



Careful What You Say About Anti-Social Acts

In an increasingly polarised world, words could make the difference between fomenting aggression and quashing it.

Threats are usually scarier when they appear to have an organisation behind them, as journalists and editors well know. Unceasing media coverage of the actions of ISIS, Boko Haram, the Ku Klux Klan, and others provokes a strong visceral reaction that, perhaps not coincidentally, translates into increased newsstand sales and online clicks. A less cynical explanation of current media practice would be that the involvement, however tangential, of these groups gives greater significance to what could otherwise be considered localised acts of anti-social aggression.

However, media protocol conceals a potentially even scarier reality. The internet has changed how hate groups win new converts. Contact with organisational recruiters and leaders – in-person or virtual – is no longer required. ISIS **sanctions online followers** to launch terror acts entirely independently, and claim them on behalf of the organisation. In blurring the line between lone gunman and loyal foot soldier, technology has fundamentally changed what it means to “belong” to groups such as ISIS – and has called into question whether the group or the loosely affiliated individual should bear the lion’s share of blame for atrocities.

Inhibiting anti-social influence

More than media ethics is at stake. My research on

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promoting **pro-social behaviour** has found that feelings of connectedness to others cause us to act in a more socially responsible manner, due to the sense of empowerment we derive from connectedness. Being part of a closely-knit group – or simply feeling psychologically connected to the group – bolsters the belief that our actions matter and puts a human face on their consequences.

Empowerment, however, is an amoral force that can be channelled in darker directions. Based on my research on pro-social behaviour, I suspect that in the world of online hate groups, a parallel mechanism to the above may trigger acts considered anti-social by the overwhelming majority of human beings. The sense of empowerment-through-connection that led participants in our social responsibility studies to donate time and money to worthy causes could work the opposite way. Linking up with a hate group may validate and reinforce the fitfully violent imaginings of extremely alienated people, enabling their online rage to explode into actual violence. If empowerment works like an explosive, identification with an infamous, globally feared group like ISIS may act as the detonator – triggering a psychological chain of events that turns a potentially harmless individual into a deadly weapon.

How we describe crimes committed in the name of collectives, then, could be key to preventing more from occurring. Emphasising group involvement – even though the group *per se* may have done little or nothing other than inspiring the perpetrators – may capture the imaginations of people with anti-social sympathies and embolden them to follow suit. Attributing acts to individuals instead of groups may constrain anti-social disaffection from flowering into active fanaticism.

Promoting the pro-social

Furthermore, **past research** suggests that careful use of language may help promote pro-social sentiments within people who feel at odds with society, essentially defusing the bomb. Media coverage that drives home the human cost of anti-social violence – victim profiles and interviews with grieving families – has the potential not only to stir dormant empathy in the disaffected, but also to inspire feelings of connectedness to a larger human community.

Finally, language invoking a broadly humanistic sense of connectedness may be better for inspiring socially responsible actions than that which references narrower affiliation, such as a professional or social context. To steer newly-empowered individuals in the most humane direction, focus their attention on right vs. wrong at the most basic level. If we incline toward the optimistic belief that every budding terrorist is also a human being possessing the potential to do good, then society should do all it can to enable its isolates to make pro-social choices. And that starts with seeing through the fearsome iconography and propaganda of extremist groups, to the real story: human suffering.

***Natalia Karelaia** is an Associate Professor of Decision Sciences at INSEAD.*

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