

# Talking back: Countering terrorist narratives may reduce recruitment

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Recruiters for violent extremist groups, just like screenwriters and marketers, use storytelling techniques to craft their messages. Analyzing those narratives and producing counter-narratives may be one way to cut the success of terrorist recruitment, according to researchers.

"No matter what the context is—whether it's terrorism or health communication or organizational communication—the principles of persuasion all operate the same," said Kurt Braddock, lecturer in communication arts and sciences, Penn State. "Although terrorists are different in the sense that they engage in activity seen as socially abnormal, the processes that they use to get people to join their groups are no different from the processes used to convince people to join other social groups."

Narratives are cohesive and coherent accounts about events that center on people engaged in actions that involve questions or conflicts, according to Braddock, who worked with John Horgan, professor of psychology at the Global Studies Institute, Georgia State University. Narratives, which have a beginning, middle and end, provide answers and resolutions to those questions and conflicts, he added.

Collecting terrorist narratives and analyzing the themes of those narratives are the first steps to crafting counter-narratives, said Braddock. Themes tend to emerge when concepts—such as, in the case of ISIS narratives, the peaceful existence within the areas they dominate—are referenced many times.

"Terrorists are very good at using stories to promote their ideologies and get their ideas out, so we need good stories to counter them and we have to be systematic about it," said Braddock. "You need to know the people you're going target with your counter-narrative beforehand and you need to know what narratives they are being exposed to by groups like ISIS. Essentially, you need to know your enemy and what messages they are aiming at people they're trying to recruit and radicalize."

After analyzing the themes, counter-terrorism experts could then construct narratives that contradict the terrorist themes point by point.

While distributing counter-narratives is a step that is often overlooked by current terrorist experts, Braddock said effective distribution is just as important as crafting the story. Government counter-terrorist agents and analysts may be working against themselves when they try to distribute their messages through sources the audience does not trust.

"If you know someone is trying to persuade you, then you might go in the opposite direction," said Braddock. "Humans have an intrinsic need to make their own decisions and when we feel like someone is trying to infringe on those decisions, we reestablish our autonomy by doing the opposite."

Using trusted sources, such as imams who are against extremist violence and former white nationalist group members who have renounced violence, to disseminate counter-[narratives](#) improves the chances that the message will be accepted, according to the researchers, who released their findings in a recent issue of *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*.

The researchers said that most extremist groups, such as ISIS, the National Alliance, the Animal Liberation Front and the Army of God, post their messages online, or spread them by word-of-mouth.

Braddock said his next step will be to work with groups currently engaged in disrupting terrorist recruitment.

"With this research, we are hoping to move terrorism studies forward in a way that we focus on practical steps that can be used in the field, but backed up by theory and data," said Braddock.

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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