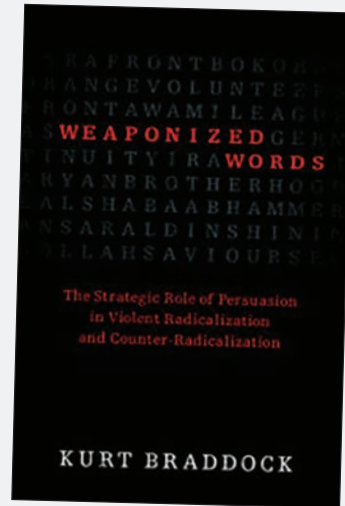

Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter- Radicalization

By Kurt Braddock
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Reviewed by Vivian S. Walker



Preoccupation with the effort to fight extremist propaganda in an increasingly complex information environment has produced an overwhelming amount of literature from professors, practitioners, policymakers, and pundits. The problem of terrorist messaging is easily defined; solutions, in the form of effective counter-narrative strategies and the tools to disseminate them, are much harder to come by. Kurt Braddock's *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization* takes this on, providing well-researched and relatively jargon-free guidelines to the development of persuasive counter-narratives and the use of emerging communications technologies to fight back.

Braddock rightly acknowledges that the key to challenging extremist messaging lies in addressing audience susceptibility to violent radicalization and the subsequent risk of audience involvement in terrorism. Beginning with an excellent overview and definition of radicalization as a persuasive process, he then offers a useful summation of past and present counter-messaging efforts in the context of current communication and psychological theories. He is especially effective in walking the

reader through the way terrorists have successfully exploited target audience beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors to frame their narratives.

Although his advice on counter-narrative construction breaks no new ground, it nevertheless serves as a useful reminder to avoid unintentional reinforcement of key terrorist themes, to highlight inconsistencies and contradictions, to disrupt “simple binary comparisons” (that is freedom vs. government control) and to challenge “villainous” portrayals. It also reinforces the need to keep a tight focus on audience needs and expectations. His use of narrative theory to analyze effective online communication channels rightly highlights the critical need to cultivate legitimacy: “counter-narratives . . . should be presented as if from a genuine member of the community in which it [sic] is distributed.” (pp. 95)

In subsequent chapters, Braddock turns to cognitive aspects of persuasion theory, beginning with a focus on communicative inoculation as a strategy to guard against target audience adoption of extremist beliefs and behaviors. His exploration of the “theory of reasoned action,” also audience-centric, yields some interesting insights into the role that individual attitudes, perceived norms, and perceptions of

Vivian S. Walker is the Executive Director of the United States Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy at the Department of State.

personal control play in influencing a decision to embrace radicalization. Nevertheless, as Braddock acknowledges, unpredictable emotional reactions will trump the science of cognition every time.

And here is where *Weaponized Words* becomes persuasive. In the chapter appropriately titled “Terrorism is Theater,” Braddock digs into the role that emotional response plays in shaping target audience susceptibility to terrorist messaging. Of particular value is his analysis of the strategies that terrorist actors use to evoke four types of emotion—fear, anger, guilt, and pride—in order to facilitate the achievement of their political objectives. What emerges is a complicated interplay of action and reaction: a focus on imminent threat elicits fear; a focus on the atrocities of others brings out anger, and a focus on guilt emphasizes the audience’s failure to take action against these threats and atrocities. Finally, a focus on pride induces actions aimed at overcoming these challenges while achieving terrorist goals. Braddock does a masterful job in explaining how terrorists embed this complex dynamic within their messaging.

In discussing the development of narrative strategies designed to counter the emotional appeal of terrorist messaging, Braddock correctly identifies the need to “identify and understand the nature of target audiences’ valued goals” (pp. 188) as an essential first step. The narrative should then focus on highlighting how terrorist actions have compromised or threatened these goals in order to “induce anger that influences their perceptions of the terrorist groups themselves” (pp. 191) and ultimately bring about a shift in audience behaviors. The identification of desired goals also offers hope in the form of behaviors that audience members can use to achieve these goals, and pride in the satisfaction of having completed them.

Finally, Braddock examines three so-called future (but, in reality, current) challenges to counter-radicalization. Beginning with online disinformation by state and nonstate actors, he succinctly lays out the

principle audience-based factors that contribute to disinformation effects; the inability to identify disinformation, the use of cognitive shortcuts, the tendency toward confirmation bias, and the susceptibility to evidence-based arguments, even if the evidence is fake. He also effectively summarizes prevailing counter-disinformation strategies, to include the systematic identification of fake news, the role that social media platforms might play in disinformation containment, and the need for audience-focused strategies such as media literacy training and attitudinal inoculation. Similarly, Braddock’s precis of the artificial intelligence threat, specifically the Deepfake phenomenon, provides additional insight into its potential to amplify extremist messaging.

Braddock’s analysis of what he describes as “stochastic terrorism” is the most compelling—and concerning—aspect of his discussion of current challenges. Defined as “the use of mass communications to incite random actors to carry out violent or terrorist acts that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable,” (pp. 224) stochastic terrorism, as Braddock argues, has emerged as a powerful persuasive tool for extremists as well as for mainstream influencers. The indirect nature of this approach, as well as the impossibility of predicting its impacts, makes it difficult to develop an effective counter-narrative. And, when respected public figures make statements that appear to condone the use of violence, it becomes even more challenging to overcome the persuasiveness of the message.

Up to this point, Braddock’s well-documented and lucid descriptions of persuasive communication strategies and counter-strategies are helpful and in many respects illuminating. But then he runs headlong into the challenge identified at the outset of this review—namely, how to actually get them to work in the fight against extremist messaging. In a (self-acknowledged) too short final chapter, Braddock lays out three “future directions” for counter-radicalization through persuasion. The

first proposes the use of “immersive virtual environments” (IVE) such as online games and virtual reality simulations to provide target audiences with “more engaging narrative experiences.” (pp. 238) The challenge that Braddock fails to address, however, is what kind of counter-narratives would be suited for IVE use. Moreover, his counter-narrative paradigm requires a degree of legitimacy that would be difficult to project in a fictionalized narrative environment. And the question remains on whose authority would that legitimacy be based.

His argument for the use of “entertainment education” to inoculate vulnerable audiences against the siren call of radicalization also founders. Without question, popular media such as television programs, can serve as effective vehicles for prescriptive counter-narratives. However, to insert messaging urging kids to “say no to drugs” into an episode of *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air* (an example Braddock cites) is one thing. But getting Will and Carlton to illustrate the pitfalls of jihad is quite another. Moreover, embedded counter-messaging requires a close working relationship between “government officials, researchers, and analysts” and “television studios and other producers of original content.” (pp. 243) Historically, such government/media partnerships have been difficult to sustain; policy agendas and high profit margins are uneasy bedfellows. Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the insertion of national security driven counter-ideological content into independent, mainstream media raises a host of legal, ethical, and political red flags.

Braddock’s final recommendation builds on the phenomenon of “self-sourcing”—contemporary communication technologies that allow message recipients a great deal of autonomy in their consumption of information. He is correct in that the more message recipients can identify with message content or perceive it to be relevant to their personal circumstances, the more persuasive it will be. So far, so good. But his solution—to produce “multi-faceted

counter-radicalization content” in order to provide “users the impression of customizing their counter-narrative experience” (pp. 245)—is based on the presumption that the freedom to customize the message will make it persuasive—and that the message recipient will choose the “right” course of action. As Braddock so effectively points out in the chapter on “Terrorism is Theater,” deeply embedded emotions such as fear, anger, or guilt ultimately drive the target audience’s response to counter-message content.

With this study of persuasive counter-messaging, Braddock sets out to “develop empirically rigorous methods for beating extremists at their own communicative game.” (pp. 246) There is indeed plenty of empirical rigor in *Weaponized Words*, especially in the overview of prevailing narrative strategies and their antecedents, the integration of illustrative case studies and analogies, and the painstaking analyses of relevant communication and psychological theories. Equally impressive are the practical recommendations—well-grounded in theory—on the construction of effective counter-narratives.

While both scholars and practitioners will benefit from Braddock’s tactical insights into the persuasive communication techniques used by terrorist groups, he is less successful in the effort to provide a strategic “blueprint” for winning the battle for extremist hearts and minds. That may be, of course, a futile objective. As Braddock himself notes, effective counter-radicalization programs require the support of government, academic, and NGO sectors, but the “organizational inertia” inherent in these institutions makes it difficult for them to respond to the extremists’ “communicative agility” (pp. 236). To that “inertia,” one could easily add the perpetual quest for resources and funding, the vagaries of inter- and intra-agency policy coordination, fiercely competitive institutional equities, and the ever-present chimera of the clearance process. Read *Weaponized Words* for its exploration of the science of persuasion, and steel yourself for a long war.