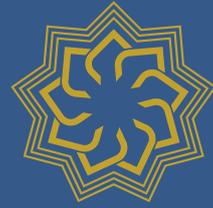


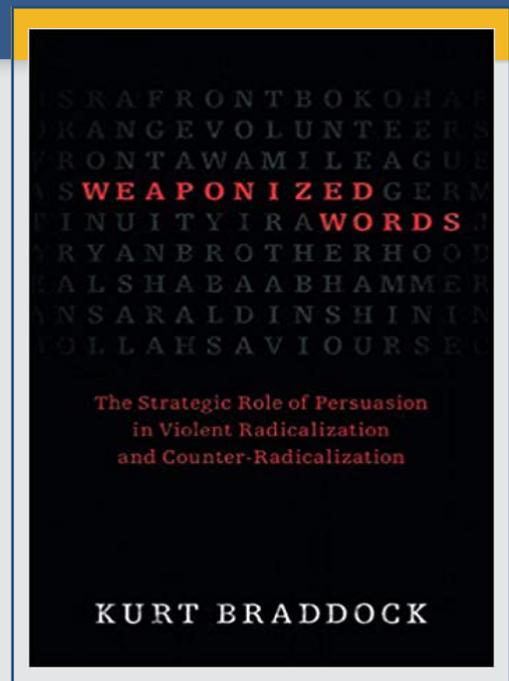
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الائتلاف العسكري لمحاربة الإرهاب
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BOOK REVIEW



WEAPONIZED WORDS

**THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PERSUASION IN VIOLENT
RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION**

KURT BRADDOCK



Book Review

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Book Review

WEAPONIZED WORDS

THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PERSUASION IN VIOLENT RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION

Extremists seek to construct themes and narratives to recruit, inspire, and propagandize among a multitude of other objectives. Extremists' goals are clear; however, it is equally important to have a means of measuring the degree of effectiveness that these various themes and extremist narratives have or do not have on their target audience. **WEAPONIZED WORDS: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PERSUASION IN VIOLENT RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION** by Kurt Braddock makes an incredible contribution by bridging these gaps through a thorough examination on how communication and persuasion theories relate to countering extremist rhetoric and providing an in-depth explanation on how to construct effective counter-messages that can inoculate against extremists' recruitment efforts.

Book Structure

WEAPONIZED WORDS: THE STRATEGIC ROLE OF PERSUASION IN VIOLENT RADICALIZATION AND COUNTER-RADICALIZATION falls into eight chapters divided into three parts. Part One is about the Battlefield and has two chapters: (1) Words are Loaded Pistols: Radicalization and Persuasion. It also provides key recommendations on how to develop counter-narratives with weaponized words to combat the rhetoric of extremism and terrorism. It reviews the impact of the Internet in disseminating such content, and how to build bridges of trust through digital platforms. (2) Lessons from Past and Current Counter-Radicalization Efforts. Part Two is about the Weapons and Persuasion Theories and has four chapters: (3) Extremist Narratives and Counter-Narratives, (4) Vaccinating against the Enemy: Attitudinal Inoculation, Radicalization, and Counter-Radicalization, (5) The Reasoned Action of Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization, (6) Terrorism is Theater: Emotion in Extremist Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda; Part Three is about War and has two chapters: (7) The Coming Persuasion Wars: Three Future Challenges in Radicalization and Counter-Radicalization; (8) Fighting Back: Three Future Directions for Persuasion-Based Approaches to Counter-Radicalization.

Every chapter provides readers with an accessible review on how various theories relate to terrorist and extremist messaging, propaganda, and persuasion efforts. In some cases, descriptions and explanations of theory may sometimes bog down readers who are unfamiliar with the subject matter, but *Weaponized Words* does an excellent job of presenting the information in a manner that is accessible to a wider audience beyond the field of terrorism studies

Overview

The concept of employing counternarratives against an adversary is not new but Kurt Braddock tailors his research to apply specifically to extremist messaging where he expertly bridges theory and real-world applicability to present a socio-scientific approach that bears crucial takeaways for experts and practitioners in academia, policy, and government. In addition to the solid presentation of communication and persuasion theories in the initial chapters, the book's step by step outlines on how to construct powerful counter-messages are per-

haps the most impactful sections in that they clearly instruct readers on how to implement these strategies themselves.

The overall layout of the chapters flows in a logical progression. Following the first chapter on radicalization theory, Braddock includes an overview of the history of counter-radicalization efforts and the various types of programs that have been employed throughout the world. He then provides the reader with a grounding in narrative persuasion theory and, more specifically, the mechanisms that are at play behind the construction of terrorist and extremist narratives.

In this same section, the text proposes key recommendations on creating strong counter extremist messaging. It also factors in how online mediums effect content dissemination and how trust can be built in virtual spaces.

Chapter Four delves into inoculation theory and examines how it can be used to proactively immunize individuals from extremist propaganda before they are exposed to such content. A blueprint guide detailing the process of constructing inoculation messages concludes this section and Braddock identifies areas for further research. Next, he explains how persuasion and behavior play into radicalization and how an understanding of the theory of reasoned action be used to counter radicalization. Chapter Six focuses on the methods in which extremist propaganda is designed to evoke a wide array of emotions in the target audience. After an examination of emotional appeals present in terrorist propaganda, Braddock includes recommendations on how to counter it through a process where one can countering violent extremist appeals through emotional appeals of their own. The final sections explore the future of persuasion wars as well as challenges that will arise and ways to improve future counter-messaging efforts.

In addition, the book addresses the reader in second person at points which adds a conversational feel as if the audience is engaging in a dialogue with the author; an approach that further contributes towards creating an almost interactive atmosphere. Each chapter also includes interesting anecdotes that lead into the content.

This unique approach makes for an engaging read and provides a real-world framework from which to understand and contextualize the information following these various vignettes. Importantly, Kurt draws from a

diverse array of terrorism events for the anecdotes that are woven throughout the chapters which reinforces the fact that motivators for engagement in violent extremist acts are rooted in wide array of ideologies across the political spectrum. Real-world examples include cases involving white supremacists, the racist tendency of the far-right, the religious discourse and the graphic content used by members of terrorist organizations, such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda..

Part One - The Battlefield: Foundations of Persuasion

Words are Loaded Pistols: Radicalization and Persuasion

As with various understandings of terrorism, defining radicalization presents a similar issue in that there are not consistencies on definitions of what it is or how the process unfolds. The nature of 'terrorism studies' is, within itself, a multidisciplinary field drawing on expertise from social sciences, psychology, political science, etc. Kurt weighs the positives and negatives of such an approach: while the multidisciplinary nature allows for a diverse set of viewpoints from which to study political violence and related topics.

It has also resulted in definitional hurdles due to an inability to establish an agreed upon set of definitions. However, following a systemic review of the literature on radicalization, Kurt identifies primary categories on how experts have understood and approached the topic of radicalization. He lists four primary linear-based categories with the important note that they are not mutually exclusive and often include overlapping elements:

- Radicalization as identity negotiation
- Radicalization as assimilation of motivational knowledge
- Radicalization as the function of social network affiliation
- Radicalization as incremental social and psychological change.

In contrast, non-linear models diverge from the linear models in that they challenge the notion that the process of radicalization is marked by direct relationships between beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors and that radicalization may contain a phasic nature, but this does not mean that it will inevitably lead to violent action. In other words, according to non-linear conceptualizations, radicalization and terrorism are not automatically connected with one another – a person can be radical-

ized without ever crossing into a stage of violent action. This model also emphasizes the individual nature of that a person may undergo as they become radicalized because although there may be shared commonalities with others, each process is unique to the person and their individual experience.

The nuanced nature of understanding radicalization is made clear in this first chapter but that being said, what exactly are the common themes that are often shared across instances of radicalization? Kurt identifies three common areas of defining characteristics: Radicalization is phasic as in it is a process that occurs over time gradually, the individual will become increasingly committed to extremist beliefs over time, but this does not mean they will continue escalating to violence, and exposure to extremist content partly contributes towards fueling radicalization. In terms of violent actions, the chapter explains that the radicalizing individual must undergo violent radicalization – a social and psychological process of increased and focused radicalization through involvement with a violent non-state-movement.

The following section presents three cases of radicalization two of whom were Salafi-jihadists and one who was a white supremacist. The consecutive examination of each of these cases highlights the potential power



that extremist messaging can have on an individual and how the person may escalate to violence.

The concluding segment reviews four proposals on how persuasion relates to extremism and radicalization: extremist groups promote changes in attitudes and beliefs through communication strategies and processes, radicalization is a persuasive process, counter-radicalization entails messaging designed to prevent taking on extremist beliefs, attitudes, etc., and persuasion theories are key in understanding terrorist messaging that encourages radicalization while also providing a framework from which to construct counter-messages against these extremist themes and narratives.

Lessons from the Past and Current Counter-Radicalization Efforts

Before discussing how counter-messaging strategies can be employed as a strategy against radicalization, the chapter proposes that it is imperative to first examine and evaluate previous counter-radicalization efforts. The four categories are:

1. Programs focused on training, education, and support.
2. Identification, referral, assessment, and counseling.
3. Reducing risk exposure.
4. Developing counter-messages.

Within the first category, there are target focus groups consisting of individuals who may encounter someone who is radicalizing. These include, but are not limited to, family and friends, security services and frontline workers, and susceptible individuals including youth.

Programs that fall within the first category offer trainings geared towards informing these various target audiences on the dangers of violent extremism and how and why they should avoid it as well as how to proceed if a person is concerned that a loved one or someone in their wider social circle may be radicalizing.

Programs in the second category are more specifically directed at individuals who may be in the early stages of radicalization and disrupting this process before further escalation. Kurt lists the UK's Channel Program as a key example of an initiative under the referral category and despite criticisms that it has stigmatized minorities, especially Muslims, other international programs have taken a similar approach in Denmark and Canada, for example.

The third category centers on limiting content exposure to extremist narratives and propaganda. Although some approaches, particularly from government, have

attempted to stem access to and remove the extremist content itself, other initiatives have focused on redirect methods. Redirect methods include guiding audiences who may be conducting online searches for pro-ISIS or pro-white supremacist content via key words towards resources that counter these ideologies by prioritizing counter-messages over extremist content.

The fourth category of messaging efforts focus on developing strategies to challenge extremist themes and narratives. Some are government-driven while others are created by non-governmental organizations. Kurt identifies two primary forms: direct argumentation and counter-narratives. Direct argumentation has been shown to be less effective and impactful – much in part due to the fact that this strategy partly incorporates unnuanced arguments that clearly lack an understanding of the content they are

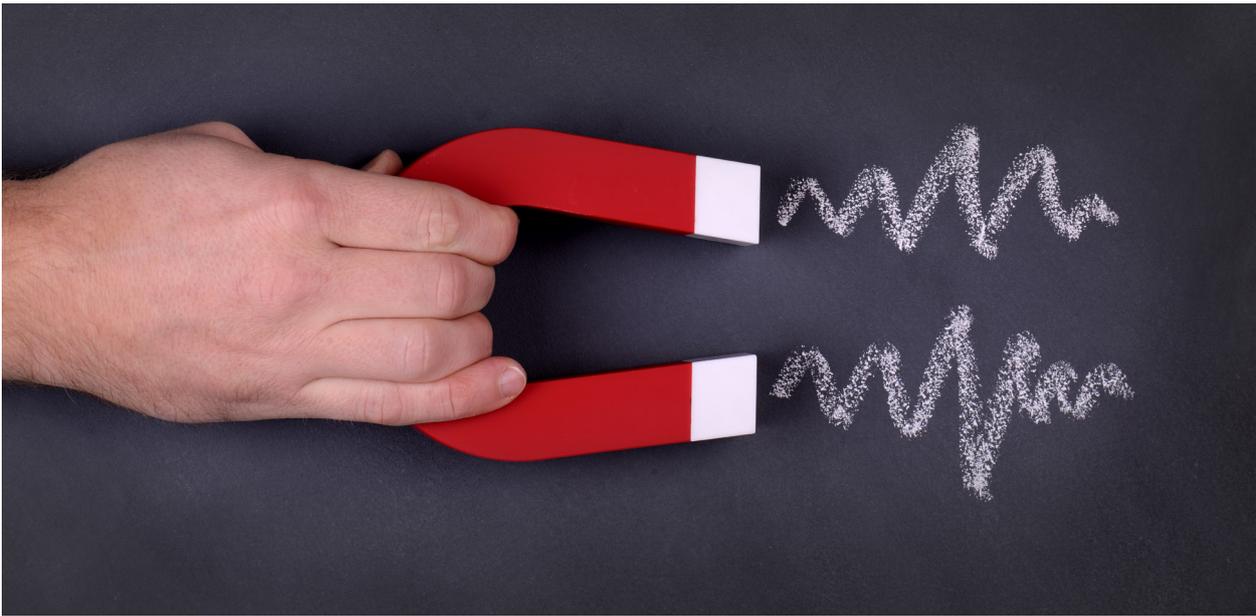
Part Two - The Weapons: Theories of Persuasion

Extremist Narratives and Counter-Narratives

Following descriptions of the Timothy McVeigh case and the role that The Turner Diaries played in influencing McVeigh's beliefs, the chapter reviews the meaning of what a narrative is, the elements that compose a narrative and, more specifically, whether terrorist narratives contribute to violent radicalization. Firstly, Kurt offers a communications literature overview and references previous studies that have been conducted on the topic of persuasion in relation to narrative presentation. As described in the chapter, the cited findings have resulted in mixed results due to the fact that the research methodologies used to determine overall persuasiveness have varied and although insightful, these studies and the lack of consistency in implementation have not established solid findings on whether narratives are persuasive by themselves.

The chapter continues with a focus on extremist narratives and highlights evidence indicating that there is nothing inherently different about persuasion tactics used by terrorists versus those used by politicians for example. In terms of the potential for a narrative to encourage support for terrorism, the text identifies two primary points: levels of persuasiveness depend on:

1. The specific narrative themes present in extremist messages.
2. The degree of influence in psychological persuasion.



To counter extremists' narratives, Kurt emphasizes the importance of the counter-message's source: for it to be effective, the target audience needs to view its source as trustworthy and valid. In summary, both the construction of the counter-message and the source credibility are key factors in overall strategic impact.

To construct counter-narratives, the chapter outlines a two key steps: obtain familiarity with extremist narratives and then allow the gathered data to direct the development of counter-narratives. More specifically, conducting a theme analysis composes a core part of this process as laid out in four fundamental stages:

1. Obtaining a familiarity with the extremist messaging and understanding the various tones, styles, and rhetoric that create such messages.
2. Re-reading through the narratives and creating an initial list of thematic codes to categorize the content.
3. Consolidating similar codes into one category to refine the overall code list.
4. Sorting the refined code list into themes while keeping in mind that codes in the same category must be conceptually similar and the themes must have distinct differences between one another.

An optional fifth step would be to quantitatively note how often each theme is used and identify which ones are most as well as least common in the data set.

The following section provides a series of recommendations when developing counter-messaging after completing a thorough theme analysis: do not reinforce the themes that appear in the terrorist narratives, disrupt

analogies that equate elements of terrorist narratives to real-world events, disrupt thematic binaries that appear in the terrorist narratives, comprise counter-narratives with themes that provide an alternative representation of the terrorist narrative's target, comprise counter-narratives with themes that highlight the contradiction in terrorist narratives, cultivate trust online, encourage counter-narratives to go viral online, and partner with credible messengers. Although this was a brief summary of Kurt's recommendations, the chapter delves further into each individual recommendation and provides case studies.

Immunization Against Enemy

This chapter focuses on the concept of attitudinal inoculation and how to construct effective proactive counter-messaging grounded. Kurt first defines attitudinal inoculation as involving warning a message target of an impending threat to their beliefs and attitudes, and then providing that target with the tools needed to fend off that threat. Unlike counter-messaging tactics previously explored, attitudinal inoculation is proactive in that the goal is to immunize audiences before they encounter extremist themes and narratives.

Although inoculation first developed in relation to gaining immunity against diseases, William McGuire believed that the same concept could be applied to immunizing individuals against ideas and attempts to persuade. McGuire developed inoculation theory which stated that people could become resistant to persuasion under two conditions:

1. They are warned in advance that another party will attempt to change their view on an issue.

2. They are provided with information to counter any future efforts to persuade.

To be successful, inoculation messages should contain a straightforward warning about an attempt to persuade a target and a refutational preemption, meaning a weakened version of the arguments that future persuasive attempts may contain.

The following section discusses previous studies conducted on attitudinal inoculation and the body of literature examining its effectiveness. As highlighted, it is important to keep in mind that terrorists also employ inoculation strategies to proactively counter messages from their enemies. In terms of creating proactive messages to prevent radicalization, the chapter proposes three crucial elements: conveying the idea that the target audience's attitudes are threatened, presenting weakened versions of extremist arguments they may be confronted with, and finally, refuting the extremist arguments.

Although inoculation theory has been expanded and developed, Kurt identifies directions for further research: determining to what degree inoculation wears off over time and the optimal timing needed to deliver booster messages to maintain resistance to persuasive messaging. Important groundwork has been laid but this direction in particular would be a logical next step progression in the development of counter-messaging and it would be beneficial in strengthening strategies in opposing and resisting terrorist propaganda.

Reasoned Action Theory

The previous chapters focused on elements of extremist messaging and developing counter-narratives and inoculation messages. This section transitions to focusing on examining the connection between attitudes and beliefs with behavior and explores reasoned action theory and persuasion. Reasoned action theory is defined as an evolved series of relationships between beliefs, attitudes, norms and perceptions of control, and intentions that describe how different factors lead to a person's engagement in a behavior. In theory, it can also predict intentions, attitudes, and behavior based on known attitudes and perceived norms of the audience targeted with extremist messages.

Kurt then reviews the various elements that compose reasoned action theory: background and contextual factors that describe how people develop beliefs about behaviors from numerous factors, behavioral beliefs which represent an individual's unbiased ideas about

performing a behavior and the consequences of doing so, normative beliefs which represent an individual's notions about others' stances on a behavior being considered, and control beliefs. Other component includes attitudes towards behavior, perceived norms, perceived behavioral control, behavioral intention, actual control and finally, behavior. An accompanying graphic is included in this section to help the reader visualize how these various elements connect and compose reasoned action theory.

To construct an intervention message using this theory, Kurt provides a pathway to increase the effective potential of the intervention effort. After selecting a specific behavior to address with the intervention, focus on target audiences as determined by survey-informed data about attitudes and beliefs. Once an audience is identified, focus the intervention on a belief that is associated with a targeted behavior. For a messaging component, content encouraging actions directed away from extremist groups will ideally influence the target audience through persuasion and act as a form of intervention.

This chapter contains specialized terminology, and it is perhaps one of the denser chapters in the book, however, Kurt's clear and direct definitions weave together the complexities that compose reasoned action theory. The various diagrams and case studies of violent extremists further assist in clarifying how these components fit together.

Terrorism is Theater: Emotion in Extremist Propaganda and Counter-Propaganda

Kurt shifts to a focus on the relationship between emotion and persuasion by first discussing what emotions are and the various models that researchers have created to both understand and map them. The simplest model posits that the more [good] a person feels, the less [bad] they feel and vice versa. Other more complex conceptions view emotions as existing independently from one another but also as capable of overlapping - meaning that someone can experience positive as well as negative feelings simultaneously.

Yet, another model measures emotions based off of levels of arousal, however, as Kurt highlights, this conceptualization risks characterizing different emotions as feeling similar, such as anger and fear. They both stem from states of higher arousal and can be classified as negative but they are not synonymous in how they subjectively feel to the individual experiencing them.

Instead, Kurt favors the framework of discrete emotions which states that emotions are physical and psychological reactions to cognitive appraisals – judgements of the degree to which environmental factors facilitate or inhibit our goals. Positive emotions mean that the wider environment align and facilitate goals while negative emotions mean that the wider environment is preventing and restricting goals from being accomplished.

Chapter Five lists five qualities that define various emotions: qualitative 'feel', physiological changes, neurological simulation, manifest expression, and cognitive changes.

In terms of discrete emotions, theorists have identified the nine categories according to how they manifest, and the actions and tendencies associated with them. The types of nine emotions are anger, fear, disgust, guilt, sadness, envy, happiness, hope, and pride. For each type, Kurt provides a meticulous explanation on how that specific emotion relates to persuasiveness and communication. Next, he discusses four of these nine emotions (fear, anger, guilt, and pride) but within the context of how they are used by violent extremists in terrorist propaganda.

Of note, the excellent incorporation of real-world case studies in terrorist propaganda and how this content exploits the ability to elicit a set of emotions in a target audience highlights their emotionally manipulative nature. It also reveals how various layers of propaganda, ranging from word choice to background music selection to accompanying imagery are layered to create a set of specific desired emotions in the viewer.

Oftentimes, coverage of violent extremist propaganda seems to focus on the negative hostility that is present in certain messaging, however, Kurt's examination serves

as an important reminder that the gamut of reactions these extremists seek to elicit from both their target audience and 'enemies' are complex and diverse.

The final section discusses how countering violent extremist initiatives can use strategic messaging based on emotional appeals to counter extremist propaganda and ideologies. He offers detailed step-by-step processes on how to construct a message based off of appeals to anger, hope, and pride.

In short, this chapter focused on answering the questions of: What are emotions? What drives emotions? How do terrorists exploit emotions? Can counter-messaging employ the same tactics used by extremists but with the purpose of challenging them? How can violent extremist attempts to emotionally manipulate be effectively countered with opposing messaging?

Part Three - The War: Future Challenges

The Coming Persuasion Wars

This section considers the damage of disinformation, deepfakes, and stochastic terrorism. The importance and relevancy of online ecosystems is an essential factor to consider when thinking about extremism, the proliferation of disinformation, and related issues.

In reference to theory on disinformation, Kurt outlines why it is so effective: people are typically not trained or skilled in distinguishing real information from false information, they tend to assume information is true if it comes from what they believe is an objective source, they may use cognitive shortcuts when faced with an influx of information, and lastly, they are more accepting of an argument when it is accompanied by evidence even if the evidence itself is unreliable or false.



Kurt then references a study on Russian disinformation tactics which found the following methods to be effective: flood message targets with disinformation, trick them with the illusion of expertise and objectivity, tailor your messages so they align with desired goals, you have effectively weaponized false information.

That being said, why do state and non-state actors use disinformation? The proceeding section answers this question. The sources of disinformation have a diverse array of motivations including undermining political beliefs, profiting from financial gain, obtaining status from the online communities in which they (sources of disinformation) operate, promoting ideological radicalization, and fueling anger and extremism to encourage the usage of violence towards enemies. Kurt proposes attitudinal inoculation, previously discussed as a possible strategy for combatting disinformation in the public sphere.

Deepfakes are another form of disinformation. Although the term may bring to mind altered videos, they also include other media such as tampered audio clips. More specific forms of deepfakes include face swaps, voice swaps, deepfake lip synching – synthetic video whereby footage of an individual's facial movements matches a specific audio style, and deep-fake puppetry – mapping one face onto another to reenact facial gestures.

Stochastic terrorism is the third topic discussed in the chapter which Kurt defines as the use of mass communications to insight random actors to carry out violent or terrorist acts that are statistically predictable but individually unpredictable. As highlighted in the chapter, the term stochastic is rooted in probability theory and it has previously been used to describe and explain social phenomena.

Steps that may lead to acts of stochastic terrorism include what psychologist, Valerie Tarico, identified as a public figure with mass communications abilities demonizing a group of people, the target of the public figure is viewed as inhuman and dangerous by their audience, the public figure uses violent rhetoric and imagery when referring to their target. If and when a member of the public figure's in-group carries out a terrorist act, the public figure immediately denies association and responsibility. To counter stochastic terrorism, Kurt purposes the wide dissemination of persuasive campaigns that push against stochastic terrorist narratives through the Internet as well as mass media sources.

Fighting Back

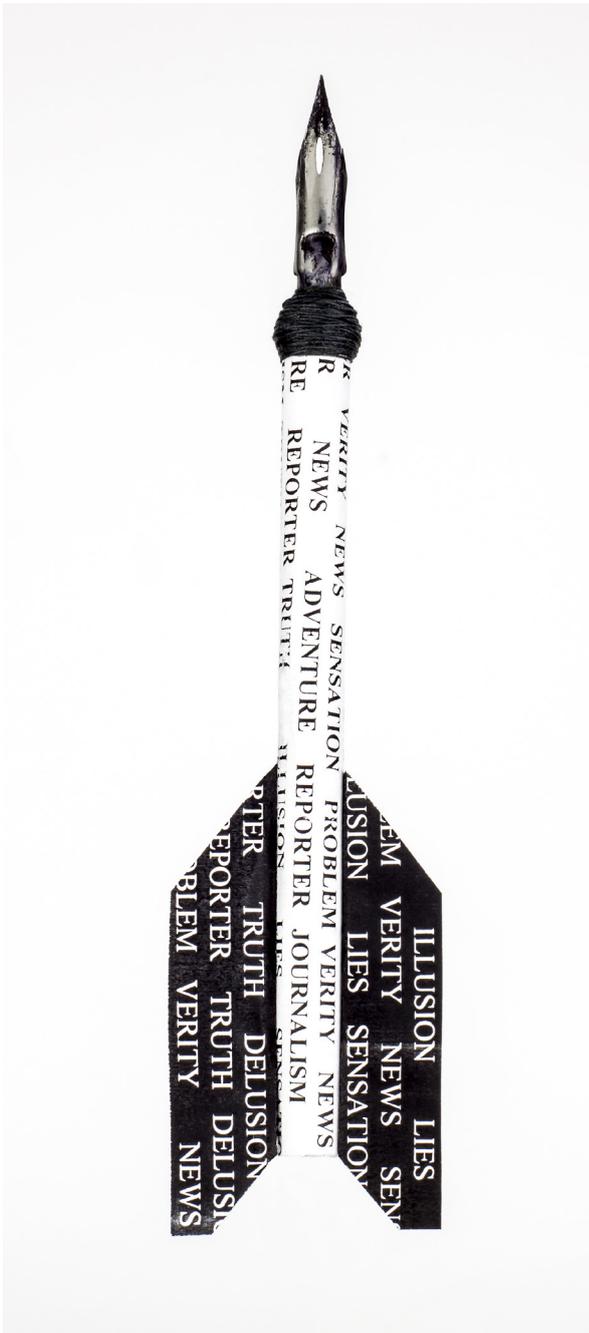
This final chapter is the shortest and it focuses on proposing new directions for further research and nascent ideas which will need confirmation and examination through empirical studies. Questions explored in this section include: if immersive virtual environments (IVEs) have proven persuasive in such a variety of contexts, can they be used for the purpose of counter-radicalization? What kinds of counter-narratives could be implemented with the use of IVEs? How can we leverage positive persuasive outcomes afforded by customization and personalization of online interfaces and content to affect counter-radicalization processes?

For each question posed in the text, Kurt explores possible future pathways and frames the discussion within the wider framework of the theories and guidelines previously woven throughout the book. Although he expands on his own thoughts on these various topics, he also encourages the reader to contemplate their own ideas on how to move the research forward and use the book as a starting point that will ideally inform the development of new studies and methodologies.

Conclusion

Weaponized Words offers an incredibly comprehensive examination of communication and persuasion theories and how these theories provide a grounding from which to construct counter-narrative and radicalization methodologies. Kurt provides step by step guidelines on how to create effective approaches to challenge violent extremist propaganda and narratives that academics, policymakers, social workers, mental health professionals, non-governmental organizations, and government will find invaluable. The blueprints presented in this book will undoubtedly be used as a foundation to construct further cutting-edge empirical research on counter-narrative effectiveness guided by the solid novel approaches discussed throughout each chapter.

The concise delivery of counter-narrative blueprints accomplishes the crucial goal of translating theory into actionable approaches that act as concrete guidance and the various case studies woven throughout the chapters further clarify how these action steps can be implemented. Case studies are primarily drawn from white supremacists and Salafi jihadists, but the overall frameworks are broad enough to allow for flexibility in their application depending on the contexts. Although the terrorism threat landscape will shift overtime, the



incorporation of narratives and themes promoting extremist ideologies into violent extremists' messaging will continue to play a key role which highlights the necessity of this flexibility in application. The content itself can be broken into three parts:

1. background knowledge and theories on terrorism, radicalization, persuasion and counter-extremism programs.
2. Persuasion and communication theory and how this theoretical grounding informs counter-extremist messaging strategies as well as how to construct effective counter-messaging.
3. An overview of future threat landscapes, how disinformation perpetrated by both State and non-state actors, deep fakes, and stochastic terrorism will pose or are already posing real threats, and counter-messaging strategies to challenge these threats.

Weaponized Words covers a large amount of material and readers will come away with in-depth understandings on theory, counter-extremism initiatives, counter-messaging strategies, and the complex nature of extremist and violent extremist messaging.

Kurt contributes innovative methodologies and strategies on how to engage in counter-messaging work in a book that will be key literature in the field. There were points of interest that could be expanded upon and studied at a more in-depth level. For example, it would be interesting to conduct a broad review of counter-messaging efforts that are not effective in their goals and consider the specific elements that hindered these attempts. How do government vs non-government driven initiatives compare? Another topic could be a comparative study on violent extremist messaging from groups within the same ideology and opposing groups from separate ideologies or a study on which discreet emotions are amplified depending on the target audience (women vs. men, in-group vs. out-group, etc.).

As Kurt identified in Chapter Four, *Vaccinating Against the Enemy*, determining if booster shots of inoculation messaging are necessary to strengthen immunity against extremist propaganda would be a crucial next step in the research.

In summary, *Weaponized Words* is an essential read and an innovative groundbreaking advancement in the terrorism studies and communications field – especially in regard to counter-messaging strategies and the real-world applicability of inoculation theory. Practitioners will find in *Weaponized Words* a reliable handbook with constructive outlines, programs focused on counter-messaging will find the grounding they need to effectively create nuanced and effective narratives to challenge extremist ideologies, and researchers will find solid literature to inform their research as well as ideas on new research directions that can expand the collective understanding on how extremists create resonating propaganda and how to counter it.

ISRAFRONTBOKOHAM
FRANGEVOLUNTEERS
FRONTAWAMI LEAGUE
AS **WEAPONIZED** GERM
FINUITYIRAWORDS
FRYANEROTHERHOOD
FALSHABAABHAMMER
FNSARALDINSHININ
FOLLAHSAVIOURSEC

*The Strategic Role of Persuasion
in Violent Radicalization
and Counter-Radicalization*

KURT BRADDOCK

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