The Ecology of Extremists’ Communications: Messaging Effectiveness, Social Environments and Individual Attributes

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Much of the research on the strategic communications of extremist groups falls victim to the ‘streetlight effect’, a type of observational bias exemplified in an old joke:

Late at night, a police officer finds a drunk man crawling around on his hands and knees under a streetlight. The drunk man tells the officer he’s looking for his wallet. When the officer asks if he’s sure this is where he dropped the wallet, the man replies that he thinks he more likely dropped it across the street. Then why are you looking over here? the befuddled officer asks. Because the light’s better here, explains the drunk man.¹

Similarly, many prevention and countering of violent extremism (P/CVE) experts focus on the mass online propaganda of extremist groups because that is ‘where the light is’. They have access to the full material, information about when and where it was released and some information about how it spread online. As a result, they tend to assume that analysing this information can provide deep insights about the relationship between messaging and its behavioural effect. However, this assumption is highly dubious.

This article will breakdown this underlying assumption by showing that: mass messaging is rarely effective across fields (such as advertising, political campaigns or extremist groups); certain environmental factors are more conducive than others in spreading extremist beliefs; certain individuals embedded in certain small-group dynamics are the most likely to be persuaded by such messaging; messaging mainly works if it is consistent with people’s already-held beliefs and values; and changing perceptions of social norms, not personal beliefs, can be sufficient to change behaviour.

The Ecology of Extremists’ Communications

Messing Effectiveness, Social Environments and Individual Attributes

Nafees Hamid

Many prevention and countering of violent extremism experts place too much emphasis on the radicalising power of online mass distributed messaging by violent extremist groups. Instead, Nafees Hamid argues that radicalisation takes place in a social ecology within which the messaging of terrorist groups plays only a small role. This article shows that people are resistant to mass persuasion and that certain environments are more conducive to the spread of extremist messaging. Small-group dynamics are useful to explain the spread of ideas and that altering these dynamics can provide a buffer against some ideas while enabling others.


have been studying the efficacy of mass persuasion attempts for some time now. Most recently, Hugo Mercier conducted a review of the literature and found that mass persuasion rarely, if ever, works. In the religious domain, proselytisation by media or preachers in the street is rarely effective; instead, religious conversion is facilitated via close personal relationships (namely, friends or family members). Surprisingly, even mass advertising for commercial products is not very effective when a consumer already has experience with a product. If a consumer is, however, already interested in a product or service but is yet to make a purchase, then advertising efforts are more likely to be successful, such as with teenagers in the 1950s who were interested in smoking but did not know it was an option for them until exposure to television adverts.

More relevantly, even the mass messaging efforts of political campaigns do not seem to work. Robocalls, negative advertisements and online commercials
are all non-predictive of long-term shifts in voter choice. In fact, there has been recent evidence of the ‘backfire effect’ in political campaigning: for instance, it has been reported that before Donald Trump ran for office, the US public was generally in favour of a wall or fence separating the US from Mexico. Once Trump made it a hallmark of his campaign, however, support for this dramatically decreased and only gained strength among those who were already highly in favour of it.

Overall, existing research shows that attempts at mass persuasion are rarely effective

Mass messaging efforts are not new. Research on Nazi propaganda has shown that their anti-Jewish propaganda worked well in areas where anti-Semitism was historically high, but had a negative (or ‘backfire’) effect in areas where it was historically low. Their other propaganda efforts largely failed at influencing Germans, and Ian Kershaw has noted the Party’s failure to instil its beliefs in the wider German population.

Overall, existing research shows that attempts at mass persuasion are rarely effective whether they come from mainstream political groups, extremists, advertisers or religious proselytisers. Instead, it seems that while people rarely change the valence of their ideas, they do change in their extremity and strength. And when beliefs do change, as in religious conversion, they change as a result of trustworthy sources (whose incentives align with the target of the message) and authoritative sources (who have privileged knowledge on a particular subject) who present arguments that appeal to the general beliefs and values of the target. These findings are consistent with the lack of evidence showing that people joined groups like the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) or Al-Qaeda just by consuming their magazines and videos alone.

In most studied cases, there was considerable person-to-person interaction, whether online or offline. Radicalisation has largely been a phenomenon of friends persuading friends.

Mass persuasion can strengthen beliefs that one already holds. It can give information that allows one to act in accordance with what one already wants, and it can backfire when it associates certain positions with an opponent group. It is most effective when combined with person-to-person influence, where the target is being offered not just new values but an entirely new moral community by a supposedly trustworthy and authoritative source. In other words, it is not that mass persuasion has no effect. Rather, the impact of a message is determined by an ecological context. This context includes what alternative sources of information the person is exposed to, what weight they put on those alternatives, by whom and how the message is being delivered, the background beliefs of the message target, the level of acceptance the message is having within the social network of the target, the saliency of alternative pathways that satisfy the needs of the target, among other potential factors. The persuasiveness of any message can be bolstered or buffered depending on the alignment of various elements within this social ecology.

Social Ecology: Networks and Environments

Noémie Bouhana has advanced the view that radicalisation should be viewed within a social ecology, and this perspective can be extended to the role of messaging. As research has shown, messages from trustworthy and authoritative sources conducted person-to-person have the greatest impact on persuasion. Previous research, which has involved speaking with members of ISIS

9. Ibid.
and Al-Qa’ida, has often found that the messenger is as important as the message; that is, radicalisation is largely spread via friends recruiting friends. 14 Recent analysis of Iraq and Syria-bound foreign fighters from the West found that in 88% of cases there was some online or offline social interaction involved in their recruitment. 15 Previous research on Al-Qa’ida diaspora cells found that 75% of recruits had pre-existing family or friend relationships within the organisation, 16 further reinforcing the fact that successful recruitment happens person-to-person rather than through mass marketing means.

These findings help to explain the geographical clustering of radicalisation. If online messaging by extremist groups was highly predictive of radicalisation then one should expect to see an even geographical distribution of radicalisation. Instead, radicalisation clusters in certain areas that are referred to as ‘hotspots’. 17 For instance, in Belgium, the country with the highest per capita number of Syria-bound foreign terrorist fighters (FTFs) in Western Europe, 45% of FTFs came from Brussels despite it containing only about 17% of the country’s population. 18 However, country-level analyses may not be specific enough to elucidate the more local environmental factors that could lead to radicalisation concentrations.

When looking at the European neighbourhoods or cities that were most affected by radicalisation in recent years, one sees that most of them are poorer areas with high crime rates made up of immigrant communities, often of North African origin. 20 Indeed, many European jihadists came from marginalised backgrounds, with one study showing 68% with a criminal record and 64% unemployed or with sporadic jobs. 21 Survey studies in France have shown that Muslim residents do experience high rates of discrimination, 22 and a study in the US showed that when marginalised Muslim immigrants experience discrimination, they increase their support for radical groups. 23

In addition, the high crime rates of these hotspot neighbourhoods have been shown to coincide with the fact that many of those who joined ISIS from Europe had criminal pasts. 24 High crime rate neighbourhoods could, therefore, create the conditions that allow illegal networks to thrive. In other words, high crime rates could weaken the ‘immune system’ of a community to extremist ideas. The bystander effect is a potential manifestation of this (namely, when non-radicals do not intervene as radicalisation afflicts their community). This

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15. Perliger and Milton, ‘From Cradle to Grave’.
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The spread of extremist ideas, or any other unwanted entity, difficult in a particular community. Those factors can be varied and result in resilience at different stages of the radicalisation process.

Community resilience to violent radicalisation, much like radicalisation, is difficult to define. Generally, it refers to the various factors that make the spread of extremist ideas, or any other unwanted entity, difficult in a particular community. Those factors can be varied and result in resilience at different stages of the radicalisation process.

A case study on the resilience of the Somali-American community in St Paul, Minneapolis, which has experienced cases of violent radicalisation, found that three factors increased the community’s risk for radicalisation: young people’s unaccountable time spent in unobserved spaces; the perceived social legitimacy of violent extremism; and contact with recruiters or their associates. The study found that what buffered against these vulnerabilities was the strength of relational ties between young people and their families, and it recommended that the government support social workers who can help facilitate building strong family ties in cases where such relationships might be fractured.

Another study on community resilience was conducted in three Danish towns that have experienced cases of violent radicalisation. Much like the previous study, researchers found that strong family relationships buffered against youth radicalisation. They also found that trust-based relationships with schools, youth clubs, friends and work colleagues could be leveraged to help intervene in cases where the individual family unit felt overwhelmed by an instance of radicalisation. The authors argued that community resilience emerged from social capital; that is, trust-based relationships between community members and networks of local actors. The study also found that the communities’ trust-based relationships did not extend to government units working on prevention, thus partially explaining why such units may be ineffective.

Research on community policing also emphasises the need for trust-based relationships between the public and police. In the context of violent extremism, this concerns how the community can potentially detect recruiters, radical cells or suspicious individuals and provide this information to authorities and/or work with them to resolve the issue. Yet most research indicates that trust,

29. Ibid., p. 2.
31. Ibid., p. 322.
transparency, equity and reciprocal communication between the community and police must be established in order for this to be effective. With this in mind, the argument could be made that in areas where a community’s social capital is low and there are few trust-based networks of individuals and organisations, one would find a community in which extremist messaging would have its greatest success.

Successful persuasion does not always lead to changes in beliefs and values

Research conducted in the US, specifically in Los Angeles and Washington, DC, on community reporting behaviour also underlined a lack of trust with authorities as a barrier to community resilience. The studies found that there was a widespread consensus that non-radical friends of extremists were the best candidates to notify the relevant parties to intervene. However, survey data indicated that the reasons why friends said they would not notify authorities were due to various fears, including the fear of the extremist friend taking retribution or of overly punitive measures being taken against them by authorities. These responses point to distrust in the authorities’ ability to protect informants and in their tendency to react proportionately in their interventions.

Many of the studies that examine community resilience start with the assumption that most of the community is non-radical. However, this is not always the case. It is possible that an area becomes a radicalisation hotspot during a high recruitment period (for instance, during the Afghan–USSR war, 2003 Iraq War and Syrian Civil War) because the sentiments of the general community are already quite extremist. A study was done on two hotspot neighbourhoods in Morocco (Jemaa Mezuak in Tetuan and Sidi Moumen in Casablanca) to test for the interactive role of psychological factors increasing one’s willingness to use violence to spread strict Sharia. The responses to the question of willingness to use violence for Islamist ends in Jemaa Mezuak received the highest possible scores. As a result, the analysis for this neighbourhood could not even be conducted, as the majority said they were willing to fully engage in violence to spread strict Sharia. While this may be a case of posturing, it is a measure of community sentiments. Thus, in some rare cases, extremist messaging succeeds in certain communities because the community members already agree with those values. Here, mass propaganda is likely to be effective since the goal would not be to change the valence of the values but just increase their strength.

Social Ecology: Individuals

Successful persuasion does not always lead to changes in beliefs and values, and not all changes in beliefs and values lead to changes in behaviour. The link between values and the willingness to use violence to uphold them could come in the form of sacralisation and identity fusion. ‘Sacred values’ are preferences people consider non-negotiable and inviolable. This construct has been studied in the context of political conflicts, such as the

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35. Ibid., p. 53.
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Israeli–Palestinian conflict, the Iranian nuclear programme, the Muslim–Hindu conflict and others. Sacred values differ from non-sacred values in that they show resistance to material trade-offs, social influence and exit strategies.

Identity fusion is a particular form of personal identification that has been linked to an individual’s willingness to make extremely costly sacrifices for their fused group. It has been shown to be distinct from social identification, which is less linked to action and more to self-concept. People fused with a group have been shown to prefer to sacrifice their own lives for the group rather than allow other group members to do the same. A study on revolutionary fighters in Libya who were combating the Qadhafi regime found that front line fighters were as fused with their battalions as with their families, whereas non-front line logistical units were more fused with family than unit, suggesting that fusion with the group is associated with sacrificing one’s life against the outgroup.

The combination of sacred values and identity fusion creates an interactive effect on willingness to engage in political violence. This observation first came from case studies on the 2004 Madrid bombers and Palestinian suicide bombers whose timelines, trajectories and testimonies all indicated a willingness to sacrifice for cause and comrade. A survey study done in the Moroccan hotspot of Sidi Moumen, Casablanca found that the combination of holding strict Sharia as a sacred value and being fused with close friends boosted willingness to make costly sacrifices, and even more so when values were threatened.

These results extend to those who oppose jihadism. For example, a study in Spain found that the combination of holding democracy to be sacred and being fused with their nation resulted in an exponential increase in participants’ willingness to make costly and violent sacrifices when they were reminded of the threat from the 2004 Madrid bombings. Another study, however, found that Peshmerga fighters who were combating ISIS in Iraq on the front lines would choose their sacred values over their fused group and even over their immediate family. This perhaps indicates that while embedded group values have an important role in increasing stated willingness to use violence, the most extreme individuals (those willing to sacrifice their lives on the front line) chose the value system over the group. In other words, fusion with friends may act as an echo chamber whereby extremist values get sacralised but, once this process is complete, the values become more important than the immediate group, and comrades can be sacrificed for the cause.

Recent neuroimaging work on jihadist supporters showed that inducing feelings of social exclusion increased sacralisation in both a neural and behavioural way, in the form of increasing stated

49. Ibid.
willingness to use violence. A second neuroimaging study on Lashkar-e-Taiba supporters found that processing sacred values deactivated an area of the brain associated with deliberative thinking. A follow-up analysis found that the areas of the brain associated with deliberative and subjective values were disconnected when participants were highly willing to fight and die for their values, but these areas reconnected when this willingness was low, meaning decisions about what actions to take were now possibly being mediated by decision control mechanisms. What lowered people’s willingness to fight and die in the original study was being led to believe that their peers were not as willing to do the same. As Lashkar-e-Taiba supporters conformed to their peers’ lower commitment to violence, the regions associated with deliberation increased in activation.

These findings indicate that counter or alternative messaging must be sensitive to which issues are sacred or not. Sacred values reject instrumental reasoning and attempting to use this form of persuasion will likely backfire. Moreover, the behavioural and brain research also support the idea that inducing ‘tragic trade-offs’ might be the most effective way to persuade someone holding sacred values; that is, to frame one sacred value as violating other sacred values they hold in order to induce a cognitive dissonance that may lead to the desired change. However, sacred values vary from person to person even within the same extremist cohort, further showing mass persuasion will not work in this context. Thus, a personalised approach should be taken instead. Furthermore, the research shows that while sacred values themselves are quite stable, individuals’ willingness to fight and die for them are more malleable. Targeting actions rather than values will therefore be more effective, and changing perceptions of social norms regarding violent actions (that is to say, what extremists think their community sees as an acceptable action) has an effect on reducing violent propensity.

Most extremists are plucked from social environments where things like carrying out acts of terrorism are not condoned. The study on Lashkar-e-Taiba supporters has shown how important it is to highlight this to at-risk youth. Changing one’s perception of social norms regarding political violence can reduce personal willingness to engage in violence. Strategic communications that highlight these prevailing non-violent norms may be met with some success in lowering tendencies towards violent actions.

Counter or alternative messaging must be sensitive to which issues are sacred or not

A study conducted in post-conflict Rwanda bolsters the findings of the Lashkar-e-Taiba study, showing how altering perceptions of social norms can lead to positive behavioural changes even though the underlying beliefs remain unaltered. The study consisted of randomly assigning various Rwandan communities to listen to either a monthly reconciliation-themed soap opera or a monthly health-themed soap opera over the course of one year. At the end of the year, the participants responded to survey and focus group questions about their personal beliefs and social norms, among other things. As well as this, their behaviour was observed and documented as they discussed how to share a resource gifted by the researcher. The study found that listening to the reconciliation-themed soap opera had no statistically significant effect on changing personal beliefs related to mass violence or intergroup relations. However, the reconciliation-themed soap opera listeners did change perceptions of social norms regarding intergroup relations, which were realised in actual behaviour change including active negotiations and cooperation as compared to the health-themed soap opera listeners. Another study replicated similar findings.

53. Hamid et al., ‘Neuroimaging “Will to Fight” for Sacred Values’.
in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.\textsuperscript{55} These results underline that messaging need not alter personal beliefs but simply change perceptions of social norms regarding violence and cooperation to create significant behaviour changes.

The above findings are consistent with evidence showing that strongly held personal beliefs are resistant to change while social norms can be more adaptable. People are often willing to adapt their behaviour in response to social norms without changing their personal beliefs. However, it is also possible that while changes in social norms do not change personal beliefs of the adults in a society, they may alter the beliefs of their children who are still being socialised. As children develop into adults, their personal beliefs are influenced by perceptions of social norms. Therefore, mass media messaging may be ineffective at directly shaping personal beliefs, but it can shape social norms which potentially could have a latent effect on the next generation.

**Potential Approaches**

As we have seen, small-group dynamics can easily act as echo chambers where sharing extremist messaging can fuse the group’s identity around sacred values. And once values achieve sacralisation, they can be difficult to persuade. However, altering perceptions of social norms is one way to effect a behavioural change without challenging a group’s underlying values, and this approach may be reflected in changes in the personal values of the next generation in a society.

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Another way to subvert the pull of extremist messaging is to increase a sense of belonging within communities

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61. Hamid et al., ‘Neuroimaging “Will to Fight” for Sacred Values’.
Recent research has investigated when changes in how norms are perceived are most likely to lead to actual changes in behaviour. The findings point to three critical factors. First, the target audience should identify with the source of the norm intervention. This amounts to picking the right reference group from which to disseminate information (for instance, using peers and not parents in order to maximise effectiveness, though this varies in context). Second, new norms should be believable opinions or behaviours of the group. Interventions that try to persuade target audiences that their peers believe in pluralism, gay rights, feminism or other notions of ‘tolerance’ in parts of the world where it is simply not believable that such ideas have become the norm will likely be ineffective. Third, when an individual’s personal views are closer to the new normative information, they are more likely to adjust their behaviour accordingly. However, even when their personal views are far away from the new norms, they will still adjust their behaviour if they believe that the new norm is strongly held by the community and that they will be punished for violating it.

Another way to subvert the pull of extremist messaging is to increase a sense of belonging within communities and create viable alternative pathways to purpose. Instead of just counter-messaging, P/CVE programmes should seek to counter-engage by offering a pro-social version of what extremist groups offer; that is, identity, local community and purpose. Community-based social activism is one route to achieving this goal. If people feel they can be part of a peer group of social changemakers within the current system, this lowers the appeal of violent anti-establishment groups. Messaging can be used to attract people to these pro-social groups, but these groups can in turn also put out messages that shape the perception of non-violent social norms and promote non-zero-sum identities within the community.

**Conclusion**

Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all solution on how to use messaging to subvert the pull of violent extremist groups. Mass persuasion has a limited effect on attitude or behavioural changes across a variety of contexts. Instead, the most successful persuasion stems from trustworthy and authoritative sources and happens on a person-to-person basis. As messages exist in a local ecology, it is important to study local contexts in order to tailor interventions.

In order to know which communications policies to implement, one must have a firm grasp of the local drivers and settings of radicalisation. This will allow for a tailored strategic communication approach to combat extremist messaging.

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