

## Chapter 28

# Deception in Online Terrorist Propaganda: A Study of ISIS and Boko Haram

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter examines the meaning, types, and practice of propaganda by two prominent terrorist groups, namely ISIS and Boko Haram, and how deception and deceptive communication form aspects of their propagandist tools. The chapter begins with the conceptual description and discussion of deception and propaganda and situate them in the research literature. It goes further to examine the impact of the internet in the enhancement and spread of terrorist propaganda by ISIS and Boko Haram; the reasons and various forms of propaganda and radicalization online are also examined. Some specific samples of terrorist propaganda by the two terrorist organizations are qualitatively analyzed using discourse analytical methodology. Studies in counter-propaganda appears to be the future research direction; although it has been argued that aggressive counter-narratives may be counterproductive, grievances expressed in terrorist propaganda should be addressed.*

### INTRODUCTION

The practice of deception in oral or written/visual communication is noticeable where the communicator (or deceiver) intentionally misrepresents information by tactically choosing between two forms of lying, namely concealment or leaving out the true information, and falsification; that is, presenting false information as if it were true (Ekman 1985 cited in Samoilenko, 2017). Interestingly, strategic communication (such as propaganda) often applies some forms of lying and deception; for example, fabricating false information, concealing or omitting truthful/relevant information, minimizing or downplaying aspects of truth, or mixing truthful information with lies. This kind of deceptive communication generally has the tendency of misleading and misdirecting attention, sometimes by exaggerating or overstating truthful information and creating false beliefs, or skirting issues through changing the subject or responding indirectly (i.e. equivocations) (Samoilenko, 2017).

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## ***Deception in Online Terrorist Propaganda***

Terrorist propaganda selects from this list of deceptive communication, and in most cases all of these forms of lying play out clearly in terrorist propagandist online content and video. This study shows from online propagandist content by ISIS and Boko Haram, that deception is a key factor in terrorist propaganda. The study is intended to add significantly to literature in terrorism and deception studies and give more insights to terrorist's process of radicalization through mind game or psychological warfare.

## **PROPAGANDA IN ONLINE TERRORISM DISCOURSE**

The United States military defines propaganda as “any form of communication in support of national objectives designed to influence the opinions, emotions, attitudes, or behavior of any group in order to benefit the sponsor, either directly or indirectly” (See Lieberman 2017, p.95). The character of propaganda is made clearer in some other definitions such as the definition by the Oxford Living English Dictionary, which defines propaganda as “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote a political cause or point of view.” The Cambridge English Dictionary also defines propaganda as “information, ideas, opinions or images often only giving one part of an argument, that are broadcast, published or in some other way spread with the intention of influencing people's opinions.” A definition by the Encyclopedia Britannica captures the fact that propagandist information is often not “objective and is used primarily to influence an audience and further an agenda, often by presenting facts selectively to encourage a particular synthesis or perception, or using loaded language to produce an emotional rather than a rational response to the information that is presented.” And much of what is disseminated as propaganda is “information – facts, arguments, rumours, half-truths or lies...” presented not only as words (or texts) but also may be in the form of gestures, banners, monuments, music, clothing, insignia, hairstyles, designs on coins and postage stamps etc.”<sup>1</sup>

Lieberman (2017) identifies and characterizes different forms of propaganda namely (1) white propaganda – propaganda that identifies the source of the message sent to a particular target (2) black propaganda – propaganda that comes from an unknown source often containing fabrications and lies (3) Gray propaganda – containing neither completely true nor completely false information and does not identify its source. ISIS generally practices black propaganda associated with unreliable information and half-truths. An example is their negotiations with Jordan for the release of the captured pilot, Muath Safi Yousef al-Kasasbeh in exchange for the release of captives in Jordanian jails in 2015. ISIS released a video showing al-Kasasbeh's death by burning on 3 February. However, the Jordanian government's investigation showed that the pilot was actually killed on 3 January, 2015. If that was true, it would confirm that ISIS never intended to exchange him for prisoners. But their propaganda succeeded because the publicity around the graphic online video of their victim's execution resulted in global media coverage of the event (Ali, 2015).

Propaganda is also categorized on the basis of its subject matter. For instance, *defamatory propaganda* is such that degrades, reviles and insults foreign states, their institutions, leaders or other agents with the aim of disrupting peaceful relations between states. *Subversive propaganda* refers to any communication that is intended to overthrow the political leader, or existing internal political order of a state, which violates international principle of non-interference in the internal affair of a sovereign state. *Propaganda or incitement to aggressive war or genocide* is communication intending to infiltrate the minds of the people with hate and disposition to engage in or normalize unlawful violence (Lieberman, 2017, p97). All the three types of propaganda are able to effectively win the hearts of local populations

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