

Securitisation and Vernacular Discussions of Terrorism on Social Media

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JOSEPH DOWNING, SARAH GERWENS AND RICHARD DRON, APR 5 2022

This article is based on *Tweeting terrorism: Vernacular conceptions of Muslims and terror in the wake of the Manchester Bombing on Twitter in *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2022).*

What happens when the audience speaks back after a terrorist attack? How do their conversations construct our definition of terrorism on Twitter and other platforms? There has been lots of consideration through Critical Terrorism Studies research regarding jihadist attacks in the Global North but there are still under-explored links between Critical Terrorism Studies and two important trends within International Relations. Firstly, although social media has looked at the “electronic jihad”, terrorism on social media has only received limited attention so far (Laytous, 2021; Rudner, 2017). Secondly, vernacular security studies are now seeking to give insight into how non-elite security discourses emerge, are contested, and (de)construct what is considered to be a security threat (Bubandt, 2005; Jarvis, 2019).

In our article (open access) we have investigated how terrorism is constructed on social media in vernacular discourses by non-elite actors and tried to make the case for a range of critical security approaches to engage more deeply with social media conversations.

In our research we looked at emerging discourses in the aftermath of a terror attack, focusing on Twitter. We started by considering the work of Jarvis who finds three areas where the contemporary terrorism paradigm has been challenged – politics, popular culture, and, crucial for our analysis, the everyday. However, his exploration of the vernacular is limited to focus groups and other studies with explicitly identified research subjects. At the same time he also notes that these methodologies risk artificiality and rely on participants’ willingness to share. While he does not suggest social media as an alternate avenue for researchers, online platforms perhaps are a way to address some of these fears where online sources can offer a less contrived view into everyday discourse than traditional research, without discounting the importance of both elite-focused and focus group security scholarship.

what the public thinks and says online matters because it provides us with an insight into how elite-driven discourses are reproduced, legitimated and challenged. Stanley and Jackson, 2016.

In our research, vernacular enables us to focus on data such as conversations on social media as an intertextual and social source that goes beyond the unidirectional media, culture, policy, and ‘expert’ outputs traditionally considered as part of Critical Terrorism Studies, opening up new and promising avenues for research.

This is an important case for such a study because of its range of coverage in media, and politics, both online and off. Given its association with jihadi terrorism, the attack particularly impacted British Muslims: in the following month, anti-Muslim hate crimes in Manchester increased by 500% compared to the previous year and survey results show that anti-immigrant and anti-refugee sentiments increased immediately after the attack, as well. The analysis uses Social Network Analysis to generate a sample to understand this case that shows how lay Twitter users share a range of messages, from mourning the attack to condemning liberal “political correctness”. Across the tweets, they exhibit a high degree of literacy in post-attack discourses, such as those blaming Islam as a religion, and seek to

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deconstruct but also defend them.

The most common theme of the posts, present in 58% of them, is criticism of Islamophobia and a defence of Islam. Users juxtapose the image of supposedly dangerous Muslims with descriptions of how many of those helping with the emergency response in Manchester were Muslims. Others draw on religious arguments, noting that “terrorism has no religion” and that violence is inherently un-Islamic. These contrast the bulk of research about Muslims online that simply focus on Islamophobia and hate speech. This also gives rise to another set of tweets, those demanding Muslims condemn the attack – and those of Muslims doing so (10%).

In the aftermath of the bombing, many Muslim organisations and individual users took to Twitter to express their shock and sadness. Through their tweets, they position themselves with the grieving, implicitly non-Muslim public rather than the “Muslim terrorist”. This is also interesting because while this further imbeds discourses whose assumptions are Islamophobic, which has been seen in past studies, these public condemnations also highlight how social media can provide a space for marginalised voices to be heard.

The tweets analysed engage with a variety of discourses; they reflect on the role of religion in general and Islam in particular, they assign blame, they discuss the figure of the terrorist and his victims, and also consider the appropriate response to such violence. Taken together, these categories shed light on how terrorism is constructed in the wake of an attack and emphasise the active role non-elite individuals takes in the construction and contestation of security speak. Indeed, there are no significant elite voices, such as national politicians or security ‘experts’, represented in the sample.

What is most notable is, firstly, the high proportion of tweets in defence of Muslims and Islam and, secondly, the range of discourses on interpretations of the incident. While there is no discussion of whether or not the attack can be understood as terrorism and should be condemned as such – this descriptor is adopted across the data, users differ in their response to it. They are aware of both the supposedly ‘pro-’ and ‘anti-’Muslim/Islam narratives emerging in the aftermath of jihadi terrorism and actively respond to them.

In our research, we present a version of Twitter that functions as a site of meta-discourse on how to respond to and interpret terrorist violence. It is essential to take such (meta-) discourses into account. Social media users are not only aware of the dominant narratives produced in the wake of an attack, but that they also shape and challenge them.

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