

SIAK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice



Steinek, Victoria/Zetinigg, Birgit (2021):

Islamist and Right-Wing Extremist Propaganda. A literary analysis on the mechanisms and impact of violent extremist narratives online

SIAK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice (International Edition Vol. 11), 12-22.

doi: 10.7396/IE_2021_B

Please cite this article as follows:

Steinek, Victoria/Zetinigg, Birgit (2021). Islamist and Right-Wing Extremist Propaganda. A literary analysis on the mechanisms and impact of violent extremist narratives online, SIAK-Journal – Journal for Police Science and Practice (International Edition Vol. 11), 12-22, Online: http://dx.doi.org/10.7396/IE_2021_B.

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Note: A hard copy of the article is available through the printed version of the SIAK-Journal published by NWV (<http://nwv.at>).

published online: 09/2021

Islamist and Right-Wing Extremist Propaganda

A literary analysis on the mechanisms and impact of violent extremist narratives online



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The fundamental aim of this article is to critically examine the mechanisms and impact of extremist propaganda on the Internet. This will be done by mapping the frames and identity concepts portrayed online as they occur in radicalization processes among individuals who are in some way engaged in Islamist and right-wing extremist scenes. A literature review will be conducted in order to provide a better understanding of ways in which narratives with an emphasis on violent extremism work, and why and to what extent they cause an impact on the target audience being exposed to extremist content on social media platforms. Taking into consideration a number of concepts and evidence-based studies from recent years, alleged parallels and differences between Islamist and right-wing extremist narratives in German-speaking countries will be discussed, including their key messages and media strategies of disseminating propaganda material and mobilizing potential members online. It will be argued that not only the inner workings and dynamics of co-existing narratives between these two forms of violent extremism share fundamental commonalities, but also reinforce and complement each other by promoting the sense of an enemy through the other group and giving credibility to their extremist narratives in the process. This analysis has been carried out by the authors in the context of the project DECOUNT (“Promoting democracy and fighting extremism through an online counter narratives and alternative narratives campaign”), which is funded by the European Union’s Internal Security Fund-Police.

1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout the last decades, a variety of approaches emerged from different fields as to which could be the most effective way to tackle issues of preventing and counter-ing violent extremism and its resultant crimes. The increasing awareness of the phenomenon, following the proliferation of related occurrences around the globe, has added new perspectives to controversial debates about the impacts and mechanisms of extremist narrative exposure, through which individuals opt for a path

of violent extremism. Such developments appear to have a strong connection to the rapid emergence of new technologies and innovations, which have offered extremist and terrorist groups the capability to spread their propaganda and communicate regularly and effectively to a global audience, leading to a significant shift of their dissemination and mobilization activities towards the digital space. Despite the overwhelming focus on the issue at hand, however, there is little agreement on what constitutes radicalization through the ex-

posure of extremist propaganda online and how, if at all, this process works.

The use of the Internet for the dissemination and exploitation of propaganda among violent extremist groups has rapidly evolved and effectively adapted to the constant shift of the online environment. Since the inception and move towards a globalized network, the high potential and utility of social media platforms and other means of online communication has been fully acknowledged by these groups as a possibility for their expansion and recruitment by modifying their strategies in accordance with the permanent change of modern technologies. Whereas in recent years, there has been a relatively high number of conceptual and empirical findings about potential root-causes and triggers which may foster individual radicalization processes, evidence underlying the mechanisms of online interaction and exposure to violent extremist narratives for the production and reproduction of propaganda is fairly limited. As a result, the phenomenon continues to pose a key challenge to security forces and civil society alike, leaving questions unanswered as to how such narratives lead to the proposed resonance with some recipients, whereas others being exposed to the same content appear to be unaffected in a way in which they do not tend towards the path of violent extremism.

When examining the questions of how such “frame resonance” works, which extremist content is appealing to which individuals and what kind of strategies appear to reach the desired impact (Logvinov 2017, 86), it is essential to look closely into the mechanisms of narratives and the phenomenon for which nowadays the term “cyber-propaganda” (Jones et al. 2015) is likely to be used. According to Jones et al. (ibid.), one key driver of the power of persuasion lying within extremist and terrorist activities online is their propaganda, which is

constantly produced and reproduced in the digital space. In this sense, propaganda can be described as “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view” (Propaganda, n.d.). The Internet alone is to be seen as a facilitator and catalyzer rather than an actual cause for an individual’s trajectory towards violent political activities (Meleagrou-Hitchens/Kaderbhai 2017, 19). Furthermore, contemporary studies have found that in many cases of digital media playing a key role in individual radicalization processes, the Internet “allows individuals to seek material that they are interested in, and to reject that which does not support their worldview. The Internet can give the illusion of strength of consensus” (von Behr et al. 2013, 27). Logvinov (Logvinov 2017, 87) hereby argues that recent empirical findings in German-speaking countries seem to forget that a comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms and impacts of violent extremist narratives must not only include aspects of media and content which consider the Internet merely a communication space, but also focus on the importance of their recipients: specific online content attracts specific individuals and social groups, but do not seem to show any relevant impact on others.

Considering this perspective, it can be argued that extremist narratives can only awake their power of persuasion when reaching a certain recipient, who in turn contributes to the desired impact through an individual reaction and the reproduction of their consumed online content on the cognitive and behavior level. The Internet therefore appears to provide a wider range of possibilities than “offline”-relationships for violent extremist groups, while enabling rather than accelerating the process of radicalization. Evidence found in recent studies, however, suggests that certain events and developments occur-

ring in the real world iteratively influence and shape individual behavior online, which results in the Internet not containing the role of a substitute but rather complementing the in-person communication through which extremist narratives are shared and internalized (von Behr et al. 2013, 29; Neumann et al. 2018, 15).

Taking this discussion about selective exposure of online extremist content further, theoretical and empirical findings address this phenomenon as the emergence of “echo chambers” in the digital space (Sunstein 2009) where extremist ideas and beliefs are confirmed and reinforced by like-minded individuals (Bobok 2016; Schmitt et al. 2017, 17). This effect is to some extent shaped and facilitated by so-called “filter bubbles” (Pariser 2011), where opposing views and opinions are filtered out through personalization algorithms which seem to automatically expose online consumers with content of their liking and interest (Schmitt et al. 2017, 18; Reinemann et al. 2019, 36). Considering that echo chambers consist of radical beliefs or behavior, their operative function appears to be linked to the degree to which an individual’s world in the digital space leads to a greater frequency of online exposure to extremist messages in opposition to messages considered normative (Akers 1998). As a result, they ultimately promote the possibility that individuals are more likely to adopt extremist beliefs and behaviors to which they are exposed on a frequent basis.

2. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES OF ISLAMIST AND RIGHT-WING EXTREMIST NARRATIVES

Based on concepts and evidence-based studies in recent years, alleged parallels and differences between Islamist and right-wing extremist narratives will be critically examined, including identifying key mes-

sages and themes, how cyber-propaganda is created and spread, and how it is made attractive to those who may act on it.

Apocalyptic ideas and conspiracy theories

Many Islamist and right-wing extremist groups apply various apocalyptic ideas and conspiracy theories, which they convey through their narratives both in the offline and online world by predicting a civil war between cultures or races, and creating a dynamic with the same strategy of causing fear and hatred to provoke a polarization in society. Whereas organizations from the Islamist spectrum communicate the ideas of a final battle between believers and non-believers – as in the global ummah as victims of oppression vs. “the West and its allies” (Bröckling et al. 2018, 249) – right-wing extremists distribute their idea of the extinction of the white population through mass immigration and Islamization of the West. However, when focusing on their theory of thinking, a difference in their approach certainly becomes evident: For Islamist groups, one of the most prominent narratives which appears to have a substantial influence on attracting potential members is that of utopia. Through the portrayal of seemingly only positive, idealized facets of civilian aspects of life in the Caliphate, they create an appealing image of utopia in order to compensate their current issues of being faced with questions of their legitimacy and the credibility of their claims (Neumann et al. 2018, 11). The focus on utopia and their constant engagement in utopian events is of existential importance to Jihadist groups, as the Caliphate “appeals to people not just because of its brutality, but because of the judicial order, economic plenty, religious piety and social justice that its propaganda promises countless times a day” (Winter 2015, 37). However, the overarching center of the

right-wing extremist and right-wing populist narrative world, which can be considered the meta-narrative in this regard, is a dystopic scenario. The opposite of utopia is dystopia, which is a negative draft of the future. A bad and uncertain outlook of the future awakens fears and suggests a compulsion to act. It is a simple recipe and very effective: society is going downhill, the demise is near. The nation state will be abolished. This is the scenery along which the main narratives are built. The far-right conspiracy theory centers on the assumption that Europe's white population is being systematically replaced by non-European migrants. The aim of this conspiracy is the destruction of the white population and "their" nation states (Baldauf et al. 2017).

Their emotionally charged enemy constellations towards a certain group increase their power of persuasion through terrorist attacks and other committed acts of violence from each side: both of them claim that their constructed enemy is an ultimate threat which is about to cause a conflict between (allegedly) Muslims and non-Muslims, and that a war of culture or race is unavoidable. A fair number of studies support this idea, their empirical findings appearing to validate the view that there is a strong correlation in the rise between Islamism and right-wing extremism due to the ascertained increase of committed attacks within the same time period (Ebner 2017). Certain groups from each side utilize the other's committed acts of violence to legitimize their victim/perpetrator constellations, to increase the effectiveness and credibility of their narratives and to justify their own violent actions against them. The interdependence between those different forms of group-focused enmity raises questions as to which factors have an impact on the rise of this phenomenon of "reciprocal radicalization" (ibid., 150).

Dualistic worldview: in-group and out-group dynamics

Taking into consideration the attempted explanations, both Islamist and right-wing extremist groups aim to legitimize their dualistic worldview by framing a certain crisis in ways in which it afflicts their in-group and was caused by a certain out-group, whereby the in-group provides its ultimate solution. Both follow similar patterns in their mobilization and recruitment strategies, in which their production of propaganda plays a key role to achieve the resonance of their narratives. Any relevant events and developments in society feed into their ideological frames and credibility. As a result, groups from both sides of the violent extremist paradigm frame the other's terrorist attacks in a way in which they can be considered proof of their constructed images of the enemy. For right-wing extremists it is the alleged threat to their national and cultural identity being destroyed by foreign infiltration, migration and Islamization. Islamists, on the other hand, frame acts of violence committed by individuals of right-wing extremism to be a war against their group of true believers and against the Islam. However, studies have illustrated that on both sides, a particular threat to their identity and culture is portrayed as not only coming from the outside, but also from within: Whereas right-wing extremism creates images of enemies from an "outside danger" against Europe's white population, they claim that a threat also derives from political opponents within their nation (Baldauf et al. 2017). In comparison, Islamist groups appear to convey that their enemy not only lies within the West and its allies, but also in the Muslim community, as they distinguish between true and false Muslims depending on whether they live according to the "pure" Islam.

From this perspective, it can be argued that these co-existing narratives also share fundamental commonalities to lure vulnerable young people into their organizations. In fact, they use the same strategies to pick up on their perceived individual or collective deprivation along the lines of identity and existential fears which have caused cognitive openings to alternative value systems (Meiering et al. 2018, 5; Ebner 2017). In doing so, they both appear to offer alternatives to perspectives which young people are lacking, provide non-complex explanations for perceived or existing issues, and convey promises of belonging, adventure, heroism and utopia through charismatic role models and their propaganda. Consequently, the solution they claim to represent often leads to a metaphoric or actual fight against or elimination of the enemy. In this regard, studies have found that right-wing extremists in Germany use the dominant co-existing themes of fear of terrorist attacks and the migration of refugees to give power to their hate-speech against Muslims on social media platforms. Terrorist attacks of the IS and other Jihadist groups are used to portray the Islam and all of its Muslim followers as aggressive and hostile, their committed acts of violence being interpreted as the Islamic invasion of Europe. The systematic agitation and hate crime of right-wing extremists against religious and ethnic minorities online, however, provides Islamists with a convenient platform to legitimize their arguments and portrayals of evil and suffering caused by the West. Both sides of violent extremism utilize the increasing fear, frustration and rage towards social conflicts and the perceived injustice, which ultimately feeds into the conveyed victim narrative of their in-group and the demonization of the out-group by framing all incidents of xenophobic violence as the validation of their group narrative and existence.

Ideological frames and messages

When speaking of this phenomenon of reciprocal radicalization, which appears to be accelerated by promoting the sense of an enemy through the other violent extremist group, current empirical findings move the attention towards the fact that Islamists and right-wing extremists spread their propaganda in the form of a subculture, which gains more power when being framed as “counter culture” (Meiering et al. 2018, 7). In order to achieve this, they offer a shared system of meaning, values and lifestyles in opposition to mainstream culture. Both types of violent extremism have created a specific language code while using key words to legitimize their hate-speech and enemy constellations – in the case of right-wing extremists, for instance: “Vaterland” (homeland), “Volksverräter” (national traitors) and “Lügenpresse” (lying press); in the case of Islamists, ummah, kuffār, or brothers and sisters of Islam. In addition, they have developed certain camouflage tactics through which extremist narratives and ideologies transported in images, videos and music allegedly play a minor role and are strategically covered with relatively unsuspecting terms.

Instead of only aiming to formulate criticism and promote hatred against their constructed enemy in certain respects, however, both violent extremist groups appear to also put effort into offering a positive, alternative narrative in the form of acting as a reliable source of support and provider for a solution. When looking at the previously stated findings, it can be suggested that right-wing extremists mitigate their ideological framing by disguising the actual hateful elements of their narratives with a positive connotation through elocution: for instance, xenophobia will be replaced with “Heimatliebe” (love of one’s homeland). The concept of “National pride” includes positive

narratives about homeland traditions and diffuse “original values”. A certain time is being constructed, in which values like family, pride, homeland and traditions had a very positive meaning. This includes also positive references to soldiers of the Second World War. These narratives are intended to paint a positive alternative draft to the threatening doom (Baldauf et al. 2017, 15). Islamist or Jihadist groups, however, focus their positive narratives on the allegedly positive aspects of living in the Caliphate as well as on the heroization and glorification of a warrior in Jihad, rather than showing the actual cruelty and other negative aspects of fighting in Jihad. Another tactic of achieving a higher resonance from young people is the strategic coverage of hateful messages along specific themes of the youth’s interest. Right-wing extremist groups, for instance, present themselves as being committed to the topic of animal and nature protection, which as a result attracts young people without them realizing the ideological messages behind the online content on social media. The increasing effectiveness in their mobilization and recruitment strategies is also pursued through particular emotionally charged themes: whereas right-wing extremists rather focus on themes like Asylum and Migration or child abuse, Salafist individuals put more emphasis on conflicts in which Muslim minorities are oppressed victims (Reinemann et al. 2019, 28). With the emotionalization of these themes used in their narratives, they not only reinforce their constructed images of enemies by provoking in their recipients a feeling of threat within a certain group, but also achieve with the degradation of the other an upvaluation of their own group, and legitimize their existence and acts of violence.

However, it appears that right-wing extremists and Islamists portray themselves

as allies when declaring the same group as their enemy, (i.a. represented by their shared ideological thinking in terms of Antisemitism and hatred against Jews) which yet again is used as a tool of disguise for right-wing extremists specifically to present themselves with an allegedly liberal attitude towards the Islam (Meiering et al. 2018, 15). In addition, groups from both sides successfully create a linkage between the loss of one’s identity and modernity as well as universalism, multiculturalism and globalization. This ultimately leads to the possibility of not only radicalization within a group, but also the development of alliances between different radical groups.

In this context, the Violent Prevention Network uses the term “remaining identities” (“Restidentitäten”) when arguing that, in case individuals are not able to develop successfully a social identity in the established system, they cling to something no one can take away from them: for right-wing extremists, it is their nationality, claiming that they are proud of being German; for Islamists, it is their masculinity or religious roots, claiming that they are proud of being a warrior and part of a religious community (ibid., 8; Mücke 2012). However, similarities in co-existing narratives between both types of violent extremism can also be found in regards to the construction of masculinity in certain respects. The most dominant element in their models of masculinity appears to be the portrayal of heroism which euphemizes violence and is constituted in a way in which it is to be seen as normalized. As a result, both for Islamists and nationalists, gender narratives have the key function to illustrate their power and domination (Meiering et al. 2018, 21), but also to reclaim an identity that post-modern society with their multiple identities and its indicated universalism cannot provide.

Reaching out to a young target audience: elements of pop culture

Elements of pop culture are used by both sides of the violent extremist paradigm in their online propaganda to attract vulnerable young people in particular. When examining the online propaganda strategies of right-wing extremists, it becomes evident that the Internet affinity of right-wing extremist groups is pronounced. Video clips, discussion groups and blogs are used as a central tool to spread right-wing extremist messages online. The highly qualitative standard is especially illustrated in a dynamic, youthful appealing and professional optic of their web presence; borrowing elements from pop culture (references to computer games, movies, music) and references to youth cultures (e.g. Straight Edge culture) play an important role. Material, which is put online on websites like YouTube, Twitter or Facebook, without a clear right-wing extremist frame has the advantage of allowing to be published in an almost usual context for (juvenile) users (Busch 2008). In doing so, right-wing actors are able to spread ideological ideas across the public virtual space and across the (media) mainstream as well. Right-wing extremists were quick to realize that they can connect young people's lives with every day topics. For example, they use guest books and forums on unpolitical sides to spread their ideologies. They approach young people with innocuous topics in order to intersperse right-wing propaganda gradually. This trend is pursued by right-wing extremist groups like the "Identitarian": They try to lure young people with smoothed messages and unsuspecting terms, they stage small and provocative actions for the Internet and most importantly, they opt for an extremely stylish optic. A few activists are thus able to reach millions of users with well-cut and provocative video clips.

In terms of Islamist groups, studies from German-speaking countries indicate that their narratives include elements which suggest an alternative youth culture as a whole in opposition to mainstream society – often symbolized and expressed through their lifestyle, dress code, language and music – as a provocative response of rejection to the West (Ministerium für Inneres und Kommunales des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen 2015, 36; Schmitt et al. 2017, 11). In this context, many of the produced and distributed videos include elements from action movies and the "ego-shooter" perspective from videogames in a highly professional manner, offering young people the opportunity to play the role of a heroic warrior going on adventure. This portrayal is strategically linked with images of the oppressed ummah and the Islam as a whole, raising the effectiveness and resonance with emotionally charged connections and the need to take action. As a result, the illustration of the Jihad as being a fight to protect and save their people from the enemy constitutes acts of violence as a "good deed" to an extent to which even a heroic death and martyr becomes attractive in the eyes of many young consumers. With this emotionalizing strategy, they highlight their positive role in opposition to the West which ultimately poses as the cause of the on-going war and suffering, and increase their power of persuasion among their young recipients by emphasizing the importance to actively engage oneself in the name of justice and the greater good (Schmitt et al. 2017, 13). The virtual space therefore provides a vehicle for luring vulnerable young people into their Islamist and Jihadist worldview by offering alternative lifestyles in opposition to mainstream society from which young people often feel alienated.

The use of pop cultural elements to shape their narratives in accordance with their

young target audience is similar in structure, however, the messages they communicate appear to differ: Right-wing extremists tend to tell stories about national pride and cultural purity of the German nation and portray refugees, foreigners or the government as their enemies; Islamists and Jihadists produce traditional Nasheeds to market the Jihad and the idealized and glorified image of a heroic warrior in the war against non-believers. In this context, alongside images, videos and texts, music plays a key role in the mobilization of vulnerable young people and in their introduction to and adaption of violent extremist worldviews. Islamists and right-wing extremists seem to put a special emphasis on the production of music as a key tool to reach their young audience and create a linkage between their extremist narratives and the youth's lifeworld (Reinemann et al. 2019, 17). In doing so, they hide their ideological messages behind the lines of their created lyrics, which leads to them transmitting hateful ideas, enemy constellations, certain stereotypes and sometimes even fantasies of violence with hardly any of their consumers' notice.

Therefore, the centralized virtual lifeworld of the youth is to be considered a space that opens the pathway of getting in touch with extremist actors and their distributed propaganda in various ways. Digital platforms are utilized to distribute their ideology and to reinforce their violent extremist narratives by mobilizing their followers and supporters to take action against their identified cause of injustice or conflict. Furthermore, both sides of the violent extremist paradigm have long acknowledged the benefit of social networks when aiming to recruit new members through processes of persuasion and resonance in online communication and information exchange. By constantly adapting to the trends of stylization through cha-

rismatic and authentic role models, they attract and reach a higher resonance of their young consumers (Reinemann et al. 2019, 32).

3. CONCLUSIO

Generally speaking, Islamists and right-wing extremists deploy a highly professional and ideologically coherent media strategy to gain a presence in a digital environment in which humans constantly interact and share information with each other. It allows them to easily market their narratives to a global audience and reinforce them in order to continue projecting influence and resonance. The core narrative in their cyber-propaganda and its generative characteristics of social communications is the one creating an "us" against "them", which secures a strong bond among the members while alienating them from mainstream society. Through the acceptance of these highly polarized worldviews and their narrow set of norms in the process of ideological framing, the uncertain individual search for identity and meaning receives simple answers. In addition, vulnerable young people are offered a comprehensive framework of social norms, values and morals, which ultimately paves the way for deciding to commit violent actions. By provoking polarization, escalation and the facilitation of fear against "the other" with emotionally charged themes, they progressively increase their power of persuasion and mobilize individuals to engage in the "war" against their declared enemy. It can be concluded that not only the inner dynamics of co-existing narratives between these two forms of violent extremism share fundamental commonalities, but also reinforce and complement each other by promoting the sense of an enemy through the other group. These "bridge narratives" (Meiering et al. 2018) indicate that recipro-

cated radicalization is not only provoked and influenced by the construction of enemy images and the hostility towards each of these groups, but also by using similar ideological elements and narratives. While shaping their messages and frames in different ways depending on their own worldview, they are intertwined through the interplay and parallels of their goals, strategies, tactics and narratives. They appear to find an inspiration also in each other in order to gain more power and legitimize their own existence.

However, the number of empirical findings on the actual impact of violent extremist narratives is fairly limited, which raises questions as to why the achieved resonance not always leads to the internalization of the transmitted ideology in their recipients. Further research is needed to explain the degree to which previously existing factors may influence individual beliefs and views when being introduced to alternative value systems, such as a general acceptance of violence (Reinemann et al. 2019, 35). As stated from the outset, the purpose of this article was not to offer a

conclusive assessment of the totality of violent extremists' online operations. Instead, it has restricted itself to illustrations of how violent extremist online propaganda is generated, spread and consumed; the dynamics of online interactions and resonance of narratives; and media strategies to inspire and recruit individuals to carry out actions on the group's behalf. The discussed collection of findings shall bring together various approaches to enrich the understanding of the increasing importance of current media ecosystems for Islamists and right-wing extremists to distribute their extremist propaganda. They appear to progressively focus on the connection between their online communication strategies and their offline activities in order to maximize their outreach and effectiveness of their narratives. This ultimately leads to the consensus that the Internet serves as a facilitator of reinforcing an individual's own beliefs through the resonance and confirmation of like-minded individuals, and a catalyzer of an individual's trajectory towards various forms of violent extremism.

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