



Diploma Thesis Evaluation Form

Author: Russell Burrell

Title: Ontological Security, Radicalization and Violent Extremism: A Practical Approach

Programme/year: International Security Studies (MISS) / Winter 2023-24

Author of Evaluation (Supervisor): Jonathan Collins

Criteria	Definition	Maximum	Points
Major Criteria			
	Research question, definition of objectives	10	7
	Theoretical/conceptual framework	30	22
	Methodology, analysis, argument	40	33
<i>Total</i>		80	62
Minor Criteria			
	Sources	10	10
	Style	5	4
	Formal requirements	5	5
<i>Total</i>		20	19
TOTAL		100	81



Evaluation

Major criteria:

The author sets out to showcase the strategic communication of terrorist content, specifically using a close-reading approach on the now infamous and influential manifesto of the Christchurch shooter – which has been reproduced and copied by different far-right terrorists. The objective to delineate “how” the message and content within the writing aims to influence individuals is timely and necessary in the age of far-right extremist mobilisation and copycat incidents. Utilising the concept of ontological security, it sets out to answer two research questions: (1) strategic discourse of this content and its link to insecurity; and (2) the relationship between ontological insecurity and radicalisation. The following review offers some comments, questions, and concerns for the author to further unpack.

The literature review is thorough as it is a bit longwinded. I found myself questioning at times the relationship between the outlined research and the overarching story that the author wanted to tell. These worries are especially conflated with quite dramatic or bombastic statements which are not backed up by any scientific evidence or which a quick google search would prove slightly misleading. For instance (pg. 25): *It is quite clear that content, narrative, and strategic communication play an integral role in reaching the individual to utilize grievances to foster a sense of ontological insecurity. Yet, it seems that in the study of terrorism, radicalization, and extremism, the content itself is often overlooked.* These types of unbased blanket statements detract from the overall argument and the gap the author attempts to set out.

Moreover, there is a concerted attempt to separate grievances – the authors main driver for radicalization – and ontological security, but I am not sure I am thoroughly convinced from the text about the differences. I would ask the author to try and explain in the defense how these two ideas are not intrinsically the same or how somehow the many authors covering the connection between grievances and radicalization are epistemologically unfounded (and should have relied on ontological insecurity instead). For instance, the author argues that grievances are based on the individual’s sense of ontological insecurity as a type of solution/byproduct. However, to be ontologically insecure, wouldn’t the individual need to experience the grievance first? Or is it how they experience the grievance? The logic used here could be better explained.

Finally, there is a section outlining how Terror Management Theory and Uncertainty-Identity Theory contribute to group (meso) radicalisation, but the author failed to make the connection between these concepts with Gidden’s



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construction of ontological security and self-identity (the individual). The author would do well to explain how these seminal theories all connect.

I do have strong praises for the thesis. The methodology section is very-well explained and justified. The use of the mixed methods (Critical Discourse Analysis and Discursive Psychology) are integrated nicely for the analysis and really set the rest of the study up for success. The case itself (the Christchurch manifesto) is as stated – a potent and influential piece of writing in far-right circles. The close-reading of the text offers an excellent look at the different discursive elements.

The analysis is, for lack of a better word, fantastic. The authors deconstruction of the many meanings and strategies employed within the manifesto is exemplary, picking apart details in an extremely novel and interesting way. I will not go into detail for each component of the analysis, but a standout for me is the section on heroes, villains, and victims – deconstructing the audience and the framing of the audience between the good vs the bad.

Finally, the discussion section was a bit limited in its substance, lacking the same analytical nuance and depth of the analysis. I wish it interacted more with the current literature to showcase its importance and re-emphasize the – excellent – findings and critical analyses that were showcased beforehand. For instance, the concluding sentence on page 67: (*Research such as this...give a clearer picture of radicalization processes than was formerly accessible*) is powerful and poignant but it is not reflected strong enough in the previous paragraphs of the section.

Minor criteria:

There is a good number of resources used throughout the text and the writing style is for the most part coherent and offers an interesting read. All formal requirements are met, and the layout of the thesis covers all necessary components to be worthy of defence.

Assessment of plagiarism: Work is cited appropriately with no obvious issues.



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Overall evaluation:

The thesis offers an interesting look into the elements of strategic communication, meaning, and narratives derived from the writings of the Christchurch shooter. Utilising the mixed-methods close-reading techniques (and the analysis which followed) offers an extremely fascinating look into how ontological insecurity is constructed to influence/radicalize future violence. This research is timely and offers a novel way of looking at such content. However, there are a couple of questions, comments, and concerns that the author would do well to answer during the defense. Overall, this is a thesis that is well-worthy of defense.

Suggested grade: B/C

Signature: