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UK Counter Terrorism Narratives
An Analysis of the Action Counter
Terrorism Campaign 2017-2020.

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Executive Summary

The Action Counters Terrorism Campaign is a public-facing campaign of the UK Government aimed at explaining and supporting the government's counter terrorism efforts. One of its primary components is a series of videos released on Youtube between 2017 and 2020. The dominant narrative of this campaign is that "ordinary people" can assist in counter terrorism and counter radicalization by being alert and following basic rules (such as Run, Hide, Tell). As part of a GCHQ Research Fellowship in National Resilience examining online messaging on violent extremism, Dr Harmonie Toros carried out a gendered narrative analysis of the ACT video campaign. This reveals that in the campaign:

- The terrorist threat is understood as exclusively male.*
- Only men, particularly young men, are viewed as at risk of radicalization.*
- Women are predominantly portrayed in relation to men in their lives (wives, mothers) and, through their love/care for these men, can support counter radicalization efforts by noticing when "something is wrong."*
- Men are given considerably more agency than women. Women are often presented as victims and only women are shown making mistakes that put them and others at risk.*
- This narrative reflects a broader societal metanarrative that views men as naturally violent and women non-violent, men as cognitively-driven and women as emotionally-driven, and women as agential primarily in relation to their loved ones (men).*

Preliminary policy conclusions are that gendered constructions need to be taken into account when designing, delivering, and evaluating narrative campaigns. Which gendered constructions will "make sense" to a target audience, how gendered constructions function in the narrative campaigns, and what are the implications of this needs to be part of the policy design, implementation, and evaluation. Presenting an exclusively male threat and risk means training people to only look at men in their prevention practices and risks further disempowering and turning away women who may not identify themselves as only daughters, wives, mothers.

Introduction

Messaging and narratives are central to violent extremism and to countering terrorism and violent extremism. Indeed, if non-state armed groups (NSAGs) and their wider support networks spend a considerable amount of energy and resources in designing and undertaking messaging campaigns, state actors also spend human and financial resources in messaging campaigns to counter violent

extremist ideologies but also in raising public awareness of terrorism, how to prevent, counter, or at worst prepare for it. Often this involves public campaigns using a variety of media and targeting different audiences. One of the direct campaigns undertaken by the UK government is the Action Counters Terrorism (ACT) Campaign. The campaign contains material aimed at the general public (posters, youtube videos, website, etc) as well as material aimed at businesses and public officials (such as training courses for private security agents).

State actors and NSAGs function in the same overall narrative context and they need to be understood as “in dialogue” with each other. If state campaigns aim to “respond” and “counter” violent extremist messaging, NSAGs also respond to, or at least take into account, state messaging on violent extremism. A thorough understanding of gendered constructions of messaging from NSAGs thus also requires understanding what messaging they are positioning themselves in opposition to or trying to capitalize on. Just as importantly, from a policy perspective, it is essential for HMG to have a full understanding of the gendered constructions it is projecting and the potential effects these have on audiences. This is particularly true when it comes to preventing and preparing for terrorist attacks – the aim of many ACT videos.

This policy analysis thus examines UK government messaging aimed at the general public, specifically analyzing the videos released as part of the Action Counters Terrorism Campaign on the Counter Terrorism Policing UK youtube channel (<https://www.youtube.com/c/CounterTerrorismPolicingUK/videos>). Excluding Welsh versions, hearing impaired versions, and 10 videos pertaining to the Salisbury attacks (not relevant to non-state violent extremism), 26 videos were analyzed, the first released in August 2017 and the latest in November 2020. The most popular video – one of Bear Grylls urging people to “Run, Hide, Tell” in case of a marauding attack – has some 53,000 views, while the least viewed (just over 300) is that of Paul Parker urging people to follow instructions in case of an attack at a football stadium.

The analysis was carried out to reveal the dominant and contesting narratives of the campaign, the gendered constructions of these narratives, and their functions. Key questions leading the investigation were: How are men and women and non-binary gender identities represented in these state-led messaging campaigns; what roles are they assigned, and what agency are they given? As noted above, gender cannot be isolated from other social categories and the videos were also analyzed for their racial and ethnic constructions. Specifically, this analysis was undertaken by identifying all primary and secondary characters in the videos, assigning them:

- a **gender identity** (man, woman, non-binary, and undetermined (for characters whose face or body is covered in such a way that it cannot be determined)),
- a **racial/ethnic identity** (white, BAME, undetermined);
- level of **importance of the character in the narrative** (1 – main character (excluding suspects/perpetrators); 2 – main antagonist (suspect or perpetrator); 3 – secondary actor; 4 – bystander);
- level of **agency** ascribed to the character (1 - ultimate decision-marker/authority; 2 – conscious decision-maker; 3 – unconscious agent; 4 – follower, victim, bystander);
- **role played by the character** (suspect, perpetrator, security agent, state agent, observer, victim, relative/friend, third party, bystander)
- a **description** of the character and role they play in the narrative.

Each video was also analyzed qualitatively for its overall narrative, the gender constructions in each narrative, and the function these gender constructions play in the overall narrative. The report shall begin by offering a brief summary of the theoretical and methodological underpinnings of this research, before describing the dominant and competing narratives of the videos and offering a gendered analysis both quantitative and qualitative. Policy recommendations will be offered at the end of the report along with future avenues for research.

Summary of Conceptual and Methodological Approach

Narratives are the way we give meaning to life. “Narratives order our world and are the ‘primary way in which human experience is made meaningful’” (Wibben, 2010: 43). Without narratives, one event would follow another without reason or meaning (Griffin, 1993). It is thus through narratives that we understand the world around us as well as constitute our identities – explain to ourselves who we are – and our place in the world. “Everything we know, from making families, to coping with illness, to carrying out strikes and revolutions is at least in part a result of numerous crosscutting relational story-lines in which social actors find or locate themselves” (Somers, 1994: 607). As such, narratives also “guide action,” according to sociologist Margaret Somers (1994: 614). People are “guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived” from multiple narratives that surround us. How members and supporters of violent extremist organizations or movements behave is guided by narratives that mold their projections, expectations, as well as their rationalizations of the past.

It is important to first understand what is meant by the term narrative. Narratives have the following key elements: a beginning, a middle, and an end, with causal

emplotment linking the three (Somers, 1992). Narrative analysis finds meaning in how events/elements are connected (temporally and spatially). Narratives also work at different levels of human relations. There are personal narratives – through which individual lives are given meaning to. Individuals do not however have complete freedom in writing their own personal narratives. Indeed, these are “crafted out of existing stories that circulate in certain contexts” (Phibbs, 2008: 48). These existing stories are public/institutional narratives that “transcend the individual: they are the cultural stereotypes that exist in the wider communities of interpretation” (Phibbs, 2008: 48). Public narratives range from within a family, to a local community, to a workplace, to a nation. The narratives “are not neutral but shape and are in turn shaped by particular understandings of the world which tend to prioritise one meaning over another” (Phibbs, 2008: 49).

Public narratives are often relatively simple to identify. There is a public narrative of resilience in the face of adversity in the UK for example which often starts with World War II and ends with a contemporary instance of resilience, with British people as the protagonists and a plot that demonstrates our/their capacity to overcome adversity without breaking their spirit or “making too much of a fuss.” Football clubs have narratives (for example Liverpool or either of the Glasgow teams), as do schools (Eton), businesses (Ben & Jerry’s, Amazon), and communities (Irish in Boston, Copts in Egypt). These narratives are relatively well known and most importantly are identified *as narratives*.

Metanarratives on the other hand are so broadly accepted that they are often not recognized as narratives as “they usually operate at a presuppositional level ... beyond our awareness” (Somers, 1002: 605). These are the narratives “that transcend the boundary of an individual profession or discipline. Metanarratives may include the master narratives of contemporary social life, such as democracy, freedom or the doctrine of progress” or they may include “sets of understandings about sexual difference” (Phibbs, 2008: 50). By being so broadly accepted, metanarratives can permeate and inform public narratives in very different (and indeed opposing) social and political settings.

All narratives are gendered. Indeed there is no social action that is “gender-free.” Gender - the social and historical framing of how men, women, and non-binary gender identities should behave - impacts on all aspects of life: from how one sits, to what sports one plays at school, to what career path one is recommended, to whether one is seen as a credible candidate for high political office. Gender relations are power relations. More specifically, violence and in particular political violence are profoundly gendered. This includes the obvious gender-based violence carried out by armed actors, but also the recruitment strategies for men and women, the roles they are allowed to take up in the groups, and the state and international responses to such groups.

With our key concepts examined above, it is now possible to outline what is meant in this project by a gendered narrative analysis. To the core, this entails an *analysis of gender dynamics in narratives*. It begins with the basic narrative analytic enquiry, which requires researchers “to *locate* the actors as characters in their social narratives and to *emplot* them in a temporal and spatial configuration of relationships and practices” (Somers, 1992: 608). This means investigating the “network of relationships and institutions in which actors are embedded” (Somers, 1992: 611). In practice, this means identifying the central actors and the plot, i.e. how the actors were part of a meaningful movement from the beginning to the middle to the end of the narrative. This will reveal how the actors are related to each other and the power relations between the actors. In this project, we are specifically searching for the gender dynamics of these narratives. This involves not only examining specific mentions of gender (men, women, male, female, transgender, gender non-binary) and sexual orientation (heterosexuality, homosexuality, bisexuality, asexuality) and the roles they play within the narrative, but also other attributes ascribed to actors, in particular agency.

Dominant Narrative of ACT Youtube Campaign

Before undertaking an analysis of the gender dynamics, it is important to situate these within the overall narrative. The ACT campaign has a very clear dominant narrative that tells the story of how “ordinary life is potentially under threat” (beginning), but if you “follow basic steps and rules” and “actively monitor your surroundings” (middle), you can “make a difference and keep yourself and others safe” (end). The best example of this narrative can be found in the “Communities Defeat Terrorism” video released in March 2018

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I6SjX2ZXMnY&t=1s>). Here several “ordinary people” going about their lives (running, walking through a market, serving tables in a café, buying tools in a hardware shop) see someone behaving suspiciously and report it. The message flashing on the screen is: “If you see something that doesn’t feel right, report it. Communities defeat terrorism.” Although this is the clearest example of this dominant narrative, 18 of the 26 videos begin with a scene of ordinary life under threat and 14 out of 26 finish with safety being reached through the following of rules and procedures.

This dominant narrative is countered but also reinforced by the single contesting narrative that can be found in the “Run, Hide, Tell” videos. These are black and white close-up interviews with notable people: Bear Grylls, James Haskell, Jade

Jones, Ant Middleton, and Jamie Vardy¹. Here the narrative begins with exceptional human beings (athletes, soldiers, adventurers), holding back on their instinct to engage with potential assailants (the middle), to follow the rules (Run, Hide, Tell) and keep themselves and everyone else safe (the end). This series will be analyzed in further depth later as they present an interesting gendered construction, but what is worth noting here is that although these seven videos differ from the dominant narrative of “ordinary people” keeping communities safe by being alert and following the rules, they also reinforce them by stressing that even “extraordinary people” need to and would follow the rules.

Descriptive Statistical Analysis

The videos present 119 characters (excluding people who have no role aside from passing by in public places), 79 of them are identifiable as men (66 percent), 38 as women (32 percent), none as non-binary, and two as undetermined as they cannot be identified based on their gender (2 percent). In terms of racial/ethnic identity, 73 appear to be white, 18 appear to be BAME, and 28 cannot be identified along racial/ethnic lines (undetermined). In terms of the importance of characters, 38 are the main characters, 18 are suspects/perpetrators, 60 are secondary characters, and 3 are bystanders. The last category has been included because they figure as dead bodies in the “Stay Safe Abroad: Advice to Holidaymakers” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzcldaLbYPA>) and fulfill a function in the narrative. Finally, in terms of levels of agency, only 3 characters qualify as ultimate decision-maker/authority, 86 characters are “conscious decision-makers” at least once in the video, 22 characters only act as “unconscious agents,” and eight characters only act as followers, victims or bystanders.

More revealing is to relate these findings to one another. Breaking down the importance of characters along gender lines (see Fig 1.1-1.2) shows that for the main characters (excluding suspects and perpetrators), 67 percent are men and 33 percent are women (Fig. 1.1). Even more relevant however is that Category 2 characters – suspects and perpetrators – are all men. No woman is represented as a threat or potential threat in any of the videos, and thus the notion of threat is entirely masculine in this campaign. This also means that men represent 78 percent of the main characters and suspect/perpetrators (Fig. 1.2).

¹ Deputy Assistant Commissioner Lucy D’Orsi also has a “Run, Hide, Tell” video but as will be analyzed at the end of this paper, it is markedly different from the other five.

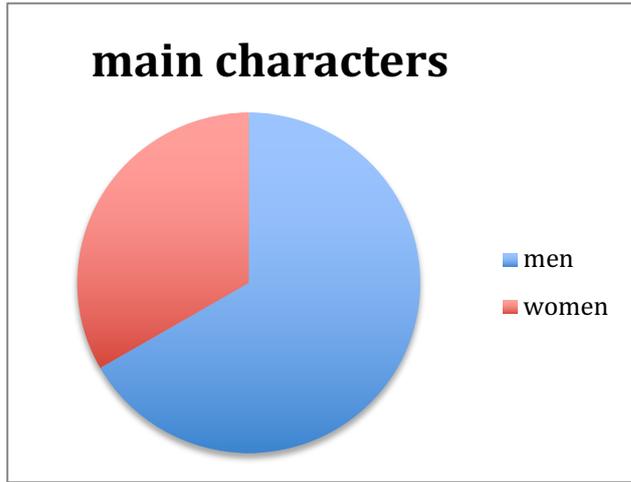


Fig. 1.1

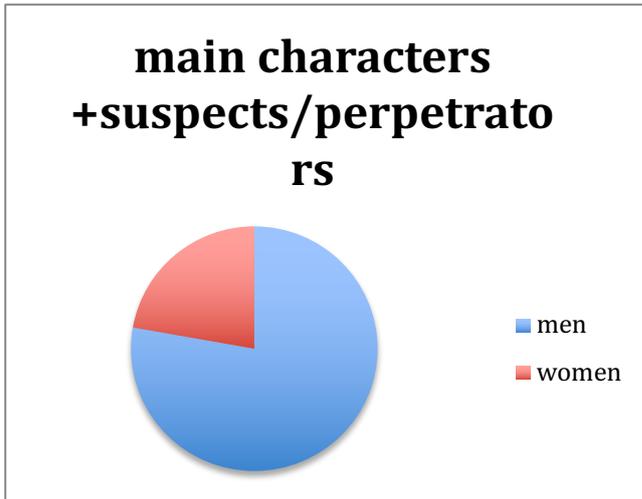


Fig. 1.2

Analyzing agency along gender lines gives a similar result: Men represent 74 percent of all characters that are attributed any form of conscious decision-making (levels of agency 1+2 as in Fig. 2.1).

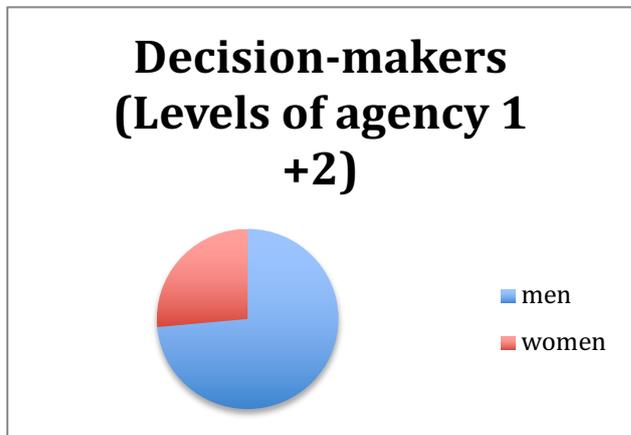


Fig. 2.1

Analyses were also carried out comparing importance of characters and agency to racial/ethnic identity. The largest proportion of characters are white (61 percent), followed by undetermined (24%), followed by BAME characters (15%).

Suspects/perpetrators are mostly white men (50 percent), closely followed by men of undetermined racial/ethnic identity (39 percent), with BAME men representing 11 percent of suspects/perpetrators. As we shall see, this is due to the number of characters linked to the extreme right. The amount of agency attributed to white, undetermined and BAME characters is more or less in line with the proportion of characters, meaning that white characters have overall more agency in the videos but not disproportionately more compared to their sample size. Breaking this down further along gender lines, white men have considerably more agency than white women (73 percent to 27 percent of conscious decision-makers), even when compared to their overall strength in the sample size (66 percent to 32 percent). BAME men/BAME women agency comparison on the other hand broke down exactly according to their relative sample size (67 percent compared to 33 percent).

Thus, a descriptive statistical analysis of the characters in the videos reveals that:

- *There is a clear gendered understanding of suspects and perpetrators. They are all men.*
- *Men represent most of the main characters (even excluding the suspects and perpetrators) and are overall attributed considerably more agency than women. This is particularly true of white men.*
- *White men represent the highest proportion of suspects/perpetrators, followed by men of undetermined ethnic origin, and a very low proportion of men who can be identified as BAME (11 percent).*

Qualitative Narrative Analysis

However revealing these statistics may be, narrative analysis has to go well beyond the gender breakdown of main characters, suspects, and the attribution of agency according to gender and racial/ethnic lines. It requires a qualitative analysis of the narratives themselves – the stories being told – and what functions gender performs within these stories. Here, the paper shall examine the principal gendered constructions of the dominant narrative of the videos – identified earlier as “the existence of danger in ordinary lives that can be countered by ordinary people being alert and following the rules” – based on a narrative analysis of each video. It shall then examine the gendered constructions of the contesting narrative – the “Run, Hide, Tell” videos – which as noted above contrasts but at the same time reinforces the dominant narrative.

If a simple quantitative analysis immediately reveals that only men are understood as potential suspects and/or perpetrators of terrorism, a qualitative analysis also reveals that only men as seen as at risk of radicalization. From the faceless (but clearly male) animated character of a young man being pulled into a

computer screen (ACT Early video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N8DPPQUem9A>) to the Hollyoaks character, Ste Hay, who is radicalized into the extreme right (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QArH9YCl7E>), to the fictionalized short film of a young man struggling with low self-esteem who is being pushed into carrying out an attack by a man online (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0QArH9YCl7E>), all these characters are men.

Their masculinity is dealt with in different ways though. In the video of young man being urged to carry out an attack (“Staying Safe Online – Radicalisation”), the narrative indicates that the main character feels undermined in his pride, for example when he remembers being called “a total loser” by a young woman. His handler stresses that they see his (masculine) strength, by saying “Come one! Remember who you are! You’re not a loser anymore!” The handler urges him to “Be strong – remember everything we’ve been through and taught you. You make us proud tomorrow, right?” Arguably, the handler is positioned in the narrative as trying to restore the young man’s injured masculinity. This narrative is clearly aimed at the countering radicalization from the extreme right, which is widely believed to recruit young men searching for comfort in violent forms of hypermasculinity (Pearson, 2020). This gendered construction is not necessarily heteronormative as can be seen with the Hollyoaks video in which the character being radicalized, Ste Hay, is gay. His recruiter however uses arguments of “male bonding” and stereotypical language associated with hypermasculinity to draw Ste in. “Take him to a match, show him a good time and we become his best mates. I want him to know that the only place he belongs is with us,” he tells other members of the group. A real-life testimony added to give factual grounding to the Hollyoaks video, shows a young man (“John) who left the extreme right saying, “when I was in the far-right, I was very angry, very aggressive.” Interestingly, it was a similar form of male bonding with his PREVENT IP that drew him out of the extreme right: “We have very similar interest, similar sports and things like that, just building a good connection with him is what really made me listen to him.” Thus, although there is some variation in the videos, radicalization is seen as a fundamentally male experience linked to anger, frustration and the need to prove one’s masculinity.

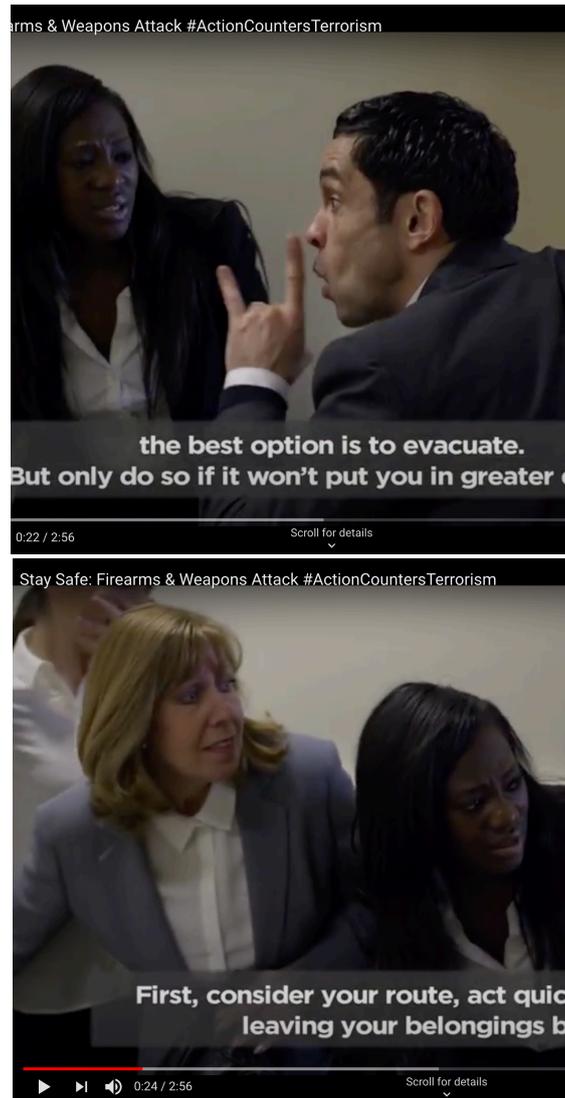
When men are not threats or in danger of being radicalized, they play four principal roles:

1. Men as planners and implementers of policy (particularly PREVENT);
2. Men as security officials, directly challenging suspects/perpetrators;
3. Men as observers who report suspicious behaviour;
4. Men as *active* victims who take themselves and others to safety.

The latter two categories are particularly present, with many videos portraying men as thwarting threat and danger by following the rules. Indeed, numerous videos present civilian men (“ordinary men”) as remaining calm during attacks or when noticing that something is wrong. They respond quickly, often directing others to follow instructions. In the animated video “What to do in a Weapons Attack (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmYmLg-jQjc>), a young white man (Lett) is asked whether he hid during the attack: “No I made it outside and I kept running. I didn’t know where you guys were. I found somewhere safe to stop. I called the Police and I told them everything I knew.” His friend, a young black woman (“Edie”) says: “The Police rescued us. Maybe it was you who sent them?” Lett is thus ascribed considerable agency (running fast, being aware of when it is safe to stop, following the rules, and reporting “everything he knew” to the police). He is not a victim at all, but rather a “heroic ordinary man.” Male security officers, particularly armed police entering buildings during or after a marauding attack, speak loudly and with authority but remain completely controlled – as expected. “You definitely do everything they tell you to do,” comments Edie after being led out with her hands in the air by armed police.

How do these roles differ from those ascribed to women? As analyzed earlier, women are neither threats nor in danger of being radicalized in these videos. They do play several other roles, some more agential than others. The principal roles are:

1. Women as supporters, particularly emotional supporters keen to help young men avoid radicalization through care and love.
2. Women as victims, who sometimes do not follow the rules and put at risk other people.
3. Women as observers, who report on activities that they recognize as suspicious.
4. In fewer cases, women as active victims, who follow the rules but take the lead and help other victims stay safe during an attack.



The third and fourth categories of women are very similar in those of men, although with some slight differences. Indeed, women observers often report to men, who then act upon the information. In only one video, “What to do in a Weapons Attack” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmYmLg-jQjc>) does a man report to a woman police officer for her to act upon the information. Otherwise, women observers are generally shown as noticing suspicious behaviour and using one of the many means to alert authorities (call, text, website, or in person). In the clearest case of a woman being ascribed agency (“conscious decision-maker”) a woman is seen as taking the lead to herd two other civilians to hide and barricade themselves in a hotel room during a marauding attack in a holiday resort abroad (“Stay Safe Abroad: Advice to Holidaymakers” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzcldaLbYPA>). She plays the role of the competent civilian described for men above: She is controlled and effective and clearly there to demonstrate the importance of following the rules. She is a heroine.

Women however mainly play roles not ascribed to men. Women are represented as capable of recognizing suspicious behaviour in their loved ones – men. Indeed, one of the key gender constructions in the dominant narrative is that of women using their instinct and their widely attributed inclination to care for others. In the latest video to be released, the animated ACT Early Video, a woman (mother, sister, girlfriend) is “worried” about her “loved one” who “could be drawn down a dangerous path.” Interestingly, the woman police officer who arrives at the home is there to “give advice and guidance.” The police officer is presented as a reassuring and compassionate character, who tilts her head, nods as she holds on to a cup of tea, and most importantly points the young man toward the right path when he reaches a crossroad.

This association of women with care and emotions more broadly emerges most clearly when one contrasts the videos presenting short speeches by two senior police officers, one woman and one man. In “Staying Safe at UK Music Festivals - #BeSafeBeSoundCampaign (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNO5f8Yalx4>), Deputy Assistant Commissioner Lucy D’Orsi, speaks straight to the camera, saying:

Festivals are really exciting times, you know we all like going to a festival. It’s about how you can do that safely and look after yourself and your friends when you are going to these events. I don’t want people to be alarmed when they go to a festival, I want people to enjoy themselves, but I want people to be alert. If you are at any of these events and see something suspicious, I need you to report it immediately, either to the police or to security staff. I need you to act.

This is not necessarily a surprising text in itself. However, the gendered construction becomes clearer when contrasted with the next video, “Together we’ve got security wrapped up – Winter 2018” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-WCIKMW12To>), with a very similar statement made by Chief Superintendent Nick Aldworth. In both videos, the senior police officers look straight at the camera and make a statement about how to behave in crowded places (summer music festivals in the former and shopping for Christmas in the latter). Aldworth however says:

The winter campaign recognizes that this time of year there are lots more people going out and about doing their Christmas shopping or going out for Christmas parties and such like. And that of course creates crowded places. We know that terrorists like to attack crowded places and it feels appropriate that at this time of year, we encourage people to be more aware, to look out for each other, and to help us combat, and deter, and disrupt terrorism.

Aldworth speaks of fact: “We know that” this behaviour will happen that therefore it feels (he does not feel, “it feels”) appropriate to “encourage people” to be attentive to “combat, and deter, and disrupt terrorism.” D’Orsi on the other hand makes an emotional appeal, indeed a personal emotional appeal. She does not “want people to be alarmed,” and “want[s] people to enjoy themselves.” For this, she “needs” people to report anything suspicious, she “needs” people to act. These may seem as inconsequential or coincidental and there is no reason to believe that the videos were designed to ascribe factual analysis to a man and emotional care and need to a woman. Nevertheless, as we shall see in the subsequent analysis of how the gendered constructions of these videos relate to societal metanarrative on gender and violence, the result is the reproduction of the man=fact/woman=emotion trope.

Another prevalent role for women is that of passive victim, or worse still victim who puts others at risk. Women in various videos demonstrate great fear – particularly during marauding attacks – but also a certain lack of self-control. In “Stay Safe: Firearms and Weapons Attack #ActionsCountersTerrorism” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WDiv-PwEde4&t=51s>), a young man has to repeatedly tell women to be quiet so as to not attract the attention of the assailants. One woman is clutching her handbag although the rule is to leave one’s belongings behind. Edie’s behaviour in “What to do in a Weapons Attack” (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jmYmLg-jQjc>) is particularly problematic. She first mistakes the shots for fireworks and then does not run because she starts taking pictures of the attack. Nur, a young BAME man with Edie, has to urge her to “Stop Edie! We need to go, come on, let’s go now” while pulling on her arm to get her to move. It of course makes sense that mistakes are shown in the videos to illustrate what not to do, but interestingly only women make these mistakes.

This dominant narrative and its gendered constructions are further reinforced by the single contesting narrative that can be found in the video series, the “Run, Hide, Tell” series of seven videos. These are videos intended to highlight how six exceptional individuals – four men (Ant Middleton, Bear Grylls, James Haskell, and Jamie Vardy) and two women (Jade Jones and Deputy Commissioner D’Orsi) – would follow the rules despite their exceptional strength, skill, or training. The men make clear hypermasculine statements: Haskell says he has “tackled beasts,” Vardy has “fought my way up to the top,” Middleton has been “an elite soldier,” and Grylls has “climbed the summit of Everest.” The women do not mention their achievements: Jones says she’s “trained in Taekwondo for 16 years” while D’Orsi acts as a messenger rather than an active subject by saying: “Run, Hide, Tell. These are the message that save lives and hopefully have a lasting impact on young people and their families.”

Thus, although the overall narrative of these videos differs from the dominant one – presenting exceptional people holding back from their instincts to follow the rules instead of ordinary people stepping up and following the rules – the gendered constructions of the dominant narrative are reinforced. The hypermasculinity of the men presented in this series is particularly emphasized (the adventurer, the sportsman, the soldier) with them underlining their superior strength, while the women (despite their superior strength and skill) stress either their training or simply pass on the message. Jones indeed could have said she is an Olympic Gold medalist in Taekwondo and D’Orsi could have mentioned her role in a police operation. This choice was not made and although they are ascribed agency, it is a reduced agency compared to the men in the same series.

These narratives are public and institutional narratives as described earlier. They “transcend the individual: they are the cultural stereotypes that exist in wider communities of interpretation” (Phibbs, 2008: 48), in this case a public institutional narrative attributed to the UK authorities. Importantly, they are “not neutral but shape and are in turn shaped by particular understandings of the world which tend to prioritise one meaning over another” (Phibbs, 2008: 49). Although this is only one part of the UK government’s narrative campaign on violent extremism, it nonetheless reveals the gendered meanings that are prioritized. To summarize the gendered aspect of the narrative:

Only men are potential threats to security and only men are vulnerable to radicalization. Stronger men – good men who are also strong enough to resist radicalization – can actively counter these threats by following the rules. Women are caring and therefore can notice changes in the men they love. This is also true of women who are given agency as security actors. Women however generally play the role of observers, who can report their concerns. Many women are victims and some of them do not follow the rules during attacks putting others at risk.

Links to Metanarrative

As discussed, public narratives are linked to metanarratives, that is narratives that are so broadly accepted that they are often not even recognized as such. These permeate and inform public narratives across social settings – although in different ways. The following metanarrative has been drawn from a literature review of an increasing body of literature on gender and political violence, such as the work of Laura Sjoberg, Caron Gentry, Victoria Basham, Alice Martini, Ayelet Harel-Shalev, Cynthia Weber and others. Based on this seminal work, I have identified seven interrelated elements to the metanarrative:

- 1. Sex and gender are viewed as fixed and immutable. They are confused and broadly taken to be “a biological variable” (Sjoberg, 2014: 534).*
- 2. Men’s violence is viewed as unexceptional and is often linked to male “natural” (likely biological) factors. Women’s violence on the contrary is seen as exceptional, again often for biological reasons.*
- 3. Some men are more prone to violence, either because they are political or because they cannot control their impulses.*
- 4. Women are guided by their bodies and are understood as embodied actors to a much greater degree than men who are understood as cognitively-led. When men are led by their bodies/instincts/emotions, they are feminized.*
- 5. Heteronormativity is central to the metanarrative. Driven by heterosexual desires, the metanarrative presents women as driven to violence by how they relate themselves to sex with men: either by a deviant desire to please men or by a deviant determination to reject men.*
- 6. Related to this, men are seen as independent actors capable of agency, while women are understood as in relation to men. This can be found in how women are described (mothers, wives, daughters of men) and in relation to their motivations for engaging in violence.*
- 7. Men are understood as political actors while women are understood as social actors. This can be noted in the narratives surrounding their rationale for using violence, in the roles ascribed to them in violent groups (agents vs recruiters and connectors) and in the policies designed to deal with them (political negotiations with and criminalization of men, while social welfare programmes for women).*

Some similarities between the metanarrative on gender and political violence and the gendered constructions of dominant narrative in the ACT campaign are obvious. Men’s violence is viewed as unexceptional – indeed, the norm – while women’s violence is deemed so much as an aberration that it is not even contemplated. Some men are more prone to violence because of their lack of control and their need for reassurance in their masculinity. Men are independent and rational actors – particularly “good men” who assess a situation and then act according to the rules. Women instead as relational actors primarily governed by their emotions – caring for their loved ones or, in the case of Lucy D’Orsi, for the broader public more generally. Women’s emotional nature also make them a threat to themselves and others as they do not always follow the rules. There are no characters with non-binary gender identities and men and women are clearly identified as such.

There are also differences. Hypermasculinity is presented in the state narrative both positively and negatively: The fear of not achieving (negative) forms of hypermasculinity is seen as a reason for men to be vulnerable to radicalization but a (positive) hypermasculinity that can be controlled (that of the soldier, the adventurer and the sportsman) is valorized. There is no direct reference of

heteronormativity and one of the main characters being radicalized is openly gay. There is also hardly any reference to politics except in the Hollyoaks video - where English nationalist statements are made by the recruiter and countered by a woman who says that pride in being English is based on its multicultural nature – and from brief images of men wearing DAESH-style clothing in online messaging being viewed by vulnerable men. These are the exception though and it is worth noting that the ACT campaign is almost entirely apolitical.

Conclusions

Gendered constructions play key roles in narratives. They mould characters, advance plots, and allow for public/institutional narratives to reflect metanarratives and thus be accepted as “making sense.” Thus, the primary conclusion of this analysis is that they cannot be ignored. As such, the design of narrative and counter-narrative campaigns need to think not only of their dominant narrative aims to be but also of what gendered constructions they should contain. As can be seen above, this goes far beyond simply counting the number of men and women in a series of videos – although this too is revealing. It requires examining what roles are given to men and women and non-binary gender identities, and how they relate to one another. It requires examining how much agency they are given and what type of agency (nefarious or beneficent).

Crucially, this analysis does not conclude that the gender constructions need to be different. This is to say that there can be reasons for policymakers to choose the gendered constructions revealed above – such as man=threat/woman=care. This however needs to be a conscious decision which requires that any narrative campaign design be preceded by a gendered analysis of the dominant narratives within the target community and how they wish to address these. Gender must thus be a key element in the analysis of the target audience(s), the intended message and effects, and in any evaluation of the narrative campaign.

Furthermore, sustaining the current gender constructions in state narratives may have problematic repercussions for the prevention of and resilience toward terrorist attacks. In an awareness campaign, what are the risks of presenting only men as potential threats? This is particularly concerning since these videos also form a key part of the online ACT training module for private security actors. What are the risks for families and others if they only identify young men as at risk of radicalization? And are we at risk of further alienating young women by presenting them as disempowered, inept or irrelevant? These questions need to be addressed if UK government CT messaging aims to inform, persuade, and protect all communities.

Based on these conclusions what are the potential ways forward.

1. *A gendered analysis of the current terrorist threat needs to be carried out for any campaign designed to raise awareness of types of radicalization and indication of terrorist attacks in the making. Such an analysis needs to feed into the designing of CT public awareness campaigns.*
2. *Future PVE/CVE campaigns need to make an analysis of gender constructions that dominate their target audience and of the repercussions of presenting certain gender constructions. Similar analyses need to be carried out on race/ethnicity and class constructions.*

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