

9

THE BATTLE FOR THE BATTLE OF THE NARRATIVES

Sidestepping the double fetish of digital and CVE

Akil N. Awan, Alister Miskimmon and Ben O'Loughlin

Introduction

Countering violent extremism (CVE) is hot; digital CVE is hotter still. As the US replaced the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications with another new CVE hub, the Global Engagement Center, other Western governments have followed suit in building teams charged with countering the narratives thought to radicalise individuals and groups into violence. Officials seek to 'contest the space', and, whilst most evidence points to the role of off-line social dynamics in leading individuals to violence (Sageman 2004; Awan 2007; Conway and McInerney 2008; Neumann 2012; Vidino and Hughes 2015; Conway 2017), the space is often taken as digital.

Digital CVE is not just hot stuff, it is also a lucrative business, offering significant sums of funding to those who can lay claim to navigating this space. Consequently, a whole host of government agencies, think tanks, civil society groups and private companies are investing a great deal of time, money and effort into digital CVE initiatives. Our aim in this chapter is not to assess and pass judgement on the relative merits of individual CVE campaigns. Certainly, there are potential shortcomings of much of the work currently undertaken on digital CVE. These fall under three broad categories: there is a lack of clarity on the evidentiary basis behind the assumptions underlying CVE. Second, evaluating the effectiveness of CVE campaigns is extremely challenging, leading to a tendency by policy actors to overstate its effect. Finally, there is increasing evidence to suggest that the stated objectives of CVE are difficult to meet because they do not translate into obvious metrics (Elshimi, 2017).

If the push towards CVE is not working, or at the very least, cannot easily be proven to be working, and the premise itself is dubious or not based on an

evidentiary basis, then what in reality, is taking place here? We contend, that we are instead witnessing a dual fetishisation of digital CVE.

What do we mean by dual fetishisation? To fetishise is to be excessively or irrationally devoted to an object or activity; to imbue an object with special, even magical qualities, ignoring its banal reality. The banal reality is that all media are new media at one point in time, whether cave paintings or digital. The banal reality is that CVE was COIN (counter-insurgency) a decade ago and previous acronyms in the decades before that. In fact, we are always in the middle: in the middle of developments in mediation and in the middle of the evolution of conflict, violence and its justifications. There are newer and older forms of media, and different actors and institutions adapt and use these forms and technologies of mediation with greater or lesser speed and skill (Hoskins and O’Loughlin, 2007; 2015; Chadwick, 2013; Grusin, 2015). Terrorism and counterterrorism, radicalisers and counter-radicalisers – all are just another set of actors within this history. And yet, all too often, newer media and newer terrorist groups and behaviours are treated as special, even exceptional: a dual fetish.

This chapter makes two moves against this framing. First, we argue this is a *radically unrealistic account of communication and persuasion* that ignores decades of research on radicalisation and a century of research on media effects. It is radical because it is almost wilfully counterproductive. The bureaucratic, target-driven goals of governments may manifest this grasping for a tangible, quantifiable mark of progress, but it also signifies amnesia towards prior COIN and other campaigns. Second and the main purpose of this chapter is *we propose a model of narrative contestation through which governments can address real-world concerns*. Our strategic narrative framework identifies convergence or divergence across narratives of the international system, narratives of identity and narratives of specific problems. By charting possible narrative alignment about how the world works, how we fit into that world and how that bears on current problems, we can identify how and why some radicalising groups may offer a coherent and compelling narrative and why counter-radicalisation offers a less coherent and compelling narrative for certain audiences. This can help explain why a certain problem definition or even worldview becomes meaningful to those open to radicalisation and violence. We illustrate this by comparing the drivers of radicalisation in Europe – with a focus on France and Islamist radicalisation – with the counter-narratives being offered by European leaders. Empirical analysis of the experience of radicalised individuals helps explain why those extremist narratives are persuasive and why certain states’ narratives are less so. On that basis, policy actors could form convincing narratives – but this will not be easy.

Our analysis of Islamic State (IS) public communications and claims indicates strong narrative alignment that might have appeal to individuals within particular contexts within French society. By contrast, we find that narratives being

projected against IS and in defence of European society are less coherent. It is important to recognise that analysing narratives projected is on only one part of a complex picture; identifying and explaining *the difference these narratives make* to the opinions and behaviour of individuals is another. Narrative reception is complex and requires much further research. This chapter and our analysis provide the rationale for that research agenda.

CVE: the problem of identifying its impact

One of the cornerstones of CVE is the use of public communication tools to dissuade the supporters of violent extremism. The State Department Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communication's CVE efforts are best captured by their unofficial motto, 'contesting the space'. The maxim received endorsement at the highest levels including that of US President Barak Obama, who deployed the phrase in a speech to the UN General Assembly in 2014, stating that the war against extremism meant "contesting the space that terrorists occupy – including the Internet and social media" (Knowlton 2014).

Primarily, this has involved undermining extremist narratives, and propagating alternative and counter-narratives to them. The US State Department's Global Engagement Center, for example, states that it "shall lead the coordination, integration, and synchronization of Government-wide communications activities directed at foreign audiences abroad in order to *counter the messaging* and diminish the influence of international terrorist organizations".¹ One well-known example of this practice was the use of the Twitter account, @ThinkAgain_DOS by the US State Department's Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications, to send anti-extremism messages, until it was superseded by the Global Engagement Center in 2016.

On the face of it, this sounds like an eminently laudable thing to do and would be perfectly reasonable if it was, in fact, only the extremists' narratives that we had to contend with. Indeed, it would be entirely rational as a strategy, if it was the extremists' narratives themselves that had the potency and efficacy to radicalise individuals towards violence. Clearly, that is a preposterous idea, considering that hardly everyone who views, or even regularly consumes extremist material, is transformed into a jihadist automaton. Indeed, such a strategy would rest on a *radically unrealistic account of communication and persuasion* that ignores more than a decade of research on radicalisation and a century of research on media effects, propaganda and PysOps.

The historian of public diplomacy, Robin Brown (2014), argues that Western responses to these aspects of Russian projection and Putin's communication strategies can be characterised as 'propaganda panic'. We argue that the same can be said for many responses to IS and al-Qaeda before them. Brown argues that policymakers, journalists and commentators had fallen into a post-Cold War narrative of declining Russian influence. Thus, they were taken by surprise when in 2014 Putin began to pursue an assertive kinetic and communicative strategy

towards Ukraine and those opposing Russian influence there. Propaganda has been an easy peg to hang blame for the situation, Brown writes:

The attraction of ‘propaganda’ is that it appears to stand somewhere outside the normal responsibilities of politics or diplomacy and helps to insulate those in charge from an accusation that they weren’t paying attention or that their policies have failed. The explanation can then be offered that it is the inadequacy of our propaganda/public diplomacy/ information efforts. The additional twist is that the people who have been responsible for the ‘inadequate’ response have been saying all along that their work is totally underfunded and so instead of coming out swinging at their critics gratefully pocket the increased appropriations.

(2014, no page)

Tongue slightly in cheek and perhaps with “hybrid war” in mind, Brown notes how quickly commentators turn one situation into a broader category, “the rise of a new unconventional-hybrid-asymmetric-Mad Max – conflict threat” (2014, no page). But perhaps more telling is the assumption that if the West could out-propagandise Putin and Russia through better-funded, more sophisticated communication strategies, influence could be exerted in the region. A similar surprise has been evident in Western approaches to Islamist terrorism. The mythology of bin Laden in the caves of Afghanistan reaching into Western homes through the Internet to radicalise the vulnerable individual is one that assumes a juxtaposition of low- and high-technology environments as well as a geographical distance and a near-metaphysical shock that this distance is overcome. Equally, that mythology reinforces an assumption that such influence is possible and, therefore, must be countered. This in turn assumes that such counter-operations must also be able to exert influence. This is a series of missteps based on an initial false assumption.

The propaganda panic identified by Brown exemplifies the tendency of policymakers to imagine how influence works. After years of ethnographic study of UK military communications teams, Sarah Maltby (2015; see also 2012a, 2012b) argues that strategic communication policymakers fall into a trap of presuming that if they take full advantage of contemporary media systems, then they can exert more influence on the attitudes and behaviour of target populations. It is not simply that, as Brown suggests, policymakers tend to presume that there is a unified enemy with a coherent narrative that must be fought at all costs, fought by ‘us’ with our benign intentions. Maltby highlights the even more suspect assumption that influence activity by the West can cause the intended effect and that there is an audience waiting and open to narratives, whether IS’s or the West’s. A problem here is that policymakers trained in strategic communication by marketing and public relations experts are taught that ‘the message’ is transmitted from the source (them) to targets who receive what was transmitted and, allowing for the possibility of interference by noise, this will create behavioural effect in line with the message’s content (Corman, 2009; cf. Carey, 1989). This

transport metaphor is wholly unrealistic since there is never a beginning or end to communication, nor are ‘messages’ discrete packages with unambiguous content. Rather, there are perceptions and communications constantly reflecting between actors, often unintentionally, so that a more accurate metaphor would be a hall of mirrors (Archetti, 2017). The sense that ‘targets’ or audiences make of these communications is not the function of their position within a society. Rather, it depends on their social context and networks, who they talk politics with and how they think about how their opinion fits within broader public opinion.

Military and security policymakers seem to find intuitive sense in the notion that ‘getting the message across’ could make a predictable difference to attitudes and behaviours, and express fears that ‘Islamic State are getting their message across better than we are’. This is an absolute misunderstanding of communication. Maltby cites the godfathers of communication theory and media analysis, Bernard Berelson and Paul Lazarsfeld, who in 1954 – a time of far fewer communication channels and a more controllable media environment – wrote,

Some kinds of communication, on some kinds of issues, brought to the attention of some kinds of people under some kinds of conditions, have some kinds of effects.

(Berelson et al., 1954: 356)

This is exactly our point about violent extremist materials in digital spaces: *some* content about *some* issues brought to the attention of *some* individuals living in *certain* contexts and consuming media in *certain* conditions, will have *some* kinds of effects. And yet, for states charged with security and order, they *must* be seen to act. They must act on and in communication spaces. Powers writes, “controlling information flows has become increasingly difficult, yet crucial, for state actors, and efforts at managing these flows are symbolic of the broader challenges that the modern era of globalization presents to state sovereignty” (Powers 2014: 239). The need to counter the narratives of IS is not simply about preventing the radicalisation of individuals, then; it is part of a broader anxiety about risk and connectivity in global society (Awan et al., 2011).

The role of strategic narratives

Cristina Archetti suggests that narratives in both terrorism research and for counterterrorism practitioners are *en vogue*. She argues, however, that, “...surprisingly little effort has gone into understanding the nature of narratives as well as their role in the phenomenon of contemporary extremism” (Archetti 2017: 218–219). Responding to Archetti’s call, this chapter takes a strategic narrative approach to understanding the role of narratives in CVE. A strategic narrative analysis enables us to systematically explore how narratives are formed, projected and received. We contend that only by examining the processes of formation, projection and reception of narratives can we more fully understand processes, not only of how

individuals become radicalised and how violent extremists influence others but also how CVE practitioners and analysts might understand the role of narratives and communication more generally in their activities. Strategic narrative also suggests a way to understand *what* is being communicated, by contending that narratives can be conceived as falling in to three categories: identity narratives, system narratives and issue narratives.

We define strategic narratives as the following:

Strategic narratives are a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of international politics to shape the behaviour of domestic and international actors.

(Miskimmon et al., 2013: 2)

As we have already pointed out, strategic narratives come in three forms. Narratives of the international system generally point to who the main actors are and the rules, norms or regimes which underpin the structural order of the globe. As we will outline below, IS's system narrative straightforwardly captures the main points of divergence from the Western model of international order. Second, identity narratives point to the values and goals an actor has and along with the actor's system narrative, provide important context for the policy or issue narratives which the actor promotes. Each of these narratives – system, identity and issue – are linked, and coherence across each of these domains can lead to the creation of a compelling and influential narrative.

From the content of what is being strategically narrated, the narrative cycle of formation, projection and reception is vital to understanding how narratives move through the new media ecology and are crucially received, interpreted and remediated by individuals in many different ways. Understanding this cycle of communication is a key. Formation of narratives focuses on the process of creating a narrative and the role of key actors in this. Individuals, groups or institutions can all play a role in the formation of a narrative. External actors and events can prove disruptive in the formation process if the context for a particular narrative is changed. The process of projection of narratives focuses on how, particularly in a new media environment, narratives are projected and contested (Awan et al., 2011; Miskimmon et al., 2013). Reception is a crucially important process in strategic narrative research. Floor Keuleers (2015) stresses that people do not simply repeat elite narratives but reformulate them to fit their own life experience, hopes and fears. Reception has been studied in various ways, for example in public opinion polls or in focus groups. Central to reception of strategic narrative is the role of the individual and how they respond to the narrative they receive: "Reception happens in social contexts where narratives may be discussed socially as well as processed individually. Reception depends on the availability of specific mediums like radio or services like Facebook, and each medium offers different possibilities for communicating back" (Miskimmon et al., 2017: 9, Figures 9.1 and 9.2).

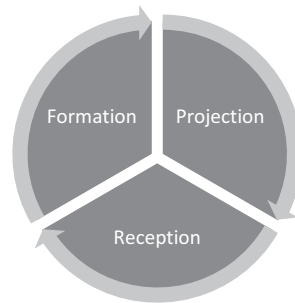


FIGURE 9.1 The Strategic Narrative Cycle.

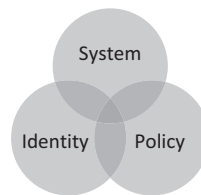


FIGURE 9.2 Core Components of Strategic Narrative.

This chapter now moves to analyse IS strategic narrative and how they have been able to forge a relatively coherent system, identity and policy narrative to seek to advance their interests. We then seek to understand the reception of the IS narrative in terms of narrative resonance, and how this problematises existing efforts in CVE to project counter-narratives in to this space.

IS’s narrative coherence

At the heart of IS’s appeal is the alluring simplicity of its *System Narrative*, which is composed of two main strands. The first strand, which sits at the core of all jihadist narratives and originates with al-Qaeda, compels Muslim audiences to view contemporary conflicts through the prism of a wider historical global attack on Islam and Muslims by a belligerent ‘Zionist-Crusader Alliance’. In response to this assault, the jihadists claimed not only to have awakened the *Ummah* (global Muslim community of belief) to the reality of their predicament but also claimed to serve as the sole and crucial vanguard, offering audiences the opportunity to reply to the enemy in kind (Awan 2012). As many commentators have recognised, this System Narrative has remained remarkably coherent and consistent over time (Scheuer 2008; Wright 2007).

Since June 2014, the second strand of the *System Narrative* – IS’s own unique addendum to the already heady mix – claims that the caliphate has now been re-established, thereby restoring glory and honour to the downtrodden Muslims once again. The obvious corollary to the establishment of the caliphate was that

it was therefore now incumbent on every Muslim to (i) make *hijrah*, or emigrate to the new caliphate; (ii) to make *bayah*, or pledge of allegiance to its leader and caliph; and (iii) to help defend and build this new utopian state. Hijrah is an important theme in Islamic literature and stems from the emigration of the Prophet Muhammad from Mecca around 632 AD in order to escape religious persecution and move to Medina, where he founded a religious community and burgeoning city-state. The establishment of the caliphate in June 2014, therefore, provided compelling alternative narratives to audiences: undertake your own hijrah (a journey that paralleled that of the Prophet Muhammad); escape the persecution in your own societies; live under Islamic sovereignty and law; help defend the burgeoning state and community; and ultimately restore the state to its long-lost glory (Awan 2016).

Both ideas, of jihad and Caliphate, are underpinned by the primary identity of all Muslims as first and foremost part of the worldwide *Ummah* or community of believers and not as residents or citizens of their countries of birth or residence. It is this radical interpretation of the religious community of believers as the sole locus of identity and belonging then, that IS's *Identity Narratives* are predicated upon. IS deploys the considerable weight of its media apparatus and social media presence to bolster and maintain these carefully constructed identity narratives. Awan (forthcoming) identifies three key media strategies from IS' extensive media catalogue that are central to its success in promulgating these identity narratives:

1. **Attachment** involves the reinforcing and strengthening of self-identity, by compelling audiences to see themselves as part of the in-group identity. Prominent examples include:
 - Military training videos that witness the transformation of individual recruits into a fighting unit, by effacing the identity of the individual before fusing the identity of the individual with the broader fighting group.
 - Nurturing fictive kinship through the vicarious identification with victimhood and grievance. Most jihadist testimony videos will follow particular tropes in which individuals cite altruistic motivations, such as the defence of their community, for their actions, invoking phrases like 'my brothers and sisters', 'our blood' or 'our children'. These are designed to nurture attachment to the group almost through blood bonds.
 - Promoting in-group identities as redemptive, for example, by providing redemption from criminal or hedonistic pasts. Similarly, IS' social media canon is replete with imagery that promotes the identification with chivalrous warrior, hero, champion, winner or real men, providing redemption from impotent, marginalised or emasculated identities. These media outputs often very cleverly deploy popular culture references from films and videogame like *Call of Duty*, to sell these identities.

2. **Deracination/Deculturation** aims to weaken and delink individuals' identities from all other competing identities, whether they are national, ethnic, cultural or political in origin. Examples include:
 - Denying the legitimacy of modern nation-states, or geographical boundaries. These range from infographics and maps that erase current national borders and state demarcations, to viral social media campaigns such as #Sykespicotover, that accompanied the symbolic destruction of the historic Sykes–Picot border between eastern Syria and northern Iraq in 2015 (Awan and Dockter 2016).
 - Severing citizenship by filming the ritualistic burning of original national identity documents in response to new members being issued IS branded passports.
 - Promoting a deculturated religion in Salafism which offers a 'pure' religious identity that is divorced from the cultural baggage of an ethnic or national religious affiliation.
3. **Polarisation** seeks to reinforce diametrical opposition between identities, highlighting how the self and the other differ. Examples include:
 - Dehumanisation of enemies, referring to them as dogs, pigs or monkeys, or through the use of pejorative sectarian insults.
 - Expressing loyalty to the believers and disavowal of others (*al-wala wal-bara*): Issue 11 of IS' English language magazine, *Dabiq*, shows happy multi-racial brothers in arms alongside the concept of loyalty to believers and disavowal of disbelievers, juxtaposed against 'American Racism'. This is not just about dissaving those who are not of your faith, but about disavowing anyone who differs, including the recruit's parents and family.
 - Employing the practice of excommunication (*takfir*), which functions to keep the faith 'pure'. Following the Charlie Hebdo attacks in France in 2015, the February issue of *Dabiq*, wrote of polarising the world by destroying its greatest threat, the grayzone; that space in which young Frenchmen could be both Muslims and good citizens of the French Republic, without any inherent contradiction. IS anticipated that provocative terrorist attacks, like the ones in Paris, would goad the French towards overreaction and create a climate of fear and hostility, further alienating French Muslims from wider society. Western Muslims would then be forced to make 'one of two choices': between apostasy or IS' bastardised version of belief.

These narratives are immensely powerful, exhibiting remarkable coherence and strong *narrative alignment* across system, identity and issue narratives. However, these narratives, potent as they may be, are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to account for the radicalisation phenomenon, particularly amongst young Muslims in the West. Instead, we recognise that narratives constitute only one part in the complex array of elements that intersect to ultimately manifest as a move towards violent extremism.

Following Awan (2016), we conceptualise the role narratives play in violent radicalisation by viewing *Narrative* as one side of a triad, with the second and third sides representing *Context* and *Agency*, respectively. As we have seen, narratives propounded by extremist groups like IS are highly compelling, but it is the individual's *Context* (encompassing personal, political, psychological, social, political, economic and cultural spheres) that is central to whether this narrative resonates with the individual. In fact, the extremists' narrative is almost irrelevant unless it finds fertile ground to take root, which it achieves by resonating with individuals on a personal level, resonating with their everyday lives and lived experiences. Context is in fact the primary distinguisher between all of those who regularly consume extremist literature, say for academic, journalistic or other research purposes, but nevertheless manage to maintain scholarly distance, and a young 18-year-old who finds himself increasingly drawn to IS messaging. The final side in the triad representing individual agency highlights the fact that very few individuals whose context and circumstances intersect with a coherent narrative become de facto jihadist automatons, but rather individuals make decisions and choices. When all three elements of the triad intersect in this way, we witness *Narrative Resonance* (Awan 2016).

Narrative resonance

Let us turn to some examples of how IS narratives work to attain *narrative resonance*, by intersecting with structural conditions and the lived experiences facing some young Muslims in the West, and the challenges that this understanding then poses for digital CVE campaigns.

(i) *Alienation & estrangement*

A survey of public attitudes on Muslims in Western countries (Pew Research Center 2006; Ipsos Mori 2016), statements on Muslims by political leaders and an examination of Islamophobia within mainstream media outlets (Poole 2002; Poole and Richardson 2006; Allen 2010; Zempi and Awan 2017) illustrates just how toxic the popular and media discourse on Muslims has become in many parts of the US and Europe, often presenting Muslim minorities as an unwelcome presence.

France, who has exported the largest number of her citizens to the ranks of IS amongst European states (Van Ginkel and Entenmann 2016), is a particularly pertinent case study and illustrates the mechanisms through which narrative resonance might be readily attained. Within the public discourse in France over the past few decades, a growing Islamophobia, and increasing rejection of the immigrant, and the other, has permeated French political and social discourse around Muslims. This environment has led to, amongst other things, a large majority of French citizens holding unfavourable views of Islam – regarding it as ‘intolerant’ and ‘incompatible’ with French values;² a staggering public overestimation of

the size of the current and projected Muslim population in France;³ the desecration of gravestones of French Muslim World War II veterans (The Telegraph 2008); sartorial restrictions on Muslim women's dress and the linkage of dress to violence – most visible with the forced undressing of French Muslim women wearing burkinis by armed police (Quinn 2016); the advent of bestselling novels like Michel Houellebecq's 2015 *Soumission*, which imagines a future France overrun and ruled by Islamists. But perhaps most significantly, it has helped spur the far-right Front National to victory in the 2014 European Parliament election and significant electoral successes in the 2017 presidential election.

It is in this context that we might begin to understand how, for some French Muslims feeling under siege and alienated in their own country, an alternative identity narrative might appear more appealing than a tainted national one (for a literature review, see Mitts 2017). Groups like IS, that prey on this kind of alienation, end up benefitting enormously. IS has shrewdly attempted not just to capitalise on these feelings of alienation and identity crises, but hopes to actively build on them by creating conditions in Western societies that work towards these outcomes by eliminating the so-called 'grey zones'. Moreover, IS wants to be perceived as a welcoming utopia, which is central to its grand narrative. We tend to think of IS propaganda as primarily constituting brutal violence, with grisly beheadings, burnings and crucifixions – what we might refer to as the pornography of violence, which often deliberately targets Western audiences and sensibilities (Awan 2016; O'Loughlin 2018). However, the overwhelming majority of IS media content at the height of its output in 2015 – around 80% – was in fact centred around depictions of blissful civilian life in the 'utopian' caliphate; state-building, identity and welcoming, joining a community, escaping persecution and enjoying religious freedoms (Winter 2015; Awan forthcoming).

(ii) Socio-economic marginalisation

A second example of how narrative resonance is attained relates to socio-economic marginalisation. Many of the individuals from France and Belgium who joined IS or carried out attacks at home have hailed from the French *banlieues*, or other ghetto like areas in and around Brussels. These environments are often characterised as providing a heady mix of unemployment, crime, drugs, institutional racism and endemic cycles of poverty and disenfranchisement (Laurence and Vaïsse 2006; Todd 2016; Packer 2015; Awan 2015). It is in these sorts of scenarios that radical groups might potentially offer an escape from a bleak future, or a criminal past. This is particularly striking in France where around 70% of the prison population is Muslim, despite the fact that Muslims only make up around 7%–8% of the general population (Atran and Hamid 2015).

IS online propaganda shrewdly seeks to capitalise on these structural inequalities in its appeals. The jihadists offer redemption through the image of the heroic warrior, with the individual reborn as some sort of avenging hero for the

victimised community. Following the Charlie Hedbo attack, IS's official radio station praised the 'Jihadi heroes who had avenged the Prophet', confirming the Kouachi brothers transformation from petty criminals and nobodies into heroes of Islam. The appeal to the valiant holy warrior or chivalrous knight is a recurring theme in jihadist literature, and the IS's propaganda machine has been busy pumping out material that shrewdly seeks to exploit these tensions. Recent social media propaganda included the telling phrases "Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures" and "Why be a loser when you can be a martyr" (Awan 2016). In this context, IS's identity narrative offers, perhaps for the first time, a sense of being part of an elite group that compensates for the shortcomings of their own trivial existence and insignificance.

The West's counter-narrative response

Naturally, addressing issues like socio-economic marginalisation or identity alienation requires time, funds, effort and perhaps most importantly, political will. This applies across Western states seeking to CVE or radicalisation, and not least France. If, for example, the French government wanted to counter IS recruitment in France, the deeply troubling and disproportionate representation of Muslim men in French prisons would seem an obvious candidate to tackle. This is particularly pressing, considering that those prisons have long been recognised as incubators of radicalisation (Neumann 2010; Silke and Veldhuis 2017). However, this is not an easy undertaking and would demand institutional changes over the course of a number of generations to even begin to remedy – a prospect certainly outside the scope of any given French political election cycle. Similarly, any serious attempt to deal with the growing alienation of French Muslims from wider society would also require an urgent reappraisal of the shortcomings of France's national identity narrative, as enshrined in her motto, *Liberté, égalité, fraternité*, particularly when a significant proportion of her citizens feel they had been systematically deprived of these ideals and did not feel part of French society. In short, France would have to address a fundamental *narrative misalignment* between its System, Identity and Issue Narratives, and the resultant dissonance experience by some of her citizens.

In a European context, what counter-narratives are on offer? A more basic question is, what narratives do European states and the European Union (EU) tell about themselves and their role in the world? For if a vision of a bright future was on offer at home, there would be no alienation or dislocation that would push an individual to seek political alternatives at home or abroad. However, in recent years, there is a sense within Europe of multiple internal and external crises. Terrorist attacks in Paris and Brussels, followed by what German police labelled 'group sexual harassment in crowds' in Cologne on New Year's Eve 2015, have led to suspicion of existing citizens of North African or Middle East origin or migrants and refugees arriving in Europe. The conflation of refugees and migrants with terrorism and essentialised cultural difference contributes to

the rising electoral popularity of far-right groups and leaders, as well as symbolic outbursts such as the cover of Polish magazine *wSieci* in February 2016, depicting a white woman draped in the blue EU flag being clutched at by dark hands coming in from outside the frame (Sherwood 2016). Finally, Brexit not only registers as a symbolic loss of one EU member but alters the balance of power within Europe, creating uncertainty about which path Europe is taking.

At a *system narrative* level, in recent years, the EU and European states have often reneged on former claims that world order was following a path towards universal values. The European Council has proclaimed that the EU foreign policy, through which it has traditionally sought to diffuse norms of democracy, the rule of law and human rights in regions surrounding the European area, is no longer promoting universal values. The European Council has stated that it “will take *stabilisation as its main political priority*...recognising that *not all partners aspire to EU rules and standards*” (European Commission and High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy 2015: 2, italics added). In other words, if authoritarian leaders in the Middle East and North Africa ‘arc of instability’ wish to reject democracy and human rights, the EU will no longer view this as a high priority problem to overcome. This signalled a pragmatic turn; still a nod to universal values but a recognition that these values are not always shared and, as crises intensify in and around Europe’s borders, stability is the priority value to realise. The EU’s chief foreign policymaker, High Representative Mogherini, has spoken not of a civilisation united by shared human rights and values but an “alliance of civilisations” (Mogherini, 2016: no page). If the system is no longer one of shared values, then this in turn creates a different European identity narrative: its values are no longer superior because they were forged through Enlightenment reason, but rather they are simply a local, contextual set of norms that others are free to turn away from. This has the potential to diminish the EU’s historical identity narrative, the future direction of the European integration project, and sets potential limits on its persuasive power in international affairs. And France, as source to many of these once-universal values, faces this identity crisis most acutely.

Looking to policy narratives in Europe, it is not just the number of urgent policy dilemmas European states face – migration, post-financial crisis economic uncertainty, terrorism, Brexit and illiberal democracies – but the difficulty of addressing such challenges. As the Polish social theorist Bauman wrote, power has escaped politics:

Having leaked from a society forcefully laid open by the pressures of globalizing forces, power and politics drift ever further in opposite directions. The problem, and the awesome task that will in all probability confront the current century as its paramount challenge, is the bringing of power and politics together again.

(Bauman 2007: 25)

Bauman's argument speaks to our earlier claim that communication is at the heart of a wider anxiety about control for state policymakers in the 21st century. Any 'propaganda panic' is because control of communication is both important in itself for managing problems of radicalisation but also important because it characterises the dilemma of achieving control of multiple global flows – of people, arms, ideas and germs. This means that the quest for a more coherent narrative entails formulating a wider set of responses to these problems of how to govern in the 21st century at all. Again, this explains why states feel the need to *do something* even when there is no theoretical or evidentiary basis that it will work, including digital counter-narrative operations. For the larger challenge is too large for most policymakers to address.

These fundamental theoretical challenges concerning power and control, tied to long-standing issues and immediate real-world issues of stagnation in wages and social mobility and conflictual identity politics, are central factors that explain why a positive narrative about the future of life in Europe is not easy to articulate. And a narrative of mere stability or consolidation, of 'getting through the crisis', is hardly inspiring or appealing to young people. In short, whilst the IS narrative is fairly consistent, the EU and European leaders have trouble offering an inspiring or coherent narrative or offering hope for a better future.

These difficulties go some way towards explaining why CVE is so often fetishised. It is relatively cheap, when compared to say overhauling the French prison system. Crucially, it allows governments to be seen by anxious publics to be proactively *doing* something. Digital CVE will be picked up security correspondents and technology journalists and can act as a public signal of taking the matter seriously. CVE also caters to the bureaucratic, metric-driven goals of government public diplomacy and international communication. Government agencies inevitably need to specify targets, and how they might measure achievement of those targets, and so are often grasping for tangible, quantifiable milestones or mark of progress.

Twitter's 2015 'takedown' policy, which removed all IS-supporting accounts, is one widely cited example of success in the CVE field (Conway, Khawaja, and Lakhani 2017). However, what is often not acknowledged is that compelling a social media company to remove extremist material and accounts from its platform, has serious consequences for freedom of expression and censorship,⁴ and often simply forces the group and its supporters to migrate to other social media platforms – in IS's case, primarily to Telegram.

However, even more problematically, other CVE campaigns which seek to contest the space by producing media content containing counter-narratives have used social media views, likes and even page impressions as proof of concept and efficacy. The biggest problem with this sort of metric for success is the constituency of the audience: if you are proverbially preaching to the choir, it hardly matters if your campaign goes viral. The other major problem is that such metrics are always incomplete because persuasion is qualitative and multifaceted. The inability to measure soft power is another example in international affairs; hence,

we argue for analysing the role of strategic narratives, who can be evidenced, rather than attraction (see Roselle et al., 2014).

Moreover, CVE campaigns such as these can also circumvent proving their efficacy. There is little evidence to suggest that online CVE campaigns work. The problem is that it is impossible to prove a false negative; it is impossible to prove that you prevented someone from becoming a terrorist through some counter-messaging CVE campaign or other action. As long as advocates of these campaigns can use metrics as proxies for efficacy, they can also claim some measure of success.

These campaigns fetishise messaging. However, if we are faced with a young economically, socially and politically marginalised man who is buying into extremist messages like, “Sometimes people with the worst pasts create the best futures. criminal” and “why be a loser when you can be a martyr”, why should we assume that removing or contesting the message would have any tangible impact, when nothing has been done to change the reality of the individual’s predicament?

In light of all these problems, *we have proposed a model of narrative contestation through which governments can address real-world concerns*. Our strategic narrative framework that identifies alignment across narratives of the international system, narratives of identity and narratives of specific problems can help explain why a certain problem definition or even worldview becomes meaningful to those open to radicalisation and violence.

Conclusion

This double fetish of CVE comes at a cost: the ‘battle of the narratives’ becomes conceptualised and practiced as the quantitative online dominance of ‘our’ content over ‘theirs’. Rather than admitting how intractably difficult persuasion is, and rather than responding to the real-world concerns of those persuadable by radical narratives – political disenfranchisement, socio-economic marginalisation, personal identity crises and xenophobia – the mass takedown of pro-IS accounts on Twitter in 2015 is instead considered a mark of progress. It is easier to simply stopping information from IS reaching individuals in the name of counter-radicalisation rather than exploring why the narrative of IS might be attractive and even persuasive. The enemy is extremism and extremism must be stopped, not the causes of its appeal.

Countering IS communication narratives cannot refute lived experience, particularly when that lived experience resonates with the narrative. Fighting the digital battle can be a small part of fighting the war, and an even smaller part of the politics of ensuring coherent and secure identities for all citizens as well as the prospect of a good life. As potent as the narratives of violent extremists may be, they are not, in and of themselves, sufficient to account for radicalisation as a phenomenon, particularly amongst young Muslims in the West. Narratives constitute only one part in the complex array of elements that intersect to ultimately manifest as a move towards violent extremism.

Today, IS is teetering on the brink of its demise, and Western governments have evinced relief that its reach over potential audiences has been drastically diminished. However, our analysis warns that unless these real-world concerns are taken seriously and addressed holistically, these very same issues will no doubt be taken up and mobilised towards the messaging of whichever extremist group inevitably emerges next.

Notes

- 1 www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=791347 and www.state.gov/r/gec/
- 2 An Ipsos Mori survey published in 2013 found that 74% of French citizens view Islam as “intolerant” and “incompatible” with French values (Le Bars 2013).
- 3 A 2016 Ipsos Mori survey found French respondents were by far the most likely to overstate their country’s current and projected Muslim population. The average French estimate for the current size of the Muslim population was 31%, compared with the actual percentage of 7.5% (Ipsos Mori 2016).
- 4 In 2016, for example, a prominent Arab Spring Iyad el-Baghdadi had his Twitter account suspended after administrators mistook him for the leader of the so-called Islamic State (BBC News 2016).