

## *Transdisciplinary Approaches to the Discourse of Islamist Extremism*

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### **By way of background**

Agreeing with Allan Luke (2002: 101), we feel that doing textual analysis, no matter how comprehensive, “requires the overlay of a social theoretic discourse for explaining and explicating the social contexts, concomitants, contingencies and consequences of any given text or discourse”. This is the spirit of a very much-cited paper by Fairclough and Wodak (1997), where these two critical discourse analysts claim that discourse cannot be conceived of without taking into consideration its situated use and its relation with other discourses. Let us explore, then, the “social contexts”, or background, of this Special Issue.

*The 2015 Global Terrorism Index Report* lists the most relevant triggers of the increased radicalisation, the growth of terrorist extremist groups and the rise in deaths due to terror attacks following 9/11.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, mention must be made of the subsequent expansion of Islamophobia, the never-ending crisis in Palestine, the overthrowing of established Arab regimes, the Syrian civil war and the Western nations’ foreign policy. On the other hand, there seem to stand out certain issues of more individual nature concerning, for example, people’s citizenship, identity, ideology and religion, plus other recurrent motivations in an era of global crisis, such as social maladjustment, unemployment, lack of empathy, or the generation of a group dynamics resting upon (and conducive to) a distinct culture of togetherness (Spiller 2005). To perhaps general surprise, this official account clarifies that the highest numbers of fatalities caused by radical Islamic terrorism currently occur in places such as Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Nigeria, Pakistan and, certainly, Syria. Furthermore, it explains that disaffection, along with uprootedness, are some of the reasons why converts (especially, women), and young third-generation Muslims in the UK, France or Belgium, have felt the urge to combat the *kufir* (or disbelievers), either by becoming fighters in the

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<sup>1</sup> See <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2015.pdf>.

battleground of the self-proclaimed Islamic State (see Al-Dayel & Anfinson 2018), or by committing suicide bombings in Europe (see McCauley & Moskalenko 2014).

Back in 1998, Osama bin Laden asked his supporters to “kill the Americans and their allies, civilians and military”, by any means and on wherever territory possible, in order to free Muslims from their grip (Goldberg 2000). Later on, the world could witness how *this jihad* started creating a very powerful international financial network, detonated bombs in various places (as we all very well know), and learnt to hit the keyboard to incite their followers to commit acts of terrorism.

Rediker (2015: 322-324) states that, in the European Union, there is some uncertainty about, and disagreement on, how to define terrorism. There is also some debate over what is meant by free speech and incitement to terror attacks; and, consequently, over how to legally typify both incitement to, and glorification of, terrorism. In actual fact, this controversy is even more difficult to deal with when it comes to the Internet (the “turbocharger of radicalisation”).<sup>2</sup> This is seen as a means of communication reaching a growing audience world-wide, where the divide between public and private speech may be unclear, and, therefore, it may not be easy to distinguish the three key components of terrorism, namely, (1) causality, (2) the intention to cause damage and (3) the likelihood of violence. One well-known cyber-jihadist who mastered all the Internet features is Younis Tsouli; he was aware of the importance of this medium for the success of the cause, and created dozens of on-line forums to distribute propaganda and promote acts of violence.<sup>3</sup> It is precisely the 2012 report by the UN Office on Drugs and Crime that focuses on these newer uses of the Internet for terrorist purposes, and prominently identifies the consequences of promoting extremist rhetoric for recruitment and radicalisation.<sup>4</sup> Understanding this is paramount to properly grasping the timeliness of the Special Issue we are introducing here.

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<sup>2</sup> See

[https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004\\_2009/documents/dv/sede090209wsstudy\\_/SEDE090209wsstudy\\_en.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2004_2009/documents/dv/sede090209wsstudy_/SEDE090209wsstudy_en.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> See [https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/PREVENT-case-study-Younes\\_Tsouli.pdf](https://www.middlesbrough.gov.uk/sites/default/files/PREVENT-case-study-Younes_Tsouli.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> See

[https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes/ebook\\_use\\_of\\_the\\_internet\\_for\\_terrorist\\_purposes.pdf](https://www.unodc.org/documents/terrorism/Publications/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes/ebook_use_of_the_internet_for_terrorist_purposes.pdf)

## **The rationale behind this Special Issue**

This Special Issue of *Pragmatics and Society* is born out of a collective effort to carry out a data-driven analysis of a particularly persuasive genre, such as jihadist propaganda, along with other text types generated in the context of extremist radicalisation. Thus, it revolves around one very particular expression of the discourse of terror, and delves into how this is being disseminated in various contexts, such as the school, the gym, the Mosque, and, specifically, the social media as a frame preserving anonymity and promoting immediacy. It is well known that radical propaganda is spread through, websites, blogs and chats (Sageman 2004; Torres Soriano 2009; Torres Roselló 2015; Benigni et al. 2017). Thanks to the Internet, an enormous number of followers can attack their ‘ancestral’ adversary, defend the holy war, honour their martyrs, and attract those who will either themselves commit suicide attacks and/or engage in close personal contact with (e.g. by marrying) whoever will commit such violent acts eventually. In this context, language proves to be a very powerful tool for humans for convincing others to act (or not to). Thus, language can be helpful to persuade someone to buy a particular set of beliefs, and to formulate their own identity, while shaping others' through all sorts of more or less effective content, formulas and tactics. In this way, anyone may become a social actor through what they say, as well as through how they actually say it. In keeping with this view, we understand that it is very important to observe both how radicals make use of an idiosyncratic discursive style in their attempt to influence the (very often) young people vulnerable to violent extremism, and how radicalised discourses can be employed in order to successfully build up extremist groups' conceptions of the world, both online and offline. The narratives shared on the Internet show a high degree of persuasiveness by drawing mainly on ethical evaluation and emotional reactions. The latter can be powerful enough to attract a disaffected (transnational) population ready to face unfairness with any resource at their disposal.

In the face of this, some institutions strive to create intervention programmes based on a continued commitment from relevant communities; here, the ultimate goal is to generate a real feeling of belonging among adolescents at risk of exclusion (and, therefore, potentially radicalisable); for this purpose, social-communicative skills are stimulated to help to establish new social ties and promote religious re-education. The role of UNESCO is fundamental in this respect; as reflected in recent reports, Tanya

Silverman, the coordinator of the *AVE (Against Violent Extremism)* Network, indicates that youngsters who have survived radicalisation can do much (for example, through the *Extreme Dialogue Program*) within the framework of their school so as to prevent its expansion.<sup>5</sup>

On the other hand, there are governmental prevention policies designed to understand the global phenomenon of fundamentalist propaganda and, subsequently, implement effective disaffection programmes. For instance, the *EU Framework of Radicalisation Risk Indicators for Early Prevention* indirectly addresses relevant matters (such as how to identify the discursive profile of extremism) by dissecting the index of its textual footprint.<sup>6</sup> The latter is precisely one of the concerns of the present collection of papers.

As mentioned above, this Special Issue mainly examines the central features of radicalised and extremist discourse, while simultaneously trying to comprehend its dominant narrative of conflict, hatred and disinformation in the very era of post-truth politics. The premises on which this effort is based are the following:

- (1) The communication between radicals and an essentially heterogeneous population starts on the Internet, either in blogs, chats, Twitter, Facebook or propaganda web pages – all of which play a significant role in the dissemination of radical messages (Al Raffie 2012). (
- 2) The social media create the illusion that each interlocutor is treated as an individual and, as a consequence, it is much easier for each of them to self-identify with the belief systems of extremism.
- (3) In communicative interaction, interlocutors are endowed with certain traits that define them in contrast to everybody else and, at the same time, help to single out the speech community to which they belong.
- (4) Once a list of such characteristics is established in a corpus of radical texts, the profiles of those who generate these texts (or, rather, their specific functions) and of those who will consume them will be easier to detect.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.isdglobal.org/against-violent-extremism-ave/>

<sup>6</sup> See [https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/framework-radicalisation-risk-indicators-early-prevention\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/networks/radicalisation-awareness-network-ran/collection-inspiring-practices/ran-practices/framework-radicalisation-risk-indicators-early-prevention_en)

## **The aims of this Special Issue in a nutshell**

In the last decades, scholarly research has dug deeply into some questions raised by the very topic of this Special Issue (and of others, more or less directly related to it); yet, their individual lenses may look less holistic than one would like to see. Reasonably enough, authorship attribution analysis (Abbasi & Chen 2005; Argamon, Šarić & Stein 2003; Corney 2003) has an impact on the field. Likewise, of similar importance are their conclusions with regard to differential behavioural patterns (in general) and communicative style (in particular) of jihadists and jihadism (Brookes & McEnery 2020; Brynielsson et al. 2013; Cohen et al. 2014; Forsythand & Martell 2007; Foy 2015; McCauley & Moskalenko 2014; Prentice, Rayson & Taylor 2012; Ramsay & Marsden 2013; Rogers 2003; Vergani & Bliuc 2015). Other relevant academic contributions deserving to be kept in mind are aimed at deconstructing terrorist discourse (Braddock & Horgan 2016; Eroukhmanoff 2015; Neumann 2013); designing computer software to counteract online terrorism (Kumar & Singh 2013; Miravitllas 2015; Qureshi, Memon & Wiil 2010; Zolfaghar, Barfar & Mohammadi 2009; Weimann & Knop 2008); detecting terrorist recruitment and identifying membership in radical groups (Eiselt & Bhadury 2015; Scanlon & Gerber 2014); or applying data mining for Internet surveillance (Ali, Mohammed & Rajamani 2014; Wadhwa & Bhatia 2013).

Having said this, in our view, a contribution like the present collection of papers is more than necessary at this moment, especially because of its inter- and transdisciplinarity both in method and in theory. As it happens, the present issue represents a truly multidisciplinary joint effort at a thorough investigation of Islamist extremism. Its object of research is twofold: Whilst the authors try to understand the causal factors of radicalisation, they engage in the analysis of how the discourse of terror is articulated against different backgrounds and in various types of text (either mono- or multimodal). Thus, attention is paid to the strategies used for recruiting, indoctrinating and instructing a potentially global audience following all sorts of ISIS propaganda online.

The articles selected here exhibit a scientific investigation reflecting on, and an understanding of, some intimately interconnected key aspects. Political communication theorises how radicalised jihadists can resort to a myriad of strategies to spread their own agendas, so that they can indoctrinate people into violence. The socio-psychological model of needs, networks and narratives serves quite well to explain the dissemination of radicalisation, especially in European urban areas. In the field of

discourse studies, the analyses of metaphor, of lexical priming, of legitimation strategies, and of transitivity, along with appraisal theory, have proven that it is possible to efficiently scrutinise how the Quran and propagandist materials use the same concepts and discursive strategies (albeit with very different objectives), and how extremists' portrayals of the enemy (both Christians and so-called 'vanilla Muslims') as monstrous entities contrast with their own self-presentation of the good Muslims (male or female) as victims and heroes. Additionally, machine learning theory can employ the data derived from the analyses above, in combination with other resources like propaganda videos, to produce (semi)supervised algorithms that can assist the detection of extremist-related profiles in the social media (from unaffiliated sympathisers, through propagandists and recruiters, to fighters in the battlefield), as well as help to identify the goals terrorist organisations try to achieve.

Summing up, in this Special Issue, a collaboration between experts in psychology, political science, critical discourse analysis, corpus linguistics and artificial intelligence has facilitated the effectuating of a challenging initiative that happens to be supported by the Spanish Police Forces and is facilitated by the FEDER-Funded Research Projects "Radicalised Discourses in the Social Media 1" (ref. A-HUM-250-UGR18), "Radicalised Discourses in the Social Media 2" (ref. P18-FR-5020) and "Nutcracker: System for Detection, Monitoring and Analysis of Terrorist Discourse on the Net" (ref. FFI2016-79748-R). As such, this Special Issue represents a synergy of approaches to a current social phenomenon transcending national borders – a movement that, being construed and enhanced by a persuasive style of communication in the service of a dangerous trend, needs to be closely looked into.

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