

Dr Benjamin Lee

Introduction

There has been a lot of interest in counter messaging as a way of reducing the support for violent extremism. This has been thought of in a variety of ways: counter narratives, alternative messaging, counter speech. Attempts at online counter messaging have been heavily critiqued:

- Hard to measure success/justify costs
- Preachy tone
- Black/grey propaganda
- Government and larger organisations lack credibility.

Some organisations have suggested that future campaigns will use ‘natural world’ content, suggesting a closer relationship between larger organisations and informal content producers.

Theory

Accounts of counter messaging have typically focused on campaigns by larger organisations. This research project starts from the premise that most counter messaging is produced informally and not part of an organised campaign.

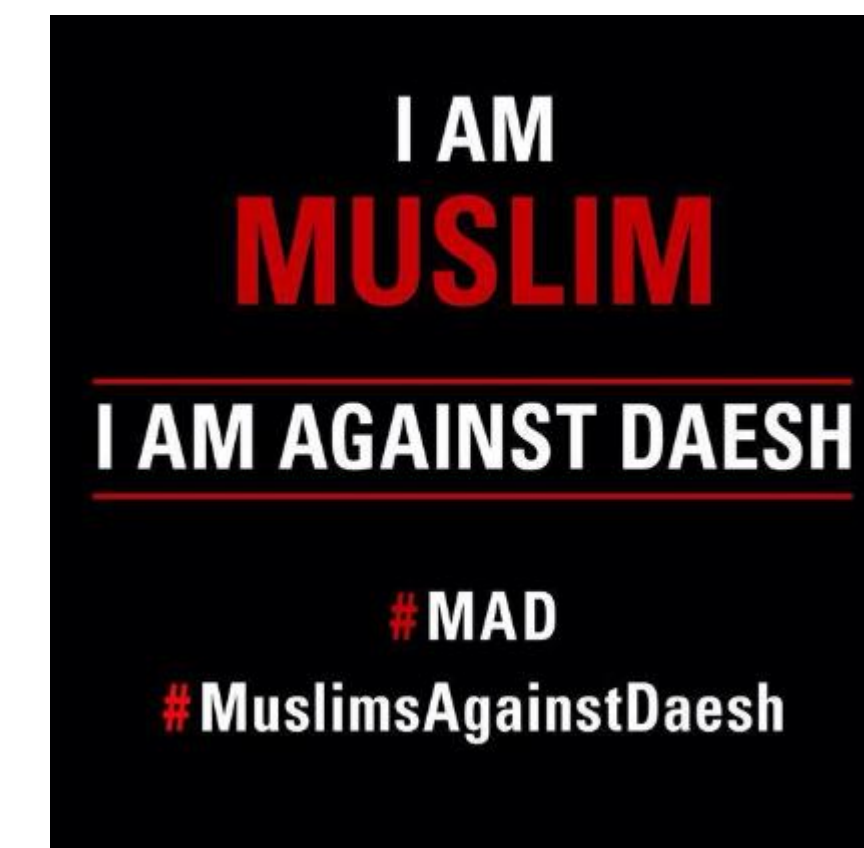
This is further developed through theories of security that suggest future security questions will increasingly be tackled by networks of public, private, and citizen actors. Different actors bring different skills and resources to a problem.

In the case of counter messaging, informal actors bring both social and cultural capital: a better understanding of target audiences and greater credibility. Informal actors are also free to use humour, satire, and bad-taste in a way that larger organisations often cannot.

This research aims to understand the motivations of informal counter messaging actors and assess their openness to greater cooperation with larger organisations.

Research

This is a pilot study based on nine interviews with actors who produce counter messaging content informally. Interviewees were primarily from the UK and either active against the extreme right or violent Islamism. This should not be treated as a representative sample.



Source: <https://www.facebook.com/MuslimsUniteAgainstDaesh/>



Source: https://www.reddit.com/r/editorialcartoons/comments/858ryn/erreur_de_transmission/



Muslim Ray Guns - The EDL Anthem
2,081,250 views

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AIPD8qHhtVU&t=21s>

“For doing the right thing, I don’t have a problem. Then again you do cross the line into “Is it propaganda?”. Government sponsored stuff is a bit whack. It all depends on what the content is and how it is going to be used and how you are going to come off in the end.

(Participant 3)



Source: <https://www.reddit.com/r/beholdthemasterrace/>



#Solidarity4SHARE
Britain First Party Political Broadcast
1,156 views

Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FUinN-0lz0w&t=158s>

“That would be brilliant. Social media, or editing, how to promote. I’m not even talking about give me a thousand pounds... How to do basic things well. I think my channel suffers a lot from that.

(Participant 1)



Source: <https://imgur.com/ITTrlpg>

Findings

Strategy – Most interviewees acknowledged that their content could further entrench the beliefs of those already committed to extremist ideologies. This suggests that informal counter messaging is about reinforcing existing social prohibitions around extremism rather than de-radicalisation of those already committed.

Risks – Most interviewees reported online harassment, including death threats. This mostly came from opposition actors, however those active against the extreme-right reported harassment from left-wing actors who saw them as too soft. In one instance an interviewee also reported concerns for extremists who were subject to abuse after posting on a social media page she managed. One interviewee also reported engaging in aggressive tactics including the ‘doxing’ (publishing private/identifying information) of ideological opponents.

Collaboration – Generally interviewees were open to the idea of collaboration with larger organisations, particularly where they thought this may provide material benefits such as training or promotion for their content. However, interviewees were also keen to maintain control of their own content. Several interviewees reported having been contacted by larger organisations already. In some cases approaches were seen as attempts at cynical manipulation. In others interviewees were eager to participate.

Conclusion: Not Everything Needs to be a Campaign

The interviewees suggest that many of those informally active against extremism have a great deal to offer larger organisations, and that support and promotion from larger organisations may be welcome. This was conceptualised as taking the form of training or promotional support, with interviewees keen to maintain ownership of the content they produce.

However, such relationships entail risks for both sides. Larger organisations will take on the burden of working with actors that are frequently exposed to online threats, and in some cases have engaged in aggressive tactics themselves. Informal actors risk losing both control and credibility in the eyes of audiences.