

# Finding predictable patterns in terrorist propaganda

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A University at Buffalo communication researcher has found predictable patterns in terrorist propaganda that attempts to persuade otherwise morally grounded people to join violent causes.

The results of the new study, published in the *Journal of Communication*, provide a foundation for developing counter messaging that seeks to neutralize those appeals or provide leverage for encouraging people to leave [terrorist groups](#).

Lindsay Hahn, Ph.D., assistant professor of communication in the UB College of Arts and Sciences, along with her research team, examined 873 items created by 73 violent terrorist organizations, including websites, rally signs, videos and notes left at crime scenes. All of the material is now part of an expansive database, dating from the 1920s, which future researchers can use to advance knowledge in this area.

Besides trying to understand the degree to which terrorists' appeals are predictable, the study also looked at the effects of terrorist propaganda by concentrating the analysis on messages created at times the groups were known to be violent.

Results of the content analysis showed an emphasis toward in-group loyalty and fairness across all propaganda, while purity-based language was directly related to the frequency of an organization's attacks and an increase in the number of deaths and casualties.

"If we're going to design effective counter messages for radicalization, it is necessary to understand how the radicalization process is happening in the first place," says Hahn, an expert in media psychology and morality and the paper's lead author.

The paper doesn't propose potential messaging strategies, but the findings do offer some possibilities.

"Terrorists often exploit in-group loyalty and purity," says Hahn. "When these are stressed in propaganda we see a correlation with a greater number of attacks and a greater number of deaths and casualties," says

Hahn.

"Interventions focused on these two [moral values](#) would be a good place to start developing counter messaging."

In 2019, terrorists killed over 20,000 people around the world.

The assumption is that these violent actors are amoral, but previous research finds that extremists believe their actions are virtuous to the point of justifying violence.

"They are actually driven by what they see as moral righteousness," Hahn says. "Although they are using violence to achieve some end, they believe their ends are justified."

Hahn says that to her knowledge this is the first study to examine terrorists' media production alongside its antecedents and effects. It is, however, an area of communication research that began with a famous set of studies called "Why We Fight" that explored the effectiveness of WWII recruitment films.

Those studies suggested that propaganda does little to change people's minds unless it appeals to an audience's pre-existing attitude.

Hahn points to the example of a violent anti-immigrant group that adopted the colloquialism "Let's roll," a phrase associated with the heroic 9/11 passenger revolt on Flight 93.

"'Let's roll' became a pro-American saying that was associated with patriotism and defending American values, but eventually came to be used in terrorist propaganda, exploiting patriotic language for nefarious purposes," says Hahn. "That's what's happening here: a moral value an audience already holds is exploited by terrorists."

Guided by that early work, Hahn's team looked at these various sources to determine how terrorist organizations persuade people with moral appeals.

She calls it a narrowcasting process that uses different messaging platforms to focus on a specific moral value that will ultimately appeal to certain audience subgroups.

"And it turns out that it's almost always about morality," she says.

"Terrorists are using [mass media](#), [social media](#) and other means to send out their message, but the appeals are focused and aimed at certain groups of people to bolster pre-existing attitudes."

**More information:** Lindsay Hahn et al, Why we fight: investigating the moral appeals in terrorist propaganda, their predictors, and their association with attack severity, *Journal of Communication* (2023). [DOI: 10.1093/joc/jqad029](#)

Provided by University at Buffalo

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