



CENTRE FOR RESEARCH AND EVIDENCE ON SECURITY THREATS

CREST DIGEST

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A round-up of research relevant to understanding and countering security threats.

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NEW RESEARCH

Memes, trolling, and flaming: Islamic State grooming of youth with social media

Two recent journal articles explore the use of social media by Islamist extremist groups. Laura Huey explores the social media evolution of 'jihadi cool'. Al-Qaeda and, more recently, Islamic State (IS) supporters have used social media and file sharing platforms to present their messages and propaganda in interesting or entertaining ways to attract and engage supporters. Rap videos and memes are, Huey argues, a way to express distaste with the status quo, supporting a counter-culture 'cool' or dangerous identity. Mass sharing via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram, in combination

with the continuous presence of messaging and dialogue about it (whether positive or negative) serves to enhance the credibility of the messages.

Al-Rawi explores the use of another form of media – video games – as part of Islamist extremists' repertoire, arguing that IS uses video games to engage sympathisers and garner support. The video game 'Salil al-Sawarem' (The Clanging of the Swords) is a violent first person shooter game created by IS, where players are in computer-mediated communication with other players. This communication can become disrupted by trolling and flaming, aggravating any arguments. Trolling seeks to create an argument or hijack a discussion, whereas flaming tends to be harsher, more personal and employs more direct insults.

The relative anonymity of online game users allows flaming and trolling to merge and lead to extended arguments. Young men who are drawn to violent video games – young men eager to identify with the characters, those who need to master working through stress and angry feelings and possibly peer rejection – are also the type of people drawn to this antisocial media content (Olson, Kutner, & Warner, 2008). They are both perpetrators and victims of cyberbullying and can be impressionable to the alluring 'cool' grip of a terrorist organisation.

Al-Rawi's analysis of YouTube comments about Salil al-Sawarem found a third were positive and mostly supportive of IS. While the majority (57%) of comments were negative toward the game and IS, almost all replies to negative comments were personal abusive attacks (i.e., flaming and trolling) to gain compliance or silence. Trolling and flaming is an effective recruitment tool in IS's Jihadi 3.0 efforts.

Similar to the 'Jihadi-cool' use of subversion and irony in memes, the group has been able to gain publicity and attract attention to the group by messages which target young people who get the impression that IS is 'a technologically advanced group that not only produces high-definition and well-edited videos but also has its own apps, social media tools, drones, and video games.'

References

- Al-Rawi, A., (2016). Video games, terrorism, and ISIS's Jihad 3.0. *Journal of Terrorism and Political Violence*. <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/al-rawi-video-games-terrorism/>
- Huey, L., (2015). This is not your mother's terrorism: Social media, online radicalization and the practice of political jamming. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 6(2). <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/huey-2016-mother/>
- Olson, C.K. Kutner, L.A., & Warner, D.E. (2008). The role of violent video game content in adolescent development: Boys' perspectives. *Journal of Adolescent Research* 23,1, 55. <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0743558407310713>

Countering toxic narratives

Motivations for committing acts of mass violence are usually expressed in terms of 'us' vs. 'them' rhetoric to accentuate differences. Maynard and Benesch (2016) suggest that justifications do not usually rely on solely hatred and exclusionary messages: hatred of another group alone rarely drives people to kill. Instead, messages which feed feelings of disenchantment, deprivation, or paranoia (such as perceiving the 'other' group to have threatening motives), lead to the rationalisation that pre-emptive violence is acceptable or necessary.

Often the main obstacle to success in terms of turning a group violent is how many people partially internalise the ideology enough to see violence as a valid or desirable option. Indeed, as Maynard

describes, 'much of the time, key ideas might be believed ambivalently, regretfully, presumptively, unthinkingly...' In most cases of group executed mass violence, those with high levels of civilian participation often rely on the approval or support of others in the group, however half-heartedly.

Beutel and colleagues (2016) suggest that we disrupt violent narratives with counter-narratives and complicating competing ('alternative') narratives with a more nuanced and complex picture. They describe an effective counter-narrative as a system of stories that 'hang together to provide a coherent view of the world'. These have the purpose of 'combating violent extremist narratives and eliciting legal and non-violent activities in support of individuals, groups or movements, which support that worldview.'

Beutel and colleagues suggest the following considerations when developing counter and alternative narratives:

- Use emotional communication to generate moral outrage which delegitimises a violent ideology.
- Disrupt simplistic narratives used to support violence with counter-messages which present nuanced points of view (e.g., TV programmes such as 'Being Muslim, Being British').
- Re-frame rather than confront, by creating narratives that acknowledge the concerns that underwrite sympathy toward extremist groups (e.g., YouTube video: 'Five Considerations for a Muslim on Syria').
- Humanise the subjects by highlighting the human costs of terrorism. This is done by invoking moral outrage while not demonising individuals who are sympathetic to the grievances.
- Demonstrate respect and empathy toward target audiences.
- Promote positive identities by drawing on character mythologies, such as those used in popular media and comic books (e.g., 'The 99' or 'Ms. Marvel')

- Protect communities' rights and liberties by using narratives that defend civil rights and liberties.
- Engage beyond violent extremism (e.g., focus on public safety messages, such as in the National Outreach for Hate Awareness Threat Education [NO HATE] USA programme.)

References

- Beutel, A., Weine, S.M., Saeed, A., Spahic Mihajlovic, A., Stone, A., Oakley Beahrs, J., & Shanfield, S.B. (2016). Guiding principles for countering and displacing extremist narratives. *Journal of Terrorism Research*, 7(3), 34-49. doi: <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/beutel-countering-extremist-narratives/>
- Leader Maynard, J., & Benesch, S. (2016). Dangerous speech and dangerous ideology: An integrated model for monitoring and prevention. *Genocide Studies and Prevention*, 9(3), 70-95. doi: <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/maynard-2016-dangerous/>

OTHER ARTICLES THAT CAUGHT OUR EYE

What's the best password? I like all the green eggs and ham

Lorrie Cranor, Director of the CyLab Usable Privacy and Security Laboratory at Carnegie Mellon University and Federal Trade Commission Chief Technologist, works on ways to make password policies more human compatible. Cranor and colleagues tested password policies by asking 470 computer users at Carnegie Mellon to create new passwords based on varying requirements of length and special symbols.

Cranor noted that making people change passwords after 30-, 60-, and 90-day periods may be ineffective.

People tend to initially choose a weak password and then make slight changes so it is easy to remember.

Organisations often emphasise that passwords should be complex combinations of letters, cases, and symbols. Instead, Cranor argues it's 'easier for users to deal with password length than complexity.' Strings of words are difficult for attackers to guess but easier for users to recall.

References

- Shay, R., Komanduri, S., Kelley, P.G., Leon, P.G., Mazurek, M.L., Bauer, L... Cranor, L.F. (2010, July). Encountering stronger password requirements, user attitudes and behaviors. In SOUPS '10. *Proceedings of the Sixth Symposium on Usable Privacy and Security* Article No. 2, Redmond, Washington, USA <http://dl.acm.org/citation.cfm?doid=1837110.1837113>
- Link to Lorrie Cranor's original blog post: <https://www.ftc.gov/news-events/blogs/techftc/2016/03/time-rethink-mandatory-password-changes>

Using Facebook to collect research on extremist groups

Researchers at Utrecht University and Erasmus University, Rotterdam used Facebook to identify 16 to 31 year-old users who showed extreme ideals in their profiles. The researchers defined 'extreme ideals' as ideals that are 'severely at odds with those of their family and/or the mainstream', including those with extreme Islamic and extreme left-wing ideals. Profiles were chosen from their activity (likes and comments) in extremist groups on Facebook, such as Shariah4Holland, Anti Animal Testing Coalition, and Fitna.

The researchers then approached these users following a carefully worded private message exchange. While many (especially extreme leftists) refused to participate, 33 agreed to meet in person for an interview with researchers following their message exchange.

Based on their research, Sikkens and colleagues have proposed a list of guidelines for researchers approaching (radical) respondents who may be mistrustful:

- Create a researchers' Facebook page.
- Use a positive approach toward the research topic.
- Use a personal approach instead of an advertisement.
- Show sincere interest.
- Be persistent.
- Be aware your online persona is traceable.

References

- Sikkens, E., van San, M., Sieckelinck, S., Boeije, H., & de Winter, M. (2016). Participant recruitment through social media: Lessons learned from a qualitative radicalization study using Facebook. *Field Methods*, 1-10. <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/sikkens-recruitment-social-media/>

NEW JOURNAL ISSUES

The journal is peer-reviewed and open access. A recent issue of *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition* includes articles on assessing when and whether psychological research is ready for use in the justice system, discussing topics such as officer-involved shootings and implications of eyewitness performance.

Another section is dedicated to modelling and aiding intuition as it relates to organisational decision making, as it is expressed in human response in clashes and conflicts, and as it is reflected in mathematics and computer coding.

<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/22113681>

NEW BOOKS

UCL Press is publishing a series of nine monographs that discuss social media use around the world in a series called 'Why we post'. They explain:

Why do we post on social media? Is it true that we are replacing face-to-face relationships with on-screen life? Are we becoming more narcissistic with the rise of selfies? Does social media create or suppress political action, destroy privacy or become the only way to sell something? And are these claims equally true for a factory worker in China and an IT professional in India? With these questions in mind, nine anthropologists each spent 15 months living in communities in China, Brazil, Turkey, Chile, India, England, Italy and Trinidad. They studied not only platforms but the content of social media to understand both why we post and the consequences of social media on our lives. Their findings indicate that social media is more than communication – it is also a place where we now live.

The monographs can all be downloaded for free here: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/why-we-post>

BEYOND THE PEER-REVIEWED LITERATURE

Reports from journalists, researchers, think tanks and governments

Converts and Islamist terrorism

A recent policy brief from the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism discusses the overrepresentation of Islamic converts involved in Islamic militancy and foreign fighting. This report is the first work to critically and comprehensively assess the current state of knowledge regarding convert extremist violence. This assessment found that converts are overrepresented in home-grown jihadist plots in the UK and Spain. Findings relating to the US are more nuanced.

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The authors stressed the absence of evidence of a clear relationship between conversion and radicalisation and also the lack of specificity about when converts radicalise (i.e., before, during or after). And while their project found no single factor that triggered the radicalisation of converts, mental health issues and personal trauma compounded both societal-level explanations (e.g., feelings of marginalisation) and personal motives (e.g., need to belong).

The brief concludes with four recommendations for future research:

1. Collating more up-to-date and reliable information about the number of converts in Western countries;
2. Gaining more accurate information (per country) regarding the involvement of Western converts in jihadi related offence and an (ongoing) monitoring of the number of converts among foreign fighters;
3. Developing and empirically testing theories about convert radicalisation;
4. Assessing how factors and processes that lead to converts' involvement in Islamist militancy are different from those experienced by non-convert militants in similar settings.

References:

- Schuurman, B., Grol, P., & Flower, S. (2016). *Converts and Islamist Terrorism*. International Centre for Counter-Terrorism – The Hague. Available: <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/research/schuurman-converts-and-islamist-terrorism/>

Read more:

CREST has produced a guide to the process of converting to Islam. It also covers why some people choose to convert, what they experience – good and bad and the factors that might influence a convert to become an extremist. Download it for free here: <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/resources/islam-conversion/>

FEEDBACK

If you would like more detail, or have suggestions for improving CREST Digest, please let us know via <https://crestresearch.ac.uk/contact/>. For updates on new research, follow us on Twitter at: [@crest_research](https://twitter.com/crest_research)

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CREST also funds a website which collates high-quality peer-reviewed academic research on radicalisation, extremism and fundamentalism. <http://www.radicalisationresearch.org/>