

A United Front: Transatlantic Cooperation Against Extremism and Propaganda in the Era of Social Media

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Social Media, Propaganda and Islamic State

Social media, along with the blogs and forums that pre-date it, has created a multi-directional communication model which allows people to produce and diffuse content that can compete with traditionally dominant media companies. The openness of these multi-directional platforms often increases the audience's exposure to varying opinions. On the other hand, it has also become common practice for companies to personalize their users' content, which may diminish people's ability to see viewpoints different from their own. Furthermore, the abundance of information that people see on a daily basis requires them to constantly assess the usefulness, authenticity and quality of what they read. This need to individually evaluate content from a variety of sources makes it possible for extremists, criminals and others to exploit social media to target the vulnerable and impressionable. For instance, a 2011 survey by Demos¹ found that while many primary and secondary school students are media savvy, they tend not to fact-check or refer to multiple resources.

A characteristic example of effective media propaganda comes from the Islamic State (ISIS), an organization which has adopted a dynamic, decentralized approach aimed at creating varying stories for diverse audiences.² It offers a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted narrative that often goes unnoticed by western audiences who mainly focus on the images of brutality that it produces to shock people and spread fear.³ It also relies on a "fanbase" to create new propaganda from ISIS-produced raw footage and images.⁴ This fanbase consists of people who, instead of fighting out on the battlefield, support the group's cause online. They don't have to go to a physical place, let alone a public one, such as a mosque, to discuss and become involved with like-minded individuals, allowing ISIS campaigns to succeed across a large geographical area.⁵

While radicalization and recruitment ultimately require the influence of another person,⁶ the impact of propaganda should not be underestimated. It plays a crucial role as a facilitator for radicalization and serves to reinforce already hostile worldviews.⁷

The Limitations of Efforts to Address Harmful Content

¹ Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2011). Truth, lies and the internet, page 3. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Truth_-_web.pdf?1317312220

² Winter, C. (2015). The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy, page 11. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>

³ *ibid*, page 18

⁴ *ibid*, page

⁵ Katz, R. (2014, June 26). Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/categories/jihad/entry/192-follow-isis-on-twitter-a-special-report-on-the-use-of-social-media-by-jihadists>

⁶ Winter, C. (2015). The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy, page 35. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>

⁷ *ibid*, page 40

Online content poses significant challenges to any effort to control its distribution due to the nature of the Internet. Material is produced and distributed by users who are equipped with the knowledge and means to create cheap and attractive content. Moreover, it has been argued that those users are able to use a network of scattered accounts to diffuse the material,⁸ which means that the removal of their content has a limited effect, even if it does contribute to the suppression of the wider circulation of propaganda.⁹

This decentralized and flexible model of content distribution by a large number of individuals was inspired by “peer-to-peer” sharing.¹⁰ Even if one member of the group is removed or if part of the content is deleted, other members will reconfigure their structure and the same content will likely appear somewhere else on the Internet or on messenger services. This results in a costly and never-ending battle, which as the efforts to take down ISIS Twitter accounts have shown, has little impact on the overall communications efforts of the group,¹¹ especially if they are not accompanied by an invigorated system for the continuous tracking of extremist activity.

Furthermore, propaganda techniques go beyond the posting of inflammatory articles. They include the manipulation of social media and search engine algorithms to set the narrative.¹² Tech-savvy extremists can take advantage of weaknesses in the system or harness people’s tendency to share or reproduce information to disseminate dangerous propaganda. This extends to the deep web, an invite-only part of the Internet that doesn’t show up in searches, where, according to a 2012 Dutch Intelligence Service study, 99.8 percent of online terrorist activities take place.¹³

Finally, governments’ hostility towards ISIS may actually make it more attractive to certain youth.¹⁴ The reason why particular groups of young people have negative feelings towards their government can be complex and emanate from a sense of exclusion and frustration in regard to policy decisions in areas such as foreign affairs and employment.

Government Efforts to Counter Propaganda

Countries on both sides of the Atlantic have undertaken online and offline initiatives to address propaganda and disinformation. In Europe, individual countries such as the Netherlands and the United

⁸ Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence. (2015). Perspectives on Terrorism, 9(3). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426/html>

⁹ Van Ginkel, B. (2015). Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative, page 4. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-van-Ginkel-Responding-To-Cyber-Jihad-Towards-An-Effective-Counter-Narrative-March2015.pdf>

¹⁰ Swarmcast: How Jihadist Networks Maintain a Persistent Online Presence. (2015). Perspectives on Terrorism, 9(3). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/426/html>

¹¹ Katz, R. (2014, June 26). Follow ISIS on Twitter: A Special Report on the Use of Social Media by Jihadists. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <https://news.siteintelgroup.com/blog/index.php/categories/jihad/entry/192-follow-isis-on-twitter-a-special-report-on-the-use-of-social-media-by-jihadists>

¹² Patrikarakos, D. (2015). From Mullahs To Moscow: Propaganda in the Social Media Age, page 18. In *Cyber Propaganda*. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <https://lif.blob.core.windows.net/lif/docs/default-source/publications/cyber-propaganda-2015-final-pdf.pdf?sfvrsn=2>

¹³ Van Ginkel, B. (2015). Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative, page 2. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-van-Ginkel-Responding-To-Cyber-Jihad-Towards-An-Effective-Counter-Narrative-March2015.pdf>

¹⁴ ‘Punching in the Dark’: Why Islamic State Is Winning the Online War - SPIEGEL ONLINE. (2015, November 19). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/authorities-struggle-to-control-islamic-state-online-a-1063490.html>

Kingdom have adopted various measures, including early prevention initiatives.¹⁵ During the last few years, there have also been efforts at European Union level to counter extremism. The European Commission has played a supportive role with the establishment of the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) for the exchange of best practice and experiences. RAN works with private partners and think tanks to promote counter narratives. In addition, the European Commission has launched the EU Internet Forum to bring together member states, Europol and technology companies to counter propaganda and hate speech related to terrorism and cybercrime.¹⁶ The European External Action Service, meanwhile, has set up East Stratcom to register and counter Russian propaganda.

In the US, The State Department has assisted in the creation of “Viral Peace,” a program that strives to empower community activists around the world to challenge online extremism. One of its offices also runs the “Think Again Turn Away” social media campaign that engages directly with extremists and aims to prevent people from joining their cause. Canada’s counter-terrorism strategy aims at protecting citizens through, among other things, close collaboration with civil society.¹⁷ This year, the Centre for Prevention of Radicalization Leading to Violence was inaugurated in Montreal, which according to the mayor, is the first of its kind in North America.¹⁸

Finally, the Policy Planners’ Network on Countering Radicalisation and Polarisation (PPN) serves as an example of transatlantic collaboration. It consists of the security and integration ministries of 10 European countries and one North American country (Canada) with the focus on policy and the exchange of best practice.

The Need for a Long-Term Strategy and Cooperation at a Transatlantic Level

Despite the existence of various initiatives to address extremism and propaganda, we advocate for a much broader and more coordinated long-term communications and media literacy strategy that will involve a network of local, regional, national and transatlantic experts. This strategy should complement disruptive efforts such as the deactivation of accounts and removal of harmful content. It is important to view any transatlantic initiative to connect experts on propaganda and extremism as a long-term project. This means that the initiative should continue even if ISIS no longer exists. In other words, the network should be permanent but have a flexible mandate so it can adapt to new trends; it should be able to produce quality research and swiftly turn it into action; it should produce content in different languages, have its own budget, and share resources with other initiatives whenever possible; and it should be able to take its own initiatives and form task forces to address pressing issues such as ISIS propaganda.

¹⁵ Bigo, D., Bonelli, L., Guittet, E., & Ragazzi, F. (2014). Preventing and countering youth radicalisation in the EU, page 18. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/509977/IPOL-LIBE_ET\(2014\)509977_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/509977/IPOL-LIBE_ET(2014)509977_EN.pdf)

¹⁶ EU Internet Forum: Bringing together governments, Europol and technology companies to counter terrorist content and hate speech online. (2015, December 3). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from http://europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-15-6243_el.htm

¹⁷ Building Resilience Against Terrorism: Canada’s Counter-terrorism Strategy. (2013). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.publicsafety.gc.ca/cnt/rsrscs/pblctns/rsln-cgnst-trrrsm/index-eng.aspx>

¹⁸ Ackerman, S. (2015, September 22). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/sep/22/us-battle-counter-isis-propaganda-online-officials-warn>

Three important observations should be mentioned. First, bureaucracy can hinder any effort to counter propaganda through its formal, rigid structure.¹⁹ Therefore, our strategy should not be to copy the distribution techniques of ISIS or other extremists, but to analyze them and experiment with different approaches for the creation of a new, working model. Second, as Dr. Bibi van Ginkel, research fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in the Hague, argues, effective communication needs to take into account the target group, the message, the messenger and the channel used to tailor messages accordingly and achieve maximum effect.²⁰ Third, concentrating on radicalization may not be the best approach as the process is complex and unpredictable.²¹ There is a need for a strategy which will focus on wider issues related to the diffusion of information online and will connect them to questions of belonging, dealing with the burden of history, and the complexity of this world. It will also take into account the emotional dimension that emanates from people's desire to live a meaningful life. Negative messages on these subjects are often used to drive a person towards destructive and dangerous behavior.

Furthermore, a network focused solely on media and the Internet will be able to build specialized knowledge on how to run campaigns against the adoption of extremist views. Overall, the policy approach should go beyond the production of information to the proactive planning of campaigns and scaled-up activities, especially with the help of the Internet, to address misinformation and extremism. In regard to the focus of the network, it is important not to target specific groups. This is not only because it alienates parts of the citizenry but also because the network should strive to involve society as a whole and not just those perceived as most at risk.

The role that transatlantic cooperation can play in the functioning of this kind of network is crucial. It can help scale up analysis, training, and engagement with media figures, parents, social works and teachers, as well as build strong links among partners combatting an issue that affects people in Europe and North America alike.

Analysis

A continuous and thorough analysis of the material distributed by extremist groups, its impact (shares, downloads etc.) and the behavioral changes it spurs must always be a priority. The better we understand the message and its audience, the more likely we will be able to address and effectively counter its appeal. The emphasis should be placed on detecting trends in different languages and communities early on and reacting to them quickly.

Training and Engagement with Opinion Leaders and Journalists

¹⁹ Winter, C. (2015). The Virtual 'Caliphate': Understanding Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy, page 44. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/the-virtual-caliphate-understanding-islamic-states-propaganda-strategy.pdf>

²⁰ Van Ginkel, B. (2015). Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative, page 10. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-van-Ginkel-Responding-To-Cyber-Jihad-Towards-An-Effective-Counter-Narrative-March2015.pdf>

²¹ Bigo, D., Bonelli, L., Guittet, E., & Ragazzi, F. (2014). Preventing and countering youth radicalisation in the EU, page 11. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from [http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/509977/IPOL-LIBE_ET\(2014\)509977_EN.pdf](http://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/etudes/join/2014/509977/IPOL-LIBE_ET(2014)509977_EN.pdf)

The network and its partners, including member state governments, should strive to create and implement concrete strategies with short, medium and long-term goals. These strategies should be reviewed regularly and changed as necessary. They should combine the use of disruptive tactics targeting a specific negative trend or message, and proactive initiatives such as campaigns and the distribution of materials.

A variety of materials can be created for this purpose, ranging from reports and information to the production of graphs, infographics and videos for use on social media and websites. In this way, the network can also be a one-stop-shop of sorts, providing strategies and information to counter propaganda, including details on programs running in different areas, to both opinion leaders and interested members of the public. Beyond visual and informational content, the network should strive to partner with journalists, bloggers, vloggers and others who can effectively spread the message. Partnerships with influencers who may not specialize in politics or security but who have a significant youth following can be particularly fruitful. Germany has already explored such options, with the Federal Agency for Civic Education collaborating with Florian Mundt, a popular Berlin-based blogger and Hatice Schmidt, who has a strong following for her beauty tutorials.²²

Media Literacy

Media literacy efforts should focus on helping people better analyze online material and understand the power they hold as distributors themselves. They should also encourage critical thinking. One way to do so is by showing people how the recruitment process works and by deconstructing the various mind tricks at play. The “Digital Disruption” program that provides youth in the United Kingdom with tools to evaluate content²³ is a very good example, which could be duplicated in other countries.

It’s important to note that media literacy efforts must be focused on people of all ages, not just on youth. This is particularly crucial for parents, teachers and social workers who need to have some basic knowledge of the digital world to offer support and guidance. Participation can be encouraged through the creation of free, open, easily accessible and multilingual resources. Resource sharing among countries can be a cost-effective way to scale up media literacy support. Alternative approaches such as e-learning, massive open online courses (MOOCs) and partnerships with companies and institutions should be considered.

The technical expertise of employees working for the network should be robust and up-to-date, and periodical training should be provided. Experts’ knowledge of search engine optimization (SEO) should match that of the most sophisticated propagandists.²⁴ An understanding of the latest online trends can also help detect threats and new opportunities for positive engagement. Furthermore, it is important to form a team dedicated to research and innovation with the freedom to experiment with new tools to spread

²² ‘Punching in the Dark’: Why Islamic State Is Winning the Online War - SPIEGEL ONLINE. (2015, November 19). Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/europe/authorities-struggle-to-control-islamic-state-online-a-1063490.html>

²³ Bartlett, J., & Miller, C. (2011). Truth, lies and the Internet, page 26. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from http://www.demos.co.uk/files/Truth_-_web.pdf?1317312220

²⁴ Van Ginkel, B. (2015). Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative, page 14. Retrieved December 11, 2015, from <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-van-Ginkel-Responding-To-Cyber-Jihad-Towards-An-Effective-Counter-Narrative-March2015.pdf>

positive messages and measure results. This could include testing new IT tools and social media, funding applications that promote knowledge and democracy, and supporting initiatives with unorthodox approaches to media literacy.

Engagement with Companies and the Civil Society

The transatlantic dimension of the network can also lead to closer cooperation with the private sector, including technology companies and media groups, as well as with NGOs, think tanks and civil society. If possible, initiatives should cover several countries including smaller ones that may not have the resources to fund such projects alone. For example, awareness campaigns can be coordinated and run simultaneously in all partner countries and across different platforms. Other initiatives, such as funding opportunities and competitions, will be addressed to a larger number of potential participants. Furthermore, the network should be a platform for discussing delicate issues such as how to bring anti-extremist messages to people at risk without infringing their privacy and civil liberties.

Conclusion

A common transatlantic initiative countering radicalization and hostile propaganda could help countries pool resources, talent and expertise. It might even end up serving as a blueprint for other transnational digital initiatives.

Efforts to fight radicalization in the digital world must not be isolated from wider government efforts to address social and political issues however – it's equally important to address the root causes of the problem. Countering online propaganda is just one piece of a much larger puzzle.

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