

Research Article

HYPERREALITY AND TERRORISM: PROPAGANDA IMPLICATIONS FOR PERPETRATORS AND SOCIETY IN INDONESIA

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ABSTRACT

Aims: To analyze the role of hyperreality in terrorism propaganda and how it influences both perpetrators and public perception in Indonesia, with particular focus on the glorification and simulation of the 9P terrorism actions (Propaganda, Logistics Provision, Terrorism Funding, Terrorist Recruitment, Terrorist Training, Terrorism Action Planning, Paramilitary Formation, Terrorist Hideouts, and Acts of Terror). **Study Design:** Qualitative exploratory study. **Place and Duration of Study:** Department of Criminology, University of Indonesia, conducted between 2022 and 2024. **Methodology:** Data were collected through semi-structured and in-depth interviews with convicted terrorists (napiter), focus group discussions (FGDs) with community members, and literature review of terrorism and media studies. Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns regarding public responses, radicalization narratives, and the influence of hyperreality in shaping public perception and terrorist ideology. **Results:** The study found that hyperreality—constructed through glorified and repetitive digital propaganda—significantly distorts perceptions of reality among both terrorists and the public. Former terrorists reported emotional and ideological attachment fostered through media content, reinforcing past beliefs and obstructing deradicalization. Meanwhile, society responds to terrorism threats with fear and moral panic, driven by media amplification. The 9P framework demonstrates how each element is dramatized through propaganda to exaggerate the impact of terrorist activity, contributing to radicalization and cult-radicalism. **Conclusion:** Hyperreality in terrorism propaganda plays a central role in shaping distorted perceptions that legitimize violence and obstruct deradicalization. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing effective counter-radicalization strategies and media literacy policies to reduce the psychological and social impact of terrorism propaganda.

Keywords: Hyperreality, Terrorism propaganda, Radicalization, Social media, Moral panic, Fear of terror.

INTRODUCTION

In the current digital era, the presence of cyberspace has transformed the landscape of radical terrorism by utilizing the internet as a medium and control center. Cyberspace has created new activities within society through social media platforms, which have become primary targets for terrorist groups to disseminate radical propaganda. With their accessibility and low cost, social media provide terrorists with the means to execute various acts of terrorism, such as spreading radical ideologies, recruiting new members, and promoting terrorist actions. Terrorist propaganda typically takes the form of multimedia communications that include virtual messages, presentations, magazines, pamphlets, audio and video files, as well as video games designed to reinforce terrorism ideologies and garner support. The public's response to terrorism is often marked by fear and moral panic (West, 2021). Fear of terrorism is usually an emotional and psychological reaction to information received through the media regarding terrorist threats. While some individuals may admire terrorist actions, many feel threatened and anxious, creating widespread fear. Moral panic, on the other hand, arises when an issue or group is perceived as a significant threat to societal values and norms. This phenomenon often involves an exaggerated reaction to situations or groups deemed detrimental to moral and social integrity. Such overreactions can be exacerbated by the media, which amplifies the perceived threat, thereby reinforcing fear and prompting disproportionate responses to groups or behaviors considered deviant from social norms (Zeiger and Gyte, 2020).

The emergence of social media and the internet has fostered an environment where information can spread rapidly and widely, consequently influencing how society responds to terrorism. In this context, it is crucial to understand the dynamics of fear and moral panic as part of the social reaction to terrorist threats, as well as how terrorist propaganda exploits media to manipulate public perception and amplify the impact of existing threats. The primary issue in the study "Hyperreality and Terrorism: Propaganda Implications for Perpetrators and Society in Indonesia" focuses on how social media creates an artificial reality (hyperreality) that reinforces radical messages and influences the thinking and actions of both terrorists and the broader community. In this context, the extremist propaganda disseminated through digital platforms repeatedly shapes a narrative that appears real. As a result, individuals exposed to these messages struggle to differentiate between the real world and a version of reality distorted by extremist ideology. When radical messages are continuously repeated and glorified, both society and terrorists begin to accept this artificial reality as truth. They are swept away by the illusion that presents concepts of jihad and violence as heroic acts, strengthening the belief that terrorism is a legitimate form of struggle. Under such conditions, individuals become vulnerable to motivations for violent actions, even when their understanding is built on erroneous narratives. A tangible example of this phenomenon is the bombing attacks in Surabaya in 2018. The perpetrators of the attacks, who consisted of a single family, were strongly influenced by radical propaganda on social media. The jihadist and martyrdom narratives they consumed online constructed an artificial reality that clouded their perceptions of the truth. This artificial reality fostered the perception that they were engaging in something noble, when in fact, their actions resulted in violence and destruction.

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METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative approach with various data collection methods to gain a deep understanding of the public's response to terrorism propaganda and the phenomenon of moral panic. The literature review involves an examination of various academic sources, research reports, articles, and books relevant to the research topic. This review aids the researchers in comprehending the theoretical framework and broader context, providing a solid foundation for data analysis. Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) are conducted with diverse community groups to gather their views and opinions on issues related to terrorism and moral panic. These group discussions are designed to explore social dynamics, perceptions, and community reactions to terrorist threats. Through FGDs, the researchers can identify common patterns as well as differing viewpoints among community members, offering a more comprehensive picture of the phenomena under investigation. By utilizing this combination of methods, the research aims to collect rich and in-depth data, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of the public's response to terrorism propaganda and the phenomenon of moral panic.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

The concept of hyperreality plays a crucial role in the context of terrorism propaganda. Hyperreality refers to the blurring of boundaries between the real world and the simulated world, where the distinction between what is real and what is fiction becomes increasingly difficult to discern. This research found that hyperreality significantly influences the perceptions and experiences of former terrorists. Terrorism propaganda often employs images, videos, and narratives that distort reality, creating a simulated world that appears real to its adherents (Sweeney and Kubit, 2020). This leads former terrorists to struggle to differentiate between reality and the narratives presented by terrorist groups, thereby reinforcing their beliefs and actions while involved in terrorist activities. These findings indicate that fear of terrorism and terrorist propaganda strategies can create and exacerbate moral panic within society. Such fear not only impacts public perception of the terrorism threat but also influences the policies and preventive actions taken by the government and relevant agencies (Cano-Paños, 2019). This phenomenon underscores the importance of understanding the role of media and strategic communication in shaping societal responses to terrorism, as well as the impact of hyperreality on shaping the perceptions and experiences of individuals involved in terrorist actions.

Smith (2019) explains that public sentiment in a society is heavily influenced by media and interpersonal communication regarding real events, which attract public interest. In the current era, mass media significantly contributes to shaping public interest by intensively and extensively reporting issues, thereby capturing attention and increasing public awareness of these issues. Public interest can be drawn in the context of terrorism as a significant "impact" by the concepts of hyperreality and simulacrum. Jean Baudrillard (1994) asserts that hyperreality is a condition where the boundaries between reality and imagination become difficult to identify. This makes simulations or representations feel more real than reality itself. Hyperreality and simulacrum in terrorism propaganda can trigger extraordinary public interest. Disruptive narratives and violent visual content enable the public to perceive a tangible threat that feels more immediate than it actually is (Weimann, 2006). On the other hand, public interest shaped by terrorism propaganda can manipulate facts to create a common enemy, deepening polarization within social and

political contexts. For some individuals, the narratives and content within propaganda created by terrorist groups can influence them to support or even decide to join these groups (Neumann, 2016). This radicalization process is closely linked to exposure to social media, which intensively affects individual perceptions through algorithms. As this situation continues to strengthen, individuals may become trapped in echo chambers due to the absence of counter-perceptions that could serve as a balance. Specifically, the following explains the forms of public interest that emerge:

Cult-radicalism

Data sourced from Densus 88 AT (2024) indicates that the utilization of social media by radical groups poses a significant threat to law enforcement agencies. This is primarily because individuals participating in these forums or groups are not limited in number; they can easily learn, practice, and reinforce each other's beliefs, allowing them to conspire to commit acts of terrorism, either as lone wolves or in small private groups, making detection by authorities like Densus 88 challenging. In the context of Indonesia, there has yet to be an official declaration of a new terrorist group arising from the propaganda occurring in cyberspace. However, there are individuals who connect with one another to form jihadist groups based on shared perspectives found on social media (Densus Data, 2024). The establishment of these new jihadist groups indicates that the propaganda circulating on social media has resonated and created a new ecosystem. This phenomenon is conceptualized by the researcher as a tangible manifestation of cult radicalism.

Fear of terror & moral panic

Fear of terror and moral panic are considered alternative responses to the hyperreality of terrorism propaganda. While some individuals exhibit a cult-like admiration for terrorist actions, others display a perception of a significant threat that incites fear as a result of terrorism. This fear represents an emotional and psychological response to information received from the media regarding terrorism. On the other hand, moral panic is a social phenomenon in which an issue or group is perceived as a significant threat to societal values or norms. Moral panic often involves an exaggerated reaction to situations or groups viewed as endangering moral and social integrity. This can stem from excessive concerns about behaviors or ideologies deemed deviant or damaging to social norms (Cohen, 1972). When fear of terror arises, it often triggers moral panic, especially if the media amplifies the existing threat. Fear of terror can lead society to believe that there is a moral crisis or a significant threat requiring immediate response. This can intensify the overreaction toward groups or behaviors considered inconsistent with social norms, resulting in pressure to take preventive or preemptive measures (Giddens, 1991).

Discussion

Terrorism propaganda often creates an illusion and hyperreal fantasy that idealizes terrorist objectives, portraying acts of violence as heroic and romanticizing the notion of martyrdom (Nnam, Ajah, Arua, Okechukwu, and Okorie, 2019). Such portrayals have a profound emotional impact on former terrorists, reinforcing their beliefs in the goals they once supported. Hyperreal propaganda affirms and intensifies the ideological convictions and identities of former terrorists (Zeiger and Gyte, 2020). Through visually compelling narratives, this propaganda maintains a sense of attachment to the objectives of terrorist groups, making it difficult for individuals to fully disengage from their past associations. Hyperreality in terrorism propaganda aims to manipulate emotions and desires, evoking

feelings of pride, righteousness, and belonging among former terrorists (Chadha, 2021). This manipulation hinders their ability to critically evaluate their past actions and beliefs. By presenting a vivid portrayal of violence, terrorism propaganda blurs the lines between the real consequences of violent actions and the fictional glorification depicted in the media (Zeiger and Gyte, 2020). As a result, former terrorists tend to rationalize or downplay the harmful effects of their past actions. For those struggling with feelings of alienation or disappointment after leaving their group, hyperreal propaganda offers an escape and refuge in an idealized version of terrorist objectives (Conway, 2019).

Another objective of terrorist propaganda includes using psychological manipulation to undermine individual trust in certain collective social values or to spread heightened feelings of anxiety, fear, or panic within a population or segments of a population (Kruglanski and Fishman, 2009). This can be achieved through the dissemination of disinformation, rumors, threats of violence, or provocative images related to violent acts. This phenomenon can be illustrated through interviews with former terrorist inmates regarding the framing of issues related to terrorism:

"Well, of course, twisting the facts into a sensational news context... right? Because it can be linked to the history of struggle... the history of overthrowing, defending the nation, or even the victories of armed groups that triumphed in foreign countries that were indeed opposing the government. It can all be connected..."

(Statement by RA, Interview with Former Terrorist Inmate, November 3, 2022)

Referring to the previous statements made by former terrorist inmate RA, it can be concluded that by creating dramatic portrayals in cyberspace, terrorist actors leverage social media to craft narratives and experiences that are highly convincing, thus appearing stronger and more influential in the virtual realm than in reality. This situation is what Baudrillard (1994) refers to as hyperreality, characterized by a simulacrum or false representation. Essentially, the phenomena of hyperreality and simulacrum arise from the glorification and dramatization of terrorism content on social media, further exacerbated by the reproduction and repetition of similar content. This creates an echo chamber or radical reverberation of enthusiasm that affects both society and the perpetrators themselves. In this study, this enthusiasm is formed from hyperreality and simulacrum, which lead the online audience into a process of cultivation regarding the glorified content of terrorism propaganda that is readily available.

The use of hyperreality in terrorism propaganda has several implications for former terrorists, including:

Radicalization Reinforcement

Hyperreal propaganda reinforces the beliefs and motivations for radicalization among former terrorists, making it difficult for them to fully detach from extremist ideologies.

Emotional Resonance

Hyperreal portrayals evoke strong emotional responses, leading to nostalgia for their past involvement in terrorism and a desire to return to the group.

Resistance to Deradicalization Efforts

Hyperreal propaganda serves as a barrier to successful deradicalization efforts, as it maintains cognitive and emotional attachment to the goals of terrorist groups.

The relationship between the elements of 9P (Propaganda, Logistics Provision, Terrorism Financing, Terrorist Recruitment, Terrorist Training, Terrorist Action Planning, Militia Formation, Terrorist Hiding, and Terrorist Acts) and hyperreality in terrorism propaganda lies in the complexity and varying levels of interaction involved in the efforts of terrorist groups to achieve their objectives.

- Propaganda and Hyperreality: Propaganda is key to creating hyperreality. Terrorist groups utilize dramatic narratives, extreme imagery, and emotional rhetoric to exaggerate the threats and significance of their objectives. This constructs an intensified image of the world, encouraging individuals to join or support these groups while idealizing and magnifying acts of terrorism.
- Logistics Provision and Hyperreality: Propaganda creates the impression that logistical provisions such as weapons, money, and explosives are crucial components of terrorism. By conveying that terrorist actions have significant impacts, terrorist groups motivate supporters to assist them in logistics provision.
- Terrorism Financing and Hyperreality: Propaganda portrays terrorism financing as a significant contribution to the group's goals. Here, hyperreality means creating the impression that even small donations have a substantial impact, despite the fact that terrorism financing is often more complex and difficult to trace.
- Terrorist Recruitment and Hyperreality: Propaganda dramatizes the narrative that joining a terrorist group is a heroic or revolutionary act. By overstating the impact and significance of recruitment, terrorist groups influence individuals to join their efforts.
- Terrorist Training and Hyperreality: Propaganda related to terrorist training creates an image that such training is an essential part of the struggle and has a major impact on the group's goals. This encourages potential terrorists to feel that they will be part of something greater and more significant than themselves.
- Terrorist Action Planning and Hyperreality: Propaganda associated with planning terrorist actions creates the impression that these actions have dramatic effects that can change the world. This motivates individuals to engage in the planning process.
- Militia Formation and Hyperreality: The formation of paramilitary groups is portrayed as a crucial aspect of the movement or struggle in propaganda. By creating a hyperreality in which paramilitary groups play a significant role in achieving goals, terrorist groups motivate supporters and members to participate in militia formation.
- Terrorist Hiding and Hyperreality: Propaganda related to terrorist hiding creates the impression that such concealment is vital for the movement's continuity. This conveys the idea that the task of hiding group members is a heroic effort with considerable impact.
- Terrorist Acts and Hyperreality: Propaganda directly related to acts of terrorism crafts a dramatic narrative about the impact of these actions on society or the group's objectives. This influences perceptions of terrorist actions and portrays them as critical steps in achieving the group's goals.

CONCLUSION

Propaganda plays a central role in creating the hyperreality of terrorism, where various elements of the 9P framework (Propaganda, Logistics Provision, Terrorism Financing, Terrorist Recruitment, Terrorist Training, Terror Action Planning, Militia Formation, Terrorist Hiding, and Terror Actions) interact to shape dramatic narratives and distortions of reality that influence individual perceptions and actions.

Terrorism propaganda often creates illusions and hyperreal fantasies that idealize terrorist objectives, portraying acts of violence as heroic and romanticizing the concept of martyrdom. Through powerful and emotional visual narratives, this propaganda maintains a sense of attachment to the goals of terrorist groups, making it difficult for individuals to fully disengage from their past associations. The hyperreality within terrorism propaganda is designed to manipulate emotions and desires, evoking feelings of pride, righteousness, and belonging among former terrorists. In this way, propaganda not only affects how individuals perceive themselves in the context of terrorist groups but also hinders the processes of deradicalization and reintegration into society.

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