with follow-up words and deeds. ISIS will continue to use this strategy to inspire “terrorists” because it has, by their calculations, worked. Hence it remains a persistent theme in their propaganda to Western audiences. It is a calculation that is also based on the consistency with which they have been able to coax their adversaries (us) into their “traps”. Media reporting must take these considerations into account.

Two other trends are worth highlighting:

- Consider the frequency with which so-called inspired attackers have shown themselves to be confused about the group that they are apparently fighting for (e.g. citing ISIS and AQ sources despite them being in conflict with each other) or have a history of mental illness. This represents less of a broadening of the terrorist threat and more a reflection of how the confused and disturbed may be triggered to frame their actions by the latest source of public notoriety.
- Secondly, the benefits to ISIS and AQ of perpetuating the perception of a ubiquitous threat is captured in how both ISIS and AQ seek to claim responsibility for the same attackers. An infographic in *Dabiq* issue 10 and, more recently, *Rumiyah* issue 9 identified many of the same attackers as were featured in a recent speech by the leader of AQAP (*A lone mujahid or an army by itself*, Shaykh Qasim al-Raymi).

Media reporting of the attacks, their perpetrators and our politicians’ rhetoric can fuel this further. Take the April 2017 Westminster attack. The simple facts are that the attacker drove into pedestrians, disembarked and stabbed a policeman before being killed. However, official statements from around the world painted a different picture. For example, before ISIS officially acknowledged the attack, one Western leader described the events as “an attack on parliaments, freedom and democracy everywhere.” A coward with a gun, a knife or a car killing unarmed

innocents is instantly transformed into an agent of a global movement. That same pathetic loner has their acts transformed into attacks on democracies everywhere, freedoms everywhere, our very way of life. All of this before any group had supposedly laid claim to an attack they had no prior knowledge of and of an individual they knew nothing about before the rest of the world did. Other statements by politicians similarly condemned the Westminster attack as a reminder of a ubiquitous threat with media reports further fuelling this narrative. When ISIS parasitically “claimed” the attack in a manner that suggested it had little prior knowledge of the plot or the plotter, this ultimately mattered little because its statement merely reinforced what was by now the dominant narrative. A recent ICCT report found that of fifty-two attacks in the West between December 2014 and June 2017, fewer than one in ten was carried out under direct orders of ISIS leadership. So I am sure many other examples are coming to mind as I speak.

There are those who may argue that once ISIS or AQ claim an attack or once the perpetrator claims allegiance to a group, that attack should be considered part of ISIS or AQ’s global campaign and anything else is “political correctness” gone mad. The reality that such approaches ignore is that inspired attacks are (to use a football metaphor) “free kicks” for violent extremists that fuel their propaganda strategies, operate as an almost risk free “force multiplier” for their words and actions while reinforcing the violent extremist’s portrayal of such actions precisely as their propagandists wish.

Pre-existing media guidelines for how best to report on suicide and mass-shooters/spree-killers have much to offer terrorism reporting, especially relating to inspired attacks. While I won’t go into all the details here, what tends to underpin these guidelines are two important principles: to increase understanding of the issue and enhance prevention measures. I have drawn out some recommendations from these sources that I think are particularly pertinent:

- Don’t glamourise or sensationalise perpetrators, for example, with anti-hero celebrity narratives.

- Avoid publishing the names and images of perpetrators unless to assist ongoing law enforcement operations.
- Avoid sensationalist language that may have an inadvertent empowering effect (e.g. a word like “cowardly” is more accurate and preferable to “evil”).
- Don’t trivialise or suggest that nothing can be done to stop attacks. This is both untrue and feeds violent extremist claims.
- Where possible, localise the story to affected communities.
- Check the accuracy of all information and only use reputable sources.
- Soberly report the impact of attacks on victims and communities.
- If nothing else, be consistent in how acts of political violence are reported. What this means is simple. Afford the same degree of concern for the nuances about an attack, for instance waiting for verification of the perpetrator’s motivation before reporting, and demonstrate the same degree of caution in making entire communities complicit in the actions of an individual (or individuals) as a *standard practice*.

Conclusion

To conclude, if nothing else, what I hope is clear from today, is that fidelity to the principles of quality journalism – critical, evidence-based, assertive, multiple source verified reporting – is more than sufficient to act as a disrupter of violent extremist propaganda. That is not the role of journalism, it is simply the likely product of quality journalism. Of course, there is space, especially for editors and producers, to understand the strategic logic that underpins violent extremist propaganda to help them make better-informed decisions about what is reported and how. For those who are looking for additional measures, the implementation of some basic guidelines could be helpful, if nothing else, to apply pressure (even if informal) to those sections of the media for whom sensationalism and “click bait” is central to their business plan. Dr Alastair Reed, the current Director of the ICCT, is keen to publish more on this subject in the coming weeks so please look out for that. Thank you for your time.