Rationale for a Extremism Deconstruct Programme & Counter Narrative Hub

Q.1: Why is one necessary?

Ans: The STREET Deconstruct programme was devised to provide a much needed analytical assessment and refutation of extremist propaganda that is promoted audio visually via the Internet. A plethora of scholarly / academic written work and critiques of extremist literature are widely available in numerous languages. However, very few projects / programmes actually effectively address extremist propaganda that is aired via the Internet.1 It is widely acknowledged that the response to extremist propaganda via the Internet is wholly inadequate and that extremists have exploited this weakness to devastating effect.

The Deconstruct methodology is itself a relatively new approach to tackling extremist propaganda in the west via the Internet, however, its objective of refuting extreme and distorted interpretations of Islamic legislature and texts etc. is based on established religious principles that have been practiced in the Muslim world for centuries.

1.1. The need for a central and consolidated approach

Refutation and clarification of distorted or misunderstood interpretations of religious texts continues to be the method through which mainstream religious beliefs and practices are disseminated by various religions. Islam is no different. However, in view of the proliferation, effectiveness and success of extremist propaganda via the Internet, there is now an urgent requirement to broaden the scope of STREET’s Deconstruct Programme beyond its present remit. A central international hub of expertise in the field of researching, deconstructing and countering extremist narratives is therefore proposed. Such an entity will be available to various counter extremist/terrorist agencies and institutions enabling them to access expertise which will provide counter narratives, tailored deconstruct templates and research data to address the unremitting flow of extremist propaganda. The hub will develop and provide the necessary counter narrative and/or Deconstruct templates tailored to the requirement of the agency in question, (i.e. a counter terrorism agencies such as the intelligence services will require

1 Refer to Prentice, S et. al: ‘Analyzing the semantic content and persuasive composition of extremist media: A case study of texts produced during the Gaza conflict’, Springer Science + Business Media, LLC 2010
detailed, academic counter narratives/deconstruct templates whereas educational institutions are more likely to need more basic, explanatory tools.)

Q.2: What methods of dissemination will be applied by the hub?

Ans: An academic case study approach will be applied to each propaganda video / footage. This enables the Deconstruct team to examine such footage from various angles:

i. historically
ii. ideologically
iii. religious methodology or practice
iv. from conventional media deconstruct perspectives.

While these are not considered as conventional case study methods, they enable detailed analyses and dissemination and can be used interchangeably, adding new methodologies whenever. The overall objective, however, remains the same:

The deconstruction attempts to isolate the various media components that have been utilised to construct the media text in question…[It] will identify the various messages being encoded within the text and the subtleties at play that are deliberately put together for effect and impact upon the viewer.  

Additionally, it aims to provide:

a counter-narrative from an Islamic perspective, using authentic sources to repel justifications offered by the producers of the named video. [The counter-narrative is] aimed at devaluing the arguments put forth by highlighting the weaknesses…in light of the Qur’an and Sunnah.

All material is transcribed. Timings of statements and commentaries etc. are accurately transcribed along with the type of imagery used throughout the viewing. Analyses and dissemination of the footage is done according to some of the above mentioned methods and case study approach. Extensive religious research is also undertaken in order to provide the intended target audience (academics, practitioners and more specifically, individuals susceptible or sympathetic to violent extremism) with the correct context in which to understand Islamic legislature and / or texts etc. The material is then systematically refuted by highlighting distorted

2 Media deconstruction and Counter-narrative of “as-Shahab Video 1”, STREET UK Ltd Deconstruction Team, August 2008, p.2
3 Ibid, p.21
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misunderstood interpretations of these texts, jurisprudence etc. often expounded by extremist protagonists. Once prepared, the material will be translated into the language/s of the agencies that utilise the services of the hub.

Q.3: What other services will the hub provide?

Ans:

i. The hub will be set up to monitor and explore websites, engaging in forums as a means of challenging and ultimately disrupting extremist rhetoric and thought. This will be done by referring to scholarly mainstream tenets of Islam and providing alternative discernable contexts which detract from the single narrative of extremist violence.

ii. Additionally, extremist propaganda will be examined to determine the extent to which western industries, i.e. popular brand products etc. are utilised/referenced to promote or further terrorism. Upon establishing that such resources are being referenced or used in this manner, the appropriate company/ies will be notified with the objective of assisting them in devising effective strategies to dissociate and distance their product/s from extremist/terrorist campaigns.

iii. Workshops and training will also be provided for practitioners in the field, enabling them to become more familiar with the Islamic legislature, tenets and history etc. so often misrepresented by extremist propagandists.

Q.4: How will the hub be funded?

Ans: In order for the hub to be effective and accessible to the various institutions that will reference the hub and utilise its expertise, the proposal that various EU members and the US government allocate sustainable funds from their respective C-T budgets is a realistic one in light of the present economic climate. Private entities, interested in preserving their products, as outlined above, will also be invited to subscribe to the services available.

Conclusion

The main operative structure of the hub will function according to Work Streams.

Work Stream 1’s [WS1] remit will focus on Counter Narratives, producing eBooks etc. and to visit and engage with users of extremist websites.
Work Stream 2’s [WS2] remit will be to provide Deconstruct templates in response to requests from various agencies and institutions that flag up the relevant websites and Internet links causing concern.

Work Stream 3’s [WS3] remit will focus on research and exploring extremist propaganda that utilises brands/products for the purpose of advancing the extremist/terrorist cause.

Work Stream 4’s [WS4] remit will be to develop and provide tailored training programmes to practitioners from various agencies and institutions.

Work Streams can be increased or decreased according to the demands upon the hub – such is the organic nature of it as an entity of dissemination, countering extremism and research.

Expertise exists across existing counter-terrorism intervention projects and academic institutes, enabling a relatively smooth transition of the present set up to a larger, international hub. That said, more staff will be required to meet increased demands of its subscribers/clients.

I am happy to discuss and/or meet with parties interested in developing this hub on the scale outlined in this proposal. An example of a Deconstruct template is attached for reference.

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