

Kurt Braddock, *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 302 pp., US \$ 79.99 [Hardcover], ISBN: 978-1-1084-7452-8.

Reviewed by William Allchorn

Over the past decade and a half, counter-narratives—defined as ‘a message that...[demystifies] deconstruct or delegitimise extremist narratives’[1]—have become a key part of Western efforts to combat terrorism. Placed at the softer end of counter terror (CT) tactics and entering the United Kingdom’s policy discourse in mid-2005, the use of communications to disrupt organisations committed to violent extremist causes has come to occupy one of many ‘upstream’ and ‘downstream’ counter measures (or what Braddock terms as ‘Supply-side’ & ‘Demand-side’ interventions) for governments and civil society actors wishing to counter political violence. This has become especially important as terrorist organisations (ranging from ISIS to the Base) have become more adept at using social media to radicalise, recruit and disseminate their messages – thereby circumventing traditional forms of media and face-to-face encounters in order to spread their ideology and recruit others to their ‘propaganda of the deed’.

Kurt Braddock’s *Weaponized Words*, therefore, comes at an auspicious time for scholarship (and the practice of) counter-narrative techniques. As he notes in chapter two of the book, there is little understanding about the exact nature of the communication used in some counter-messaging interventions or empirical evaluation of the psychological processes that have been triggered by them (p.62). An early example that Braddock provides is the United States Government’s Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications’ (CSCC) attempts in 2013 to counter ISIS messages on Twitter. With its “Think Again, Turn Away” campaign bearing the U.S. State Department’s seal, the message was quickly ridiculed by ISIS supporters (pp.6-7). This lack of theoretical and scientific underpinning, in Braddock’s eyes, has led to an impoverished ‘strategic counter-terrorist toolkit’ – lacking a systemic, theoretical or empirical basis for best practice when constructing or distributing of counter-narratives in the field (p.83).

What unfolds in *Weaponized Words* is therefore a (largely accomplished) corrective to this ‘hit and miss’ approach. Leveraging insights from the fields of terrorism studies, communication studies, and psychology, Braddock’s chief aim in this book is to present a master class in the study of persuasion – both when it comes to violent extremist propaganda itself but also counter-radicalisation efforts that privilege a narrative approach. Layered with useful stories and analogies to help the reader ‘key’ into the main themes of each chapter, Braddock takes the reader through a crash course in how terrorists use persuasion as part of their radicalisation efforts and how counter terrorism experts can ‘maximize the effectiveness of [their] own counter-messages’ (p.7).

Adopting a scholarly but accessible narrative approach, Braddock’s book first provides a useful overview of research on radicalisation and counter-radicalisation before immersing the reader in the cognitive (chapters 3-5) and emotional processes (chapter 6) of extremist persuasion and counter-persuasion. Core to Braddock’s theoretical and empirical ‘toolkit’ is attitudinal inoculation against terrorist propaganda that innovatively warns and exposes those targeted to weakened versions of extremist arguments to ‘immunise’ them against terrorist recruitment.[2] Based on decades of research in the fields of politics, health and wellness, advertising, animal rights, and the environment, it is certainly a promising approach. Most interesting, and as Braddock argues in chapter 4 of the book, such attempts at attitudinal inoculation cut both ways – with both terrorists and counter-terror practitioners keen to engender vigilance among their target audience against the competing narratives from the other side. Later chapters delve into slightly tangential, future-gazing areas (e.g. impending opportunities and challenges for counter-terror scholars and practitioners going forward in chapters 7 & 8) but this is remedied by the innovative counter-radicalisation methodologies, evidence-based tips and examples surveyed in early sections of the monograph.

In sum, then, *Weaponized Words* is the first book length treatment of counter-messaging techniques and counter-tactics that ultimately lives up to its 'evidence matters' mission statement. A key audience will be students and scholars of terrorism studies, communication studies and psychology. However, and given the array of useful stories, examples and well-evidenced pointers, the main audience of the book will most certainly be practitioners and policy-makers keen to sharpen their toolkits against extremist actors. Published amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, never has such a systematic treatment of terrorist persuasion and counter-narrative interventions been so timely, as counter-terror actors attempt to win the 'war of words' waged by terrorist actors during a crisis moment.

About the Reviewer: William Allchorn, Ph.D., is Associate Director at the Centre for the Analysis of the Radical Right (CARR) and a Postdoctoral Researcher at the University of Leeds. He is an expert on violent far-right extremist narratives and counter-narratives. His latest research project – with CARR & Hedayah - looked at this phenomena globally - surveying far-right extremist narratives and counter-narratives in the Balkans, Germany, Ukraine, UK, US, Canada, Scandinavia, Australia and New Zealand.

Notes

- [1] Tuck, H. & Silverman, H., 'The Counter Narrative Handbook', London: ISD, 2016, online at: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Counter-narrative-Handbook_1.pdf.
- [2] See also Braddock's earlier writings on this: Kurt Braddock, 'Vaccinating Against Hate: Using Attitudinal Inoculation to Confer Resistance to Persuasion by Extremist Propaganda', *Terrorism and Political Violence* Vol. 31 (Nov.-Dec., 2019). DOI: 10.1080/09546553.2019.1693370.