

Researchers call on science fiction to understand extremist psychology

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Deakin University researchers have used science fiction to understand terrorist propaganda techniques in an innovative study.

Dr. Matteo Vergani, postdoctoral researcher at the Alfred Deakin Institute for Citizenship and Globalisation, and Dr. Ana-Maria Bliuc, senior lecturer at Western Sydney University, have used an innovative research strategy to gain new insights about the psychology behind the mobilising propaganda of the "new terrorism."

The researchers undertook computerised linguistic analysis of the language used in two English-language online magazines from ISIS and al-Qaeda, "Dabiq" and "Inspire."

The results from analysis of almost 350 articles from the two publications suggest that ISIS' "Dabiq" used language with a stronger authoritarian and religious tone than that of al-Qaeda's "Inspire."

Then, masking the publications as science fiction stories, the study asked participants to rate their attitudes to the texts. Their responses were tested for positive correlations against their own religiousness and authoritarianism.

"The text comes from a [science fiction](#) tale that describes the struggle of the inhabitants of a planet, Angos, from the Kraton warriors who have conquered Angos and oppressed the Angosians," the study reads.

"The text is the speech made by an Angosian rebel leader in front of a group of young Angosian people to convince them to join the fight against the Kraton warriors."

Changing the names of countries to planets, and people to alien races, allowed the researchers to maintain the same language used by the terrorist groups without arousing suspicion in the study participants.

Drawn from a sample similar to the actual audiences that terrorist groups attempt to target online, the 146 participants in the study were English-speaking individuals from a Western country high in computer literacy.

Participants who scored higher in the traits of religiousness and authoritarianism were more likely to prefer the language of ISIS publication "Dabiq" than that of al-Qaeda's "Inspire."

"ISIS-related mobilisation requires high levels of authoritarianism and religiousness to counterbalance the high psychological costs on its followers – psychological costs due to the members being aware and supportive of the group's adoption of extreme violence, especially against other Muslims (which al-Qaeda has criticised)," said Dr. Vergani.

This research paves the way for further investigation into the psychological underpinnings of support for ISIS among Western populations at high risk of radicalisation, particularly young and disaffected individuals from Muslim backgrounds.

Since the so-called "Islamic State" was declared in July 2014, there has been an increase in the number of "home-grown attacks" in Western countries, nearly all of which were claimed to have been perpetrated by ISIS.

This increase has been further characterised by an overall trend in more

frequent and lethal attacks against religious and ideological "out-groups," for example, Jewish or Christian targets.

Dr. Vergani believes this research may assist in identifying and preventing newly emerging forms of terrorism, in particular, the choice of victims of political violence perpetrated by [terrorist groups](#) like ISIS and al-Qaeda.

More information: Matteo Vergani et al. The Language of New Terrorism: Differences in Psychological Dimensions of Communication in Dabiq and Inspire, *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/0261927X17751011](https://doi.org/10.1177/0261927X17751011)

Provided by Deakin University

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