Violent Jihadist Magazines: Exploiting a Human Need for Significance

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The November 2015 terror attacks in Paris and elsewhere caused understandable grief, anxiety, and a need for explanation. What could possibly cause individuals to commit such grotesque acts of violence against civilians? Many believe that it is the result of specific problems with the religion of Islam as if it were a backward, primitive faith which is incompatible with modern societies. Others hold that such acts of violence have nothing to with Islam, but that some dysfunctional individuals adopt incorrect and "warped" interpretations of it. Over the last few years in the UK, the government has emphasised the need to counter the threat by promoting certain national and/or Western values through a form of "muscular liberalism." This catch-all solution would mean that "Britishness" would either supersede Islam or that the latter can be altered and incorporated within the former. The fundamental problem with all of these approaches is that they ignore the voices and subjective needs of Muslims – especially young ones.

In making such generalisable claims as "it's all Islam/religion", "it's an incorrect interpretation of Islam" or "they've not been integrated enough," we lose sight of the particular circumstances and needs of individuals. Unfortunately, violent jihadist movements have learned to fill this void through the usage of online English-language magazines targeted towards young Muslims in the West. These magazines are designed to encourage people into acts of violence in almost exactly the same manner that was seen in the November 2015 attacks in Paris. They are not only creatively produced in a manner that mimics many mainstream Western magazines, but they answer many of the grievances that young Muslims feel – regardless of whether they advocate violence or not. They also offer a sense of adventure and meaning for people in the here and now where they may otherwise experience futility and hopelessness.

In my recently published article in *International Political Sociology,* I argue that violent jihadist movements have learnt to adapt what I call a "political myth" to the particular circumstances readers of their online magazines. I demonstrate this through an analysis of the English-language online magazine known as *Inspire* (Kirke, 2015). I do not use the concept of political myth in the mainstream sense as a necessarily false story or statement, but as dramatic and figurative narrative processes which construct bonds for social groups by collectively interpreting their shared political conditions of existence, providing adherents with maps for behaviour and certainty for action (Kirke, 2015: 285). Myths can contain a variety of themes, including founding moments of social orders, heroic and villainous figures, and moments of tragedy and joy (ibid). Myths are one way in which we answer a fundamental human need for significance, as both Hans Blumenberg (1985) and Chiara Bottici (2007) have argued. Blumenberg viewed significance (*Bedeutsamkeit*), as a way of finding a sense of grounding in an otherwise indifferent (or even chaotic) world (Blumenberg, 1985). Myths provide human beings with a defence against "the absolutism of reality" in which "man comes close to not having control of the conditions of his existence and, what is more important, believes that he simply lacks control of them" (Blumenberg 1985: 3-4).

This is more than just a need for a general sense of meaning that we all share. As Chiara Bottici puts it: "while something can have a meaning but I can still remain completely indifferent to it, something that has significance is something that I feel 'close' to" (Bottici 2007: 124). Myths provide the significance needed for people to regain this sense of control, and to "act" within the world. This is well captured by Georges Sorel, who was a French theorist of revolutionary syndicalism, who saw myths as not just "descriptions of things" but also as "expressions of a

determination to act" (Sorel, 1999: 32). It is exactly this need for significance, and a need to act that violent jihadist movements have learned to exploit in magazines like *Inspire*.

The publication condenses all the grievances of violent jihadist movements into an easily accessible and colourful format that eerily mimics most other mainstream Western magazines. It is colourful, full of creative imagery, humour, and uses regular colloquialisms. Online slang such as "LOL" (laughing out loud) and "ROFL" (rolling on the floor laughing) are interspersed between violent interpretations of Islamic scripture and general justification of massacring civilians (Kirke, 2015: 290). Modern events such as drone strikes, the invasion of Iraq, and even general discriminatory practices against Muslims in Western societies are constructed as if they are part of a conflict which has occurred since the Crusades. Nothing is seen as historically contingent; it is as if each injustice is part of the process of violence with the equivalent actors and motives. As one contributor to the magazine puts it, the West has a "deeply rooted historic hatred for Islam and Muslims" which was previously led "in the name of Christianity" but is today "in the name of democracy (Kirke, 2015: 290). Furthermore, "False Muslims" (i.e. non-violent, less extreme Muslims) are aiding and abetting these Crusades and they are therefore also legitimate targets. Since Muslims are purportedly under attack from all sides, their only logical, moral, and indeed appropriately theological response, is to engage in violent jihad.

The magazine tells readers in many creative ways – including through poetry and rap lyrics – how they can become an epic and revered hero and a defender Muslims across the world. It provides individuals with a clear purpose and a sense of adventure in the "here and now." The magazine taps into the uncertainties and anxieties felt by people as a result of alienation and discrimination in society. They are offered the hope of becoming heroes through rather simple means, as what matters is not the scale of the violence, but the profile they are able to raise. For instance, they praise Roshonara Choudhry for her innovation when she stabbed UK Labour MP Stephen Timms despite the fact that he survived and made a full recovery. Even those who completely fail, such as the would-be Times Square bomber Umar al-Faruq, are still lauded as heroes and examples to be followed (Kirke, 2015: 290). The reader is told that they can also reach such levels of heroism by conducting terror attacks at home. Indeed they are actively encouraged to avoid "open areas of conflict" as they are "in a place where they can cause great harm to the enemy" (Kirke, 2015: 290).

The authors legitimise their claims by effectively bringing the conflict to the reader by showing how it is has in impact in their daily lives; the "here and now". They do this through a rhetorical strategy known as "legitimisation via proximisation", as discussed by Piotr Cap (Cap, 2007: 1; 2008: 22; Esch, 2010). Cap explains this through what he calls the "STA" (spatial, temporal, axiological) model of proximisation. Spatial proximisation, which is where people and events that are external to the "deictic center", or the position of legitimacy which normally incorporates the audience the speaker is addressing, are seen to be quite literally closing in on the addressee and thereby of direct relevance to them (Esch, 2010: 364). In *Inspire,* an example of this would be articles that construct the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan as an attack on all Muslims, including the reader. Temporal proximisation is a strategy which makes events see "momentous and historic" and thereby of central importance to the addressee, often by connecting them to past events (Cap, 2005: 14). The magazine does this by making numerous references to Western foreign policies as the continuation of the eleventh to thirteenth century Crusades. The crusades are still relevant for many Muslims, who view them as a "violent intrusion in their history that left an indelible scar and was echoed in later colonial and post-colonial involvement of the West in the Middle East (Maalouf, 2004: 265). Finally, axiological proximisation constructs individual events as being part of a major clash between those on the centre and those on the periphery (Cap, 2005: 14). This is seen throughout every issue, where the reader and other "true" Muslims are presented as being in a perpetual clash with "false (i.e. non-violent) Muslims and their Western crusader allies. There is no route for peace and reconciliation, and there are certainly no compromises.

What does all this mean? Primarily, myth and proximisation are simplifying strategies, just like Western responses have been. However, they also manage to answer this human need for significance by adding a sense of purpose, drama, and adventure, in a way that is sorely lacking in Western responses. Counter-narratives are needed against publications like *Inspire* and ISIL's new magazine *Dabiq* in a way that advocates non-violence and that can address the particular concerns of young Muslims. This must not replicate the same fundamental myths that reduce politics, history, and religion, into absolutist statements of good/evil, right/wrong or a "clash of civilisations" (Bottici and

Challand 2006; 2010) without any reflection upon social or historical context. This is especially challenging as non-violence and peace may seem like a hard-sell in comparison to the promises of adventure and heroism offered in *Inspire.* Yet many of us do find significance in our lives without resorting to acts of violence in justification of such worldviews. How we do this largely depends upon our passions, interests and aspirations. For example, many of us find significance in activism, whether for gender equality, human rights, anti-racism campaigning, or party politics. Some find it in participation in sport, and the camaraderie that this brings with it. Some even find it within the more charitable traditions of their religion. However, all the examples mentioned can be grounded in myth and none of them necessarily entail a need for violence (some sports aside) and they even have the potential to act against it. What matters is helping people to find things in the here and now, because this is central to the need for significance.

These are profoundly challenging and complex issues for policy-makers and community leaders. It is important to ensure that young people are able to critique the content of magazines like *Inspire,* especially the fact that they ignore historical contingency. Unfortunately, unlike the messages of *Inspire,* the totalizing and universalizing responses of Western governments are failing to listen to the voices and grievances of many young Muslims. This needs to change. That means ensuring their concerns heard and ensuring that they have the means to find less violent and destructive routes to significance. Western governments have tried to address all these issues at once by creating policies which are designed to integrate Muslims. Some countries have tried to impose nationalistic values on children in an attempt to supersede other radical and undesirable narratives.

In the UK, there has been a recent drive to ensure that children are taught “British values” in schools, and this will also soon be extended to children under the age of five. The problem is that British values (like those of many other nations) are no less commonly understood and are in fact heavily contested across the UK. They provide none of the adventure, heroism, and significance that violent jihadist attempt to articulate in their magazines. They are unlikely to incite the genuine, inspiring, emotive attachment and significance that violent jihadist movements manage to cultivate. It is also highly unlikely to universally quell any desire for violence and remove any political grievances. Instead, these attempts to prevent “radicalisation” have often homogenised all Muslims and missed the more immediate concerns and desires that they have. This may even incite resentment rather than moderation.

Inspire offers people a chance to make a difference in a world which may otherwise be indifferent to them. It is the ultimate defence against the “absolutism of reality” insofar as it provides a guide to the “here and now”, regardless of what happens in the afterlife (even if that is an important motivation). It is important for policy-makers and communities to bring the human side of radicalisation to the fore, and tailor any attempts at counter-radicalisation to the specific needs, passions, interest, and desires, of individuals. As challenging as this may be, it will, in my view, be an important part of any attempt to prevent a repeat of the bloody month of November 2015.

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