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**Cartoons vs. the Caliphate: The Scale of Counter-Narrative Campaigns and the
Role of Religion**

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts
in Global Studies

by

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June 2018

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ABSTRACT

by

James Digby

This paper analyses the deployment of counter-narratives on social media as part of counter violent extremism (CVE) strategies aimed at degrading Islamic State's ability to recruit foreign fighters and inspire attacks abroad. It argues that the bulk of counter-narrative content emerges out of a small network of NGOs, think-tanks and organizations based in London which is conceptualized as a lattice. The quantity of counter-narrative content emerging from this lattice and elsewhere, whilst significant, is vastly mismatched by the scale of Islamic State content produced at their operational apex, and is frequently overestimated by policy papers and CVE reports from social media companies. Successful counter-narrative campaigns – identified by their adherence to academic communications theory and prevalence within CVE policy spheres – demonstrate the need for religious narratives in which normative Islam plays an active yet embedded role in modern societies outside of the so-called caliphate.

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Cartoons vs. the Caliphate: The Scale of

Counter-Narrative Campaigns and the Role

of Religion

"Average Mohamed asks: what do you think your job description is when you join Islamic State?

Your job description is to commit genocide against Muslims, Christians, Yazidi and Jews; terrorise innocent women, men and children like your family into blind obedience; behead unarmed, innocent people you round up; destroy world heritage sites, mosques, tombs and shrines; empower unelected, self-nominated, murderous, blood-thirsty, individuals as leaders.

Not exactly Disney World, or action-film like the propaganda says it is, is it?

Remember: peace up, and extremist thinking, especially Islamic State, out.

*This message is brought to you by averagemohamed.com."*¹

Average Mohamed is a series of short cartoon videos about the teachings of Islam, the barbarity of terrorism, Islamic State, and Muslim identity in the West. They are the creation of Mohamed Amin Ahmed, a Somali-American living in Minneapolis, Minnesota, who uploads his content to YouTube. The central character is the eponymous Mohamed, a smiling middle-aged man with a comfortable paunch who

¹ Average Mohamed, 'Islamic State Job Description', YouTube, 5th September 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7vJ-SlxjRrQ>. Accessed 11th June 2018.

ends each video with the same invocation: “Remember, kids: peace up; extremist thinking out. This message is brought to you by averagemohamed.com.”²

Abdullah X is a similar series of YouTube videos and online content, this time created by a British Muslim who prefers anonymity. In interviews, he has stated that he was once tempted by narratives of violent extremism and wants to steer Muslim youth away from that path.³ The videos are narrated by Abdullah X, a sharp-featured young character with chunky headphones around his neck, graffiti on the walls behind him, and a thick London accent.⁴ They deal frankly with questions of Muslim identity in the UK, depictions of Muslims in the media, the Syrian civil war, normative Muslim values, and the Islamic State. For instance, in the following extract from a two-part video, Abdullah X is transported to Islamic State territory which he compares to Medina in the time of the Prophet:

“What the YouTubes is happening here? ... I don’t recall learning about non-Muslims and Muslims being murdered in cold blood for being – what? – aid workers, givers of charity, helpers. Were not the people of Medina called ‘The Helpers’, ‘the Ansar’? In Medina, were minorities not protected? Were people not free to practice their religion? Was it not a place where freed slaves came to live, and be free, and not become slaves all over again? Servants of Allah, yeah, but not of the corrupt desire of thugs and power-driven sociopaths. What kind of

² <https://www.youtube.com/user/1mohamedamin/videos>. Accessed 11th June 2018.

³ Atika Shubert & Florence Davey-Attlee, “Abdullah X:’ Former extremist’s cartoon aims to stop young Muslims joining ISIS’, CNN, 7th October 2014.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx/videos>. Accessed 11th June 2018.

*'Islamic State' is this warzone? This is their representation of that Sunnah? Nothing feels right about this, man: from the name, to the deeds of those acting in its name, nothing. It's a state all right, trust."*⁵

Both Average Mohamed's and Abdullah X's channels have an average view count of a few thousand per video. These numbers are not insignificant; nor are they staggering. But their YouTube channels have both received significant political attention from the highest echelons of Western governments. Average Mohamed was spoken about at a White House counter-violent extremism (CVE) summit in the USA, and Abdullah X was referenced extensively in a British House of Commons report on counter-extremism in the UK.⁶ They are examples of 'counter-narratives', campaigns and content designed to challenge or disrupt the narratives of Islamic State and other extremist organizations on social media. Average Mohamed and Abdullah X's content is located right at the center of a lattice of funding, policies, and research which conceptualizes counter-narratives as an effective foil to Islamic State's media jihad. Most of the work in this lattice is done by a select group of NGOs and think-tanks, though it stretches right up to social media giants and multilateral political institutions, and right down to grassroots content producers and activists.

⁵ Abdullah X, 'Abdullah X: 'Journey Through Mankind' Part 2 of 2', YouTube, 13th February 2015. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ae3mupy4cXo>. Accessed 11th June 2018.

⁶ Tanya Silverman, Christopher J. Stewart, Zahed Amanullah, & Jonathan Birdwell, 'The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016, p. 12, & House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point', Eighth Report of Session 2016-17, 2016.

This study is the result of five months spent in London from September 2017 to January 2018 talking to the NGOs and think-tanks mentioned in the paper. I visited their offices, read their research output, attended their conferences, and mapped their operations. I am grateful for the support they showed me along the way, and deeply respectful of the important work which they are doing.

This paper is divided into three parts. The first weaves together the main strands which emerged in 2017 to empower counter-narrative theory and practice in the UK and beyond (particularly Europe and North America). It explains the threat that Islamic State posed from 2014 to 2018, how their social media propaganda operated, and the measures which social media companies and governments took to try and dismantle this online threat. It finally notes how, in the context of repeated attacks and boiling public pressure, counter-narrative theory emerged out of policy recommendations and civil society practice to gain a prominent position in counter-violent extremism (CVE) discourse.

The second section is a quantitative analysis of the scale of counter-narratives operating globally. It argues that the emphasis placed on counter-narratives in CVE discourse is wildly disproportionate to the actual amount of counter-narrative content circulating online. Literature reviews list a dizzying array of multinational institutions and international NGOs which are involved in counter-narrative work, yet their levels of substantive output and public engagement are extremely unclear. The bulk of accessible counter-narrative content is linked to a small lattice of NGOs, organizations and think-tanks in London, led by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD). Policy papers promoting counter-narratives consistently recycle the same

examples of counter-narratives (such as Average Mohamed and Abdullah X) whilst making the unverifiable claim that they are singular examples of a much larger phenomenon. Social media companies reach to the lattice for help with specific counter-narrative efforts, which they sometimes casuistically promote to governments and the public as long-running strategies. Ultimately, the scale of counter-narratives would need to be radically enlarged to provide an adequate counter-messaging response to the vast swathes of propaganda being pushed out online by Islamic State at its operational apex.

The third section offers some qualitative reflections on the content of successful counter-narrative content. The scale of counter-narratives notwithstanding, there is empirical evidence showing that campaigns designed to create links between the audience targeted by Islamic State propaganda and the society which the propaganda aims to alienate or isolate them from can be effective in diverting or reversing radicalization trajectories. Islamic State propaganda, and other Salafi-jihadist content, offers a powerful moral, epistemological, and social vision in which the world is bifurcated into two camps. This vision is religious in that it is mediated by religious frames of reference and shot through with religious terminologies, arguments, and even aesthetics. Counter-narratives which can retain the powerful appeal of the religious vision while contesting the binary worldview of 'us vs. them' can achieve counter-messaging goals. The way that this most often and most effectively plays out in practice is for the content to be created by authentically religious actors who have a vision of normative Islam which is embedded in Western societies, and this can be demonstrated by looking at some successful counter-narrative campaigns and the messages they send.

1. The Emergence of Counter-Narrative Theory

ISIS's Online Ecosystem

2014, the year that Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi declared the establishment of the Islamic State caliphate out of the blood and rubble of fallen Mosul, was – according to Charlie Winter, probably the foremost analyst of Islamic State's media industry – 'the year in which Salafi-jihadist propaganda went mainstream'.⁷ ISIS-branded productions were plastered across Western newspapers, network television and social media, where they would remain for the next few years. This fixation is understandable. The group had swept from relative obscurity in geopolitical terms to a position of startling military and economic power. At the height of their insurgency from 2014 to 2015, ISIS controlled a stretch of land roughly the size of Britain in Iraq and Syria, with an estimated population of 12 million.⁸ They ruled ancient cities in the Levant with an iron grip, and claimed provinces in at least 16 other countries from West Africa to South Asia. This position was ultimately untenable, and as intelligence assets and military understandings of their operations grew, the group was forced back in persistent offensives which stripped Islamic State of the bulk of their territory.⁹ In 2018, ISIS can only claim to hold a fraction of their former self-proclaimed caliphate, with the main cities – Ramadi, Raqqa, Fallujah, and Mosul – liberated in bloody and destructive battles.

⁷ Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand', 2018, p. 103.

⁸ Rukmini Callimachi, 'The ISIS Files: When Terrorists Run City Hall', The New York Times, 4th – 5th April 2018.

⁹ Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand', 2018, p. 104.

Islamic State has been exceptionally successful at manufacturing an image of itself as a looming – even existential – threat. It intentionally courted front-page headlines and airtime as part of a coordinated system of media proliferation.¹⁰ Winter calls its media operations ‘unparalleled in their scope and sophistication’, and notes that they revolutionized many aspects of insurgent communication and propaganda.¹¹ ISIS uses the internet – particularly social media – to interact with followers, enemies, and potential recruits using thousands of messages in multiple languages.¹² Their media offices routinely publish photos, videos, magazines and text updates about Islamic State’s activities featuring a carefully controlled concoction of civil order and extreme violence.¹³ Whilst Western media focused on shocking broadcasts such as the murders of James Foley, Steven Sotloff, David Haines, Alan Henning, Abdul-Rahman Kassig and others, or the gruesome Clash of Swords video series in 2014, ISIS was churning out literally thousands of media products in what Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger refer to as a ‘propaganda tsunami’ in which ‘bloody weeks turned into bloody months’.¹⁴

ISIS was not the first Salafi-jihadist group to produce such gruesome materials – al-Qaeda and others have been making content since the Soviet-Afghan war in the

¹⁰ Charlie Winter, ‘Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand’, 2018, p. 103.

¹¹ Charlie Winter, ‘Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand’, 2018, p. 105.

¹² Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, ‘Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism’, 2016, p. 394.

¹³ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, pp. 113 – 114.

¹⁴ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, pp. 122 – 124.

1980s – but the production value and dissemination methods ISIS employed were novel.¹⁵ Their videos were often produced by experienced professionals and featured fast-paced editing, music, charismatic narration, and consistent storytelling.¹⁶ Their blend of audio-visual materials disseminated globally online is used to create persistent and ideologically coherent chains of propaganda intended to attract foreign fighters and portray an appearance of strength.¹⁷

ISIS opened its first official Twitter account in October 2013.¹⁸ A year later, at its operational zenith, Islamic State was publishing around 200 propaganda events a week, ranging from photograph reports, documenting videos and radio bulletins to poetry.¹⁹ Winter found that in one month in 2015, 'IS's official propagandists created and disseminated 1,146 separate units of propaganda. Photo essays, videos, audio statements, radio bulletins, text round-ups, magazines, posters, pamphlets, theological treatises – the list goes on' in multiple languages.²⁰ These products were uploaded to social media – primarily Twitter – where they were circulated by a swirling mob of semi-anonymous global supporters sometimes referred to as the 'media mujahideen' aided by algorithms and other computational devices designed to

¹⁵ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, pp. 101 – 103.

¹⁶ 'RAN Issue Paper: Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives', RAN Centre of Excellence, 2015.

¹⁷ Ali Fisher, 'Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence', 2015; Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, p. 112.

¹⁸ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 154.

¹⁹ Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Wired UK, 20th December 2017.

²⁰ Charlie Winter, 'Fishing and Ultraviolence', BBC News, 6th October 2015.

extend their reach and evade deletion.²¹ J.M. Berger launched a large-scale assessment of ISIS's Twitter following in 2014 – 2015 and found that over 46,000 Twitter accounts supporting the organization were in use at one point.²² This online ecosystem was centrally controlled by arguably the most complex non-state media operation in history: ISIS ran 5 media foundations with at least 35 affiliated stations across the Levant, Maghreb and Sinai Peninsula.²³

This propaganda system is part of an explicit strategy, as stated by ISIS operatives themselves. Excerpts from 'Media operative, you are also a mujahid' analysed by Haroro Ingram illustrate this point: 'The media is jihad in the way of Allah', it reads. 'You, with your media work, are therefore a mujahid in the way of Allah ... Some criticize media operatives for engaging in verbal jihad whilst sat on sofas in beautiful houses ... But by Allah no, they are at the forefront of the conflict, in the heart of the war, within the furnace of its battles ... All things considered, it is no exaggeration to say that the media operative is a martyrdom-seeker without a belt!'²⁴ A member of ISIS's social media team is on record saying, 'This is a war of ideologies as much as it is a physical war. And just as the physical war must be fought on the battlefield, so too must the ideological war be fought in the media.'²⁵ Charlie Winter analysed the same document, highlight passages such as, 'Anyone who knows the

²¹ See, for instance, Martyn Frampton, Ali Fisher, & Nico Prucha, 'The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online', Policy Exchange, 2017.

²² J.M. Berger, 'Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State's Recruitment Strategy', 2015.

²³ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Nick Kaderbhai, 'Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006 – 2016', VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017, p. 38.

²⁴ Haroro Ingram, 'Islamic State's English-language magazines, 2014-2017: Trends & implications for CT-CVE strategic communications', ICCT, 2018.

²⁵ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 147.

Crusaders of today and keeps track of that which infuriates them understands how they are angered and terrorised by jihadi media. They – the curse of Allah the Almighty be on them – know its importance, impact and significance more than any others!’ Therefore, if launched effectively, ‘media weapons [can] actually be more potent than autonomic bombs’ and have ‘far-reaching potential to change the balance in respect to the war between the Muslims and their enemies’. Winter concludes that ISIS considers messaging one of its most important weapons, and the primary method by which ISIS extends its influence outside of its physical territory in Iraq and Syria.²⁶

However the Islamic State’s territorial apex has passed, the result of sustained military losses and ever-tightening controls by the coalition of nations and forces arrayed against them. Its caliphate has been shattered into a system of interconnected statelets in Syria and Iraq, and many of its key operatives and operating centers have been obliterated.²⁷ This has affected its media operations. There is no clear consensus on whether Islamic State’s media operations are undergoing a full-fledged collapse or have been shifting to more covert channels giving a false indication of decline, though the numbers certainly appear to point to a significant decrease in ISIS’s media productivity.²⁸ Three-quarters of their media outlets were silenced by December 2017, and most analytics show that their mean

²⁶ Charlie Winter, ‘Media Jihad: The Islamic State’s Doctrine for Information Warfare’, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2016.

²⁷ See, for instance, Charlie Winter & Jade Parker, ‘Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State’s Evolving Online Strategy’, Lawfare, 7th January 2018.

²⁸ For an argument that Islamic State’s media has undergone a ‘full-fledged collapse’, see Charlie Winter & Jade Parker, ‘Virtual Caliphate Rebooted: The Islamic State’s Evolving Online Strategy’, Lawfare, 7th January 2018. In contrast, Frampton, Fisher & Prucha argue that ISIS’s output has not declined in the way that popular wisdom suggests: Martyn Frampton, Ali Fisher, & Nico Prucha, ‘The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online’, Policy Exchange, 2017, pp. 59 – 63.

output has reduced by over half.²⁹ The quality of material has also suffered: high-quality videos have been replaced with cruder clips, and utopian presentations of the caliphate have given way to defiant depictions of combat alone. ISIS has not only run out of operatives and media centers to create their content – they have run out of civil order and military victories to create it about.³⁰

The Response in the UK and Beyond

The period of time from the announcement of the caliphate in 2014 and the current state of play in 2018 has been one of considerable panic in Europe, the Middle East and North Africa, and North America as countries worry about ISIS's ability to recruit foreign nationals to swell its ranks and launch terrorist attacks in their homelands.

Islamic State attracted somewhere in the region of 25,000 – 30,000 foreign fighters, mainly from Middle Eastern nations, with 4,000 – 5,000 coming from the West. In Europe, particularly large numbers travelled from France, Germany and the UK, and disproportionately large numbers relative to the overall populations of Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden also made the journey.³¹ The role of the internet and social media in convincing British and other youths to choose to join

²⁹ See: Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Wired UK, 20th December 2017; 'Analysis: Islamic State media output goes into sharp decline', BBC Monitoring, 23rd November 2017; Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand', 2018, p. 107.

³⁰ Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Wired UK, 20th December 2017.

³¹ Lorne Dawson & Amarnath Amarasingam, 'Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq', 2016.

the extremist group is contested: Rachel Bryson makes a convincing case for the existence of offline radicalization hubs in the UK (she found that two thirds of British jihadis had links to just 6 individuals), and Peter Neumann and Shiraz Maher argue through their study of nearly 800 Western recruits that the ‘decisive factor’ transitioning people from terrorist sympathisers to foreign fighters is offline social networks.³² However they concede that social media plays a role in the radicalization process, which is explained in detail by J.M. Berger’s assessment of social media grooming of potential fighters: recruiters trawl Muslim networks looking for targets, before isolating individuals within an online micro-community and shifting their conversation onto private communication where they encourage emigration.³³

As ISIS started suffering irreparably serious military defeats in Syria and Iraq, their message began to morph. They spent less energy recruiting fighters to travel abroad, and increasingly looked to incite terrorist attacks in their correspondents’ home countries, offering logistics, instructions, and encouragement.³⁴ Between June 2014 (the declaration of the caliphate) and June 2017, there were 51 successful terrorist attacks in Europe and North America by individuals directly controlled by ISIS, connected to ISIS, or inspired by ISIS. These attacks killed 395 people and injured 1,549.³⁵

³² Rachel Bryson, ‘For Caliph and Country: Exploring how British jihadis join a global movement’, Tony Blair Institute for Global Change, 2017; Peter Neumann & Shiraz Maher, ‘London attack: How are UK extremists radicalised?’, BBC News, 5th June 2018.

³³ J.M. Berger, ‘Tailored Online Interventions: The Islamic State’s Recruitment Strategy’, CTC Sentinel, Vol. 8, No. 10, 2015.

³⁴ Charlie Winter, ‘Inside the collapse of Islamic State’s propaganda machine’, Wired UK, 20th December 2017.

³⁵ Lorenzo Vidino, Francesco Marone & Eva Entenmann, ‘Fear Thy Neighbor: Radicalization and Jihadist Attacks in the West’, ICCT, 2017, p. 151.

In the UK, these attacks were clustered in 2017. The country had suffered a terrible assault in 2005, when four bombers targeted public transport in London, killing 52 and injuring 700 in the so-called '7/7 bombings'. Another prominent jihadist attack came in 2013 when a British soldier, Fusilier Lee Rigby, was run over and decapitated in London whilst fundraising for a veterans' charity. The spate of attacks in 2017 started on 22nd March 2017, when Khaled Masood drove a car into pedestrians on Westminster Bridge and stormed the Palace of Westminster, stabbing a policeman; he killed 5 people and injured 49. On May 22nd, Salman Abedi detonated a suicide bomb at an Ariana Grande concert in Manchester, killing 22 and injuring 250 (most of whom were children or teenagers). Under two weeks later, a van was used to run down pedestrians on London Bridge, before the occupants rushed out and started slashing people at random; they killed 8 people and injured 48. Later that month, Darren Osborne drove a van into Muslim worshippers in Finsbury Park as a self-proclaimed racially-motivated revenge attack. And in September a bomb only partially exploded on the London Underground at Parsons Green station, injuring 30. Reports circulated that these attacks, combined with at least 7 other 'significant plots' which had been foiled by police and intelligence services, made 2017 'the most sustained period of terror activity in England since the IRA bombing campaign of the 1970s'.³⁶ Pundits were blunt: 'this is the new normal' wrote Shiraz Maher in the New Statesman, and the official threat level flickered between the two highest categories of 'SEVERE' and 'CRITICAL'.³⁷

³⁶ Dominic Casciani, 'Parsons Green: What do the police do next?', BBC News, 16th September 2017.

³⁷ Shiraz Maher, 'Parsons Green, and why more attacks on the West by Islamic State are inevitable', New Statesman, 22nd September 2017; <https://www.mi5.gov.uk/threat-levels> – the threat level was

In the midst of the atmosphere of fear and crisis developing in Britain, Prime Minister Theresa May made a speech the day after the London Bridge attack. She called all the recent attacks ‘connected in one important sense’, saying ‘They are bound together by the single, evil ideology of Islamist extremism that preaches hatred, sows division, and promotes sectarianism ... It is an ideology that is a perversion of Islam and a perversion of the truth. Defeating this ideology is one of the great challenges of our time.’³⁸ Here she was on well-worn ground: the previous Prime Minister, David Cameron, gave a speech in July 2015, in which he argued that the central threat – over socioeconomic grievances or geopolitical rivalries – is Salafi-jihadism itself: ‘What we are fighting, in Islamist extremism, is an ideology. It is an extreme doctrine.’³⁹ UK counter-terrorism strategy had been concerned with terrorist ideology since the advent of CONTEST, the controversial policy inaugurated in the 2000s and amended in 2010/11 explicitly to ‘confront the extremist ideology at the heart of the threat we face’.⁴⁰ But Theresa May in 2017 went further in her diagnosis of the context of the problem: she blamed the internet.

The Home Affairs Select Committee had previously blamed internet and social media companies on two occasions. They ran an inquiry from August 2015 to July

raised from ‘SUBSTANTIAL’ to ‘SEVERE’ in August 2014, and it has not dipped below since. This date, of course, coincides with the establishment of Islamic State as a potent terrorist force. Accessed 20th May 2018.

³⁸ Kate Samuelson, ‘Read Prime Minister Theresa May’s Full Speech on the London Bridge Attack’, Time, 4th June 2017.

³⁹ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘Extremism: PM Speech’, Gov.UK, 2015.

⁴⁰ Samuel Rascoff, ‘Establishing Official Islam? The Law and Strategy of Counter-Radicalization’, 2012, pp. 150 – 152.

2016, resulting in a report called 'Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point' in which they argued that 'the internet has transformed the way that terrorist organisations can influence and radicalise people', and accused social media companies of 'consciously failing to combat the use of their sites to promote terrorism and killings'.⁴¹ Their next inquiry, launched in July 2016, called 'Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online' was more scathing, saying 'The biggest and richest social media companies are shamefully far from taking sufficient action to tackle illegal and dangerous content, to implement proper community standards or keep their users safe ... the major social media companies are big enough, rich enough and clever enough to sort this problem out'.⁴² It examined YouTube (owned by Google), Twitter and Facebook, calling each of them 'shamefully irresponsible' for allowing extreme content to saturate their sites.⁴³ So there was significant political momentum underpinning Theresa May's words in July 2017 when she said 'we cannot allow this ideology the safe space it needs to breed. Yet that is precisely what the internet – and the big companies that provide internet-based services – provide.'⁴⁴ Over the coming months, her and her administration incessantly called for internet companies to take a greater share of responsibility for counter-terrorism measures and be subject to tighter controls.

⁴¹ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point', Eighth Report of Session 2016-17, 2016.

⁴² House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Hate crime: abuse, hate and extremism online', Fourteenth Report of Session 2016-17, 2017.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ Kate Samuelson, 'Read Prime Minister Theresa May's Full Speech on the London Bridge Attack', Time, 4th June 2017.

Just over a week after her speech, May announced a commitment with the French President Emmanuel Macron to increase the legal responsibility of online operators.⁴⁵ In September 2017 May called on the UN General Assembly to make the fight against terrorists and ‘the ideologies that drive them’ the theme of next year’s Assembly, and called on technology companies to do more to stop ‘the increasing numbers being drawn to extremist ideologies not only in places riven by conflict and instability, but many online in their homes thousands of miles away from those conflicts.’⁴⁶ At the same summit, May, Macron and Italy’s Paul Gentiloni met with Google, Facebook and Microsoft and urged them to take down terrorist content within two hours.⁴⁷ The government’s offensive on technology companies grew in volume and public attention; by December 2017 the security Ben Wallace was slamming tech firms for not removing radical content more speedily, saying, ‘Because content is not taken down as quickly as they could do, we’re having to de-radicalize people who have been radicalized. That’s costing millions ... we should stop pretending that because they sit on beanbags in T-shirts they are not ruthless profiteers.’⁴⁸ The government started calling for access to end-to-end encrypted platforms such as WhatsApp, and multiple proposals for fines on companies which hosted terrorist content were floated.⁴⁹ May made further calls for the automatic

⁴⁵ ‘France and UK announce plan to tackle online radicalization’, France in the United Kingdom, 13th June 2017.

⁴⁶ ‘Theresa May’s speech to the UN General Assembly’, Gov.UK, 2017.

⁴⁷ Heather Stewart, ‘May calls on internet firms to remove extremist content within two hours’, The Guardian, 20th September 2017.

⁴⁸ ‘Call for tech giants to face taxes over extremist content’, BBC News, 31st December 2017.

⁴⁹ By this point, many analysts who were aware of the efforts social media companies were making to tackle terrorist content grew wary of what they saw as governmental scapegoating: Amarnath Amarasingam tweeted in January 2018 – in response to Ben Wallace – ‘Oh, just stop with this shit already.’

removal of content in Davos at the World Economic Forum, January 2018, whilst Germany passed a law fining tech companies up to €50 million if they failed to delete illegal material from their platforms.⁵⁰ The Home Office announced in February that they had developed their own technology which could automatically detect 94% of ISIS propaganda ‘with 99.995% accuracy’ to be used on ‘any platform’.⁵¹ Most recently, in March 2018 the European Commission proposed non-binding EU legislation requiring terrorist content to be removed by online operators within one hour of being flagged by local law enforcement or Europol.⁵²

To summarise, the concern with ‘extremist’ or ‘Islamist’ ideology remained entrenched in the government’s thinking, and was only compounded by the spate of attacks which rocked the UK in 2017. However the focus of the spaces in which this ideology was to be contested shifted from local communities, schools, streets, and mosques where it had been located in earlier counter-terrorism strategies. These places were still noted as important areas of contestation, but the gaze of the government, media, and civil society had shifted to the internet and social media, particularly the social media ‘giants’: Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter.

Detection and Deletion

⁵⁰ Heather Stewart & Jessica Elgot, ‘May calls on social media giants to do more to tackle terrorism’, *The Guardian*, 24th January 2018; Zeke Turner, ‘Facebook, Google Have a Tough New Job in Germany: Content Cop’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 10th January 2018.

⁵¹ Home Office, ‘New Technology revealed to help fight terrorist content online’, Gov.UK, 13th February 2018. Charlie Winter and J.M. Berger both posted thoughtful threads on Twitter about the viability of the technology; Winter noted that it would block most content but not eradicate extant content; Berger raised concerns about the availability of automatic government-created blocking tools becoming mandatory.

⁵² Natalia Drozdiak, ‘Facebook, Google Get One Hour From EU to Scrub Terror Content’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 1st March 2018.

In many ways, they were behind the curve on this. In keeping with the social media trends of everybody else, jihadists and supporters opened accounts on the major social media platforms like Facebook, YouTube and Twitter, and these were their preferred mediums when Islamic State burst onto the scene.⁵³ Facebook had been aggressively deleting terrorist accounts and profiles since 2009, making it a hostile environment for ISIS accounts and supporters who moved most of their accounts from Facebook to Twitter and uploaded videos to YouTube in 2014.⁵⁴ Public awareness and pressure about Islamic State actors on social media mounted after the declaration of the caliphate: Facebook routinely knocked down pages, groups and users; YouTube responded quickly to reports of terrorist videos but did not deploy large-scale technical tools against them at this stage; Twitter tried to sit out the debate from a stoic position of free speech defence, but by the end of 2014 was forced to start suspensions which quickly escalated and have remained high in the years since.⁵⁵ Twitter was once the most obvious gateway to the Islamic State online scene, but it was slowly replaced by Telegram (established in August 2013) as the social media platform of choice for Islamic State actors and supporters.⁵⁶

Brian Fishman, a counter-terrorism academic and practitioner hired by Facebook in 2016 as their Counterterrorism Policy Manager, responded to accusations levelled by the UK Home Affairs Select Committee in 2017 that social

⁵³ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, pp. 128 – 130.

⁵⁴ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 136 & p. 162.

⁵⁵ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, pp. 134 – 142.

⁵⁶ Maura Conway, 'Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017: The Year in Review', VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017.

media companies were ‘shamefully far’ from taking action: he acknowledged that there was a learning period, but retorted, ‘from my vantage point, it’s clear technology companies across the industry are treating the problem of terrorist content online seriously. Now we need to work constructively across the industry and with external partners to figure out how to do that job better.’⁵⁷ In the recent context of increased scrutiny and regular bashing in government and media publications in the UK and abroad, Facebook, YouTube and Twitter have all made increased efforts at censoring and deleting terrorist content, and they make sure that these efforts are publicized. VOX-Pol, an EU Programme dedicated to researching violent online political extremism, described 2017 as ‘[s]omewhat of a turning point ... with major tech companies displaying an increased willingness to take down certain content from their platforms.’⁵⁸

Facebook released a series of blog posts from Brian Fishman and Monika Bickert (Head of Product Policy and Counterterrorism) called ‘Hard Questions’ explaining their approach to tackling extremist content. The first, from June 2017 subtitled ‘How We Counter Terrorism’, detailed the artificial intelligence processes they have been using to detect terrorist content for deletion, which range from image matching and language processing to targeting terrorist clusters.⁵⁹ The second, ‘Are

⁵⁷ Paul Cruickshank, ‘A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Policy Manager, Facebook’, 2017, p. 8.

⁵⁸ Maura Conway, ‘Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017: The Year in Review’, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017. It should be noted that these changes are not purely altruistic – the technology companies have seen advertising revenues hurt after it emerged that advertisements were being placed on top of or alongside terrorist content.

⁵⁹ Monika Bickert & Brian Fishman, ‘Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism’, Facebook Newsroom, 5th June 2017.

We Winning the War on Terrorism Online?’ from November 2018 noted that this AI approach is ‘showing promise ... 99% of the ISIS and Al Qaeda-related terror content that we remove from Facebook is content we detect before anyone in the community has flagged it to us, and in some cases, before it goes live on the site’.⁶⁰ In the latest post, ‘How Effective is Technology in Keeping Terrorists off Facebook?’ from April 2018, they wrote that they had updated their detection technology to focus on ISIS, al-Qaeda and affiliated groups’ material, and grown their counterterrorism team to 200 people. During the first quarter of 2018, they removed just under 1.9 million pieces of terrorist content, which was largely detected automatically or picked up by internal reviewers. The median time a piece of newly uploaded content remained on Facebook was under a minute, and they developed tools for detecting old content, removing around 600,000 pieces.⁶¹

YouTube’s CEO, Susan Wojcicki, wrote a blog post in December 2017 noting that YouTube started using machine-learning technology to automatically detect violent extremist videos in June 2017. In the six months since, YouTube had removed over 150,000 videos. 98% of them are now being flagged by algorithms, and 70% are removed within 8 hours of upload.⁶² YouTube also confirmed in November 2017 a new policy which banned videos from persons or groups designated as terrorists by the US or UK governments, even if they lacked any explicit violence or hate speech.

⁶⁰ Monika Bickert & Brian Fishman, ‘Hard Questions: Are We Winning the War on Terrorism Online?’, Facebook Newsroom, 28th November 2017.

⁶¹ Monika Bickert & Brian Fishman, ‘Hard Questions: How Effective is Technology in Keeping Terrorists off Facebook?’, Facebook Newsroom, 23rd April 2018.

⁶² Susan Wojcicki, ‘Expanding our work against abuse of our platform’, YouTube Official Blog, 4th December 2017.

This led to hundreds of videos of the Yemeni-born preacher Anwar al-Awlaki being removed, such as his lectures on the history of Islam.⁶³

Twitter released figures in April 2018 about their suspension rates of terrorist-linked accounts: over 1.2 million accounts were suspended from August 2015 to December 2017 for promotion of terrorism. In the 6 months from July 2017, 93% of accounts suspended were flagged by internal tools, and 74% were suspended before they even sent their first tweet. Annual suspensions are decreasing, which they attribute to the 'positive, significant impact of years of hard work making our site an undesirable place for those seeking to promote terrorism'.⁶⁴

Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Microsoft came together in December 2016 to develop a shared industry database of 'hashes' – unique digital fingerprints for photos and videos – for terrorist content, designed to aid the development of detection algorithms. According to Monika Bickert in January 2018, this database now contains over 40,000 hashes and the consortium has grown to 12 companies.⁶⁵ In June 2017, with help from the UK Home Office, the four original partners announced the launch of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) which aims to share best practices for countering terrorist groups on social media platforms. They have held working sessions with well over 50 companies internationally, but the hashes

⁶³ 'Google Broadens Takedown of Extremist YouTube Videos', Reuters, 13th November 2017.

⁶⁴ 'Expanding and building #TwitterTransparency', Twitter Public Policy, 5th April 2018.

⁶⁵ 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?', U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018. Accessed via: <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>.

database is still touted as the primary product from this partnership, implying that few other concrete products have emerged.⁶⁶

The drive to take down terrorist content has often been likened to a game of ‘whack-a-mole’ where deleted content inevitably reappears somewhere else. Whilst J.M. Berger and others have shown in a number of empirical studies that suspension and suppression of terrorist accounts and content lead to reductions in overall activity and dampens their reach, there is little doubt that much activity migrates to platforms with less stringent policing mechanisms.⁶⁷ ISIS actors and supporters typically now use Telegram channels as a platform to engage with interested outsiders and ‘refer’ to content which is still hosted on an array of mainstream sites including Twitter, Google, and Facebook.⁶⁸ A host of other, less prominent, file, text and video websites as well as traditional websites are still also nodes of propaganda.⁶⁹

A secretive cyber-war is being waged on ISIS’s online branches through organizations such as the US military’s Cyber Command Joint Task Force Ares and Europol. Sustained attacks, combined with ad-hoc offensives launched by volunteer hacking groups, in the context of social media clampdowns on terrorist material is

⁶⁶ *Ibid*, & Monika Bickert & Brian Fishman, ‘Hard Questions: How Effective is Technology in Keeping Terrorists off Facebook?’, Facebook Newsroom, 23rd April 2018.

⁶⁷ Alexander Babuta, ‘Online Radicalisation: The need for an Offline Response’, Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), 25th September 2017, p. 29.

⁶⁸ Martyn Frampton, Ali Fisher, & Nico Prucha, ‘The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online’, Policy Exchange, 2017, p. 53.

⁶⁹ Maura Conway, ‘Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017: The Year in Review’, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017.

having a demonstrable impact on ISIS's ability to promote itself online.⁷⁰ But it has not scrubbed the internet of the problem. A recent example of whack-a-moling illustrates this point: the cyber divisions of the UK, USA, Belgium, Bulgaria, Canada, France, the Netherlands and Romania under Europol launched a combined assault on ISIS's online media portal Amaq on the 25th March 2018. It successfully downed the portal, leading Europol to claim, '[w]ith this ground-breaking operation we have punched a big hole in the capability of IS to spread propaganda online and radicalise young people in Europe ... Today's international take-down action, with the support of Europol, shows our global strength and our unwavering resolve to fight against terrorist content online. Daesh is no longer just losing territory on the ground – but also online. We will not stop until their propaganda is entirely eradicated from the Internet.'⁷¹ Their jubilation was short-lived; Amaq resurfaced just 6 days later to claim a deadly attack in Libya's capital. A spokesperson for Europol spoke to reporters, saying, 'We never claimed that we silenced them forever.'⁷²

Counter-Narratives: A Working Theory

In the face of the seemingly Sisyphean task of deleting or blocking all terrorist propaganda from Islamic State and other groups online, a different solution gained prominence: counter-narratives. The thinking is that terrorists recruit sympathisers online through a communicative strategy in which their propaganda sells a 'narrative' – a blend of ideology, values, justifications, concerns and stories which are potent

⁷⁰ Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Wired UK, 20th December 2017.

⁷¹ 'Islamic State Propaganda Machine Hit by Law Enforcement in Coordinated Takedown Action', Europol Press Release, 27th April 2018;

⁷² 'ISIS's media mouthpiece Amaq was silenced, but not for long', CBS News, 2nd May 2018.

tools for persuasion.⁷³ One logical corollary to this radicalization trajectory is to block the content conveying the narrative; another is to confront it with a counter-narrative, designed to contradict the themes and discourage support for the terrorism that they fuel.⁷⁴

Counter-narratives as a counter-terrorism policy coalesced out of the studies and recommendations of policymakers, think-tanks and civil society rather than academic literature.⁷⁵ This meant, at least at first, that it lacked a fully articulated theory and was best conceptualized as a working theory based on a set of assumptions (I will return to more in-depth counter-narrative theory later in the paper).⁷⁶ The breadth of potential counter-narrative material corralled by these civil society actors is illustrated by an information pack from the Online Civil Courage Initiative which states that ‘a counter-narrative is a tool to challenge the ideologies, narrative and stories of violent extremists. The purpose of a counter-narrative is to discredit, deconstruct and demystify extremist messages. They can do this by using logical or factual arguments or using satire and humour. They can be as specific or nuanced, as direct or indirect, as the person or group creating them wants to make them.’⁷⁷

⁷³ Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, ‘Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism’, 2016, p. 381.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 381 – 2.

⁷⁵ Kate Ferguson, ‘Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence’, 2016, p. 2.

⁷⁶ Andrew Glazzard, ‘Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 3.

⁷⁷ ‘The Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) Information Pack on Counterspeech Engagement’, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016.

In the UK, counter-narrative theory is at least a decade old. The architect of CONTEST, Sir David Omand, said in 2005 that Britain ‘badly need[s] a counter-narrative that will help groups exposed to the terrorist message make sense of what they are seeing around them.’⁷⁸ A series of think-tanks and NGOs including the Quilliam Foundation and the Institute for Strategic Dialogue have helped sculpt government thinking and kept the need to counter Salafi-jihadist narratives at the forefront of policy agendas. These sentiments and rationales infused the speeches made by David Cameron and Theresa May referenced above, in which extremist ‘ideology’ is blamed for the radicalization of British youth. The Home Affairs Select Committee report ‘Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point’ placed great emphasis on the potential of counter-narratives, drawing on a study by another UK think-tank, Demos. Part of its conclusion was that the government ‘must forge and disseminate strong counter-narratives that will address the wilful blindness and blame-games of vested interests and combat the lies and deceit that the extremists want to feed to our young people in order to send them to their deaths’ (this last part is written in bold).⁷⁹ As Andrew Glazzard summarises, in the UK ‘counter-narrative theory is firmly entrenched in government policy, political activism and in public debate’.⁸⁰ Similar coalitions of think-tanks, civil society actors and government policymakers have come to parallel conclusions across the world,

⁷⁸ Andrew Glazzard, ‘Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 4.

⁷⁹ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, ‘Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point’, Eighth Report of Session 2016-17, 2016.

⁸⁰ Andrew Glazzard, ‘Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism’, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 5.

particularly in North America and Europe, though the UK remains at the forefront of counter-narrative promotion.⁸¹ At an international level, the UN's 2016 Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy implored member-states to develop their own counter-narrative strategies and offered a number of sharing initiatives. In April 2017, the Security Council published an international framework to counter terrorist narratives, calling for law enforcement measures, partnerships between states and private internet companies, and counter-narrative campaigns facilitated by governments.⁸²

Do They Work?

Due to the way that counter-narrative theory emerged as a working theory from a nexus of civil society practitioners and not out of academic recommendations, some scholars have questioned whether counter-narratives are effective at all. Andrew Glazzard, in his study 'Losing the Plot', argues that counter-narrative theory suffers from a crippling lack of conceptual clarity, saying 'counter-narrative approaches to violent extremism are currently built on weak foundations, theoretically and empirically, and therefore it makes little sense for governments, multilateral bodies and civil society organisations to continue to invest scarce resources in such approaches until those foundations have been strengthened'.⁸³ Generally, other

⁸¹ See, for instance, Jamie Bartlett & Louis Reynolds, 'The State of the Art 2015: A Literature Review of Social Media Intelligence Capabilities for Counter-Terrorism', Demos, 2015; & Andrew Glazzard, 'Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017.

⁸² Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, pp. 14 -15.

⁸³ Andrew Glazzard, 'Losing the Plot: Narrative, Counter-Narrative and Violent Extremism', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 3.

academics echo his concerns that counter-narratives are under-theorised, making their effectiveness difficult to gauge. But they also acknowledge that civil society practitioners have done a lot of work over the last few years to standardize their terms, establish best practices, and provide clear targets for their work.⁸⁴

Another criticism is that there is no empirical evidence that counter-narratives make a tangible impact in the way that they are spoken about. Kate Ferguson, in her literature review of counter-narrative theory in the UK and USA, found that there is 'no evidence to suggest that the current or past counter-narrative strategies have been effective at reducing the VE [violent extremism] threat. Moreover, publically available evidence, beyond isolated case studies, is at present unable to sufficiently demonstrate if and how counter-narratives are having a positive impact on their desired audiences ... Despite this, much grey literature continues to presume that counter-narratives will be effective, even after acknowledging that they have not been so far.'⁸⁵

It is true that some grey literature is amusingly overenthusiastic about the impact of their counter-narrative campaigns despite thin evidence that they have made a positive difference. But this does not mean that counter-narrative theory is unverifiable, and there have been empirical tests done on the effectiveness of narrative and counter-narrative materials. The most complete study was done by

⁸⁴ See, for instance: Alexander Melagrou-Hitchens & Nick Kaderbhai, 'Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006 – 2016', VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017; & Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram, & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017.

⁸⁵ Kate Ferguson, 'Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence', 2016, p. 15.

Kurt Braddock and James Price Dillard, who performed a meta-analysis on studies evaluating 30 years' worth of scholarship on narratives' persuasive influence on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviours; they found that 'exposure to a narrative is positively related to the adoption of narrative-consistent viewpoints. It follows that narratives have the potential to persuade, independent of context'.⁸⁶ This is closer to the position found in most of the better grey literature: counter-narratives have potential to persuade, but they need to be constructed and administered in the right way in order to have an impact, and the results will always be tough to measure.

2. Counter-Narratives in Practice: the Lattice and a Problem of Scale

The extent to which counter-narrative theory has been picked up and adopted by official counter-terrorist actors can be demonstrated by the proliferation of state-linked organizations which claim to be promoting counter-narratives.

The British government set up the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU) within the Office for Security and Counter-Terrorism in 2007. According to observers, it uses strategic communications to counter violent extremism over a range of media platforms like blogs and social networking sites. Information on its activities is scarce, but it has been linked to a few online resources such as Educate Against Hate, My Former Life and Ummahsonic.⁸⁷ The USA's State Department

⁸⁶ Kurt Braddock & James Price Dillard, 'Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions and behaviors', 2016; Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2016, p. 383.

⁸⁷ See: Minerva Nasser-Eddine, Bridget Garnham, Katerina Agostino & Gilbert Caluya, 'Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) Literature Review', Australian Government Department of Defence, 2011, p.

established the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) in 2010, but their 2013 ‘Think Again Turn Away’ Twitter campaign was widely criticised for engaging in unedifying and counter-productive spats with ISIS supporters and producing content which looked decidedly amateur. It was replaced by the Global Engagement Center (GEC) in March 2016, which takes a more partner-orientated approach to content production.⁸⁸ The GEC’s activities under the current Trump administration are unclear, especially given its newly expanded role to counter ‘the adverse effects of state-sponsored propaganda and disinformation’.⁸⁹ Its website claims that the organization is ‘consulting widely’.⁹⁰

The European Union established the EU Internet Forum in 2015, whose primary aim is to liaise with Europol and the Internet Referral Unit to reduce the amount of terrorist content online. It is also tasked with amplifying counter-narratives through the Civil Social Empowerment Programme (CSEP), which runs multiple workshops annually covering how to create and disseminate counter-narrative campaigns.⁹¹ The EU set up the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) in 2012, which reviews counter-narrative practices, organizes events and runs workshops. It is described as a ‘network of frontline practitioners’, coordinated through the RAN Centre of

50; & Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, ‘Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs’, European Parliament, 2017, pp. 23 – 24.

⁸⁸ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Nick Kaderbhai, ‘Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006 – 2016’, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017, pp. 60 – 61; & Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, ‘Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs’, European Parliament, 2017, pp. 16 – 17.

⁸⁹ <https://www.state.gov/r/gec/>. Accessed 21st May 2018.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, ‘Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs’, European Parliament, 2017, p. 22.

Excellence, and includes sub-groups such as the RAN Communications and Narratives division which focuses explicitly on the delivery of counter-narrative communication campaigns.⁹²

29 member states of the UN created the Global Counterterrorism Forum (GCTF) in 2011, to serve 'as a mechanism for furthering the implementation of the universally-agreed UN Global Counter-Terrorism Strategy', which called for national counter-narrative strategies. The UN also created an independent center of excellence in the United Arab Emirates called the Hedayah Center in December 2012. Hedayah hosts a counter-narrative library which is accessible to counter-violent extremism practitioners and academics.⁹³

According to a report for the European Parliament, a couple of NATO Centers of excellence exist which are charged with conducting some counter-narrative activity, and the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OCSE) also works with governments, practitioners, researchers and civil society to aid community-based preventative measures.⁹⁴

⁹² *Ibid*, p. 127; & Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Nick Kaderbhai, 'Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006 – 2016', VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017, p. 61.

⁹³ Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, pp. 15 – 17; <http://www.hedayahcenter.org/what-we-do/91/departments/98/research-and-analysis/477/counter-narrative-library>. Accessed 21st May 2018.

⁹⁴ Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, pp. 18 – 19.

Outside of the West, the UAE partnered with the USA's GEC program to create the Sawab Center which creates counter-narrative material designed to showcase ISIS's incompetence on Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube.⁹⁵ Other organizations working in the region include Sawt Al-Hikma ('The Voice of Reason') which produces articles and short videos denouncing extremism, and Etidal in Saudi Arabia established in 2017.⁹⁶

These organizations range in transparency: they tend to have dedicated websites and mission statements, as well as optimistic executive summaries of their core activities (generally confined to action verbs such as 'promote', 'amplify', or 'support', and typically they are referring to workshops). With some exceptions, such as Sawt Al-Hikma, these organizations do not display any substantive counter-narrative material of their own.

The Lattice

The real bulk of counter-narrative material and practice stems from a lattice of think-tanks, NGOs and initiatives largely run out of London in the UK. The research and best practices conducted by these actors feeds into the counter-narratives they facilitate or construct, which in turn informs further research in an evolving feedback loop. Understanding this intellectual ecosystem is essential for demonstrating how counter-narratives are created and deployed in practice, and how this practice is

⁹⁵ *Ibid*, p. 17 & 36.

⁹⁶ Lilah Elsayed, Talal Faris & Sara Zeiger, 'Undermining Violent Extremist Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: A How-To Guide', Hedayah, 2017, p. 21.

mismatched with many discussions of counter-narratives in grey literature and policy reports and also with the scale of the problem presented by ISIS propaganda.

There are, of course, more organizations involved in counter-narrative theory and practice than the ones listed below, operating in many different countries and languages. But the majority of campaigns and studies are substantially informed by an organization from the lattice, and almost every piece of literature about counter-narratives is linked to the lattice. Furthermore, the lattice is significantly integrated through professional institutional partnerships and flows of individual researchers.

The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), based out of the War Studies Department at King's College, London, produces empirically rigorous research on the drivers of extremist groups like Islamic State.⁹⁷ A number of prominent academics working on ISIS, Salafi-jihadism or radicalization more generally either currently work at ICSR or came through the War Studies Department, including Peter Neumann, Shiraz Maher, Charlie Winter and Aaron Zelin.⁹⁸ Other key think-tanks working in the field include Demos, whose Centre for the Analysis of Social Media (CASM) examines the impact of new media forms on civil society and works closely with other organizations to monitor hate speech and extremism online; the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change (formerly the Tony Blair Centre for Religion and Geopolitics); and the EU's VOX-Pol Network of Excellence which writes reports on extremism and writes recommendations for disrupting the

⁹⁷ <http://icsr.info/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

⁹⁸ See, for instance: Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand', 2018, p. 105. Winter gives a neat summary of academic analysis of Islamic State propaganda, including studies by all of these scholars.

radicalization process.⁹⁹ The Quilliam Foundation used to be extremely prominent within the field but has been largely silent for the last couple of years after repeated controversies.

The primary facilitator of counter-narratives within the lattice is the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), a ‘think-and-do tank’ which aims to ‘counter extremism and the ideologies that underpin it in ways that are practical, affordable, effective, and scalable’.¹⁰⁰ Founded in 2006, ISD underwent a rapid period of expansion in mid-2017 as the UK government and social media companies desperately sought new tools to stop the spate of ISIS attacks.¹⁰¹ Their programmes include intervention initiatives, educational resources, and activist networks, and they are partnered with a huge range of international organizations including Facebook, Google, Twitter, Microsoft, Brookings Institution, Chatham House, ICSR, Demos, the Royal United Services Institute (RUSI), the European Commission, and various departments from the governments of Denmark, the Netherlands, Finland, Germany, Norway, Canada, Sweden, the UK, and the USA.¹⁰²

One of the underappreciated ways in which the ISD has been central in shaping counter-narrative practice is through the reliance of grey literature and then

⁹⁹ <https://www.demos.co.uk/research-area/centre-for-analysis-of-social-media/>; <https://institute.global/>; <http://www.voxpol.eu/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁰⁰ <https://www.isdglobal.org/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁰¹ ISD probably also benefitted from the absence of the Quilliam Foundation, once the UK’s most prominent counter-extremism think-tank but which tumbled from controversy to controversy at the height of its influence around 2014 before fading in the background.

¹⁰² <https://www.isdglobal.org/isdapproach/partnerships/>.

academic literature (reflecting the way that counter-narratives were proposed first as a working theory, and translated into academic literature after) on their definitions. Rachel Briggs and Sebastien Feve wrote a 2013 paper for ISD called 'Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism' in which they distinguished between 'counter-narratives', 'alternative narratives' and 'government strategic communications'.¹⁰³ These categories were picked up by organizations such as the EU's RAN (whose 2015 'Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives' paper drew almost exclusively on ISD definitions), the European Parliament, and various summarising academic papers.¹⁰⁴ A 2016 ISD paper by Henry Tuck and Tanya Silverman updated this theory to note that 'counter-narratives' has become the 'catch-all term' for these kind of strategic communications, rendering the earlier definition obsolete; however the tripartite distinction has continued to be used uncritically by certain actors (for instance the International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism, a think-and-do tank well outside of the lattice).¹⁰⁵ ISD's latest understanding of what constitutes a counter-narrative is commonly cited in literature reviews and case study reports.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Rachel Briggs & Sebastien Feve, 'Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism', Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2013.

¹⁰⁴ 'RAN Issue Paper: Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives', RAN Centre of Excellence, 2015; Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, p. 10; Alejandro Beutel, Stevan Weine, Aliya Saeed, Aida Spahic Mihajlovic, Andrew Stone, John Oakley Beahrs & Stephen Shanfield, 'Field Principles for Countering and Displacing Extremist Narratives', 2016, p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Henry Tuck & Tanya Silverman, 'The Counter-Narrative Handbook', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016. Tuck used to work for ICSR. For ICSVE's reliance on Briggs and Feve (2013), see any of ICSVE's publications, for instance: Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, Lorand Bodo & Haris Fazliu, 'Bringing Down the Digital Caliphate: A *Breaking the ISIS Brand of Counter-Narratives* Intervention with Albanian Speaking Facebook Accounts', International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), 2017, p. 6.

¹⁰⁶ See, for instance: Jamie Bartlett & Louis Reynolds, 'The State of the Art 2015: A Literature Review of Social Media Intelligence Capabilities for Counter-Terrorism', Demos, 2015. Reynolds now works for ISD.

Moonshot CVE, founded in 2015 by two former ISD researchers, offers data-driven solutions to violent extremism and assists counter-narrative campaigns.¹⁰⁷ One analyst described their approach on Twitter: 'Can we use the same tools that Coca Cola uses to sell us Coke and those same tools to counter extremism? ... Moonshot CVE is trying to do just that.'¹⁰⁸

Major Initiatives and Campaigns

The big social media companies have established a number of initiatives and campaigns in response to the public and political pressure they have faced over misuse of their platforms by ISIS and others. These initiatives are largely run by, or at least in conjunction with, organizations from the lattice.

Facebook has an program called 'Peer to Peer: Facebook Global Digital Challenge', or P2P, a challenge where students create anti-hate content and distribute it using free advertising credits: Facebook estimates that the 500 or so campaigns have reached around 56 million people in two years, though these campaigns do not necessarily have counter-violent extremism aims.¹⁰⁹ Facebook founded the Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) in Europe (specifically, the UK, France, and Germany) to 'promote the civil courage displayed by organisations and grassroots activists

¹⁰⁷ <http://moonshotcve.com/>. Accessed 22nd May 2018. Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ Ryan B. Greer's Twitter.

¹⁰⁹ Paul Cruickshank, 'A View from the CT Foxhole: An Interview with Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Policy Manager, Facebook', 2017, p. 11.

carrying out valuable counterspeech work online', by supporting European NGOs, developing best practices, and assisting research.¹¹⁰ It was founded as a partnership between Facebook, ISD, ICSR, and the Amadeu Antonio Foundation from Germany; ISD currently leads the project.¹¹¹

Google announced in September 2017 that they were establishing a \$5million 'fund to counter hate and extremism' which, over two years, would 'support technology-driven solutions, as well as grassroots efforts like community youth projects that help build communities and promote resistance to radicalization.'¹¹² The only concrete monetary pledge they made was \$1.3 million to ISD, which they described as 'an expert counter-extremist organization in the U.K.'¹¹³ ISD subsequently ran two rounds of competition in which UK organizations pitched online projects which 'empower and amplify new or existing voices and actions aiming to undermine hate and extremism; build resilience to hate and extremism through innovative educational resources and/or approaches; enable innovation and fresh thinking in approaches to tackling hate and extremism, including but not limited to technological innovation.' 13 projects were awarded funding in the first round; the second round's successful applicants have yet to be announced.¹¹⁴

¹¹⁰ 'The Online Civil Courage Initiative (OCCI) Information Pack on Counterspeech Engagement', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016.

¹¹¹ <https://www.isdglobal.org/programmes/communications-technology/online-civil-courage-initiative-2/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹¹² Kent Walker, 'Supporting new ideas in the fight against hate', Google, 20th September 2017.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁴ <https://www.isdglobal.org/innovation-fund/>. Accessed 22nd May 2018.

YouTube (owned by Google) pledged in January 2018 to plough over \$5million into its 'Creators for Change' program, a collective of over 100 YouTubers who 'encourage empathy and understanding around the world', as part of YouTube's promise to counter hate and promote tolerance on their platform.¹¹⁵ In the UK, Creators for Change teamed up with Google and ISD in 2017 to deliver workshops on media literacy to youths called 'Be Internet Citizens'.¹¹⁶

Alphabet – the parent company of Google – set up Jigsaw, an incubator which builds technology solutions to 'tackle some of the toughest global security challenges facing the world today'.¹¹⁷ One of its original areas of focus was violent extremism, and it ran projects including the Against Violent Extremism Network, a platform for former violent extremists to collaborate and discourage youth from following their path (founded in collaboration with, and now solely run by ISD) and Abdullah-X.¹¹⁸ In 2016 it created 'The Redirect Method', which used targeted advertising to place counter-narrative videos in front of people likely to be searching for ISIS propaganda on YouTube.¹¹⁹ This project was constructed in partnership with Moonshot CVE, as well as Quantum Communications and Valens Global.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Alex Hern, 'YouTube to fund videos that 'counter hate' as pressure over extremism grows', The Guardian, 20th January 2018; <https://www.youtube.com/yt/creators-for-change/>. Accessed 22nd May 2018.

¹¹⁶ <https://www.isdglobal.org/programmes/education/internet-citizens-2/>. Accessed 22nd May 2018.

¹¹⁷ <https://jigsaw.google.com/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹¹⁸ <https://jigsaw.google.com/projects/>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹¹⁹ 'The Redirect Method: A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism', Jigsaw, 2016.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Two of the few sources of publically available counter-narrative material emerge from the heart of this lattice: Jigsaw's The Redirect Method videos, and ISD's counternarratives.org, which hosts resources to help build and manage counter-narrative campaigns, including a library of case studies.¹²¹

Jigsaw defined the Redirect Method project as a '4-step approach that employs readily available online resources – existing online videos and targeted advertising tools – to counter ISIS recruitment efforts online'.¹²² The Jigsaw team started by mapping the major recruitment narratives being used by ISIS – good governance, military might, religious legitimacy, a call to jihad, and the victimhood of the ummah – before scouring YouTube for videos which countered these themes in a credible and effective fashion. The team then created two new YouTube channels, one in English and one in Arabic, which hosted themed playlists of the handpicked videos. Using Google's AdWords advertising program, these playlists were then targeted at internet users searching for terms indicating positive sentiments towards Islamic State, with the aim of enticing them into viewing the counter-narrative videos and potentially changing their perspective.¹²³ An estimated 320,906 users clicked on these 116 advertised videos during the 2-month pilot study in 2016, which were watched for a combined total of 500,070 minutes.¹²⁴

¹²¹ <https://redirectmethod.org/>; <http://www.counternarratives.org/>. Accessed 22nd May 2018.

¹²² 'The Redirect Method: A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism', Jigsaw, 2016.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

ISD ran a similar study to the Redirect Method earlier in October 2015 in which they provided funding and guidance to three counter-narrative video campaigns and assessed the impact.¹²⁵ The campaigns were Average Mohamed, which they described as ‘a non-profit organisation that uses animation to encourage critical thinking among Somali youth (in Somali and English) about extremist ideologies’, ExitUSA, ‘a project of a US-based non-profit organisation ‘Life After Hate’ which aims to discourage individuals from joining white power movements and encourage defection by offering a way out’, and Harakut-ut-Taleem, ‘a front organisation ... they aim to counter Taliban recruitment narratives in Pakistan.’¹²⁶ The Average Mohamed campaign consisted of five specially produced videos called ‘Be Like Aisha’, ‘A Muslim In The West’, ‘Identity In Islam’, ‘Islam Against Slavery’, and ‘The Bullet Or The Ballot’, which tackled themes of identity, gender equality, democracy, belonging, and slavery.¹²⁷ ISD paid for advertising across Facebook, Twitter and YouTube which targeted the campaigns at the relevant demographics: for Average Mohamed, 14-25 year olds in the UK and USA who were searching social media for terms and figures deemed sympathetic to Islamic State.¹²⁸ The three campaigns overall received over 378,000 video views and over 20,000 ‘total engagements’ (including likes, shares, replied, retweets and comments). They generated over 480 comments, and all three of the campaigns’ social media accounts increased in likes. ISD published the engagement data in full with a set of recommendations for further campaigns,

¹²⁵ Tanya Silverman, Christopher Stewart, Zahed Amanullah & Jonathan Birdwell, ‘The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a year-long cross-platform study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact’, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016.

¹²⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 5 – 6.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 19.

¹²⁸ *Ibid*, p. 18.

drawing particular attention to the far reach of social media advertising for comparatively low costs.¹²⁹

Average Mohamed and ExitUSA are listed on ISD's counternarratives.org, which invites viewers to 'learn more and get inspiration from successful counter-narrative campaigns run by organisations around the world.'¹³⁰ 19 campaigns are presented, of which 15 are aimed at 'Islamist extremism' (ISD also works to combat far-right extremism). They are drawn from organizations based in at least 6 countries, working in 4 languages, and include projects like Abdullah-X, Extreme Dialogue (a Canadian-funded series of videos telling personal stories of people affected by extremism), and Not Another Brother (a Quilliam Foundation dramatic video about British man who has travelled to join ISIS). However, a number of the initiatives listed have been silent for many years.¹³¹

I want to offer some critical observations about counter-narratives in practice. As noted, they largely emerge from the lattice in London, and this is certainly where the social media giants reach when they need assistance creating initiatives as a response to public and political pressure. I contend that there is a large disconnect between the way counter-narratives are spoken about in policy papers or political circles and the actual quantitative scale that they are operating on which needs to be recognized.

¹²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 6.

¹³⁰ <http://www.counternarratives.org/html/case-studies>. Accessed 22nd May 2018.

¹³¹ For instance, Saudi Arabia's al-Sakinah, or the UK's Radical Middle Way project. *Ibid*.

The Narrow Set of Counter-Narrative ‘Examples’

Speaking in front of the General Assembly in 2015, the United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon had this to say as part of his plan of action to prevent violent extremism: “The manipulative messages of violent extremists on social media have achieved considerable success in luring people, especially young women and men, into their ranks. While violent extremists have demonstrated some sophistication in their use of old and new media tools, it is equally true that we who reject their message have largely failed to communicate to those who are disillusioned and disenfranchised a vision of the future that captures their imagination and offers the prospect of tangible change. *Thousands of young activists and artists are fighting back against violent extremism online through music, art, film, comics and humour, and they deserve our support.*”¹³²

This may well be the case. But where are they? The political will certainly exists to amplify and project the voices of such counter-narrative actors; in fact, the same speech called on member states to ‘develop and implement national communications strategies, in close cooperation with social media companies and the private sector [and] promote grass-roots efforts to advance the values of tolerance, pluralism and understanding’.¹³³ Yet literature reviews and scholarly articles repeatedly refer back to the same campaigns and material as singular ‘examples’ of counter-narrative content. The implication is often that plenty of other material exists, yet this does not seem to be true.

¹³² United Nations General Assembly, ‘Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism: Report of the Secretary-General’, 2015. Emphasis added.

¹³³ *Ibid.*

Take, for instance, a RAN issue paper from 2015. Its ‘examples of counter- and alternative narratives’ annexe features Abdullah-X, One2One, Extreme Dialogue and EXIT Germany, all of which are campaigns run by or in partnership with ISD.¹³⁴ It was particularly impressed with Abdullah-X, noting its ‘concise but compelling content [and] engaging visual style’.¹³⁵ ISD’s own ‘Counter-Narrative Monitoring & Evaluation Handbook’ from 2016 cites only Average Mohamed, Extreme Dialogue, and ExitUSA in its ‘Evaluation Case Studies’ section.¹³⁶ An extremely thorough report by the European Parliament in 2017 includes a section on ‘Actions Taken and Projects Set Up on a European Level’, in which the only civil society organizations mentioned are ISD, the Quilliam Foundation, and Moonshot CVE.¹³⁷ The next section in the same report is titled ‘Present Approaches from a Selection of EU Member States and Third Countries’, which talks about the Redirect Method, ISD, Hedayah, and RAN. Only one series of actual counter-narrative content is named: Abdullah-X.¹³⁸ A comprehensive literature review for the EU’s VOX-Pol Network of Excellence in 2017 by two ICSR researchers discusses Saudi Arabia’s al-Sakinah project (which has been silent since 2013), the Redirect Method, and Abdullah-X.¹³⁹ Finally, the UK Home Affairs Select Committee’s paper ‘Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping

¹³⁴ ‘RAN Issue Paper: Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives’, RAN Centre of Excellence, 2015.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*

¹³⁶ Louis Reynolds & Henry Tuck, ‘The Counter-Narrative Monitoring & Evaluation Handbook’, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016, pp. 40 – 43.

¹³⁷ Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, ‘Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs’, European Parliament, 2017, pp. 25 – 26.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

¹³⁹ Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens & Nick Kaderbhai, ‘Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review, 2006 – 2016’, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2017, pp. 61 – 62.

point' recommends that the government hold regular meetings with British Muslims and counter-narrative think-tanks, into order to build a 'bank of best-practice counter-narrative case studies' and help 'implement effective counter-narrative programmes'. These recommendations were based on '[t]he success of Abdullah-X's YouTube channel'.¹⁴⁰

The point is that the same campaigns and organizations are repeatedly recycled as examples of counter-narrative campaigns. This pushes back against policy proclamations which imply that there are thousands of counter-narratives either already extant, or just waiting for the right amplifying mechanism. This same dynamic was obvious on 17th January 2017, when Facebook, YouTube and Twitter were hauled in front of the US Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation to explain their oft-cited inaction in the face of extremist misuse of their platforms in a hearing called 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?'.¹⁴¹ Each of the companies had plenty to say about their content detection and deletion strategies, but relied on the same few examples when talking about their soft approaches. Monika Bickert from Facebook noted that they had 'partnered with non-governmental organizations and community groups around the world', for instance setting up the OCCI with ISD, organizing hackathons with Affinis Labs, and developing the Facebook Global Digital Challenge (P2P). Juniper Downs from YouTube argued that they had expanded their expertise by reaching out to 'several counter-terrorism

¹⁴⁰ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, 'Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point', 2016.

¹⁴¹ 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?', U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018.
<https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

experts such as the Institute of Strategic Dialogue and International Centre for the Study of Radicalization’, and had invested in both Creators for Change and had deployed the Redirect Method. Carlos Monje Jr. from Twitter noted their collaboration with Parle-moi d’Islam (France), Active Change Foundation (UK), Wahid Foundation (Indonesia), the Sawab Center (UAE) and True Islam (USA), and argued that ‘[w]e supported the Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s ‘Against Violent Extremism’, the results of which were published in a report’; he was referring to the ISD’s 2015-16 study of Average Mohamed, ExitUSA, and Hakut-ut-Taleem, explained above.

Only a couple of sources allude to existing counter-narrative material from outside the lattice. A 2017 how-to guide from Hedayah lists 5 organizations operating in the Middle East and North Africa region: al-Sakinah, Sawt al-Hikma, the Sawab Center, al-Rabita al-Muhammedyya of Muslim Scholars, and Eitdal (of which all except al-Sakinah appear to be currently active), and a March 2018 paper from ICSR examines counter-narrative organizations and efforts in the UK, France and Germany; ISIS-focused campaigns from the continent include Ufuq.de, Datteltäter, Stop-Djihadisme, the Association française des Victimes du Terrorisme, and Katiba des Narvalos.¹⁴² Hedayah’s counter-narrative library currently features 784 examples in 17 languages (over half of it in English), but of this only 40 examples are listed as ‘social media campaign’s, and 50 examples are ‘social media pages’. Even these figures are slightly misleading, given that many of the campaigns and pages featured are Twitter hashtags which were briefly trending in specific contexts, and some of the

¹⁴² Elsayed, Lilah, Talal Faris & Sarah Zeiger, ‘Undermining Violent Extremist Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: A How-To Guide’, Hedayah, 2017, p. 21; Charlie Winter, & Johanna Fürst, ‘Challenging Hate: Counter-speech Practices in Europe’, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), 2017.

pages are posted multiple times. This expands the range of counter-narrative material which we can positively assert exists, but still leaves the global state of play well short of Ban Ki-Moon's assertion that 'thousands' of young activists are involved.

Blurred Lines between Pilots and Strategies

The accounts given by the social media giants at the US Senate Committee hearing 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?' illustrate another quantitative problem with counter-narratives in practice: as companies scramble to respond to political and public pressure, pilot campaigns designed to explore the potential for counter-narrative messaging online have been repackaged and presented as long-running counter-terrorism strategies.¹⁴³ These misrepresentations have been picked up by the media and misinform common understandings about the scale on which counter-narratives are operating.

The 2015-16 ISD study using Average Mohamed, ExitUSA, and Hakut-ut-Taleem, was intended to test the hypothesis that 'a small amount of funding and guidance for counter-narrative campaigners, in terms of deploying social media advertising tools to reach 'target audiences', could dramatically improve the awareness, engagement and impact of counter-narratives and NGOs working in this space'.¹⁴⁴ They furthermore wanted to construct an evaluative framework for online counter-

¹⁴³ 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?', U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018.
<https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁴⁴ Tanya Silverman, Christopher Stewart, Zahed Amanullah & Jonathan Birdwell, 'The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a year-long cross-platform study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016, p. 6.

narratives, to help inform other efforts. The paper concludes that ‘this methodology – an organised cycle of curation, production, data acquisition and analysis – can be replicated and applied globally’.¹⁴⁵

As demonstrated above, there is minimal evidence that this model has been ‘applied globally’ in any meaningful sense. The study itself concluded in 2016. However Twitter seized the results of this report to prove its participation in meaningful counter-terrorism strategies, stating, ‘we supported the Institute for Strategic Dialogue’s ‘Against Violent Extremism’ project ... The project used *pro bono* Twitter advertising to increase the reach of key NGOs. The campaigns yielded real results. One NGO participant, Average Mohamed, doubled its number of Twitter followers and another, ExitUSA, tripled its Twitter followers.’¹⁴⁶ ISD’s short exploratory study became framed as a sustained strategy by a social media platform which gifted it some advertising credits over two years previously.

The Redirect Method is an even clearer example of this. The original report – subtitled ‘a Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism’ – is extremely clear that the study conducted in 2016 is a pilot experiment.¹⁴⁷ It ends with a section titled ‘Follow the Blueprint’, featuring a 44-step guide to creating, disseminating and evaluating

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid*, p. 47.

¹⁴⁶ ‘Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?’, U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018. <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁴⁷ ‘The Redirect Method: A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism’, Jigsaw, 2016. Emphasis added.

analogous campaigns, which it asks be shared on a third-party website. So far, there have been no engagements or parallel campaigns posted.¹⁴⁸

YouTube's testimony in front of the US Senate Committee presented the Redirect Method by saying 'Google's Jigsaw group, an incubator to tackle some of the toughest global security challenges, has deployed the Redirect Method, which uses Adwords targeting tools and curated YouTube videos uploaded to disrupt online radicalization. It focuses on the slice of ISIS's audience that is most susceptible to its messaging and redirects them towards YouTube playlists of videos debunking ISIS recruitment themes.'¹⁴⁹ The deliberately atemporal language casts the Redirect Method as an ongoing strategy as opposed to an 8-week pilot study conducted in 2016.

This understanding of the Redirect Method has pervaded media representations of the study. Articles with titles like 'Google's Clever Plan to Stop Aspiring ISIS Recruits', 'The subtle way Google plans to use its greatest skill to combat ISIS', and 'Jigsaw's Redirect Method: Brainwashing the Brainwashed' from 2016 are littered across the internet.¹⁵⁰ In July 2017, YouTube did announce plans stating they 'hope' to roll out the Redirect Method across its platform on a permanent basis; and in

¹⁴⁸ <https://legacy.gitbook.com/book/tbeck/the-redirect-method/details>. Accessed on 23rd May 2018.

¹⁴⁹ 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?', U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018. <https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁵⁰ Andy Greenberg, Andy, 'Google's Clever Plan to Stop Aspiring ISIS Recruits', Wired, 7th September 2016; Jillian D'Onfro, 'The subtle way Google plans to use its greatest skill to combat ISIS', Business Insider, 11th September 2016; & Else Feikje van der Berg, 'Jigsaw's Redirect Method: Brainwashing the Brainwashed', Medium, 6th November 2016.

August they claimed they had ‘started rolling out features’ (in both cases, it is unclear whether they mean in general, or just in Europe).¹⁵¹ There has been no update since, and my attempts to trip the redirection algorithm using the ‘suspicious’ phrases listed in the Redirect Method study in both the UK and USA have delivered a mix of search results including both pro- and anti-ISIS videos.

Translating Commitments into Practice

The current prevailing model for commissioning and deploying counter-narratives is for funding to flow from governments or wealthy companies such as social media giants, through NGOs, to grassroots organizations or content creators. In this model, the primary facilitators of the counter-narratives are NGOs: they are responsible for sourcing and disseminating counter-narrative content.

This was not always the case. The UK government directly ran a number of counter-narrative campaigns in the period between the 7/7 bombings and the rise of ISIS. The Home Office’s Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU) developed counter-radicalisation messaging campaigns (as they were then called), and the UK government bolstered select initiatives like the Radical Middle Way. They also established a £70million Prevent Extremist Pathfinder Fund in October 2006 which supported local authorities in developing their own programs for dealing with violent extremism.¹⁵² All of these initiatives were criticized for being ineffective and controversial; they were seen as isolating Muslim communities and exacerbating

¹⁵¹ ‘Bringing new Redirect Method features to YouTube’, YouTube Official Blog, 20th July 2017; ‘An update on our commitment to fight terror content online’, YouTube Official Blog, 1st August 2017.

¹⁵² Tim Stevens & Peter Neumann, ‘Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action’, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2009, pp. 44 – 47.

concerns that the government was targeting British Muslims with the CONTEST counter-terrorism strategy. In short – as the 2016 Home Affairs Select Committee noted – the concern was that the campaigns were too closely affiliated with the government. The Committee cited witnesses (including the Quilliam Foundation and ISD) who agreed ‘that it was better for the source of the counter-narrative to be community-led and non-government.’¹⁵³

In the new model, civil society and local practitioners are empowered to take the lead in counter-narrative production. This model has many proponents and many obvious attractions: at-risk communities are more likely to trust the content producer if they are from that community, secular governments can nominally distance themselves from accusations of establishing ‘official’ religious positions, and the set-up and running costs are low.¹⁵⁴

But a persistent problem with such decentralized messaging structures is that the funding pledges from the ‘top’ (the government or social media giants) rarely translate into the kind of substantive counter-narrative material at the ‘bottom’ as they envision or promise. Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger note that after 9/11, ‘vast pools of money became available for CVE [counter-violent extremism], which resulted in many people repurposing their pet projects under that heading ... town halls and

¹⁵³ House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, ‘Radicalisation: the counter-narrative and identifying the tipping point’, 2016.

¹⁵⁴ See, for instance: Tim Stevens & Peter Neumann, ‘Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action’, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR), 2009; & Peter Neumann, ‘Countering Violent Extremism and Radicalization that Lead to Terrorism: Ideas, Recommendations, and Good Practices from the OSCE Region’, Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), 2017.

soccer leagues, as the joke in the practitioner community goes.’¹⁵⁵ Something similar appears to be happening in the current counter-narrative lattice, resulting in a glut of proclaimed of counter-narrative projects with very little published information about their effects or even tangible products to show for all their funding and workshops.¹⁵⁶

Let’s take some examples. In David Cameron’s 2015 speech about the dangers of Islamist extremism, he said, ‘We can’t stand neutral in this battle of ideas. We have to back those who share our values. So here’s my offer. If you’re interested in reform; if you want to challenge the extremists in our midst; if you want to build an alternative narrative or if you just want to help your kids – we are with you and we will back you – with practical help, with funding, with campaigns, with protection and with political representation.’¹⁵⁷ It is entirely unclear whether any of these rather amorphous claims were ever actioned, and if so in what way.

A more concrete pledge came from the EU Internet Forum’s Civil Society Empowerment Programme (CSEP), ‘a new EU initiative supported by the RAN Centre of Excellence (RAN CoE) to encourage online campaigns countering extremist propaganda’ in October 2017.¹⁵⁸ It noted that the EU had allocated €6million to support counter-narrative campaigns, and that interested organizations and producers could submit campaign proposals until January 2018 for €250,000 to

¹⁵⁵ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 248.

¹⁵⁶ Kate Ferguson is particularly cutting on this point: Kate Ferguson, ‘Countering violent extremism through media and communication strategies: A review of the evidence’, 2016, p. 9.

¹⁵⁷ Prime Minister’s Office, ‘Extremism: PM Speech’, 2015.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Update Special: EU Internet Forum’, RAN, October 2017.

€1million in funding. Their campaigns should ‘target groups within the EU who are susceptible and vulnerable to online radicalisation and terrorist content, or those who have either been radicalised or are on the brink of radicalisation. Proposed campaigns should provide these target groups with credible alternatives and positive narratives, or challenge and expose terrorist and extremist online propaganda’.¹⁵⁹ The call for proposals was resent in December 2017, and broadcast across the RAN website and Twitter. There has been radio silence since: no successful counter-narrative campaigns have been announced, and RAN CSEP has not responded to my requests for information. It is entirely possible that the campaigns are being strategically deployed in a way that prohibits their public advertisement, but it seems unlikely. RAN CSEP uploaded 5 updates on their activities for 2017, but they have not published anything in 2018.¹⁶⁰

The \$5million ‘innovation fund’ announced by Google to ‘counter hate and extremism’ has at least resulted in the funding of actual initiatives. As noted, only \$1.3million of it has been allocated to an NGO as of yet, to ISD in London, which has finalized 1 of 2 application rounds.¹⁶¹ The 13 projects which were successfully granted funding are wide-ranging: they include HOPE not hate’s ‘Project Counterbalance’, a tool for identifying hateful content on social media and responding with counter-narrative content, Paddington Arts’s ‘Faith, Identity and Belonging’, where young people create artwork based on discussions with former extremists, and

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ https://ec.europa.eu/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/civil-society-empowerment-programme/news_en. Accessed 23rd May 2018.

¹⁶¹ Kent Walker, ‘Supporting new ideas in the fight against hate’, Google, 20th September 2017.

Limehouse Boxing Academy's 'KO Racism', boxing lessons which include a discussion about racism and prejudice.¹⁶² The original Google pledge was to support 'technology-driven solutions, as well as grassroots efforts like community youth projects that help build communities and promote resistance to radicalization'; this is what it looks like in practice.¹⁶³

The point here is not to denigrate the (presumably excellent) work being done by these small NGOs and grassroots organizations in the UK being funded by Google through the ISD. But it is important to note that internationally-recognized gestures by regional organizations like the EU's RAN or social media giants like Google have to translate into substantive content on the ground. Often, this material never materializes – it simply gets lost somewhere in the multiple levels and machinations of transnational promises and funding flows – and when it does, it takes very specific, localized forms: Google's promise of a massive cash injection designed to counter ISIS and other extremists, extracted under immense political and public pressure in the UK, Europe, and the USA, has resulted in some boxing lessons being funded in East London.

A New Context: Information Warfare

Let's put this in a different context. In 2017, the primary antisocial user of social media that policy-makers and the public were concerned about in the West was ISIS. In 2018, this shifted very rapidly to Russia. In the US Senate Committee hearing with

¹⁶² <https://www.isdglobal.org/innovation-fund/>. Accessed 23rd May 2018.

¹⁶³ Kent Walker, 'Supporting new ideas in the fight against hate', Google, 20th September 2017.

the social media giants, the company representatives focused on their counter-terrorism policies and campaigns; however, Senator Bill Wilson and Clint Watts from the Foreign Policy Institute both placed ISIS online propaganda in the context of the state-sponsored disinformation spread by Russia.¹⁶⁴

According to Robert Mueller's February 2018 Indictment of 13 Russian nationals charged with interfering in the USA's 2016 Presidential elections, the Russian state established an organization called the Internet Research Agency which employed hundreds of people for 'online operations', including meddling with the US electorate.¹⁶⁵ The Internet Research Agency had a budget of millions of dollars which financed its graphics, data analysis, search-engine optimization, information-technology and finance departments. Project Lakhta – a multi-campaign project which included the manipulation of US voters – had a monthly budget of around \$1.25 million by September 2017. The Internet Research Agency had a running program focused on the US population from April 2014, conducting operations on YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and Twitter which created fake social media accounts and divisive group pages designed to sow discord. The impact of these pages and profiles was measured through various engagement metrics and constant reports.¹⁶⁶ According to Mark Zuckerberg's testimony in front of Congress, Facebook found evidence that the Internet Research Agency manipulated electorates across the USA,

¹⁶⁴ 'Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?', U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018.
<https://www.commerce.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/2018/1/terrorism-and-social-media-isbigtechdoingenough>. Accessed on 22nd May 2018.

¹⁶⁵ Priscilla Alvarez & Taylor Hosking, 'The Full Text of Mueller's Indictment of 13 Russians', The Atlantic, 16th February 2018.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

Europe and Russia, using at least 470 accounts and generating around 80,000 posts over two years, reaching approximately 126million people.¹⁶⁷

Reading Mueller's indictment, it is striking that the Internet Research Agency's operations read like a textbook counter-narrative campaign from the 'how-to' guides produced by ISD, the Redirect Method, Hedayah, and other organizations in the lattice.¹⁶⁸ These guides (broadly) feature step-by-step directions for understanding the campaign's objectives, identifying the target audience, determining an effective messenger, identifying cheap and scalable mediums, developing effective content, disseminating it in a sustained manner, and evaluating the impact – everything that Russia did with such devastating results, except on a scale which utterly outstrips any of the counter-narrative campaigns deployed against Islamic State.

I agree with a 2015 RAN paper which says '[t]he success of counter messaging overall depends on it being of a scale and quality that is proportional to the challenge we face: equal to the ISIL propaganda machine in terms of volume, production value, and speed. At present, combined counter-narrative and alternative narrative efforts represent a drop in the ocean compared to ISIL.'¹⁶⁹ Or, in Peter Neumann from ICSR's words (in front of Congress), 'Even if we found the perfect messenger, and even if we managed to produce the perfect video, it would still be a drop in the ocean. There still

¹⁶⁷ Sara Salinas, 'Congress releases Mark Zuckerberg's prepared testimony ahead of Wednesday's hearing', CNBC, 9th April 2018.

¹⁶⁸ See, for instance: Louis Reynolds & Henry Tuck, 'The Counter-Narrative Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016; 'The Redirect Method: A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism', Jigsaw, 2016; Lilah Elsayed, Talal Faris & Sara Zeiger, 'Undermining Violent Extremist Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: A How-To Guide', Hedayah, 2017.

¹⁶⁹ 'RAN Issue Paper: Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives', RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017.

wouldn't be oomph. This is the internet. People are exposed to thousands of things every day. You need to be loud, you need volume, and you can't be on your own.'¹⁷⁰

Islamic State, at one point in 2014, had approximately 46,000 overt supporters on Twitter alone retweeting and disseminating thousands of pieces of content, aided by bots carefully calibrated to avoid triggering Twitter's anti-spam protocols.¹⁷¹ These supporters circulated thousands of individual content points through a fluid and dispersed network of accounts conceptualized by Ali Fisher as a 'swarmcast', ensuring the persistent presence of jihadist content online.¹⁷² ISIS built a brand, with recognizable iconography – the black flag, the stark color scheme, the high-quality videos – and tightly woven narratives.

In contrast, the counter-narrative campaigns run out of the lattice are launched from a handful of social media accounts, and they are few and far between. The quality of the content notwithstanding, they do not operate on any kind of scale comparable to the phenomenon they aim to confront.¹⁷³ A standing criticism of counter-narratives in literature reviews and scholarly studies is that there remains a very large gap between the volume of counter-narrative campaigns and the

¹⁷⁰ Alistair Reed, Haroro Ingram & Joe Whittaker, 'Countering Terrorist Narratives: Civil Liberties, Justice, and Home Affairs', European Parliament, 2017, pp. 37 – 38.

¹⁷¹ J.M. Berger & Jonathon Morgan, 'The ISIS Twitter Consensus: Defining and describing the population of ISIS supporters on Twitter', Brookings, 2015.

¹⁷² Ali Fisher, 'Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence', 2015.

¹⁷³ There is one exception: ISD ran an operation in Kenya over the 2017 Presidential elections, training over 20 CSOs in online counter-narrative creation and helping them launch anti-Islamist and anti-tribalist campaigns. These campaigns combined reached 4.4 million individuals, over 10% of Kenyans. Zahed Amanullah & Anisa Harrasy, 'Between Two Extremes: Responding to Islamist and tribalist messaging online in Kenya during the 2017 elections', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2017.

propaganda operations of Islamic State.¹⁷⁴ But it is difficult to see how this can be rectified without ploughing in levels of resources and operatives equivalent to the Russian Internet Research Agency – which of course would embroil counter-narrative producers in all sorts of moral and legal quandaries which they are currently largely able to avoid.

Perhaps the most visceral example of the disjunction between the scales on which Islamic State propaganda operates – or at least used to operate – and that of the counter-narratives comes, again, from the US Senate Committee hearing with Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. In the statement from Twitter by Carlos Monje Jr., he notes that Twitter supported the ISD campaign in which Average Mohamed ‘doubled its number of Twitter followers’ and ExitUSA ‘tripled its Twitter followers’.¹⁷⁵ However he neglected to mention the actual number of followers on these Twitter accounts: ExitUSA tripled its Twitter followers from 50 to 155; Average Mohamed doubled from 90 to 183.¹⁷⁶ Twitter has around 336 million users monthly.

A Problem of Scale: Conclusions

There is, of course, more to this problem than simply scale. Monika Bickert and Brian Fishman quote the Irish Republican Army in one of their ‘Hard Questions’ blog posts, after the IRA failed to assassinate British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in

¹⁷⁴ ‘RAN Issue Paper: Counter Narratives and Alternative Narratives’, RAN Centre of Excellence, 2017.

¹⁷⁵ ‘Terrorism and Social Media: Is Big Tech Doing Enough?’, U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, 17th January 2018.

¹⁷⁶ Tanya Silverman, Christopher Stewart, Zahed Amanullah & Jonathan Birdwell, ‘The Impact of Counter-Narratives: Insights from a year-long cross-platform study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact’, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016, p. 31.

1984: 'Today we were unlucky, but remember that we only have to be lucky once – you will have to be lucky always.'¹⁷⁷ The purpose of the Russian election meddling, as far as we know, was to incite uncertainty and discord, and ultimately shift the allegiances of a small fraction of the electorate enough to influence the election outcome. It was wholly a big-numbers game.

The online battle against Islamic State is also a big-numbers game, but it is intensely personal at the same time: only one person needs to slip through the net to launch a terror attack in their home country, with potentially devastating effects and largescale loss of life.

This is why research from ICSR, VOX-Pol, ISD and others emphasise that counter-narrative online campaigns can only ever be part of the answer; personal interventions (like ISD's One2One programme) and offline interventions are also necessary. Perhaps most importantly, the social media companies need to keep up their sustained assault on Islamic State propaganda on their platforms, detecting and deleting it in bulk.

The point remains that counter-narratives have attracted attention in CVE circles which is disproportionate to the quantity of campaigns which actually exist, and that counter-narratives at the moment are not operating on any kind of comparative scale to the threat which they confront.

¹⁷⁷ Monika Bickert & Brian Fishman, 'Hard Questions: How Effective is Technology in Keeping Terrorists off Facebook?', Facebook Newsroom, 23rd April 2018.

3. The Role of Religion in Counter-Narratives

The quantity of counter-narratives notwithstanding, publically accessible counter-narratives from ISD and the Redirect Method can be analysed to demonstrate the role that religion ought to play in dismantling Islamic State narratives. This chapter uses counter-narrative academic theory, qualitative insights about the nature of Islamic State propaganda disseminated online, and best-practice counter-narrative examples to argue that successful counter-narratives necessarily operate out of the same religious framework as ISIS content, therefore leveraging the same powerful normative religious appeals whilst discouraging violent acts of terror.

Religion in Counter-Narrative Theory

Kurt Braddock and his co-authors have done extensive work to infuse counter-narrative working theory with thoroughly researched academic communications strategies in a series of papers from 2012 to 2018.¹⁷⁸ Braddock and John Horgan, in 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism' (2016) define a terrorist 'ideology' as 'a group of beliefs to which a terrorist group purport to adhere and attempts to instil in members to guide their actions'; a 'narrative' is 'a vehicle through which an ideology can be communicated'.¹⁷⁹ They offer constructive methods for 'fighting fire with fire by using

¹⁷⁸ See: Kurt Braddock, 'Fighting words: The Persuasive Effect of Online Extremist Narratives on the Radicalization Process', 2012; Kurt Braddock & James Price Dillard, 'Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive evidence of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors', 2016; Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2016; Kurt Braddock & John Morrison, 'Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2018.

¹⁷⁹ Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2016, p. 383.

the narrative form (i.e. the vehicle) to counter ideologies that terrorist groups disseminate via their own strategies'.¹⁸⁰ The medium for this is 'counternarratives': 'narratives comprised of content that challenges the main themes intrinsic to other narratives ... counternarratives challenge themes within terrorist narratives that are consistent with the group's ideology'.¹⁸¹

According to Braddock and Horgan, there are three steps to creating effective counter-narratives: 1) analysing the terrorists' narratives; 2) constructing counter-narratives that challenge terrorist narratives; and 3) disseminating the counter-narratives in a manner which overcomes barriers of persuasion.¹⁸²

The first step involves thorough and careful scrutiny of the propaganda being produced by the terrorist organization. Braddock and Horgan recommend combing through the content multiple times, before establishing an evaluative code, breaking the data set into different thematic categories, and quantifying the results.¹⁸³

The next step is to construct counternarratives which challenge the terrorist narratives which have been identified. Braddock and Horgan argue that practitioners should: 1) avoid reinforcing themes emphasized within the terrorist narratives (for instance by strenuously denying claims, placing the terrorist group in charge of the discourse); 2) reveal inconsistencies and contradictions in the terrorist narratives

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 386.

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 381.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp. 387 – 378.

and their actions; 3) disconnect terrorist narratives from real-world events; 4) contest binary ideological presentations of the world; and 5) present an alternative view of the terrorists narrative's target.¹⁸⁴ These recommendations are concordant with ones made by J.M. Berger in his 2017 'linkage-based' approach to disrupting Islamic State propaganda, in which he argues that ISIS propaganda creates 'links' between itself (the 'in-group') and its targeted recruits, which it then presents as opposed to outside people and the outside world (the 'out-group').¹⁸⁵ Their intention is to draw sympathisers into a binary worldview in which there is just 'us' and 'them', resulting in the simplification of life and thought in which good and evil are brought out in stark contrast.¹⁸⁶ This worldview can be contested by counter-narratives which seek to build links between the would-be sympathisers and the out-group, or dissolve links between the potential recruits and the Islamic State.¹⁸⁷

The third step is finding an appropriate dissemination strategy which spreads the content without engendering mistrust or suspicion.¹⁸⁸ As Braddock and John Morrison show in a recent paper, cultivating trust between counter-narrative disseminators and the targeted audience is absolutely essential for the transmission

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid*, p. 390.

¹⁸⁵ J.M. Berger, 'Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda: A Linkage-Based Approach to Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 5.

¹⁸⁶ For more on this binary understanding of the world, see: Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 242.

¹⁸⁷ J.M. Berger, 'Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda: A Linkage-Based Approach to Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 5.

¹⁸⁸ Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2016, pp. 392 – 394.

of the message.¹⁸⁹ Failure to establish trust risks antagonizing the target and worsening the situation.¹⁹⁰

Broadly speaking, the how-to guides from NGOs within the lattice offer similar instructions for constructing counter-narrative content, although their literature is stuffed with more practical advice (and typically feature a fourth evaluative step). The ISD's Counter-Narrative Handbook (2016), the Redirect Method blueprint (2016) and Hedayah's how-to guide for counter-narratives in the Middle East and North Africa (2017) all call on practitioners to identify the narratives they want to counter, construct content with a carefully calibrated message, and disseminate it as widely as possible in such a way that the target audience are receptive.¹⁹¹

Prominent campaigns from within the lattice broadly follow a variant of the rigorous communications-based strategy laid out by Braddock and Horgan, and therefore create subtle and well-thought-out campaigns which respond to ISIS narratives without reinforcing ideological binaries or losing the trust of the prospective audience. In contrast, poorly conceived counter-narrative campaigns reinforce insider-outsider dynamics and are presented from a position of ideological superiority which fails to connect with target audiences, antagonizing more than they engage.

¹⁸⁹ Kurt Braddock & John Morrison, 'Cultivating Trust and Perceptions of Source Credibility in Online Counternarratives Intended to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2018.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁹¹ Louis Reynolds & Henry Tuck, 'The Counter-Narrative Monitoring and Evaluation Handbook', The Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD), 2016; 'The Redirect Method: A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism', Jigsaw, 2016; Lilah Elsayed, Talal Faris & Sara Zeiger, 'Undermining Violent Extremist Narratives in the Middle East and North Africa: A How-To Guide', Hedayah, 2017.

The Religious Content of Islamic State Propaganda

There have been multiple large-scale analyses of Islamic State's propaganda output over the last few years. Typically, the research procedure follows the methods outlined by Braddock and Horgan above: a researcher (or team of researchers) collects a data-set of ISIS propaganda from social media (normally Twitter), spends a while acquainting themselves with it, before categorizing it according to its main themes and presenting the results. As every researcher chooses their own system of categorization, there is no real way to measure the results against one another with any kind of systematic rigour.

Aaron Zelin, a Fellow of ICSR, examined a week of official ISIS media releases from 18th – 24th April 2015 which he analysed in a report called 'Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output'.¹⁹² Looking at the 123 pieces of content disseminated on Twitter from 3 official ISIS accounts that week, he argued that ISIS's content was far broader than the gruesome execution videos which were receiving significant media attention.¹⁹³ He categorized the content according to the following schema: Military, Governance, Dawah [proselytising], Hisbah [accountability], Promotion of the Caliphate, Enemy Attacks, News, Martyrdom, Execution, Denying Enemy Reports, and Other. According to this categorization, the bulk of Islamic State's content was military in nature.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Aaron Y. Zelin, 'Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output', 2015.

¹⁹³ *Ibid*, p. 86.

¹⁹⁴ *Ibid*, p. 90.

Charlie Winter, also from ICSR, gathered two larger sets of data nearly two years apart. From 17th July 2015 to 15th August 2015 he collated Islamic State propaganda using officially-designated hashtags, gathering 892 products from 38 outlets.¹⁹⁵ He divided this data into the following categories: Brutality, Mercy, Belonging, Victimhood, War, and Utopia, with the last two categories each containing several sub-categories.¹⁹⁶ A second data set was collected from 31st December 2016 to 29th January 2017 using feeds on Telegram and Twitter, resulting in 463 pieces of content (significantly less than 2015). These propaganda materials were divided into 3 thematic groups – Victimhood, Utopia, and Warfare – and contrasted with the 2015 data (which had been re-codified according to this new tripartite division) to show that in the 18 months between the two studies, ISIS had shifted the main focus of their narratives from Utopia to Warfare.¹⁹⁷

Daniel Milton produced a similar report in 2016, in which he examined over 9,000 Twitter content pieces marked with an official Islamic State logo from January 2015 to August 2016.¹⁹⁸ He examined each release and coded it according to its primary theme, leading to the conclusion that 48% of Islamic State propaganda from

¹⁹⁵ Charlie Winter, 'Apocalypse, later: a longitudinal study of the Islamic State brand', 2018. For an exceptionally readable summary of this project, see: Charlie Winter, 'Fishing and Ultraviolence', BBC News, 6th October 2015.

¹⁹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 160.

¹⁹⁷ *Ibid*.

¹⁹⁸ Daniel Milton, 'Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts', 2016, p. 21.

the period was primarily Military in nature; 20% concerned with Governance, 19% Other, 7% Commercial, 7% Religious, and under 0.5% Lifestyle-based.¹⁹⁹

However, Milton noted a problem: ‘Focusing on the primary theme of a release is not without limitations. One of these is that, on some level, all of the Islamic State’s products have religious undertones. A product that focuses on traditional military activities (soldiers fighting enemies, the aftermath of the battles, etc.) still has a religious meaning for the group as it fights to establish the caliphate and hasten an apocalyptic confrontation with its enemies. The same could be said for a product showing a construction crew paving a street. Are they paving a street or building (literally) a religious state?’²⁰⁰ Milton and others notice the problem that it is impossible to isolate the religious elements of the narratives from the irreligious, because such a clear divide does not exist. Identifying what proportion of Islamic State’s propaganda is ‘religious’ – in the sense that it focuses on mosques, sermons, or dawah (to use Milton’s criteria) – is less important than noting that the linguistic, visual, and cultural frameworks deployed by Islamic State to frame all of their propaganda pieces are religious.

Graeme Wood makes a similar point in his phenomenally successful article for the Atlantic, ‘What ISIS Really Wants’ (2015). He quotes Bernard Haykel, writing ‘according to Haykel, the ranks of the Islamic State are deeply infused with religious vigor. Koranic quotations are ubiquitous. “Even the foot soldiers spout this stuff

¹⁹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 30.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, p. 23.

constantly,” Haykel says. “They mug for their cameras and repeat their basic doctrines in formulaic fashion, and they do it all the time.”²⁰¹

This is immediately obvious when examining Islamic State content. For instance, in a report proclaiming the establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, ISIS spokesperson Abu Muhammad al-Adnani writes ‘Here the flag of the Islamic State, the flag of tawhid [monotheism], rises and flutters. Its shade covers land from Aleppo to Diyala. Beneath it, the walls of the tawaghit [tyrants] have been demolished, their flags have fallen, and their borders have been destroyed. Their soldiers are either killed, imprisoned, or defeated. The Muslims are honored. The kuffar [infidels] are disgraced.’²⁰² Another example is the comment referenced earlier from an Islamic State media operative manual translated by Charlie Winter: ‘Anyone who knows the Crusaders of today and keeps track of that which infuriates them understands how they are angered and terrorised by jihadi media. They – the curse of Allah the Almighty be on them – know its importance, impact and significance more than any others!’²⁰³ This short passage is about strategic communications and would probably be coded as ‘Warfare’ in one of the analyses above. Nonetheless, it is written in a profoundly religious lexicon, and pulls on the political-cultural history of Islam in its representation of a battle of Tweets.

²⁰¹ Graeme Wood, ‘What ISIS Really Wants’, *The Atlantic*, 2015.

²⁰² Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, ‘This is the Promise of Allah’, 19th June 2014.

²⁰³ Charlie Winter, ‘Media Jihad: The Islamic State’s Doctrine for Information Warfare’, *The International Centre for the Study of Radicalization and Political Violence (ICSR)*, 2016, p. 17.

Lorne Dawson and Amarnath Amarasingam (Senior Research Fellow at ISD) conducted 25 interviews from mid-2014 with foreign fighters who had travelled to Islamic State territory and 40 interviews with friends and family of other foreign fighters.²⁰⁴ They published a results paper which pushed against theories emphasizing the purely socioeconomic factors which cause people to travel to fight for ISIS, arguing ‘most of the fighters involved provided justifications for being a foreign fighter that were largely moral and religious in character, more than explicitly political, although there is little real separation between these things in the minds of these individuals.’²⁰⁵ They went on, ‘the interactions with these individuals were so heavily mediated by religious discourse it seems implausible to suggest that religiosity (i.e. a sincere religious commitment, no matter how ill-informed or unorthodox) is not a primary motivator for their actions. Religion provides the dominant frame these foreign fighters use to interpret almost every aspect of their lives.’²⁰⁶ Similarly, online propaganda from Islamic state is saturated with religious content and framed in religious terms, which does not detract from its profoundly political message.

The Salafi-Jihadi Vision

This content provides an ideological vision in which Islam is incompatible with modern life and can only be realised by supporting Islamic State. It pushes an absolute bifurcation between normative Islam and everything and everyone else. Al-

²⁰⁴ Lorne Dawson & Amarnath Amarasingam, ‘Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq’, 2016.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid*; emphasis added.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid*.

Adnani, when announcing the establishment of the caliphate, writes, 'So rush O Muslims and gather around your khalifah [caliph], so that you may return as you once were for ages, kings of the earth and knights of war. ... By Allah, if you disbelieve in democracy, secularism, nationalism, as well as all the other garbage and ideas from the west, and rush to your religion and creed, then by Allah, you will own the earth, and the east and west will submit to you. This is the promise of Allah to you. This is the promise of Allah to you.'²⁰⁷ Just as ISIS seeks to tear foreign fighters from their communities and families, so it seeks to tear Islam from the societies in which Muslims live.

There is a scene in the wildly popular Islamic State video 'Clanging of the Swords, Part 4', in which an IS fighter stands with his Kosovan passport in one hand and a microphone in the other, surrounded by fellow fighters foisting black IS flags, also clutching their passports. The man shouts:

'We say to the tawaghit [tyrants] and the disbelievers everywhere, we say to you as Ibrahim – peace and blessings be upon him – said to his father, 'Verily, we are free from you and whatever you worship besides Allah. We have rejected you, and there has started between us and you hostility and hatred forever until you believe in Allah alone.' And we say to you as the Prophet Muhammad – peace and blessings be upon him – said, 'We have come to you with nothing but slaughter.' So rejoice, oh disbelievers. Declare Allah the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest!' ... These are your passports, oh tawaghit in

²⁰⁷ Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, 'This is the Promise of Allah', 19th June 2014.

every place. For I swear by Allah that we are Muslims. We are Muslims. We are Muslims. Declare Allah the Greatest! Allah is the Greatest!’²⁰⁸

During the scene he draws a large knife, as the crowd gets more and more raucous. At the end, he brandishes his passport at the camera and then rips it apart, throwing it on the ground before stabbing it with the knife as his fellow fighters throw down their own shredded passports alongside his. The point is clear: there is an absolute distinction between the Islamic State fighters and the tawaghit, between the Muslims and the disbelievers, and between the caliphate and the nations the fighters have come from. It is fundamentally impossible to belong to another nation as a Muslim, the video argues, and so these angry young men visibly shred the most obvious marker of their original nationalities whilst they shout ‘we are Muslims’.

According to Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, ‘What seems to be most appealing about violent fundamentalist groups – whatever combination of reasons an individual may cite for joining – is the simplification of life and thought. Good and evil are brought out in stark relief. Life is transformed through action.’²⁰⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer draws on interviews with terrorists from around the world to argue in *Terror in the Mind of God* that religious terrorism escalates the stakes of the conflict in the minds of the fighters beyond any temporal scale; they understand themselves as participating in a ‘cosmic war’.²¹⁰ He notes that the religious worldview underpinning such fanaticism is appealing, providing otherwise lost individuals with

²⁰⁸ Accessed via. Jihadology.net, a website established by Aaron Zelin.

²⁰⁹ Jessica Stern & J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror*, 2015, p. 242.

²¹⁰ Mark Juergensmeyer, *Terror in the Mind of God*, 2017.

‘a goal more ennobling than the simple accretion of power and possessions’. Religious ideas give these people ‘profundity and ideological clarity’.²¹¹ Shiraz Maher from ICSR argues something similar in his book *Salafi-Jihadism*, noting that Islamic State’s worldview is a ‘satiating ideology’ which provides its adherents with ‘a form of common cause, a unifying mission, and sense of purpose for bringing society together’.²¹²

The worldview espoused by Islamic State is a form of Salafi-jihadism. Maher shows that Islamic State’s ‘intellectual framework appears to sit within the mainstream tradition of Salafi-jihadist thought’, and that the group is ‘perhaps the most powerful Salafi-jihadist movement in history’.²¹³ As a theology, Salafi-jihadism is centrally concerned with issues of rightful authority, legitimacy, obedience and rebellion. Its various streams base themselves on Salafism, a redemptive philosophy drawing on an idealised form of Islam with emphases on authenticity and purity, which is combined with violent rejection of the modern international order and insistence on sustained armed struggle.²¹⁴ Islamic State’s Salafi-jihadist worldview is located at the intersection of theology and politics; just as its worldly concerns are mediated by and expressed through religion, so too contemporary questions of geopolitics and power infuse its theology.

²¹¹ *Ibid*, pp. 299 – 300.

²¹² Shiraz Maher, *Salafi-Jihadism: The History of an Idea*, 2016, p. 27.

²¹³ *Ibid*, pp. 6 & 209.

²¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 7 & 9-10.

This ideological base is important, but it is not the whole story. Thomas Hegghammer shows in *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Islamists* that Salafi-jihadists have a 'rich aesthetic culture' which is 'essential for understanding their mindset and worldview.'²¹⁵ Hegghammer examines Salafi-jihadist cultural products including poetry, music, iconography and cinematography, noting that 'cultural products and practices serve as emotional persuasion tools that reinforce and complement the cognitive persuasion work done by doctrine ... We also know that individuals are exposed to cultural products early in their recruitment trajectories, and several explicitly say they were drawn to jihadism more by the videos and the music than by the ideological tracts.'²¹⁶ *Jihadi Culture* does not focus on Islamic State or digital proliferation of cultural products, but Hegghammer's work is backed up by other studies which do. Charlie Winter's analysis of ISIS propaganda notes the persistent presence of nasheeds (vocal songs with religious themes, which he characterizes as 'acapella songs'), and Donald Holbrook's 2017 study of the media content collected from convicted terrorists in the UK found that nasheeds were the most common type of foreign-language material.²¹⁷ Manni Crone similarly argues in her analysis of the online radicalization of young European fighters by Islamic State that 'religious violence in Europe today is largely enabled by aesthetic technologies of

²¹⁵ Thomas Hegghammer, *Jihadi Culture: The Art and Social Practices of Militant Extremists*, 2017, p. 1.

²¹⁶ *Ibid*, p. 16.

²¹⁷ Charlie Winter, 'Inside the collapse of Islamic State's propaganda machine', Wired UK, 20th December 2017; Donald Holbrook, 'What Types of Media do Terrorists Collect? An Analysis of Religious, Political, and Ideological Publications Found in Terrorism Investigations in the UK', 2017, p. 11. Hegghammer quotes Anwar al-Awlaki's '44 Ways to Support Jihad' on the particular power of nasheeds: 'Muslims need to be inspired to practice Jihad. In the time of Rasulullah (saaws) he had poets who would use their poetry to inspire the Muslims and demoralize the disbelievers. Today nasheed can play that role. A good nasheed can spread so widely it can reach an audience that you could not reach through a lecture or a book. Nasheeds are especially inspiring to the youth, who are the foundation of Jihad in every age and time. Nasheeds are an important element in creating a 'Jihad Culture'.

the self, such as for instance jihad- and martyr-videos'.²¹⁸ Juergensmeyer's summary of Hegghammer makes the point succinctly: 'the appeal of ISIS is largely a socio-cultural attraction. Put a different way, what has enticed the many followers of ISIS in the region and around the world is its distinctive worldview.'²¹⁹ This worldview is ideological and aesthetic. It is simultaneously theological and political. It provides a framework, a vision, and is heavily aspirational. It is religious in the thick sense of the term.

It is possible for counter-narratives to retain the powerful moral, epistemological and aesthetic vision provided by Islamic State's Salafi-jihadist narratives whilst undermining the conclusions they reach about normative action.

Challenging the Bifurcation

Kurt Braddock and John Horgan's communications-based guide to the construction of effective counter-narratives notes that 'One element of many extremist ideologies, and by extension, their adherents' narratives, is the presence of binary comparisons. For example, multiple violent jihadist groups depict their activities as part of a struggle between 'believers' and 'nonbelievers'. By representing their activities like this, they portray their actions as a fight between truth and falsehood ... Counternarratives that reveal some 'gray areas' to these black-and-white portrayals may discredit them, and in the process, discredit the narratives they

²¹⁸ Manni Crone, 'Religion and Violence: Governing Muslim Militancy through Aesthetic Assemblages', 2014, p. 2.

²¹⁹ Mark Juergensmeyer, 'Thinking Sociologically about Religion and Violence', 2018.

comprise'.²²⁰ J.M. Berger argues something similar with his 'linkage-based' understanding of how Islamic State links itself with potential recruits online and excludes others to create two distinct groups.²²¹ The out-group is then linked with crises such as the Syrian Civil War, solutions to which require the recruits to join forces with IS. He argues that this propaganda can be countered by dissolving the links constructed by Islamic State's narratives between the recruits and IS, between the out-group and the crisis, or forging links between Islamic State and the crisis or the out-group and the recruits.

Good counter-narratives do this by speaking from a religious perspective which appeals to the same motivational, normative and aesthetic values as Islamic State propaganda but re-embeds these in the modern world. They keep the religious vision but offer radically different perspectives about the best way it ought to be realized. This is demonstrable by looking at some of the most prominent counter-narrative campaigns from the heart of the lattice which received global political attention in EU issue papers, UK Home Office reports, and US Senate hearings: the Redirect Method's curated videos, Abdullah-X and Average Mohamed.

Average Mohamed's YouTube videos interrogate extremist arguments and propaganda and argue that they cannot possibly represent Islam.²²² For example, in

²²⁰ Kurt Braddock & John Horgan, 'Towards a Guide for Constructing and Disseminating Counternarratives to Reduce Support for Terrorism', 2016, p. 390.

²²¹ J.M. Berger, 'Deconstruction of Identity Concepts in Islamic State Propaganda: A Linkage-Based Approach to Counter-Terrorism Strategic Communications', International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT), 2017, p. 5.

²²² <https://averagemohamed.com/>. Accessed 24th May 2018.

‘What does the Quran have to say about suicide bombing? – English’, the eponymous narrator notes, ‘the Prophet Muhammad, peace be upon him, says: ‘He who commits suicide by throttling himself will keep on throttling himself in the hellfire. And he who commits suicide by stabbing himself shall keep on stabbing himself in the hellfire (Sahih al-Bukhari, Hadith number 1365). What do you think happens to suicide bombers? You’ll be made again, blown up again, be made whole again, blown up again, be made whole again, blown up again, eternally in the hellfire!’ Average Mohamed often contrasts the horrific crimes committed by ISIS and other terrorists (rendered in cartoon explosions and vehicular homicides) with passages drawn from the Qur’an and Hadith. His content also draws extensive links between authentic Islam and Western citizenship in ‘Family video’, ‘Identity in Islam’ and ‘A Muslim In The West’. ‘Be Like Aisha’ and ‘The Bullet or the Ballot’ are examples of aspirational calls to action for Muslims.²²³

Abdullah X offers a similar blend of advice, religious considerations, and ruminations on the role of Muslims in the modern world.²²⁴ He contrasts normative Islam with the actions of Islamic State in videos such as ‘Abdullah-X: ‘Road to Realisation’ Part 2 – Islamism’ and ‘Abdullah-X: The Real Meaning of Jihad’. His videos feature appeals to religious reasoning and ethics; for instance in ‘Abdullah-X: Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria’ he argues, ‘Allah does not need your so-called ‘martyrdom’ when the fight out there is about power and influence in the form of some manufactured jihad. Do you even know how fard al ayn [individual duty] and

²²³ <https://www.youtube.com/user/1mohamedamin/videos>. Accessed 3rd May 2018.

²²⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx/videos>. Accessed 3rd May 2018.

fard al kifaya [communal duty] apply to you in your homeland and to your own responsibilities? Engage in relief work for those people and raise awareness; don't go and find for a so-called 'cause' you have not even questioned critically!

The Redirect Method pulled videos from across YouTube into playlists which it then promoted using paid advertising; the videos were chosen based on their counter-narrative potential. The English-language playlists were created by a channel called Upvotely which made 5 channels called 'Beliefs of the Caliphate', 'Answering the Call', 'Experiencing the Caliphate', 'Welcome in the West?' and 'The Soldier's Perspective'.²²⁵ Some of these videos were drawn from content producers in the lattice, such as Abdullah-X or the Quilliam Foundation's 'Not Another Brother'. Others came from news channels such as BBC, CNN, or Vice, and simply show ISIS losing territory. However, the majority came from a range of independent sources such as 'iLovUAllah™', 'IslamUnitedInshalah', 'TerrorismIsKufr' and 'MercifulServant'. They include sermons from respected Islamic scholars like Dr Tahir-ul-Qadri challenging ISIS's jurisprudential understanding of jihad and Mufti Ismail Menk reminding Muslims why it is important to make dua [supplication] for their enemies. In one video, an old lady in Islamic State territory berates some laughing fighters, yelling 'O you devils turn back to God ... Go back to the way of God o grandchild' before launching into a tirade about how their behaviour contradicts Islam. 'God is watching what you are doing', she warns. In '#MessageToISIS: Global Condemnation', Muslims from around the world express their solidarity against Islamic State. 'We have to write our own narrative', one woman states. 'I would love to drop the first 'I' in that

²²⁵ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVwgi-Z4Yj0LB-DpduCDFXg/playlists>. Accessed 24th May 2018.

ISIS, because there is nothing Islamic about them.’²²⁶ The most viewed videos came from Adam Saleh, a YouTube personality with a large following. In ‘PRAYING IN PUBLIC!’ and ‘MEET A MUSLIM FAMILY’ (both of which have millions of views) expressions of Islam are publically performed and accepted in touching displays of intercultural bonding on the streets of New York. These videos are examples of Islam being wrested back by everyday Muslims and re-embedded in the everyday contexts in which they live and love.

These counter-narrative videos can be considered religious in the same way that Islamic State’s propaganda products are religious: though many of their messages are primarily concerned with action and conduct, the mediums in which they are expressed are profoundly and naturally Muslim. They refer to similar Islamic histories, cultural forms and theological methods of reasoning, but reach profoundly different conclusions from Islamic State. The Redirect Method, Abdullah-X and Average Mohamed have all been cited internationally as successful counter-narrative campaigns and emerge out a lattice of organizations with well-developed procedures for content creation based on current academic theory and constantly-refined best practices. Not all campaigns are as well-designed.

The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), headed by Anne Speckhard, has been interviewing ISIS defectors to create short videos which they disseminate as part of their ‘Breaking the ISIS Brand’ campaign.²²⁷ Speckhard et

²²⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCVwgi-Z4YI0LB-DpduCDFXg/playlists>. Accessed 3rd May 2018.

²²⁷ <http://www.icsve.org/isis-defectors-speak-videos/>. Accessed 24th May 2018.

al. diverge from the communications-based counter-narrative theories offered by Braddock or Berger, arguing instead that ‘Most experts agree that the most effective tool to discredit both ISIS and their militant jihad ideology is using the voices of disillusioned ISIS cadres themselves (Speckhard, 2016).’²²⁸ The videos they produce are comprised of the most ‘damaging, denouncing, and derisive content’ from the interviews with the ISIS defectors; they are designed to be emotional and tough to watch.²²⁹

ICSVE ran two pilots in which they created Facebook accounts and used them to share their counter-narrative videos with ISIS supporters on Facebook. In the first study, they targeted 77 Albanian-speaking accounts, which they befriended and attempted to tag in their videos. However Facebook’s counter-terrorism protocols shut down over half of the sample before ICSVE even uploaded their first video, and ICSVE’s own accounts only lasted 3 days after uploading material before being closed down (losing all their data in the process). In the 3 short days in which the counter-narrative videos were available on Facebook, comments included: ‘You jealous duale khalifa bakijjaa we tetemedde your jealousy will kill you, dirty Munafiq, Murtad, Kufr, etc’; ‘Video made by kuffars and filmed in cooperation with kuffars’, and ‘Get out of my sight you filthy munafiq you are worse than the kuffar, only the kuffar believe in this, your attempts are worthless. The IS rose with Allah’s help Elhamdulillah, whatever fabrications you create it won’t help you achieve your goals you slave of the

²²⁸ Anne Speckhard, Allison McDowell-Smith & Ahmet S. Yayla, ‘Beating ISIS in the Digital Space: Focus Testing ISIS Defector Counter-Narrative Videos with American College Students’, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), 2017.

²²⁹ Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci, Lorand Bodo & Haris Fazliu, ‘Bringing Down the Digital Caliphate: A Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narratives Intervention with Albanian Speaking Facebook Accounts’, International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), 2018.

devil'.²³⁰ (ICSVE's paper claims 'in a number of cases, we managed to lead our target audience towards constructive engagements'.)

The second study attempted a similar project but with English-speaking ISIS-supporting Facebook accounts, largely located in the UK.²³¹ They added nearly 50 ISIS-supported accounts, but found their Facebook accounts disabled before they could upload their first video.²³² Some remaining accounts were used to upload a Breaking the ISIS Brand video ('A Sex Slave as a Gift for you from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi – English Subtitles') to a closed group of ISIS supporters which promptly disappeared (ICSVE doesn't know if it was expelled, or the whole group was deleted). Finally, ICSVE set up some new accounts and targeted 'fence sitters' who appear to ambiguously support ISIS. At last they were able to upload a video and some pictures to which people reacted with 'sad or angry faces' and 'comments were made criticizing the authenticity of the video'. ICSVE concluded that 'our research revealed that our counter-narratives resonate with our target audience.'²³³

Shocking lack of research ethics, comical execution, and ridiculous conclusions aside, the ICSVE counter-narrative campaigns are illuminating because of the vehement criticism their videos elicited. Their content was presumed fake and the posters were repeatedly called kuffar. This is important – the primary accusation

²³⁰ *Ibid.*

²³¹ Anne Speckhard, Ardian Shajkovci & Lorand Bodo, 'Fighting ISIS on Facebook – Breaking the ISIS Brand Counter-Narratives Project', International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE), 2018.

²³² The most positive effect of this study was its demonstration of the effectiveness of Facebook's counter-terrorism algorithms.

²³³ *Ibid.*

levelled against the videos was that they were the products of outsiders (either apostates or Americans). Instead of breaking down the bifurcation between Islamic State and everyone else, the ICSVE content, with its shocking images of shackled prisoners, children posing with AK-47s, and Islamic State defectors with hidden faces, reinforced this binary worldview by antagonizing the audience.

The primary difference between well-designed counter-narratives and poor ones is that the successful counter-narratives have a religious message. They are therefore able to break down the absolute binary between Muslims and disbelievers drawn by the narratives presented by Islamic State in a way which irreligious counter-narratives struggle to do. Well-designed counter-narratives challenge the simplification of life and thought in which Islamic State is set up in direct opposition to the forces of disbelief and apostasy. Instead, Islam is disassociated with the violent actions of Islamic State and links are drawn between living according to normative religion and living a caring, fulfilling life in the modern world. As Average Mohamed – himself a firm advocate of Muslim values and the contemporary role of religion – concludes, ‘Peace up, extremism out.’

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