Prediction model of propaganda characteristics used by the main jihadist groups

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Abstract
Purpose – Jihadist terrorism is one of the most important current global issues. Terrorism is an instrument of fear and fear an instrument of news. The purpose of this paper is to understand the difference in propaganda between the most powerful terrorist groups and the association with the Islamic State group (ISIS).
Design/methodology/approach – This cross-sectional study has been carried out on the usage of propagandistic material. For the analyses, two different groups have been created, propaganda emitted from the Islamic State group and propaganda from the other main terrorist groups (Boko Haram, Taliban, Al-Qaeda).
Findings – It has been proved that there are significant differences between the Islamic State propaganda and the other main groups.
Originality/value – This study has been conducted in order to provide a comparison of the propaganda content of the main jihadist groups.
Keywords Terrorism, Crime, Propaganda, Mass media, Islamic State, Jihadism
Paper type Research paper

Introduction
In war, propaganda is a powerful additional weapon. It is the main instrument used to legitimize violence, generate chaos, influence a population and many times, not only to gain the people’s consent, but also their participation in the struggle. In addition to the effects of propaganda, the constant use of spreading fear becomes part of daily life and of how we perceive and talk about it (Altheide, 2006). Throughout history, propaganda has been one of the great catalysts of diverse movements and has transformed consciousness and changed attitudes. It creates an intentional butterfly effect due to the fact that a small group of people can influence a large population. Undoubtedly, propaganda is one of the best tools of communication, but in most cases, is used for inhuman purposes. This instrument has the power to change attitudes, behaviors and thoughts.

The purpose of terrorism is to intimidate a wider audience by harming only a few (Bartlett and Fisher, 2015; Crenshaw, 2000). But, the most extraordinary fact is that it is of no importance where terrorist organization kills people because the attack can garner publicity from around the world (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2017). The relationship between terrorists and the media can be described as symbiotic (Rohner and Frey, 2007), terrorists promote a sense of disorder and a belief that things are out of control and the mass media gains audience through sensationalism.

The public gravitates toward violence not only because of its impressive nature, but also out of a morbid interest in the images and stories offered by the media. The matter of how violence provokes fear continues to occupy center stage in our understanding of individual behavior (Ruddock, 2011). The major impact of the discourse of fear is the pervasive communication and expectation that danger and risk are a central feature that people define and experience in everyday life (Altheide, 2006). Research has demonstrated a link between media coverage of terrorism and the intensity of the terrorist threats perceived by the public (Corcoba and Jafet Martinez Portilla, 2018).
events and the formation of traumatic reactions from those who view them (Kratcoski, 2001). However, the most extraordinary fact is that anyone can be a jihadist from behind the scenes, contributing to the effort be being involved in propaganda or even cyber-attacks (Bartlett, 2015).

It is more attractive for the public eye to witness violence than to observe peace. The tactical usage of publicity can turn terrorism into a powerful weapon. The internet has in fact developed into a tool for terrorism-related recruitment, propaganda and financing, as well as a catalyst for radicalisation (Bebe, 2015). It is important to highlight that the dimensions that articulate the construction and the experience of emotions are the modality of the scenes, the classification of the same, the legitimation or de-legitimation of the acts and the identification or de-identification with the personages (Fernández et al., 2011). This dimension based the construction of the variables of the video. All these elements produce a significant difference between the degree of professionalism with which terrorist organizations handle the instrument of publicity.

When speaking of Jihadism and especially of jihadist propaganda, it cannot be confined to a single sector. Religion and politics are the communicative tools that give meaning and logic to seemingly more irrational actions and provide a set of beliefs that guide and justify a doctrine of behavior. Political demands or claims are the main axis of the terrorist movement, but also where they justify attacks as obligations imposed by a superior entity and not in the mode of political revolution. People desire to act in accordance with our beliefs and in this sense, jihadist are no different (Gómez et al., 2016).

Over the last few years, it has been possible to observe the impact of many different jihadist groups and their growth according to the number of incidents and deaths provoked. The Institute for Economics and Peace (2017), pointed out that the principal jihadist group is the Islamic State, followed by Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda.

During the year 2016, the percentage of deaths attributed to ISIS increased dramatically, with a total of 9,132 victims and 1,1132 incidents. The number of deaths effectuated by the other main groups is high, but clearly the gap between the number of deaths provoked by ISIS when compared to the other groups is very wide. In 2016, Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda reduced their numbers of fatalities with respect to the previous year. The results show that in the recent years a difference has grown between ISIS and the rest of the main terrorist groups.

Also, the number of countries affected by the ISIS attacks is much higher. According to the Institute for Economics and Peace (2017), the Islamic State carried out attacks in 15 countries, being the only one which committed attacks in European countries in 2016.

In this context, this study aims to understand the association of propaganda characteristics between the most powerful terrorist groups and the Islamic State group. We have established a difference between ISIS and the grouping of the other associations including Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda due to the special relevance that ISIS has acquired in the last years focusing on the most relevant features that make the Islamic State group’s procedure unique.

In this context, this study aims to understand the association of propaganda characteristics between the most powerful terrorist groups and the Islamic State group, focusing on the most relevant features that make the Islamic State group’s procedure unique.

Methods

Sample

This cross-sectional, observational, and analytical study has been carried out on the usage of propagandistic material issued on the internet from the main terrorist groups from 2012 to 2017. A sample of 50 videos from Islamic State group and 50 videos from “other main groups” was analyzed for this study.

According to Institute for Economics and Peace (2016), the following are the main Jihadist groups that have released propaganda: the Islamic State, Boko Haram, Al-Qaeda and the Taliban.
These listed above met the following criteria: video propaganda, issued after 2012, adequately visible and audible, and issued in English, Spanish or Arabic.

These propaganda classifications were researched and equally divided between the Islamic State groups as well as others, within the category “other groups” Al-Qaeda, Boko Haram, propaganda and Taliban groups were included.

It has been decided to separate ISIS from the other main groups and to create two different variables as a consequence of the enormous relative impact that ISIS has created in the last several years. Furthermore, the quantity of ISIS video propaganda emitted, following the criteria mentioned during the period selected, is higher than the combined video releases broadcasted by Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in the same period.

**Materials**

For the analysis of the characteristics of the videos, a questionnaire was created based on a previous questionnaire created by Torres (2009) for the analysis of Al-Qaeda propaganda. This questionnaire was created to analyze different types of media such as videos, letters, and audio recordings among others. This study has chosen to analyze video communications exclusively and for this reason it has been considered to modify and adapt the questionnaire. The variables included in the general characteristics of the video and in the main category reference were based on the questionnaire created by Torres. The specific features of the video releases were arbitrary selected to explore the video characteristics.

**Procedure**

The research was carried out via the search engine Google by reason of it being the main internet research tool used by citizens around the world. The objective consists of simulating the research process that everyone can perform on the internet by searching for key words. The key words “propaganda,” “comunicados,” “video,” “video message,” “last video message” and “jihadist propaganda” followed by the name of the group to be analyzed: “Islamic State,” “Daesh,” “ISIS,” “Al-Qaeda,” “Taliban,” and “Boko Haram” have been used for online research. Given the exploratory nature of the study, it was not possible to estimate a study sample size. In an arbitrary manner, the researchers decided to include a minimum of 50 video messages from the Islamic State Jihadist groups and 50 from the other main terrorist groups, with a total of 100 video releases assessed.

The following information was extracted from the propaganda: Jihadist groups propaganda, which can be divided between ISIS and the other main groups; diffusion method, which refers to the type of internet resource that broadcasts the video; recipients gender, if the video is specifically destined for males or females, if the communicate makes not reference to the gender, it has been classified as non-specific; recipient’s age, which is included if the video communicate is destined to a specific age group, if the media does not directly mention an age group, it has been assumed that the age-range is non-specific; integrity of the statement, it classifies the video; language of propaganda, classify the language between Arabic, English, Arabic with subtitles or other; main references of the category of the release, selected if the video refers to threat attacks, mentions a jihad, execution of hostages, capture of hostages, mobilization of mujahidin, denial of attack, claim of attack, military training or other; duration, being the length of the video; canticles or music, which refers to the presence of musical elements; appearance of weapons, identification of armament material although it has not been used; outdoor images, referring to videos recording outside; color images as it makes a difference whether images are in color or in black and white; special effects, include videos edits; deaths, presence of deceased people in the video release.

**Statistical analyses**

The variables were analyzed according to general content characteristics and video characteristics. Quantitative variables were assessed using the Mann-Whitney test for continues variables with non-normal distribution whereas normally distributed variables were
compared using t-test and expressed as mean and standard deviation (SD) median and interquartile range was used for the description of these variables. Non-normal qualitative variables were compared using X2 and Fisher’s exact test and expressed as frequencies and percentages. Data were analyses using STATA for Mac, v.15 (College Station, Texas).

Results

In all, 50 different types of video communications from the Islamic State Jihadist group and 50 from the variable “other jihadist group,” which include Boko Haram, the Taliban and Al-Qaeda, were analyzed with a total of one hundred videos. Within the typical characteristics of the reviewed propaganda, significant differences in the integrity of the communication were found for between Islamic State and “other groups” (Table I). The data illustrate that most of the videos emitted by ISIS (90 percent) were found in a complete state. However, a significant number of videos created by the other groups only were found in a fragmented state (66 percent). In the rest of the general characteristics analyzed no significant references were found.

Within the reference category of the video message, the execution of hostages and the committing of attacks was significantly higher in Islamic State than in the reports of other terrorist groups 24 percent ($p = 0.012$) and 34 percent ($p = 0.019$). No significant differences were found in the remaining characteristics (Table II). The categories including “capture of hostages,”

| Table I  | General characteristics from the study groups |
|---------|---------------------------------------------|
| Characteristics | Islamic State ($n = 50$) | Other groups ($n = 50$) | p-value* |
| Method of diffusion | Web 38 (76) | 36 (72) | 0.579 |
| | TV channel on internet 0 | 1 (2) | |
| | Newspaper on internet 12 (24) | 13 (26) | |
| Gender | Not specified 50 (100) | 48 (96) | 0.360 |
| | Not specified 50 (100) | 48 (96) | 0.153 |
| Integrity of the statement | Full 45 (90) | 33 (66) | 0.015 |
| | Fragment 4 (8) | 14 (28) | |
| Language | Arabic 44 (88) | 39 (80) | 0.146 |
| | English 5 (12) | 6 (12) | |
| | Arabic with English subtitles 0 | 4 (8) | |
| | Others 1 (2) | 0 | |

Note: *p-value calculated by X2, Fisher’s exact test or Mann-Whitney U

| Table II | Main reference category for the release |
|---------|---------------------------------------|
| Characteristics | Islamic State ($n = 50$) | Other groups ($n = 50$) | p-value* |
| Threat of attacks | 0 | 1 (2) | 1 |
| Mention of jihad | 18 (36) | 21 (42) | 0.539 |
| Execution of hostages | 12 (24) | 3 (6) | 0.012 |
| Capture of hostages | 0 | 4 (8) | 0.117 |
| Mobilization of mujahideen | 0 | 1 (2) | 1 |
| Denial of attack | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Claim of the attack | 0 | 3 (6) | 0.242 |
| Commission of attack | 17 (34) | 7 (14) | 0.019 |
| Military training | 2 (4) | 4 (8) | 0.678 |
| Others | 1 (2) | 6 (12) | 0.112 |

Note: *p-value calculated by X2, Fisher’s exact test or Mann-Whitney U
“mobilization of mujahideen” and “claim of the attack” were only found in the other groups. When observing the characteristics of the videos, the variables “mention of jihad” (36 percent), “commission of attack” (34 percent) and “execution of hostages” (24 percent) show up as a higher percentage when compared to the other characteristics.

Video analysis according to both groups showed a higher prevalence of songs and music 94 percent \( (p = < 0.001) \), weapons 100 percent \( (p = 0.012) \), outdoors 98 percent \( (p = 0.002) \), military clothes 100 percent \( (p = < 0.001) \), special effects 98 percent \( (p = 0.08) \) and deaths 72 percent \( (p = < 0.001) \) for the Islamic State group. The categories “video duration” and “color images” were not statistically significant (Table III).

**Discussion**

Many terrorists perpetrate violent acts to gain publicity for their causes, this publicity helps these organizations advertise their strength and recruit sympathetic individuals who share their grievances (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2017). The most notable finding in our research is the mastery with which the Islamic State uses propaganda and how this group includes many more different elements than the other groups. For this reason, the identification of the main elements of the Islamic State propaganda and the observation of the differences between the other media released from other terrorist groups will allow a more detailed and specific analysis of the characteristic elements and an overview of how it can influence the audience.

Violent images impact viewers, and these can be perceived as real or fictitious. Manstead et al. (1995), argue that violence perceived as real generates more fear than if it were thought to be fictitious. Several studies suggest that a violent media attitude is more exciting and therefore more pervasive than a nonviolent attitude. The emphasis on violence and conflict leaves the disquieting impression that turmoil exists everywhere (Kappeler and Potter, 2017). There is evidence that exposure to both real and media violence increases aggressive and antisocial behavior (Fowler et al., 2009). Violent images perceived as real can cause fear, sadness, and helplessness and people respond with more empathy when they know they are seeing scenes of actual violence with real people being harmed compared to when they are watching fictional scenes (Ramos et al., 2013). Violence stimulates aggressive behavior through the same social-cognitive and behavioral mechanisms (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

In our case of study, it has been observed that ISIS propaganda contains a higher number of weapons, military clothing, outdoor images, special effects, music and deaths than the rest of the groups. The Islamic State uses real violence in its media where there is presence of weapons, military clothes and deaths, as well as fictional part which includes special effects. Furthermore, the presence of music as a propagandistic element is another special technique that can enhance the effectiveness of a message (Lee Plaisance, 2005). The songs themselves function as propaganda by propagating a particular belief or mindset (Oettinger, 2017). The combination of all these elements works to produce fear and attraction at the same time and heighten the viewer’s sensitivity.

| Characteristics         | Islamic State \( n = 50 \) | Other groups \( n = 50 \) | \( p \)-value* |
|-------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------------------|---------------|
| Duration, minutes (IQR) | 14.9 (1-9)                  | 12.5 (2-14)               | 0.3359        |
| Canticle or music, \( n \) (%) | 47 (94) | 24 (48) | < 0.001 |
| Weapons, \( n \) (%)     | 50 (100)                    | 43 (86)                   | 0.012         |
| Outdoors images, \( n \) (%) | 49 (98) | 38 (76) | 0.002 |
| Military clothes, \( n \) (%) | 50 (100) | 37 (74) | < 0.001 |
| Color images, \( n \) (%) | 50 (100) | 47 (94) | 0.242 |
| Special effects, \( n \) (%) | 49 (98) | 40 (80) | 0.008 |
| Deaths, \( n \) (%)      | 36 (72)                     | 6 (12)                    | < 0.001       |

**Note:** *\( p \)-value calculated by X2, Fisher’s exact test or Mann-Whitney U
These types of images transmit instrumental violence which is used to achieve another objective. Sensationalism attracts audiences and the media is especially vulnerable to manipulations by terrorist who are willing to use violence in their efforts to publicize their causes (Biernatzki, 2002; Kappeler and Potter, 2017). In our analysis, the most prevalent methods of propaganda used by the Islamic State were found to be the execution of hostages and instructions of attack, which are the most violent categories included in the analysis.

The continued exposure of violent scenes becomes especially relevant as it modifies the emotions. There is ample evidence that violent media can increase aggressive cognitions, aggressive affect and minor aggressive behaviors (Markey et al., 2015). Unz et al. (2008) alluded to the fact that the viewers who are exposed to repeated violent images generate feelings such as anger, sadness and disgust in comparison to those who avoid seeing violent images. The effect of violent content in the Islamic State propaganda as a common instrument can create desensitization and normalization of violent images for its viewers. People who see these types of images begin to view them as a normal element which legitimizes their acts. To see the execution of hostages or commission of attacks is a normal action for the Islamic State viewer.

Viewers can accept or even enjoy the violence presented. Furthermore, they can begin to consider what they see as nonviolent when they consider it to be legitimate. In these cases, it is common to legitimize the violence through the use of argument. It is the primary mechanism by which societal conflict is represented in the discursive realm (Buttny and Ellis, 2007).

The realization of terrorism cannot be measured only by their propagandistic releases, however, they are indeed one of the main instruments of terrorist activity. The Islamic State appears to be the most violent group because its releases include more specific and forceful characteristics than the rest of the main groups. The results, here, provide a baseline to see potential variations in the attitudes, method and targets of these groups.

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Further reading

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Appendix

Propaganda characteristics

Identificatory: _______.

Terrorist group:

Type of propaganda: Video

Year: ________

Method of diffusion:

Internet web______, TV on internet______, magazines on internet ________.

Gender of destination:

Male______, Female______, Not specified______

Age group of destination

(<30 years) ________, (≥30 years) ________, not specified ________

Integrity of the release:

Full release: ________, Fragment of release: ________

Main reference category of the release

Threat of attacks: ________, Mention of jihad: ________, Execution of hostages: ________, Capture of hostages: ________, Mobilization of mujahideen: ________, Denial of attack: ________, Claim of attack: ________, Commission of attack: ________, Military training: ________, Others: ________

Language

Arabic: ________, English: ________, Arabic with English subtitles: ________, Others: ________

Videos

Duration (min): ________, Canticles or music (Yes/No): ________, Weapons (Yes/No): ________, Outdoor images (Yes/No): ________, Military clothes (Yes/No): ________, Colour images (Si/No): ________, Special effects (Si/No): ________, Deaths (Si/No): ________.

Link:

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