

# Responding to Cyber Jihad: Towards an Effective Counter Narrative

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**ICCT Research Paper**

**March 2015**

“Who is in control of the narrative?” is the mantra that now echoes in the hallways of the EU’s headquarters in Brussels. Spurred in part by large-scale jihadist propaganda, approximately 20,000 people from 90 countries have joined the fight in Iraq and Syria. So far, authorities in their countries of origin have not been able to address the jihadist radicalisation messages transmitted via the internet and social media. Many new initiatives were recently announced, however, including the establishment of a European counter-narrative centre in Brussels.

In this research paper, ICCT Research Fellow Dr. Bibi van Ginkel analyses the role of the internet and social media in processes of radicalisation. It offers an outline of the various aspects of the jihadist narrative, in order better to understand what message needs to be countered. The counter-actions against this cyber jihad can take different forms. Parallel to the way in which advertisement campaigns are tailored to sell products to a certain target group, strategic communication should take into account how a number of recurring elements play a role in the counter-messaging. The understanding of who the target group is, what jihadist narrative is used and how that message can be countered, who the credible messenger should be, and what medium can best be used to deliver the message are all relevant questions that can only be answered in a context-specific manner. The report concludes with several recommendations on how the recently announced new European counter-narrative centre can effectively contribute to the already diverse landscape of counter-narrative initiatives.

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## 1. Introduction

“Who is in control of the narrative?” is the mantra that now echoes in the hallways of the European Union’s headquarters in Brussels. Spurred in part by large-scale jihadist propaganda,<sup>1</sup> approximately 20,000 people from 90 countries have joined the fight in Iraq and Syria.<sup>2</sup> So far, authorities in their countries of origin have not been able to address the jihadist radicalisation messages transmitted via the internet and social media. On the contrary, the jihadist propaganda machine of terrorist organisations such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is proving most effective, producing Hollywood-style high-quality videos of their actions that attract a great many viewers and supporters. The possibilities offered by the internet and its various social media platforms provide excellent opportunities to spread extremist messages. In response, authorities are looking for ways to prevent this from happening. Many new initiatives have recently been announced, including the establishment of a European counter-narrative centre in Brussels.<sup>3</sup> Clearly, the aim behind the establishment of this centre is “to gain back control of the narrative”. Nevertheless, key questions remain, including: What is the impact of the internet and social media on radicalisation? What are effective counter-measures? What could such a new centre offer to the landscape of various initiatives that are already in place? And what lessons learned can be drawn?

These questions will be addressed in this paper. First, the focus will be on the effect of the internet and social media on the process of radicalisation, followed by a description of the various counter-measures aimed at “cyber jihad”. Subsequent paragraphs will analyse the dos and don’ts of counter-messaging. Finally, some concluding remarks will be made.

## 2. The Role of the Internet and Social Media in Radicalisation

Technological developments and the accessibility of these technologies to a broad audience of users and consumers have created almost unlimited opportunities to broadcast information. Since its creation, the internet has enabled the introduction of various platforms for mass communication, such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, Instagram and other social media outlets. Not surprisingly, among the billions of users worldwide, we also find terrorist organisations.<sup>4</sup>

Just a few years ago, the common understanding was that although online activities played an important role in the process of radicalisation, recruitment and planning of terrorist activities, physical contact between a member of the terrorist group and a potential new recruit was needed at some point to “seal the deal”. In the report *Jihadism Online* by the Norwegian Defence Research Establishment (NDRE) of 2006, the authors concluded that case studies show that although the internet played an important role in the recruitment of jihadists, there

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<sup>1</sup> According to J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, in a recently published study for Brookings, an estimate of 46,000 pro-ISIS twitter accounts were used by ISIS supporters in the period from September through December 2014: J.M. Berger and J. Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter”, *Brookings*, Analysis Paper no. 20, March 2015, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/papers/2015/03/isis-twitter-census-berger-morgan>.

<sup>2</sup> ICSR in a recent estimate of January 2015: see P.R. Neumann, “Foreign Fighter Total in Syria/Iraq Now Exceeds 20,000; Surpasses Afghanistan Conflict in the 1980s”, London: ICSR, January 2015, <http://icsr.info/2015/01/foreign-fighter-total-syriairaq-now-exceeds-20000-surpasses-afghanistan-conflict-1980s/>.

<sup>3</sup> During the International Summit on Countering Violent Extremism in February 2015 at the White House in Washington DC, the Belgian Minister for Home Affairs announced the establishment of a European counter-narrative centre in Brussels, which will receive € 1 million seed money from the European Union.

<sup>4</sup> G. Weimann, “New Terrorism and New Media”, *Woodrow Wilson Center Report*, Research Series vol. 2, 2014, [http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/STIP\\_140501\\_new\\_terrorism\\_F.pdf](http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/STIP_140501_new_terrorism_F.pdf); B. Berton and P. Pawlak, “Cyber Jihadists and their Web”, Policy Brief, *European Union Institute for Security Studies*, January 2015, <http://www.iss.europa.eu/publications/detail/article/cyber-jihadists-and-their-web/>.

were hardly any examples of direct recruitment via the internet.<sup>5</sup> In other words, at that time the internet acted as a facilitator rather than a driver of radicalisation.

According to a study by the Dutch Intelligence Service in 2012,<sup>6</sup> 99.8 percent of online terrorist activities take place at the hidden levels of the internet, also called the Deep Web or Darknet. In order to enter these hidden forums on the internet, a person needs to be invited and given the right access information, since a normal Google search will not generate these sites in their search results. When individuals actively participate in the online discussions on elements of the extremist narratives, jihadist recruiters can trace these individuals, approach and potentially even recruit them. The reasons why these individuals become interested in these radical chatrooms in the first place, are still unclear, and appear to vary quite strongly from person to person.<sup>7</sup>

Although radicalisation processes usually develop gradually over many years, recent experiences in Western countries seem to indicate the opposite: in some cases, youth radicalisation processes are occurring within a very short period.<sup>8</sup> Together with the recent cases of “lone wolf”<sup>9</sup> or “virtual packs of wolves”<sup>10</sup> violent extremist attacks in the West, this raises the question whether these may be exclusively attributed to the open-access social media outlets. Clearly, persons looking for confirmation of their ideas will find that the internet can function as an echo chamber of their already extremist ideology,<sup>11</sup> but clear evidence that the internet and/or social media are the main drivers of radicalisation is yet to be found.<sup>12</sup> What would happen if we were to take the availability of information on the internet and social media out of the equation? In other words, is the availability of information on the internet the starting place of radicalisation, or do other factors trigger that process, with the internet merely functioning as a catalyst?

A 2013 study by the RAND Corporation stated that although the internet creates more opportunities for radicalisation, there is still little evidence for its role in accelerating the process, or its role in self-radicalisation without any physical contact.<sup>13</sup> Yet while a direct causal link has not been proven, many activities of extremist organisations are indeed taking place online.

Terrorist organisations such as ISIS are specifically using these media outlets to target vulnerable youth and to stimulate radicalisation with smartly crafted messages and fancy videos.<sup>14</sup> The internet and social media are used by jihadist groups for various purposes.<sup>15</sup> These include propaganda and live reporting from the battlefield to celebrate their successes and the heroism of their followers. Those who died for their cause are honoured as martyrs and eulogies are placed on web forums and disseminated via social media. Clearly, these

<sup>5</sup> H. Rogan, “Jihadism Online: A Study of How Al Qaida and Radical Islamist Groups Use the Internet for Terrorist Purposes”, Kjeller: Norwegian Defence Research Establishment, 2006, p. 29.

<sup>6</sup> *Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), Jihadism on the Web: A Breeding Ground for Jihad in the Modern Age*, February 2012.

<sup>7</sup> D. Weggemans, E. Bakker and P. Grol, “Who Are They, and Why Do They Go? The Radicalization and Preparatory Processes of Dutch Jihadist Foreign Fighters”, *Perspectives on Terrorism* 8, no. 4 (2014), pp. 100–110; and R. Coolsaet, “What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS? Insights from the Belgian Case”, *Egmont Paper* no. 75 (2015), pp. 11–18.

<sup>8</sup> Weggemans, Bakker and Grol, “Who Are They, and Why Do They Go?”, p. 103; *Algemene Inlichtingen en Veiligheidsdienst (AIVD), The Transformation of Jihadism in the Netherlands: Swarm Dynamics and New Strength*, June 2014; and Coolsaet, “What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?”, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> The term “lone wolf” refers to those individuals who, without any physical social contact with extremist individuals or organisations, go to the process of radicalisation on their own, even to the point where they decide to commit terrorist attacks that they conduct on their own.

<sup>10</sup> G. Weimann, “Virtual Packs of Lone Wolves: How the Internet Made “Lone Wolf” Terrorism a Misnomer”, *It's a Medium World*, February 2014, <https://medium.com/its-a-medium-world/virtual-packs-of-lone-wolves-17b12f8c455a>.

<sup>11</sup> I. von Behr, A. Reding, C. Edwards and L. Gribbon, “Radicalization in the Digital Era: The Use of the Internet in 15 Cases of Terrorism and Extremism”, Brussels: RAND, 2013, p. 18, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR453.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.html).

<sup>12</sup> This argument was made by Maura Conway during a presentation at the Symposium on “The Terrorists’ Use of the Internet”, *Symposium Report of the Cyber-Terrorism Project*, p. 11, <http://www.cyberterrorism-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014-Symposium-Report.pdf>; G. Hussain and E.M. Saltman, *Jihad Trending: A Comprehensive Analysis of Online Extremism and How to Counter It*, Quilliam Report, London: Quilliam Foundation, 2014, p. 13; and T. Stevens and P. Neumann, *Countering Online Radicalization: A Strategy for Action*, London: ICSR, 2009, p. 12.

<sup>13</sup> Behr, Reding, Edwards and Gribbon, *Radicalization in the Digital Era*.

<sup>14</sup> Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*.

<sup>15</sup> United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *The Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, September 2012, pp. 3–12, [http://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use\\_of\\_Internet\\_for\\_Terrorist\\_Purposes.pdf](http://www.unodc.org/documents/frontpage/Use_of_Internet_for_Terrorist_Purposes.pdf).

communication tools are used to spread extremist ideology, which consists of a combination of narratives, with the ultimate aim of recruiting more followers.<sup>16</sup>

A narrative can be defined as a storyline to communicate and legitimise a political or religious conviction, with the aim of generating support and with a call to action in support of that conviction. One aspect of the jihadist narrative relates to resistance against the brutality of a regime, and thus calls upon a need for humanitarian intervention, meanwhile celebrating the heroism of those who are protecting the ones who are vulnerable.<sup>17</sup> Another aspect of the narrative relates to the spreading of their extreme jihadist ideology, also calling upon the duty to defend what they claim is the true Islam, which is under attack.<sup>18</sup> And third, the narrative appeals to the individual's identity and personal commitment. This could call upon their feelings of frustration, marginalisation, or experiences of discrimination, but could also relate to a personal journey in search of one's own identity and purpose in life.<sup>19</sup> Certainly individuals of a vulnerable age going through such periods of soul-searching are targeted with this narrative, assuring them that if they join the cause it will make them a better person, and will offer camaraderie and a great adventure. Together, these various aspects of the narrative constitute the cyber jihad that these terrorist organisations are conducting, building a virtual *Ummah*,<sup>20</sup> and hoping it will contribute to further radicalisation and recruitment. Finally, the internet and social media are also used to attract online funding, and for instruction and the planning of attacks.<sup>21</sup>

The specific characteristics of the internet and social media explain why it is so effectively used by Islamist extremist organisations. First of all, it is cost-free and user-friendly. One can easily hide behind fake identities, and thus anonymously spread messages. These messages can reach a large target group. They can be one-to-one messages, one-to-many, or many-to-many, and depend partly on a high degree of interactivity, while at the same time they can be used for so-called "narrowcasting" (as opposed to broadcasting) to communicate messages towards a specific target group.<sup>22</sup> The immediacy of the messages via social media also makes them suitable for live reporting of ongoing attacks or directly from the battlefield. This characteristic was particularly used to their advantage by Al-Shabaab during the Westgate attack in Nairobi, Kenya, in September 2013.<sup>23</sup> In sum, internet and social media outlets are widely used by terrorist organisations. A causal relationship between the internet and radicalisation has not been proven. Nevertheless, because of the efficacy of the messaging by jihadist extremist organisations, and their direct or indirect effect on processes of radicalisation, governments are now fervently searching for effective responses to this problem.

<sup>16</sup> For an elaborate explanation of the various narratives, see R. Briggs and R. Frenett, "*Foreign Fighters: The Challenge of Counter-Narratives*", London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2014, [http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Foreign\\_Fighters\\_paper\\_for\\_website\\_v0.6.pdf](http://www.strategicdialogue.org/Foreign_Fighters_paper_for_website_v0.6.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> Briggs and Frenett, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> Briggs and Frenett, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Briggs and Frenett, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 8; T. Veldhuis and J. Staun, "Islamist Radicalization: A Root Cause Model", *Clingendael Security Paper* no. 12, October 2009, pp. 39–51.

<sup>20</sup> National Coordinator for Security and Counterterrorism (NCTV), *Global Jihadism: Analysis of the Phenomenon and Reflections on Radicalisation*, December 2014, p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> UN, *Countering the Use of the Internet for Terrorist Purposes*, Counter-Terrorism Implementation Task Force Working Group Report, February 2006, pp. 3–4, [http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/ctitf\\_internet\\_wg\\_2009\\_report.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/terrorism/ctitf/pdfs/ctitf_internet_wg_2009_report.pdf).

<sup>22</sup> T. Stevens, "New Media and Counter-Narrative Strategies", in: E. Kessels (ed.), *Countering Violent Extremist Narratives*, National Coordinator for Counter-terrorism, July 2010, p. 113; and International Peace Institute, *Combating Incitement of Terrorism and Promoting Intercultural Dialogue*, Expert Meeting Report, October 2010, p. 3.

<sup>23</sup> Hussain and Saltman, *Jihad Trending*, p. 46; and Weimann, *New Terrorism and New Media*, p. 8. See also the presentation by David Mair on the "Westgate Case Study", *The Symposium Report of the Cyber-terrorism Project*, p. 6, <http://www.cyberterrorism-project.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/2014-Symposium-Report.pdf>.

### 3. Counter-actions against Cyber Jihad

How can governments most effectively respond to this new reality? Counter-actions discussed and implemented by governments and international organisations can be categorised into two kinds of measures: repressive measures versus soft measures. Although the repressive measures will be briefly touched upon, the focus of this report will be on the soft measures.

#### 3.1 Repressive measures

The repressive measures are focused on denial of access to the extremist narratives that are spread by terrorist organisations and their supporters, by taking down websites or blocking messages, as well as the prohibition of communicating and spreading radical content, and henceforth criminal prosecution of those behind it.

The effectiveness of these repressive, negative and punitive measures is highly debatable. For instance the removal of content on the internet by governments (“take down strategy”) has a limited effect,<sup>24</sup> since it is very easy to set up new – as yet unknown to authorities – websites to repost the content. As a result of “take down measures” with regard to ISIS online accounts, the number of accounts dropped significantly, but new accounts were created afterwards.<sup>25</sup> Nevertheless, these “take downs” resulted in the setting up of new accounts that no longer used the hashtag ISIS, and that did not to the same extent show horrific images of executions. Berger and Morgan argue that although a simple suspension of social media accounts might only have a limited effect, this does not imply that suspensions could not be executed in an effective way.<sup>26</sup>

While “take down measures” target the open-access websites<sup>27</sup>, effective “take downs” should also aim to take down the different (hidden) levels of platforms used for communication.<sup>28</sup> However, this policy might deprive intelligence services of a surveillance opportunity, if they lose the point of entrance to vital information about the extremist organizations.<sup>29</sup>

Because criminalising the dissemination of radical content could result in violations of the right to freedom of expression,<sup>30</sup> the principles of legality, legal certainty and proportionality must be respected. A public statement or posting online clearly crosses a legal line, if it can be proven that the statements made are intended to incite terrorism, and that a causal link can be established between these statements and the imminence and likelihood of the actual act being committed.<sup>31</sup>

#### 3.2 Soft measures: the variations of strategic communication

In the category of soft measures, various terms are used to identify the actions taken against the cyber jihad. The term “counter-narrative” is used frequently in relation to the different forms of strategic communication that a state can take against extremist narratives, whereas this term strictly speaking only fits one of the variations of strategic communication. Another term that appears to have been used often recently is “counter-propaganda”.<sup>32</sup> Although clearly not a new term, since it was also used during the Second World War and the Cold War, the term

<sup>24</sup> For an overview of various negative measures, see Hussain and Saltman, *Jihad Trending*, pp. 83–91.

<sup>25</sup> Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census”, p. 56.

<sup>26</sup> Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census”, p. 56.

<sup>27</sup> Hussain and Saltman, *Jihad Trending*, p. 91.

<sup>28</sup> AIVD, *Jihadism on the Web*, p. 15.

<sup>29</sup> Berger and Morgan, “The ISIS Twitter Census”, p. 54.

<sup>30</sup> For more elaboration on this topic, see B. van Ginkel, *Incitement: A Matter of Prevention or Repression?*, ICCT Research Paper, International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, August 2012, <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/incitement-to-terrorism-a-matter-of-prevention-or-repression->

<sup>31</sup> Van Ginkel, *Incitement*.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, the announcement of the US counter-propaganda campaign #Think again turn away; and B. Robinson, “War on Twitter: State Department Makes Mock ISIS Recruiting Video to Counter Terror Group’s Online Pursuit of Westerners”, *The Daily Mail*, 6 September 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2745875/War-Twitter-State-Department-releases-mock-ISIS-recruitment-film-bid-counter-terror-groups-online-pursuit-Westerners.html>.

“counter-propaganda” is now more frequently used, alongside the more neutral term “counter-narrative”. This use of a term that has a war-related ring to it could be the result of the realisation by states that they are conducting a battle of ideas on the internet with jihadist organisations.

There are four different categories of strategic communication. The first three categories relate to the ways in which actors can respond to the narratives of jihadist organisations.<sup>33</sup> The fourth category is distinct, and deals with the manner in which the activities of jihadist organisations are reported and discussed in the public domain of the regular media.

#### *Public information campaigns*

The first category concerns public information campaigns with regard to Western involvement in conflict zones, explanation of the foreign policy positions with regard to sensitive topics, and a narrative of one’s own with regard to Western values.<sup>34</sup> Public information campaigns could also take shape if government authorities consistently shared fact sheets with regular media desks, in order for them to report on these in their news bulletins and newspapers. This category seems obvious, but is often taken for granted, and therefore not carefully considered. It furthermore only contributes effectively as a positive instrument against the cyber jihad when it is perceived as a genuine message. This implies that a message in itself is not enough if there are no actions to back it, or – worse – if actions contradict what is being proclaimed.

The United States (US) government established the Centre for Strategic Counter-Terrorism Communications (CSCC)<sup>35</sup> in 2010 with the intention of setting up a public information campaign. The CSCC’s Digital Outreach Team (DOT) had been initially designed to counter misinformation and explain government positions surrounding US foreign policies through direct engagement on the internet and social media. Since its incorporation into the activities of the CSCC in 2010, the initiative has combined traditional public diplomacy communications with more direct efforts to counter the propaganda of Al-Qaeda and global affiliates. Recently, DOT has initiated the #Thinkagainturnaway campaign.<sup>36</sup> This campaign, which is entirely in the English language, has two purposes: tweeting counter-messaging material in response to the jihadi propaganda that is spread on the internet; and entering into direct conversations with holders of prominent jihadist accounts. This campaign has been severely criticised for being ineffective and for providing a stage for jihadists to voice their extremist narratives.<sup>37</sup> Although the US government has taken a step in the right direction, by realising that jihadist online narratives play an important role in recruitment and that something needs to be done, the US government is not a credible and therefore effective messenger to bring this counter-message.

Following the example of the United States, Canada with a programme called “Extreme Dialogue”<sup>38</sup> and France with the online campaigns called “Stop Jihad”<sup>39</sup> have recently introduced similar public information campaigns. Although, some sceptical reports were issued in the media, it is too early to analyse the effectiveness of these campaigns. It is, however, important to stress that an effective public information campaign fulfils more purposes than the ones that are aimed at with these recently launched online campaigns.

<sup>33</sup> This classification follows the one developed in the report by R. Briggs and S. Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, London: Institute Strategic Dialogue, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, pp. 14–17.

<sup>35</sup> Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup> The campaign uses various social media platform, such as YouTube, Twitter and Facebook: <https://www.youtube.com/user/ThinkAgainTurnAway>; [https://twitter.com/thinkagain\\_dos](https://twitter.com/thinkagain_dos); and <https://www.facebook.com/ThinkAgainTurnAway>.

<sup>37</sup> R. Katz, “The State Department’s Twitter War with ISIS is Embarrassing”, *Time*, 14 September 2014, <http://time.com/3387065/isis-twitter-war-state-department/>.

<sup>38</sup> Canada launches its own counter-narrative; see T.T. Ha, “Canada to Combat jihadist Recruiters with Own Social Media Campaign”, *The Globe and Mail*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/world/canada-to-combat-jihadist-recruiters-with-own-social-media-campaign/article22993242/>.

<sup>39</sup> Days after the terrorist attack on the offices of *Charlie Hebdo*, the French government announced its own counter-propaganda initiative: “*Décrypter la propagande djihadiste*”, <http://www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr/decrypter.html>.

### *Alternative narratives*

The second category concerns the *alternative narrative*. Here, it is important to challenge the extremist narrative, and to sow seeds of doubt in the minds of those who are on a quest for guidance in their lives.<sup>40</sup> It might also contribute to the ability of critical thinking and educating those who are religious illiterates.<sup>41</sup>

An example of such an alternative narrative is the programme called “Radical Middle Way”,<sup>42</sup> which was founded in the United Kingdom after the 7/7 attacks on the London transport systems. The programme is supported by the Home Office’s Research Information and Communication Unit (RICU). This network aims to connect moderate Islamic scholars and other credible community leaders with other Muslims in order to discuss the role and place of religion in the twenty-first century. According to the “About Us” section on their website, “Radical Middle Way” promotes a mainstream, moderate understanding of Islam. The narrative that is countered relates to the grievances that arise from political instability, chaos and intolerance. In addition, misconceptions about Islam and extremist interpretations are countered. The messages are communicated by religious scholars, imams, community leaders, sports personalities and activists. In an evaluation of the effectiveness of this programme that was conducted by the Welsh government in 2012, it was concluded that “Radical Middle Way” had indeed better equipped its participants through its training programme to protect the communities they serve, particularly young people, against the arguments of extremists.<sup>43</sup>

Another example is the public education campaign called “MyJihad”,<sup>44</sup> which is run in the United States. This campaign is about reclaiming a moderate understanding of faith and its concepts from extremists, both Muslims and anti-Muslim, about pushing for an intelligent and informed understanding of Islam and its concepts and practices in the media, educational circles and the public. While “MyJihad” could prove to be a useful tool in community engagement in how it relates to counter-radicalisation programmes, it currently serves especially as an outlet to promote awareness, for instance, by sponsoring public advertisements on buses and trains.

In order to be able to produce an effective alternative narrative, it is vital that one understands the motivational factors of those who are radicalised towards an extremist interpretation of Islam. In response to some of the motivational factors, especially those that relate to grievances, it is possible to point to alternative (non-violent) ways to address these grievances.

A non-governmental programme that is financially supported by the US State Department, called “Viral Peace”,<sup>45</sup> contributes to capacity-building programmes that empower local counter-voices to undermine the appeal of violent extremism through the internet and social media. The programme is designed to help analyse the various elements of the extremist narratives, and to distinguish the humanitarian, ideological, or identity-related aspects of the narrative. It furthermore aims to strengthen the voices of the silent majority of moderates.

Clearly, both the first and the second category of soft measures target individuals who belong to a vulnerable group or who are in the initial phases of radicalisation.

### *Counter-narratives*

A counter-narrative should directly counter the (stream of) extremist messages that are sent around. This could include debunking myths, responding to misrepresentations of facts, showing the atrocities committed, and

<sup>40</sup> Briggs and Frenett, *Foreign Fighters*, p. 12.

<sup>41</sup> The purchase of *Islam for Dummies* and *Koran for Dummies* by two British youngsters who left Birmingham for Syria makes an interesting example to support this argument. See also Coolsaet, “What Drives Europeans to Syria, and to IS?”, pp. 11–12.

<sup>42</sup> See Radical Middle Way (2005), <http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/page/about-us>; and Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 42.

<sup>43</sup> S. Sheikh, S. Sarwar and E. King, “Evaluation of the Muslim Council of Wales “Prevent” work”, *Government Social Research*, 2012, <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/evaluation-muslim-council-wales-prevent-work/?lang=en>.

<sup>44</sup> See MyJihad.org, <http://myjihad.org/about/>.

<sup>45</sup> See US Department of State, the Office of the Special Representative to Muslim Communities, <http://www.state.gov/s/srmc/c45088.htm>; and Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 46.

piercing the aura of heroism and camaraderie.<sup>46</sup> Formulating and communicating effective counter-narratives starts also with an in-depth understanding of the various aspects of the extremist narratives. An effective counter-narrative campaign furthermore requires a long-term commitment by a variety of stakeholders and a commitment to search proactively for the narratives that need countering. They should thus be timely and responsive to events.<sup>47</sup>

One example of a counter-narrative programme is the “Say No to Terror” online campaign “Noise”.<sup>48</sup> “Say No to Terror” is a communication campaign that uses a variety of mechanisms, including short videos and posters, for communicating a counter-narrative to selected elements of the terrorist narrative and to be communicated via various media outlets. The website is entirely in Arabic and hosts information content as well as videos, posters and links to social media platforms. The narrative that is countered is the master narrative of Al-Qaeda, which claims that the West is waging war on Islam, that the West is the major enemy, that Muslim rulers are the agents of the West, that the establishment of Israel is a humiliation and an injustice that Muslims must rectify, that Muslims have a duty to wage violent jihad, that self-sacrifice is the route to victory, and that ending injustice and suffering requires restoring the Caliphate.<sup>49</sup> In the message to counter the extremist narrative, this campaign emphasises that those who join terrorist groups are misled and that the terrorist lifestyle is damaging. It moreover stresses that terrorism destroys individuals and families. It thus communicates that terrorists are the real enemy, the real oppressors who attempt to brainwash children and youth,<sup>50</sup> and that Muslims are suffering at the hands of terrorist criminals who kill other Muslims. It also aims at undermining the heroic image of terrorist leaders, claiming that they are liars and manipulators, who use Islam to serve their personal agenda. In the campaign, there is also a focus on the obligation of all Muslims to be vigilant against terrorist manipulators and to protect themselves and their families from the scourge of terrorism.<sup>51</sup> In contrast with the master narrative of al-Qaeda, which imposes on Muslims a religiously sanctioned moral obligation to contribute to a violent jihad, the “Say No to Terror” campaign communicates a moral obligation that follows from an interpretation of the Koran to protect themselves from extremism and terrorism.<sup>52</sup> Although it is not transparent who is behind the campaign (while operating with Montenegro as a front, it is a Saudi initiative), it projects itself as an initiative by Muslims who are against terrorism, and communicates in Arabic.

### *The role of the regular media*

The fourth category might be slightly controversial, since it concerns the role of the regular media and the way in which they report on activities and messages that are sent by extreme Islamist organisations such as ISIS. It is common knowledge that terrorist organisations are looking for ways to spread their extremist message with the intention of, *inter alia*, spreading fear and celebrating their successful attacks in the West and their alleged victories over other opponents when cities are conquered. One can thus pose the question of whether public mass media should allow themselves to be abused for that purpose. Clearly, the press has the important task to bring the news in an objective and independent manner, and any form of self-censorship might be considered as undermining this principle. Yet, considering the dilemma between bringing the news and being used as a platform by jihadist organisations to communicate their message, some careful consideration and debate should at least take place. The important question is: What responsibility should the media or can the media bear in this respect?

However, this debate has so far hardly been conducted, or at least not with the thoroughness and soul-searching that it deserves. After the attacks on the offices of the satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* in Paris in

<sup>46</sup> Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 23.

<sup>47</sup> Hussain and Saltman, *Jihad Trending*, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> A. Aly *et al.*, “Making “Noise” Online: An Analysis of the Say No to Terror Online Campaign”, *Perspectives on Terrorism*, vol. 8, no. 5, October 2014, pp. 33–46.

<sup>49</sup> Aly *et al.*, “Making “Noise” Online”, p. 41.

<sup>50</sup> Aly *et al.*, “Making “Noise” Online”, p. 38.

<sup>51</sup> Aly *et al.*, “Making “Noise” Online”, p. 38.

<sup>52</sup> Aly *et al.*, “Making “Noise” Online”, p. 42.

January 2015, certain news desks decided not to broadcast that part of a video recording showing how one of the terrorists killed the wounded policeman in the street.<sup>53</sup> Although that decision appeared to be taken and not contested out of respect for the victim, the debate heated up when it became clear that some newspapers decided not to publish the disputed cartoons from *Charlie Hebdo*, since that was considered to result in an unwanted form of self-censorship, which would henceforth implicate a downright denial of the freedom of press and the freedom of speech.<sup>54</sup>

When weighing their responsibility, media desks could also use alternative ways to bring the news. “Telling but not showing” might be one option. Due to the fact that all images are available on the internet for those who want to see them anyway, those opposing any reluctance in bringing certain news items might argue that holding back in news reporting is useless. Yet the fact that the extremist message or news is picked up by the regular media does render it a certain status and recognition of how widely broadcasted the extremist message is.

In addition, there is the matter of framing a topic. One interesting case is the way in which the Dutch media reported on the terrorist acts committed by Anders Breivik in Norway in July 2011. Instead of reporting about the “terrorist” Breivik, the media consistently reported about the “mass murderer” Breivik.<sup>55</sup> Apparently, the perception was that a blond Western man did not fit the profile of a terrorist according to the Dutch audience. In itself, there is a valid point in not providing the platform and the status of hero that apparently goes with the label “terrorist” in some circles, and that a terrorist is seeking, but the inconsistency in the way in which the media frames one a terrorist and the other not, plays into the narrative of prejudice against and discrimination of a certain minority.

These considerations would at least legitimise an in-depth discussion on the role that the regular media can play when reporting on the activities of terrorist organisations and how that can affect processes of radicalisation.

#### 4. Dos and Don'ts of Counter-Campaigns

Why do companies spend a lot of their financial budgets on advertisements in order to sell their products or services to customers? And why do good advertisement campaigns convince buyers that they need the products offered, even when they did not realise before seeing the advertisement that they were missing the item? The answer lies, of course, in the targeted way in which advertisements are crafted to appeal to the lifestyle of a specific target group. There is thus a lot that one can learn from the way in which marketing companies draft their advertisements and communication campaigns for their clients.

For any effective communication, there are a number of recurring elements that need to be taken into account:<sup>56</sup> the *target group*; the *message*; the *messenger*; and the *channel used to communicate* the message. When dealing with counter-campaigns against the extremist narratives communicated by terrorist organisations

<sup>53</sup> See Brussen, B. “Realiteit (de actuele feiten) te kwetsend voor #OPHEF-roepers op Twitter”. *The Post Online*, 7 January 2015, <http://nieuws.thepostonline.nl/2015/01/07/nos-en-rtl-nieuws-censureren-nieuwsbeelden/>.

<sup>54</sup> See Grenoble, R. “In Wake of Charlie Hebdo Attack, Some Media Censor Cartoons”. *The Huffington Post*, 7 January 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/07/charlie-hebdo-censorship-cartoons\\_n\\_6431854.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/01/07/charlie-hebdo-censorship-cartoons_n_6431854.html).

<sup>55</sup> See examples of various media platforms: Wisse, M. “Massamoordenaar Breivik wil Playstation 3 in cel”. *Metro*, 30 January 2015, <http://www.metronieuws.nl/buitenland/2015/01/massamoordenaar-breivik-wil-playstation-3-in-cel>; “Massamoordenaar Breivik wil bij uitvaart moeder zijn”. *De Volkskrant*, 23 March 2013, <http://www.volkskrant.nl/dossier-aanslagen-in-noorwegen/massamoordenaar-breivik-wil-bij-uitvaart-moeder-zijn~a3414398/>; “Hoe werd Anders Breivik een massamoordenaar?”. *Nieuwsuur*, 15 December 2014, <http://nos.nl/nieuwsuur/artikel/2009151-hoe-werd-anders-breivik-een-massamoordenaar.html>; and Willems, M. “Massamoordenaar Breivik ontoerekeningsvatbaar”. *NRC Handelsblad*, 29 november 2011, <http://www.nrc.nl/nieuws/2011/11/29/breivik-is-otoerekeningsvatbaar/>.

<sup>56</sup> A similar classification of elements was identified during a Hedaya and ICCT event on counter-narratives, see the Meeting Report titled *Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism*, September 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/publications/icct-papers/developing-effective-counter-narrative-frameworks-for-countering-violent-extremism>.

and their supporters, these elements should be taken into account. Clearly, there is not a one-size-fits-all counter-narrative formula available, and every campaign thus needs to start with a thorough analysis of the target group.

#### 4.1 The target group

The target group of various counter-campaigns is not homogenous. There might be sympathisers, followers, active facilitators, active believers who take the lead in debates, religious leaders, foreign fighters, former fighters and recruiters, to name but a few subgroups. Individuals might be active online without belonging to a certain group, they might know each other because they frequent the same mosque, or they might be from the same family or neighbourhood. Vital elements that need to be taken into account include the profile of the target group, the question of with whom its members are in contact, the background that its members come from, the level of education or professional experience that they have, their (former) interests, and the sources used to find information. A close analysis of a subgroup might also show that although the individuals have very radical ideas, they do not seem to be willing to take the next step in the process of radicalisation by travelling to Syria and Iraq, or to engage in acts of terrorism at home.<sup>57</sup>

Conducting these kinds of analyses takes time and technical know-how, for one has to map the interests and communications on the internet of the individuals in the target group. Since not all of the information can be found with open-source research, it might even be necessary to create legal powers for certain authorities to conduct a thorough analysis of the lifestyle preferences and the social network of individuals. This kind of work requires proper funding and cooperation among multiple actors to stimulate the exchange of information. For small-scale initiatives, this is not always possible.

An example of such a relatively small-scale initiative is Inspire,<sup>58</sup> which is a counter-extremism and human rights organisation that seeks to address inequalities facing British Muslim women. These British Muslim women launched the campaign “Making a Stand” in 2014, because they wanted to stop the “damage caused by extremists poisoning young minds in their communities”. In their message, they reject the barbarism of the ISIS, and reject extremists and radicalisers such as Boko Haram and Al-Shabaab. Their message also aims to confront the false interpretations presented by Islamic imams who preach hatred and intolerance. The message furthermore intends to strengthen resilience in British Muslim society to resist the extremist rhetoric. Inspire, for instance, exerts influence in British mosques and communities, and creates local support networks and partners with other organisations. It furthermore seeks to equip communities with counter-narratives and help families to identify the signs of radicalisation. This organisation could benefit from support in better identifying the youngsters who are vulnerable in British Muslim communities, as well as their communication patterns and lifestyle interests, in order better to tailor their counter-messages, and to become even more effective.

#### 4.2 The message

The message of the communication strategy could be part of the public information campaign, an alternative narrative or a counter-narrative (see section 3). Once the target group has been identified and mapped out, the next step will be to analyse and understand the extremist narratives that need to be countered. As explained in section 2, the extremist narrative might contain elements that are humanitarian, ideological/religious, or identity-oriented. Especially in cases of alternative and counter-narratives, the drafting of these narratives should be tailored to address the elements of the extremists’ narratives.

Both the analysis stage and the drafting process of the message will benefit from a multidisciplinary input in order to understand the sociological, psychological, criminological and religious elements in the narrative and its response. It is furthermore advisable to consult communication experts in this process, in addition to

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<sup>57</sup> AIVD, *Jihadism on the Web*, p. 19.

<sup>58</sup> See Inspire, <http://www.wewillinspire.com/making-a-stand/>.

anthropologists and regional experts. Finally, the language chosen for the message needs to be adapted to the (sub)culture of the selected target group.

Several organisations have dedicated work to the analysis of jihadist messages and the crafting of possible elements of the counter-messaging campaigns. The Quilliam Foundation,<sup>59</sup> for instance, aims to generate creative, informed and inclusive discussions to counter the ideological underpinnings of terrorism. It addresses the challenges of citizenship, identity and belonging in a globalised world, advocating pluralistic, democratic alternatives that are consistent with universal human rights standards.

### 4.3 The messenger

Even though the message itself might be perfectly drafted to address the narrative of jihadist and radicalised groups, this message will not have any chance of being received favourably by the target group if a *credible messenger* does not communicate it. The credibility of the messenger lies in the eyes of the beholder, or, in other words, depends on whether the messenger is perceived as a credible person in the eyes of the individuals in the target group. This relates to the extent to which the messenger is a person trusted by the target group, or a local actor that is considered to be familiar with the issues at stake in the neighbourhood. A religious counter-narrative coming from a government does not bear that credibility, whereas the same message coming from a local imam might be more effective.

Various actors could thus play a role as the social carriers of the message in different phases of the strategic communication strategy:

*Government actors*, either on the central level or regional or local levels, will be especially well positioned in their official capacity to communicate the messages that fall within the public information campaigns that focus on the Western narrative of a rule-of-law-based society that respects pluralism and human rights. In addition, government actors would be well advised to communicate and explain the foreign policy choices made, as well as the policies and measures that are adopted to address national security risks. Government spokespersons could also address misrepresentations of government actions and clarify the intentions behind operations, as well as the facts and figures that give credibility to the message. The role of government actors is therefore rather limited, and best confined to public information campaigns or analytical and financial support to other programmes.

It is important to note that the communication strategies that are developed to address these issues are not aimed to please their constituencies for future elections, or to take the wind out of the sails of a political opponent, but rather to address members of a target group that is vulnerable to radicalization. This obviously implies a different tone of voice. Although it falls outside the scope of this report, it is quite clear that certain remarks made by government members or politicians when nations are dealing with serious security risks might have an opposite effect with regard to countering radicalisation, and feed rather than prevent perceptions of discrimination, marginalisation, stigmatisation and exclusion, with the potential effects of further polarising societies.<sup>60</sup>

Government actors could also play a limited role in communicating an alternative narrative. This role is limited, because the motivational factors behind a radicalisation process are diverse, and a government actor cannot address all aspects. A government actor could play a role on objective factual matters, whereas when it comes to matters of, for instance, an interpretation of the Koran, this is better left to other actors. The #Thinkagainturnaway campaign of the US government (see above) is an example of an ineffective way of communicating an alternative counter-message.

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<sup>59</sup> See The Quilliam Foundation, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/about/fags/>.

<sup>60</sup> T. Veldhuis and E. Bakker, *A Fear Management Approach to Counter-Terrorism*, ICCT Discussion Paper, February 2012, pp. 4–5, <http://www.icct.nl/download/file/ICCT-Veldhuis-Bakker-Fear-Management.pdf>; and F. Furedi, *Invitation to Terrorism: The Expanding Empire of the Unknown*, London: Continuum Press, 2007, pp. 13, 25, 73 and 118.

*Semi-public actors*, such as first-line professionals, have a slightly different position. Within this category fall those professionals who deal with situations of probation, unemployment and youth problems, including medical professionals, who should not so much focus on the public information campaigns, but rather on one-to-one communication with individuals when discussing alternative narratives and, in some situations, even counter-narratives. Their effectiveness depends highly on their ability to build a relationship of trust with the individual.

In contrast to public actors, *religious leaders and religious associations* are far better placed to address alternative interpretations of the Koran and other religious texts in response to extremist interpretations of Islam. These actors can moreover directly counter the extremist jihadist narratives. They can do this publicly either offline or online, or targeted to a certain group of individuals or in a one-on-one dialogue both offline or online.

Although religious leaders or religious associations might not consider it to be their core business, they could fulfil a role in explaining the values of Western society – the rule-of-law-based system, respect for human rights and the general policies adopted by governments – and the ways in which these values can be respected while still living the life of a devout Muslim.

*Associations representing minority groups of migrants* are in a comparable position to religious leaders in the way in which they can communicate an alternative narrative and contribute to a public information campaign about Western values. To what extent they are well positioned to communicate counter-narratives depends on what underlying causes of the radicalisation process or elements of the radical narrative need to be addressed. One such programme is STREET (Strategy to Reach, Empower and Educate Teenagers),<sup>61</sup> which is a community-based counter-radicalisation programme in the United Kingdom, which was created and is now run largely by members of a Muslim community in south London. STREET works with disaffected young people at risk to divert them from involvement in antisocial behaviour, gang violence and violent extremism, and towards leading more productive and positive lives. Depending on the individual in question, STREET's interventions may involve emotional well-being support, such as counselling, social and welfare support (including help with employment or training), personal development and faith-based work.<sup>62</sup>

*Role models and youth leaders* are persons that are well respected and looked up to by others. They might be able to set an example of what one can accomplish and might therefore inspire others to aspire to the same, instead of following the path of radicalisation. If they are public figures, they could contribute to public information campaigns, although they will probably be most effective in communicating an alternative narrative. Youth leaders, because of their leadership position, which requires support by a larger group and therefore credibility, are well placed to deliver counter-narratives.

Kenyan journalist Robert Ochola, for example, works with role models and youth leaders, either through its community work, or by his interactive "ghetto radio" show in the Eastleigh neighbourhood of Nairobi, Kenya. He is a well-known figure within his community and respected by the people with whom he works. By giving a platform to role models, who have sometimes themselves come back from a way of life that involved criminality and violent extremism, but who are now successful in their new lives, he contributes to an alternative narrative by leading by example.<sup>63</sup>

*Former jihadists* can, after a proper rehabilitation and reintegration process, also become credible voices of change. On a voluntary basis and with proper training, they can deliver credible alternative narratives and

<sup>61</sup> Jack Barclay, *Strategy to Reach, Empower and Educate Teenagers (STREET): A Case Study in Government Community Partnership and Direct Intervention to Counter Violent Extremism*, Center on Global Counter Terrorism Cooperation, 2011; and Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, pp. 54–55.

<sup>62</sup> A critical article in the English-language edition of *Le Monde diplomatique* in December 2013 mentions the budget cuts by the UK government of STREET in favour of budget support for the Quilliam Foundation. The author quotes an advisor to Charles Farr, the Director of the Office of Security and Counter-Terrorism (OSCT) in the UK Home Office, who had advised against that decision, convinced that STREET is a credible outreach programme. See N.M. Ahmed, "UK's Flawed Counter-terrorism Strategy", *Le Monde diplomatique*, December 2013, <http://mondediplo.com/blogs/uk-s-flawed-counter-terrorism-strategy>.

<sup>63</sup> See Street Radio, <http://streetradio.co.ke/from-the-graves-to-the-grounds.html>.

counter-narratives to a specific target group or individuals. They can talk from experience and share their disappointments about how they might feel misled or cheated, thus undermining the camaraderie narrative of jihadists. They have a certain street credibility that no other actor has. When used with caution, they could even have a function in public information campaigns, although one has to respect concerns for their own safety as well.<sup>64</sup>

*Victims* of terrorism are in a unique position as apolitical and non-partisan voices to counter the dehumanization strategy followed by extremists by giving a face to the victims. Only if they are mentally fit to fulfil the task as a counter-voice and with proper training and coaching will they be able to fulfil a role in each of the three categories of strategic communication strategies.

Two examples of programmes that work with former extremists and victims of terrorism come to mind: the Against Violent Extremism (AVE) network,<sup>65</sup> and the Victims' Voices project.<sup>66</sup>

The AVE network was devised and launched by Google Ideas at the Summit Against Violent Extremism in Dublin in 2011. It is managed by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue (ISD) and is a private-sector partnership involving ISD, Google Ideas,<sup>67</sup> the Gen Next Foundation<sup>68</sup> and Rehabstudio.<sup>69</sup> Former violent extremists and survivors of violent extremism are the main actors in this project. It leverages the lessons, experiences and networks of individuals who have dealt first-hand with extremism. It seeks to amplify and disseminate the narratives of former extremists and survivors, and to incubate and launch a series of targeted, strategic initiatives with AVE members that aims to have practical impact on reducing violent extremism.

The Victims' Voices project is a survivors' foundation and association of victims of terrorism bombings in Indonesia. The project was initiated by an Associate Fellow at the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism (ICCT) in The Hague, Max Boon, who was a victim of the July 2009 Marriott Jakarta terrorist bomb attack where he lost both his legs. The focus of the Victims' Voices project is on public schools with children in the age category of 14–18, who are particularly vulnerable to the extremist narratives spread by jihadist organisations in the Klaten region of central Java. The programme therefore aims at preventing radicalisation. By telling the victims' stories in a constructive and positive way and by bringing convicted terrorists face to face with victims and their families, also in a joint effort in workshops with students, the programme aims to put a stop to the dehumanisation of victims, and sends a message of forgiveness and reconciliation.

*Educators* play a crucial role in both recognising early signs of radicalisation and addressing the problem and underlying causes in an open debate with their pupils and students. They could design special education programmes in order to contribute to preventing radicalisation and violent extremism. These education programmes can include elements from public information campaigns. In addition, they could discuss alternative narratives, although if this is done within a classroom, it might not be targeted enough to influence effectively the target group that needs to be reached. In limited cases, and in one-on-one contacts, schoolteachers or mentors could be in a position to engage in a counter-narrative dialogue with a person who is radicalising or radicalised.

Governments can play a role in supporting the work of educators. The Dutch National Coordinator on Security and Counter-terrorism (NCTV), for instance, has developed a toolbox and e-learning module for first-line professionals to help them identify the first signs of radicalisation and to support education programmes in schools that address and discuss the issues of violent extremism.<sup>70</sup>

<sup>64</sup> "Developing Effective Counter-Narrative Frameworks for Countering Violent Extremism", pp. 5–6.

<sup>65</sup> See Against Violent Extremism, <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/about>; and Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 49.

<sup>66</sup> M. Boon, *Victims' Voices Project Report*, ICCT, 2014, <http://www.icct.nl/activities/projects/victims-voices>; and *Countering Violent Extremism in Indonesia: Need for a Rethink*, IPAC, 2014, pp. 16–22.

<sup>67</sup> See Google Ideas, <http://www.google.com/ideas/>.

<sup>68</sup> See Gen Next Foundation, <http://gennextfoundation.org/>.

<sup>69</sup> See Rehabstudio, <https://rehabstudio.com>.

<sup>70</sup> See National Coordinator on Security and Counter-terrorism, *Toolbox Extremisme*, <https://toolbox-extremisme.nctv.nl>.

*Family members and direct neighbours and friends* are as close to radicalised individuals as anyone could be. Because of this unique position, they can pick up on early signs of radicalisation, and conduct a dialogue with the individuals to address the alternative narrative and the counter-narrative. Within this category, mothers and women play an important role, especially because of their special role within families, placing them in a position to encourage family members and transmit certain values to the next generation.<sup>71</sup> However, not all families have the capacity, skills and intellectual knowledge to counter the extreme (religious) views of their relatives, neighbours and/or friends. Because of the sometimes poor situation in which these families find themselves, they are not able to create and show alternative ways to avoid marginalisation. More capacity building and training might be needed to support this group of messengers to fulfil their role. This kind of support is given, for instance, by the organisation “Inspire”, as discussed above, but also the programme “Mothers Schools”,<sup>72</sup> initiated by Women without Borders, and Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE) are examples of programmes that aim to provide knowledge and skills to mothers so that they can recognise and respond to early signs of radicalisation in their children.

From the outline above, it becomes clear that not all actors are equally effective in their role as messenger in the different categories of strategic communications. Table 1 shows which actors are especially well placed (+) to deliver a certain message, which ones whose effectiveness depends on other circumstances (+/-), and which ones are not considered to be effective and credible messengers to deliver a message that falls in a specific category of strategic communication (-).

	Public information campaign	Alternative narrative	Counter-narrative
Public actors: government representatives	+	+/-	-
Semi-public actors: first-line professionals	-	+	+/-
Religious leaders/associations	+/-	+	+
Representations of minority groups	+/-	+	+/-
Role models/youth leaders	+/-	+	+
Former jihadists	+/-	+	+
Victims	+	+	+
Educators	+	+/-	-
Family members/neighbours	-	+/-	+/-

**Table 1:** Credibility actors in message delivery

#### 4.4 The medium used

Effective communication depends on various elements, as outlined above. Once the target group has been identified, and those elements of the extremist narrative that require countering have been mapped out, the

<sup>71</sup> N. Chowdhury Fink, R. Barakat and L. Sheret, *The Role of Women in Terrorism, Conflict, and Violent Extremism: Lessons for the United Nations and International Actors*, Global Center on Cooperative Security, April 2013, p. 4.

<sup>72</sup> See Women without Borders, Mothers Schools, <http://www.women-without-borders.org/projects/underway/42/>.

messages to counter the extremist narrative can be formulated and the most effective messengers can be identified. The final stage is to determine the best channel or medium to communicate the message. Countering jihadist narratives needs to take place on multiple platforms at the same time and in a timely and responsive manner to events. These communication strategies thus need to aim for long-term effects and should therefore consist of a continuing output of messages.

Since extremists typically use various online media outlets to communicate their message and reach their target groups, communication strategies should likewise use the same outlets in addition to offline communication campaigns. From an analysis of the extremist narrative, one should also be able to get an understanding of the key words used by those who are searching for those messages. In drafting the counter-communication strategy, knowledge of the key words employed should be used to the advantage of those who want to deliver their counter-message. Those same terms should be built in to the counter-message to ensure higher ranking in search engines. This kind of knowledge is difficult to acquire for individuals and civil society actors, and government actors should therefore play a role in this respect by conducting this analysis, and providing the proper tools to be used in the counter-messaging.

To match the smart and sophisticated way in which jihadists package their messages, investments need to be made to ensure that credible messengers develop technical skills in using the various media outlets. This goes beyond the standard user instructions, but should also contribute to developing skills, for instance, in creative video montaging to counter the Hollywood-style videos presented by extremist terrorist organisations, thus avoiding boring talking heads' monologues.

The Radicalization Awareness network (RAN), which was established by the European Commission in 2011, is a network that connects experts involved in preventing radicalisation and violent extremism throughout Europe. The RAN@ working group on the internet and social media<sup>73</sup> tries to fulfil the role of contributing to capacity-building in skills development. It researches the role of the internet and social media on radicalisation and in addition the role that the internet can play in counter-messaging. RAN@ takes a special interest in new positive civil society responses aimed at countering violent extremism. It especially focuses on building partnerships with and among the different actors in its network in order to contribute to the creation and dissemination of counter- and alternative narratives through the internet and social media. RAN@ focuses on ways in which the positive power of the internet and social media can be harnessed to push back extremist messages and discourse. It places strong emphasis on the importance of public-private partnerships, bringing a range of tech companies to the table alongside community activists and communication experts. It identifies the challenges faced by civil society campaigners and the necessary partnerships that need to be activated between community groups, policy-makers and private-sector organisations to enable effective campaigns. It furthermore produces original targeted audio-visual content to counter the messaging of extremist movements online.

## 5. Concluding Remarks and Policy Recommendations

While the question "Who is in control of the narrative?" is asked, the answer is clearly that Western states are certainly not (yet) in control of this narrative on the internet. The sad fact, however, is that Western governments for already quite some time have been aware of the potential threat of the increase of messaging and the creativity with which jihadist organisations have been using the internet and social media. The inability or inadequacy of government efforts to put a stop to that trend, or to master the art of effectively countering these narratives, is being indicated as one of the reasons for the stark increase of radicalisation and the still growing

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<sup>73</sup> See European Commission, the Radicalisation Awareness Network, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-at/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalisation_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm); and Briggs and Feve, *Review of Programmes to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*, p. 48.

numbers of foreign fighters travelling from the West to ISIS and Al-Nusra battlegrounds in Iraq and Syria. Currently, many initiatives that focus in various ways on strategic communication – introduced by international organisations, states, municipalities or civil society actors – are being brought to the attention of a broader public, and their effectiveness is discussed in the regular media. Some are new or are being intensified; others have already been running for quite some time. The EU Counter-terrorism Coordinator, Gilles de Kerchove, has advocated the establishment of European centre on counter-narratives, which was recently announced. The question is therefore about what role a new European centre on counter-narratives could add to this already rather diverse landscape? The author of this report would, however, argue that such an initiative could contribute to rendering more effective all sorts of communication strategies to counter the jihadist narratives. It could do this both on its own account, as well as by supporting other initiatives. It would moreover be advisable to take into account some of the recommendations made below.

Evaluations on the effectiveness of these initiatives have so far not been systematically conducted. A consortium of organisations is currently conducting an evaluation programme called IMPACT Europe, sponsored by the EU's Seventh Framework Programme, which aims to shed some light on what works and what does not.<sup>74</sup> The evaluation programme runs until June 2017. Meanwhile, it is recommended that a division of any international counter-narrative centre, when established, should concentrate on keeping a database of the various initiatives that are implemented by different stakeholders and an evaluation of the effectiveness of these programmes to the greatest extent possible. Such a database would furthermore serve as an important source for generating good practices in counter-messaging. The various elements of strategic communication and the ways in which they are implemented and in what circumstances offer important information for the mapping of good practices.

A European or international counter-narrative centre could furthermore play an important role in analysing the smartly crafted jihadist narratives and the way in which these narratives speak to a variety of target groups by appealing to widely-held Muslim grievances and motivations to join the cyber jihad. In order to effectively counter that, a thorough and ongoing analysis needs to be conducted and mapped out in order to understand the different elements of the jihadist narrative and the way that it appeals to the various target groups. The analytical and technical capacities that are needed to do so can only effectively and comprehensively be resourced by states or international organisations, since this can be too costly for smaller organisations. It is therefore recommended that efforts to do so are intensified and more financial resources are made available. Although some governments or international organisations are conducting these analyses for their own purposes, it would make sense to establish and financially sponsor international or European research centres to perform this task. International initiatives and cooperation in this respect should furthermore enhance the exchange of information and good practices, and will moreover prevent overlap of activities and unnecessary spilling of budgets.

In addition, by bringing together experts with backgrounds in communication, Islam, criminology, sociology, psychology, security issues, political affairs, rehabilitation and reintegration, social and economic affairs and cultural identity, one should be able to draft different sets of counter-messages, which could function as another database, from which non-state actors, in their capacity as credible messengers, can pull the information needed to craft their own authentic messages. Furthermore, these local credible messengers could be assisted by technical and creative training to deliver their messages by using the various media outlets in a manner that appeals to the targeted groups.

Finally, the fact that the terrorist threat of jihadist organisations and lone wolf sympathisers is currently seriously undermining the security of many states and societies calls for a common effort by all possible stakeholders to effectively contribute to strengthening the resilience of societies. Politicians and government

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<sup>74</sup> For more information on IMPACT Europe, see: "FP7 Project IMPACT Europe", TNO, <https://www.tno.nl/en/focus-area/defence-safety-security/national-security-crisis-management/fp7-project-impact-europe/>.

representatives, as well as public mass media directors, bear an enhanced responsibility to consider carefully their actions and the possible consequences that these may have on the increase or decrease of this threat. Public and commercial mass media, in particular, run the risk of being used by jihadist organisations to disseminate further their extremist propaganda, and thus unintentionally contribute to the strategic goals of these organisations. A taboo still appears to exist on raising these issues, which should be overcome by conducting a public debate and exchange of points of view and considerations, as well as possible solutions.

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**More Information on the initiative programmes is available at:**

Against Violent Extremism, <http://www.againstviolentextremism.org/about>

Digital Outreach Team (DOT), #Thinkagainturnaway, <https://www.youtube.com/user/ThinkAgainTurnAway>  
[https://twitter.com/thinkagain\\_dos](https://twitter.com/thinkagain_dos)  
<https://www.facebook.com/ThinkAgainTurnAway>

Inspire #Making a Stand, <http://www.wewillinspire.com/making-a-stand/>

My Jihad, <http://myjihad.org/about/>

Quilliam Foundation, <http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/about/faqs/>

RAN@ working group on the internet and social media, [http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalization\\_awareness\\_network/about-ran/ran-at/index\\_en.htm](http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/home-affairs/what-we-do/networks/radicalization_awareness_network/about-ran/ran-at/index_en.htm)

Radical Middle Way, <http://www.radicalmiddleway.org/page/about-us>

Sisters Against Violent Extremism (SAVE), <http://www.women-without-borders.org/save/>

Stop Jihad, <http://www.stop-djihadisme.gouv.fr/index.html>

Viral Peace, <http://www.state.gov/s/srmc/c45088.htm>

Women without borders, <http://www.women-without-borders.org/>

Extreme Dialogue, <http://extremedialogue.org/>

Street Radio, From the Graves to the Grounds (Kenya), <http://streetradio.co.ke/from-the-graves-to-the-grounds.html>