

DEVIANT FANDOMS: THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF TERRORISM FANDOM PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

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Between April 2013 and June 2018, estimates by International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation estimated that around 42,000 individuals had been radicalized by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (known by the acronym ISIS) (Khomami). As early as 2015, estimates by thinktanks such as the National Economic Bureau placed the number of recruits traveling to Syria to join ISIS at 30,000 (Benmelech and Klor, 1). Surprisingly, Benmelech and Klor documented that recruits to ISIS were likely to come from countries with high per capita gross domestic product, low income inequality, and highly developed political institutions (Benmelech and Klor, 2). Recruits came, not from economically underdeveloped nation-states, but from places such as New Zealand, Canada, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States.

Governments from North America, Western Europe, and elsewhere also became concerned with the media sophistication of ISIS. News stories on ISIS seemed to communicate recurring themes. One theme, as outlines above, was the unlikely provenance of many of its recruits. Another theme, picked up by news organizations, was on the sophisticated use of media, including social media, used to recruit young people into ISIS. Media outlets in the

United States began to cover how ISIS was waging and winning a media war. These media outlets reported the story with titles such as “ISIS Has a Really Slick and Sophisticated Media Department,” “Why is ISIS winning the media war?,” and “Who is behind Isis’s terrifying online propaganda operation?” (Becker; Koerner; Kingsley). The use of social media by ISIS has been well documented, both in the popular press and in academic research.

In this paper, we seek to establish a theoretical framework for understanding and studying the phenomenon of social media use by terrorist organizations. As researchers based in the United States, we acknowledge that most terrorism that takes place in the United States is domestic in origin and not affiliated with Islamist terrorism. Regardless of its media content, whether a white supremacist message or an Islamist message, the effect of the media on its audience is similar. Rather than testing a hypothesis, we are extending and building on established sociological theory to interpret the phenomenon of terroristic social media messaging in contemporary society

The Social Character of Social Media

The concept of social character was first described by psychologist Erich Fromm in

Fear of Freedom (2001 [1942]). Within sociology, David Riesman further amplified and applied the concept to study society and the types of individuals within (Mestrovic 1997: 44). Social character, beyond serving as a psychological concept also serves as a descriptor for sociological phenomena. At first glance, social character may appear to be very similar to the psychological phenomenon of personality, yet it is not (Riesman 3). While personality concerns the more or less permanent attributes of the individual self, social character relates to the way drives and satisfactions are socially organized within the individual (Riesman 3). Social character is a shared product of a society, even when found within individuals (Riesman 3). Social character, then, is a product that develops from the experiences held in common by groups, even entire societies (Riesman 4).

Riesman's best known work on social character is *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* ([1950] 2001). Riesman, who never held a doctorate in sociology and worked as an attorney, co-wrote *The Lonely Crowd* with Nathan Glazer and Reuel Denney. A national best-seller with over a million copies sold in 1954, the success of *The Lonely Crowd* catapulted Riesman to national prominence (Horowitz, 1006). After appearing on the front cover of Time Magazine, Riesman was a household name (Horowitz, 1006). *The Lonely Crowd* is considered a classic in social and cultural criticism. To this day, Riesman's book is still the bestselling book in sociology.

The American public's fascination with *The Lonely Crowd* was in its rich description

and analysis of social character types, and the transformation in American society from among them. Riesman described tradition-directed, inner-directed, and other-directed social character types. Riesman openly stated that the three social character types were not presented in hierarchical order from less to more developed. Rather, the three character types were modes of social organization that appear in historical order. The transition in societies from an earlier type of social character (tradition-directed) to a later type (inner-directed), or from inner-directed to other-directed, should not be seen as progress, improvement, or evolution.

In historically development, the first type of social character, or tradition-directed social character, is one in which the social self learns rigid rules and roles from one's society. Tradition-directed societies are ones which value traditions and extended families. In these tradition-directed societies, people do not think of themselves as individuals, but as members of a group, typically an extended family such as a clan or tribe. Each character type is animated by fears and aspirations, and in the case of tradition-directed character types they fear shame and aspire towards achievements in honor (Riesman 24). Shame and honor exist in tradition-directed societies as complete opposites of each other.

Next, in its historical development is the social character of inner-directedness. Individuals who are inner-directed social character types are guided by goals and motivated from within by principles. For inner-directed types, it is not the allegiance to families or tribes that guides goals and

fears, but the guidance towards individualized goals and fears are set in motion by adult-authorities in the individual's world (Riesman, 24). In this case, the person is an individual with very specific notions of goals and fears, and is guided through life by these internal motivations (Riesman, 24). Riesman used the metaphor of the gyroscope to describe this mental mechanism in inner-directed types, which alerted the inner-directed individual when he or she was off course in life (Riesman, 24). Unlike the tradition-directed type, for whom shame existed as the emotion to avoid at all costs, the primary emotion organizing the life of inner-directed types is guilt.

Compared to the inner-directed type, the person with other-directed social character has no internal gyroscope of any kind (Riesman, 25). Contrary to the tradition-directed or inner-directed type, the other-directed person is motivated entirely by society (Riesman, 25). The other-directed type responds to cues from the social environment, taking his or her signals from others (Riesman, 25). The metaphor that Riesman uses to explain the mental workings of the other-directed type is that of the radar, constantly scanning the social environment for cues on everything (Riesman, 25). Without internal principles or family honor to guide his or her actions or beliefs, the other-directed character type is instead motivated by approval and anxiety (Riesman, 25). Much like shame and honor are polar opposites in the social world of the inner-directed type, anxiety and approval are the polar opposites in the world of the other-directed.

Two caveats should be noted in understanding social character types. First, the character types should be understood as ideal types. Ideal types are abstractions, and they do not exist in pure form in actual society. Rather, ideal types serve as models against which specific people and societies can be compared. A person in contemporary American society may be a mixture of the three types with, one type dominating. In present society, the most prevailing type is that of other-directed social character.

A second caveat is that other-directed character types are motivated by approval above and beyond that of the other two character types. Where the other-directed character type is distinguished from tradition-directeds and inner-directeds is in the value of acceptance: being liked and popular is placed above all other values or principles. As a contrast to this value, tradition-directed and inner-directed people like to be liked and feel accepted within their own respective societies, but not at the cost of another value. For tradition-directed types, being liked never trumps shame, and for inner-directed types, being liked is not as important as being true to one's principles or goals.

The use of social media by terrorist organizations appeals to the other-directed attributes of their consumers. Social media and closely related internet platforms are attuned to the value of other-directed types and other-directed society. Hence, other-directed types place value on how accepted something is. The more acceptance, the less anxiety they can feel about enjoying a song, a movie, or a video on Youtube. Even though Riesman wrote *The Lonely Crowd*

nearly 70 years ago, present day society in the United States is an exaggeration but not a contradiction of the trends that Riesman could see as early as 1950s America. Other-directed individuals today do not eat a restaurant unless it has the approval of users on Yelp!, a social media platform for evaluating such businesses. When they eat at that restaurant, they seek approval over their food selection by photographing it and sharing the image on social media platforms in order to be reassured by their friends that the food, in fact, does look delicious. Other-directed types will even plan entire vacations on the basis of the vacation being photogenic enough for social media (Delgado). A neologism, the word “instagrammable,” has even entered the language: other directed types are progressively influenced by how “instagrammable,” or photogenic, something is on social media.

Terrorist Fandom

Riesman described fandom in relation to other-directedness (73). Other-directed types are highly susceptible to the “morality of the group,” meaning the opinions of one’s peers (73). Riesman states:

Each particular peer group has its fandoms and lingo. Safety consists not in mastering a difficult craft but in mastering a battery of consumer preferences and the mode of their expression. The preferences are for articles or “heroes” of consumption and for members of the group itself. The proper mode of expression

requires feeling out with skill and sensitivity the probable tastes of the others and then swapping mutual likes and dislikes to maneuver intimacy. (73)

In the era of social media, where everything is graded on a “thumbs up/thumbs down,” “like/dislike” scale on smartphone apps, it is eerie to realize the prophetic quality of Riesman’s insight. Likewise, other-directedness and fandoms go hand in hand.

In academic studies and journalist coverage of terrorism, social media, and the recruitment of ISIS supporters and white supremacists, one insight that has not been mentioned is this: recruits and potential recruits of terrorist organizations behave as if they are members of a fandom. Fandoms in American popular culture form around beloved intellectual properties, which take the form of movies, television shows, comic books, toys, and video games. Examples of fandoms are those based on Star Wars, Marvel comics (and now Marvel Universe movies), Transformers, and Japanese Animation (known as anime among its fans). Each fandom creates its own set of words and slang, or lingo, with each fandom deciding on the preferences for consumption for the members of its groups. While fandoms are generally considered subcultures, or groups whose norms and value might deviate slightly from the mainstream, they are not generally considered seriously deviant or criminal. Terrorist fandoms, on the other hand, are deviant and criminal by definition.

In regard to Islamist, terrorist propaganda, outsiders of its fandom see the

“hard side” of terrorism. ISIS, for example, was notorious for producing and circulating via social media and the internet, videos of horrific violence. In infamous videos, ISIS terrorists set fire to a captured pilot of the Syrian Air Force, or recorded themselves decapitating prisoners (Hassan). However, the other-directed side of Islamist terrorism and its recruits complete the picture, and their other-directed character remains to be explained.

For example, in one 30 day time period, an analyst for Quilliam, a counterterrorism think tank, analyzed 1,146 ISIS propaganda events (Winter, 5). Winter, the author of the report, noted that the message of the propaganda videos functioned almost as “brand management” (6). Propaganda videos and other social media messages depicted ever changing themes, almost on a daily basis, which ranged from themes of “the ISIS caliphate as utopia,” “brutality,” “victimhood,” “mercy,” and “belonging.” Riesman stated that a characteristic of the other-directed person was in fear of commitment to one thing and a preference for a vast array of marginally differentiated products (139). An inner-directed person’s mental gyroscope was directed to one goal or preference, similar to a guiding star, but other-directed personality types are directed to ever changing goals and preferences, similar to a Milky Way galaxy of choices (Riesman, 139). The other-directed aspect of online terrorist propaganda from ISIS seemed to be “brutality” one day, “mercy” the next, “utopia” a third, and so on. Even terrorist recruits, who seemed to be mostly young people from other-directed societies (USA, Canada, UK, France, etc.), were

spared the anxiety of having to commit to one terrorist goal or preference: each new day brought a new message from the Milky Way galaxy of terrorist themes.

Winter’s study also makes an important point supporting Riesman’s understanding of other-directed types: over half of the propaganda events were of daily life inside ISIS controlled territories in Iraq and Syria (7). Riesman states that a fate for the other-directed is in the death of imagination:

Imagination withers in most of the [other-directed] children by adolescence. What survives is neither artistic craft nor artistic fantasy but the socialization of taste and interest that can already be seen in process in the stylization of perception in the children’s painting and stories [at school]. The stories of the later progressive grades are apt to be characterized by “realism.” (62)

In other-directed societies, there is an abundance of reality television shows. Most of the shows are interchangeable one with the other, its characters interchangeable one with the other, and the shows are marked by gradations of marginal differentiation. The episodes are forgettable, requiring neither commitment nor investment by the audience, which is to the liking of other-directed types. ISIS propaganda videos, tweets, blogs, and other propaganda events were, in a sense, like a reality show.

Normal fandoms outside of terrorism function in the same way. Being a member of the fandom becomes like following a reality television show. A fan can read blogs

about Marvel superheroes, watch Youtube videos reviewing movies, watch Youtube videos commenting on other Youtube videos reviewing movies, follow opinion leaders on social media platforms such as Twitter, and so on. And the Marvel fandom is interchangeable with Star Wars, Magic: The Gathering, and other objects of fandom in the sense that they operate in similar, other-directed ways.

Terrorist fandoms follow similar patterns of involvement and commitment. Following the shooting of the Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina, white supremacists started forming fandoms of the killing (Ghansah). Calling themselves “Roofies” as a take-off on the last name of the murderer, Dylan Roof, fans of deviant, white supremacist fandoms used online social media communities in order to express their admiration and proclaim their allegiance to Roof’s ideologies (Ghansah).

Another quality of ISIS propaganda, for example, also dealt with imagery that is bizarre by inner-directed standards. Two such types of imagery caught the attention of western newspapers, and it dealt with ISIS fighters posing with jars of Nutella, a hazelnut cocoa spread popular in western countries, or of ISIS fighters posing with kittens (Khaleeli). A journalist covering the phenomenon of Isis Nutella and ISIS kittens sums up the dynamic by accurately identifying the peer-oriented nature of social media propaganda:

Yet this *incongruous, peer-led approach* [my emphasis] has allowed Isis to reach beyond its usual channels. Prospective recruits can

identify with the chatty, young, female jihadists, many of whom post messages saying how happy they are to be living in an Islamic land. Longer blogs, and the Ask.fm sites of foreign fighters, give practical and motivational tips. (Khaleeli)

The images of kittens playing with ISIS fighters gives potential recruits an image of something pleasant in contrast to the hardcore imagery of beheadings. In other words, it gives another choice in the Milky Way galaxy of choices, and it falls in line with other-directed principles of “keeping it real,” being “nice,” and “having fun.” For potential other-directed recruits, seeing the terrorist who is dedicated to his cause without distractions (in other words, inner-directed) is no fun. Other-directed terrorists want “fun” in fundamentalism.

Some observers have been critical of journalistic coverage of ISIS social media propaganda and point out its low production value and amateurish quality. An academic appraisal of the situation sums up the situation thus:

Countless other journalists praised the Islamic State’s masterly use of social media, pointing out how “slick” and on-point its message was.

These fawning appraisals helped burnish the group’s invincible image and might have spurred ISIS to create yet more videos, ramping up the shock quotient as it went. As the Spanish photographer Ricardo Vilanova, who spent eight months in

an ISIS jail, told the BBC, “I think the West is also to blame because we became a loudspeaker for the Islamic State. Every time there was an execution, anything related with the Islamic State would get the front pages. I believed that encouraged them to get crueler and amplify their message.”

I count two problems with the media’s response to ISIS videos: It was ethically dubious to praise what was often straight-up snuff, and the videos were not really all that good. Many were no good at all. (Cottee)

The assessment that online propaganda by terrorist groups is amateurish yet effective in radicalizing or recruiting individuals has to be reconciled. Why is it that amateurish videos for ISIS or neonazi groups compete effectively against slick, multi-million dollar campaigns by household brands such as Coca-Cola or McDonald’s in winning the loyalty of some individuals? As stated above, the idea of an ISIS caliphate, or white nationalism, or racist ideology generally, have become brands (Winter).

The reason that a hastily photoshopped image on social media works to draw the sympathy of would-be terrorists is that it appeals to other-directed sensibilities. Riesman states that in other-directed dealings, what counts is not necessarily production value but a feeling that the message is “sincere” (194). Other-directed reactions to performances, and propaganda for the other-directed becomes a performance are these:

One element may be the apparent freedom of the entertainer to express emotions that others cannot or dare not express. Again, sincerity means performance in a style which is not aggressive or cynical, which may even be defenseless, as the question-answering or press-conferencing technique of some politicians appear to be. The performer puts himself at the mercy of both his audience and his emotions. Thus sincerity is on the side of the performer who evokes the audience’s tolerance for him: it would not be fair to be too critical of the person who has left himself wide open and extended the glad hand of friendliness.

But the popular emphasis on sincerity means more than this. *It means that the source of criteria for judgment has shifted from the content of the performance and its goodness or badness [my emphasis], aesthetically speaking, to the personality of the performer. He is judged for his attitude toward the audience, an attitude which is either sincere or insincere, rather than by his relation to his craft, that is, his honesty and skill.* (194)

Terrorist videos and other forms of propaganda, whether they are ISIS videos or propaganda from white supremacist web sites need not be slick, professionally produced media products. What makes such form of propaganda effective in manipulating their audiences is in the apparent sincerity of its message.

Consumers of terrorist propaganda believe that the message contained in a terrorist video, video game, or ask.fm audiocast is sincere, even more sincere than the message for consuming brands with multi-billion dollar budgets.

Sincerity works in two directions. Riesman states of sincerity among the audience itself:

By ignoring what the audience believes itself to lack (ability to perform) and emphasizing the qualities that it believes itself secretly to possess (capacity for sincerity), the audience is enabled, to a degree, to patronize the artist just as it patronizes the bumbling participants in a give-away show. (195)

In a sense, this is the origin of fan-generated content. Among fandoms such as Star Wars, Marvel Universe, and Anime, fans create their own fan-generated content in the way of alternate universe coffee houses, cosplay (creating and wearing elaborate costumes based on characters), and fan fiction. Not merely satisfied to consume media content, other-directed fans create their own, semi-original media content using characters, settings, situations, and ideas from the object of their fandom. Rather than create a new space opera from scratch, Star Wars fans, for example, may write short stories or novellas using characters taken from the Star Wars movie franchise.

The other-directed creation of fan-generated content, almost always of very low quality production value yet sincere in

its love for the object of the fandom, is a form of prosumption. Prosumption was first coined and described by Alvin Toffler (1980) in *The Third Wave*. Writing before Toffler, Riesman wrote about peer groups as “consumer unions” consuming themselves:

For indeed, over and beyond the socialization of consumption preferences and the exchange of consumption shoptalk by this consumers’ union [a peer group, in the case of popular culture, a fandom], the membership is engaged in consuming itself. That is, people and friendships are viewed as the greatest of all consumables. (81)

The other-directed mode of life is one in which the boundaries of consumer and producer become progressively blurred. Fast food, which is an other-directed version of restaurants, with a similar history paralleling the rise of other-directed types, provide this type of presumptive experience: not relying on waiters or waitresses, the consumer takes his or her own food to the table, pours his or her drink out of the drink fountain, and buses his or her table at the end of the meal. Likewise, terrorist propaganda and even terrorist actions are presumed products by members of terrorist fandoms:

But while parts of Isis’s messaging are centralised and run by professionals, its online strength is also derived from the participation of a large swath of independent actors. First, there is Isis’s online fanclub: thousands of Isis supporters with no

official role within the group who boost its brand by retweeting its hashtags, and translating its Arabic members' messages for potential sympathisers in the west. Many of them make Photoshopped slogans to promote the group – in fact, many of Isis's slick viral adverts come about this way, claims al-Janabi. "The graphic design is mostly independent and done by individuals. For example, that picture that said 'Baghdad, we are coming' – nobody asked [its creators] to do it, but they did it anyway."

And then there are the Isis militants themselves. They tweet about their experiences in the field, and publish their own private pictures – sometimes gory images of severed heads, sometimes mundane snaps of food and cats – often to appreciative audiences. (Kingsley)

To the other-directed individuals under the thrall of ISIS or white supremacists ideology, creating fan-generated, deviant propaganda of one's own bears a similarity to the way that a normal person who happens to be a fan of Dr. Who, the television series, will write a short story of fan fiction to share with other fans online. The gravity of terrorism becomes normalized in the terrorist fandom: going to Syria to join in on the cause becomes treated as if a fan for Marvel Comics was traveling to San Diego to a major comic convention; creating an account and participating in a white supremacist message board becomes normalized as if one was on a message

board participating in discussions about science fiction.

Conclusion

As of 2019, media reports that ISIS in Syria is quickly losing territory and facing an imminent defeat (McKernan). ISIS may well be headed towards a physical destruction in Syria, but socially significant is that it has demonstrated the new repertoire for terrorist public relations and marketing. However, the new repertoire for terrorist public relations was not invented or created by ISIS: it is an extension of the other-directed character of its followers and of the other-directed character of social media. Similarly, white supremacist groups in the United States also use many of the same tactics to produce and prosume its message among the white supremacist fandom.

Terrorist fandom rejects the norms, values, and beliefs of western society while adopting, paradoxically, much of its social character. This paradigm shift in seeing would-be terrorist recruits and supporters as fans of a deviant, criminal fandom opens new possibilities for research, and, ultimately, control. Fandom studies can and should be extended to include terrorist fandoms. Research on how law abiding fans form virtual and real communities, create fanfiction, and migrate to new fandoms when old fandoms fade away can help answer questions on why would-be terrorists become radicalized, seek out other likeminded individuals, self-propagandize, and perhaps migrate to different forms of criminal activity.

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