

RSIS Commentary is a platform to provide timely and, where appropriate, policy-relevant commentary and analysis of topical and contemporary issues. The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the author(s) and RSIS. Please email to Mr Yang Razali Kassim, Editor RSIS Commentary at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

Carnage in Christchurch: The Logic of Live-Streaming Slaughter

By Irm Haleem

SYNOPSIS

On 15 March 2019, New Zealand and the world were shocked by an Australian self-declared fascist who rampaged into two mosques and opened fire on worshippers, slaughtering 49 people. Brenton Tarrant recorded and live-streamed the slaughter on Facebook. What does this latest act of terror, this time by a far-right extremist and white supremacist, portend?

COMMENTARY

On 15 MARCH 2019, Brenton Tarrant, an Australian self-declared fascist, opened fire on congregants in two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand, slaughtering 49 worshippers. Tarrant recorded and live-streamed the slaughter on Facebook using a helmet camera. Prior to the attack, he also left a 74-page manifesto on a Twitter account which detailed his hatred for immigrants, Muslims, and Jews, and in which he explained his actions as wanting to defend “our lands” from the “invaders”.

The tactic used by far-right violent extremists and white supremacists like Tarrant of slaughtering unsuspecting individuals in their place of worship is not new: February 1994, an American-Israeli Jewish extremist, slaughtered nine congregants in a Hebron mosque, in West Bank; June 2015, a white supremacist slaughtered nine individuals in a black church in South Carolina, United States; February 2017, another white supremacist slaughtered six people in a Quebec mosque, in Canada; October 2018, an anti-Semitic white supremacist slaughtered 11 people in the *Tree of Life* synagogue in Pennsylvania, United States.

Logic of Live-Streaming Images of Slaughter

What makes this most recent act of terrorism in New Zealand notable is not just the

sheer number of victims, but that the shooter live-streamed the murders on a social media account. But here again, graphic recording of brutal acts is not unique; members of the radical Islamist movement, ISIS, are infamously known for recording, and later uploading, videos of brutal beheadings.

Scholars of terrorism studies explain the logic of recording and uploading images of slaughter to social media in two broad ways: First, as a tactic to get attention from a public that is already somewhat desensitised to violence and terrorism; and second, as a way to heighten the shock-and-awe and the drama of terrorism, and thereby to instill more fear amongst the persons of the targeted group.

I argue that there are two additional reasons for this gruesome tactic that can be summarised as follows: power play, and as method to dehumanise the enemy. First, as a power play, recorded images of brutality elevate the significance of terrorism from its designated smaller scale unconventional war domain, to that of grander war that can compete with the grandest visuals of brutality that we have come to expect from conventional wars.

Second, the disseminating of recorded images of brutal acts serves to belittle and dehumanise the victims. Consider, for example, ISIS' tactic of beheading its victims and then putting their severed head on their torso. This imagery, I argue, is a kind of iconography intended not only to generate repulsion for a visual that appears shockingly grotesque, but also to depict the ultimate weakness and powerlessness of the enemy.

The Logic of Dehumanising the Other

Recorded acts of brutality dehumanise the victims by depicting them as vulnerable and thus as 'less than' the other humans. Demeaning language is another venue for dehumanisation of the other. For example, Adolf Hitler referred to Jews as snakes and leeches. Heinrich Himmler — a prominent leader of the German Nazi party — referred to Jews, homosexuals and gypsies as harmful vermin. Rush Limbaugh — an American right wing pundit — referred to Iraqi prisoners at Abu Ghraib as sub-human.

Current Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte justifies his extra-judicial slaughter of ghetto inhabitants by referring to them as "drug scum". President Donald Trump is alleged to have referred to illegal immigrants as "animals, not humans".

The tactic of dehumanising the other — whether through graphic images that appear surreal in their brutality, or through demeaning language — is fundamentally an effort to pacify the moral conscience of one's audience (be that the electorate of a country or potential recruits for extremist groups).

By presenting the enemy as filthy, dangerous, or sub-human, the hope is to generate sympathy for the brutality that will be levied against them. Live-streaming slaughter, as in the New Zealand massacre, offers another element of dehumanisation, as the live-streamed images become vaguely reminiscent of violent video games, thereby nullifying the gravity of the brutality.

From Right Wing Populism to Toxic Populism

The tactic of dehumanising the other (the out-groups) is a characteristic of extreme far right-wing populism. Populism is often understood as political behaviour that is premised on representing the common people. But this understanding is deficient as all politicians seek to represent the people, but not all politicians are populists.

Princeton political scientist, Jan-Werner Muller, argues that what distinguishes populists from other politicians is that populists present their agenda in 'moral' terms. To the extent that references to morality universally subdue, or even silence, our moral objections to violence and brutality, the populist tactic of moralising hatred and violence must be recognised as toxic for society.

It is toxic precisely because in masquerading as necessary and moral, such rhetoric often succeeds in deflecting negative attention, allowing hateful populists to go unabated at a significant human cost.

Ultra right-wing white supremacist rhetoric of violent extremism, as a defensive measure against the racial and cultural pollution of their societies by outsiders, is no different in its toxicity to Al-Qaeda's rhetoric of fighting for the rights of the 'ummah', or ISIS' rhetoric of the caliphate as the 'rightful' system for the 'true' representation of Muslims.

Populists who frame hateful narratives in terms of a morality are toxic precisely because in inciting violence and brutality, they become a threat to the very people they claim to represent.

The Desensitisation of Society

The strategy of dehumanising others through demeaning language or brutal imagery serves to desensitise the audience (the bystanders), and thereby serves to normalise violence and brutality. The larger damage in this tactic is that it invariably generates an apathy vis-à-vis the racism and inhumanity of the ultra right wing, and toxic populists amongst their audiences.

The consequences of this are that the burden of proof of both the inhumanity and immorality of right wing groups and movements comes to rest on the very victims of such policies and movements. This means that the very people who are threatened by such violence are themselves burdened with the responsibility of whistle blowing.

This only further serves to perpetuate brutality and terrorism of right wing groups and movements, as the targeted audience often becomes intimidated into silence.

Irm Haleem is Assistant Professor in the Strategic Studies Programme, and is also Manager of Research and Publications at the International Centre for Political Violence and Terrorism Research (ICPVTR), a unit of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU), Singapore.
