

Understanding Extremists' Use of Narrative to Influence Contest Populations

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One of the research questions for the *Mapping Ideas* workshop asks how we identify the networks of social/radical groups and how their networks change over time. For the past two years I and members of my research group have been addressing this question, albeit from a somewhat different perspective than envisioned in the research question. For us, the question is how to identify the networks of ideas of Islamist extremist groups, specifically with respect to the stories they tell.

Stories are powerful rhetorical devices and they play a key role in the strategic communication of terrorist and other extremist groups, persuading contested populations to tolerate or support/join them. They do this, in part, by drawing upon deeply embedded cultural narratives to frame local events in a way that appeals to the emotions and values of target audiences (Fisher, 1987), encouraging individuals to align their personal narratives in a way that suits the strategic interests of the extremist groups (Betz, 2008). Unpacking this process relies on existing theories of narrative, yet this body of literature is poorly organized, characterized by inconsistent and contradictory use of concepts, and uses methods that are poorly suited to a general understanding of extremists' use of narrative.

To address this problem, we begin by distinguishing story from narrative (terms that are often used interchangeably). A *story* is a sequence of events, involving actors and actions, grounded in desire (often stemming from conflict) and leading to an actual or projected resolution of that desire. Though some stories are unique, they more typically follow *story forms*, standard patterns on which stories may be based, defining typical actors, actions, and sequences. Often, story forms also employ *archetypes*, standard characters in stories with known motives and expected behaviors in particular situations.

A *narrative* is a *system of stories* that share themes, forms, and archetypes. Every story in a narrative need not have exactly the same characteristics; the point is that they relate to one another in a way that creates a unified whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. Some narratives, whose stories are widely known in a culture and consistently retold over time, rise to the level of *master narratives* (Halverson, Goodall, and Corman, 2011). They are so deeply engrained that they can be invoked by words and phrases without telling the actual stories that make them up. In extremist rhetoric, Muslim master narratives are used strategically as templates for interpreting local events in their terms.

Reliable methods for identifying these different narrative elements are key to understanding the narrative landscape of Islamist (and other kinds of) extremists. However methods of narrative analysis in the humanities are ideographic in character, focusing on "deep"

reading and interpretation of single or small groups of texts by lone analysts. This is not suitable for analyzing and tracking the large number of extremist texts that are produced and disseminated widely using new media.

A solution is to analyze texts using natural language processing, representing them in an abstract form that can be used to identify narrative elements and structures and track these over sources, time, and space. Stories can be decomposed into events, which in turn can be identified by their semantic structures (Franzosi, 2004). So rendered, stories can be represented as networks of generalized concepts and actions. Accordingly, similarities between stories can be discovered despite differences in their surface details, identifying clusters that represent narratives with particular story forms and archetypes.

The methods just described afford a number of capabilities that existing methods of narrative analysis do not. First, it is possible to objectively link particular statements by extremist groups to known narratives, and detect the emergence of new narratives. This is crucial for understanding how efforts should be mounted to counter extremist rhetoric. Second, because the statements have geo-spatial origins and frequently mention particular places, their movement across time and space can be tracked and predicted, and their changing spatial foci can be understood. Third, returning to the question posed at the beginning, since the stories can be sourced, changing ideological linkages between extremist groups can be identified and understood. This is important for identifying threats posed by rhetoric that diffuses from one region to another, and for understanding how extremist ideology is evolving across geographic regions.

A few challenges face implementation of the methods just described. First, given the complexities of language, better methods are needed to identify stories in extremist texts and to analyze these semantically. There is also the challenge of implementing a scheme like this in multiple languages. Second, methods are needed to generalize the semantic content of extremist stories beyond surface details in the stories. How do we recognize that a story about a suicide bombing that kills Americans in Mosul is similar to one about an ambush that kills German troops in Kandahar? Third, how do we geo-locate the statements of secretive groups who distribute texts over the Internet?

References

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