

Dramaturgical Analysis in Terror Propaganda in Cyberspace

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ABSTRACT: Terrorists have utilized cyberspace to further their agendas, particularly in the expansion and dissemination of propaganda. Within this digital realm, terror actors orchestrate various processes of reconstruction and manipulate facts and reality. By applying Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory, terrorism is conceptualized as a stage play where social interactions are performed roles in a drama. This research examines how terrorist groups strategically design and present their propaganda as "performances" on social media and online forums, employing dramaturgical elements such as stages, roles, and audiences to enhance the effectiveness of their messaging. The study highlights the dramaturgical techniques employed in normalizing violence, leveraging symbolism, and fostering communities with shared ideologies. Insights from this research contribute to more effective counter-propaganda strategies that address the manipulative narratives propagated by terrorist groups in the digital era.

KEYWORDS: dramaturgy, propaganda, cyberspace

I. INTRODUCTION

The rise of digital technology has revolutionized the means by which terrorist organizations disseminate their ideologies. Terrorist actors have transitioned from traditional media to cyberspace, utilizing social media platforms and forums to stage meticulously crafted narratives. This shift is not merely a technological adaptation but a strategic evolution that leverages the interactive and global nature of digital platforms to amplify their ideological reach.

The theoretical lens of dramaturgy, pioneered by Erving Goffman, offers a compelling framework to analyze these activities. Goffman's theory likens social interactions to theatrical performances, where individuals consciously or unconsciously present themselves to create desired impressions. Terrorist propaganda can be understood as a deliberate and calculated performance aimed at crafting a narrative that resonates with specific audiences. By examining the "front stage" where these performances are displayed and the "backstage" where strategies are devised, this study provides a nuanced understanding of how terrorist groups sustain their propaganda campaigns.

Digital platforms, with their capacity to instantly reach millions of users, provide terrorist groups with unprecedented opportunities to craft and project their narratives. These platforms enable terrorists to exploit the principles of dramaturgy in a way that traditional media could not. By using multimedia tools, they can dramatize their ideological battles, casting themselves as protagonists in a global struggle. This ability to create visually and emotionally compelling narratives has fundamentally altered the dynamics of propaganda.

Furthermore, the anonymity and decentralization of cyberspace create an environment where terrorist groups can operate with relative impunity. This environment allows for the continuous refinement of their messaging strategies. For instance, terrorist groups can test and adapt their narratives in real-time, observing audience reactions and adjusting accordingly. This iterative process underscores the importance of studying the dramaturgical dimensions of digital propaganda.

The introduction of interactive technologies such as augmented reality (AR) and virtual reality (VR) has further expanded the tools available for propagandists. These technologies allow for the creation of immersive environments where users can experience dramatized narratives firsthand. This deeper level of engagement represents a new frontier in the application of dramaturgical principles in digital propaganda. Countering these sophisticated strategies requires an equally innovative approach, combining technological tools with psychological insights to undermine extremist narratives.

By identifying and deconstructing the performative aspects of these campaigns, counter-terrorism efforts can develop more targeted and effective strategies to disrupt extremist narratives. This paper aims to bridge the gap in understanding how dramaturgical principles manifest in the digital age and their implications for global security. In doing so, it seeks to provide actionable insights for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in the field of counter-terrorism.

II. RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research methodology, utilizing multiple data sources to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the dramaturgical elements in terrorist propaganda. The primary method of data collection involves content analysis of digital propaganda materials disseminated by terrorist groups. These materials include social media posts, videos, and narratives sourced from platforms such as Twitter, YouTube, and encrypted messaging apps between 2018 and 2023. The content is examined for key dramaturgical components, such as roles, stages, and audience interaction, as outlined in Erving Goffman's theoretical framework.

Additionally, a literature review forms a significant part of the research method. Scholarly articles, books, and reports from 2000 to 2023 were analyzed to provide context and support for the findings. Works such as Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* and studies on digital propaganda dynamics were crucial for building the theoretical foundation of this research. The literature review also highlights how dramaturgy has been applied in other domains, offering comparative insights into its relevance in analyzing terrorist activities.

To deepen the analysis, this study incorporates case studies of specific propaganda campaigns by groups such as ISIS and Al-Qaeda. These case studies provide detailed examples of how dramaturgical techniques are employed to achieve strategic objectives, including recruitment, radicalization, and the dissemination of fear. Interviews with three academic experts specializing in counter-terrorism were conducted to gain additional perspectives on the strategic use of dramaturgy in propaganda. The interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow for in-depth exploration of topics while maintaining flexibility to address emerging themes.

The methodological framework also includes a comparative analysis of traditional and digital propaganda to underscore the unique characteristics of cyberspace. This comparison reveals the transformative impact of digital technologies on the strategies employed by terrorist groups. Ethical considerations were carefully observed throughout the research process, particularly in analyzing sensitive and potentially distressing content. The study adheres to established ethical guidelines to ensure respect for human dignity and mitigate harm. By integrating content analysis, literature review, case studies, and expert interviews, the research provides a triangulated perspective that enhances the validity and reliability of the findings. This approach not only captures the complexity of the subject matter but also offers actionable insights for developing counter-propaganda strategies.

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The research findings reveal how terrorist groups have intricately woven dramaturgical principles into their propaganda strategies, both in the construction and dissemination phases. The concept of the "front stage," as conceptualized by Erving Goffman, becomes particularly evident in the way terrorist propaganda is carefully crafted for public consumption. On social media platforms, this front stage is meticulously designed through multimedia content, including emotionally charged videos, visually captivating images, and dramatic storytelling elements aimed at influencing audience perceptions.

Cyberspace offers an acceleration and amplification of threats arising from terrorist activities occurring in the real world. Interested parties leverage the power of words, symbols, and images to create an atmosphere in which society is under threat from individuals with the capacity to attack anyone, anywhere, at any time. This phenomenon draws global attention and disrupts social stability and public security, particularly concerning public facilities and authorities responsible for national security. The dissemination of information regarding terrorist acts on social media further inspires other group members to participate in terrorist activities, often framed as jihadist agendas or patriotic actions. With the advancement of internet technology in cyberspace, terrorists are no longer solely dependent on mainstream media coverage. They can now publish press releases and distribute striking and horrifying images that intensify the atmosphere of fear.

There are common narratives across different dimensions of terrorist groups. Regarding the extensive use of the Internet for terrorism, Conway (as cited in Golose, 2015, p. 23) presents a comparative classification of how the Internet is utilized for terrorist purposes based on expert opinions. These classifications include: propaganda and publication; financing; information dissemination; and secure communication. Additionally, the Internet is used for design; financing; operations and coordination; political activities; and propaganda. Furthermore, it is employed for profiling; propaganda; anonymous or covert communication; instilling fear throughout cyberspace; financing; command and control; recruitment and support of members; data collection; risk minimization; data theft or manipulation; and executing attacks using false information.

For example, Various online radicalization and recruitment practices employed by groups such as Al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and Salafi Jihadists in general. These practices are examined as negative consequences of globalization, which facilitate terrorist activities. The study focuses on the recruitment strategies utilized by terrorist groups and highlights the increasing use of digital platforms to disseminate radical ideologies and stimulate individuals to join their movements.

This research employs social network analysis and digital content examination to identify patterns and recruitment strategies frequently used by terrorist organizations. The findings indicate that terrorist groups effectively utilize social media and online forums to construct "assemblages"—clusters of ideologies and identities that attract individuals toward radical activities. Furthermore, the relevance to this lies in understanding how propaganda extends into the digital realm, creating an alternate reality

Dramaturgical Analysis in Terror Propaganda in Cyberspace

that reinforces terrorist narratives. Consequently, this study provides insights into online recruitment and propaganda mechanisms and how they can be countered through effective counter-terrorism strategies, particularly through counter-narrative initiatives in Indonesia.

Moreover, Nnam et al. (2019) conducted a study to explore the relationship between cyberspace usage and terrorism, specifically focusing on how Boko Haram in Nigeria utilizes the Internet to expand its influence. The study highlights the complexity of cyberspace, which makes detecting and apprehending cyber terrorists increasingly difficult, particularly through traditional law enforcement efforts. To analyze this phenomenon, Nnam et al. (2019) adopted an integrated theoretical approach, connecting various terrorism-related theories to understand the link between cyberspace and Boko Haram's terrorist activities. The study's findings demonstrate that the Internet plays a crucial role in Boko Haram's long-term strategy to sustain conflict and reinforce its ideology. The relevance of this lies in the analysis of how terrorist groups manipulate online platforms to create a distorted reality through propaganda. Additionally, this research provides an expanded international perspective that is valuable for understanding similar phenomena in Indonesia.

The "front stage" is not merely a static space but a dynamic arena where terrorist groups strategically control their image. Videos of masked figures, the use of flags and symbolic clothing, and the careful selection of phrases and slogans are all dramaturgical elements used to evoke both fear and ideological solidarity. In terrorist propaganda, symbolic clothing serves as a crucial visual tool that reinforces ideological narratives and conveys specific messages to both supporters and adversaries. Clothing choices are not merely incidental but are deliberately selected to evoke powerful connotations. Black garments, for instance, are frequently used to symbolize militancy, defiance, and a willingness to embrace martyrdom. This color association fosters an image of resilience and dedication to a cause, often appealing to potential recruits by glorifying the notion of sacrifice. Conversely, white garments can be employed to signify purity and the sanctity of martyrdom, reinforcing the perception of self-sacrifice as an honorable and divine act.

The use of face coverings, such as balaclavas or keffiyehs, further enhances the symbolic power of clothing in terrorist propaganda. The obscured identity of individuals in these visuals contributes to an aura of mystery and intimidation while simultaneously fostering a collective identity among members. The keffiyeh, in particular, carries historical and cultural significance, often associated with resistance movements, making it a potent symbol for groups seeking to frame their actions as part of a broader struggle. Additionally, military-style uniforms and tactical gear are frequently featured to project an image of organizational strength and strategic competence, reinforcing the group's credibility and operational capacity in the eyes of their followers.

Slogans in terrorist propaganda function as a linguistic extension of these visual symbols, encapsulating core ideological principles in concise and impactful phrases. These slogans are designed to evoke strong emotional reactions, inspire loyalty, and mobilize action. Many slogans romanticize martyrdom, such as "The blood of the martyrs is the light of the struggle," transforming acts of violence into perceived heroic sacrifices. This rhetorical device not only justifies extreme actions but also encourages new recruits to view participation in terrorist activities as a noble and inevitable duty.

In the dramaturgical perspective, social media serves as the stage where terrorist groups construct and perform their ideological narratives. As Goffman (1959) postulates in his dramaturgical theory, social interactions resemble a theatrical performance in which individuals or groups act before an audience. In this context, the content disseminated by terrorist organizations—whether in the form of text, images, or videos—functions as the actors and actresses that embody their message, recruit new members, and shape their collective identity.

Likes and comments act as the audience's applause, reinforcing the legitimacy and perceived impact of the content. A high level of engagement—such as shares, reactions, and discussions—strengthens the group's presence in the digital ecosystem, making their ideology appear more influential and attractive to potential sympathizers. Social media, therefore, enables terrorist groups to construct a dramaturgical narrative that is emotionally compelling, ideologically persuasive, and strategically effective.



Propaganda Poster of Radical Groups on Social Media Instagram

Source: Densus Indonesia, 2024

Dramaturgical Analysis in Terror Propaganda in Cyberspace

One of tangible examples of terrorist propaganda above is the dissemination of visually striking posters with provocative slogans. As illustrated in the following image, radical groups frequently engage in counter-framing of national ideologies, such as by distorting the fundamental principles of Pancasila into a derogatory term like “Pancasila.” This rhetorical strategy aims to redefine the national ideology, delegitimizing state authority while constructing an alternative ideological framework that aligns with their extremist views.

The propaganda poster presented in the image exemplifies the radical reconfiguration of national symbols to serve extremist narratives. The image prominently features the title “PANCAGILA”, a derogatory play on Pancasila, Indonesia’s foundational ideological framework. The visual composition of the poster employs stark black-and-white contrast, accentuating the ominous tone of its messaging. At the top of the image, a menacing skull with wings is centrally positioned, reinforcing themes of rebellion and defiance against state authority. The dark aesthetic of the image aligns with common radical propaganda strategies, where grim and confrontational visuals are used to evoke strong emotional responses.

Beneath the title, five rewritten principles mimic the structure of Pancasila but are instead repurposed to frame the government as corrupt and illegitimate. The principles emphasize financial greed, systemic corruption, collusion between law enforcement and criminals, authoritarianism, and nepotism, all framed as defining characteristics of the ruling elite. This deliberate distortion serves to delegitimize the state by suggesting that the national ideology has been fundamentally perverted.

Additionally, the image is embedded within an Instagram post, demonstrating how radical groups exploit social media platforms to disseminate their ideology. The caption accompanying the post further contextualizes the poster within a broader extremist narrative, calling for resistance against the perceived injustices perpetrated by the state. Hashtags, a common feature in online propaganda, likely serve to amplify reach and engagement, ensuring that the message spreads beyond the immediate follower base.

These propaganda posters are not merely tools of communication but also powerful instruments for fostering collective identity and amplifying the distinction between “us” (the extremist group) and “them” (the general public or government). By utilizing emotionally charged language and strong visual symbolism, such posters embed radical ideologies in the minds of their audience, often portraying acts of violence as noble and necessary sacrifices.

Furthermore, the visual and textual elements in these posters serve as extensions of the broader dramaturgical performance on social media. The use of militant imagery, religious references, and binary oppositions reinforces the ideological script that terrorist organizations seek to propagate. Through repeated exposure to such propaganda, sympathizers are gradually drawn into the extremist narrative, perceiving participation in terrorist activities as an inevitable course of action.

In addition to the previously discussed strategies, another concrete manifestation of terrorist propaganda in Indonesia is the recurrent narrative that frames the government as *Thaghut* (a term used to denote tyrannical or ungodly rule). This rhetorical device is deliberately employed to undermine the government’s credibility and legitimacy. In this context, terrorist actors attempt to construct an impression of themselves as the true religious authorities, while labeling those who do not conform to their interpretation of faith as *Thaghut* or *Kafir* (infidel). This constructed impression cannot materialize without the strategic use of religious narratives and content, carefully packaged and continuously reproduced in cyberspace by these extremist actors. A prime example of this tactic can be observed in the social media content presented in the image below.



Propaganda Poster on the Narrative of *Thaghut* by Radical Groups on Instagram

Source: Densus Indonesia, 2024

Dramaturgical Analysis in Terror Propaganda in Cyberspace

The propaganda poster in the image exemplifies the strategic use of religious narratives to delegitimize the government and reinforce extremist ideologies. The image prominently features text that questions the viewer's faith, beginning with "ANDA SEORANG MUSLIM?" (Are you a Muslim?), a rhetorical tactic designed to create an "us vs. them" dichotomy. By posing this question, the propaganda seeks to instill doubt and provoke an emotional response from viewers, pushing them toward further engagement with extremist ideology.

The central text in the poster specifically labels the government as "Pemerintah dzalim yang merubah hukum-hukum Allah" (A tyrannical government that alters the laws of Allah). The phrase "thaghut", a Quranic term often interpreted as referring to oppressive or ungodly rule, is deliberately employed to frame the Indonesian government as an enemy of Islam. This counter-framing strategy is commonly used by radical groups to shift religious and political allegiance away from the state and toward extremist factions. By portraying the government as a transgressor against divine law, they seek to justify civil disobedience, rebellion, and in extreme cases, violent action.

The background of the poster, which features a neoclassical-style government building with uniformed officials or security personnel standing on the steps, further reinforces the anti-government message. The image selection is not arbitrary—it visually represents state power and authority, which the propaganda seeks to discredit. Additionally, the Instagram post itself contains reinforcing textual elements in the caption: "Sembahlah ALLAH saja dan jauhi thaghut" (Worship only ALLAH and avoid thaghut). This serves as a call to action, urging followers to reject state authority and align themselves exclusively with the extremist's interpretation of religious teachings.

This continuous impression management strategy is aimed at shaping public perception of terrorist actors, reinforcing their self-image as ideological warriors. The response from the public—whether in the form of engagement, fear, or controversy—serves to further validate their self-perception and strengthen their ideological commitment. This phenomenon aligns with Cooley's (1902) concept of the "Looking-Glass Self", which posits that individuals form their self-identity based on how they believe society perceives them. In this case, terrorist actors internalize their role as "jihadist warriors," reinforcing their belief in their legitimacy and moral authority. This self-perception, in turn, serves as a motivational force to encourage others to engage in terrorism under the guise of religious duty.

Moreover, the public's reaction to terrorist content—whether through direct engagement or widespread discourse—reinforces the terrorists' confidence in their agenda-setting strategies. As their backstage and offstage planning (Goffman, 1959) unfolds successfully, these actors become more convinced that their ideological framing is being accepted, thereby fueling further radicalization efforts.

Other slogans emphasize opposition to external entities, portraying governments, international organizations, or specific ideological groups as oppressive forces that must be resisted. Phrases such as "War Against Tyranny" or "Destroy the Infidel System" construct an antagonistic worldview, fostering a sense of urgency and legitimizing violent action as a necessary response to perceived oppression. Additionally, slogans aimed at fostering unity within extremist circles, such as "One Nation, One Struggle," serve to consolidate group identity and reinforce a shared purpose, transcending national and cultural boundaries. Propaganda also employs slogans that instill fear and a sense of inevitability. Statements like "We Are Everywhere" or "The End Is Near" seek to unsettle both adversaries and potential recruits by portraying the terrorist organization as omnipresent and unstoppable. These fear-inducing messages contribute to the psychological warfare aspect of propaganda, compelling opponents to perceive the group as a persistent and insurmountable threat.

The interplay of symbolic clothing and strategic slogans in terrorist propaganda is a meticulously crafted effort to manipulate perceptions and expand influence. These elements are carefully curated to evoke fear, inspire allegiance, and establish a narrative framework that sustains extremist ideology. Understanding the semiotic and rhetorical significance of these propaganda techniques is essential for developing effective counter-narratives and mitigating the impact of terrorist messaging in the digital age.

Behind these front-stage performances lies the "backstage" where the actual planning and narrative construction occur. Terrorist groups often use encrypted forums and private chat rooms to discuss narrative framing, language choices, and audience targeting strategies. These hidden activities highlight the deliberate nature of the propaganda process, as strategies are carefully rehearsed and adapted based on audience reception. Leaked documents from extremist forums further reveal how content creators within terrorist organizations collaborate closely, sometimes taking inspiration from historical propaganda models while adapting them to modern digital platforms.

A significant aspect observed during this study was the reliance on emotionally driven visual symbolism. Terrorist groups have consistently utilized graphic violence, not just to shock but to reinforce ideological messages. Images of suffering victims, burning flags, and celebratory displays after violent acts are all part of this dramaturgical toolkit. Audience engagement plays a central role in this dramaturgical model. Social media platforms allow for a level of interactivity previously unavailable in traditional media channels. By enabling audience comments, shares, and reactions, terrorist groups transform passive viewers into active participants in the ideological performance.

Dramaturgical Analysis in Terror Propaganda in Cyberspace

However, despite the sophistication of these dramaturgical strategies, significant limitations persist. The overuse of graphic violence, while initially effective in drawing attention, can lead to audience desensitization over time. This diminishing shock value reduces the effectiveness of future propaganda attempts. Another challenge is the homogenization of narratives, where terrorist propaganda often fails to account for the diverse sociocultural backgrounds of global audiences. Content tailored for one regional audience may be misinterpreted or lose impact when shared in a different cultural context.

The analysis further revealed the role of digital algorithms in amplifying terrorist propaganda. Social media platforms' recommendation systems, driven by engagement metrics, often prioritize sensationalist content, inadvertently boosting the visibility of extremist materials. Moreover, the study identified how emerging technologies, such as artificial intelligence and deepfake videos, are increasingly being incorporated into the dramaturgical strategies of terrorist groups. These technologies allow for the creation of hyper-realistic content that blurs the line between fact and fiction, making counter-propaganda efforts even more challenging.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study underscores the significance of dramaturgical analysis in understanding terrorist propaganda in cyberspace. By framing propaganda as a theatrical performance, it reveals the calculated strategies employed by terrorist groups to influence and mobilize audiences. The analysis of "front stage" and "backstage" dynamics highlights the meticulous planning and emotional manipulation inherent in their narratives.

The findings also emphasize the critical role of symbolism, visual imagery, and audience engagement in amplifying the impact of propaganda. By understanding these dramaturgical elements, counter-terrorism initiatives can be designed to target and dismantle the narratives at their core. Strategies such as exposing the backstage manipulations, promoting alternative narratives, and leveraging cultural nuances can effectively challenge extremist propaganda.

As digital platforms continue to evolve, so too will the methods of terrorist groups. It is imperative for future research to remain adaptable and forward-thinking, incorporating insights from emerging technologies and interdisciplinary approaches. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort that integrates technical innovation, policy-making, and public awareness to mitigate the influence of harmful ideologies in the digital era. This study provides a foundation for such efforts, paving the way for more comprehensive and effective counter-propaganda strategies.

By extending its analysis to include emerging technologies and algorithmic influences, this study calls for a holistic approach to counter-terrorism that encompasses technical, cultural, and ethical dimensions. The battle against extremist narratives is as much about preserving democratic values as it is about ensuring security. In this light, dramaturgical analysis emerges as a vital tool for navigating the complex landscape of digital propaganda.

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