Symbiotic radicalisation strategies: Propaganda tools and neuro linguistic programming

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SYMBIOTIC RADICALISATION STRATEGIES: PROPAGANDA TOOLS AND NEURO LINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING

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Abstract

The rise of Islamic State has seen a rise in the threat and incidences of domestic terrorism. Sophisticated strategies are being used to target youth and draw them into the ideology of Islamic state and other terrorist groups. Two common strategies used by Islamic State are the use of propaganda tools as well as Neuro linguistic programming strategies. This paper looks at how these strategies were used through a longitudinal online ethnographic study on the social media site Facebook. Data collected revealed that these two strategies were used in a targeted manner and worked together in a symbiotic fashion to create a change in the mental frameworks of an individual. Both strategies worked in the linguistic domain to help shape and internalise key discourses and ideologies. Finally, these strategies were used implicitly without any direct references on how to achieve change.

Keywords

INTRODUCTION

With the rise of Islamic State in recent years, the threat of radicalisation and domestic terrorism is at its highest level since 9/11. Several terrorist attacks in Australia are a reminder of the reach of Islamic terrorism propagated especially through online means, most notably, social media. This paper focuses on two key radicalisation strategies that work together in a symbiotic fashion to achieve a shift towards greater radicalisation coupled with an increased propensity to act in a violent manner. The first of these strategies are propaganda tools which are designed to propagate and spread the extremist Islamic ideology. Second are Neuro Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques that are designed to embed the ideology within the individual to create a state change.

Prior to looking at these two strategies, it is important to note that such strategies do not represent the limit of those used by Islamic State or that other frameworks cannot be used to undertake such an analysis. Nonetheless, these two were chosen given their prevalent use by Islamic State in the online domain as well as they way they work together. One final note before introducing each of these strategies is the fact that both are used implicitly without any specific reference to the mechanisms of each.

Propaganda Tools

Many authors over the years have attempted to develop a list of propaganda techniques used. This section looks at these lists of techniques by several authors. The study of propaganda really came to prominence during World War II with the rise of the Nazi 'propaganda machine.' In order to combat such ideas, it was necessary to first understand the mechanisms at work. The same lesson can be applied to the study of Islamic terrorism and its propaganda with a need to first understand the mechanisms at work. These developed lists have many commonalities, they also have some differences.

Often there are misnomers surrounding the term propaganda. Although propaganda can be a powerful tool, it has limitations as to what it can achieve. In other words, 'Propaganda is as much about confirming rather than converting public opinion. Propaganda, if it is to be effective must, in a sense, preach to those who are already partially converted' (Welch, 2004, p 214). This observation is particularly important and highlights the limitations of propaganda and that it is not a form of 'brainwashing'.

Different researchers have compiled various lists of propaganda tools. These lists will be overviewed in brief and then compared for similarities and differences.

List of devices compiled by Yourman (1939)

This early study listed seven key devices used for propaganda. They have been summarised below:

1. **Name Calling** - appeal to a person's hate or fear to try and create a judgement on another without evidence.
 2. **Glittering Generalities** - works to associate cause with positive virtues by using positive emotional images such as love or brotherhood.
3. **Transfer** - attempts to transfer the authority or respect of something we have or believe onto a tenant for their cause.
4. **Testimonial** - this is a testimonial by a leader or well respected person to promote a cause.
5. **Plain Folks** - this is where an attempt is made to promote solidarity by appearing as an ordinary person just like everyone else.
6. **Card Stacking** - this is a deception tool used to overemphasise certain positive aspects and under emphasise negative aspects.
7. **Band Wagon** -this is to encourage people to follow and join a common cause because 'many others' have also joined.

List of techniques compiled by Brown (1963)

This list became an inventory of techniques and included errors in reasoning or logical fallacies (Brown, 1963). Key techniques have been summarised below:
1. **Stereotyping** - to present all people in a certain group as something. Used to dehumanise or demonise groups of people.
2. **Selection** - selecting the truth you wish to present and only presenting that while disregarding other facts.
3. **Repetition** - used by Hitler as one of the main fundamental techniques that if people hear a message often enough they will believe it.
4. **Overt lies** - even overt lies can be believable if presented the right way.
5. **Assertion** - this requires making a statement without any evidence or proof. If presented in an emotive context can be a powerful tool. Based on Freudian suggestion technique.
6. **Appeal to Authority** - particularly powerful when utilising religious references.

List of techniques compiled by Smith (1989)

Smith (1989) outlines four major categories of propaganda techniques:
Falsehoods, Omissions, Distortions and Suggestions. Within these are the following techniques:

1. **Symbolic Fiction** - false claim supported by a respected or neutral party.
2. **Allusion** - same as assertion see (Brown, 1963).
3. **Multiple Standards** - what we would call double standards where different standards are used to judge different groups. Other are judged much more harshly.
4. **Historical Reconstruction** - historical record is altered to eliminate or include events.
5. **Asymmetrical Definitio**n - use words with a different meaning for the audience.

Table 1 - Propaganda matrix showing similarities and differences

(Yourman, 1939)	(Brown, 1963)	(Smith, 1989)	(Shabo, 2008)	(Jowett, 1999)
Name Calling	Stereotyping			
Glittering Generalities	Stereotyping		Glittering generalities	
Transfer	Appeal to Authority	Symbolic Fiction		
Testimonial	Appeal to Authority			
Plain Folks				
Card Stacking	Selection	Multiple Standards	Card stacking	White propaganda
Band Wagon			Bandwagon	

	Assertion	Allusion	Assertion	
	Selection	Asymmetrical Definition	False dilemma	
	Repetition			
	Overt lies			Black propaganda
		Historical Reconstruction		
			The lesser of two evils	
				Grey propaganda

Types of propaganda compiled by Shabo (2008)

The following list contains many of the previously mentioned devices particularly Yourman (1939) :
1. **Assertion** – asserting a statement without evidence. Many people simply accept these
2. **Bandwagon** – herding instinct and belonging to the majority
3. **Card stacking** – gives a more one sided viewpoint while downgrading the opposing view.
4. **Glittering generalities** – vague words designed to evoke emotion.
5. **False dilemma** – black and white thinking – reduced complex arguments to a small number of possibilities.
6. **The lesser of two evil**s – used particularly when people find propaganda hard to accept (Shabo, 2008).

Types of propaganda compiled by Jowett (1999)

This final part of this section looks at types of propaganda which in reality is a classification on the ethical stance or accuracy of techniques used and are as follows:

1. **White propaganda** - promotes information that tends to be accurate albeit one sided.
2. **Black propaganda** - uses overt lies and deception.
3. **Grey (gray) propaganda** - lies somewhere in between white and black propaganda. (Jowett, 1999)

In order to better make sense of these different but overlapping perspectives, Table 1 is a matrix showing similarities of propaganda techniques. Some techniques from one author may overlap with two on another author. Table 1 illustrates numerous commonalities in propaganda frameworks by various researchers.

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP)

Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) is not a single strategy, rather it is a set of strategies that are designed to create change. Commonly, NLP strategies have been either used by individuals to affect change in their own life or to effect change on others. The first is in the realm of human performance and creating self change such as advocated by Anthony Robbins. Secondly, NLP strategies are used in marketing to create a state change and increase the probability of a sale.

While there are many NLP strategies, there are several that were more prominent and these are outlined below (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000):
1. **Anchoring** - anchoring is the foundational strategy whereby a state of mind or feeling is linked to a trigger or sensory response.
2. **Future Pacing** - this technique takes a person's mind into the future and uses language that indicates an acceptance of the desired change or desired product in the case of marketing.
3. **Association/Dissociation** - this pair of strategy aims to create strong associations with a new mental framework and at the same time create a progressive dissociation with existing mental frameworks.

METHOD

The methodological paradigm for this study was a longitudinal online ethnographic study on the social media platform of Facebook. The author observed interactions and collected data on linguistic structures as part of a PhD study. Radical and extremist pages on Facebook were sought out on the criteria that they were Australian based and demonstrated a high level of extremist materials and/or narratives. Over five thousand pages, groups and profiles were observed over a period of 4 years. An average of 50 hours per week was spent in data collection or observation on Facebook. The type of data examined was primarily textual but also incorporated images and video data which was observed by the author when it was directly linked to a Facebook page, group or profile. Apart from key textual data, the primary data collected was the author's observations or field journal entries as part of the study. Researcher reflexivity was incorporated into the study to allow reader testing of researcher bias. In addition, since interaction with participants was not conducted in this study, the author's observations as part of this extensive ethnography were critical. Hence reflexivity by extension was also imperative for testing researcher bias.

Data collection and analysis was undertaken using a Grounded Theory approach in which collection and analysis was a cyclic approach with the avoidance of apriori assumptions. Essentially what occurred was the author created preliminary analysis based on observations in the online setting. Preliminary analysis was then further investigated to search for both supporting data as well as disconfirming or contrary data. Any preliminary analysis was not conducted until after at least one year of collecting textual data in the online setting. Another key aspect of data collection and analysis was focussing on particular case interactions of individuals that exhibited a mentor/student style of relationship. Analysis was performed manually through continued recording and revision of field journal entries of the author's observations particularly towards the end of the extended online ethnography.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results are presented in three sections, propaganda tools, NLP strategies and how the two work together to create change. Each section includes a discussion on how these tools are utilised based on extensive ethnographic observation.

Propaganda Tools

Not only were the techniques themselves examined, but also the way in which discourses were propagated and circulated online. While it is difficult to trace the origins of the use of certain propaganda tools, their use, prevalence and circulation all provided important markers on how these tools were utilised. Research also supports the notion that some degree of radicalisation is necessary for individuals to seek out and be influenced by discourses and propaganda (Bermingham et al., 2009).

As outlined in Table 2, propaganda techniques were easy to find and employed regularly in a very implicit way. These results are certainly expected and highlight techniques used. Other research into prominent clerics also highlights the use of various propaganda strategies by these clerics (Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014) which are subsequently propagated by others. Although terrorist groups such as al-Qaeda and IS have their own media arms and propaganda specialists, the majority of propaganda material was found to be created and circulated by many different radicals in what can only be described as a networked model of propaganda or more correctly a networked model for the circulation of discourses. Furthermore, an increasing number and sophistication of media options is available for the presentation of propaganda (Taylor, 2003).

As a consequence of a networked model of discourse was that there was not a complete agreement on the messages or discourses being propagated. In some cases, messages had different emphasis on what is important, in other cases there were disagreements about the messages being sent. Nonetheless, techniques of propaganda were clearly present and were used by many with an implicit knowledge of the techniques. Certainly, there were no explicit references to any propaganda techniques from the data studied.

Given the use of propaganda tools by many extremists on the internet we need to remember its purpose is to create a change in belief systems by demonising the enemy as well as focussing on the just cause of jihad. Repetition as the foundation tool coupled with the other propaganda tools aims to create a new belief system in which individuals reject Western values and norms as well as viewing the West as responsible for not only the historical suffering of Muslims globally, but also the current targeting and victimisation of Muslims. In conjunction, the positive sense of a just cause, the obligation of Muslims to take action and the esteeming of those who do help to reorient the belief system of the individual.

One final important point is needed on propaganda techniques. While they aim to change the cognitive belief structures that an individual has, they utilise a strong affective dimension. Propaganda tools were found to also invoke an emotional response including a sense of outrage or anger at perceived injustices. Positive feelings were also targeted including a sense of strength and heroism.

Table 2 - Propaganda techniques found on social media

Propaganda technique	Description of how it was used on social media
Name calling/ stereotyping	This was a common notion found with many derogatory names (eg infidel, Kufur) used to create not only hatred but also a separation from the enemy.
Glittering generalities	Positive emotional images such as brotherhood of jihad and heroism of martyrdom were common, with a just fight to free the oppressed worldwide Ummah was most significant.
Transfer	Emphasis on justice and helping the helpless was commonly used in grievance discourses.
Testimonial	Words of well known leaders such as bin laden and Al-Awlaki coupled more recently with sentiments by Musa Cerantonio (Carter, Maher, & Neumann, 2014) were found on many social media posts. In addition, words of martyrs were held in esteem.
Plain folks	Stories outlining those who had joined the cause and came from ordinary lives was used as a recruiting tool.
Card stacking	Discourses only focussed on the positive aspects of jihad. While not ignoring hardships, these were reframed as a positive part of the journey.
Band wagon	This was not a common technique until the formation of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. The success of this group was a key factor in motivating others.
Selection/ multiple standards	Evidence showed a key focus on grievances and actions against muslims with no or very little mention of internal conflicts among muslim groups.
Repetition	As one of the most fundamental techniques of propaganda, discourses were continually repeated and recirculated. In addition, parallel or similar discourses were also continually being created and circulated.
Assertion	Emphasis on emotive aspects was found not only in discourses but also in the visual images.
Appeal to authority	Religious justifications from the Qur'an, Hadith and religious scholars were fundamental in all key arguments relating to jihad and martyrdom.
Overt lies	Evidence indicated that overt lies were only used in terms of the realism of goals such as the statement or an image that shows the black flag flying over the White House.
Asymmetrical definition	The most significant asymmetrical definition found was that of terrorism. Extremists reframed this definition to capture the actions of Western powers.

NLP tools

Prior to outlining key tools it is important to note that while traditional NLP often uses physical triggers that are linked to change, non physical triggers such as imagery, words smell etc can also be used (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). This was found to be the case with the NLP strategies used online. Moreover, NLP strategies have been found to have the potential to create transformative learning and change in individuals (Tosey, Mathison & Michelli, 2005).

Use of anchoring

Anchoring is all about associations and creating these strong associations using triggers. Triggers can be physical or can be certain images or keywords. Using social media, physical triggers are not practical so image and verbal triggers were the key triggers used to reinforce a particular state. These are termed 'internal anchors' (Dilts & DeLozier, 2000). Table 3 outlines two key examples of internal anchoring.

Table 3 - Achieving state change and establishing triggers through anchoring

Concept	Internal triggers	Achieving state change
Martyrdom	**Keywords/imagery -** blood, martyr, death, Also sense of smell	Recruits have their focus directed to the blood of martyrs and how precious it is. A sense of great significance is attached to the blood of martyrs as well as rewards and of course great esteem among other radical Muslims. Smell is also embedded with the blood of martyrs likened to a sweet musk smell.
Jihad	**Sounds** - chants played consistently on videos **Keywords/imagery -** warrior, hero, mujahideen	Recruits are taken to key video's where they can picture themselves as warriors for the cause of Allah. Heroism and strength is portrayed as recruits immerse themselves in this state which is then reinforced through sound.

Table 3 illustrates just how powerful social media was in helping to create state change as well as establishing triggers. Every time a person plays an IS video with their chants, the sound triggers and reinforces that state change of the warrior hero. Over time these triggers get stronger and a state change is achieved as evidenced by observations of increasing radicalisation in individuals with links to such videos. This multisensory approach is critical given marketing research using NLP found that individuals only responded to messages delivered via their prefered sensory perception using their own language and filtered out non relatable messages as noise (Mainwaring & Skinner, 2009).

Use of future pacing

Future pacing was an observation made after watching the interactions of recruiters with not only those who showed an interest in radical Islam but also those who showed dissent toward government. Radicals seemed skilled at identifying individuals which were best to target. One of the core criteria for selection seemed to be identification with grievances of Islam. This may not have been their original form of grievance but often became a primary and linked sense of grievance.
Future pacing is a strategy where the end product or goal is continually placed in front on an individual in order to direct their focus and attention. In fact, recruiters were quite explicit in their future pacing drawing on discourses of jihad and martyrdom as an effective tool to achieve their goals:

After engaging potential recruits with their grievances as well as grievances of Islam, extremists sought to redirect individuals by using future pacing of key Islamic discourses. Although this was expected to disengage individuals, surprisingly enough of a relationship was built in many cases to sustain a connection. In addition, recruiters continued to show empathy towards the dissent of potential recruits.

Use of association/dissociation

Association is similar to anchoring and is designed to create strong associations with new mental frameworks. A number of emotive triggers were found to be associated with discourses of radical Islam, namely grievance, jihad and martyrdom. These emotive triggers included a sense of disatisfaction with their current situation, a positive sense of purpose and significance. Encouragement was given to strongly associate with the key discourses using these affective triggers. Research by Sharif, Rohazaand and Aziz (2015) found that NLP strategies could be used to enhance motivation of at risk students. Although this research was conducted in an educational setting it does support the potential use of NLP to enhance motivation.

It stands to reason that association is only half the process. Not only is it important to associate towards new states and mental frameworks but to also dissociate with current ones. Dissociation also involves taking a change of perspective and moving attention away from current issues. Observations suggested that dissociation was

achieved by highlighting the ills of Western society and culture. Furthermore, the West was constructed as the cause of Islamic grievances as well as personal grievances.

Symbiosis of Propaganda and NLP Strategies

As outlined, the two tools are powerful techniques in their own right used to create change in emotions and cognitive frameworks. What is especially concerning is the fact that these two tools work together in a symbiotic way complementing and strengthening each other. In order to understand this symbiotic relationships there is a need to understand the mechanisms at work.
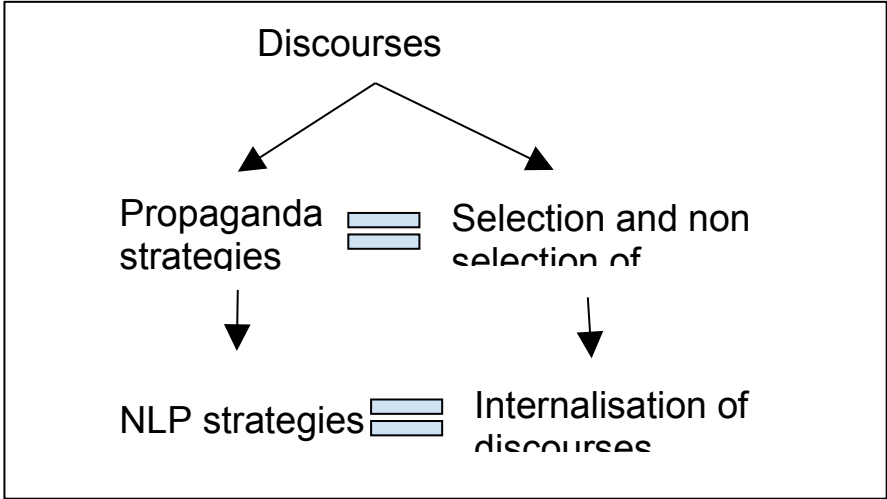

Figure 1 - Symbiosis of Propaganda and NLP strategies through flow of discourses

Firstly, both strategies are linguistic based techniques. In other words, both utilise strongly the discourses used to frame radical and extremist Islam. These discourses are critical for reframing belief systems and ultimately actions. NLP strategies are effective tools for leaders to guide and most importantly build and maintain relationships (Joey & Yazdanifard, 2015). In particular, NLP strategies are effective for building trust and loyalty (Joey & Yazdanifard, 2015).

Secondly, propaganda aims to strengthen existing radical ideas as well as taking them further through careful selection of discursive elements and key omissions of competing elements. Comparatively, NLP techniques aim to embed these discourses to create change by targeting cognitive and affective dimensions. In fact, NLP is used to help internalisation of learning as well as develop the overall human resources of organisations (Kong, 2012). This is precisely what terrorist organisations aim to do enhance their human resources through adherence to an ideology. Here is where the true symbiosis lies. Propaganda tools involve the careful construction, selection and non selection of discourses which are then internalised using the various NLP strategies. This concept is highlighted in Figure 1 which shows the flow of discourse through selection and then internalisation.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Prior to outlining the implications, it is important to make clear that the findings of this paper are innovative and new and further research is needed for peer comparison. Furthermore, strategies used by terrorist groups are continually evolving and being refined. Other researchers have primarily focused on the stages of radicalisation (e.g. Borum, 2011; Helfstein, 2012; Moghaddam, 2005; Schmid, 2013) or causes of radicalisation (e.g. Veldhuis & Staun, 2009) rather than the strategies used by recruiters.

Understanding the mechanisms used by terrorist groups such as Islamic State has important implications for helping to tackle youth radicalisation. Most significant is that it gives Islamic Youth Leaders and mentors a better understanding of how youth are targeted end enables explicit explanations and challenging of techniques used. In addition, it also gives intelligence agencies and law enforcement some direction in spotting both recruiters and those being targeted. This is particularly important for early intervention which will give the greatest chance of deradicalisation.

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