

SOME OBSERVATIONS ON 'COUNTERING TERRORIST NARRATIVES AND PREVENTING THE USE OF THE INTERNET FOR TERRORIST PURPOSES'

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1. We underestimate the 'social' in social media.
2. **The socio-political context is decisive.** The message will find its own medium. Overwhelming emphasis on the role of the Internet in the process of radicalization, but the evidence is ambiguous at best. Number of examples of great revolutions and transformations through history, some of them far more cataclysmic than the disorders we experience in this age of social media. Christianity outlawed, on pain of death by torture, for 300 years. 50 years later, it was the state religion of the Roman Empire. Messianic movements before and after secured no traction. The enveloping conditions – the collapse of empire, economic and social disruption, the loss of faith. People looking for a new framework to find order in a disordered world.
3. Within religious communities today, traditional authority is being challenged, but is not being replaced by an alternative value-based authority. Volatile and relatively unschooled leaders are emerging, capitalizing on alienation and isolation.
4. The expression 'cyber-radicalization' is often misapplied. Cases would be rare. In our own research on Daesh recruitment in India, echoing the public discourse, most interviewees referred repeatedly to cyber-radicalization, but the subsequent description of the process indicates access by already radicalized individuals, and it is more accurate to speak of it as cyber-mobilization or cyber-recruitment. These are already radicalized individuals engaging in a purposeful search on the internet of specific materials that will allow them to identify organizations and courses of action that enable them to take their intentions forward, and thereafter, to establish some measure of contact with such organizations or their mediators. Cyber radicalization may also play a role in early stages as a supplement to face to face radicalization within the community, but even at this stage reflects intentional seeking behavior among individuals who have undergone a sufficient measure of radicalization to create the cognitive opening within which such searching becomes a psychological need.

5. The internet became crucial in the final stages of mobilization in most cases. The radicalization process from this stage on is extremely rapid, culminating in action, either to move into terrorist organisations, or to engage in terrorist action locally.
6. Blurred lines between online and other forms of radicalization. Online radicalization is a part of a complex radicalization process in society. Major thrust of response must be constructed in society. Cyber tools, particularly social media are just media. While they empower radicalized individuals, the initial stages of radicalization occur within society. The problem is not so much social media, it is the larger social discourse. Not them vs. us. Just us. We are, in many ways, the radicalizers.
7. **Ecosystem of political falsification, identity-based political polarization and extremism.**
Social media is only the noise surrounding these developments. Emphasis is on narrative. But *what we do* is also part of the narrative. Much of contemporary political practice is morally unjustifiable. Loss of legitimacy in global, national and democratic leaderships.
8. Mainstreaming of extremist ideas through polarizing electoral politics. Trend across the world.
9. Problem: how do you introduce an element of non-partisan rationality in a discourse dominated by intemperate speech and unyielding pole positions. **Competitive extremism** is the most destructive dynamic, whether inter-religious or sectarian, or political ideological.
10. Why is the narrative of democracy, freedom, justice and human dignity in retreat? Because it is not practiced consistently. Globally, in all our affairs, brazen power appears increasingly to prevail. And if this is the case, why should ideologies of absolute power not gain traction?
11. Advocacy of this narrative is also poor. Complacency and hubris of the 'end of history' narrative; progressive erosion of the moral high ground of democratic societies and systems that have opportunistically violated their own norms, and the norms they established for the international community and institutions.
12. Need for research-based strategies and tactics to frame our counter-narratives. Why does a tiny country like Belgium, with roughly 400,000 Muslims in its population, send 413 fighters

(2017) to join IS? And India, with 200 million Muslims, see just 169 go to Iraq, Syria and Afghanistan, more than half of whom were recruited abroad? (Of these 56 have been confirmed killed; another 171 persons have been arrested in India for a range of activities sympathetic to IS, or for various criminal plots connected with IS). Smartphone penetration in India is over 931 million (nearly 67% of the population). These numbers can only be reassuring in a population of 1.4 billion, including an estimated over 200 million Muslims, and after nearly eight years of *Daesh* propaganda and activity seeking recruits in India. Intensive inquiries: Where can the most effective interventions and investments be made? What interventions – in the media or in physical institutions – have the most lasting impact?

13. Most important element of the success of extremist narratives is not just the failure of counter-narratives, but the progressive failure of the systems and establishments they attack.
14. The extremist narrative resonates in the vacuum that has arisen out of the loss of trust in and moral authority of the of the democratic-liberal-humanist value system and its institutions. This loss is the consequence of our own practices. As many states undermine their own legitimacy, become purveyors of falsehood. We then have a contest of falsehoods, in a competition to dominate the narrative by all means available. Strategically, this can only be counterproductive from a perspective that seeks to establish an order based on explicit principles and values.
15. 'Fake news' crisis is not SM or verification issue. It is a collapse of values and the absence of any stigma attached to discovery and exposure of falsehoods.
16. Unless we create successful institutions and societies based on clearly articulated values, principles, and practices, we will fail to establish an effective counter-narrative.
17. Narratives: tactical and strategic responses. Effort to contest each claim is continuous and necessary. But a strategic response must comprehend, on the one hand, undermining the legitimacy of the extremist narrative and, on the other, establishing the legitimacy of the idea of democracy, and of human rights and dignity. Beyond phobias and philiias.
18. Importance of networks to counter extremism. Media, non-governmental research and advocacy groups, and community outreach, must combine both real and virtual

interventions. Primary motivation for radicalization is not grand ideologies but fellowship with comrades. Social alienation and isolation are the shared characteristic of most individuals susceptible to radicalization.

19. Platforms' algorithms connect users to content that resonates with existing inclinations. Internet giants are "attention merchants"; feeds are "personalized based on past clicks". Result: "filter bubble" created by algorithms give user what he or she wants... rarely encounter diverse opinions. Material becomes "more and more bizarre or hateful." Sharpest-edged, least-nuanced, most emotionally resonant content, is most widely disseminated. Feedback loop confirms and strengthens pre-existing beliefs and inclinations. It may be useful if platform algorithms pair such materials with views and inputs which establish a balance.
20. Seeding doubt and discrediting radical ideas, potentially viable tools for counter-radicalization. This requires intervention in, and not disruption of, the radical discourse online.
21. Heterogeneity of terrorist and extremist organisations needs to be factored into campaigns. One size doesn't fit all.
22. Facts don't matter. Emotional appeal, the thrill of adventure, internal group dynamics, spiraling one-upmanship and a perceived lack of alternatives to the use of violence could explain how non-violent radicals turn violent.
23. But systematically expose fake news and falsehoods across the board, and promote critical thinking.
24. All manually intensive interventions have limited impact. Gephi analysis reveals important aspects of the discourse and counters. However, use is likely to be limited to institutions.
25. Not just Social Media, the wider environment of discourse is crucial. Countering extremist narratives through entertainment: literature, TV, Films. Overload of violence, conflict, radical values. Deepening the discourse on SM. We must restore the link between popular culture and the idea of founding society and civilization on the basis of rationality, science and human values.

