



Examination of Blog Discussion about the Beheading of Two American Journalists by ISIS

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Abstract

This study examines how Americans perceived the beheading of two American journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014. A content analysis of 980 comments from three representative political blogs of the United States (Townhall–conservative, DailyKos–liberal, and The Moderate Voice–moderate) finds that Americans had somewhat contrasting attitude toward the beheading. While many blog comments blamed the diplomatic failure of the United States toward the Arab world, they took an anti-Islamic stance and did not oppose military action against ISIS. The findings suggest that Americans' blog discourse about the beheading is characterized more by patriotism rather than by deliberation.

Keywords: *beheading; ISIS; blogs; deliberation; patriotism; rationality*

The beheading of American freelance journalists, James Foley and Steven Sotloff, by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2014 has shocked Americans. ISIS posted the videos of the gruesome crime, which contain justifications for the action. With the beheading videos, ISIS drew tremendous and furious reaction from the American public. As seen in prior research on public reaction to terrorist attacks (e.g., Greenberg, 2002; Norris et al., 2003; Venkatraman, 2004), people tweeted and posted on Facebook their thoughts and feelings about the horrible brutality. Using social media including Facebook, Twitter and blogs, Americans actively expressed their emotions and opinions and engaged in discussions with others. Much of the reaction focused on the barbaric, savage, and evil nature of the displayed violence and the perpetrators.

The present study approaches the ISIS beheading of the two American journalists, focusing on how people perceived the atrocity and constructed their narratives via social media. Today social media have become an essential communication tool for both radicalized groups such as ISIS and ordinary individuals who seek information about terrorism and discuss about it. But prior research has focused mostly on the strategic use of social media by terrorists (e.g., Farwell, 2014, 2015; Ghajar-Khosravi, Kwantes, Derbentseva, & Huey, 2016; Huey, 2015; Picart, 2015; Weimann, 2015; Zech & Kelly, 2015), neglecting how people react to terrorism using social media. The analysis of people's engagement in communication via social media is important for three reasons. First, an enormous number of people generate and discuss about social and political issues through social media platforms on a constant basis (Ghajar-Khosravi, Kwantes, Derbentseva, & Huey, 2016; Park, 2015). Second, the public opinion on social media can directly influence a nation's security and foreign policies. Lastly, the examination of people's activities on social media can deepen our understanding about whether cyberspace can play a crucial role in motivating people to engage in rational and deliberative communication as cyberoptimists argue (Barber, 1998; Benkler, 2006).

The current study conducts a content analysis in three representative political blogs of the U.S. – *Townhall*



(conservative), *The Moderate Voice* (moderate), and *DailyKos* (liberal). The discourse about a national tragedy like the beheading is critical in understanding the political ramifications of a highly publicized political issue outside a nation. Also, it would be useful to evaluate the dominant current of emotional and perceptual reactions Americans showed to the beheading. To examine such research questions, the present study relies on the concept of deliberation, which refers to reasoned public discourse, dialogue, or conversation (Guttman & Thompson, 1996; Benhabib, 1996; Cohen, 1989; Habermas, 1989), under the assumption that deliberation is a key variable that explains the nature of the American public's discourse about terrorism.

Literature Review

Blogs and Deliberation

Since democratic theories took a deliberative turn a little more than two decades ago (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009), researchers from different backgrounds have applied the deliberative model to diverse areas from radical forms of democracy to more traditional models of representative democracy. Despite variations, the deliberative model of democracy highlights “the role of open discussion, the importance of citizen participation and the existence of a well-functioning public sphere” (Gimmler, 2001, p. 23). In other words, central to the deliberative model of democracy is the concept of the public sphere. A well-functioning public sphere requires the presence of rational-critical debate, which is essential to deliberation.

Ryfe (2002) defines deliberation as “advancement of claims, presentation of evidence, consideration of counterfactual data.” Deliberation is “reflective, open to a wide range of evidence, respectful of different views. It is a rational process of weighing the available data, considering alternative possibilities, arguing about relevance and worthiness, and then choosing the best policy or person” (Walzer, 1997, pp. 1–2).

Baoill (2004), based on Habermas' idea of the public sphere, argues that deliberative conversation should be inclusive, treat participants as equal, and uphold rational-critical debate.

Advocates of democratic deliberation have turned their attention to the Internet which presents unprecedented opportunities for democratic deliberation. This is partially because the Internet gives citizens almost unlimited access to information. By accessing the Internet, citizens can easily inform themselves on political issues (Jansen & Koop, 2005). Through the Internet, citizens can be better informed, which can translate into deliberation.

More important, the accessibility of the Internet means that online forums have the potential to engage enormous numbers of citizens in deliberative debate. If the public sphere of the 18th century within which citizens debated issues and formed opinions was bourgeois coffee shops and salons, cyberspace, which allows a huge number of citizens to engage in communication and deliberative processes, represents the public sphere of the 21st century. To the extent that deliberative democracy requires broad participation (Weeks, 2000), the Internet as an unprecedented communication medium may provide new opportunities for deliberation to take place.

Because blogs allow people to engage in knowledge sharing, reflection, and debate, they often attract a large and dedicated readership (Boulos et al., 2006). People are attracted to blogs because they offer relevant, immediate, and credible information as well as diverse perspectives about an issue (Johnson et al., 2007). In the blogosphere, conversations and discourses do not always follow media agendas (Johnson et al., 2007) and often bring up new agendas ignored or neglected by mainstream media. Blogs also provide people with a new



tool to express their voices. Blogging is “arguably the most significant media revolution since the arrival of television” because it allows people to “make arguments, fact-check them and rebut them in a seamless and endless conversation” (Sullivan, 2002, p. A4). In other words, the blogosphere allows for direct interactions and robust communication among users, which often results in involvement in deep discussions about social issues (Reese et al., 2007). In a nutshell, blogs have the potential to empower the public and enhance deliberative democracy by making it easier to engage in deliberation (Benkler, 2006; Woodley, 2008).

However, some scholars point to limitations in blog deliberation’s extensibility to real-world political conversation. In assessing blogs for debate about the invasion of Iraq, Roberts-Miller (2004) found that blogs lacked true argumentation. The author found that many assertions surrounding the Iraq war were made without supporting evidence. He argued that the blog communication contributed to the strengthening of people’s ideological orientations, and that as a result the public sphere became more fractured. Baoill (2004) also said that it is questionable the blog format has the potential to contribute to the public sphere. Blogging involves a heavy time commitment, which could be foreboding to citizens. Baoill concluded that blog discussions do not fulfill the ideal of rational debate.

Why have scholars obtained mixed results about the deliberative potential of blogs? One reason may be that little work has examined different dimensions of deliberation. For example, it is true that blogs expands the opportunity to meet diverse people, but it is not certain such encounters with different people necessarily lead to deliberation. Some blog users may be constrained by their emotion, as Hoggett (2002) pointed out that emotional tyranny exists in deliberative areas. Blog users’ social or group identities are another obstacle (Ryfe, 2002). Some types of blog communication isolate participants from ideas that do not confirm to their position (Hargittai, Gallo, & Kane, 2008; Sunstein, 2001). This study revisits the deliberative nature of blog communication, by looking at diverse dimensions of deliberation.

Dimensions of Deliberation

Participants in deliberation are encouraged to speak intelligently, to be civil and polite (Papacharissi, 2004), to actively process arguments, and to show mutual respect, considerateness, and empathy to guide argumentation and decision-making (Fishkin, 1991, 1995; Gutmann & Thompson, 2009, 1996; Benhabib, 1996). The search for shared, common ground is important because it is closely associated with increased tolerance and understanding of others’ viewpoints stressed (Gutmann & Thompson, 2009, 1996; Warren, 1996a). Warren (1996b) points out that deliberation should make participants more tolerant, selfless, public-minded, and self-reflective.

How then do we assess the extent to which blog users engage in deliberation? Sheer participation in blog communication is not enough to make the communication deliberative. We need to identify major characteristics that online discussion must contain in order to be considered deliberative. To date, most scholarly attention has been paid to the institutions that might facilitate deliberative communication online (Rosenberg, 2004). This study conceptualizes three major dimensions of deliberation (reciprocity, reflexivity, and empathy) and examines how those dimensions are interconnected one another.

The first dimension that needs to be considered for deliberation is the presence of *rational* debate. The ideal process of deliberation envisioned by Habermas (1984, 1987) must take the form of rational-critical debate and go through a process of defending and questioning the validity of claims and reasons. By doing so, deliberation enables a careful weighing of all pertinent information in conversation to permit an accurate analysis of the problem and a proper framing of solutions (Barber, 1984; Matthews, 1994). In short,



deliberative arguments must be rational-critical as opposed to being emotional (Benhabib, 1996), in order to enable a better argument to arise without non-rational coercive pressure.

Second, deliberative communication should be *reciprocal*. Schneider (1996) defines reciprocity as “the notion that people are engaged in conversation with each other” (p. 74). Reciprocity provides the opportunity to gain knowledge regarding the perspectives of others and the degree to which these opportunities are realized. Although an opinion is built upon careful contemplation, evidence, and supportive arguments, it does not necessarily become deliberative. In order to make an opinion deliberative, the discussant also needs to grasp and take into consideration the opposing views of others. Essentially, reciprocity, which implies a mutual exchange of viewpoints, constitutes deliberation.

Another critical dimension of deliberation is *mutual understanding*. Simply recognizing, listening to, and receiving other participants’ perspectives are not enough to achieve mutual understanding. Participants must move past the superficial level of reciprocity and achieve a deeper level of understanding (Price, Cappella, & Lilach, 2002). Habermas (1984), in his theory of communicative action, emphasized mutual understanding – awareness of what others think, coupled with some understanding of why others think the way they do. Whereas speaking highlights the strengths and individuality of an opinion, it is hearing that develops mutual understanding. Deliberation requires both. Deliberation is a “dual process of speaking and listening” (Park, 2000, p.5) and thereby forms a shared ground for understanding.

Chambers (2003) defined deliberation as “debate and discussion aimed at producing reasonable, well-informed opinions in which participants are willing to revise preferences in light of discussion, new information, and claims made by fellow participants” (p. 309). Here we should note that the very definition of deliberation includes openness to the arguments of others (presumably arguments with which the participant disagrees). Openness allows people to feel others’ pain and unique experiences so that their decision takes others’ viewpoints into consideration (Morrell, 2010). In other words, open minds are likely to result in mutual respect and inclusion. Cohen (1989), for example, emphasized the importance of respect for a pluralism of values among participants in democratic deliberative forums.

Following the literature and the above reasoning, this study conceptualizes mutual understanding as how much a blog user is open and generous to different viewpoints and, as a result, respects them. This study analyzes the blog comments on the recent beheading according to the three major dimensions of deliberation.

Research Context

In 2014, ISIS rose from one of many factions vying for power in Syria and Iraq to the forefront of violent struggle in the region. Beheading has emerged as one of the key strategies of ISIS and has served to distinguish its “brand” of violence from other terrorists.

ISIS attained notoriety when it released a gruesome video showing the beheading of American journalists James Foley. Four subsequent beheadings shocked and outraged audiences across the globe when ISIS murdered Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, and Abdul-Rahman Kassig. All five victims were held in prolonged captivity and each death was accompanied by a grisly, widely disseminated video. In each of the videos, a hooded figure and often the victim cite foreign aggression as the motivation for these actions. ISIS has warned the West about intervention and demanded the cessation of foreign bombing campaigns. In February 2015, ISIS provoked further global outrage when it killed Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh by



burning him alive. Later that month the ISIS beheaded 21 Egyptian Coptic Christians on a Libyan beach.

Although it is obvious that ISIS uses extreme violence including beheading as a goad against Western powers, it should be also pointed out that there are underlying factors fueling the rise of religious fundamentalism like ISIS. For example, the presence of foreign troops on the ground, U.S. and Western support for repressive regimes in the Middle East, and Israel's ongoing occupation of Palestine may have triggered the grievances of extremists of the region (Sprusansky, 2014).

Method

Population and Sample

This study was conducted based on the comments regarding James Foley and Steven Sotloff in three political blogs – Townhall (conservative), The Moderate Voice (moderate), and DailyKos (liberal). Using two keywords “James Foley” and “Steven Sotloff,” we retrieved 122 posts and 3682 comments from Townhall, 36 posts and 1,240 comments from Daily Kos, and 44 posts and 281 comments from The Moderate Voice during August 19 to September 19, 2014. Some messages were eliminated because they were deemed irrelevant, although they were posted under pertinent titles or message headings. To make the analysis manageable, we randomly selected 15 comments from each threaded discussion posting. If the comments were less than 15 under a post, all comments were coded. This systematic random sampling yielded a dataset of 980 messages for a content analysis. Three hundred fifty five comments from Townhall, 160 comments from The Moderate Voice, and 465 comments from DailyKos were coded by two coders independently. The coding procedure followed the steps proposed by Krippendorff (2004).

Operationalization

Deliberation is a complex and abstract theoretical concept, which makes it difficult to translate into empirical indicators. On top of that, the theoretical dimensions of deliberation, more specifically rationality, reciprocity, and mutual understanding, are not mutually exclusive. Drawing on sporadic attempts to measure deliberation in literature, this study suggests its own operationalization for major variables of interest. The unit of analysis is each comment in the three blogs.

To assess *rationality*, the current study judged whether a blog comment contains persuasive reasoning or not and conducted a dichotomous coding. Persuasive reasoning becomes possible when an argument is centered on a solid logic and enough reasoning instead of emotions, prejudices or intuition. Only through such a process, a message can be accepted to both sides without causing conflict or misunderstanding. Therefore, this study assesses a blog comment to be rational when it contains a solid logic and enough reasoning.

Reciprocity can be easily measured by observing whether a blog comment contains different viewpoints in it. If a blog comment does not contain others' opinion, thoughts, or viewpoints, the comment lacks reciprocity. Reciprocity was coded as: “1” for comments that simply express certain positions without providing any reasons; “2” for comments that give a one-sided opinion and offer reasons to support it; and “3” for comments that express considerations for different sides of the beheading issue.

Drawing on Chambers (2003), Cohen (1989) and Morrell (2010), this study operationalizes *mutual understanding* as the extent to which a blog comment is open and generous to different viewpoints and respects them. To measure mutual understanding three categories were created: attitude toward America's



international policy, attitude toward military action against ISIS, and attitude toward religion. The first two categories were coded following a binary distinction – “positive” or “negative.” Attitude toward religion was coded as: “pro-Christian,” “anti-Christian,” “pro-Islam,” “anti-Islam,” and “respect for both Christianity and Islam.”

Additionally, the present study coded media source mentioned in each comment: “traditional media” such as TV and newspapers; “online media” such as online news sites; “social media” such as Facebook and Twitter; or “none” which did not include any media source. Discrete emotions were also coded: “anger” for comments that express the feeling of being upset or irritated; “fear” when blog users feel threatened; or “sadness” when the comment contains sorrow or grief due to the loss of the two American journalists.

To assess intercoder reliability, 10 percent of posts for each day were randomly chosen. Using Holsti’s coefficient of reliability formula, a coefficient of 91 percent was obtained on average. Codes were entered directly into Excel and pulled into SPSS for statistical analysis.

Results

In Townhall, 6.2% (22) of the comments included information from traditional media. Only one comment contained information from online news. Social media sources were cited in 7% (25) of the comments. Among the four types of emotions, anger (58.6%, 208) was dominant, followed by fear (3.9%, 14). Sadness and anxiety were not found at all.

In DailyKos, 6.5% (30) of the comments included information from traditional media. Ten comments contained information from online news. Social media sources were cited in 7.5% (35) of the comments. In terms of emotion, anger (46.2%, 215) was most dominant, followed by fear and sadness. In The Moderate Voice, 10.2% of the comments included information from traditional media. Social media sources were cited in 15.8% of the comments. In terms of emotion, anger (41.4%) was most dominant, followed by fear and sadness.

Most comments in the three blogs were unfavorable toward the U.S. government, and, at times, blamed the officials in government leadership positions. In Townhall, 207 comments (66.8%) were coded as opposing the government’s handling of the beheading issue. In DailyKos, 33.5% were found to oppose the government’s stance. In The Moderate Voice, 40.2% were coded to be negative toward the government. Only 3.1% of Townhall comments, 37.0% of DailyKos comments, and 14.8% of The Moderate Voice comments showed favorable evaluation toward the government action. A similar pattern was observed as to President Barak Obama. The proportion of negative evaluation of Obama’s action was 58.6% (208) in Townhall, 26.7% (124) in DailyKos, and 30.8% (49) in The Moderate Voice.

Regarding *rationality*, the comments that are not based on any rationale accounted for 66.5% (236) in Townhall, 59.4% (95) in The Moderate Voice, and 56% (260) in DailyKos. In other words, a majority of comments in the three blogs lacked reasoning. One-sample chi-square tests reveal that rational comments are significantly more common than comments that are not rational in all the three blogs ($\chi^2(1, N = 355) = 38.56, p < .001$ in Townhall; $\chi^2(1, N = 160) = 8.54, p < .01$ in The Moderate Voice; $\chi^2(1, N = 465) = 6.51, p < .05$ in DailyKos). A test where all the comments were added up yielded a similar result, $\chi^2(1, N = 980) = 41.64, p < .001$.

With regard to *reciprocity*, the mean in Townhall is 1.45 (SD = .87). Comments that simply express a one-sided opinion without providing any reason constituted 122 (34.4%), and comments that give a one-sided



opinion with reasons supporting it explained 29.3% (104) of the total comments. Only 15 comments (4.2%) were found to contain different perspectives regarding the beheading. A chi-square test was run to compare the difference between one-sided comments (122 + 104 = 226) and comments with multiple viewpoints (15). The difference was statistically significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 241) = 184.73, p < .001$.

In DailyKos, the mean of reciprocity is 1.53 (SD = .88). One-sided comments without reasoning made up 29% (135). Comments that gave a one-sided opinion with reasoning explained 28% (130) of the total comments. Only 75 comments (16.1%) were found to include different viewpoints. We conducted a chi-square test to compare the difference between one-sided comments (135 + 130 = 265) and comments with multiple viewpoints (75) and found a significant difference, $\chi^2 (1, N = 340) = 106.18, p < .001$.

In The Moderate Voice, the mean of reciprocity is 1.48 (SD = 1.03). One-sided comments without reasoning made up 30.7% (49). Comments that gave a one-sided opinion with reasoning explained 29.6% (47) of the total comments. Only 24 comments (15.0%) were found to include different viewpoints. A chi-square test was run to compare the difference between one-sided comments (49 + 47 = 96) and comments with multiple viewpoints (24). The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 120) = 43.20, p < .001$. A test where all the codes of reciprocity from the three blogs were added up yielded a similar result, $\chi^2 (1, N = 701) = 319.16, p < .001$.

	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Appropriate	11	22	172	205
Not Appropriate	207	64	158	429
χ^2	176.22 ($p < .001$)	20.51 ($p < .001$)	.59 ($p = .441$)	79.14 ($p < .001$)

Table 1: U.S government's handling of the beheading.

	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Rational	119	65	205	389
Non-rational	236	95	260	591
χ^2	38.56 ($p < .001$)	8.54 ($p < .001$)	6.51 ($p < .001$)	41.64 ($p < .001$)

Table 2: Rationality.

	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Single Viewpoint	226	96	265	587
Multiple Viewpoints	15	24	75	114
χ^2	184.73 ($p < .001$)	43.20 ($p < .001$)	106.18 ($p < .001$)	319.16 ($p < .001$)

Table 3 : Reciprocity.

Regarding *mutual understanding*, the current study first compared the blog users' evaluation of the U.S. policy for the Middle East. In Townhall, 26.5% (94) of the comments contained criticism about the U.S. policy, while 27 comments (7.6%) agreed with the direction of the U.S. policy. The difference was significant,



$\chi^2 (1, N = 121) = 37.10, p < .001.$

In DailyKos, 25.0% (116) of the comments criticized the U.S. policy, while 30 comments blamed the U.S approach to the issues regarding the Middle East. A chi-square test revealed that the positive evaluation of the U.S. policy is significantly less observed than the negative evaluation of it, $\chi^2 (1, N = 146) = 50.66, p < .001.$

In The Moderate Voice, 30.8% (49) of the comments contained criticism about the U.S. policy, while 10 comments (6.3%) agreed with the direction of the U.S. policy. The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 59) = 25.78, p < .001.$ A test where all the codes related to U.S. policy from the three blogs were added up yielded a similar result, $\chi^2 (1, N = 326) = 113.08, p < .001.$

Concerning military action, 110 comments (31%) from Townhall supported it while only 36 comments (10.1%) opposed it. The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 146) = 37.51, p < .001.$ In DailyKos, 102 comments (21.9%) supported and 98 comments (21.1%) opposed it. A chi-square test did not reveal any statistical difference, $\chi^2 (1, N = 200) = .08, p = .777.$ In The Moderate Voice, 44 comments (27.6%) supported while only 15 comments (9.4%) opposed it. The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 59) = 14.25, p < .001.$ A test where all the codes related to military action were added up yielded a similar result, $\chi^2 (1, N = 405) = 28.27, p < .001.$

When it comes to religion, 117 comments in Townhall included anti-Islam messages. Only 36 comments showed a balanced attitude between Christianity and Islam. Interestingly, 25.4% (90) comments mentioned the term “terrorist.” A chi-square test revealed that Anti-Islam comments were significantly more common than comments that respect both Christianity and Islam, $\chi^2 (1, N = 153) = 42.88, p < .001.$

In DailyKos, 102 comments included anti-Islam messages. Only 56 comments showed a balanced stance between Christianity and Islam. The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 158) = 13.39, p < .001.$ In The Moderate Voice, 58 comments included anti-Islam messages while only 18 comments showed a balanced stance between Christianity and Islam. The difference was significant, $\chi^2 (1, N = 76) = 52.74, p < .001.$ A test where all the codes related to attitude toward religion were added up produced a similar result, $\chi^2 (1, N = 387) = 72.06, p < .001.$

	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Critical	94	49	116	259
Agreeing	27	10	30	67
χ^2	37.10	25.78 ($p < .001$)	50.66 ($p < .001$)	113.08
	($p < .001$)			($p < .001$)

Table 4 : Evaluation for the U.S. foreign policy (mutual understanding).



	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Supportive	110	44	102	256
Opposing	36	15	98	149
χ^2	37.51 ($p < .001$)	14.25 ($p < .001$)	.08 ($p = .777$)	28.27 ($p < .001$)

Table 5: Military intervention (mutual understanding).

	Townhall	The Moderate Voice	DailyKos	Sum
Balanced between Christianity and Islam	36	18	56	110
Anti-Islam	117	58	102	277
χ^2	42.88 ($p < .001$)	52.74 ($p < .001$)	13.39 ($p < .001$)	72.06 ($p < .001$)

Table 6 : Attitude toward Religion (Mutual Understanding).

Discussion

Most Western media and authorities emphasized persistently the atrocity of the beheading of the two American journalists by ISIS. To date little research has systematically examined how people responded to such a horrible crime and what discussions they had about it. Therefore, it is meaningful to investigate what perceptions Western citizens had regarding the beheading and terrorism. This study collected 980 comments posted on three representative political blogs of the U.S. and analyzed the blog users' discourse about the beheading, focusing on the concept of deliberation.

Technology optimists view blogging technology as having the potential to engage citizens in unrestricted and deliberative discourse about political issues. The blog provides a much needed public sphere for people to express their views and speak their minds on an important issue like the beheading by ISIS. Blogs are particularly valuable because they offer an opportunity to discuss controversial and multi-faceted issues. But the findings of the current study point to somewhat non-deliberative nature of blog communication.

This study found that rational reasoning was not common in Americans' blog communication about the beheading. The majority of American blog users expressed their subjective thoughts and ungrounded opinions rather than engaging in deliberative communication based on deep reasoning. Many blog users also did not show a reciprocal attitude, failing to consider different viewpoints or ignoring them. Most comments were based on one-sided perspectives rather than on diverse perspectives. These results indicate that blogging technology itself does not guarantee or promote deliberation.

The lack of reciprocity and rationality suggests that blogs fail to offer a forum for deliberation as long as they concern terrorism. Roberts-Miller (2004) criticized that mostly consensual arguments in blog comments cannot facilitate rational debate. The current study shows that the deliberative nature of the blog comments has largely been lost, without encouraging citizens to engage in deliberation about important terrorism issues.

The current study also found that most blog users lacked mutual understanding in discussing the beheading.



It is surprising that many ordinary American citizens favored the idea of taking military action against ISIS. Particularly, among the comments posted in Townhall, the claim of supporting military action was three times more frequently observed than the voice of opposing military intervention. If U.S. political leaders considered seriously the public opinion of blog users when determining a national action about the beheading, it might have resulted in another military intervention to the Middle East. Also, a lot of blog users revealed anti-Islamic attitude, which indicates that many American blog users attempted to connect the cause of the beheading to the issue of violence by the people who believe in Islam rather than attributing the responsibility of the beheading to extreme Muslim terrorists.

Some excuses may be brought up regarding the above findings. First, we can interpret the findings in relation to Americans' realization that the Arab world consistently harmed the U.S. and its citizens. Americans are quite upset at the continuous terrorism by the Arab world. Because of that, many Americans view Islam to be related to terrorism. This is the same concern that has materialized in the days and months following 9/11. Many Americans saw 9/11 as a clash of civilizations: Islam vs. America. It appears that Americans believe it is the intrinsic nature of Islam that hurts the interests and safety of America.

However, it should be noted that the beheading is a political issue rather than a religious issue. Even though we admit that some sorts of action should be taken toward the anti-humanitarian crime, it is not certain whether the issue can be solved by taking military action against the Arab world in general or by developing a hostile perception toward the Islam as a religion. It's not true that the beheading is an issue that involves the whole Arab world or the Islam. Although it is an undeniable fact that many terrorists come from the Islam world, it does not make much sense to attribute the responsibility of the beheading to the people who believe in Islam.

Readers also should note the finding that a considerable number of American blog users had the understanding that the previous U.S. policy about the Arab world has something to do with the terrorism against American citizens. The findings of the current study reveal that the comments in the three blogs were mostly negative rather than positive toward the U.S. international policy. This outcome suggests that the blog communication about the beheading was not completely non-deliberative. Obviously many blog users had the perception that the beheading issue should be understood in relation to international, geopolitical, and historical context.

But unfortunately, such critical evaluation of the U.S. international policy did not result in reason-based, deliberative debate about the beheading. Many blog users consciously or unconsciously approached the issue with a hostile attitude toward Islam and with a belief in America's superior role in international affairs. Therefore, we cautiously speculate that the deliberative effort of American blog users was to some extent undermined by their patriotic pride and longstanding antagonism against Islam even though they knew that such an approach is not logical and not the best way to solve the problem. In this respect, the present study raises an important question to follow-up studies: In what ways are deliberation and patriotism interconnected?

This study makes a significant theoretical contribution to the study of deliberation. To date, most deliberation studies conceived deliberation as a one-dimensional concept. This approach may have produced mixed results about the deliberative potential of Internet-based media. This study conceptualized three dimensions of deliberation and applied the categorization to an analysis of the blog communication about ISIS beheading. The present study argues that the three dimensions of deliberation have enough usability to be applied to the study of people's engagement in online discussion about terrorism.



This study has some limitations. External validity is one concern. Blog users constitute a small percentage of the American public. Nonetheless, blogs are one of the popular media channels in the U.S. and reflect the grassroots sentiments of the American society regarding the beheading issue. Another shortcoming can be found from the generalizability of the findings. This study examined the comments on ISIS beheading only from American blogs. Future research should conduct comparative studies by looking at diverse countries' political blogs. Despite a few limitations, this study contributes to the study of terrorism by suggesting an innovative theoretical and methodological framework which can deepen the understanding of extremists' terrorism and blog users' reaction to it.

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