

White Knights, Black Armour, Digital Worlds: Exploring the Efficacy of Analysing Online Manifestos of Terrorist Actors in the Counter Terrorism Landscape



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Abstract Over the past few years, a number of major terrorist attacks have been accompanied by the uploading of detailed, online manifestos, which chart and publicise ideologies, motivations and tactical choices in the backdrop of a dehumanized foe. Such manifestos can also act as inspiration for potential copycats and group-think style supporters within an insulated network. However the types of conclusions that can be drawn from manifesto analysis is a complex issue. The broad aim of this chapter is to explore such identity construction and the usefulness of analysing terrorist manifestos through a narrative framework, with a view to demonstrating that manifestos can be understood as a script to a violent performance (the terrorist act) in the theatre of terrorism (the digital world). These insights can serve the development of policy directed towards aspects of the personal attitudes and the social drivers that are necessary for the amplification of violence rather than in the often impenetrable prediction of who is and who is not likely to become a terrorist actor.

1 Introduction

Militant actions and the promotion of online manifestos demonstrates a concerning advancement in efforts to prevent and counter terrorism and violent extremism¹ (“PVE”). Over the past few years, a number of major terrorist attacks have been

¹For the purposes of this chapter, “violent extremism” is defined as the broad umbrella term of ideologically motivated violence, where terrorism is a subset. These two terms may be used interchangeably throughout this paper and will depend on the terminology being used in the respective piece of research literature being quoted.

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accompanied by the uploading of detailed, online manifestos, which chart and publicise ideologies, motivations and tactical choices in the backdrop of a dehumanized foe. Such manifestos can also act as inspiration for potential copycats and group-think style supporters within an insulated network. However the types of conclusions that can be drawn from manifesto analysis is a complex issue. From an intervention point of view, the analysis of extremist manifestos can be a fraught exercise, often grappling with a number of issues both theoretically (narrator reliability and analytical subjectivity) and ethically (media reproduction and the magnification of inciteful messaging).

However, recent work in areas like criminology [1, 2] and sociology [3, 4] has suggested that there is merit in exploring identity formation and applying narrative frameworks in the analysis of terrorist manifestos. Manifestos not only provide insights into inhabited social worlds of terrorist actors but can offer a number of benefits in efforts to understand the terrorist mindset and its underpinnings: that is, a sense of how different factors merge to define, shape and sustain activist narratives and biases and then direct identity-formation. As a starting point, individuals who use politically motivated violence often seek to justify it as this level of engagement can feed into a wider sense of identity, meaning and purpose. Identity formation and reification in particular, is an essential aspect of the radicalisation process.² In other words, an ideology that espouses or validates violence can give individuals ‘answers’ that make sense for their particular need and create an identity fusion (see [5]).

The broad aim of this chapter is to explore such identity construction and the usefulness of analysing terrorist manifestos through a narrative framework, with a view to demonstrating that manifestos can be understood as a script to a violent performance (the terrorist act) in the theatre of terrorism (the digital world). To this end, the chapter will unpack the dynamic of identity fusion and a specific online terrorist manifesto that coupled with an activist extremist agenda while seeking, in part, to exploit the media in a national security context. The March 15 terrorist attacks in Christchurch in 2019 was staged ‘in real time’ (see [6])—by an adherent to a Far-Right extremist ideology that cut across several transnational movements within the milieu of White supremacy, Neo-Nazism and “ecofascism”³ (herein the author of this manifesto will be referred to as “BT”).⁴

The chapter will also utilise social identity approaches and the above analytical framework to explore BT’s tendency to search for order, empowerment and structure;

² In this context, radicalisation itself refers to a process by which an individual or group embraces an extreme ideology so that an ‘outsider group’ is seen as posing a dire threat to the survival of the ‘insider-group’ and they therefore reject the existing status quo – an outlook that might justify the use of violence to bring about political change.

³ Eco-fascism is an ideology that blames the demise of the environment on overpopulation, immigration, and over-industrialization and has its roots in neo-Nazism as a means to ‘protect and save’ the planet.

⁴ This point has been taken to heart by NZ Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern who has not publicly used BT’s name in any communications or statements (<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-03-19/christ-church-shootings-jacinda-ardern-house-speech-shooter-name/10917030>).

not only for what their experiences and orientations might reveal about the often-unclear dynamic between online and offline behaviour, but also the cognitive styles of those who inhabit toxic and hateful digital ecosystems that can boost activist identities, negative stereotypes, expressions of ethno-centrism and wider processes of self-justification that might lead to validating the value of violence.

Lastly, a number of other ethical issues arise between media reporting obligations and the content of a terrorist manifesto that is promoting violence. This dilemma will also be briefly explored. In particular, [2] cite the influence that the media has in providing violent actors a platform and the consequences of expanding an extremist profile that can inspire contagion and copycat effects. Media coverage of mass shooters rewards them by making them famous and delivers a clear incentive for future offenders to attack. Instead, the authors argue that if the media modifies how they cover mass shooters, such anticipated changes might be able to deny offenders the personal attention they seek in their quest for significance and help to deter some future perpetrators from normalizing violent behaviour [62].

2 Background

The challenges to PVE are represented by the need to recognise and detect routes into violent extremism and indeed proactively work to mitigate processes of radicalisation. This challenge is complicated due to the globalisation of ideas and technological advancements that can link like-minded individuals, promote moral ambiguity and strengthen zero-sum radical beliefs that rationalize the utility of violence. So even with a numerical decrease in the actual occurrences of terrorist violence globally [7] the threat to society by acts of violent extremism consistently ranks as a high level priority for governments all over the world while any ‘silver bullet’ solution towards completely eliminating terrorism is naïve at-best or simply over-simplistic (see [8]). At the same time, there are always trade-offs when considering the search for security—this applies to governance approaches as well as to the legal and ethical aspects of security.

One particular contemporary stream of risk assessment that has re-emerged in recent years as a revised threat to national security and community stability is due to the growth and impact of Right-Wing Extremism (‘RWE’). As captured by the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee in April 2020, in exploring unique forms of political violence:

... extreme right-wing terrorist groups and individuals are becoming more transnational. Research has long recognized the potential for extreme right-wing groups to forge strong transnational links and build networks. Recent evidence suggests that there has been a greater exchange of views between like-minded individuals, both online and offline. These connections allow extreme right-wing groups to improve their tactics, develop better counter-intelligence techniques, solidify their violent extremist views and broaden their global networks.

Such extremist movements continue to employ a number of tactics to magnify and amplify messaging, outreach and recruitment that can strengthen extremist identity. And one specific trend that does appear to be on the rise is the online promotion and use of manifestos by lone actors [9]. More than just statements of intent and blatant propaganda, perpetrators of mass violence such as school shooters and violent extremists have often drafted and disseminated manifestos for more personal reasons: i.e., to seek fame or notoriety [2, 10] or to reinvent themselves as white knights in “black armour”. Black Armour is a phrase coined by ([11], 92) is defined as “the process that such individuals may come to embrace a self-styled image based on low self-esteem or negative self-perceptions that may be tinged with an ominous or threatening undertone. That is, they embrace their dark, negative cognitions and fashion them into a recognizable suit of black armour”.

In broad terms, a manifesto is defined as an *ex-ante* communique expressing an actor’s values, intentions and the motivations behind their actions (which at the time of its writing are yet to occur and by the time of dissemination already took place). Rather than incoherent ramblings or crude propaganda, the assumption here is that terrorist manifestos represent an exercise in the selection and emphasis (or de-emphasis) of issues, problems, moral evaluations and solutions, that act to legitimize target selection and a course of violent action (see [12]).

With the increasing ubiquity of the Internet as a way for users to generate and disseminate their own content, the ability for these works to reach wider audiences is unprecedented (see [13]. As summarised by [14], 23) “...this digital ecosystem is fuelling a cumulative momentum which serves to lower ‘thresholds’ to violence for those engaged in this space...as one attack encourages and inspires another, creating a growing ‘canon’ of ‘saints’ and ‘martyrs’ for others to emulate”. So from an audience’s perspective, we assume that a terrorist actor’s intention is to either terrify or inspire us, depending on what type of audience segment we represent to them. Thus in the broad spectrum of policy, research, and programming aimed at preventing such acts from recurring in the future, understanding the terrorist’s mindset, identity formation and interpretation of their social world does remain one of the most central factors for developing appropriate and effective PVE policy responses (see [15], 107).

Much academic interest in the terrorist use of manifestos has tended to tilt towards more psycholinguistic assessments of risks and threats for the purposes of intervention [16]. And while these types of analyses are important (and indeed, foundational) they often face a number of challenges including narrator reliability and analytical subjectivity ([1], 634). These problems can sometimes undermine the usefulness of analysing the narratives for the purpose of risk assessment and intervention, this in addition to the close proximity of the publication to the violent act that leaves little time for preventative actions [17]. In addition to this, and as explored later, violent online actors and actions do pose a difficult challenge for how mass media, social media companies and other public commentators should respond to a massacre broadcast of such manifestos across the Internet.

3 Manifestos as the Script, Violence as the Final Act

Few studies have applied narrative frameworks to terrorist manifestos in order to learn about the social worlds that terrorist actors construct within their own interpretations (See [18, 19, 64]). This is despite their potential to teach us about the mindsets, experiences and logic (however, flawed or compromised) that lead to these actors to violence in the first place. Instead, scholars of terrorism have tended to focus on particular aspects such as psychological predispositions or traumatic experiences as necessary precursors to violent radicalisation (see [20]). Yet such research ambitions can fail to view terrorist violence as acts embedded within, and reliant upon, a social context, in-group pressures and a process of moral re-justification to, in part, create an ‘us-against-them’ atmosphere in daily life.

The value then of analysing terrorist manifestos through a narrative framework becomes not just an exercise in understanding what story the author is telling, but also possibly what story the author is living. In other words, terrorist manifestos could also be considered as another way to understand a terrorist’s own narrative of the social world—sequences of linked people, places and processes (see [4])—that could indeed provide and add insights to our ability to answer elusive questions about the motives, processes and synergies that result in a sustained participation in violent extremism. This approach can incorporate a wide range of prevention efforts that aim to curb the potential of generalised imitations and copycat violence ([14], 4).

The assumption to explore is whether a terrorist actor’s social constructs and search for social acceptance become replicated in their manifesto’s rhetorical choices and overall narrative structure that supports violence. If the goal is to simply inspire or terrify, we may assume that a terrorist actor selects and emphasises specific details that would resonate with a prospective like-minded audience. The actor/author is also usually the protagonist, and everyone else—be it a group, an individual, an event of injustice—are invariably represented as antagonists, core plot points and/or catalysing events [21]. The narrative arc is often one of a transformation (of the protagonist) into a warrior for a higher cause and who is no longer paralysed by moral ambiguity. Hence, applying such a rationalisation framework to terrorist manifestos becomes an exercise in exploring the processes that can maintain violent extremism in analysing both the ‘what’ and ‘how’ in that story, including cost–benefit calculations. Such analysis can provide unique insights into how these actors interpret and experience (or at least wish to demonstrate) a sense of control and purpose about themselves, others, and the world around them.

4 Cues and Liner Notes: World-Building and Motivations of Terrorist Actors

If there is any degree of consensus in a contentious field of study like terrorism, it is that it will never be possible to fully understand the motivations of terrorist actors, and

why they make a decision to employ violence as a means to an end (see [22], 245). While empirical studies acknowledge this reality, scholars note that there is still a tendency to treat participation in terrorist activity as a syndrome of a fixed etiological state, rather than a decision (however, flawed or compromised the decision-making process is) to utilise the act of terrorism as a tool to achieve specific goals ([23], 193).

Wakefield ([4], 1) notes below that this tendency of academics and policy-makers often manifests as a quest for providing simplified explanations for people's participation in terrorist activities, invariably revolving around one of the following factors:

... brainwashing, cultural factors, frustration aggression, identity crisis, mental illness, narcissism, political exclusion and oppression, rational choice, poverty and relative deprivation all feature prominently within studies of terrorism.

While there are certainly salient themes that recur in case studies of terrorism across disciplines, the reality is that there is no 'one size fits all' explanation that applies to all cases. What applies in one case is not guaranteed to be a factor in another. Hence by pathologizing the actions of terrorist actors as predominately impulsive, or as a manifestation of some evil disease of the mind, we risk overlooking a very important aspect of terrorism: its inherently social nature and a need to have a 'story'—and as explored below with BT, this can incorporate an almost mythological element with their fixation to medieval battles and figures. For instance, BT had a black sun symbol (sonnenrad) emblazoned on their rucksack that might appear innocuous at face-value. But this symbol does hold significant meaning including in white supremacist youth and occultist subcultures (see [24]). Its origins are tied to mosaic floor in a castle where the black-uniformed SS elite would conduct pseudo-religious ceremonies during Nazi Germany.

So as an alternative etiological starting point, sociologists such as ([4], 2) suggest revisiting this issue of violence using a starting point which places a terrorist actor with a distinctive sense of agency—even if this sense of agency is influenced by formative life experiences, and dynamic emotional worlds—and is more constructivist in nature. Much in the same way a narrative is a sequence of plot points linked by a binding thread spanning from its beginning to its end with observable signs of an extremist branding and identity development. Support for this view of terrorism can be seen with some variances from the likes of [18, 25–30].

Smith and Talbot's 'Social Influence Model of Violent Extremism' (SIM-VE) extends the 'people, places and processes' view of terrorism by exploring the ways that social influences and differing processes of radicalization can lead to violent behaviour. As per the SIM-VE model, social influence is conceptualised as the plethora of influences that transform a person's identity to align with a violent extremist group, shape their beliefs to align with an extremist ideology, and reconstruct their moral position to allow for violent action to become ethically acceptable. Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee ([3], 105) identify three broad categories of social influences: ideological (beliefs), behavioural (emotions and cognitions) and social (relational).

Notably these are very broad categories to describe the domains of the behaviour and are not mutually exclusive from one another. In fact, [3] emphasise the rather interdependent nature of each domain, with changes in one area of a person's life contributing to the changes within others. This is particularly important in light of the increased and diffuse connection to toxic online and digital echo-chamber spaces that actors are increasingly showing evidence of inhabiting and developing bonds of friendship within while usually displaying black-and-white perceptions of wider society.

Therefore, the question becomes to what extent a manifesto-embedded narrative bridges the gaps between the people, places and processes of terrorism in any given account. Thematically, the focus of such analysis is to uncover the constructions of self, others, and the world-at-large present within any given manifesto. However to understand how each terrorist actor engages with these themes within their own self-accounts, the analysis not only has to consider the explicit discursive choices made by the authors, but also the narrative techniques employed by each author. This includes the overall narrative sequencing [31], core as well as periphery events and people [21], coherence of characterisations and descriptions [29]; salience and selection of relevant social themes [32]; and paratextual references [21].

In order to analyse the social narratives contained within a terrorist manifesto, we should not only look at 'what story is being told', but also 'how the story is told.' Therefore, the analysis of the empirical data—i.e. the two manifestos chosen for this dissertation—amalgamates a combination of various qualitative methods including thematic, linguistic and narrative analysis. All of these aspects will be utilised to understand how terrorist actors can frame the issues discussed within their respective manifestos.

Utilising framing theory

According to ([33], 52), in his seminal work on framing theory, *Framing: Toward Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm*:

Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described. Typically frames diagnose, evaluate, and prescribe

As noted, frames are a foundational aspect of narrative-based exercises, particularly as they relate to the self-accounts of terrorist actors. Berntzen and Sandberg [32], Borum [34], Cottee and Hayward [21], Howard et al. [35], Sandberg et al. [29], all use some form of framing theory in their empirical analyses of terrorist accounts, and this chapter framework will continue method.

This is particularly appropriate for understanding the motivations of terrorist actors as terrorist violence relies on the invocation of *collective action frames* ([32], 760). Considered the language of social movements, collective action frames can be found in terrorist narratives because they emphasise all of the important aspects of the terrorist mindset: group identification and the social nature of the problems and

solutions within any given context. Collective action frames, whether explicit (e.g. “we” and “us”) or implied (e.g. putting yourself in the shoes of the characters) what allows a writer of a text to tap into the “emotional raw materials” needed to mobilise people towards a particular goal (see [12], 85).

In order to analyse BT’s manifesto in accordance with a narrative-framing theory approach, the analysis was conducted in the following way. Firstly, the social themes that were identified in the literature review were used as the thematic basis for the analysis of each manifesto. These themes are:

1. Self as the pseudocommando;
2. Intense feelings of anger at injustice and revenge against others;
3. Social experiences of victimisation, isolation and ostracism;
4. Unbalanced existential needs; and
5. The world as “black and white.”

To understand how each manifesto engages with these themes, the analysis not only considered explicit discursive choices made by the authors, but also narrative techniques employed by each author, including: overall narrative sequencing [26], ‘core and periphery’ events and people [21], coherence of characterisations and descriptions [29] and salience and selection of relevant social themes [32].

5 Analysing BT’s Manifesto

BT is an Australian man who, at the age of 28, took the lives of 51 Muslim worshippers at the March 2019 Christchurch Mosques’ attacks. The killing spree itself was self-broadcasted to social media, with hundreds of thousands of viewers witnessing the events before the live-stream was taken down approximately hours after its initial broadcast started [11]. Hours prior to committing the terrorist attack, BT had released their manifesto which broadly revolved around the conspiracy theory of ‘The Great Awakening’, whilst drawing on various theme including fear of Muslim conquests (as epitomised in the past by Ottoman rule), White genocide⁵ (orchestrated by increasing birth-rates and migration patterns of Muslims and other non-whites into Europe, the US, New Zealand); occurrences of immigrant violence against White Europeans and concerns over overpopulation and eco-fascism⁶ all of which fit under the broad umbrella of Far-Right Extremism [19, 38].

BT’s 74-page manifesto can be divided into two distinctive parts: The first section is written in a predominantly Q&A style, addressing hypothetical questions and comments from various imagined or intended audiences. The broad categories of

⁵ The term “White genocide” refers to a conspiracy theory which alleges a premeditated genocidal campaign against the ‘white race’ by turning it into a minority in its own lands. See: [36].

⁶ The term “eco-fascism” refers to the beliefs of “living in the original regions a race is meant to have originated in and shunning multiculturalism is the only way to save the planet they prioritise above all else.” See: [37].

audience can be classified as their “embedded allies”, those who are sympathetic to their cause and hostile to their enemies: “the invaders” (non-White migrants) and “the traitors” (social progressives that are sympathetic towards the so-called “invaders”). The second part of the manifesto could be classed as a series of general calls-to-action, addressing broader ideological issues that seem to underpin the beliefs espoused within, and a sense of interpretation of the reality of, the first part.

Therefore BTs manifesto employed multiple narratives and tropes to justify their attack and to reach multiple audiences to maximize its impact. At the same time, it should be noted that academic research into terrorism and the partial replication of such manifestos in itself is often confronted with cost/benefit breakdowns and beset with related ethical challenges and dilemmas. But in the case of BT, as noted above, we argue that such an analysis of extremist context can identify and extrapolate insights to support different PVE perspectives with content-based analysis predominately intended to help to developing risk profiles as well as prevent future attacks.

5.1 The Self as ‘The Pseudocommando’

In terms of how terrorist actors construct their notion of self, [11] work on pseudocommando identification that provides a starting point and has been adapted by many prominent researchers such as [2, 39] in subsequent works to understand terrorist behaviour. Based on extensive analyses of perpetrator profiles and self-narratives, Knoll describes pseudocommando identification as a construction of a warrior-like mentality. It is often a self-characterisation that is in equal parts vengeful and narcissistic. Almost paradoxically, said actors will go to great lengths to appear deliberate and rational ([11], 87). Pseudocommando identification can be detected through analysis of both textual and non-textual data and can be expressed in a number of ways:

- Self-references as a soldier, a warrior or other militarised self-characterisations ([16], 249–250),
- A strong identification as an agent for a higher/collective cause or with key figureheads ([16], 249–250),
- A preoccupation with weaponry and war memorabilia ([16], 249–250), and/or
- A painstaking attempt to document the logic and decision-making leading to their decision to use violence—likely an attempt to control the narrative rather than being written off as of unsound mind or merely frustrated/aggrieved ([11], 87).

BT’s manifesto demonstrates a noteworthy pseudocommando self-identification in their methodical detailing of their intentions, their expositional way of addressing hypothetical scenarios and audience questions (exhibiting deliberation and self-awareness) and the flexing of their tactical prowess. While these elements are present throughout the manifesto, BT also writes from the first-person perspective and goes to great lengths to position themselves as an ordinary person (often using the word

“regular” to describe themselves and their circumstances; “an ordinary White man or working class, low income family”) who then transforms into a reluctant hero (“... who decided to take a stand to ensure the future of my people”). Further, BT lists a series of historical events of aggression towards their own people—again, the aggressions of the “invaders” and “traitors” against the “European people” that have been victimised in a so-called clash of civilisations.

Another pseudocommando tendency BT displays is a grandiose self-image, even if reluctantly. BT explicitly claims that they were not motivated by seeking fame, stating it would be “laughable” to do so. Conversely, this attempt to humble himself does ring to some degree hollow when contrasted with the various instances of other fame seeking behaviours and fantasy present elsewhere in the manifesto. They cite affinity with many figureheads of similar movements (Oswald Mosley, founder of the British Union of Fascists and progenitor of modern ultranationalist movements) and other mass shooters and terrorists (Dylann Roof and Anders Breivik). BT even states that their violent actions will be celebrated in the future, citing Nelson Mandela winning the Nobel Peace Prize. This conflicting characterisation and constant re-assessment of morality evokes Lankford’s ([2], 473) observations that the:

evidence [of fame-seeking by mass shooters] requires more interpretation, because even though many have admitted wanting attention and directly orchestrated their attacks to get it, they often claim they want this attention for their cause [and not themselves].

5.2 Intense Anger at Injustice and Seeking Revenge Against Others

BT went to great lengths to appear deliberate and methodical in the decision to use violence by pointing to a long list of transgressions by respective antagonists within the manifesto. Notably, while BT is dedicated to the idea of ‘tit for tat’ cultural confrontations, their transformation into a paramilitary soldier appears to have resulted from group-think pressures as well as some transformative events that they did witness online, but had not experienced personally. This observation provides an interesting consideration about how zero sum calculations and community (rather than personal) gains can underpin terrorist violence. This is perhaps a deliberate narrative choice by BT, in order to overcome emotional barriers while not appearing impulsive or irrational—an undesirable trait in the pseudocommando mindset [11].

BT did not identify a specific person or group as their antagonist. Instead, the antagonists are defined by generalised albeit hardened stereotypes, negative imagery and the corrosive, corrupt and anti-social values they represented. For BT, it was the “invaders” seeking to replace White Europeans due to below-replacement white birth-rates (paired with the high fertility of non-white immigrants) that will lead to the replacement of the white population in the West. Notably, the manifesto demonstrates a significant highlighting of comradeship and perceived collective or community injustice rather than direct references to personal traumas and experiences of personal

victimisation and isolation. Again, this may confirm Knoll's findings of tendencies for terrorists and mass shooters to try and avoid appearing irrational and illogical. It may also reflect a desire by BT to control their own instinctive narratives and to present himself to an external audience in a distinct way: fearsome to opponents and galvanising to supporters in efforts to inspire other in-group members to action.

Additionally, according to [3] SIM-VE Model, violent behaviour is often conceptualised as an embodied and lived experience with a person's cognitive and sensory dimensions—namely emotions—that influence how a person identifies an enemy and then rationalises and performs violent actions. In regards to the role of emotions and associational drives in fuelling a terrorist mindset [40] notes that anger and the reshaping of identity to create the distance from the other that is, as was noted earlier, necessary to facilitate a cognitive direction towards self-justification, moral authority and violence. Similarly, in a study by ([41], 94), they hypothesise that the interplay of anger (an assessment of another's actions), contempt (an evaluation of another's attributes and worth) and disgust (an evaluation that something or someone is so intolerable, that they must be removed) can provide the emotional powder keg that underlies the acceptance of indiscriminate violent actions.

Interestingly, in line with Knoll's conceptualisation of the pseudocommando as collectors of injustice, BT includes a list of violent actions by the other at several points in the manifesto. While referring to their enemies as "invaders", BT is not simply preoccupied with the demonization of the other through simple name-calling. Instead, they also frame the other as a corrosive yet worthy (and indeed, dominant) adversary that must be countered by any means necessary.

They were an obvious, visible and large group of invaders, from a culture with higher fertility rates, higher social trust and strong, robust traditions that seek to occupy my people's lands and ethnically replace my own people [sic]

Certainly, by positioning the other as possessing a war-like presence, they arguably intensify their own pseudocommando identification—and this psychologically primes themselves to engage in conflict and violence (even against random non-combatants) who they still perceive as guilty of aggressing against white people. While listing certain global events (such as the death of Ebba Akerlund and the 2017 French election) as key impetuses for actions, they do not allude to any specific personal instances of victimisation, humiliation or ostracism. So it is unclear whether BT was subjected to experiences of victimisation and ostracism in their personal life. In the event that they did have these experiences, a deliberate choice appears to have been made to omit such information, again conceivably in order to reinforce themselves as both a fearsome and noble character.

On the first page of BT's manifesto, they do also make it explicitly clear that the reasons for their terrorist attacks were done in the name of vengeance: against the "invaders"; against "Islamic slavers", as payback for "enslavement" and "murder" of their people on Western lands. In the Q&A segment of their manifesto, BT addresses the hypothetical accusation that they are "a bigot, racist, xenophobe, islamphobe, nazi, fascist [sic]". Their response, at first instance, appears to be a vitriolic tirade, ultimately ending with "you're fucking dead, kiddo."—a direct quote directed at the

reader who is assumed to be an enemy or antagonist. BT's response to this question is in fact a well-known quote that was written to satirise the vitriolic online behaviour of people within the gaming community.⁷ Further, while they tend to utilise the laundry list method of building to build their case for violence against the other, and a patriotic tone when addressing hypothetical supporters, BT appears to stoke their own rage when addressing those perceived as traitors including other white people who have essentially turned on their own culture and allowed a white genocide to occur.

The only other distinctive outpouring of emotion that rivals this above passage was BT's own self-described turning point when they visited the graves of fallen soldiers during travels through France. After highlighting the impact of French elections in 2018, BT demonstrates an utter loss of faith in the establishment of a "once great" European nation, which essentially betrays its citizens:

The candidates were an obvious sign of our times: a globalist, capitalist, egalitarian, an ex-investment banker has no national beliefs other than the pursuit of profit versus a milquetoast, feckless, civic nationalist, an uncontroversial figure who's most brave and inspired idea resolved to the possible deportation of illegal immigrants

Given their frequent references to the opportunism of the "invaders" and lamentation of White Europeans complacency, these passages may possibly be most revealing of one of the main sources of rage, and perhaps, a strong sense of empowerment in that face of an us-against-them dynamic.

In terms of their preoccupation with revenge, BT also employs gendered characterisations when highlighting inspirations for violence, and in particular, the idea of women as damsels in distress (as in the case of Ebba Åkerlund, the 11-year-old girl killed in the 2017 Stockholm terror attack) and as muses (mentioning African American conservative commentator, Candace Owens whom they cite as having had the strongest impact on their radicalisation). Generally, manifestos that use gendered characterisations may provide an insight into the identity construction of terrorist actors, particularly in the case of ideologies that have very narrow confines for hegemonic masculinity—namely, entitlement and expectation [42, 72]. In this case, while BT's construction of women is consistent with more traditional, passive Right-Wing extremist constructions, it could be a revealing window into their own personal needs, as they frequently use female characters as sources of inspiration and encouragement.

Interestingly, BT did not engage with any themes relating to social victimisation, isolation or ostracism in their own life. And this may be for a number of reasons. A likely explanation would have been the fact that including any details of this nature could undermine self-directed grandiose characterisations as a "pseudocommando". Thus inclusion of such personal, painful, and emotional experiences would contradict the pseudocommando framing as methodical, deliberate and unemotional. It also may have interfered with the resonance of any collective call-to-action framing, if the grievance appeared too personal to a prospective reader (see [32]). Of course,

⁷ See: Know Your Meme. 'Navy Seal Copypasta | Know Your Meme'. Accessed 5 October 2019. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/navy-seal-copypasta>.

it could also be that BT may not have been consciously aware of the psychological effect that such experiences would have had on them.

But overall BT did go to great lengths to position themselves as an average bystander that was transformed into a warrior by the changing world around them. This was evident in their self-framing as coming from an unremarkable upbringing, through to eventually justifying their acts as objective, reasoned choices, which were forced on them by confronting circumstances. Naturally, this depiction explicitly accords with the pseudocommando tendency to consider oneself as ‘collectors of injustices’. This, contrasted with the absence of any mention of personal experiences of victimisation, ostracism and isolation, leads us to interrogate a terrorist actor’s attachment to the issue of injustice, grievance and feelings of efficacy to begin with.

5.3 *Unbalanced Existential Concerns*

Another notable feature is the fact that the manifesto demonstrates a worldview which sees the world as place where violence is not only constant, but inevitable. BT was explicit about a gloomy ‘only the strong survive’ outlook, with all outgroup actions being framed (and usually misapplied) as war-like and aggressive in nature.

In BT’s manifesto, their dehumanising perspectives and framing of anger at the injustices inflicted towards white people is intertwined with their framing of broader existential concerns regarding purpose (evolving from “why won’t someone do something?” to “why don’t I do something?”) as well as the injustices they bore witness to on their travels—which resembled a quest for meaning, even if the search for cognitive justification is not directly expressed that way.

To date, much research has focussed on more deficit-oriented risk factors such as negative emotions and experiences; however, some scholars have noted the need to consider the influence of more propulsive emotional drivers that we would normally consider as “positive.” For example, ([43], 965) note that certain feelings experienced by terrorist actors are overlooked when trying to understand a decision-making process. Arguably, a more philosophical aspect of the extremist mindset and emotional state, existential concerns refer to the fundamental questions of existence itself that may be motivating factor in an actor committing an act of violence in the name of a cause or ideology:

The key argument advanced in what follows is that terrorism, for those who practice and embrace it, can be profoundly thrilling, empowering and spiritually intoxicating, and that this particular aspect of it may inform, along with other key motivations no doubt, the decision to engage in it. (p. 965)

Crenshaw [43] highlight the tendency of the literature to pinpoint deficit-based vulnerabilities and a loss of control over one’s life as leading causes as driving an actor down the road towards anti-social behaviour and violence. In their view, dehumanising perceptions of others is often performed at the expense of moral clarity

while processes of identification can be driven by the attainment of general feelings of empowerment and recognition.

These too, are basic and possibly more propulsive emotional states, than anger at injustice alone. Others, such as [44] adapt the work of existential psychologist, Irvin D Yalom, and put forward a framework of understanding of the terrorist mindset as a way to mitigate against the core existential concerns of human existence: *identity, isolation, death, freedom and meaning*. McBride ([41], 561) also makes a philosophical case for understanding the logic of involvement in terrorism, but draws more explicitly on terror management theory and existential psychology as a quest to alleviate existential anxiety:

... terrorism may be driven by an existential-terroristic feedback loop: a cycle in which people support or engage in terrorism to alleviate existential anxiety but ultimately find this anxiety exacerbated in the wake of the violence they create or sanction. The loop is closed when this exacerbated anxiety compels them to reaffirm their support of, or participation in, terrorist violence.

Such existential concerns do add a potentially metaphysical aspect to understanding the motivations of terrorist actors because they deal with the fundamental orientations of one's world views, and the emotions and events that influence someone's path towards (or away) from death essentially. Given that the mindset of terrorist actors is generally thought of as rigid and 'all-or-nothing'-oriented, these findings do seek to encourage future researchers to pay more attention to the existential concerns of terrorist actors, as the scope of their motivations may be far more intangible than they might sometimes superficially appear.

Overall, BT's manifesto details a long search for existential meaning and purpose. Their sense of place, while not especially a focal point, is conspicuously framed as a reflection of the society/culture/order of the race they believe they "belong" to. In terms of Australia and NZ, BT sees them as both extensions of Europe and as the "last existing Utopias for White Europeans". And while they acknowledge that they have no issues with Muslims who are practicing their faiths in their own lands, they are reliant on dehumanizing perceptions and quick to attribute the degenerate, unappealing nature of the enemy.

It is worth noting that BT indicated that the online documents that they authored might be a last chance at to fulfil previously unfulfilled aspirations. Certainly, BT demonstrated an explicit preoccupation with the military, constructing their manifesto as a tactical document and exposing the reader to hypothetical operational situations. This may have been another way to inform readers that that they had thought of all possible scenarios and that the eventual terrorist action approach was indeed the most effective and judicious.

And these existential concerns do dovetail into the dogmatic and even self-protective cognitive aspects of the terrorist mindset. For instance, scholars like ([45], 32) and ([31], 205) assert that a rigid, fixed and unbending cognition often forms to provide the backbone for the necessary commitment to violent action in a violent extremist context.

In other words, a tendency to want to pathologize terrorist actors as 'sad, mad or bad' often betrays the role of identity development and the complex social reality of

factors that sustain involvement in terrorism. Researchers can emphasise the need to understand how individuals use their idiosyncratic social experiences to construct their worlds with, and how and why someone could decide upon the need to commit acts of violence in the name of an extremist ideology. Such a point of view is particularly confronting for policymakers, as the natural implication of this finding is to try and look at such morally reprehensible actions with a form of cleared-eyed rationality.

In sum, BT's manifesto possesses a strong dogmatic intolerance and tendency to dehumanize those who opposed their beliefs. They frequently employ clear-cut binaries on the core issues like nationalism and hierarchy. For example, some clear examples related to White genocide include: the strong association made between "birth-rates", "fertility rates" and the presence of "invaders"; coupling the victimisation and "rape of White women" with expressions of vengeance and expressions of rage against those they consider "race traitors." BT views the world as an inherently violent place, full of prejudice and perpetually at war and their political standpoint is a desire for group-based dominance along a superiority-inferiority racial and gender dimension. Critically, a pseudocommando identity and a need for cognitive closure provided a lens to feed into an all-encompassing sense of purpose, belonging and moral disengagement.

6 The (Digital) World We Live in or the (Digital) Battleground We Fight in?

In regards to the transmission of extremist ideas, when we think of the Internet in relation to terrorism, we can accept that the digital era has opened up many routes to spread hateful ideology from subcultures to general audiences as well as create spaces for like-minded individuals to come together and form a sense of community that they do not have access to in their offline circumstances.

The RAND Corporation [46] findings about the role of the Internet and violent extremism, provides a useful starting point for interrogating the assumptions we make around the relationship between a terrorist actor's online and offline behaviours. That is, that the Internet:

- did create more opportunities to be radicalised;
- did act as an echo chamber;
- did not necessarily accelerate the process of radicalisation;
- did not replace the need for physical contact in the radicalisation process; and
- did not increase the opportunity for self-radicalisation.

Outside the manifesto itself, BT's extended connection to online extremist groups and forums has been well documented [19]. And as mentioned, the terrorist attack perpetrated by BT was live-streamed via Facebook with the manifesto disseminated hours prior to the event. Yet in terms of BT's manifesto itself, the narrative paints

a highly intermingled and multifarious relationship between BT and their online environment—one that is at once both intentional and filled with propaganda but also coalesced with processes of identification and the search for meaning and direction. Certainly, BT appeared to have been well acquainted with extremist corners of the Internet that repeated, for example, false propaganda about immigrants as “invaders”. In their own words:

From where did you receive/research/develop your beliefs?

The internet, of course. You will not find the truth anywhere else.

While not the prime focus of the manifesto, BT did construct their relationship to the Internet as frequently celebrating it as a liberator from the blinkered, limited preferences that shaped their actions and moral standards in offline circumstances—referring to it as responsible for “breaking the grip of the media on the zeitgeist of modernity”; in short a place to find the ‘truth’. Additionally, BT did appear to be acutely attuned to the online instincts and internet culture of their intended audience, with numerous references to popular memes and frequently utilising in-group vernacular and LEET⁸ speak throughout the manifesto. Many of the memes inserted into the manifesto did aim to bolster the fervour and enthusiasm of fellow white supremacists.

Unquestionably, the Internet’s precise role in the process of radicalisation is vexing. But radicalisation does remain a deeply social process. So, in general terms, the Internet allows alienated and disaffected people to find and connect with each other. It also provides a space for those looking for acceptance, recognition and a sense of approval. And some of the most extreme forms of dialogue, including dehumanising and hateful ideas that target specific pre-existing biases, this pattern can become self-reinforcing. In that regard, it can be argued the Internet should remain to be seen as a mechanism to enable or facilitate radicalisation. But as highlighted in the study of the above manifesto, such processes of radicalisation do remain complex and contested. It will incorporate a combination of online and offline communication and a fluid mix of different political, psychological and social factors.

At the same time, media and related reporting frameworks must carefully consider the history of mass shooters seeking fame for their actions and reflect on possible changes to media coverage in the future. Covering mass shootings is a tricky proposition for the media. Indeed, there are entire RWE communities dedicated to spreading propaganda and misinformation. Lauland et al. [47] identify a number of consequences of media coverage, including perpetrators’ fulfilment and incentive to achieve notoriety, competition among offenders to maximize victim fatalities and copycat and contagion impacts in various types of aggressive behaviour stemming from impressionable individuals. The authors cite information from the 2007 Nebraska mall shooter, the 2011 Tuscon shooter, the Virginia Tech shooter, and the Columbine shooters that all suggest that fame and notoriety were a large factor in their decision to engage in mass violence. As a consequence, some such as [48] propose that media refrain from using names and images of current and past shooters

⁸ LEET is a style of typing that replaces English letters with similar-looking numbers or symbols.

while reporting all other aspects of the story in as much detail as possible. Additionally, as captured by ([12], 13), "... a broader discussion is needed on the merits and drawbacks of internet censorship, particularly regarding the sites and servers which have typically hosted these manifestos". With the modern-day growth of transnational far-right movements, as a starting point, the media must consider the merits of publishing any 'call-to-arms' information that might empower future terrorists.

So while research does suggest that terrorists are often motivated by the notoriety they gain in the media, and manifestos such as BT's—immediately banned in New Zealand and more recently targeted for takedowns by social media companies—can spawn copycats, a number of difficult ethical and associated reporting issues do still simultaneously remain.⁹ For instance, some have questioned the ban, stating that it risks turning BT into a martyr and therefore lending a form of legitimacy to their far-right ideology. Stephen Franks argued that the "... damage and risks are greater from suppressing these things than they are from trusting people to form their own conclusions and to see evil or madness for what it is" (cited in [9]). Such questions surrounding censorship and how traditional and social media companies respond to such events will remain provocative—at the very least, in tackling what can be done to minimize the destructive appeal of extremist ideas without infringing on freedom of speech and without limiting the audience's rights to be informed. As captured by Dr Bharath Ganesh (cited in [12]), a researcher at the Oxford Internet Institute in questioning the public purpose of journalism:

Taking down the video [of the Christchurch shooting] is obviously the right thing to do, but social media sites have allowed far-right organisations a place for discussion and there has been no consistent or integrated approach to dealing with it. There has been a tendency to err on the side of freedom of speech, even when it is obvious that some people are spreading toxic and violent ideologies.

Similarly, the UK's head of counter-terrorism policing Neil Basu previously challenged the media to have a "sensible conversation" how they report terrorism, stating that the problem extends beyond social media platforms where perpetrators can disseminate manifestos and convey their crimes in real time (see [15]). Basu cited a report, *Terrorism and the Mass Media*, which had again underlined that there was a need for more lucid and consistent ethical guidelines to help the media in reporting terrorist attacks, in this case similar to the code of practices often used in the treatment of suicide cases. "The key is to find a balanced approach that reduces negative impact, increases positive impact, and enshrines media independence and the public's right to know" (cited in [49]).

Consequently, while a core PVE challenge is not so much countering the active use of violent social media but in inhibiting and averting the conditions conducive to such violence before it happens, there is at least an acknowledgement now that multi-stakeholder, multifaceted approaches are needed in order to respond effectively to problematic content and such debate will entail, at the very least, how to make ethical decisions about what to censor, de-platform, demonetise, leave up, moderate or refer to the authorities. It is worth noting that the Christchurch Call to Action

⁹ In March 2019, New Zealand banned the possession or sharing of the Manifesto.

and the inception of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) had both pushed for systemic changes in the covering extremist content after the attack by reinforcing ‘better practices’, that encompassed not naming the perpetrator/s as well as the reviewing the effects and impacts of commercially sensitive algorithms, to reduce future manipulation and harm. Problematically, despite encouraging wider cooperation between the tech sector and governments in responding to terrorist incidents, the US, Russia and China all remained notably absent in supporting the above initiative (see [50]). Nonetheless, at least in the US case, when a mob of pro-Trump rioters stormed the US Capitol on January 6 2021 and footage of the insurrection flooded social media, some domestic debate was again resurrected about social media as a extremist ‘rallying cry’ and related issues about fact-checking, digital citizenship, media literacy and how tech companies might take a more effective and ethical approach to scrutinising their platforms (see [46]).

7 Conclusion

The narrative accounts of extremist manifestos not only provide insights into the social worlds of terrorist actors but they can also offer clear benefits to more sophisticated understanding of the terrorist mindset—including how a complex range of social, political and other related factors might all come together to shape and amplify the terrorist worldview. In short, a core challenge “... is to ask why, when people tell their story, they use or repeat particular phrases to the exclusion of all other possibilities” ([51], p.144). If a terrorist actor’s cognition is an internalised story that is influenced by experiences and emotions resulting from both a mix of online and offline social interactions, then manifestos arguably re-externalise a particular cognitive framework—and can provide policymakers and PVE experts with clues for better targeted prevention and intervention policy approaches.

By distinguishing the central themes in the manifestos of known-terrorist actors, models of radicalisation can begin to create a preliminary understanding of the construction of an actor’s social world that sustains their violent extremism. For instance, we may assume that terrorist actors tend towards possessing some combination of the following experiences:

- high expectations of their own value and worth, and a low estimation of the people they consider themselves different to;
- grievances with their current circumstances and processes that lead them to their current place (usually interpreted through the lens of injustice);
- have social experiences of victimisation, ostracism and isolation that reinforce their internal sense of alienation to other people and places;
- rigid ideas of how the world operates, their place within it and what needs to be done in order to improve their place in it;

- reliance on the Internet as both a tool for promoting terrorist violence and for meeting their unmet social needs of their offline lives, characterised as banal, yet silently tumultuous.

Viewed separately, the above reflections could be considered deeply human and even relatable experiences that are highly applicable to a variety of people in a particular context. However, taken together, they can form a militant identity, a violent lifestyle and a more dogmatic interpretation of the world that is characterised by an extreme social and cultural polarisation. One in which BT's evaluations of people (themselves and Others), places (the world) and processes (their indoctrination) tend to be dichotomous and options for recourse to 'shift' the status quo are perceived as limited and will necessitate and rationalize violence.

Thus analysing terrorist manifestos can serve the development of policy directed towards aspects of the personal attitudes and the social drivers that are necessary for the amplification of violence rather than in the often impenetrable prediction of who is and who is not likely to become a terrorist actor. The narrative accounts of terrorist actors do offer valuable insights into identity fusion and the 'how' and 'why' of their beliefs, associated risks and decisions to engage in violent tactics. Manifestos are not an account of absolute truth and are certainly a form of propaganda. Yet even deliberate selections and omissions can be extremely illuminating. As a result, manifestos should be seen as an interpretation of the experiences that help to shape the transformational opportunities and the related decisions of at-risk individuals as well as those that engage in terrorist violence. The careful study of online manifestos can provide a fertile pathway provide a more holistic account of terrorism in a social media age. This includes the identification of 'red flags' to help to guide the understanding of PVE efforts that will incorporate the demand side of radicalization and the wider environmental and social contexts that can make individuals more receptive to extreme ideas.

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