Book Review: *Weaponized Words*

Reviewed by Dr. Don Meyerhoff

K. Braddock. *Weaponized Words: The Strategic Role of Persuasion in Violent Radicalization and Counter-Terrorism*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020. ISBN: 978-1-108-46487-1. 289 pages. \$29.37

One of the most popular uses of media and online platforms is in the persuasion of audiences. An innumerable number of hours of the average person's day exposes them to persuasion of some form or another. Someone only has to turn on a television, read an online news article, or spend time on any of the popular social media platforms and they will be immersed in volumes of advertisements and articles attempting to persuade them to purchase a particular product, vote for a specific candidate, or perhaps even align with a new radical ideological belief. For whatever purpose it may be presented to the viewer, the intent comes down to the use of persuasive messaging through communication.

Of popular concern is the threat to younger generations and disenfranchised individuals susceptible to the persuasive messaging of domestic and international terrorist groups. Online messaging of radical ideologies centering around religious extremism, anarchism, and racism present themselves in the forms of video, music, e-zine publications (e.g., Dabiq and Inspire), and chat room conversations. This messaging has infected, molded, and motivated individuals to the point of active participation in violent acts they would not have previously engaged in. Susceptible individuals no longer have to travel long or short distances to training camps, religious centers, or compounds in order to fall prey to the radicalization process and the associated dire outcomes. Kurt Braddock, an assistant teaching professor and researcher at the Pennsylvania State University, skillfully explains how persuasive narratives and messaging are used as part of the overall radicalization process on the part of terrorists and how they can be countered and combatted.

Starting out in an attempt to explain the persuasive narrative and counter-narrative process the book's author provides the reader with a light yet digestible discourse of necessary theoretical groundwork on the radicalization process. Though there are several espoused frameworks of radicalization, the author presents McCauley's Single Pyramid model of radicalism and Moghaddam's Staircase to Terrorism model for a discussion of linear radicalization processes. Alternatively, for discussion of non-linear approaches to radicalization, McCauley and Moskalenko's Double Pyramid Model is introduced. As a final preparation for continued progression through the text the author establishes four key or baseline propositions pertaining to the radicalization process and its use of persuasion. The

fourth proposition rolls up the first three providing a baseline and overall direction for the rest of the text, and states “Proven theories of persuasion can inform (a) our understanding of how terrorist messaging promotes radicalization and violent radicalization and (b) our development of messages intended for counter-radicalization.”

Braddock continues to discuss lessons learned from existing counter-radicalization processes and programs focused on prevention as well as intervention for those already engaged in the mind-altering radicalization process. Hotlines and outreach programs, in countries such as Germany and Holland, which utilize presentations by ex-group members and victims of radicalization, are discussed. Training programs for frontline workers (e.g., social workers and counselors) in numerous countries such as Australia and Belgium are presented as well. Additionally, discussion of online re-direct programs and their tactics (e.g., Google’s Jigsaw program) are presented to the reader. For further comprehension, case examples are peppered throughout the text and aid the reader in binding concepts and theory to actual events.

The book’s author further sets the table for counter-narrative creation by providing baseline information on persuasive narratives which advances into a discussion on thematic analysis of radicalizing narratives. The results of the analysis eventually inform the proposed counter-narrative development processes. Additionally, the various emotions intended to be acted upon by radical messaging and how they are possibly countered are discussed. Once counter-narrative creation has been achieved methods of dissemination and associated communication vehicles are presented. The importance of utilizing trusted communicators (e.g., reformed terrorists or those that have previously been radicalized) is emphasized due to their essential nature in the creation of trust, believability and general acceptance by the intended audience.

Braddock also addresses inoculation of audiences against persuasive messaging meant to radicalize. Counter-messaging is created in order to prepare the public for terrorist-based attempts meant to entice particular age groups, populations and segments to embrace terrorist ideologies. Similar to public service announcements aimed at preventing or stopping smoking, drunk driving and drug use, inoculation messaging against terrorism prepares individuals from engaging or believing radical ideological messaging from groups such as Al Qaeda or the Skinheads. Oftentimes, the messaging presents the audience with grim images of unheeded consequences.

The book’s author then spends time discussing reasoned action theory and its several components describing the decision-making process and how influencing different factors may alter final decisions and behaviors. Ultimately, to wrap up the section on influencing human behavior, Braddock discusses the influential use of emotions in messaging, on the part of terrorists, and how it may be countered.

The final section of Braddock's work discusses current and future threats in persuasive communication and future directions. Areas covered include fake news, stochastic terrorism, and state sponsored illicit actors. Covered as well is the roles large media outlets and social media giants play in validating information for the masses.

Overall, Kurt Braddock did a fine job bringing the reader into the world of persuasive narratives and counter-messaging. Throughout the work there were necessary diversions into relevant psychological and communications theory. These moments were relevant and provided background necessary to comfortably progress the reader through well described processes and case interpretations essential to the understanding the subject matter at hand. However, due to the depth of detail and continued reference to various theoretical and academic material, the text is probably best suited for the student, scholar, and practitioner, not the layman.

Don Meyerhoff holds a DBA in Homeland Security Leadership and Policy and an MA in Business and Organizational Security Management. His primary area of research includes the examination of factors attributable to terrorism as well as the impact of terrorist events on society. Highlights from his research include the impact of terrorism on the protection of buildings and spaces in the commercial and government sectors as well as its impact on entrepreneurialism in weak and failed states. He welcomes opportunities for continued research and collaboration.