

Translating terror: On ‘gatekeeping’ new security discourses

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Broadly speaking, there are two bodies of communication around terrorism: the discourses produced and disseminated by terrorists and their supporters (‘terror discourse’), and the discourses about terrorism produced by governments, journalists, academics and other experts (‘security discourse’). An investigation of how these discourses intersect reveals a simple, consistent but significant disjuncture: those producing the security discourse are often not working with the original terrorist texts, but with translations. These translations lose what is important about the original texts, leading to an enduring lack of understanding of why the terror discourse might be persuasive to those who can understand the original or at least watch the images and songs of the original, including ‘vulnerable Muslims’. Current translation practices are retarding the understanding of radicalisation in security discourse. Consequently, policies stemming from security discourse may be misconceived. This paper (i) demonstrates why this is the case through an examination of Western translations of jihadist texts, (ii) suggests that translation is also critical to understanding how terrorism features in mainstream public opinion and knowledge, and (iii) invites consideration of how translation might adequately be addressed.

We examine the translation into English of four of the most important jihadist texts of the 2000s by sites such as MEMRI and the NEFA Foundation, and the subsequent re-production of these jihadist texts in mainstream media. The translation institutions often remove all content of these texts except for the speech by the main figure in any jihadist production. They also remove any Quranic references by the main figure. This makes invisible what makes a production persuasive to Muslim audiences: the authority afforded by references to the status of the speaker, and the legitimacy afforded by quotations of scripture and the aural and visual representations of suffering Muslims. At a second stage of translation, for mainstream audiences, Western media reporting selectively reproduces and highlights statements of threat and incitement of violence. Western publics are granted no opportunity to understand why the original production would be persuasive. The translation process reduces rich, collaborative media productions that appeal to emotions, and whose intent is to create a mood or disposition rather than a set of rational claims, to a decontextualised set of linguistic statements by a threatening individual that contain no intelligible motive.

The question of translation allows us to step back and consider the role of ‘the mainstream’ in radicalisation. In the terror and security discourses, jihadist terrorism is often disembodied from ordinary society; populations may be sources of legitimacy and consent, but they are rarely actively involved in the battle at hand other than as passive victims. Yet the terror and security discourses course through the mainstream; jihadist violence, arrests, trials, plots - all are a regular presence in mainstream news and an underlying if unarticulated concern for publics. The mainstream may also be a source of recruits to such violence. Hence, how translation shapes the version of jihadism present in mainstream public life becomes important but is presently overlooked. Take recent research in the Change Institute’s comprehensive ‘Studies into violent radicalisation’ commissioned by the European Commission. This aimed to explore ‘the beliefs, narratives and ideologies that underpin violent radicalism with a view to developing a much deeper understanding of the causes and remedies for violent radicalisation as part of an ideological response to the main terrorist threat facing Europe’ (2008: 4). Yet, despite the resources invested in ‘145 stakeholder and primary fieldwork interviews in four Member States’ (p.4) and an extensive ‘analysis of the content and imagery of terrorist rhetoric and propaganda found on the internet’ (p.8) this research excluded consideration of other mass media and the role

of its agents (i.e. commentators, journalists, ‘experts’ etc.) in translating and remediating ‘the beliefs, narratives and ideologies’ that it sought to interrogate.

Based on original research across several collaborative grant-funded projects, this paper holds up and interrogates **translation** as a key and overlooked dynamic in production of understandings of terrorism. This is part of a broader theorization of the ‘information infrastructure’ through which security phenomena emerged and became understood since 7/7.

Reference

The Change Institute (2008) ‘Studies into violent radicalisation; Lot 2: The beliefs, ideologies and narratives’, European Commission.