Humanizing Violent Extremism: Journalistic Reflections on In-depth Personalized Narratives of Western jihadists

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Abstract
The issue of young Westerners travelling to Syria to join the Salafi-jihadist group the Islamic State (IS) has, in recent years, been high on the public agenda in a number of European countries, including Norway. The phenomena of so-called foreign fighters have generated renewed interest in radicalization and why young people growing up in Western, democratic countries come to engage in political and religious violence. One journalistic approach to these questions has been in-depth feature stories, zooming in on specific individuals' lives prior to joining groups like IS, and describing their "path to extremism". Drawing on theoretical perspectives on human-interest framing and individuals in journalism, the present chapter explores this particular way of narrating radicalization and violent extremism. Based on 26 in-depth interviews with Norwegian journalists and a close reading of a selection of in-depth human-interest stories about Norwegians who have joined IS, the chapter explores journalistic reflections on and representational implications of personalized narratives of violent extremism. The interviewed journalists underline that giving extremism a face and a story is crucial to make the audience identify, expand understandings and broaden the range of perspectives within public discourses on violent extremism. This includes humanizing the topic and depicting extremists as regular, complex human beings rather than as purely dangerous and threatening criminals. The chapter furthermore points to how personalized narratives of individual jihadists largely foreground a socialization approach to radicalization, and, in line with interviewees' accounts, suggests that these narratives may add complexity to public discourses concerning radicalization and violent extremism.

Keywords Human Interest, Journalism, Personalized Narratives, Radicalization, Violent Extremism

1. Introduction

The issue of young Westerners travelling to Syria and Iraq to join the Salafi-jihadist group the Islamic State (IS) has, in recent years, been high on the public agenda in a number of European countries, including Norway. The phenomena of so-called foreign fighters have generated renewed interest in radicalization[1] and why young people who have grown up in Western, democratic countries come to accept and engage in political and religious violence.

One journalistic approach to these questions has been in-depth feature stories, zooming in on specific individuals and reporting in-depth on their life stories prior to joining groups like IS, and describing their "path to extremism". With titles such as *Why did three friends from Levanger end up with terrorists?,* these stories typically highlight aspects of the depicted individual's personality, their family background and education, previous engagement with crime, drug use, psychological issues, and their process of being presented to and increasingly becoming part of extremist milieus and accepting extremist ideas.

Depictions and, in turn, understandings of violent extremism[2] are shaped by the frames employed in journalistic reports. Studies have pointed to the manner in which the mainstream media tends to represent jihadists as dangerous and uncivil, foregrounding how "they" threaten "us" (Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2010). The present chapter takes as its starting point that by emphasizing the life stories of individuals, personalized narratives may unveil alternative understandings of and policy solutions to radicalization and violent extremism than, for instance, stories focusing on the overall threat of IS. Based on 26 in-depth interviews with Norwegian journalists and editors and a close reading of a selection of in-depth human-interest stories about Norwegians having joined IS, the present chapter shed light on how journalists reflect on foregrounding the human aspects of actors deemed illegitimate, intolerant and dangerous, and discusses the understandings of radicalization and violent extremism conveyed through such personalized narratives. In-depth, personal life stories of individuals are not representative of the overall topics and frames present in journalism on violent extremism; rather, they represent one way of approaching and narrating violent extremism and radicalization. Drawing on theoretical perspec-

1 The term "radicalization" generally refers to a process of accepting and/or carrying out violence to achieve specific political objectives. The term came into widespread public use in Europe from 2005 in attempts to understand and prevent so-called "home grown" terrorism. The concept tends, implicitly or explicitly, to be tied to jihadist-inspired violence (Crone, 2016; Sedgwick, 2010).

2 In the context of the present chapter, the term "violent extremism" refers to groups/individuals advocating or employing physical violence to achieve specific political objectives. "Jihadism" refers to a violent revolutionary version of Islam (see e.g., Maher, 2016).

tives on human-interest framing and individuals in journalism, the chapter explores this particular way of approaching and narrating violent extremism, emphasizing journalistic reflections and representational implications of these specific narratives.

2. Human-interest framing and representations of radicalization and violent extremism

The notion of framing highlights how, in presenting issues, journalism foregrounds, excludes and tones down specific aspects, symbolically structuring the social world and promoting specific definitions, causes and solutions to the issues reported (Entman, 1993; Reese, 2001). The human-interest frame has been identified as one of several generic news frames commonly applied in reporting a range of topics and typically include bringing "*a human face or an emotional angle to the presentation of an event, issue or problem*", including the use of human examples, visual information and adjectives that generate empathy, and/or inclusion of private or personal information (Semetko and Valkenburg, 2000: 95). By focusing on specific individuals, personalized narratives make abstract issues more tangible and accessible and enable the identification with and understanding of others situation, feelings and motives (Neuman, Just and Crigler, 1992; Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013: 132). Moreover, by employing the human-interest frame, the issues reported tend to be dramatized and emotionalized, favoring victim portrayals of the individuals depicted (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015; Steimel, 2010). Thus, by focusing on the plight and perspectives of specific individuals, personalized narratives might broaden the range of perspectives present in journalistic discourses on violent extremism (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015). These narratives might contribute to the construction of "them", not purely as dangerous enemies to be squashed, but as "*others with humanity*" (Chouliaraki and Orgad, 2011) and as adversaries whose views might be regarded as illegitimate, but who are nevertheless heeded, with there being an inclination toward understanding them (Mouffe, 2000; Eide, 2016).

Understandings of radicalization can broadly be divided into two approaches. The first emphasizes radicalization as an ideological process of increasingly accepting "violent extremist ideas", whereas the second focuses on social marginalization and socialization into extremism (e.g., Basra, 2016; Crone, 2016; Hörnqvist and Flyghed, 2012). Recent statistics on individuals "frequenting extreme Islamist environments" in Norway largely highlight a group dominated by vulnerable and marginalized individuals with a "difficult childhood and youth", previous experience with substance abuse, criminal activity and low levels of education (PST, 2016).

The human-interest narrative opens up specific understandings of and policy solutions to radicalization and violent extremism. For instance, in a recent study

of Norwegian public debate concerning foreign fighters[33] in Syria and how to deal with them, Fangen and Kolås (2016) identified two main ways of defining foreign fighters that, in turn, have implications for possible policy solutions. While the first primarily defines foreign fighters as criminals who should be met with legal sanctioning – i.e., largely presenting jihadist foreign fighters within a crime frame – the second largely highlights the human aspects of violent extremism, defining radicalized youth as marginalized members of society who should be reintegrated upon return. Research has furthermore suggested the Western mainstream news media tends to highlight a socialization approach in depicting "domestic terrorists", focusing on individuals' personal struggles and motives, whereas "foreign terrorists", to a larger extent, are portrayed as angry men with ties to terror groups and violent international conflicts (Crenshaw, 2014; Powell, 2011).

A common critique of the person-centered news narrative is that it serves to individualize and de-contextualize complex social issues (see Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr and Legnante, 2011). This critique is echoed in scholarly discussions of the academic and political construction of the idea of "radicalization", highlighting that radicalization has come to be seen as an individual process, emphasizing the individual and de-emphasizing broader social and political circumstances (Crone, 2016, Hörnqvist and Flyghed, 2012; Sedgwick, 2010). For instance, Crone (2016) argues that:

> (I)ndividualist bias in radicalization theories is reflected in the most common way of understanding a terrorist attack, by looking into the individual life story of perpetrators… But these individual life stories omit both the role of extremist milieus and the role of the broader social context, that is, the influence of the western societies in which the processes of radicalization are taking place (Crone, 2016: 598).

Furthermore, individual life stories of "radicalized individuals" have been criticized for retrospectively taking the biographical details and previous activities and choices of the depicted individuals as signs of radicalization, thus suggesting that "*those concerned were 'always going to be' vulnerable to radicalisation*" (Awan, Hoskins and O'Loughlin, 2011). Recent research has however suggested that an emphasis on individuals does not necessarily lead to the omission of social or structural factors (Figenschou and Thorbjørnsrud, 2015).

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3 Hegghammer (2010: 57-58) defines a foreign fighter as "an agent who (1) has joined, and operates within the confines of, an insurgency, (2) lacks citizenship of the conflict state or kinship links to its warring factions, (3) lacks affiliation to an official military organization, and (4) is unpaid". The present article uses the term in referring to individuals who (allegedly) have joined Salafi-jihadist group IS, as reported in the news media.

In what follows, the perspectives presented above are drawn upon to shed light on and discuss journalistic reflections on and representational implications of violent extremism through in-depth personalized narratives.

3. Methods

The present analysis is based on 26 in-depth interviews with Norwegian journalists and editors conducted between March 2015 and June 2016, including journalists working for broadcasting, print and online newspapers, mainstream and niche outlets, as well as freelance reporters. The majority of interviewees (19) work for the largest mainstream news outlets in Norway (*Aftenposten*, *Dagbladet*, *NRK*, *TV2* and *VG*), while the others work as freelancers or in smaller local, regional, and niche outlets. Nine interviewees work as news editors, and 17 interviewees work as reporters who have covered topics concerning violent extremism more or less extensively over time in various formats, including news, books, and documentaries. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then sent to the interviewees for approval. The interview transcripts were approved either altogether or with minor adjustments, clarification, and/or provision of additional information. The interviewees are named Editor 1-9 or Journalist 1-17 to protect their anonymity.

The following analysis emphasizes the perspectives of those reporters who have worked on in-depth personalized stories of Norwegian jihadists. Therefore, the views expressed in the analysis section do not represent the full complexity of journalistic reflection on how to present violent extremism. In preparing for the interviews, the author conducted a close reading of selected personalized narratives, and during the interviews, reporters were asked to reflect on these stories. The reading of these stories was also drawn upon in the present chapter to describe characteristics of in-depth personalized narratives. The material consists of written news and feature articles, books, as well as radio and television documentaries.

4. Analysis: reporting violent extremism through personalized narratives – journalistic aims and assessments

> Radicalization is a process whereby a person, to borrow the PST's [The Norwegian Police Security Services] definition, "increasingly accepts the use of violence to achieve political, religious or ideological goals". The word seeks to bridge a gap. On one hand, you have young boys from Norwegian neighborhoods. On the other hand, you have fanatical warriors in Iraq and Syria. The mystery is in the middle. It goes beyond the limits of imagination. The PST describes it in general terms. Researchers know more but seldom have access to jihad-

> ists in the field. The media struggle to go beyond descriptions of "a regular boy". What if we zoom in even closer on one Norwegian jihadist's development? If we collect more pieces of information and put them closer together, will we then understand more? (Sætre, 2014: 12).

The above excerpt from the introduction of an in-depth feature article about a young Norwegian who joined IS, published in the weekly *Morgenbladet*, is illustrative of how reporters reason and explain the aims of personalized narratives of Norwegian foreign fighters in Syria. Overall, individual stories are highlighted as important to shed light on and aim to understand radicalization processes and why individuals come to hold violent extremist views and choose to join terror organizations abroad. In addition, these stories are to some extent driven by the journalistic fascination with the seemingly inexplicable: why "normal" Norwegian boys and girls leave everything behind to fight for terror organizations abroad.

Reporters highlight how stories of specific individuals give a more detailed picture, going beyond superficial descriptions of the threat of terrorism, to shed light on factors that illuminate and might help explain radicalization, including individual motives and socio-economic aspects. Contrary to a broad body of scholarly work, the interviewed reporters do not see person orientation as a given sign of declining news quality but, rather, as an important way of making the audience identify, expand understandings and broaden the range of perspectives present in public discourses on violent extremism. As noted by one reporter:

> Human beings are the most specific. They also make for good stories… What is interesting is that you can get much deeper when you concentrate on one person. But the individual has to be interesting in the sense that s/he expresses something broader or is a kind of key person. The individual needs to say something about a larger community… I also think it increases understanding... And people identify (Journalist 11).

Reporters underline that giving extremism a face and a story is crucial to convey the human aspects of violent extremism, and creating audience identification and understanding. Relatedly, by presenting stories of the private and personal lives of jihadists, including these individuals' own thoughts and perspectives, reporters aim to illuminate individual and social aspects and motivations that may shed light on why these individuals came to hold violent extremist views. A reporter from one of the largest newspapers puts it this ways:

> To some extent, you can choose to see them as victim stories. They are human beings, and to understand how they came to be this or why they chose to enlist, you need to understand the human aspects. But for every such story, you get emails where people write "yeah right, 'of course' they are victims. Wake up, they are terrorists and monsters". But I don't think

> so… These are young and impulsive people who I don't think are evil in that way… They have lived in Norway for twenty years, went to kindergarten, school, had jobs, friends, and family who care about them. So there is of course a human side to this that is important to convey (Journalist 3).

Another journalist, having followed a group of Norwegians associated with Salafi-jihadism, over an extended period, notes:

> The media has a tendency to portray them [jihadists] as very dangerous. Our thought was that we wanted to "make them harmless" and learn to know them as human beings… The intent was to show that they have feelings, that they have love for their cause, and why they have this love – to show why they are passionate about this; why they went from being completely normal Norwegian integrated youth to become so radical, so extreme in their faith; to find out when and why that change occurred (Journalist 14).

Thus, through personalized depictions reporters aim to broaden the perspectives within public discourses on violent extremism. This entails foregrounding the individuals' status beyond being "extremists", presenting them as regular and complex human beings, not purely as dangerous criminals.

Such representations are however contested and are regularly subject to critical audience feedback. While reporters highlight a journalistic duty to report violent extremism, they are wary of the perceived boundaries of representation and seek to find the appropriate balance between conveying the human aspects of violent extremism while at the same time aiming to avoid legitimizing the actors or undermining the gravity of their acts. In the overall coverage, this entails varying the frames and perspectives brought forth in different journalistic texts, with reporters pointing to the personalized narrative as one among several ways of reporting violent extremism. One reflection on this overall balance is evident in the quote below. It concerns a specific news story based on pictures and posts from the Facebook profiles of Norwegian jihadists who have joined IS and illustrates their opinions, showing how they present themselves and their life in Syria. The reporter points out that the publication of this material, which could be regarded as propaganda, was contested, thus resulting in critical feedback from voices arguing that it was "*(a)n advertising brochure for life in Syria*" (Journalist 1). However, the decision was made to publish it because:

> (w)e believed that in order to understand the phenomenon of so many travelling to Syria, we had to show different aspects of it. Who travels to Syria or Iraq only because they want to behead people? Why does an 18- or 19-year old do that? We felt that we should report on some of the things that they say about life there; why they are there; what they do there;

> that they also indicate that they are doing fine. That can help us understand why so many are going to Syria – that it isn't just to kill but also because they find a community there that they perhaps haven't found at home… To be able to understand, you cannot just show one side of the story (Journalist 1).

Furthermore, within specific individual narratives, depictions are typically "balanced" in their description of the individuals as "regular" boys/girls while also emphasizing their "deviance" in wording such as "jihadist", "terrorist" and "IS warrior".

It should be noted that while reporters regard personalized narratives as an important part of journalism on violent extremism, the production of in-depth stories is foregrounded as specifically resource-intensive. The actors themselves tend to be inaccessible to reporters and journalists highlight the need to work over time to establish relations with central sources, including the actors themselves and sources around them such as family and friends. In recent years, the largest Norwegian news outlets have had designated reporters working to report issues concerning Norwegian jihadist foreign fighters. The smaller news outlets, however, do not always have the resources to carry out longer-term investigative work and tend to report on the issue in a more ad hoc manner. Moreover, while access is highlighted as a general challenge in reporting extremist groups, some reporters point out that access to sources has been made more difficult due to recent policing practices. This relates in particular to one instance in which the Norwegian Security Police Services (PST) seized unpublished film material filmed as part of an ongoing documentary project about IS recruitment. While the Norwegian Supreme Court revoked the seizure, some reporters maintain that the seizure had a somewhat chilling effect on their access to sources. Hence, while reporters foreground the value of in-depth stories of individuals, the possibility to produce these stories is limited by resource and access constraints.

5. Conclusion

The aim of the present chapter was to shed light on and discuss journalistic reflections on personalized narratives of violent extremism. In what follows, some possible implications of the findings in relation to depictions and understandings of radicalization and violent extremism are discussed. It should be noted that due to the relatively limited scope of the textual material analyzed in this chapter, the representational implications indicated below should be further explored including broader samples of texts and/or through more fine-grained textual analysis.

Contrary to a broad body of scholarly work, reporters do not express person orientation as a given sign of declining news quality but, rather, as an important

way of making the audience identify with and relate to "the other", expand understandings, point to explanatory factors and broaden the range of perspectives within public discourses on violent extremism. This includes humanizing violent extremism and depicting extremists as "regular" complex human beings rather than as purely dangerous and threatening criminals. Overall, interviewees' accounts and the textual material implicitly or explicitly emphasize a "socialization" approach to radicalization and violent extremism. This largely confirms previous studies of how individual "domestic terrorists" are depicted (Crenshaw, 2014; Powell, 2011). Most prominently, the narratives highlight psychosocial and socio economic factors, including drug use, engagement in crime, marginalization from education and work life, and the feeling of "not fitting in". Extremist groups are presented as providing the individuals' with a community, role and sense of social belonging and status that they did not find elsewhere. Whereas broader systemic issues relating to, for instance, the educational system are largely omitted, the social dimension of radicalization is relatively prominent, in particular the role played by smaller networks of friends and acquaintances. This suggests that an emphasis on individuals does not necessarily entail ignoring the social circumstances within which the individuals are placed (cf. Crone, 2016). Scholars have alluded to the manner in which public discourses of radicalization tend to be based on deterministic communication models, presenting vulnerable individuals as radicalized by "external forces" such as the internet or religious preachers (Archetti, 2015; Crone, 2016). Focusing on a variety of social circumstances, experiences, steps and choices in specific individuals' lives, personalized narratives arguably unveil representations of radicalization as a complex process consisting of various social factors rather than as a process whereby passive individuals are "infused" with extremist ideas and then turn to violence. Hence, in line with the journalistic accounts presented above, humanizing violent extremism may arguably serve to add complexity to public discourses of violent extremism and expand the range of possible understandings of and responses to the violent extremist "other". These stories are, however, specifically resource-intensive to produce: it is difficult to gain access to sources and the stories are best conveyed in lengthier formats such as journalistic feature articles, books and documentaries.

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Biography

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