Preventing/Countering Violent Extremism Annotated Bibliography

A Report to the Bureau of Conflict & Stabilization Operations
U.S. Department of State

June 2015

Michael Goldfien MA’15
Michael Woolslayer MA’15
Adrienne Von Schulthess ’15

Adviser: Beth Van Schaack, Leah Kaplan Visiting Professor in International Human Rights
Countering Violent Speech Online

Speaking at the White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015, President Barack Obama told an audience of civil society actors, law enforcement officials, and religious leaders that “[w]e have to confront squarely and honestly the twisted ideologies that these terrorist groups use to incite people to violence.” Obama continued, arguing that “[w]e need to find new ways to amplify the voices of peace and tolerance and inclusion, and we especially need to do it online.” Since the “War on Terror” began in the wake of 9/11, the battle for the hearts and minds of people around the world has increasingly taken place on the Internet. Groups like ISIS and Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula use sites like YouTube and Twitter to spread slick and modern propaganda well beyond the territory that they inhabit.

As President Obama’s comments suggest, dealing with the threat of extremism online has taken on a new urgency in recent years as the impact of online extremism are increasingly felt. Our research focuses on the following topics: (1) the role of the Internet in the radicalization process; (2) social science research on misinformation, beliefs, and corrections; and (3) current and proposed efforts to counter extremist messages online. Our preliminary research indicates that despite the widespread presence of extremist propaganda online, the radicalization and recruitment of people to extremist causes almost always involves in-person interactions. Furthermore, current social science research suggests that deep-seated beliefs can be very difficult to change; several recent studies have show that people often remain committed to their beliefs, even when provided with factual evidence that undermines them. In fact, corrections can in some cases lead to a “backfire effect,” with dissonant evidence increasing the strength with which people hold inaccurate beliefs.

Correcting Beliefs


The authors discuss past research that demonstrates the phenomenon of “belief perseverance,” whereby information about a person or organization can persist long after it is discredited. However, past research has focused exclusively on negative information. The authors find that belief perseverance does not appear to be strong when positive information is demonstrated to be untrue. The authors argue that this reflects an ignorance of the “differential effects of positive and negative
information.” Negative information is more powerful and thus people tend to under-correct for its influence when it is discredited. Brendan Nyhan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College. His research, often experimental, focuses on political misperceptions and corrections. (http://www.dartmouth.edu/~nyhan/)


The authors conducted a survey asking respondents about their preferences regarding welfare policy. The respondents were split into three groups: one control group that was simply asked about their policy preferences, one group that was asked about their policy preferences following a quiz that posed factual questions about welfare in the US, and one group that was asked about their policy preferences after being given factual information about welfare in the US. The authors found that dealing with factual information, even being presented hard facts, did not have a statistically significant impact on respondents’ policy preferences. This was despite the fact that respondents who answered the quiz were grossly misinformed about welfare in the US.

The authors conducted a second study, asking two groups to answer two questions:

(1) What percentage of the US federal budget goes to welfare? And,

(2) what percentage of the US federal budget should go to welfare?

The first group was asked to indicate their support for cutting welfare spending after answering these questions. The second group, after answering these two questions, was then told the actual percentage of the budget going to welfare and asked to indicate their support for cutting welfare spending. Those who were provided with factual information, in many cases showing that welfare spending was below their perceived and preferred level, seemed to be less inclined to cut welfare spending than those who did not receive factual information. The authors conclude their empirical investigations “show that, in general, citizens tend to resist facts. They can be induced to use correct information, even in the context of a single-shot survey, but it takes an extraordinarily obtrusive presentation of information. ... People hold inaccurate factual beliefs, and do so confidently.”


The authors conducted four experiments in which they gave subjects mock news articles that contained either a misleading claim by a politician or a misleading claim
by a politician and a correction. The authors found that corrections rarely reduced misperceptions by the subjects and that there were many instances of a “backfire effect,” whereby corrections in fact increased the level of misperception by subjects.


The authors discuss their social science research relating to misinformation about politics, discussing three reasons that attempts to correct misperceptions might fail:

(1) use of non-credible or unpersuasive sources,

(2) failure to displace incorrect causal stories, and

(3) focus on the negation of false claims rather than the affirmation of correct ones.

With respect to sources of correction, the authors find that people can be less receptive to corrective information if it both cuts against their political beliefs and comes from a source perceived to be associated with different a different political viewpoint. On the importance of causality, the authors found that people are more likely to accept corrective information if it include a causal explanation that can displace a previously held, incorrect causal explanation. Finally, with regard to the phrasing of corrective information, the authors maintain that corrections phrased in an affirmative manner (e.g. “he was exonerated”) rather than negative manner (e.g. “he was found not guilty”) are less likely to ‘backfire.’


The authors conducted a convenience sample of university students, asking them to respond to questions relating to health. In particular, they asked respondents to list up to four individuals with whom they discuss health matters and whether they believed that those individuals supported vaccinations (H1N1 in one instance, influenza in another). The authors found that, perhaps not surprisingly, people who believed their social networks were ‘pro-vaccine’ were more likely themselves to hold positive attitudes toward vaccines (e.g. feeling that vaccines were safe, intending to get vaccinated, etc.). Conversely, people who believe their social networks were ‘anti-vaccine’ were more likely to hold negative attitudes toward vaccines.

The authors claim that people who believe conspiracy theories suffer from “crippled epistemology” rather than mental illness or an inability to think rationally. That is, people who believe in conspiracy theories tend to have access to limited sources of information. The authors further suggest that there may be a link between “crippled epistemology” and the fact that terrorists are likely to come from societies in which civil rights and liberties are restricted. Closed societies narrow the menu of information sources, leaving citizens more likely to accept the logic of conspiracy theories.

The authors posit that conspiracy theories tend to be particularly resistant to counter-narratives, since efforts to undermine the theories may simply be seen as part of the conspiracy. The authors then propose a policy response to conspiracy theories, which involves various efforts and strategies to rebut conspiracy theories in order to increase information sources and “break up the crippled epistemology of conspiracy-minded groups.”

### Online Recruiting and Radicalization


Aly examines the radicalization of an individual in two cases: a Singaporean and an Australian. She finds the Internet playing a developing role in the process of radicalization and suggests that the Internet has become an important tactical tool in the terrorists’ repertoire. She also indicates that the role of the Internet in radicalization and the extent to which it contributes to the process through which latent beliefs translate into violent actions is not fully understood. A developing strand of terrorism studies deals with the diffusion of intent as an integral component of counter-terrorism efforts; with this has come an understanding of terrorism as a battle of words and ideas. The author argues that nowhere is this more evident than on the Internet.


The spectre of a retrograde, puritanical and belligerent ideology may seem anachronistic in the twenty-first century. However, Jihadism (as opposed to the classical reified conception of Jihad) is a thoroughly modern phenomenon. The
Internet, that most contemporary of media, is increasingly its medium of choice: Jihadist websites, forums and blogs flourish. This article examines the audience, the functions of the Internet for Jihadists, how Jihadist media derives legitimacy, radicalization, and Jihadist media as an alternative paradigm.


Large amounts of jihadi video content on YouTube along with the vast array of relational data that can be gathered opens up innovative avenues for exploration of the support base for political violence. Conway and McInerney's exploratory study analyzes the online supporters of jihad-promoting video content on YouTube, focusing on those posting and commenting upon martyr-promoting material from Iraq. Findings suggest that a majority of consumers of this content are under 35 years of age and reside outside the region of the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) with the largest percentage of supporters located in the United States. Their evidence supports the potential for online radicalization. What is clearly evident however is that jihadist content is spreading far beyond traditional jihadist websites or even dedicated fora. This content now embraces, in particular, video sharing and social networking—both hallmarks of Web 2.0—thus extending the reach of content purveyors far beyond what may be conceived as their core support base in the MENA region to diaspora populations, converts, and political sympathizers.


Friedland and Rogerson suggest that although the broader political climate may exert a powerful influence on the success or failure of emerging social movement organizations (SMOs), the Internet is enabling groups previously incapable of political action to find their voices. Whether this shift is offering greater relative benefit to previously underrepresented or incumbent political fixtures is subject to debate, but it is clear that like-minded people are now able to better locate and converse with each other via Internet media. As a result, the distance between talk and organized action has grown smaller. The Internet is a locus for all types of groups to communicate, collaborate, and cooperate. This technology is, in principle, value neutral: it can be a channel for both positive and negative connections. The authors provide a summary of the literature on the role of the Internet in social and
political mobilization, with the goal of examining concepts, theories, and findings that may be relevant to understanding the potential role of the Internet in radicalization.


Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman draw on empirical data taken from an examination of 117 “jihadist” terrorists in the United States and the United Kingdom to trace the initial arc of their trajectory into terrorism. They conclude that religious beliefs play a role in radicalization, a finding which itself is not surprising but is likely to be controversial. The study identifies six manifestations of the radicalization process:

1. adopting a legalistic interpretation of Islam;
2. trusting only select religious authorities;
3. perceived schism between Islam and the West;
4. low tolerance for perceived theological deviance;
5. attempts to impose religious beliefs on others; and
6. political radicalization.

The authors found that in-person overseas training was a significant step in the radicalization process, more so than anything done online.


Husain and Saltman, focusing on the U.K. and France, look at common extremist search terms and find that most would lead to non-extremist sites on initial searches. This suggests that people generally do not get exposed “by accident,” but are instead already headed in a particular direction. The authors identify several key findings in studying online extremism. First, the majority of radicalized individuals are exposed to extremist ideology through offline socialization before further online indoctrination. Second, negative measures like censorship were ineffective, costly, and potentially counter-productive. Third, positive measures like counter-extremist content and online initiatives are more effective, but there is not enough counter-extremist content available now. The Quilliam Foundation is a UK-based counter-extremist think tank founded by Maajid Nawaz, a former member of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir (http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/).

O’Rourke suggests that while the Internet is facilitating global virtual communities (like Second Life, MySpace and Facebook), it is also providing anonymous meeting places for disenfranchised individuals to gather, share ideas, post, and exchange information regarding their particular ideology. This virtual community provides a sense of belonging to a global cause in which the actions of an individual can be aligned with, and seen to contribute towards, something more significant than their own lives. Membership of this virtual community can facilitate the indoctrination of individuals, thereby negating psychological barriers that would normally inhibit particular types of behavior. Terrorist groups operate as amorphous, fluid networks providing them significant advantages over rigidly structured state and nation-based law enforcement agencies. In addition, terrorist groups are exploiting the combination of rapidly evolving technology and incommodious legislation to prevent detection.


The Internet is of major importance to the global jihadist movement today. It facilitates ideological cohesion and network-building within a geographically scattered movement, and all levels of the jihadist network are present on the Internet. Yet on recruitment, Rogan suggests that the Internet plays a major, but indirect, role. “The jihadist material propagated on the net is free and easy to access for those interested in the subject and included guides both for novices and experts. It thus creates a basis of knowledge and possibly recruits new supporters of the jihadist ideology.” However, “it seems as if the Internet is not used as a direct means of recruitment, but that it functions merely as a facilitator for the recruitment process. Physical contact, in addition to online communication and propaganda, is essential. Furthermore, the need for anonymity on the Internet most likely prevents it from becoming a primary recruiting tool.”


Tucker examines the available research and questions Marc Sageman’s claim that the Internet is transforming how terrorists interact. In his book Leaderless Jihad, Marc Sageman claims, as the title indicates, that Jihad in the modern world is changing from a centrally-organized and structured activity into a more dispersed, decentralized movement in which small groups self-organize to carry out attacks. In
making this argument, Sageman claims that the Internet “has dramatically transformed the structure and dynamic of the evolving threat of global Islamic terrorism by changing the nature of terrorists’ interactions.” The author concludes both that Sageman offers no evidence to support his claim the Internet is transforming how terrorists interact and there is little evidence elsewhere to support this claim.


Vohn Behr, Reding, Edwards, and Gribbon test the hypothesis that the Internet plays a significant role in the process of radicalization. They identified five key findings. First, the Internet does create more opportunities to be radicalized. Second, the Internet does have an “echo chamber” effect, helping confirm existing beliefs. Third, the Internet does not necessarily accelerate the pace of radicalization. Fourth, evidence does not suggest that the Internet allows radicalization without physical contact; it complements rather than replaces in-person interactions. Fifth, evidence does not suggest the claim that the Internet has contributed to the development of self-radicalization. The authors emphasize that the Internet is just one aspect of radicalization, and it is essential for future research to look both online and offline to be able to understand the process as a whole.


Wojcieszak analyzes survey data obtained from members in neo-Nazi and environmentalist discussion forums. It assesses the links between participation in radical and ideologically homogeneous online groups and two forms of political engagement: movement support and movement promotion. This study also tests whether perceived political dissimilarity of offline friends and family (core ties) and of more distant interpersonal associates (significant ties) encourages or thwarts political engagement and whether it moderates the influence exerted by online groups. As expected, political engagement among the analyzed respondents increases with online participation, also controlling for extremism, political discussion and news media use. Although dissimilar core ties neither encourage nor discourage political engagement, they moderate the mobilizing influence from neo-Nazi and radical environmentalist online groups. Dissimilar significant ties, in turn, do not directly affect political engagement and do not interact with online participation. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed. Wojcieszak’s
analysis shows that although face-to-face groups have been traditionally seen as central to political socialization, online groups have emerged as an additional factor that influences political engagement.


Wojcieszak’s study draws on survey data obtained from members in neo-Nazi discussion forums and builds on evidence that participation in these forums exacerbates false consensus, that is: an overestimation of public support for their own views. This study goes further to test whether contacts with dissimilar offline social networks as well as exposure to ideologically dissimilar news media attenuate false consensus and its association with online participation. Contrary to predictions, politically-dissimilar networks do not reduce false consensus among the analyzed sample. Exposure to ideologically dissimilar news media, on the other hand, results in more accurate estimates (main effect), but it exacerbates false consensus as resulting from participation in neo-Nazi online groups (interactive effect). She concludes that active participation in some online groups might bias members’ estimates of the public opinion climate regardless of the dissimilarity of their social and informational environment offline.


The Internet came to Indonesia in 1983 and its usage has continued to expand ever since, especially within institutions of learning and in the government sector. Yang Hui situates the study of radical websites within the development of the Internet in Indonesia in general instead of in isolation. She then examines the impact of certain activities such as cyberterrorism in perspective, given the vast expanse of Indonesia as an archipelago and the resulting difficulties in linking the entire country to the Internet. The article seeks to trace the development of the Internet in Indonesia and examine the resulting impact on the reach of the radical Bahasa Indonesia Islamic websites in the Indonesian Archipelago and beyond. It concludes that hard-line proclamations and agreement with extremist ideas online, and even the provision of materials to commit violence, need not necessarily translate into action. In addition, the “tipping point” toward radicalization differs between individuals; therefore, the Internet is not the only medium with the potential to radicalize readers.

**Online Counter-Messaging**

Is “online de-radicalization” possible? Given the two growing phenomena of “online radicalization” and “behavioral/ideological/organizational de-radicalization,” this article outlines a broad strategy for countering the narratives of violent extremists. It argues that an effective counter-narrative should be built on three pillars:

1. The first is a comprehensive message that dismantles and counter-argues against every dimension of the extremist narrative, namely the theological, political, historical, instrumental and socio-psychological dimensions.
2. The second pillar encompasses the messengers. The article argues that for the first time in the history of Jihadism a “critical mass” of former militants, who rebelled not only against the current behavior of their former colleagues but also against the ideology supporting it, has come into existence. This “critical mass” can constitute the core of credible messengers, especially the few de-radicalized individuals and groups that still maintain influence and respect among vulnerable communities.
3. The third pillar is the dissemination and attraction strategy of the counter-narratives(s), which focuses on the role of the media.

The author of the article outlines a broad framework, which is a part of a UN-sponsored, comprehensive research project on countering the extremists narrative.


Briggs and Feve aim to review the state of knowledge around efforts to counter narratives of violent extremism and make recommendations for governments, such as the Canadian government, to guide their emerging work in this sensitive area of policy. In order to make sense of the complex range of actions and initiatives described as “counter-narratives,” this report sets out a “counter-messaging spectrum,” which is comprised of three main types of activities: government strategic communications, alternative narratives, and counter-narratives. They suggest that much of the emphasis to date has been placed on restrictive measures, such as takedowns and filtering. While it is important for governments to enforce the law—and be seen to be doing so—there are severe limitations on the effectiveness of this response, given the speed with which new data is uploaded and the limited capacity of law enforcement agencies.
Conference participants gathered to discuss the emergence of the Internet as a key way for violent extremists to encourage others to adopt their views. The conference focused on identifying good practices in using the Internet to undermine the appeal of terrorism, to expose its lack of legitimacy and its negative impact, and to undermine the credibility of its messengers. Key themes included the importance of identifying the target audience, crafting effective messages, identifying credible messengers, and using appropriate media to reach vulnerable communities.

The CTITF Working Group on Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes generated this report focused on the potential for the Internet to be used as a tool for terrorist activity. It outlines approaches taken by member states to counter the use of the Internet by extremists, breaking that activity down into four categories:

1. use of the Internet to perform cyber terrorist acts;
2. the Internet as a terrorist information source;
3. the Internet as a communication hub for terrorist activity; and
4. the use of the Internet as a means of supporting terrorism.

The report suggests that countering the latter two functions will require innovative new thinking. The report also focuses on the use of counter-narratives and identifies areas for further work in that space.


Neumann seeks inform the debate about strategies and options for countering online radicalization within the U.S. domestic context. The article’s aim is to provide a better understanding of how the Internet facilitates radicalization; an appreciation of the dilemmas and tradeoffs that are involved in countering online radicalization within the United States; and ideas and best practices for making the emerging approach and strategy richer and more effective. Neumann argues that online
radicalization can be dealt with in three ways. Approaches aimed at restricting freedom of speech and removing content from the Internet are not only the least desirable, they are also the least effective. Instead, government should play a more energetic role in reducing the demand for radicalization and violent extremist messages—for example, by encouraging civic challenges to extremist narratives and by promoting awareness and education of young people. In the short term, the most promising way for dealing with the presence of violent extremists and their propaganda on the Internet is to exploit their online communications to gain intelligence and gather evidence in the most comprehensive and systematic fashion possible.


The authors examine the increased use of the Internet as a radicalization and recruitment tool, although the focus has largely been on technical solutions like deleting and/or blocking radicals’ access. Yet the authors find that any strategy that relies on reducing the availability of content alone is bound to be crude, expensive, and counterproductive. Radicalization is largely a real-world phenomenon that cannot be dealt with simply by “pulling the plug.” Any strategy that hopes to counter online radicalization must aim to create an environment in which the production and consumption of such materials become not just more difficult in a technical sense but unacceptable as well as less desirable. Elements of this strategy include:

- Deterring the producers of extremist materials
- Empowering online communities to self-regulate
- Reducing the appeal of extremist messages
- Promoting positive messages


Thomas provides a brief overview of past and current efforts at countering Internet extremism, dating from the 1980s and focusing on initiatives of the U.S. Department of Defense. He breaks down various expert opinions on the use of the Internet by extremists and the potential for countering their messaging online. The promotion of secular and moderate authorities is identified as a promising avenue of countering online extremism, as long as it is part of a broader effort to constrain, monitor, and deceive extremists.

York and Chalk examine the challenges and possibilities of online counter-radicalization programs. They also identified a U.S. State Department Capacity Building project and efforts by the “think-do tank” Google Ideas to counter violent extremism online. Recommendations include removing from the control of security forces, or “de-securitizing,” efforts to counter violent extremism, addressing sources of mistrust within the Muslim community, focusing engagements and CVE education on social media influencers, building leadership and social media capacity in the Muslim community, enhancing private sector funding and engagement, and finding avenues to enhance government funding.

**Countering Violent Extremism Generally**


This report argues that there are several risk factors that contribute to violent extremism, including political grievances, structural inequalities, ethnic tensions, social change, and a culture of violence. This policy research report focuses on three important factors: what compels people to take violent action in the name of religion, what makes these messages so appealing, and the role these movements have in recruiting and influencing individuals to take action.


This report covers the western fixation on “expert” mantra and language, which often leads to oversimplified and black vs. white explanations of very complex issues. Doing so has led us to misjudge the influence and importance of the United States in the world, and to underestimate the strength of certain factors that most polarize local opinion on violent extremism. This report attempts to shed light on some of these factors, and potential solutions.

This FBI report discusses how connections to al Qaeda are not a prerequisite for successful Islamic terrorist operations and that support for violent Islamic extremism will most likely remain an ongoing problem. To counteract and address the potential threats that violent extremists can pose, the FBI has developed a two-pronged approach, which first involves the identification of indicators of those who may demonstrate potential for violence, and then involves an engagement in high levels of outreach to Muslim communities in order to dispel misconceptions that may facilitate violent extremism.


This report discusses the efforts by the Obama administration to combat violent terrorism. It goes on to discuss the transition from Radicalization to Terrorism and countering this radicalization in the United States. It discusses the Obama Administration’s Strategy and Current activities, which include community engagement, building government and law enforcement expertise, and countering violent extremist propaganda. This report also discusses the challenges and risks of these efforts.


Homeland Security’s approach to countering violent extremism focuses on three objectives: understanding violent extremism, supporting local communities, and supporting local law enforcement. These objectives focus on supporting and coordinating efforts to better understand the phenomenon of violent extremism, strengthening the relationship with communities that may be targeted for recruitment by violent extremists, and deterring and disrupting recruitment and individual mobilization through support for local law enforcement programs.


Holmer argues that building a stronger bridge between security policymakers and the community involved in peacemaking, along with coordinated and clearer lines of
engagement, could facilitate the advancement of preventing violent extremism. Holmer also discusses the challenges of implementing these policies and the challenges that are faced when trying to prevent conflict. Lastly, she discusses how closer collaboration between policy and global security efforts may help catalyze the process towards effective peacebuilding.


Canada’s Counter-Terrorism strategy aims to target the root causes and factors that contribute to terrorism by engaging with individuals, communities, and national and international partners. Additionally, research is used to better understand these factors and how to prevent and counter them.


This book covers the findings of case studies in Europe and North America that pertain to countering violent extremism. It also covers methods used to counter violent extremism and various factors that are related to doing so, including protecting human rights, radicalization, the development of co-operative/community-oriented approaches to counterterrorism, and the risks in applying community-policing approaches in preventing terrorism.


This talks about a neighborhood where seemingly “good” boys started to leave to join the fight in Iraq. This piece goes in depth into the lives and neighborhood of the masterminds of some of the plots in Spain. This piece does a good job getting into the mentality of those who join and are thinking of joining violent groups. However, it stays at the individual level and does not come to conclusions as to motivations overall.


This piece looks at different Colombian guerilla groups and the stages and motivations of those who joined the groups. Key findings are that motivations to join are influenced by the level of government repression, the goals of the insurgency group, social interactions, and the resources of the group.

This piece examines deradicalization programs. This study notes the lack of empirical data on which programs actually work and if they do, why they work. This piece creates and presents a framework to evaluate different deradicalization programs. This framework is called Multiattribute Utility Technology. The case studies applied in this study are: North Ireland, Colombia, Indonesia, Yemen and Saudi Arabia.


This article takes a narrow look at two terrorist plots. The first is the 2004 attack in Madrid that resulted in many causalities. The second is the killing of a filmmaker in Amsterdam by an Al-Qaeda copycat group. The analysis points to the conclusion that the Iraq War has motivated violent extremism and is seen as representing the injustices against the Muslim world in general.