

COUNTER-NARRATIVE' STRATEGIES VS
**ONLINE
RADICALISATION**

THE RISE OF SO-CALLED ISLAMIC STATE' ONLINE STRATEGIES AND HOW TO TACKLE THEIR
APPEAL FOR DISENCHANTED YOUNG EUROPEANS. IS COMMUNICATION ENOUGH?

STUDENT
VITTORIA MARCHEGIANI

PROMOTER
PATRICK VASTENAEKELS

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Vittoria Marchegiani - student
Executive Master CPE, *Communication et politique européenne*
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Mr. Patrick Vastenaekels – promoter

*To all those who asked me why I decided to challenge myself with another Master.
To all those who keep asking me why I never stop to ask questions.
But above all, this is for myself and all the questions that I will keep asking.*

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Executive Summary

This thesis is intended to approach the phenomenon of online radicalisation from an unconventional point of view: communication. As many believe, online radicalisation is something uniquely related to the dynamics of terrorism and as such must be exclusively approached from a legal point of view; however, this study will demonstrate that the phenomenon is far more complex and involves the sum of a multitude of different behaviours that must be approached and analysed from different perspectives, while never underestimating the human ratio behind such kinds of phenomena.

Starting with an in-depth analysis of the phenomenon of Islamic radicalisation and its evolution throughout the years, this study is intended to delve into the core of online radicalisation to better understand the online dynamics involved in such processes and allow the reader to understand that online radicalisation is always connected with the offline world, an aspect that in the past was often underestimated in the understanding of such a phenomenon.

The reader will then be accompanied through a journey that involves a multidisciplinary approach, with theories, data and information obtained through a mixture of communications studies, behavioural sociology, terrorism studies, international relations, history, and of course, European studies.

As a conclusion of the first part of this study, the author provides a comprehensive overview of the existing different approaches for tackling online radicalisation, with a focus on the past and the actual European efforts being implemented in the fight against online radicalisation and terrorism that underlines its strengths and weaknesses.

The second and third part of the thesis focus on a more practical approach to the issue, providing a critical opinion on how communication can be a special and efficient tool to understand and defeat online radicalisation and how this approach can be ameliorated and implemented by European actors to better tackle online radicalisation from a future standpoint. Relevance is given to counter-narratives as one of the most efficient ways of tackling the issue of online radicalisation, especially from a long-term perspective.

The focus and attentive analysis is dedicated to counter-narratives and the reasons for their efficiency if implemented in a comprehensive way against the radical online propaganda of certain Islamist extremist groups.

For this reason, the third part of the study guides the reader step by step through a proposed communications strategy for a European campaign against online radicalisation, with particular attention to all of the details of such a campaign, from its main message, to a well-defined target audience, from its method of implementation, partners, and funds, to how to evaluate its results. For this purpose, the study also includes an in-depth analysis on how big-data can help in building and evaluating such kinds of campaigns.

As a conclusion to the study, the author, on both the communicative and political level, lists a set of "10 recommendations."

Finally, in support of the theories, examples, and recommendations illustrated by the author. Case studies and interviews are included as annexes of this study.

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Counter-narrative' strategies VS online radicalisation.

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Introduction

From France to Syria, from Sweden to Afghanistan, from Belgium to Iraq, what do all of these countries have in common? The Internet, and most sadly, terrorist attacks... If you have ever discovered yourself questioning if there is any relationship between the Internet, Social Media, and Islamic radicalisation and terrorism, the answer is yes. However, this should not lead us to think that the Internet and Social Media are dangerous (virtual) places, but there is no doubt that they can be fertile ground for radicalisation and for the practical organisation of plots and violent extremist acts. Despite this, it must be said that Islamic terrorism is not a new phenomenon uniquely linked to the Internet but has existed for long before the arrival of the Internet and Social Media on a wide scale, a phenomenon that we sadly have learnt to know in the last decade more than ever.

This dissertation is intended to analyse the relatively new phenomenon of online radicalisation, its links - or alleged links - to violent extremist acts and terrorist actions in real life, and how to efficiently stop and prevent these from a communicational point of view, without forgetting all of the political and institutional efforts needed to prevent the wide spread of online radicalisation and all its horrific consequences.

As we will see in the next chapters, the Internet, modern technology, and more generally communication, are playing a leading role in what we are used to calling Islamic propaganda, and the radicalisation of individuals in Europe and the Western world. Nevertheless, as explained further, we will demonstrate that a simplistic demonization of the Internet is misleading and can negatively affect the design of policies and actions to be implemented to tackle this phenomenon. In fact, as this study will demonstrate, the Internet itself is not, and cannot, be the only reason or tool for radicalisation, which is always accompanied by a greater landscape of social interactions, including face-to-face communications, exchanges of information, and other external factors (e.g. the political situation in a given country, the level of education of individuals, rate of social exclusion and many others).

As briefly mentioned before, this dissertation is mainly intended to approach the phenomenon of online radicalisation from a communicational point of view, a new approach that is also being adopted by many experts of Terrorism Studies on the European and International levels. Despite the rise of studies that include communications in their analysis of terrorism and the radicalisation process - especially if focused on the analysis of such phenomena online - this new kind of approach faces a certain number of limits, that we also experimented with in this research and that are also demonstrated and underlined in most of the documents, position papers, working documents, and publications consulted for the purpose of this research.

Briefly, one of the main issues faced in such a field of studies is the “*abundance of conceptual problems*¹.” In other words, it is difficult to isolate a unique definition of “*online radicalisation*,” a phenomenon that involves many other sub-categories of online behaviours (e.g. accessing extremist online content, consulting jihadi websites, or sharing Islamic propaganda, just to give some examples).

Another relevant issue to deal with while studying and analysing this subject is the lack of data-driven analysis on online radicalisation with consequences in trying to build categories of factors and

¹ GILL Paul, *et al.* *What are the roles of the Internet in terrorism? Measuring online behaviours of convicted UK terrorists*, sine loco, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2015, p. 5.

behaviours with the consequence of having difficulties in rigorously analysing the phenomenon with the scientific method; the inability to analyse the problem in all of its different aspects (in fact there is a common tendency of analysing these themes in a unique way, but what can be applied to an individual or an entity cannot be assumed as valid for any other given individuals or entities). Furthermore, the complexity of the phenomenon itself is the cause of all of the difficulties for experts and scholars in such field. By way of explanation, analysing all of the different dynamics, causes, consequences, and methodologies included under the concept of online radicalisation (and terrorism) it is something that touches different fields of studies that also have broadly different methodologies, so that it is not as difficult to understand how complicated it can be to observe and analyse all of this from a strictly scientific perspective. It is sufficient to think about all of the differences on how this given subject can be approached by experts of Terrorism Studies, Sociology, Psychology, Communications, Marketing, International Communications, Political Science, International Relations, and Political Communication... By consequence, it is evident that a unique definition of the problem, its analysis, and a series of comprehensive proposals to tackle the phenomenon are difficult to be individuated.

However, despite all of these difficulties, the author of this dissertation intended to broadly analyse and report here on the essentials of the most important researchers, authors, European and international entities (think-tanks, NGOs...) that approached the subject from a communication point of view, and give its own remarks and recommendations to not only better understand this topic, but also to define the practical actions and policy guidelines needed to tackle the phenomena.

The subject of this thesis could seem for many too controversial and difficult to be explained in an essay like this, the complexity of the scenarios that will be described in the following pages can lead readers to have a pessimistic outlook, but the proposed communications-based approach based on the efficiency of counter-narratives explained here - and combined with suggestions of modernisation of some policies - should be interpreted as a new and strong tool for fighting the spread of hate and the willingness of individuals to radicalise online.

If it is true that the Internet and new technologies have created “*super-empowered individuals*”², it is also true that the Internet and new technologies gave us most of the tools we need to peacefully fight against radicalisation and terrorism. For these reasons, the study is accompanied by a series of recommendations regarding how to approach the issue from an innovative point of view in order to help European countries and the European Union’s institutions as a whole to better approach the issue and implement a series of reforms to tackle online radicalisation.

Furthermore, it has to be reminded that (online) radicalisation is not something that takes into account mere “users” - as most tend to think of when talking about this subject - but people. This will lead us to the conclusion that there is a certain urgency for a deeper understanding of the phenomena from all its aspects in order to better define and put into practice all of the necessary policies and to tackle radicalisation and terrorism.

The proposed innovative approach - focused on communication - also includes the analysis of a hypothetical communications campaign to build an efficient counter-narrative strategy and how to use big-data to better understand both the online radicalisation phenomenon and ways to tackle it.

² This expression was used first by Thomas Friedman, a columnist for The New York Times. Quotes from STEVENS, Tim, NEUMAN, Peter R., *Countering online Radicalisation. A strategy for Action*, London: ICSR The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and political Violence, King’s College London, 2009, p. 11.

First part

1. Islamic radicalisation and the Internet - a new phenomenon?

To understand terrorism and online radicalisation currently, a few introductory remarks are needed. In this first paragraph of Chapter 1 “Islamic radicalisation and the Internet - a new phenomenon?” we will try to explain the complexity of the subject and how it can be approached for a comprehensive understanding of online radicalisation and its characteristics, including an overview of all of the difficulties that occurred in this research, demonstrated also by many studies and authors.

To better understand how the online radicalisation process occurs, we will also stress some introductory principles about terrorism, that are necessary for understanding the societal and sociological mechanisms that stand at the basis of extremism and radicalisation, and that are also useful for the further proposed analysis based on communication.

The analysis will then continue in the next paragraphs with an overview of the rise of the online Islamic radicalisation phenomenon and its mechanisms for functioning (factors of attraction, communications,). All of this will lead us to prove the demonization of the Internet wrong, by providing an in-depth analysis of the irrefutable relevance of new technologies and new media in the radicalisation process, an illusory contradiction that we will better explain further in this study.

1.a. Terrorism, radicalisation, and new media. The difficulties and benefits of a new communication based approach.

Despite the misleading belief that the Internet is the main tool for radicalisation and the recruitment of foreign fighters and terrorists, it has to be specified that the Internet is only one of the numerous tools that have to be analysed in order to really understand the radicalisation process of individuals. However, it would be equally misleading for any efforts spent trying to understand this process only through a traditional approach that tends to analyse political extremism only with the help of political and sociological meanings.

As one of the main experts in this field, Cristina Archetti,³ explains in one of her latest studies: *“To understand terrorism in an age of interconnectedness and globalisation we need to engage with the question of the role of communication and the media in the phenomenon of political extremism. Communication and the media cannot, however, be approached in isolation. To comprehend the difference media can possibly make in the exchange of information, its processing, and its effects, they need to be “fitted” into the broader picture of how social media interactions occur, identities are constructed and groups mobilise for political purposes.”*⁴

In fact, it is currently commonly agreed that terrorism (including during the radicalisation process that is in some cases the first step towards violent extremist acts) needs to be approached in an innovative way. Despite this, the efforts in this sense are still insufficient even if it has to be said that the academic community worldwide is currently committed to a better understanding of such phenomena. Given this situation, some further steps in this field have already been made and have led us to sum up some fundamental knowledge. Starting from the basics to truly understand the mechanisms that reside under online radicalisation, we should be able to give a clear definition of radicalisation and terrorism.

³ Doctor Cristina Archetti is Associate Professor in Politics and Media at the University of Salford, United Kingdom. Since 2008 she is a member of the Editorial Board of the journal “Critical Studies on Terrorism” and has been teaching the Master’s level course “Terrorism and the Media”. Her fields of interest for research vary from security, politics, strategic communications, and the connections between all these subjects.

⁴ ARCHETTI, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, sine loco, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 12

However, the doctrines still have some difficulties in unequivocally defining terrorism and radicalisation. Some efforts have been made, and, for example, radicalisation has been defined by the European Commission as “*the phenomenon of people embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism*”⁵, followed also by the definition made by the Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation that specifies that “*radicalisation can be considered as socialisation to extremism, which may lead to terrorism*”⁶.

Other definitions were given by the UK government's prevention strategy as “*the process by which a person comes to support terrorism and forms of extremism leading to terrorism*”⁷, and also by the International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR), which defines radicalisation as “*the process (or processes) whereby individuals or groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims (...) ‘violent radicalisation’ in order to emphasize the violent outcome and distinguish the process from non-violent forms of ‘radical’ thinking*”⁸, and finally another definition of the phenomenon has been given by the United States' Foundation for Defence of Democracies (FDD) which states that radicalisation “*refers to the process of adopting for oneself or inculcating in others a commitment not only to a system of belief, but to their imposition on the rest of the society*” and specifies that radicalisation “*implies not only extreme beliefs, but extreme actions*”⁹.

It is evident how difficult it is to uniquely and efficaciously define even the process of radicalisation without occurring from several different points of view. By consequence, this will lead any study in this field to a certain number of consequential issues concerning the analysis of the problem and of how to approach (and tackle) radicalisation, especially in regards to the processes that define online radicalisation. However, all these definitions - even if different from one another - emphasize some common key points of the definition of radicalisation: it is not an immediate fact, but a process that changes step by step the beliefs and behaviours of a given individual (or group), leading him/her to a sort of extremist thinking and, most importantly, all definitions agree on the fact that this process is not always directly linked to terrorism and violent acts in real life. This will be very important to our further analysis, as we will better explain further on in our analysis.

In fact, there is no evidence of a direct link between the process of online radicalisation and violent extremist acts in real life. Even if radicalisation can be defined as a process that leads to a change of behaviour that leads a given individual to identify with a story, an identity, and definitively with a certain extremist narrative¹⁰, the final step that could push an individual to commit a violent extremist act in real life is weak, especially when this sort of identification process takes places exclusively online, and this because face-to-face interactions and relationships are still essential for any human being to fully commit with a certain mission, which in this case is the final mission of the extremist narrative to which the individual has established a connection, and in some case a real identification.

⁵ This definition refers to the definition of “violent radicalisation” given to the European Commission. EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL, *Opinion of the European Economic and Social Committee on the ‘Prevention of terrorism and violent radicalisation’*, 19 August 2008, 2008/C 211/17, p. 2, art. 3.1.

⁶ COMMISSION'S EXPERT GROUP ON VIOLENT RADICALISATION, *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism. A concise Report prepared by the European Commission's Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation*, Brussels, 15 May 2008, p. 5

⁷ UK GOVERNMENT, SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOME DEPARTMENT BY COMMAND OF HER MAJESTY, *Prevent strategy*, London: The Stationery Office Limited on behalf of the Controller of Her Majesty's Stationery Office, June 2011, CM 8029, p. 108.

⁸ NEUMAN Peter R., *Prisons and Terrorism: Radicalisation and De-radicalisation in 15 Countries*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2010, <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/1277699166PrisonsandTerrorismRadicalisationandDeradicalisationin15Countries.pdf>

⁹ GARTENSTEIN-ROSS Daveed, GROSSMAN, Laura, *Hometown terror in the U.S. and U.K. An Empirical Examination of the Radicalisation Process*, WASHINGTON D.C., FDD Centre for Terrorism Research, 2009, p. 7.

¹⁰ An in-depth analysis of the concept of “narrative” and “counter-narrative” is provided in Chapter 4, § a-b, pp. 33 - 38 of this study.

This short explanation of behavioural changes that defines well the radicalisation process of individuals is confirmed by many communication and social behaviour studies and has also been defined as follows by a report published by the New York Police Department in 2007, which defines radicalisation thanks to the following sequential model, which also includes terror attacks as final steps of the radicalisation process: “(a) *pre-radicalisation: the life situation before adopting a “jihadi-Salafist” ideology; (b) self-identification: the state in which “individuals, influenced by both internal and external factors, begin to explore Salafist Islam, gradually gravitate away from their old identity and begin to associate themselves with like-minded individuals and adopt this ideology as their own; (c) indoctrination: the progressive intensification of an individual’s radical belief and the conviction that “militant jihad” is required to further pursue the ideological cause; (d) jihadisation: the self-designation as “holy warrior” that, in practice, consists of planning, preparing, and carrying out a terrorist attack*”¹¹. In other words, the radicalisation process is a process of identity construction which involves both a social rupture with a certain group (in our specific case: the Western World), the rejection of its political and cultural basis (identity - narrative), and the adoption of a new narrative (the Islamic extremist one) where the first group becomes the enemy to fight and violence is only a way to obtain a more equal, better world.

This theory explains the process well, but one can then ask himself why this happens, and it is here that communication can help to better explain the process. In fact, the power and efficiency of the jihadi propaganda is now proven and its ways of sharing and engaging with different audiences is one of the predominant reasons for its “success.” As every political communicator knows, simply messaging people is not enough to create a real connection and engagement with an audience, the real way to create this link and engage a vast number of people - which in this case can be defined as the process of radicalisation - is the power of persuasion of the message itself and how the message is communicated.

It is demonstrated currently that Al-Qaeda in the past, and the so-called IS have real “marketing agencies” established for the specific purpose of improving their propaganda and spreading their message worldwide, and the Internet has made and continues to offer the opportunity for establishing virtual communities based on the free dissemination and exchange of information - covered by anonymity - to get more and more people involved and become radicalised for the purpose of the final “holy war.” In support of this spread of jihadi propaganda, the so-called IS and other Islamic extremist groups also take advantage of the role of Western mass media and the free advertising that they give to them every time that a terror attacks occur, and also by the weakness of the communications strategies of many of the Western institutions and democracies.

For all of these reasons, the way the so-called IS communicates is not only propaganda but also a tool for their “holy war.” As we will better explain in Chapter 6¹² they created a narrative in which the Western world is the enemy to fight in order to obtain the world of equity and social justice that the Western world currently impedes the achievement of. It is not difficult to understand how such a kind of narrative can easily have a certain appeal to disenchanted young Europeans, and especially to those who experience phenomena such as social exclusion, racism, and unemployment, just to mention some of the main factors that we will better explain later in Chapter 1, § c¹³.

At this point, it is also needed to specify what the limits of such an approach are. First of all, the literature that approaches the link between terrorism and communication, and the media in general, is based on secondary and recycled data belonging to previous studies, and are sometimes affected by generalist and non-fact/data-checked assumptions, a consequence of the interconnection between different studies linked to such issues (in fact this field of study is directly connected with several other studies that are based on different methodologies and theories).

¹¹ ARCHETTI, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, sine loco, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 104.

¹² Chapter 6, pp. 48 - 50.

¹³ Chapter 1, § c: pp. 11 - 19.

Another important issue, lamented by many in the academic world, is the lack of a real theoretical framework and the fragmentation of terrorism-based research and studies. It is sufficient to think that even a unique definition of terrorism still does not exist in the literature and that, as previously mentioned before, the definition and distinction between terrorism and radicalisation is not well-defined or commonly agreed upon. As a consequence, another important pitfall of radicalisation' studies came out: the lack of explanatory research in this field (*Why?*) primarily caused by a lack of descriptive research (*What?*).

The main reason of this is that radicalisation and terrorism can be studied only empirically, event-driven, and stimulated by the need for more and stronger public security when terror attacks take place. All this is caused by the absence of, or difficulties to access clear and classified data regarding the phenomena, especially if we think about online radicalisation and the immense amount of extremist and jihadi content available online. It goes without saying that if it is difficult to understand “what is going on” (descriptive research), better explanatory research (why this happened/why it is happening) would be very difficult. Furthermore, some of the data available in order to pursue Terrorism Studies is often linked to public security and, being often covered by the label of “national security”, and not available for consultation, causing an important loss of important empirical data in this field.

Another limit to such field is the absence of comparative research, essential for any theory building in scientific research, and to formulate a valid theory together with all of its variables and possible outcomes (and, for example, being able to explain a possible cause or correlation between being exposed to propaganda materials online and being radicalised, or even more, becoming a terrorist). This will lead us to another of the problems of terrorism studies: the lack of a real and data-fact/checked categorisation of variables, which is also related to the fact that terrorism and all of its variables are linked to a wide range of other phenomena or precondition that acts and causes different reactions in different groups (impossibility of categorisation).

All this leads us to the final and maybe most important issue to face while approaching this field of study: the impossibility of *theoretical testing* (and consequent absence of “theory building”) and the consequential “absence” of scientific theories on this, and especially on online radicalisation, to which all efforts have started to focus on in the last few years. This, in fact, is one of the reasons why there still is not a unanimous consensus on this matter (i.e. online radicalisation, and more in general terrorism and radicalisation).

To conclude, it must be specified that all these limits should not lead us to think that a theory on (online) radicalisation and terrorism will never be achieved, but as we mentioned before, this should function as a real motor for becoming more and more involved in promoting an innovative and interdisciplinary approach on this matter that can lead, in the future, to a more comprehensive approach and understanding of this phenomenon. Only the real cooperation between different disciplines - Terrorism Studies, International Relations, Sociology, Behavioural Sociology, Communications, etc... - will lead to an important step in further understanding and tackling (online) radicalisation and to the definition of a commonly agreed theory. Always for this reason, the role of communications studies and the importance of adopt such interdisciplinary approach, should be underlined and serve as a real driver in this research field and it is also the approach recommended by the author of this study.

1. Islamic radicalisation and the Internet - a new phenomenon?

When talking about online radicalisation, most could be led to think that it is a brand-new phenomenon with no similar experiences recorded in history, but this is only partially true. As already mentioned before in the previous paragraph, the Internet and Social Media are simply new and extremely powerful tools for something that has always been fundamental to all regimes in history, especially for those totalitarian (or extremist) regimes or groups based on a real doctrine: political propaganda.

The main difference between current and past historical usage of propaganda are the new tools

implemented for those reasons - and in the specific case of the so-called IS are not only use for indoctrination but also to recruit real fighters. However, this change in tools should not be underestimated as things such as the Internet and Social Media have an immense power of quickly spreading, “convincing,” and manipulating people, a larger effect than any other tool or media usage in the past (even more than TV or newspapers).

In contrast, it has to be specified that this kind of advertising-style propaganda is not something that emerged together with the growth of the Internet, but already existed in the past. The main differences were the tools for the spread and dissemination of their propaganda, but the methods remains (partially) the same and has only been modified in its tools of implementation due to technological discoveries and innovation. But how has the so-called IS, and in general most Islamic extremism, has arrived to understand the power of the Internet and Social Media and started implementing their communications and recruitment strategy online? In this paragraph, we will define a sort of “history” of Jihadi global propaganda.

To do so, we must start this paragraph by stressing out that Islamic radicalisation can be considered as different from all other kind of political radicalisation. In fact, as also explained by Mr Alessandro Di Maio in our interview, a kind of an “extremist side” of Islam existed since the beginning of this religion/theocracy. What this we do not want to say that Islam is an extremist religion, but that sort of a jihadi narrative has ever been part of Islam (as a religion that touches all sides of its society, on both its public and private spheres). In fact, as Mr Di Maio explained, Islam always had inside its doctrine concepts such as the “big jihadi” and the “little jihadi”, that have been then manipulated for extremist purposes¹⁴.

1.b. History and evolution of Islamist extremist propaganda and the new media.

In all extremist regimes, propaganda plays a central role not only for communications purposes, but also for political reasons in order to establish its power and continuously reaffirm its legitimacy and continue to feed the relationship with its people, and most importantly: to continue recruiting (young) people, who are vital for any group to grant it continuity and stability.¹⁵ The same of course occurs with terrorist groups and radical regimes based on mystical or religious beliefs. It goes without saying that for the radical believers of the Islamic “*holy war*” the same kind of mechanism played and continues to play the same central role in reaffirming its power, legitimacy, and to recruit new followers and real fighters for its mission against its enemies (even when the “enemies” are identified with an entire societal structure and/or institutions and/or beliefs).

The current literature on Islamic radicalisation and its processes pays little attention to the “history” and evolution of the communicational strategies of Islamic extremism; all studies in this field, in fact, tend to focus more on the “supplier-side” of communications and propaganda, than to its processes, methods, and real content, even if in recent years some efforts have been and are currently being made. However, thanks to an in-depth study in this field, we have been able to retrace some of the milestones that defined the evolution of the propagandist strategies of some of the major Islamic extremist groups that we will illustrate in this paragraph such as Al Qaeda in the recent past and the so-called IS presently.

Without elaborating on all of the historical and geopolitical changes here and the conflicts that have occurred in the Arab states since its beginning, or since the most recent times, i.e. the end of the Second World War (Arab Nationalism, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan, and the following

¹⁴ As explained during our interview, the “big jihadi” defined the intimate effort of Muslims in trying to commit to their religion and fight against personal egos; the “little jihadi” - by contrary - describes the military efforts demanded to Muslims in order to defend Islam (little jihadi should not be intended as a justification for attacks, but very often this concept has been sort of manipulated in order to justify wars and military actions).

¹⁵ BOUCHARD Martin, *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: Radical and Connected*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 105.

invasion by the Americans who occupied Afghanistan and Iraq...), it has to be said that all of the most recent *hunger* that resides under the ideological extremism of Islam stands also behind the construct of anti-imperialism that bases itself on the belief that these “imperialist forces” (i.e. the European “imperialists,” followed by the Soviets and Americans, and currently the Western World in general...) are the outsiders that committed injustices and tried to destroy the Arab world, its culture, and its people in order to conquer them¹⁶. In fact, this kind of message, which according to the Western World is continuously committing abuses towards the Arab people, is one of the strongest and most recurrent messages that stands at the basis of the jihadi propaganda and meta-narrative. But how has this process evolved throughout the years until present time and attract not only Arabs, but also young Europeans?

The question to be asked is: how have we arrived at this point, where the so-called IS can so easily benefit from the Internet in recruiting new fighters and allowing people to engage with its ideology? It seems important then to understand the past evolution of extremist propaganda and communications strategies to better understand how it works, how it will evolve, and, most importantly, how to stop and prevent its dangerous effects worldwide.

Since the beginning of the 1990’s, many researchers have started to analyse the evolutionary process of the Islamic extremist propaganda, and how the rise of modern technologies has influenced this phenomenon. One of the first theories was stated by John Arquilla and David Ronfeldt (1993), who affirmed that ITCs and its evolutions would have influenced not only the way of implementing any kind of propaganda, but also the “*war strategy*”¹⁷. Since then, expressions like *cyberwar*, *netwar*, and *information-related conflict* have started to gain ground. A few years later (in 1999), a report published by RAND Corporate¹⁸ observed that modern technologies have introduced new opportunities for any terrorist group thanks to the greater power gained by what they called the 3Cs (Communications, Command, and Control).

Although we already mentioned some of the first scientific efforts in analysing this issue and figuring out that these kinds of studies started at the beginning of the 90s, it has to be stressed again that Muslim propaganda started decades before the sedimentation of the ideology that identifies the Western World as the cause of all the crimes and injustice in the world and, in particular, the Arab World. It is easy to understand how this kind of belief has reached its maximum apex with the start of the Muslims’ desire to defeat the American/European imperialists and the birth of terrorist organisations based in the Arab Countries, but how does this propaganda start to spread worldwide?

If we think about new media and their efficiency, there is no doubt that Osama bin Laden was the first jihadi leader that first deeply understood the power of communications and the media. In fact, he was the first to use modern media for propagandistic purposes. In 1988, he recorded a videotape¹⁹ to disseminate his message and strengthen not only his personal role in the Islamic holy war against all infidels, (which indeed was the first aim of the video) but also to spread widely the role and message of the holy war itself and foment Muslims. Thanks to this video, in fact, he not only spread his messages but also helped facilitate the rise of the legend around his person as a charismatic leader of the jihad and as every communicator knows, in every terroristic or extreme political regime, charisma, and the power of messages spread by the charismatic leader, always plays a central role for the regime itself.

During those years (end of the ‘80s, to the start of the ‘90s), the Internet started to quickly gain ground in everyone’s everyday life, and this provided a new opportunity for jihadi groups, who started

¹⁶ BOUCHARD Martin, *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: Radical and Connected*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p 28.

¹⁷ MORISCO, Vito, «Network jihadisti tra virtuale e reale», Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica», sine dato <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Network-jihadisti-tra-reale-e-virtuale-Morisco.pdf>,

¹⁸ ZANNI, Michele, EDWARDS, Sean J.A, «The Networking of Terror in the Information Age», in ARQUILLA, John, RONFELDT, Networks and Netwars: The Future of Terror, Crime, and Militancy, sine dato, Rand Corporation Monograph/Report MR-1382, 1999., pp. 29 - 60.

¹⁹ The mentioned video was recorded at the occasion of Osama bin Laden first combat against Russia, the Jaji fight that took place in 1988.

to appreciate the opportunity that the Internet could give them: an easy-to-use and potentially immense opportunity to spread their messages worldwide, instead of using videotapes or other types of propaganda tools, but the real revolution only begun in the 2000s.

The first Jihadist websites appeared in Great Britain at the beginning of the 2000s and were promoted by radical Imams in their environment. But, it is only starting from 2002 that Al Qaeda officially began intensively implementing its strategies online, and did so for a simple logistic reason: the absence of training camps for terrorists in their homelands and the need to find new, efficient methods of recruitment. For those reasons, and to the benefit of all the advantages offered by the Internet, Al Qaeda published its first rudimentary website (2002) called *Sawt al-Jihad* (literally: *The voice of the holy war*) which published two jihadi dedicated online magazines. Those two magazines were different, one more theoretical and the other one more focused on the practical side of the jihad. These websites remained online for only two years, due to the death of its major editor, and in the two years of its existence 22 issues of those magazines were published and disseminated online, or over 18.000 pages if printed. But, before the death of these websites, other extremist online platforms had been born, especially in Iraq where two main websites were published: *Majallah al-Fatah* (literally: *The magazine of the conquest*), and *Dhurwat al-Sanam* (literally: *Belief in the most virtuous*), both websites were essentially focused on Al Qaeda and their military strategies for terror attacks, and in *Dhurwat al-Sanam* there were translations of real military guidelines, testimonies, and strategies to train young jihadists. Those websites were closed years ago by the police, but currently there are hundreds of (better) websites that are being used for the same purpose and also with totally different contents, but always focused on their purpose of engaging with a wider target audience and letting them embrace the jihadi ideology.

What must be underlined for these kinds of jihadi online networks is the evolution of such websites. In fact, while the first Jihadi websites were mainly focused on military and tactical content, and often available only in Arabic, currently these websites can also be focused on online gaming or the stories of young Muslims, and very often tend to hide violent content or direct extremists' violent content or messages, and are currently available in several languages in order to attract and engage a worldwide audience. Presently, these websites are in fact focused on building a meta-narrative and engaging with people, focused mainly on youth, and in doing so they tend to be focused more on engaging with them instead of trying to teach them how to fight (which can be a second step, to be implemented only when the radicalisation process is being achieved).

Although the police try to map these websites and take the necessary actions, these websites continue to be published online again and again each time one is closed. It is interesting to notice how Islamic extremist organisations make use of real communications and media agencies that are able to manage their online activities. These entities are in charge of transforming each Al Qaeda and or IS message into online and video content such as their official website and propaganda movies, and attract new sympathizers worldwide, thanks to these online communication tools and their potential in order to amplify the global jihad. During the years, all these tools have evolved and currently we can find most of these jihadi websites translated into all of the major European languages, in order to widely spread their messages and engage with all of those disenchanted Europeans that can more easily fall into the trap of extremist propaganda for the purpose of their own social ransom.

Since the end of the 2000s Islamic extremist groups have moved from simple website, forums, and online magazines, to the so-called Web 2.0, intended as the world of Social Media. But it is only with the rise of the so-called IS that we can see actual modern and technological propaganda be strategically implemented online and through Social Media. As pointed out in "*Le Jihadisme, le comprendre pour le mieux combattre*"²⁰, already in 2010, a study published by the US Department of

²⁰ BÉNICHOU David, KHOSROKHAVAR Farhad, MGAUX Philippe, *Le Jihadisme, Le comprendre pour mieux le combattre*, Paris, Plon, 2015, p. 126.

Homeland Security²¹, underlined how jihadist groups started using Facebook for their own purposes such as to share operational information, radicalise, and recruit new potential fighters. In the same study four main uses of Facebook were individuated: (a) a new way of propaganda maker; (b) give complementarity to online forums and expand the audience, (c) a dynamic way of exchanging information concerning operational information, tactics, and militaristic kinds of information for the purposes of their holy war (e.g. how to build homemade bombs); (d) the easiest way to organise further attacks. A more in-depth analysis of how and with what methodologies the jihadist groups use the web and Social Networks for will be given in the next chapter, but it is essential to understand how these groups already understand and have closely followed all innovations in technologies and updated their strategies for radicalising and recruiting new members for their groups.

Since 2011, the greatest attention has been given (by the so-called IS and other minor groups, always referring to the so-called IS) to Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, whose Internet users are young people between 16 and 35 years old, and mostly used among young Europeans with ease of access and very little control. Jihadist groups around the world understood this and adhere to this kind of new way of communicating and engaging with this “new” audience. As a direct demonstration of the deep understanding of the potential of Social Media by these groups, it is important to mention the following quote that appeared on a jihadi website (namely *As-Sahab*), that stated: “*Facebook is a great tool of action, far more efficient than online forums. Instead of waiting users to come on the forum to get informed, you can directly go and educate them. For the grace of God, the mujahideens (...) and the proud jihadist journalists will use it [Facebook]. It is clear that the market of Social Network is incredibly developing in a way that corresponds to the new needs of Internet users. Facebook has shown its success in this domain. It is our duty to use it, as partisan of our jihad.*”²²

However, it has to be specified that some jihadi groups, albeit still a minority, are not convinced of the opportunities given by Social Networks, as what they fear the most is censorship, the loss of their anonymity, and, most of all, because they are convinced by the fact that all Social Networks are controlled by a secret Zionist lobby. Furthermore, these kinds of open Social Networks (not controlled by their creators like the old internet forums, for example) in some cases can also put in danger the jihadi messages, as on Social Networks anyone can express their opinions so that the jihadi messages can be exposed to criticism and negative comments (most of the time blocked or removed or used as examples of “bad Muslims”).

Always regarding this, a certain relevance should be given to “*Al-Qaeda’s 20 Years Strategy*”, a 20 year-long strategic plan devised by one of Al Qaeda’s leaders and in which the terrorist organisation listed seven essential phases of its strategy and can be used as a lens to see and understand the new strategies of these kinds of terrorist organisations. In fact, one of these phases (the fifth, 2013-2016 period), is a phase of complete mobilisation of all Muslims - also with European and American Muslims being involved - in order to achieve the proclamation of the Caliphate.

In that sense, and seeing their urgency in achieving their goals and demonstrating the strengths of their beliefs, we understand how the so called “*cyber jihad*” implemented worldwide thanks to its own nature, is dedicated not only to the *Umma* (Muslim community) but also to all Muslims around the world, and especially those that are now living in the infidel Western World, those who are closely living with the enemy, and will be far more efficient in striking a blow to the Western World in its own core of values and “infidel” way of living. As explained by a paper by Italian National Security²³, the *Virtual Umma* has a double meaning and is useful for the so-called IS for two main reasons: to recruit people that can potentially fight for their cause through an intense radicalisation process (e.g.

²¹ US Department of Homeland Security, *Terrorist Use of Social Networking Sites: Facebook Case Study*, 2010 <https://publicintelligence.net/ufouoles-dhs-terrorist-use-of-social-networking-facebook-case-study/>.

²² Translation of the author.

²³ MORISCO, Vito, «Network jihadisti tra virtuale e reale», Sistema di Informazione per la Sicurezza della Repubblica, sine dato <https://www.sicurezzanazionale.gov.it/sisr.nsf/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Network-jihadisti-tra-reale-e-virtuale-Morisco.pdf>.

propaganda and recruitment), and to spread the jihadi culture beyond national borders (e.g. worldwide dissemination of extremist beliefs). In this sense, and as seen before in this and previous chapters, the Internet has become a *virtual milieu*, a sort of substitute for face-to-face interactions in which radicals can pursue their fundamental needs for the existence and establishment of their groups and organise their actions.

If we also think about the so-called dark-web and deep-web²⁴, not analysed here due to the communicational purposes of this study, we can easily understand how much potential the Internet has in spreading extremist content, but also in exchanging views and “educational” guidelines for potential terrorists, and is large and needs to not only be controlled, but first of all understood in order to achieve the level of knowledge which is necessary to define how to tackle the problem.

It has to be clarified that Jihadism is not the first and only extremist movement that has been able to go worldwide, but the Internet gave these groups the possibility of executing a massive form of violence and violent messages that was not possible before, and consequently can lead to a sort of legitimization of violence on a scale that was never seen before either. Thanks to the Internet, national borders no longer exist and these groups are able to create connections that were not possible before without this technology and give an immense power to these extremist groups, more often exiled in countries with not enough resources to pursue their objectives. Finally, it also has to be said that during recent years, and these groups of Jihadism in general, benefit from the so-called “*BBC effect*,” or “*CNN effect*”²⁵, caused by the Western media coverage on their attacks and actions. In other words, the world of mass media has inherently given these groups the media coverage that they were seeking and were not able to produce themselves.

Even if it is not yet fully clear how Jihadi propaganda online will evolve in the near future; once acknowledged the importance given to jihadist groups to this kind of marketing actions and communicational strategies and tools, and their evolution during the years, it would seem correct to assume that the so-called IS and other forms of organized Muslim terrorists, will continue to evolve and search for new ways to meet and engage with new potential fighters for their cause. As a conclusion, it would seem legitimate to affirm that the online global jihad can be identified as a new phenomenon only if we look at the new and innovative online tools that these groups are using; in contrast sociology and history teaches us that any violent and politically extreme regimes have always used propaganda as their main tool for persuading people, engaging with them, and eradicating its establishment.

1. Islamic radicalisation and the Internet - a new phenomenon?

Since the Internet has become the major tool for propaganda and the radicalisation of the extremist wing of the so-called IS and all other terrorist organisations linked to the Islamic holy war, it is necessary to clarify how this tool is being used. In this chapter, we will analyse both the old and new ways of propaganda usage by jihadists online, with particular attention to their methodologies in order to better understand their strategies.

1.c. Methodologies of Islamist extremist online propaganda.

1.c.i. Radicalisation: the process.

²⁴ The dark web is intended as a whole part of the World Wide Web that requires specific software and procedures to be consulted. The deep-web, even more vast, is that part of the Internet which is not indexed by common search engines. Most of the contents on the dark and deep web include child pornography, black markets, illegal drugs and so on.

²⁵ BÉNICHOU David, KHOSROKHAVAR Farhad, MGAUX Philippe, *Le Jihadisme, Le comprendre pour mieux le combattre*, Paris, Plon, 2015, p. 281.

As many studies demonstrate, the online (and offline) radicalisation process of individuals is always an individual process of identifying with a larger group, that can be summarized as follows: 1) isolation of a given individual; 2) the identification of the enemy; 3) the complete faith in the jihadi ideology; 4) the full adoption of a certain code of conduct for the pursuit of the *great* final aim of the jihadi²⁶.

The first step, the one we call “isolation,” is a prerogative of the radicalisation process and can be described as a precondition of it. During this phase, the individual starts his disconnection from society and the social groups the individual used to belong to, and starts to feel a certain distance from the behaviour and beliefs of those groups to which the individual normally belonged. This phase is essential for radicalisation because it is the phase when this “disoriented” and isolated individual starts to look for another group to belong to, another narrative in which he can identify with, and where he can find the acceptance and strength that he did not feel in his society. Thanks to this isolation (that can be caused by many societal reasons such as a lack of education, unemployment, racism and so on), the individual can easily fall into the trap of radicalisation and start to identify himself with extremist groups that attempted all of these ruses to attract this isolated individual and give him all of the fake-answers he was looking for during his isolation. This is very often the case of young people already living in their societal ghettos and moved by a sense of rebellion against modern Western societies.

The “identification of the enemy,” or the second phase, strengthens the hate of the individual against that society or groups to which he has completely disconnected himself and to which he felt a certain frustration - that now becomes a sort of embryonic hate. This is the phase where a certain sense of hate, rejection, and aversion starts to be instilled in the identity and beliefs of the individual. In other words, this phase leads to the third one: the ideology.

This third phase is what we call “complete faith” in the jihadi ideology, finally proclaiming the ideological and identity adherence to the jihadi narrative. In fact, every extremist group, or political regime (or terrorist group) has at its own basis a strong ideological aspect, essential to the indoctrination of its own adepts. In such cases, the same happens for the extreme side of Islam. The ideology under all its beliefs and calls for action became that strong to convince people to follow its “orders” even to its most extreme demonstration such as, for example, the organisation of a plot or suicide attacks. But how has this ideology become so strong and powerful at influencing people? To answer this question, behavioural sociology and psychology may help.

As many studies demonstrate, ideologies are always as broad as possible, in order to attract the most people as possible, and is always presented as a path to be followed for the pursuit of a better and equal world and opposite to the current system (in this case intended as modern and western societies, which, thanks, to this mental mechanism are identified as the enemy as already explained in the previous step towards radicalisation). In case of extreme Islamist beliefs, the pursuit of this better world divides opinion (not all Muslims are extremists!), but what unites them in unanimity is the ideological belief that a better world can be achieved only with a complete and faithful application of the “*Sharia*”²⁷ in everyday lives. In this sense, and to make the Ideal - in our case, the *sharia* - more attractive to people, it is always presented as pure in order to avoid any criticisms or misconceptions.

To allow this ideal to become even more appealing, it is always accompanied by a short slogan and easily recognisable images, a rule that we also find in marketing studies and in which the winning brands are always those with a highly recognisable identity (i.e. the so-called IS that also contains their slogan of faith), most of the time composed by a powerful combination of a logo and a slogan (e.g. Nike and its unforgettable “just do it” slogan). But we will reflect back on this later on.

The fourth and final step of the radicalisation process, which also involves a sort of strategic

²⁶ DAMAISIN d'ARÈS, J.-C., *Terrorisme Islamiste. Recrutement et radicalisation. Nos enfants sont concernés*, sine loco, éditions JPO, 2016, p 36. The author will adopt this description of the radicalisation process as seems the most appropriate within the multiple analysis consulted and can provide a correct and comprehensive schematisation of the process.

²⁷ The term Sharia (or Charia), or Sharia-law, describes the sum of all Islamic laws that are part of the Islamic tradition.

way of communicating, is the one we defined as “the full adoption of a certain code of conduct for the pursuit of the great final aim of the jihadi.” As sociology teaches, every societal group has his own core of rules, a code of conduct to be entirely followed to be part of the group, and also to be a relevant member of the group. The more precise and strict the rules are, the more serious and organised the groups seem to be and this is exactly the same for radical Islam and the *sharia*, plus other specific and horrific rules - and challenges - to be followed in case of extremism and the terroristic wing of radical Islam. Furthermore, it is demonstrated that the existence of a highly identifiable set of rules helps in assuring their members regarding the legitimacy of their own existence as a group and justifies every kind of action to be taken for the common good and defence of the group from the enemies.

Slightly different is the recruitment process that - after the finalisation at the radicalisation process - also includes a series of additional challenges for new adepts, and proof of being ready to organise a plot, even a suicidal one. Studies also demonstrate that recruitment always also includes a b2b interaction (often also including face-to-face human interactions) and real training leading to terror attacks, also in the case of the self-radicalised or - the very few existing cases of - self-recruited terrorists, mostly known as “lone wolves.”

If it is easy to imagine this process being implemented in a Muslim community and their usual *milieu* of aggregation, like mosques for example, and one can ask how this process can be possibly successful online and also involve European and non-Muslim individuals. The answer is as simple as we can imagine: the Internet is us, a new milieu that it is virtual only in its structure, but can be more real than ever when including human interaction, even if behind your smartphone screen. In the next paragraph, we will provide a comprehensive overview of the tools and methodologies being implemented in order to promote that jihadi narrative and facilitate radicalisation.

1.c. Methodologies of Islamist extremist online propaganda.

1.c.ii. Radicalisation: online tools.

Given the importance of online propaganda - and the creation of a strong jihadi narrative, that we will analyse in a next chapter - we can individuate five (5) main traditional channels of propaganda and Islamic radicalisation on the net, that we can list as: 1) Websites; 2) Forums; 3) Social Networks; 4) Video-sharing websites; 5) Online magazines.

It has to be specified that currently, following the most recent evolutions of their communicational strategies (also designed in accordance with their new target audiences and the most recent evolutions in the ITC world) the main channels that the so-called IS uses to share their messages and propaganda are online magazines, Social Networks, and the widely shared videos of executions and fights²⁸, while online forums have started to become more rare in the last few years, even if they were one of the first and more efficient tools for spreading extremist propaganda and the online training of newly radicalised young fighters, as we will explain more deeply later on in this study of the so-called IS' methods of recruitment and propaganda.

All of these online tools have not simply appeared by accident one day, they were, and are, the result of a deeper understanding of the basic principles of political communications and propaganda, and most of all they demonstrate the willingness of a certain wing of the Islamist extremist movement in trying to spread their messages and engaging with an always wider audience, intended also as a broader geographical area of action (e.g. by using not only Arabic on their websites, but also English, French...). But how has this phenomenon evolved? How the so-called IS has been able to implement an “intelligent” communications strategy that also engages young Europeans? How do they craft their violent messages to be attractive for so many?

²⁸ BÉNICHOU David, KHOSROKHAVAR Farhad, MGAUX Philippe, *Le Jihadisme, Le comprendre pour mieux le combattre*, Paris, Plon, 2015, p 142.

Let us first start with a brief analysis of the above-mentioned channels:

• 1) Websites: as briefly mentioned before, jihadi websites started to proliferate on the Internet at the beginning of the 2000s, but since then they have changed their forms, their methods of being published, and most importantly, their content. Websites have always been used as a way of spreading the jihadi message and educating newly recruited people on how to organise attacks, rudimentary handcrafted bombs, etc. Most of these websites were written in Arabic, which limited their expansion, but now those kinds of websites can be consulted in most of European languages (which, with English, also means in the United States and worldwide). Websites are currently also used to disseminate jihadi magazines, educate young Muslims, and build a strong narrative able to engage new believers and recruit fighters.

• 2) Forums: online forums can be defined as the first online tools used by jihadi groups and still remain one of the most used ways of exchanging views and information, and disseminating the jihadi message. By their own nature, forums are different from Social Media and websites. In fact, forums are a sort of virtual chat room where individuals can discuss specific issues, with little or no control, where they can maintain a certain level of anonymity, but where the access is limited to those who are registered. Messages on these forums are in full control of their admin, so that all of the content can be moderated and any opposing opinions can be deleted and not appear on the forum. As for websites, these tools are presently also proliferating in European languages.

• 3) Social Networks: in recent years, Social Networks started to become the most powerful tool for communicators worldwide. Their power in spreading their contents is immense, it goes from texts to images and videos, or even to interactive content. In contrast to websites and forums, admins have very little control of these channels, and users are free to write, comment, and post whatever they want, so that their opinion on Social Media in the jihadi world swings from the excitement of having such kinds of immensely powerful tools in their hands, to their fear of facing opposing opinions. Despite this, Social Networks have become more and more important in the building of a jihadi narrative online, spreading their messages, trying to engage with new followers, and creating a link that also goes outside the online world and is able to convince new affiliates, similar to what modern companies do with Social Media: they use these tools to engage with an immensely wide audience.

Historically, Al-Qaeda started first to demonstrate a certain interest in Social Media at the very beginning of 2000, we could have even called them a progenitor of the potential of this new tool. As an anonymous internet user described well in a post that appeared on the well-known jihadi website *Shomukh al-Islam* the advantages of Social Networks, and in this case, Facebook are: the possibility to engage with the largest audience of Muslims users ever possible, encourage Muslims to convince a wider number of “brothers” to start using Facebook in support of all other traditional online channels, create a new group of users that will form a group of Facebook users ready to spread their message, and find and implement new ways of building and motivating their growing online community, expand their power online, and encourage more and more people to join them through daily interactions and participation in daily activities and debates online, find new, creative, flexible, and innovative ways to attract more people online to establish efficient ways to encourage people to join the jihadi online movement, and finally, to address their violent messages (e.g. video of executions) to the enemy, as a demonstration of the power of their fearless fighters (and in doing so, they also foment the attractive ideal of “heroism” in their narrative)²⁹.

Particular attention should be given to Social Media in nowadays hyper-connected world, and this is something that jihadi movements understood well since day one. Such groups, in fact, started to monitor the role of Social Media during the Muslims’ revolutions and in other current event, and understood how to use these tools for their own purposes, also facilitated by the difficulties of Social

²⁹ BÉNICHOU David, KHOSROKHAVAR Farhad, MGAUX Philippe, *Le Jihadisme, Le comprendre pour mieux le combattre*, Paris, Plon, 2015, p 127.

Media for themselves to control all of the content being posted and the difficulties in identifying users, who most of the time in these cases are hiding under fake profiles and using servers that can hide their real location while posting. Another “pro” of using Social Networks is the fact that they are free and there are no charges for posting and sharing content. Furthermore, the audience present on Social Networks - mainly Facebook and Twitter - is composed of young people between 16 and 35 years old, which is exactly the target of extremists: recruiting young people to reinforce their organisation and empower their legitimacy, and also because young people are the ones more easy to catch and convince, or manipulate for their own purposes. The online jihadi movement is not only present on Facebook, but also on YouTube and Twitter.

For a while, Twitter has been, and in certain ways continues to be, the main vector for diffusion and support of the jihadi message. The proliferation of Twitter accounts entirely dedicated to the jihad has during the last years been seen to lead to an exponential growth, and as we have already noticed for their websites and forums, these Twitter accounts, mainly curated in Arabic, started to also post in English, French, and other European languages. Just to give an example of this huge diffusion, we can observe the immense growth of the Twitter account of a well-known jihadi website, *Ainsi Al-Shokunk al-Islam*, that registered its own Twitter account to enlarge the website audience. When the Twitter account was created in March 2013, the number of its followers was 750, to arrive at 40.000 only one year and a half later (2015). As demonstrated by a recent study carried out by the Brookings Institute that appeared in *Le Monde* on March 9, 2015, in 2014 the Twitter accounts dedicated to the so-called IS propaganda numbered between 46.000 and 90.000 with a high share of content posted also in English (18%) and French (6%).

• 4) Video sharing websites: if it is true that an image is sometimes worth a thousand words, for Al-Qaeda and the so-called IS, videos are worth a thousand images. These extremist organisations have understood since the beginning of modern technologies the importance and power of videos (see Cap. 1 §b, the first propagandistic video diffused in by Bin-Laden). Videos and propagandistic movies have always been the flagship of Al-Qaeda and the so-called IS propaganda, but with the escalation of Social Networks, movies have become old-fashioned and less appealing for Internet users. While during the 1990s Al-Qaeda videos were rudimentary, long, and mostly dedicated to the glorification of their fighters and suicidal attackers designated as heroes, nowadays their videos are shorter and characterized by more action, presented as Hollywood-esque short movies, and more appealing to young people. These videos are mostly published on platforms like YouTube and Dailymotion, with priority given to Dailymotion, due to the opportunity to post all kinds of videos and movies (i.e. videos of more than one hour) at zero cost. Furthermore, YouTube has recently put in place a real war against jihad and the spreading of violent extremists’ content online.

• 5) Online magazines: maybe less known now that Social Networks have gained more ground, but relevant to the dissemination of jihadi messages are online reviews. These reviews are real, curated magazines made available online on dedicated jihadi websites and have reported large-scale success amongst radicalised people and sympathizers. The most famous jihadi online review is called “*Inspire*” and provides its readers sources of inspiration dedicated to reinforcing their jihadi messages and fomenting the misleading concept that only when one is a fighter, a martyr of the Muslim jihadi, then one can reach the meaning of life and a better world for all. But, in addition to these narrative contents, the review also offers tips and accurate instructions for how to organise plots, how to identify new targets to fight and suggestions on how to reinforce the jihadi army and spread their messages. The review has accomplished being diffused internationally and worldwide, while other online reviews of such kind have remained local.

What emerges from this brief analysis is the capillary and highly professional attention that these extremists’ movements gave and continues to give to the world of communication, thanks to which they are able to follow online trends, and new creative ways of communicating, which is why it is urgent to deeply understand online radicalisation’s mechanisms: to better define efficient counter

strategies able to tackle this process and its horrific effects.

1.c. Methodologies of Islamist extremist online propaganda.

1.c.iii. Radicalisation: online methodologies & peculiar contents.

In addition to this overview on the online tools being used by extremist to spread their message, there are some recent trends and methodologies to which particular attention should be given to truly understand the jihadist strategy online.

First of all, jihadist messages online started to be prevalent since the beginning of the 2000s mainly to emphasize their success in their holy war (i.e. videos of executions of Western soldiers...), but recently evolved into something more articulated and well-tailored in order to engage also those who are not Muslims already and their sympathizers. As briefly mentioned before, the so-called IS dispose nowadays of a certain number of really well-established communications and media agencies that constantly work for the development of media content tailored for a more modern audience and also using western modern technologies. These agencies have become more and more powerful and marked a clear evolution in the online propaganda of the so-called IS, based mainly on online magazines, Social Networks, and the production of very cruel videos, the latter with the aim of inducing the enemy into fearing the power and cruelty of the so-called IS fighters and also playing with the voyeurism of young internet users that can feel a sort of attraction to this kind of violent and prohibited kind of content.

All these tools have now evolved and transformed themselves into something slightly different from what they used to be. Developed in order to attract a wider audience, for example, online magazines developed by the so-called IS are more oriented at convincing Muslims worldwide to join their holy world and to support the return of the caliphate, instead of providing any sort of training to build handcrafted bombs and so on, albeit providing this sort of training was the primary intent of classic Islamist reviews like *Inspire*. We can say that these brand new online magazines are more oriented at building a jihadi narrative based on the holiness of the jihadi and the relief that one can only have if they follow this doctrine. The hidden message is the one of the entire jihadi movement: the time of relief has come; we should all fight the enemy (i.e. Western society) to live in a better world where all oppression against the Muslims will come to an end. In contrast to traditional Islamist reviews, in these new magazines, violence is sometimes completely absent: they prefer to play on a different ground, for example by explaining all the societal benefits that the *caliphate* can give to people, in opposition to all of the problems caused by Western societies, such as unemployment, racism, social exclusion, and so on. In other words, in a very strategic way, these reviews try to transmit their messages of hate via positive messages such as equality and wellness, that are only reachable thanks to their holy war and the establishment of the *caliphate* (i.e. the justification of violence as a tool for a better world).

Another important revolution of the way the so-called IS communicates with the outside world, it is the way it uses Social Networks. First of all, it has to be mentioned that the jihad, historically, is the first large-scale conflict with worldwide media coverage present 24/7 online. Of course, this is not the case. If it is true that the so-called IS benefits from what is called the BBC-effect, it is also true that the so-called IS' communications headquarters have understood the power of Social Media well and how to use it in order to transmit their messages. It not very often mentioned, but the so-called IS also created, in 2014, an app for Android called "*Fajr al-Bachaer*" (literally: the sunrise of the good news³⁰). Thanks to this app, users were able to receive live information from the geographical areas where the conflicts were taking place on a regular basis, a sort of live stream from the jihadi lands. Social Networks become the main marketing tools for jihadist groups, as it is common today, for

³⁰ Translation of the author.

example, to read the reclamation of attacks in Western countries via a Tweet. Most popular was the hashtag #AMessageFromIStoEU, showing uncensored pictures of dead western soldiers and other violent messages of intimidation.

Generally speaking, in recent years the online jihadi have massively moved to Social Media and have been able to create a radical digital milieu where users are united by a “shared political imaginary”³¹, or narrative. Thanks to Social Media such as YouTube, Facebook and Twitter, extremists have been able to build a multi-dimensional milieu that can potentially become an environment where the permission to radicalise seems to be allowed (or at least permitted by the lack of controls, censorship, and the opportunity to be anonymous). Despite the already mentioned lack of tangible proof of connections between terror attacks in real life and the Internet, many studies demonstrated that being part of such online communities on Social Media can be defined as a first predictor for extremist behaviours outside the internet, meaning in real life.

Furthermore, Social Media allowed terrorist organisations to target youth more efficiently, which is one of their main objectives in order to foment their actions and go ahead with recruitment and build a strong group of potential new combatants. On Social Media, in fact, communication can be easily and immediately made (i.e. chatrooms, direct messaging, and exchanging and sharing blog posts, notes, and other kinds of content via Social Media services). As explained by Bowman-Greve in their study published in 2009, Social Media “*can be seen as important social arenas for the formation of interpersonal bonds, with the potential to contribute to individual involvement process*”, and the so-called IS has deeply understood that and not missed the opportunity of being present on Social Media.

We can then affirm that despite the top-down communications offered in the past thanks to websites and forums, the so-called IS and other Muslim extremist groups have now transformed their communications and benefit from a bottom-down communication approach, also thanks to the wide variety of interactivity offered by tools such as Social Media. This does not lead us to perceive jihadi websites and online reviews as obsolete tools, which continue to be curated by these groups, but the importance on their change of strategy cannot be underestimated.

Other recent trends of jihadi propaganda include also the call to action for Muslim women and the tendency to attract children active online. In doing so, the so-called IS has developed tailored tools for these new audiences, such as for example online reviews only for Muslim women, or the manifesto of the perfect Muslim’s wife (also available online).

Another interesting new tool implemented in the framework of so-called IS communication (and identification) strategies for radicalisation is online gaming. Unlike online communities, video games are able to merge the power of images, engage with impressionable teenagers and young adults, and catch their attention in a brand-new way and are able to spread the glorifying message behind the actions implemented by suicidal terrorists. One of the most well-known videogames in such a field is called “*The Resistance*”, where the player identifies with the avatar of a young farmer in South Lebanon, engaged with the mission of killing all Zionist invaders. The message of the videogames is clear, and dangerous: Muslims are in danger; non-Muslims are invaders, the enemy is to be killed. Identifying with such messages, especially at such a young age, can be very dangerous and can shape divergent minds that can transpose their online actions from a simple game to real life.

Finally, it has to be reminded that the power of images (and videos) have always played a central role for Islamic extremist groups on the Internet, both on websites, Social Media, and all other online tools: The So-called IS has with no doubt has well understood one golden rule of modern marketing: the importance of having a powerful and recognisable logo and slogan.

³¹ BOUCHARD Martin, *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: Radical and Connected*, New York, Routledge, 2017, p. 87



Figure 1 - so-called IS flag

Who, nowadays, have not seen the so-called IS flag? As the French expert on International Relations, Defense and Psychology, Jean-Christophe Damaisin d'Arès³², explains in one of his latest publications, the importance of symbolism in Islamic propaganda is at the core of all of their communicational strategies. Among photos, videos, and other symbols, what is currently the image that more than anything else reflects and is seen as the incarnation of the (visual) identity of the so-called Islamic State is their flag (see figure n. 1).

In fact, what is written on the flag corresponds with the first part of the “*Shahada*,” which is one of the most fundamental declarations of faith in Islam

and the first of its five-faith pillars³³. The first part of the text on the flag (in white) states the uniqueness of God and the importance of his prophet, literally: “*There is no god but Allah [God]. Mohammad is the messenger of Allah.*” The second part of the flag (black text on a white background) is the so-called prophet seal, and literally means: “*Mohammed is the messenger of God*”. Such a powerful symbol reflects the basic ideals behind the Islamic doctrine, the same that are the basis of the radicalisation process. Such symbols, like the Islamic State flags that are recurrent in all of the so-called IS propaganda, their video clips, their posts on Social Media, and so on, in order to fuel the hate and underline the “success” of every violent extremist act of their holy war.

By contrast, according to Charlie Winter, senior researcher on Jihadism at the Quilliam Foundation³⁴, the flag is not really the so-called IS flag. In other words, the flag is not really their own symbol, but they have done a very good job of marketing and adopting a very common symbol for Islam, recognisable and strong, that can give a meaning for their group even when the flag is used outside their organisation. According to a recent interview Mr Winter released on the Independent “*The Shahada and the Prophet’s seal are important symbols that all Muslims share. (...) So, by co-opting words which have nothing to do with Jihadism, they [Isis] broaden themselves and try to claim ideological territory that they wouldn’t be able to if they had something specific.*”³⁵

As a conclusion, we can acknowledge that the so-called IS’ way of communicating and making its propaganda appealing is not something that they leave to random success, but is well studied and tailored for a well-defined target audience. With their new ways of communicating in a strategic manner, they have been able to manipulate their original violent and hated core of values in a set of positive messages (war against inequality, fight for a better world...) and create real heroes (fighters) that immolate themselves for a common relief, they have been able to catch people in their trap where violence becomes only a mere and acceptable tool for achieving a better world, the promised paradise for all good and faithful Muslims.

As criminology taught us, it is not difficult to understand how young people, mostly the ones

³² Jean-Christophe Damaisin d’Arès is a French expert in International Relations, Defence and Security. He served also as “Auditeur de la Défense nationale” in France, and he edited several books on different topics, including economy and terrorism.

³³ DAMAISIN d’ARÈS, J-C., *Terrorisme Islamiste. Recrutement et radicalisation. Nos enfants sont concernés*, sine loco, éditions JPO, 2016, p 38.

³⁴ The Quilliam Foundation is a London based think tank that aims to promote pluralism worldwide and counter terrorism on a global scale. More information is available on the official website of the Foundation at:

<https://www.quilliaminternational.com/>

³⁵ GANDER Kashmira, «Isis flag: What do the words mean and what are its origins? The monochrome flag has become a symbol of Isis», Independent, 6 July 2015, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/isis-flag-what-do-the-words-mean-and-what-are-its-origins-10369601.html>

perhaps lacking education, or with a frustrating life characterized by social exclusion, a history of mental illness, unemployment, and more in general societal exclusion, can be easily manipulated by this captive message where they can become heroes. Violence becomes a way of escaping their lives of invisibility at the eyes of their family, their friends, and the whole of the societies to which they feel nothing other than abandon.

1.d. Online radicalisation, is it really a threat?

In order to better understand the real threat of online radicalisation and the power of the Internet and new media as a radicalisation tool, we need to put the role of the Internet into perspective and not fall into the misleading trap of blaming the Internet for all of the faults that come from the attractive power of the called-IS' communications and appeal to young Europeans. Of course, the Internet has given people a new and easy way of communicating, exchanging, and disseminating information at a very limited or no cost and has expanded the access to information and knowledge worldwide immensely, and given to people the power to establish new and wider networks among like-minded users (individuals) despite geographical distances and helped them to build and identify with their given identities and narratives.

All of these aspects of the Internet revolution can be identified as positive developments of the way people can get connected, and in many cases, this has also led to what some called a “renaissance of civic engagement”³⁶ for example by enabling NGOs to spread their messages and also get funds, get people involved in their causes, and expand their fundraising opportunities. By contrast, all of these free-communication opportunities can also be used for politically extremist and violent intent.

The main differences between the behaviours of non-extremist users, and politically extremist-users on the Internet reside mainly in the quality of the content being shared, disseminated, and exchanged on the Internet. Political extremist groups, in fact, appreciate and make use of all of these functionalities offered by the Internet to easily and freely disseminate their beliefs, reach the widest possible audience and establish and/or maintain their networks and take advantage of the anonymity that the Internet offers (amplified by the fact that they have developed systems of IP changes that most of the times makes it very difficult or impossible to detect their servers) and avoid controls and censorship.

As many studies demonstrated, Islamist extremist groups use the Internet mainly for the following range of activities and objectives:

- to present, illustrate, and reinforce their ideology and narratives;
- to get people involved with their cause and join their community;
- to transform their habits and beliefs, especially the most violent, as something acceptable and even deserved for their cause.

As a consequence, many can be led to think that the role of the Internet in the radicalisation process is fundamental, and in some ways, it can be interpreted in this fashion, but it cannot be defined as the main cause of radicalisation. As already mentioned, the Internet is only a tool that made the exchange of information easier, and in doing so it allows users (people) to identify with different kinds of narratives that can be defined as extremist and/or violent. In other words, it is not the Internet itself that is a “dangerous place” but the characteristics of the Internet makes it a place where identification with a radicalised/extremist narrative can be easier, even if there is little evidence of the Internet as a dominant factor of facilitation in the radicalisation process of individuals, but radicalisation does not depend upon the Internet. The role of human interaction continues to be essential for the change of behaviours of individuals and proof of self-radicalisation and self-recruitment that has only happened

³⁶ STEVENS, Tim, NEUMAN, Peter R., *Countering online Radicalisation. A strategy for Action*, London: ICSR The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and political Violence, King's College London, 2009, p. 11.

thanks to virtual interaction remains very rare.

“There is no easy offline versus online radicalisation dichotomy to be drawn. It is a false dichotomy. Plotters regularly engage in activities in both domains. Often their behaviours are compartmentalised across these two domains”³⁷.

In fact, as many studies demonstrated, the massive use of the Internet has not led to a direct increase in terrorism. Just to give an example, following the results given by a study carried out on 15 terrorists in the United Kingdom³⁸, even if over a half of the interviewed (54%) admitted to having used the internet to obtain some or more information regarding terrorist activity, only 44% of them directly downloaded extremist material and, more importantly, only one third of them (to be precise, 32% of them) have actually prepared themselves online for their attacks. The figures decreased even more if we take into account the percentage of how many of these terrorists used modern technologies to communicate and exchange information with the others (only 29% of them communicated with others online, only 15% used emails, 9% of them used online discussion forums and only 8% of them made use of chat rooms. Finally only 6% used the Internet to support others by directly providing them with content).

Regarding this, it is useful to analyse some other key findings of the mentioned study that we can summarise as follows. In the 15 cases analysed in the study:

- The Internet was a source for information and propaganda;
- Online interactions were judged more easily than offline, and a useful way to affirm users’ beliefs, but did not substitute real-life interaction and meetings, or let them complete offline interactions;
- The Internet was not a driver for radicalisation and did not accelerate the process;
- Online extremist content and the Internet itself did not increase the opportunity of complete self-radicalisation, to which face-to-face interactions remain a key factor.

The study also focused on the phenomenon of the so-called “*lone wolves*”, regarding which the common belief is that lone actors are those who entirely self-radicalise online and, in solitude, planned and implemented their attacks - a belief that grossly underestimates the central role of networks and communities in the radicalisation process that leads to violent extremist acts. In fact, what we said about the role of the internet and Social Media in the process of radicalisation of individuals and groups of individuals is also valid for “*lone wolves*”: radicalisation is not dependent on the Internet even if it can be a facilitator tool.

Already by a study carried out in 2014 by Gill on *lone actors*, there is no correlation in the growth on the Internet and the rise of lone actor’s activities (the study refers to the period 1990-2011). By contrast, there is a rise of *lone actors* using the Internet to gather information and/or plan attacks; furthermore, the study also underlines that young lone actors are more willing to use the Internet than the elders.

Both studies examined in this paragraph, and many of the others analysed for the purpose of this study, commonly agreed on the fact that there is no direct correlation between the Internet as a mainstream tool for communication and the rise in terrorism, there is no real dichotomy between online and offline radicalisation but one goes with the other, and finally, the Internet can be a tool to facilitate radicalisation, but it does not accelerate the radicalisation process. The real threat to our democracies is not the Internet itself, which has offered a wide range of opportunities for our democratic system, citizens, and also enterprises or civil societal organisations, but the real threat remains the phenomena of radicalisation itself.

In the same way that Islamist extremist groups use the Internet and new media to implement their communicational strategies to recruit new followers and establish their core of beliefs, including

³⁷ GILL Paul, *et al*, *What are the roles of the Internet in terrorism? Measuring online behaviours of convicted UK terrorists*, sine loco, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2015, p. 35.

³⁸ VON BEHR Ines, *et al*, «Radicalisation in the digital era. The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism», Rand Europe official website, 2013, https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR453.readonline.html

their mission and objectives, Western democracies should be able to implement a better usage of new media and communications to build their image, their credibility, and construct a credible and attractive narrative in order to prevent their population from appealing extremist narratives and avoid the downside effects of this. If the radical Islamic propaganda is so attractive, the questions that we should ask are: why are they more attractive than our own “Western” and peaceful narrative? And do we really have a narrative? What are we doing in both the private and public sphere to achieve a better result in engaging with people, mostly the youth, online?

In the Western world, policymakers often judge the mere lack of terror attacks, as a success but they should understand that the lack of attacks itself is not enough to judge their actions as successful as the spread of radicalisation among Europeans continues even in the absence of real attacks (as we mentioned before, radicalisation is not always linked to terror attacks in real life). The main problem is not only terrorism itself, which is of course despicable, but the fact that more and more people in Europe tend to adhere to such ideal of Islamic extremism and uses the internet as a tool to reach their ultimate goal of freedom and social justice, via extremist ideologies instead of appreciating the opportunities that the “enemy” (Western societies) give them.

Europe and the Western world in general should define serious objectives to be achieved in the framework of a broader picture that should also include a real understanding of the so-called IS’ views and mission. This of course will not be sufficient unto itself, but must be accompanied by a real strategy to strengthen the image of Western democracies and their principles, and a real strategy for achieving their objectives in order to be able to measure them and successfully prevent the willingness of people to go and look for an ideology (the extremist one) that can allow them to feel stronger and accepted by the society in which they live.

The Internet should become a fertile ground of action for our governments not only to focus on the fight against radicalisation, but also to spread the democratic principles on which we have based our democracies and the credibility of the democratic brand, as the final aim is to promote social engagement.

The growth in the use of the Internet and Social Media as mainstream tools for communication, however, have led to a period of unpredictable relationships and networks, also presenting a new challenge to the field of Terrorism and Communication studies. Greater attention should then be given to communications and the narrative that our democracies have to define and implement, but simply following the assumption that the war against radicalisation should be driven only by information and communication is a highly dangerous underestimation. Both European and all Western democracies should inevitably start thinking of an innovative strategy that is able to merge all of the progresses made by Terrorism and International Relation studies and those made in the field of Communications because if it is true that the Internet itself is not a threat to our democracies, it could be a weapon in the hands of any extremist group.

Second part

2. How to tackle online radicalisation. Different approaches.

Once acknowledged, the importance of communication to the process of online communication and the so-called IS' intelligence strategy of recruiting people online, the following step has to be the definition of a counter-strategy to prevent and stop this phenomenon. The reader can henceforth ask if there is only one way to defeat online radicalisation, and if censorship, legal actions, or a purely communications-based approach can be effectively put into action to stop it. The answer to these questions is not unique, and different actors in cooperation with each other in order to elicit a beneficial effect can merge different approaches together to attain better results, or to put it succinctly, there is no magic rule to beat the phenomena.

In this chapter we will analyse the different approaches studied by the most influential Institutions, lecturers, and pupils, NGOs, and think tanks active in this field, underlining their pros and cons in order to try to define some general frameworks for actions and lead the reader to a deeper understanding of these different approaches, and finally understand the guidelines and recommendations that the author will explain later (Parts 3 and 4 of this thesis), as a conclusion of this multidisciplinary study.

2.a. Different approaches.

There are different approaches to tackle online radicalisation, and it would not be fair to describe one approach as better when compared to another, although it is true that different approaches have different impacts, and different combinations of tools can be even more efficient - all of course depending on several factors that should be analysed on a case-by-case basis. In order to try to figure out the different characteristics and pros and cons of all these approaches in general terms, we will hereby list and briefly analyse all of these.

As underlined by a study carried out by the International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (ICSR) in 2009³⁹, there are a wide variety of different approaches to this that can be differentiated as: (I) *negative measurers*; (II) *detering procedures*; (III) *regulatory measures by empowering online users and communities*; (IV) *reducing the appeal of violent extremist narratives on the internet*; and (V) *promoting positive messages and grassroots initiatives*⁴⁰.

Technically speaking, with *negative measurers (I)* we intend for all those actions put in place by the authorities and/or companies (or both in cooperation) in order to shut down any websites or content aiming to provide and disseminate extremist and radical content. The purpose of such an approach resides under the assumption that there is a real link between the presence of extremist content online, radicalisation, and violent extremists act in real life, so that denying the presence of such online content will also restrict the possibility for individuals to radicalise and thereby reduce violent extremist actions in the real world. It is then not difficult to understand that such an approach is not only easily criticised (the link between extremist content online and terror attacks is still very vague) and also difficult to be put in practice.

Currently, the negative measures possible are mainly these three kinds: removing content or websites from the Internet, filtering out content and information, and also hiding those from the web. Without going into the technicalities of such actions, which requires a very deep understanding of the functioning of the Internet and its tools and that is not ultimately necessary to our study, it is important

³⁹ STEVENS, Tim, NEUMAN, Peter R., *Countering online Radicalisation. A strategy for Action*, London: ICSR The International Center for the Study of Radicalisation and political Violence, King's College London, 2009, 31 p.

⁴⁰ Ivi, pp. 11 - 47.

to underline some implications if such an approach is implemented.

First of all, even if sometimes those actions can currently be possible, sometimes they are completely ineffective: just think about instant messaging services. The content shared in chat rooms between individuals (for example on Social Media) cannot be controlled, or filtered and shut down, despite some kinds of content and/or even Social Media profiles being censored - though not always, it must be said. Despite these kinds of technicalities, there is also a legal aspect that can be taken into account: if we think about websites, for example, it is necessary that its service provider and its host are from the same country, meaning under the same legislation, which is something that does not always happen, especially for those kinds of website that voluntarily spread violent extremist content and messages, and for this purpose they adopt illegal or even legal systems to hide their IP addresses and make it difficult or even impossible to track their sources, with the consequence of making it very difficult for the authorities to have any control over this phenomenon.

Without going into too many technical details, it has to be underlined that these kinds of actions also imply certain costs (and privacy issues....) for companies and authorities for their implementation, and that can sometimes make it impossible to see those measures being implemented. Just to give you an example: how can a Social Media platform control and filter all of the content posted on it? And would it be correct to read all users' private messages? If so, the company would have hire an almost limitless number of employees solely to dedicate their time to this task, and imagine this multiplied for any Social Media, forum, website, chat-rooms, and apps on the world wide web... it is impossible.

In addition to this, filtering, controlling, and eventually shutting down some of the content is not always technically possible - as briefly mentioned before, but most importantly: this kind of banning action can put into place a sort of censorship that is difficult to be controlled, managed, and even justified by the public authorities, with tremendous effects on the management of national security and the inevitable tightening - or even instrumentalisation - of the political debate on that, which can lead to a vicious cycle where these negative measures starts to become one of the other reasons for extremist groups to fight the enemy. For this, and other reasons, there are other measures that can be more productively implemented.

We will now continue the analysis by explaining the second kind of actions listed above: the (II) *detering procedures*. According to the ICRS study mentioned before, under this category we can include all of the actions that aim to combine negative measures such as the takedown of dangerous websites, but doing this together with other legal options such as prosecuting the individuals responsible for spreading of this content online. It must be clarified that the Internet is not a place without regulation, but to let people understand that the same rules that apply in the real world are also applicable on the Internet and must be implemented to deter the production of such content via "strategic prosecution"⁴¹. Also this approach is also not immune to criticism and danger, and such kinds of legal prosecutions can be seen by the public as a restriction of their right to free-expression and not as a deterring strategy, but as a real and even excessive constraint, which will lead - as in the case of negative measurers - to groups of extremist Muslims claiming another injustice perpetrated by the enemy against them; in other words: another reason to fight. This approach, even if strategically implemented, is not proven to be efficient against online radicalisation.

Another approach would be the one that, according of the above-mentioned study, we termed: (III) *regulation measures by empowering online users and communities*. Such a kind of approach can be listed as a "positive" one, as in this case we are not talking about prohibiting or censoring or blocking something/someone from the Internet, but acting efficiently - especially from a long-term perspective - by empowering online communities to tackle online radicalisation without giving extremist users another reason to "fight the enemy" as is the case with banning online content indiscriminately. But what does "empowering online communities" really mean? Practically speaking, it would mean giving users - and the industry itself - the right tools to identify and ban all dangerous and violent content

⁴¹ Ivi, p. 27.

online. Various Social Networks like Facebook are already implementing a sort of mechanism like this, but it does not always work and Social Networks do not always have the right - or adequate - instrument to police all of the content posted on their platform. The situation becomes even more complicated if we think of the whole Internet, where a complete and non-stop control of all of the websites is basically impossible.

For these and other reasons, the demand for more regulation of cyberspace, a demand that can absolutely be seen as understandable but raises many questions regarding its correct implementation and the control over that, without considering all of the questions that can be raised regarding freedom of speech and un-justified censorship. To avoid all of these problematic sides of this issue, a fair and effective compromise would be empowering individual users and online communities in order to give them all of the tools, rights, and the strength needed to control and report online content. A good example of the effectiveness of such a user-driven strategy is the well-known online crowd-sourced encyclopaedia Wikipedia, which exists thanks to over 12 million entries drafted, posted online, controlled, and even reported by users. In other words, instead of trying to burden the power of the Internet with strict regulation, a sort of self-regulated system would be preferable and, as a matter of fact, it would also be 100% democratic and far more efficient than complicated regulation that is impossible to implement worldwide.

It goes without saying that also such system would not be applicable quickly, and would require effort from both the industry and the users themselves, who also need to be “educated” for this, but from a long-term perspective it seems to be the best model to apply - also in combination with other actions, such as, for example, legal prosecution of those users that use the Internet for criminal purposes. The point, however, is not only to remove violent extremist content from the internet (which also is an inefficient approach), but how to encourage people to report them and feel that that content is wrong and dangerous, so that their appeal will also defeat the mission of recruiting more people.

Continuing our analysis on different approaches to try to burden this phenomenon, the following two and the last approach listed by the ICRS, and in our analysis, can be defined as “positive” approaches, just like the previous one. We are in fact now talking about: (IV) *reducing the appeal of violent extremist narratives on the Internet*, and (V) *promoting positive messages and grassroots initiatives*. These approaches, that can be combined with the previous one for a wider effect, are all about creating valid positive messages and contemporarily reducing the appeal of violent extremist online narratives in order to override their potential appeal for identification of online users, who first of all are people acting in a given society and whose behaviours can be definitively altered by the identity they build - even more so online.

The first of the two regards the need for “*a comprehensive strategy (...) to improve young people’s capacity to deal with extremist’s Internet content critically*” and “*contribute to strengthening media literacy as a means of countering online radicalisation*”⁴². The point here is not only about reducing access to extremist and violent content and all sorts of hate speech, but about reducing their appeal through a close cooperation between institutions, schools, families, and other stakeholders in educating their kids on the correct usage of the Internet, evaluate sources of information, and deeply understand all of the content they find online, while developing their critical thinking in order to contextualise what they see and so they do not fall into the trap of the divergent messages of some websites, posts on Social Media and so on. It is here that we can categorise “*counter-narrative*” strategies, as we will explain more on later.

These kinds of approaches underline the gap between the generations of digital natives and their families, and more often between young people and governments, with those policy makers that are supposed to understand - and not underestimate - the power of new media and find new ways to interact with young people in a correct way. In order to succeed in such a kind of comprehensive approach, a big effort must be made from all stakeholders, from parents, to the government itself,

⁴² Ivi, p. 37.

without forgetting the importance of the industry, which should implement far more efficient parental control systems together with imparting upon parents the correct knowledge of what the Internet is currently used for and how their children can and should behave online. Only thanks to their coordinated efforts, and a high level of young people being educated regarding the Internet and its mechanisms, fake news, hate speech, violent content and similar, can be finally seen by young people as what they are: dangerous lies.

As we will explain later in our recommendations, we also truly believe that despite the importance of such kinds of efforts, all approaches that are purely Internet-based are insufficient. As a way of explanation, what the author believes is that focusing only on the Internet is not enough and misses the main point of online behaviours: Internet users are people, what happens online is a reflection of what is going on in real life, meaning that if a young man or woman started to look forward to getting in touch with already radicalised people online, this cannot be a fault of the web, but is always a consequence of some sort of societal and maybe also familial or psychological problems in which the individual feels uncomfortable, lonely, and also depressed or invisible. This means that when talking about online behaviours and phenomena, we should never forget the dichotomy between online-offline reality, which would be a huge mistake in understanding the roots of the phenomena itself and, as a consequence, missing the point of it and failing in defining efficient solutions.

This leads us to the final approach listed in the ICRS study, and that goes together with the positive approaches listed before: (V) *promote positive messages and grassroots initiatives*. This kind of approach stands for providing the right resources to all these online projects aimed at building a credible strategy for providing online content based on positive messages able to counter extremism online. Despite the ICRS paper focusing on British initiatives and approaches, we would generally affirm that such an approach has a very high potential of directly engaging with young people online and getting them away from dangerous messages, content, and overall narratives online to impede them from radicalising. Such an approach has different benefits: for example it does not necessarily involve the direct influence of governments, often seen as something invasive and that can give terrorists another reason to strengthen their narratives against the “evil” Western governments, because as explained in-depth in the ICRS paper “*in the current climate of conspiracy and paranoia, government sponsorship can be the ‘kiss of death for independent initiatives hoping to counter terrorism*”⁴³.

The independence of online actors and their own initiatives is, and remains, important, but we also believe that the financial and strategic help of institutions can sometimes be fundamental for NGOs, think tanks, and grassroots initiatives that often lack the necessary findings or knowledge to put in place their, even amazing, ideas for online campaigns and narratives aimed at countering violent extremist online narratives, which used to be enough to implement a brilliant online campaign to also recruit young Europeans, as explained before, and in particular for the case of the so-called IS, even if there is evidence of a certain recent weakness shown by the so-called IS online media demonstrated, for example, through some press releases and online messages released in very bad English, demonstrating the absence of those leaders or strategists who used to translate messages, or the lack of funds to get a proper translation published.

Going back to our analysis of these kinds of “positive” approaches, we can affirm that - on a long term perspective - those are the best to truly construct a positive narrative in which individuals can identify themselves, build relationships, and exchange messages and information, instead of identifying themselves with any radicalising messages and therefore narratives. This is of course a project that cannot be achieved with a singular project or can succeed without any critical thinking at its base. Building a narrative is like building a brand new positive identity for online groups and communities that often see these positive messages as messages to which only “losers” identify with. Just to give you an example, let us think about the importance of volunteering in our communities and

⁴³ Ivi, p. 43.

how young people treat their peers involved in volunteering projects: often as marginalised people, not popular, and not cool. This, even if just an example, better explains the difficulties in creating positive messages that can also appeal to young people.

As explained before, the so-called-IS and many other extremist groups understood this well and created an attractive narrative that convinces people that by adhering to their groups, one day they can be seen as heroes, and what is cooler than a hero who is on all broadcasting channels? What we suggest is that we, the Western countries and Europe in particular, should pay more attention to those kinds of narratives in order to build efficient counter narratives, as we will explain later in this study, and to do this by giving to non-governmental groups, start-ups, NGOs, and any other given group involved in this mission, enough opportunities - for example by providing free training, funding via independent grant mechanisms, and prizes - to truly build attractive and efficient counter-narratives online because only saying to young people that radicalising is wrong, will never be enough. Also, here it is reminded that those positive messages can be efficient only if positive messengers, projects, and better education for young people will be provided by governments, in order to let them feel better in this society, instead of starting to identify as an enemy to fight.

As a matter of fact, none of the “negative measures” took into consideration communications, which by contrast seems to be at the basis of all positive measures (in some more than in others). Despite all of the criticisms or differences in ways of approaching the subject, it has to be acknowledged that it plays a central role in shaping people's online (and offline) identities and behaviours. The author is strongly convinced that communication - if strategically applied, together with other measures that we will explain in Chapter 6⁴⁴ in our recommendations - can play a leading role in preventing people from being attracted to and imprisoned by the ploy of online radicalisation.

This categorisation of measures to counter terrorism online is just an overview of all the types of measures that can be implemented and took inspiration from an ICRS report published in the framework of its actions and studies carried out to improve knowledge and leadership in order to counter online terrorism in Britain, that will then be expanded upon and applied to Islamic radicalisation as a whole and purged of all references to other British projects applied in other online fields and not necessarily to radicalisation, but that will explain well the kind of actions that can be taken to fight online radicalisation currently. It also has to be specified that there are several profiles and peculiarities that should be explained and examined between one category and another, especially when we think about positive measures and legal actions that depends of course on who implements them and where they are applied. Generally speaking, those categories can work, but the way of implementation of those actions is unlimited and can of course be improved on a case-by-case basis. As many studies and the literature on this demonstrate, and especially when sociology and communication come into play in the scenario, each case is different – even if some basic principle can be most always be assumed as valid – as explained in the previous chapter.

Given the impossibility for the author in this study to examine all of the practical cases that exist to counter online radicalisation, the study will now examine all of the actions being put in place by the European Union itself (meaning not country by country but by the EU and its institutions as a unique entity) in trying to counter online radicalisation, a not so easy mission if we think of all the different legislations concerning the internet in all 28 (soon to be 27) EU countries and the presence of tech-companies that are not even EU-based, but present in our everyday online life, not to think of all the cultural differences amongst all EU countries that can influence individuals ways of acting and their online and offline behaviours.

⁴⁴ Chapter 6, pp. 48 - 50.

3. The European effort against online radicalisation.

The European Union has always been in the first line in trying to combat terrorism and hatred, now more than ever and also online. In fact, combating terrorism at its sources in order to avoid terror attacks against EU citizens and to combat radicalisation (of every kind) are real priorities of the EU's strategy.

The first EU Strategy on Radicalisation (EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment) was adopted in 2005 and revised in 2008 and 2014, and formed the basis for an increase in the involvement of civil society in joining force in order to tackle and counter radicalisation. Briefly, the strategy specifies that the fight against radicalisation is a priority that stands primarily under the competences of the Member States but at the same time underlines the importance of the European framework for such a fight as a reliable added value for a better outcome, thanks to the possibility of cooperation between the Member States, through the exchanging of expertise, and thereby avoiding repetition, mistakes, and the waste of resources, while coordinating policies and establishing a comprehensive set of good practices. Therefore, in this document the European Commission was identified as the entity in charge of supporting Member States in the fight against terrorism and radicalisation.

Therefore, the Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) was established with the main purpose of establishing valuable connections between the main local actors, including NGOs, associations, think tanks, and individuals, involved in the fight against radicalisation and terrorism from different perspectives - from experts in this particular field of study, to policy makers, from victims' associations, to academics. Currently, the RAN Network can count on more than seven hundred organisations and thousands of participants, with the prospect of growing more in the near future.

Always in the framework of the EU Strategy for Combating Radicalisation and Recruitment, as of today RAN has developed a wide range of activities, including, amongst others: the implementation of several working groups focusing on different aspects of the phenomena of radicalisation, including online radicalisation; made up of a collection of relevant studies, best practices, and approaches, lessons learned, and projects in the field of (online) radicalisation that are all available online on the DG HOME (Migration and Home Affairs) European Commission RAN dedicated web page for free; implemented a practical support system of help for those Member States which require the RAN Centre of Excellence's help in the combat against radicalisation (such support is activated upon a Member State's request and is tailored following the needs of the applicant and includes a wide range of activities, from workshops to practical help on implementing specific actions and projects); the organisation of trainings, workshops, conferences, and, last but not least, the network has implemented its own project dedicated to the empowerment of civil society (in cooperation with the EU Internet Forum).

But how do the network and its working groups work? The RAN working groups are led by a steering committee composed of the chairs of each working group and the RAN Centre of Excellence, which takes care of all the logistics, technology, and administrative support for the working groups, and is chaired by the Commission, which also funds the initiative. As of today, the working groups number nine, including:

1. Communication and Narratives working group (RAN C&N)
2. Education working group (RAN EDU)
3. EXIT working group (RAN EXIT)
4. Youth, Families, and Communities working group (RAN YF&C)
5. Local authorities working group (RAN LOCAL)
6. Prison and Probation working group (RAN P&P)
7. Police and Law Enforcement working group (RAN POL)
8. Remembrance of Victims of Terrorism working group (RAN RVT)

9. Health and Social Care working group (RAN H&SC).

In addition to these working groups, a few words should be spent on the RAN initiative about the empowerment of Civil Society. The project aims to assist civil society - meaning any actors actively involved in the process of representing and defending the right and will of all citizens - in their activities, and in this particular case focusing on all activities dedicated to countering online activities of propaganda, radicalisation, and recruitment for terroristic purposes online. The programme was established within the framework of the EU Internet Forum activities, which started in 2015 on the initiative of Dimitris Avramopoulos, Commissioner for Migration, Home Affairs, and Citizenship. Thanks to this programme, all civil societal organisations already or newly involved in the fight against online radicalisation and propaganda can benefit from the valuable help of EU institutions that are able to provide them with the knowledge, tools, expertise, and resources that they lack in order to implement successful campaigns. As of today, several countries benefited from the activities, resources, and trainings provided by the programme.

The commitment of the EU in tackling online radicalisation does not only involve these activities listed above, but has been witness to fast-growing attention and involvement of the institution to put in place all the efforts they can to tackle online radicalisation. Regarding this, and as briefly mentioned above, the European Institutions have released several documents, starting with the “European Union Counter Terrorism Strategy,” released by the Council of the European Union in 2005. Pillars of this strategy are: prevent, protect, pursue, and respond. The document is intended to define the European Union Commitment “to combat terrorism globally while respecting human rights, and make Europe safer, allowing its citizens to live in an area of freedom, security and justice.”⁴⁵

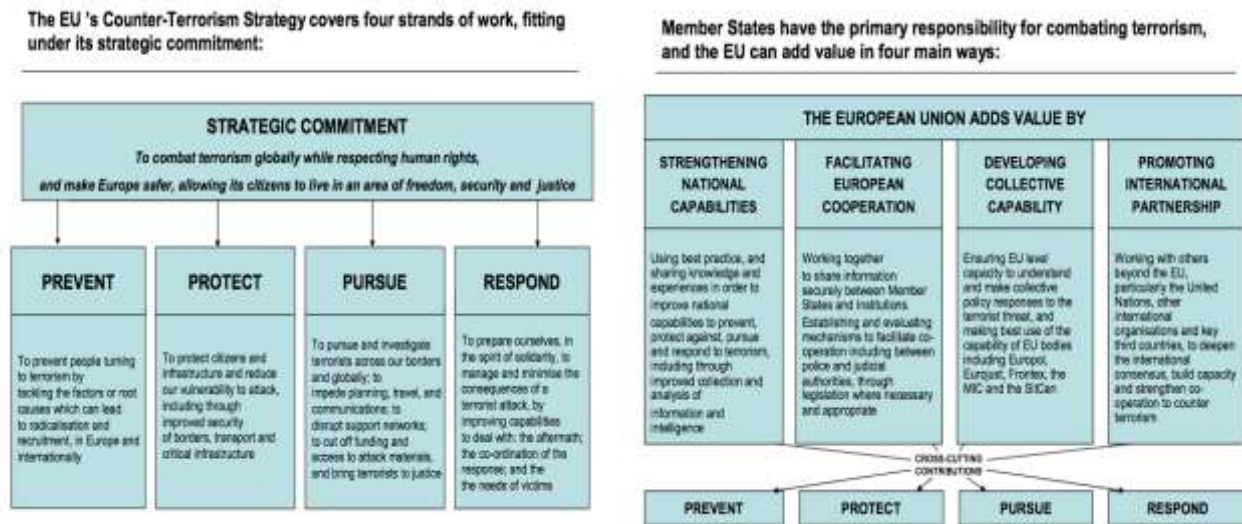


Table 1 & 2 - source: Council of the European Union, *The European Union Counter Terrorism Strategy*, Brussels, 30 November 2005.⁴⁶

As well illustrated by Tables 1 and 2 of the paper, and by the document itself, the EU strongly condemns any sort of terrorist acts and emphasises the need for stronger cooperation between Member States and also with international organisations, in order to better prevent radicalisation and terrorism. The document also provides some key points not only in relation to prevention but on how to better

⁴⁵ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION, *The European Union Counter Terrorism Strategy*, Brussels, 30 November 2005, No. Prev Doc. 14469/05 REV 3 JAI 423 ECOFIN 33 TRANS 234 RELEX 639 ECO 136 PESC 100COTER 72 COSDP 810 PROCIV 174 ENER 172 ATO103, 17 p.

⁴⁶ Ivi, pp. 3 - 4.

protect European citizens, pursue terrorist groups, and respond to threats. The strategic document also offers a well-defined list of key priorities for any of the four pillars of the strategy.

For the purposes of this study, it is interesting to underline that the document, already in 2005, refers to the internet as a tool to be monitored in order to stop terrorist organisations from using it as a tool for internal and external communications (page 8 of the document, under the section dedicated to how to prevent terrorism in Europe and abroad). Another important point, that will be also underlined in the following parts (from Chapters 5 to 7) of this study and our recommendations, is the importance of building a strong and understandable European narrative and deliver positive messages, a key point also underlined by the strategic document which, in its typically bureaucratic language, states: “*we need to get our own message across more effectively, to change the perspective of national and European policies. We must also ensure that our own policies do not exacerbate division. Developing a non-emotive lexicon for discussing the issue will support this.*”⁴⁷ It also encourages, amongst others, the European Union to “*develop common approaches to spot and tackle problem behaviour, like the misuse of the internet*” and “*develop a media communication strategy to explain better EU policies.*”⁴⁸ It also has to be specified that the document also focuses on a series of legislative and law-enforcement measures and provides a series of tools for cooperation between Member States and also at the international level.

The Strategic document has therefore been amended and updated in 2008, and in 2014. These new versions of the document, especially the most recent one, gave more attention to the role of the Internet in the radicalisation process and acknowledges the importance of ensuring that the message of peace, freedom, and prosperity – which stands at the very foundation of the European Union – is not misunderstood (“*Ensuring that voices of mainstream opinion prevail over those of extremists*”).⁴⁹ The document(s) also focuses more on the need for: understanding radicalisation and the main reasons that can lead individuals to adhere to violent extremist messages, improving governance and policies that can ameliorate those individuals’ lives, and appreciating Europe instead of identifying it with the reason for their suffering (and as a result being more prone to radicalisation or at least sympathising with a certain extremist narrative that justifies the use of violence), implement policies and actions to tackle (online) radicalisation, and improve cooperation between Member States to pursue these goals. The importance of a positive European narrative (and counter-narratives), and the amelioration of European communication as a whole, is taken into account and indicated as real priorities, and the necessity for exchanging better practices and expertise between Members States is also underlined.

Other relevant documents released by EU Institutions in this field are:

- The Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Region “*Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU’s response*” (COM/2013 941 final)⁵⁰;
- the Communication from the European Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Region “*Supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremism*” (COM/2016 379 final)⁵¹.

⁴⁷ Ivi, p. 8.

⁴⁸ Ivi, p. 9.

⁴⁹ COMMISSION’ S EXPERT GROUP ON VIOLENT RADICALISATION, *Radicalisation Processes Leading to Acts of Terrorism. A concise Report prepared by the European Commission’s Expert Group on Violent Radicalisation*, Brussels, 15 May 2008, p. 4

⁵⁰ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Preventing Radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism: Strengthening the EU’s Response*, Brussels, 15 January 2014, COM(2013) 941 final, 12 p.

⁵¹ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremists*, Brussels, 16 June 2016, COM(2016) 379 final, 16 p.

Both documents pay particular attention to the online radicalisation process and the importance of a good communicational strategy to be provided by the EU, give practical recommendations of how to improve the EU's strategy, and with the aid of the RAN network and all its activities to support Member States. It must also be underlined that despite the fact that all actions to be implemented against terrorism are still under the exclusive competences of Member States, the EU acknowledges the importance of the European added value in these actions as the EU can provide the necessary tools and expertise that Member States and civil societal organisations would need in the fight against (online) radicalisation and terrorism. Within the actions foreseen in those documents, in fact, there are several of them that encourage European initiatives dedicated to: a better configuration of the RAN jobs combined with the real needs of Member States, high level conferences to increase knowledge and the exchange of information and expertise amongst Member States, training projects to ensure the best level of expertise for those who are in charge of training others, work closely with local authorities in each Member State and other related activities, all within the scope of the established relationship within the EU and between the Member States to better understand and have the right tools (and knowledge) to identify the best strategies to tackle the problem, with a local approach.

The importance of acting locally - a point that we will also suggest and defend in our recommendations (in Chapter 6) - and with well-tailored strategies is also underlined in the Communication of 2016, in which the European Commission acknowledge the urgency of the fast-growing, complex, and continuously evolving phenomena of radicalisation, with particular attention to the actual situation in the EU and worldwide (according to the document, more than 4.000 Europeans have joined terrorist organisations operating in the Middle East conflict zones, e.g. Syria and Iraq). Regarding this, several actions have also been put in place in third-party countries in order to ensure security through the support of law enforcement and respect for human rights in order to tackle and prevent violent radicalisation on an international scale. For this reason, the EU is committed to the following two priorities, “*Strengthening partner countries' security capacities*” and “*Supporting third countries in tackling the underlying factors of radicalisation*”⁵².

To give a more precise overview on the EU's actions to prevent and tackle radicalisation, the following initiatives need to be mentioned:

- Projects like the VoxPol Center of Excellence (NoE)⁵³, and many others have been funded and implemented under the Seventh Framework Programme for European Research and Technological Development (FP7), in order to develop a comprehensive research framework and boost knowledge in the field of (online) radicalisation and extremism;
- In 2016, the European Commission included the topics of radicalisation and inclusion under the Horizon 2020 funding programme. €8.5 million has been dedicated to a call for projects for the development of a comprehensive approach to violent radicalisation and an additional €5 million for a call focused on current radicalisation trends;
- Further studies were funded with €2.5 million in order to develop projects about the religious diversity in Europe, and its past, present and future;
- The already mentioned EU Internet Forum, established in 2015, that witnesses the participation of Member States, law enforcement authorities, and civil society organisations to tackle online radicalisation and related issues;
- The continuous cooperation of the European Commission with Europol⁵⁴, and also with the major players in the Industry such as Facebook, Twitter, and Microsoft to study how to tackle online

⁵² EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremisms*, Brussels, 16 June 2016, COM(2016) 379 final, pp. 14 - 15.

⁵³ VoxPol is an academic research network that focuses its researches, publications and projects on the topic of violent online political extremism.

⁵⁴ Europol is the European Union Law Enforcement Cooperation Agency, commonly also known as the European Police Agency. More information are available at: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/>

propaganda, hate speech, and other related content;

- The updating of EU and Member State legislation as far as Audio Visual Services are concerned, and the development of safe media literacy, and finally
- the continuous cooperation and commitment within the RAN Network and the efforts to provide an efficient counter-narrative online, and the non-stop commitment to reaching the highest level of education for young pupils, which from a long-term perspective is the key action for tackling hate, racism, social exclusion, and any form of political radicalisation.

In addition to this, the European Commission and the Council have also continued without interruption to work on this topic in the current year and wished for a fast-growing commitment to the subject. For example, if we look at the most recent conclusions adopted by the Council after its meeting on June 22-23, 2017⁵⁵, and the Foreign Affairs Council's outcomes of June 19, 2017⁵⁶, the fight against online radicalisation is still stressed as a top priority within European strategy, among others. More explicitly, if we look the Conclusions adopted on June 19 (focused on the EU External Action and Counter-Terrorism) and the ones adopted after the meetings on June 22-23, all are focused on protecting European citizens from terrorism and how to prevent and fight the phenomenon in a more efficient way.

Already the first point of the Conclusions of June 22-23 states: "*The European Council strongly condemns the recent terrorist attacks (...) These acts have strengthened our resolve to cooperate at EU level so as to enhance our internal security: we will fight the spread of radicalisation online, coordinate our work on preventing and countering violent extremism and addressing the ideology, thwart the financing of terrorism, facilitate swift and targeted exchanges of information between law enforcement authorities, including with trusted partners, and improve the interoperability between database.*"⁵⁷, underlining the importance of addressing the EU's attention and efforts on the online side of radicalisation, hate, and terrorism, and an acknowledgment of the relevance of the phenomena currently and the urgency of finding new ways to efficiently tackle it, thanks to, and with a closer cooperation within, the EU, and all of its Member States and partners. In fact, as this is a matter of exclusive competences of the Member States, the Council again encourages the Member States and the industry to closely work, and - amongst other things - establish an Industry Forum, in which matters related to this subject can be discussed and solutions can be found at the most appropriate levels, and in respect of consumers' and citizens' rights.

Furthermore, the European Commission has recently published (June 29, 2017) its 8th report on the progress made towards an effective and genuine Security Union⁵⁸, in which - together with its annexes - again stressed the importance of preventing and combating terrorism online and, despite all the efforts and measures already being implemented at the EU and national level (e.g. the EU Internet Forum and the work done by the Radicalisation Awareness Network or RAN), the Commission urges Member States to establish more coherent and efficient systems of measures to be applied nationally, by, for example, establishing national Internet Referral Units that will better cooperate with Europol at the supranational level

The newest thing underlined in this document is the fact that it states that a series of initiatives will also be launched under the Erasmus+ programme and the newly established initiative for a European Pillar of Social Rights, which on the one hand demonstrates the acknowledgment by the

⁵⁵ EUROPEAN COUNCIL, *European Council meeting (22 and 23 June 2017) - Conclusions*, Brussels, 23 June 2017, (OR. en) EUCO 8/17 CO EUR 8 CONCL 3, 13 p.

⁵⁶ EUROPEAN COUNCIL, *Outcome of the Council Meeting, 3551st Council meeting Foreign Affairs*, Luxembourg, 19 June 2017, 10424/17 (OR. en) PRESSE 38 PR CO 38, 14 p.

⁵⁷ EUROPEAN COUNCIL, *European Council meeting (22 and 23 June 2017) - Conclusions*, Brussels, 23 June 2017, (OR. en) EUCO 8/17 CO EUR 8 CONCL 3, p. 1.

⁵⁸ EUROPEAN COMMISSION, (2017). *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Eighth progress report towards an effective and genuine Security Union*, Brussels, 29 June 2017, COM(2017) 354 final, 9 p.

Union for a better educational and cultural system that will stimulate inclusion, will fight racism, and will ultimately create that environment of peace and acceptance that can finally destroy discrimination (and by consequence the desire of combating the EU), but on the other hand methods for practical implementation of this principle are not clear in the report and should be better defined (and funded) for a better impact once implemented. The report also takes into account a whole series of different actions in other fields such as terrorist financing, the return of foreign fighters, cyber-security, relationships with third parties etc., that we will not examine here as they are not a part of the topic we are examining in this study.

To conclude, we can surely affirm that the EU is well aware of the phenomenon of online radicalisation and its link with the offline world and already started its fight against the phenomenon years ago, but a lot still needs to be done on several fields such as, e.g. letting all of the Member States know about the opportunities that the EU can offer in this field, from knowledge and expertise to funds, or again how to cooperate with other Member States to tackle the phenomenon or how private entities and civil society organisations can help. Beside this, the EU should communicate better with its own Member States in this field and, once acknowledged, the difficulties that the EU may encounter regarding such a topic that not only is an exclusive competence of the Member States but also involves national security and the intelligence services of different Member States, and should also find a better way to encourage Member States to cooperate and share useful information, expertise, and knowledge.

The author is well aware that such a topic as the phenomenon of online radicalisation, is a topic that under the EU and legislative lens, cannot be seen as an independent problem: it involves - as already mentioned in the first part of this study - matters such as National Security and Intelligence, national and international Law Systems, and so on... but Europe should not give up on this and foster better cooperation between the Member States, along with international organisations to ultimately fight the issues of radicalisation and terrorism by all possible means, including strategic communication, because - it has to be reminded - that even if the intent of this study is to approach the problem through a “communications angle” the problem of radicalisation and terrorism is first of all, a problem of security, and the EU should fight this and protect its citizens, and in doing so fulfil its end of the bargain with all its citizens by empowering and boost their knowledge and trust in Europe, with the final aim of both help and protect their citizens and built an efficient European (counter) narrative able to tackle the appeal of extremist narratives.

Third part

4. Is Communication a good way to beat online radicalisation?

Starting from the assumption that relevance should be given to a deep understanding of the (online) radicalisation process from a communications point of view to complete this study, it is now important to also try to theorize ways of practically tackling the phenomenon *Can communication be enough? Can we really be able to build a narrative that can counter the extremist Islamist narrative online, and lead people away from the dangers of radicalisation?* In this chapter, we will try to answer these questions and many others from an academic perspective, and provide general guidelines for an ideal counter-narrative strategy and campaign against Islamic radicalisation online, convinced that communication can be a powerful tool to fight the online extremist Islamist narrative.

4.a. Social relations and narratives, the importance of communication.

Why does communication seem to be so important in understanding the online radicalisation process of young people, and also in trying to define an efficient counter strategy? The answer resides in the very nature of communication itself and the basic necessary understanding of some sociological principles and behaviours that stand at the basis of any realistic theory regarding societal phenomena like political movements and the identification of individuals with them, meaning also extremist groups and the role of strategic communication in these processes.

Before going into the details, it seems appropriate to start with some basic definitions to better understand theories and suggestions examined in this chapter. First of all, what does “narrative” mean? What about *counter-narratives*? Definitions could seem easy, but from a sociological and communicative point of view, things can be a bit more complicated. In fact, we can define a narrative as “*a system of stories that share themes, forms, and archetypes*”⁵⁹, or also, a narrative can be described as “*many stories whose combination is greater than the sum of its parts*”⁶⁰. In other words, a narrative is the whole system of ideas, stories, messages, and behaviours to which a group or an individual can identify themselves, both online and offline. Saying that, a counter-narrative can be described as a counter system of ideas, behaviours, messages, and identity that stands at the opposite of a given narrative, which in our specific case is the Islamist extremist narrative proposed by the so-called IS, its supporters and other related groups.

It is important to be reminded that any given “narrative” is not an artificial product of communication, but is a social product that is created in a specific historical, sociological, and political environment at a very specific time. Acknowledged, this will help us to understand the importance of communication presently, and how communication can impede individuals from falling into the trap of identifying themselves with any extremist narrative, which is full of propagandist (but efficient) messages. As C. Archetti further explains in one of her latest studies (*Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, 2013), one thing that organisations like Al-Qaeda in the past and the so-called IS currently have understood well, is that to build a narrative to which individuals will feel a sense of belonging in real life as well, is that simply messaging people is not enough. What these organisations are doing, in fact, goes much further than simply delivering messages to an audience, but they have built a system where all messages are aligned and complementary to the ideas explained in their narrative and what their audience - that they finally want to recruit - believes. In this way, they fostered a real sense of belonging in their audience, an engaged

⁵⁹ ARCHETTI, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, sine loco, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 129.

⁶⁰ Ididem, p. 129.

environment, that will consequentially make them feel even more engaged with a certain radical narrative and would make them willing to follow the beliefs and *diktat* of such a narrative in their every-day life as well, when the individual narrative of a person is finally completely aligned with the narrative of a (extremist) group. The process is not as simple as just described, but provides a brief and understandable overview on why narratives are important, first for understanding the online radicalisation process and, secondly, for how to tackle it through strategic communication.

Building an efficient narrative involves the active role of a communicator on one side, and the target audience, on the other. It is not a passive relationship where the speakers send messages to the outside world, but it is the building of a real relationship within a group, an active group made up of individuals who feel their affinity to one given group and interact with others within the group. Engagement is the key word for any efficient narrative.

To be precise, it has also to be specified that despite narratives are often compared to brands (we often read or hear about the “ISIS brand” and similar expressions), a narrative is more than simply a brand: individuals that start to belong to a certain narrative would also start to fully embrace their beliefs, values, and disciplines, also meaning their way of acting and communicating with others, even offline.

It goes without saying that in our hyper-connected society the role of (online) narratives (which also affects the offline lives of individuals) is becoming more and more important. In fact, thanks to technology, any individual who has full access to the Internet, can find easy ways of communicating with others, no matter the certain sociological, societal, and geographical distances that would have impeded certain connections in a world without technology, and this is one of the main reasons why communications and modern technology should not be taken off while debating about terrorism, radical or extremist political movements and their power to recruit new combatants. This leads us to the importance of developing an efficient, and above all, credible, counter-narrative to which individuals can approach, interact with other individuals, and finally identify themselves with, instead of doing so with the extremist narrative present online: “*Communication is the very enabler of the formation of any relationship*”⁶¹, this sentence explains well the importance of communications and narratives, which are the sum of the different interactions of any given individual, because we all belong to a certain narrative, a community, and core of values, and have our own narrative (that can of course also change over time).

As Alberto Melucci⁶² explains, social or political movements, including groups that have a terroristic purpose “*offer individuals the collective possibility of affirming themselves as actors and of finding an equilibrium between self-recognition and hero-recognition.*”⁶³ This becomes even more evident for certain individuals that, feeling brushed aside in their real lives, would then immerse themselves in an online world that seems to accept them more than the society in which they live their (offline) life and therefore start to identify with certain groups that provide them with messages of relief and the promise of a better world. Viewing terrorism and extremists’ movements through this sociological lens would help to better understand its mechanisms and succeed, and also to understand why people would act in the name of extremist ideologies.

In fact, terrorism can be seen as the result of certain narratives that legitimise - or even encourage - violence for its own purpose. In this sense, radicalisation cannot be defined as a phenomenon *per se*, but is a temporal process, characterized by specific relationships built on a certain narrative; a temporal process built step by step within a system of ideas, beliefs, and behaviours that is

⁶¹ ARCHETTI, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, sine loco, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 82

⁶² Alberto Melucci (1943 -2001), was a Italian journalist and sociologist. He has also been lecturer of Sociology of Cultural Processes at the Università degli Studi di Milano and lecturer at the specialisation school of clinical psychology. Psychotherapist and poet, his main studies were in the field of social movements.

⁶³ Melucci’s quote from ARCHETTI, Cristina, *Understanding Terrorism in the Age of Global Media: A Communication Approach*, sine loco, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 87.

also built up thanks to human interactions both online and offline.

Another way to explain and understand the importance of the role of “narratives” and interactions in this field of study, is given by the Situational Action Theory (SAT), developed in 2014 by criminologist Per-Olof H. Wikström⁶⁴. Briefly, the mechanism that stands under this theory can be summarised as follows: “*the convergence (in time and space) between a person’s propensity and exposure initiate a perception-choice process whose outcome is an action of interaction.*”⁶⁵ In other words, according to the SAT model, radicalisation can be described as a process in which an individual tends to engage with a certain extremist narrative, and can even decide to start acting following the beliefs of this narrative (e.g. use of violence on purpose) by his/her own choice, after a process of convergence and societal identification with a certain group or identity. This, of course does not mean that a single exposure or the choice of consulting extremist content online (e.g. moved by curiosity), would automatically lead to the complete choice of appurtenance for an extremist narrative (remember: radicalisation is a process) and the immediate radicalisation of individuals. What this theory underlines is the importance of the results of continuous exposure to certain content and beliefs (made by choice!) that can gradually shape an individual’s identity, meaning letting him or her identify with a certain narrative that feels more attractive to him/her.

This will also lead us to again underline the interconnection between the online and offline world and social spheres, as also stressed by one of the most recent study in the field⁶⁶ that interacts, shapes individuals’ identities and narratives, and in which individuals live in. In fact, if one identifies with a certain narrative online, this would also be reflected in his/her offline life and vice-versa (for example: if I am a convinced vegan and often consult websites, blogs, and Social Network profiles about veganism, its impact on modern society, and similar topics, it would be highly improbable that as soon as I would quit working behind my computer desk, I will start a butcher’s tour in my city, eating meat for breakfast, etc...). This because, as mentioned briefly before, we should never forget that Internet users are, first of all, human beings that also live and interact with others (and their respective narratives) in their everyday professional and personal lives, where different networks or social spheres also interact. We are all sociable people, and this should never be forgotten, as the nature of human beings and their deeper understanding is - and always will be - the key point to understanding (online and offline) behaviours and ways of communicating.

In fact, - it should be stressed - the interconnection of these living (or social) spheres can also help us in understanding why finding a real link between the exposure to violent extremist content online does not always result in a fully accomplished radicalisation process that, by contrast, is the result of multiple factors as explained before in Chapter 1⁶⁷, and not even the implementation of violent extremist acts in real life.

In fact, seeing that an individual identity is the result of continuous, active, and passive interactions with and between different narratives and life spheres (online: websites, social networks, blogs... and offline: family, school, work...), the mere presence of violent extremist content online cannot be the unique reason for radicalisation, but what is important to understand and what we - and future scholars and researchers - should focus our attention on is the propensity for individuals to consult and get in touch with a certain narrative, often online – a virtual milieu that makes hyper-connection real in our everyday life as also pointed out by Alessandro di Maio⁶⁸ during our interview.

In fact, when we discussed with Mr. Di Maio the main differences between Al-Qaeda’s and so-

⁶⁴ Per-Olof H. Wikström (1955), is Professor of Ecological and Developmental Criminology at the Institute of Criminology, University of Cambridge, and Professorial Fellow of Girton College. Author of several books and articles, in 2010 has been elected as a Fellow of the American Society of Criminology and, the year after, Fellow of the British Academy.

⁶⁵ BOUCHARD Martin, *Social Networks, Terrorism and Counter-terrorism: Radical and Connected*, New York, Routledge, 2017, pp. 92-94.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 92.

⁶⁷ Chapter 1, pp. 3 – 21.

⁶⁸ See Annex II of this study, pp. VII – VIII.

called IS' strategies of communication and narratives, one of the main differences between the two terrorist organisations - despite the fact that they belong (to a certain degree) to the same meta narrative - he clearly underlined the importance of the technological revolution occurred during the last decade and the changes that the Internet used as a mainstream tool for communication that has influence the strategy of communication of these two criminal organisations. In fact, while Al-Qaeda years before the so-called IS produced videos that were very difficult to find and consult (that is also why some studies described Al-Qaeda's communication as "stuck in Web 1.0")⁶⁹, the so-called IS quickly understood the importance of modern communications and social networks and also transformed their strategy in accordance to their narrative (slightly different from Al-Qaeda's), in order to benefit from the immediacy of mainstream web-media for their own purposes and to spread and reinforce their narrative, which at the beginning was purely based – in opposition to the one from Al-Qaeda and other groups that promoted mainly the idea of attacking the West in the West - on following the jihad in its purity: as Mr Di Maio explained, in fact, the so-called IS started its successful strategy and to build its narrative online by saying something that would sounds like: "we will build the world as the prophet told us. We will win. Come join us in the Caliphate, join forces with us and we will have built a better world, by conquering the world." By way of explanation, this kind of message were not only strategic for the so-called IS and its tentative caliphate (and for recruitment reasons) but also to differ its own narrative from all the (Islamist) ones that have come before.

4.b. The importance of building credible "counter-narratives".

"I'm sick and tired of dead heroes, don't celebrate your heroes when they're dead. Go to your living hero and say thank you" (S. Bakhit, 2017)⁷⁰. The importance of efficient counter-narratives to tackle extremist radicalisation can be summed up by the sentence above. In certain Islamist narratives the heroes are those who died for their religion, for the purposes of the jihad, to defend Islam. Martyrs - in this narrative - are the heroes that everybody wants to be, the ultimate apology of the success that everybody - especially the weaker - wants to have, and this is one of the most dangerous messages that one can spread.

Counter-narratives, in this sense, should be able to build a counter-message where violence is not a tool for a better world, and cannot be a method for achieving success and life-accomplishment. By way of explanations, an efficient counter-narrative should be able to provide the opposite message - but in a positive manner - and allows people to identify with positive heroes and identify with principles such as freedom, gender equality, the acceptance of others etc., which goes against the use of violence and are essentially the complete opposite of any existing violent extremist narratives. Only by underlining all of the positive effects of these can we truly disrupt extremism.

As explained before, building a narrative is not an artificial process and is not that easy to build, but this should not lead us to think that building a counter-narrative in this sense can be impossible. In fact, there are plenty of examples that demonstrate that this is possible (see for example the "Hero Factor" project, case study in *Annex III.I.iii*).

Also, according to one of the latest RAN publications⁷¹, despite the relevance of approaches that include the elimination of violent extremist content online or reducing its accessibility on the internet, it is now clear that public opinion also matters and delivering a counter (or alternative)

⁶⁹ Common expression to underline the gap between Al-Qaeda online (communication) strategies and current so-called IS advanced online strategies and tools.

⁷⁰ Quote of S.Bakhit during a live interview on the official Facebook Page of the World Economic Forum on May 20, 2017 (Online interview available at: <https://www.facebook.com/worldeconomicforum/videos/10154434821971479/>)

⁷¹ RAN Radicalisation Awareness Network, *Preventing radicalisation to Terrorism and Violent Extremism. Approaches and Practices*, from the RAN Collection of Approaches and Practices, 2017, PP. 282 - 287

narrative is an essential step in the fight against terrorism by challenging and disrupting extremist ideologies online. The study also then underlines the importance of understanding the different types of counter-messaging and counter-narratives, and their relevance compared with the extremist propaganda they want to disrupt. Briefly, the approaches of counter-narratives include: undermining violent extremist propaganda online by focusing on positive messages, rather than focusing on negative messages (like “fight against”...), challenging, deconstructing, and discrediting violent extremist propaganda and online messages, and to explain our societies and government policies better, and to provide positive and rational messages that will help people to understand and accept the better aspects of our societies, instead of identifying it as an enemy. All of this can be done in different ways, for example, by providing positive messages of social acceptance, putting in relevance the positive core of societal values of a given society (tolerance, acceptance, freedom...), or even using emotions, humour, and underlining all of the lies of the propaganda this strategy is fighting (e.g. the so-called IS’ propaganda and all its lies about a better world that can be achieved through violence), or even by providing fact-checkable information and avoiding any misunderstanding on public policies, disrupt misinformation, and finally build a reliable relationship with the given audience.

When interviewed about its “Hero Factor” project (see Annex III) Suleiman Bakhit said: *"Many people joining these groups aren't even very religious,"* and he added *"MI5 released a report that some British men on their way to Syria or Iraq bought the book Islam for Dummies - that's a real case. This is much more about a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and a call to adventure... it's about narratives."* (S. Bakhit interviewed by VICE magazine, in 2015).

In other words, it is all about giving people a credible and positive narrative in which they can feel not only at ease, but also to which they can feel that sense of belonging that is essential to keeping them from engaging with radicalised messages, and ultimately to allow them to fully engage with these positives narratives in real life as well. As human beings, in fact, all persons need to identify with a certain core of values, stories, and beliefs (both online and offline), the same need of belonging that we already identify as one of the main reasons why certain individuals, who felt alone and “invisible” in this society, tend to adhere to extremist narratives.

Building “trust networks” is essential and, in fact, can facilitate relationships and collaborations between different actors and boost the positive attitude (and professionalism) of those involved, mainly causing two beneficial effects: the first is of course the strength of the credibility of the network itself as seen from the outside (meaning by the people we want to reach and to which we want to deliver our narrative), and secondly, because trust and credibility presently - in the current political and societal environment of discouragement, or even conspiracy, especially amongst young generations. Regarding this, it is also interesting to see how extremist networks use “trust” as one of the main pillars of their narrative, interpreting “trust” as the complete faith of their followers in all of the statements made and orders emitted by the group’s leaders and, going back to the analysis of what we called positive approaches against radicalised narratives and content online, this is one of the main reasons why the author believes that disrupting extremist networks by underlining all of their lies (and/or fake news) and misinformation, should always be included in a counter-narrative strategy (more directly or indirectly depending on the strategy itself) to discredit their credibility and mine their appeal to users.

To conclude, a very important initiative active in this field, Mr Di Maio told us in our interview⁷², is the *Middle East Media Research Institute (MEMRI)*, that he had the chance to know during his post in Israel. The MEMRI is a non-profit organisation headquartered in the United States (Washington D.C.) founded in 1998 with the main aim of monitoring, analysing, and translating (also in English) all news and media reports published by the Islamist world. In fact, its mission statement is to *“bridge the gap between the Middle East and the West”* and, in doing so, the organisation has been able to spot hate speech and fake news related (also) to a certain Islamist extremist world and, translating those into English and other languages, makes it possible to reveal all of the misinformation

⁷² See Annex II of this study, pp. VII -VIII.

conducted by “fake news.” For these reasons, the organisation has always been considered as an immensely valuable resource for understanding and disrupting (locally, so more efficiently) extremist networks and spot (and report to the competent authorities) people actively involved in online recruitment and efforts to radicalise young, new potential offenders.

Counter-narratives are essential to build that sense of belonging, acceptance (of others and him/her selves) that any individual seeks in his life, and ultimately to not let people identify with the online present extremist propaganda and narrative. Only by building a real sense of trust and belonging in a positive narrative where violence is not a tool for a better world, but a despicable act to be denounced (i.e. disrupt the extremist messages), we will really be able to let people understand the danger of a certain extremist narrative and, in doing so, influence - in a positive way - also their offline behaviour and address them to values like peace, social acceptance of the others and let them engage not in a fight, but in a constructive way of living their life for a better world where heroes are not plotters or suicidal attackers, but positive role models.

5. A Communication campaign against online radicalisation.

If we start from the proven assumption that the so-called “*IS has truly transformed the state of play. Its vast propaganda operation is unrivalled, involving devoted media teams (...) who work relentlessly, day and night, in the production and dissemination of the ‘caliphate brand’*”⁷³, and for all the reasons provided in the previous chapters, it seems more than appropriate to try to tarnish the appeal of the “caliphate brand” on its same ground of action: strategic communication, and most specifically in our case, by providing a valuable and efficient counter-narrative’ strategy for young Muslims and young disenchanting Europeans.

After all of the theoretical speculation regarding the importance of communication and the importance of effective counter-narratives online in order to tackle online radicalisation, in this chapter the author proposes a series of guidelines for the implementation of an ideal strategic communications campaign based on the theoretical assumptions of the previous chapters (i.e. counter narratives).

5.a. The campaign. General characteristics.

The most important thing of an ideal communications campaign against online radicalisation would be to always bear in mind the feelings and perspectives of our target audience, who are not merely "users" but people, as we have already underlined in the chapter dedicated to (online) narratives and counter-narratives.

Therefore, a campaign based on this counter-narrative strategy should be aimed at building a strong and efficient message that is able to engage with people (online). In the framework of a certain (counter-) identity that can engage with the selected target audience and be able to feel them identifying with these messages, which is in a contrasting position with the messages and objectives of the Islamist extremist propaganda online, with the final results of keeping people far from identifying or sympathising with the extremist Islamist propaganda and its narrative.

Essential for such a campaign is the ability to truly engage with people, something without which the identification process – to our (counter-) narrative – will never start and, as C. Archetti reminds us: “*as political campaigners know, there is no point in trying to convince people who are very interested in politics about whom to vote for: these individuals have already made up their minds. (...) In other words: if you can change an extremist’s network (and the narrative that is embedded in it), then you also gradually change the extremist’s identity - to a point perhaps in which the person is no longer an extremist.*”⁷⁴, the same of course applies to those individuals that are not already radicalised but have just started to familiarise themselves with a given extremist narrative. Ways of engaging with people and encouraging them to approach our content online can vary according to: our target audience and their interests, the localisation of the target audience, and the given political and societal situation. There are no “golden rules” for a successful campaign but – as we will better explain in the next paragraph – a good analysis (and tests!) would be extremely helpful.

To conclude, we truly believe that although the European effort against online radicalisation⁷⁵ must be saluted, an increased commitment from European countries and Europe as a whole must be put into place as soon as possible and with the cooperation and direct commitment of the private sector (civil societal organisations active in the field of human rights, for examples, and ITC companies).

⁷³ WHINTER, Charlie, «Documenting the virtual ‘Caliphate’ », Quilliam Foundation, October 2015, sine loco, <http://www.quilliaminternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>, (latest consultation on August 15, 2017)

⁷⁴ ARCHETTI, Cristina, «Terrorism, Communication and new media: Explaining Radicalization in the Digital Age», Perspective on Terrorism, Vol 9, No 1, 2015, <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/401/html> (latest consultation on July 29, 2017).

⁷⁵ Chapter 3, pp. 27 - 32.

As also underlined in our interview with Mr. Di Maio; there is no way to wholly defeat extremism, but being pragmatic (referring to the legislators and politicians) and not falling into the trap of easy-to-use ideologies and stereotypes, must often only be used for electoral reasons. In just a few words, communication can (and must!) be very helpful in stopping and preventing such kinds of phenomena, but cannot be the only tool for action and must be accompanied by legislative and political measures designed and implemented with honesty and pragmatism. As regard of this, an overview of the proposed action in this field will be given at the end of the study⁷⁶.

5.b. Target audience. The importance of a well-tailored target audience and how to define it.

As for every communications campaign, a precise definition of the specific target audience you are addressing your campaign to is essential. But how can we define a target audience for such a broad topic? How can we define who we want to dedicate all the effort of building an efficient campaign to that will be able to grab the attention of that target audience and engage with them? The answer is: research and analysis, also to avoid to address our campaign to “the general public”.

As every communications professional knows, the identification of a campaign’s target audience is a sort of scientific process that in a certain way can be compared to the market research that brands undertake for advertising purposes to identify the section of the market that will be attracted to their advertising and definitely buy their products. In this specific field of action, the process would be more difficult as we do not have to sell a product but craft a narrative to which people would identify with, furthermore there is no scientific way of identifying to whom this campaign would be addressed, so how do we proceed? At the first stage, it would be recommended to start a sort of inverted process and ask yourselves: who would be more prone to radicalisation? Who do we definitely need to keep away from the problematic appeal of the extremist propaganda? By answering these questions, with the help of the numerous studies carried out in the field of (online) radicalisation, we would be able to define to whom we need to address such a campaign. In addition, we can combine such a study with other useful information gathered thanks to modern technologies such as big data (that we will also examine for the evaluation of such a campaign) and analytical tools.

For these reasons, it be also be helpful to have a look at the so-called IS propaganda available online. In fact, what could be better than trying to beat them through engaging and educating those who they are trying to radicalise and recruit for their terroristic purposes and finally weaken their resources and credibility online? Another important clue for a correct identification of our target audience is the examination of the profile of former (European) radicalised individuals and former jihadists, especially if examining those who have been radicalised online. This, of course, are only initial steps.

Starting from some easy-to-find information, we know that the so-called IS is implementing new strategies for trying to engage with young Europeans for their despicable purposes and is doing it online and with some success, especially now that they are losing more and more ground in the Middle East and losing battles to defend the *caliphate*. According to the most recent Europol report called “Changes of the IS modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited”⁷⁷ and their analysis of former jihadists we can generally identify individuals in our target audience as average “*young men who have a criminal past, are or feel discriminated, humiliated and marginalised in society, with some also having mental health issuers who are not strictly practicing their Islamic religion*”⁷⁸, and also those with a “*lack of education, unemployment and an inferiority complex [that] can make them vulnerable to radicalisation and recruitment, offering a sense of social belonging and emotional fulfilment (...) a*

⁷⁶ Chapter 6, pp. 48 - 50.

⁷⁷ EUROPOL, *Changes in modus operandi of Islamic State (IS) revisited*, The Hague, November 2016, 14 p.

⁷⁸ Ivi, p. 8.

person isolated and therefore prone to using violence”⁷⁹.

This would seem to prove our assumption that radicalisation is more able to attract those individuals who, living already in disadvantage and social exclusion, and are more prone to radicalise in order to feel the societal acceptance that they cannot find in their lives (and this identifying modern Western society as the enemy to beat, as already mentioned earlier in this study). The mechanism of convincing people that violence can be a mere tool to achieve a better world, in fact, can only establish roots in a fertile ground of exclusion and rage, as also stressed by Professor Olivier Roy’s theories about radicalisation, and the reflection made with Mr. Di Maio during our interview⁸⁰.

However, even this accurate definition provided by Europol seems to already give us a clear picture of those to whom our campaign needs to be addressed. As such, more precise information would be extremely helpful in order to achieve better results.

First of all, we should be able to identify a range of ages for our target audience, their geographical positioning, and even gender, without forgetting an analysis of (online) interests and behaviour of the audience we want to reach and engage with. This would also help the determination of the online channels to use for the definition and implementation of the strategy itself. For example, if we identify our target audience as young men between 15-35 years old, who mostly use Facebook and Twitter over other Social Media platforms, and whom are interested in comics, sports, and movies, this will lead us to implement a strategy that would violate its message with language that would sound familiar to people of those ages, would use tools of interest of those people and would be implemented through the Social Media platform that they like the most, without forgetting of course the implementation of all of the other useful tools and the use of other channels for the completeness and efficiency of the campaign. In order to better define online behaviour and the interests of a given target audience, and to define it first, big data can be an extremely helpful source of information, and there is proof of the growing use of this technology in this field. An example of this is a project currently in the course of implementation being carried out by the University of Bath and aimed at defining trends and statistics for the creation of a software that will be able to individuate the changes in online behaviours of radicalising/radicalised individuals and better understand the process (results of the project are not available at the moment of the editing of this study as the project is currently underway, and will come to an end the 31th of August 2017)⁸¹.

It is also important to mention the relevance of big-data for understanding “*information related to the communication practices of violent radicalisation*”⁸² is also acknowledged by the European Commission in this field, and even if the Commission refers to big data in order to better analyse the behaviour of already radicalised individuals, we believe that nothing would impede us from using the same method to also define the online behaviour and interests of a given target audience, like marketing practices teach us. This will be further examined in Chapter 5 § e.

5.c. Mission and objectives of the communication campaign. Key messages.

Another important point of our campaign, to be defined as the first real strategic step for creating an efficient campaign - and also modelled on the basis of a well-defined target audience - is the definition of a clear message and goals (objectives) to be achieved over short, medium, and long-

⁷⁹ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁸⁰ More detailed information about Professor Roy’s theories on radicalisation are available in Annex I, at page viii of this study.

⁸¹ More information about the project are available at: <http://www.bath.ac.uk/psychology/research/projects/using-big-data-understand-online-radicalisation/>

⁸² EUROPEAN COMMISSION, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions supporting the prevention of radicalisation leading to violent extremisms*, Brussels, 16 June 2016, COM(2016) 379 final, 16 p.

term perspectives, especially if we want to implement a campaign under the framework of the creation of a new, efficient, European narrative to counter online extremism.

To build a powerful campaign it would not be sufficient to only say to people that they do not have to radicalise, simply messaging people, or saying to them that they do not have to do something, is not efficient and a waste of time and resources. Furthermore, by simply saying that with no real argument, you can also risk having the opposite effect, especially when this kind of sterile and not augmented message is provided by a Western Institution (which will risk being seen by our target audience as a mere act of Western propaganda).

What a campaign needs to promote as a message, and in the specific case of a campaign based on the assumption of the efficiency of counter-narratives, is a credible (and fact-checkable) message that it is in clear opposition of the violent messages of Islamic extremist propaganda - without even mention or even worst, attack that – and providing a positive message that is able to engage with people, be credible, and automatically keep them away from sympathising with the contrasting online propaganda, meaning the campaigns and messages spread online by the so-called IS and related groups.

It goes without saying that providing such kinds of messages, and building a credible (counter) narrative is not the simplest thing to do, and would require high communications skills, but we can learn from some of the current actors involved in Western and Eastern societies' fight against extremist Islamist propaganda and recruitment. A good example of what we just explained here, are the actions carried out by Suleiman Bakhit⁸³ who created a project called “Hero Factor,” thanks to which he aims to prevent and counter violent extremism in Jordan, through creating positive heroes that promote messages of hope, tolerance, health, gender equality, and, generally speaking, peace and acceptance. In practice, Hero Factor consists of a series of comic books entirely dedicated to the mission of providing positive heroes that can defeat extremism for young Muslim men and women, combating that idea of violence and extremism as a tool for a better world, but providing the opposite message and emphasizing the importance of positive stories, peaceful heroes, and prosperity and equality for all. The project is the biggest world project of this kind ever implemented in the Jordan area, and its success has been astonishing and has gone worldwide.

Going back to our tips and guidelines for an ideal campaign in this field, it seems clear now that the key message(s) at the base of such a campaign should be: that the acceptance of the others and freedom of all are the only real useful tool to be promoted in order to achieve the equal society that we all wish; that only a peaceful environment can be a propeller for individual accomplishment and prosperity for all; and finally, that the real hero that we should wish to follow, or even imitate, are those “positive” heroes that dedicate their life to promote peace, solidarity and equality for all, by helping other, and not fighting against them. By promoting these positive messages we will let our audience gradually understand that Western societies are not the cause of all the sins in this world and the answer for an “Eden” in real life does not reside in violence (mean as jihadi).

Furthermore, while promoting a certain message it should not be forgotten to whom this message is communicated. This is because based on our target audience, we will choose an appropriate “tone of voice,” language, and tools for implementation.

It also has to be remembered that the key message(s) of such a campaign is intrinsically tied to its own objectives, that in our case are: first of all, to raise awareness on the subject and spread real information and fight against the misbelief promoted by the extremist propaganda; and gradually let our target audience engage with our campaign and call for action (if calls for action are foreseen in such a campaign) and start their process of identifying with our narrative (as opposed to the extremist

⁸³ Suleiman Bakhit is Jordan entrepreneur and Countering/Preventing Violent Extremism (CVE/PVE) and Heroism expert, active also in the field of humanitarian aid and volunteering. He is the mind and author of several initiative such as HEROMAKERS (largest PVE and Heroism initiative in the world in Jordan) and Hero Factor, amongst other. His projects are focused on CVE/PVE narratives and mythology using Heroism as a valid alternative narrative to extremism by promoting stories and Heroes based on narratives of tolerance, hope gender equality, and acceptance of the other.

one); portray violent extremist content and the extremist propaganda as increasingly less attractive and credible; and finally allow our target audience engage with our message 100% and fight against radicalised messages online, which would be a sign of the complete success of our campaign.

5.d. Implementation of the campaign. Tools and partners.

The methods and tools for implementation of such kinds of campaigns is something that cannot be determined a priority, but must follow the research and analysis made by the campaigner before starting the campaign itself. But we can stress some trends that are present in such kinds of campaigns and examine those that have been demonstrated to be successful for the purpose of these kinds of campaigns (which is part of the ex ante evaluation that we will examine in the next paragraph).

First of all, it has to be underlined – as briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph – that the choice of tools for the implementation of a given campaign, would not only follow the trend of the moment in a specific field of action, but must be based on the tools on which our target audience spend most of their time and where they are most active. It should also be pointed out that being “everywhere” on Social Media and other platforms is not essential to any campaign and can even be a bad move and as such negatively affect the implementation, management, and result of the campaign itself. By contrast, the efficiency of a campaign is also the result of a good choice of tools and platform that would be used to disseminate our material and message.

Social Networks nowadays are multiple and differs from one to the other on the basis of the content you can post on it, the audience you want to reach, and the amount and “quality” of users that spend their time on it. For example, if one decides to produce videos and short movies, it would be appropriate to use a platform that allows the posting of high-quality videos, like YouTube, Vimeo, and Dailymotion for example, and embed this video on our website, if one is foreseen by the campaign. Regarding videos, it is important to underline that nowadays Facebook also allows the upload of high-quality video, on this platform in fact, it is now recommended to directly upload videos, as the Facebook algorithms will show more Facebook videos rather than videos uploaded from other platforms. Furthermore, presently, on Facebook pages, you can post and give a certain reaction thanks to special buttons and link to a video directly upload on your page.

When talking about tools and platforms like Social Networks, it cannot be forgotten that content on such platforms can also be advertised (with the consequence of having more visibility). Advertising content can be a good move because it allows you to select a very specific audience to reach, give you more visibility, provide you with the opportunity to benefit from more precise analytical tools and can help give a campaign in attracting more attention from your audience and testing the reaction to different kinds of content, but also has some cons that should be taken into consideration, like for example: it is not cost free, the reaction of the audience can be altered because of the advertising itself, advertising is not always possible (especially on smaller platforms), and can also alter the evaluation of the effectiveness of your message⁸⁴. A good piece of advice would be to evaluate if advertising your content can really be efficient and financially sustainable, before deciding to use it for an online campaign.

According to a study carried out by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue together with the Against Violent Extremism initiative⁸⁵, and based on the analysis of a given number of counter-narrative campaigns implemented online, any Social Network has its own pros and cons that should be carefully taken into account while choosing which of these tools you should use. Just to give a

⁸⁴ TUCK, Henry, SILVERMAN, Tanya, *The Counter-narrative handbook*, sine loco, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2016, p. 31.

⁸⁵ SILVERMAN, Tanya, *et al*, *The impact of counter-narratives. Insights from a year-long cross-platform pilot study of counter-narrative curation, targeting, evaluation and impact*, London, The Institute for Strategic Dialogue, sine dato, 54 p.

couple of examples, following the outcome of the aforementioned study, Facebook can be able to reach the widest engagement among users, while – maybe surprisingly – Twitter provides the largest amounts of views of videos posted online (even if it is not a platform dedicated to sharing videos). These, and other kinds of considerations, should always be taken into account not only regarding the number of views and reactions we want to achieve, but also in order to achieve the scope of our campaign.

There are no general guidelines for achieving success with an online campaign, and there is a platform better than others: everything depends on your strategy and goals, your audience, and how you want to engage with them, but there are some key facts that should not be forgotten for the ideal implementation of a campaign. Once you have chosen your channel and messages to spread, the most important thing you should do is engage your audience, and even if the interactivity of Social Networks can help, the engagement process is not something so simple.

In order to successfully engage with a given audience there are some “golden tips” to follow: first of all, post appropriate and incisive content; emotions and humour always help in engaging and are the most liked content online, bearing in mind that the aim of such kinds of campaigns is not to be viral but to provide quality credible content to which one can trust, there should always be a link between the online and offline world, and finally, a successful campaign should never be sporadic, but prove a continuous and credible story (remember that the jihadi narrative never stops spreading their propaganda, also in order to gain more ground and credibility online).

Another relevant point to be mentioned about the implementation of a European campaign is the establishment of partnerships. In fact, as already mentioned before, a campaign that is purely “European” and promoted solely by EU institutions or national governments can be less successful than a campaign promoted by partnerships with grassroots initiatives and civil societal organisations. These organisations, in fact, can help in reaching a wider audience, and promote positive messages online, while also promoting the essential link to the offline world that we mentioned before. Furthermore, these organisations are the ones that can help a campaign in “going local” and really address its messages to the right audience and also engage people in the offline world with concrete activities that can be carried out in our everyday lives (just think about all the associations that help radicalised people to go back to their normal lives and abandon certain violent ways of thinking, by, for example, helping those more in need in our society; or organisations of former combatants or familial victims that can provide an emotional direct testimony of all of the so-called IS’ lies and undermine the credibility of their narrative).

The choice of partners must be strategically designed and should include reflections on: the innovative kinds of partners and their impact on our target audience in terms of resonance of their (our) message within and outside our target audience, which skills we lack and what partners can provide us with and, finally, a strategic reflection should be made on which kinds of partners (and how) can help us to best reach local and mainstream media in order to enlarge and strengthen our visibility, but most of all: our credibility. Partnerships must be encouraged - and following the author’s opinion, these must be established also with online influencers (e.g. as “ambassadors” of our mission/campaign) and private companies.

5.e. Monitoring of activities, evaluation of the campaign. Traditional tools and big data.

The evaluation process of a given communications campaign is an essential step for understanding how the implementation of the campaign goes, analysing its success, and examining in detail, thanks to analytical tools, what went well and what went wrong during the process.

When talking about the evaluation phase of a campaign, most tend to think of this phase as a conclusive step, the author is strongly convinced that a “continuous” evaluation of a project, is the only way to implement it at its best, understand every step of it, and is the best way possible to gather data and information throughout the entire process, in order to conclude it with a valuable set of data, that

will not only help the final evaluation of the project but would also allow the understanding of it during the entire history of the campaign itself while improving our knowledge and skills in this field.

First of all, for a good evaluation outcome, an initial analysis should be carried out before the implementation of the campaign itself, which is what we call an “*ex ante* evaluation,” which is carried out to better understand our target audience and consequently how to efficiently define and implement our strategy. Secondly, periodic evaluations would be extremely useful in order to gather data about the achievement of the smart goals and milestones we defined in advance, also using KPIs (Key Performer Indicator). KPIs can of course vary on the basis of the campaign and its tools for implementation, they can be, for example, the number of views for a video, or the number and kind of reactions obtained for a given Facebook post, the number of followers and retweets of a given Twitter account, and so on. Finally, also a final evaluation of a campaign should be carried out. This, together, and compared with the result of the *ex-ante* and periodical evaluation of the campaign, a complete analysis of the outcome of the campaign would result in a highly accurate overview not only of the final results of the campaign, but also help in understanding any single action implemented in the framework of the strategy we defined and implemented.

Only through a correct and precise analysis of the weakness and strengths of a campaign, would the communications specialist truly be able to understand the success or the failure of their campaign. But how would it be possible to define the methods and practice of a good analysis? Firstly, the choice of good and relevant analytical tools is essential to carrying out a good evaluation. It is useless, for example, to base the evaluation of a multiplatform campaign by only counting the number of clicks and visitors to the main website of the campaign, if it also benefits a number of other platforms like social networks. Secondly, to really understand the success of a campaign, it would also be helpful to compare the results of the campaign itself with the online behaviours of users in regards to similar campaigns or related topics on the internet.

It should also be underlined that currently, in our hyper-connected society, modern technology itself could provide much help to communications specialists in understanding the online behaviours of users and then help us in planning and evaluating a campaign. Starting from the basics, it should be mentioned that all website hosting services, Social Media, and other platforms offer reliable analytical services (i.e. Facebook Insights) that can be very helpful for our purposes, but there also exists a series of online tools and software that can be used in a more accurate way for such purposes. In addition to this, we also highly recommend to every communicator specialist to benefit of the help of *big data*, a technique already well known in the marketing sector and last but not least, by political campaigners.

Big data, in fact, consists of the vast amount of data available online which can be very helpful – if stored and analysed properly – for studies of all kinds. Even if the issues of big data are still under discussion in most countries (e.g. who stores the data and who own the data itself? Who has control over these datasets and what about privacy?)⁸⁶, a proper analysis of those kinds of information can help while trying to detect, map, and understand the online (and in a certain way also offline) behaviours of a given group of people, and consequently be used for marketing or communication – or even political – reasons, a technique that unfortunately seems not to have been fully understood yet by Western institutions that are very often still characterized by their lack of knowledge of ITCs...

Always as regards of big data, and as also stated in one of the most recent VoxPol⁸⁷ publication in the field, that reflects also the ideas of the author of this study, such kind of advanced technologies in computing and analyse data, open the way to a series of new opportunities for example as regards of: the opportunity of mapping flows of relevant information and/or extremists’ group behaviours online, including also on Social Networks and, consequentially, to improve our necessary online

⁸⁶ FRISSEN, V., *Big society, big data. The radicalisation of the network society. Paper n° 2011-06*, The Hague, Center for Strategic Studies (HCSS) and TNO, 2011, p. 6.

⁸⁷ BROWN Ian, COWLS Jowls, *Check the web. Assessing the ethics and politics of policing the Internet for extremist material*, sine loco, VOX-Pol Network of Excellence, 2015, pp. 56 - 67.

investigation useful not only from an academic point of view but, very practically, to better define any communication strategy online.

In other words, big data can help on several sides of the designing of an efficient counter strategy online: firstly, to better understand and analyse the process and actors involved in the process of radicalisation and secondly because big data can help in better identifying our target audience - and also our “competitors” online) and finally they would also hugely help us to trying to evaluate and analyse step-by-step the results of our online counter-narrative strategy and relevant nine behaviours.

Last but not least, we should also bear in mind that such kinds of considerations made regarding technology and online evaluation and monitoring should also be applied to the opposing side of the issue: to understand radical networks. In fact, the same tools that we can apply in order to better understand our target audience, can also be applied to better understand in what kinds of online environments radicalised networks operate in, and what are the typical online behaviours of radicalised networks, jihadi recruiters online, and so forth. As already mentioned before, the hyper-connected society in which we are currently living allows us to benefit from a certain number of technological innovations, such as Social Networks, which are registering a constantly growing number of users⁸⁸ and can function as a huge resource for identifying, studying, and definitively fighting violent extremist organisations online. Plus, certain results of this kind of analysis can be used as a plus for our *ex ante* analysis. For example, if we discern from the results of such kinds of online behaviour mapping that the most sensitive topics for Muslims that appear to be more prone to radicalisation have in common a series of keywords, or we identify an age/sex profile of users that consults propaganda websites etc., we could then decide to use the same lexicon, such as a very specific set of key words and content, to attract the same target audience for our counter narrative and keep them away from dangerous and radical online environments.

In just a few words, only a deeper understanding of a given phenomenon will allow us to better define our counter-strategy and win on the same ground of action, which in our case is the limitless scope of the Internet. Finally, those same “tools of understanding” can be applied to our evaluation – continuous – process.

5.f. The EU role, from the funding process to the implementation and evaluation.

As already mentioned in the chapter dedicated to the EU’s role in the fight against (online) radicalisation, the EU is already active in this field and has promoted several projects - also financially - to better understand and tackle the problem.

Despite this, we strongly believe that a more specific action and policy should be addressed on the subject, and all this should also be better promoted in order to allow the EU Member States and all civil societal organisations to be aware of the opportunity they have to operate in this field and benefit from EU aid, that most of the time is unknown by citizens and also organisations. This, and other recommendations, would be listed in the last chapter of this study.

Going back to our ideal European communications campaign, the risk of having a campaign promoted uniquely - or mainly - by the EU Institutions or national European governments - especially in this current climate of conspiracy and Euro-scepticism - would be seen by many as a mere act of propaganda and can result in the opposite effects of the ones it aimed for. This does not mean that the author is against a European campaign, but we would recommend a completely new approach, where Europe can serve as a sort of framework or vehicle thanks to which the implementation of a campaign would be broadly, and efficiently done. By way of explanation, we wish for a bit of a revolution in the EU communicational strategy – specifically in this field – by first aiming to help and empower civil

⁸⁸ CAMACHO, David, *et al*, *RiskTrack: a new approach for risk assessment of radicalisation based on social media data*, Madrid, Universidad Autonoma de Madrid, sine dato, 10 p.

society and citizens, by establishing private communications agencies and so on, to better cooperate or better implement their own projects in order to truly build an efficient European narrative and efficient counter-narratives campaign aiming at fostering a stronger European feeling among citizens, and a feeling of acceptance for those young people who feel abandoned by this society, and not only to promote the European brand (which would also need to be revisited and modernised...).

The author believes that Europe should serve as a real hub of ideas, tools, expertise, and also financial resources to enhance such kinds of projects and give them the European-scale that those projects alone might not ever achieve.

The promotion of grassroots initiatives, partnerships, and the funding of projects in this field would be highly recommended. Thus, this should not remain a mere declaration of intent, but an actual brand-new strategy to truly boost, as a final result, the European narrative of peace and prosperity that we all know but many do not “feel” or trust.

As already mentioned, the financial help that the EU has given to such kinds of projects is already huge (but not well-known in all countries...), but we wonder if implementing a real funding programme dedicated to this would represent a real opportunity not only to boost private projects to tackle the problem of online radicalisation, but also to give a kick to (re-)starting the European project since now more than ever we could use a breath of fresh air. As every European project manager knows, in fact, all EU funded projects (thanks to specific calls for grants) have in their mandatory guidelines a very specific principle to respect: enhance the European spirit and add value. For this reason, and the ones just listed above, we truly believe that a brand new approach to the world of EU communications would allow all of the EU to benefit from such a “revolution” and by consequence, all communications projects aimed at fighting online radicalisation would give their important contributions to society, especially if we think that such opportunities would be also open to civil societal organisations of all sorts, and young people in such field of actions, and therefore the guidelines for funding should be definitively more “communication friendly”.

However, also the idea of a purely EU-based campaign should not be considered as something negligible, but only if characterized by a new way of considering the EU’s way of communicating with and for its citizens. In other words, we truly believe that in order to gain a certain credibility, the EU should engage with people and not appear as some European-propagandistic campaign, and such a project should avoid any of the typically European mistakes that characterize the way Europe used to implement its communicational strategies (even if it has to be mentioned that for some very specific fields, this has seen a certain evolution during the last months).

Fourth part

6. Conclusions and recommendations.

As a brief conclusion and recap of what we examined in this study, in this final chapter the author will list 10 suggestions both from a communications point of view, and on the political side of the subject, always with a European perspective. The following recommendations are also intended to ask questions, rather than provide answers, and stimulate a new debate in the field of European communications and policies applied regarding radicalisation and extremism.

6.a. 10 Recommendations on an EU Communications Campaign & Strategy.

1. Start with an excellent and precise target-audience analysis. You do not need to address your campaign to everyone but must be efficient. The EU should start by avoiding always trying to address their campaign to the “general public”.
2. Avoid general key messages, be specific. Focus on a message, an objective to be achieved, and set up SMART goals to be evaluated step by step, to help implement and ameliorate the campaign - also during the course of implementation.
3. Adopt a continuous evaluation process based on top-level analytical engines. We highly recommend at least an *ex ante* evaluation, an on-going evaluation, and an ex-post evaluation. This would be very helpful to better understand the target audience (their interests, tastes, online behaviours...), the pros and cons of the campaign itself, and its evolution over time, and of course the final outcome of the campaign itself.
5. Such political topics are very sensitive ones, so every message, everything that is said in a given campaign, should be cleansed of any ideological elements and should be built in a way that no one would instrumentalise the message of the campaign (something that very happens often, especially in periods such as this or if a political election is around the corner...). For example, such topics must be treated with intellectual honesty, pragmatism, and clarity, without trying to be “politically correct” at all costs.
6. Use direct experience, engage with real people and their life through using “slang,” and adopting ways of communicating and talking that are understandable by young people, and in which they can identify themselves.
7. Avoid any “boring” or banal rhetoric and political messages that could be perceived as propaganda, or even worse, as a lie. If your campaign also has one or more “ambassadors,” be sure that they will follow these rules and will speak in your name and promote the campaign instead of their own image.
8. Always bear in mind that emotions (and humour) are worth a thousand words. The strategy should play and be based on emotions, focusing on creating an emotional link with the target audience. A certain sense of surprise, for example, for short films and videos, is also always a good card to play.
9. Private partnerships, meaning also implementing a campaign with the cooperation of vloggers, bloggers, and, generally speaking, young influencers that can create a real connection with a given target audience, and create the first step for the identification process we wish our target audience will start with our campaign and narrative. Do not be afraid of mixing “Europe” with the everyday lives of

our target audience – this can be a winning strategy.

10. Go local! Define and implement a strategy on a local level that would definitively help in designing a specific and far more efficient campaign. The outcome of such a locally addressed campaign be not only be easier to implement, but also to evaluate for further projects of this kind.

6.b. 10 Recommendations at the political / institutional level.

1. Foster better cooperation at the European level but also the establishment of partnerships between member states and/or between member states, private companies, and civil societal organisations. The scope of a closer and transparent cooperation is a better dialogue and better outcome of the proposed project in the field.

2. We recommend a rise in the quality of the attention given to the subject. Unfortunately, communication is something that is always felt as important but not essential, there is nothing more wrong than a weak external-internal exchange of information and communication that opens the way to speculation and instrumentalisation on all subjects (i.e. populism, radicalisation of all sorts, etc.).

3. Much more freedom of action should be given to communication specialists in the EU institutional environment. Better cooperation with the private world should be foreseen.

4. We would also recommend the creation of a new inter-institutional task force to closely work on the subject of online radicalisation and ways of tackling these phenomena.

5. We encourage an effort in the sense of creating (through a working group, task force, or otherwise) a reliable set of online indicators, datasets, and an open source database regarding online radicalisation. These tools should then be free of use - after a security check - for Member States, their institutions and bodies, companies and civil societal organisation involved in the fight against online radicalisation. The importance of the opportunities given by modern technologies should never be underestimated and also the funding of projects in this field, with specific calls for grants, would be a good way to reach the final targeted results.

6. On a more political level, better regulation should be implemented in the field of online monitoring, control, and the removal of online content, also in consultation and partnership with the most relevant ITC companies. Banning online content itself is not a unique solution, but dangerous content must be eliminated, as well as the profiles of jihadist combatants and recruiters.

7. The implementation of closer cooperation between national intelligence services is essential. National egos must fall apart when acting against terror and extreme violent propaganda and recruitment online (and offline).

8. Financially, Europe should define better ways of financing such kinds of communicational projects aimed at preventing and countering online radicalisation.

9. Such funding opportunities (European grants) should be better communicated themselves to the general public and specialists, across Member States, as very often companies, civil societal organisations, and individuals do not even know about such opportunities or how they can benefit from them. The same recommendation applies for all existing projects and opportunities such as the support

activities provided by the RAN project.

10. A conclusive and more general, but essential recommendation for EU policies and institutions, would be to better promote the European brand, and do it in a brand new and young way. Only by truly engaging with people and allowing them to understand what Europe really is, would help foster a gradual process of acceptance, peace, and the understanding of differences that can help achieve a better society, where radicalisation and hate can finally be beaten.

As conclusive remarks, the author wants to stress her acknowledgement on the controversy of such issue and the interconnection between online radicalisation and many other political and societal factors that can occur in a given space, at a given time. However, despite the complexity of such phenomenon, the wish is to see Europe, private actors and policy makers more aware of the issue, on all its aspects.

In fact, despite many lecturers and expert in the field are currently fully committed to an in-depth analysis and understanding of the phenomena, more needs to be done by Western democracies. The rise of hate, racism, nationalism and other extremist belief that are sadly characterising our current times - despite history should have taught that these are real catastrophes for any given society... - urges for more actions in such sense.

Decision makers should put aside their electoral purposes and ideological instrumentalisation of current phenomena, and really commit to achieve the ultimate goal of fighting hate, radicalisation and finally, terrorism. Nationalisms and particular interests should be forgotten in honour of a common fight against terrorism, and this should be achieved not only on a legal and/or military side, but also through peaceful means - for example, communication - that should not be underestimated as powerful tools against hate and violence, especially on a long term perspective.

Research, analysis, deep understanding of what we are facing in our times, pragmatic and positive solutions should stand at the core of our decision makers' agenda.

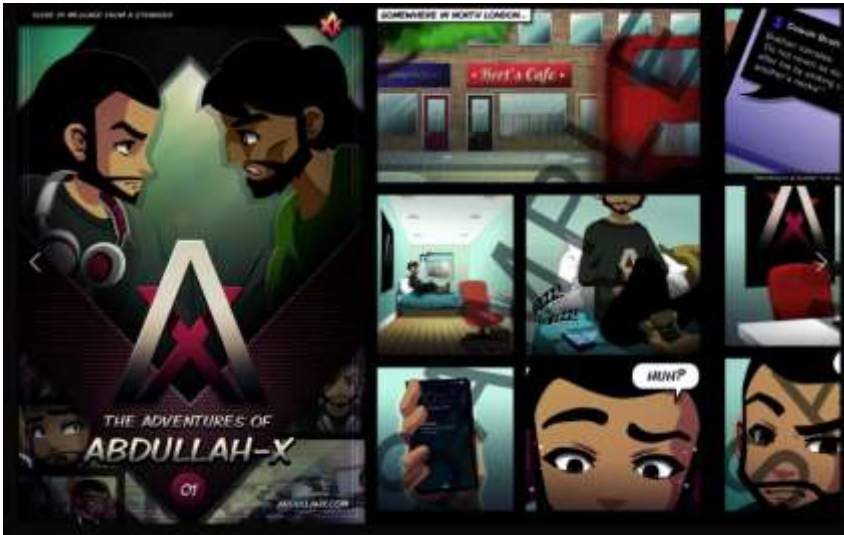
Annexes & Bibliography.

III. Annexes
 III.I. Case Studies
 III.I.i. Abdullah X

<i>Name of the initiative</i>	Abdullah X
<i>Provider</i>	Individual – a former extremist
<i>Year of implementation</i>	Started in February 2014
<i>Campaign' contents</i>	The campaign identifies with Abdullah-X, who is a young Muslim living in the UK. Abdullah-X is a disenchanted young man who almost felt in the trap of radicalisation, but understands that this is not the right life-path for a happy life.
<i>Campaign' message</i>	<p>Abdullah-X mission as stated in the dedicated website: “To safeguard the lives of young people from harm and those who seek to harm them. ”</p> <p>Stop young British people from so-called IS recruitment and leaving from Syria.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Violence is not the right answer for a better land happier life. - With a series of videos and cartoon the campaign aims at dissuading young Muslims from engage with foreign jihadi and - Dispels false-myths and prejudices about Islam. - Promote information (fight against misinformation) about the real situation in Syria.
<i>Target audience</i>	Young Muslims at danger of radicalisation and non-Muslims who have prejudices or also are in danger of radicalisation
<i>Tool of implementation</i>	<p>The campaign is composed of/present on:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cartoons (available on website) - YouTube (https://www.youtube.com/user/abdullahx) - Facebook (not available as of July 16, 2017) - Twitter (https://twitter.com/theabdullahx)
<i>Additional info</i>	<p>The author always remained anonymous.</p> <p>The campaign received relevant press coverage, including CNN, Sky News, The Independent in the UK and America, and other newspapers around the world.</p>
<i>Key findings</i>	The success of the initiatives resides also in its direct engagement with young people. The character of the campaign “talks young” and is able to really engage with young people from their own perspective, he talks with them instead of imposing them any believe of ways of thinking,

without being seen as an enemy.
The campaign is multi-platform and so able to engage with its target audience from several angle and perspective, being efficient avoiding paid advertising.

Example of a cartoon available on the Abdulla X website:



Abdullah X YouTube channel:



A Tweet from the Abdulla X Twitter Account (tweets stopped on 2016)/



III. Annexes

III.I. Case Studies

III.I.ii. Not Another Brother

<i>Name of the initiative</i>	Not Another Brother
<i>Provider</i>	<p>Quilliam Foundation.</p> <p>The Quilliam Foundation is a London-based think tank that aims at tackling extremisms of all kind promote pluralisms, and inspire changes. With teams focusing on the UK, North America and the World, the foundation is the world's first counter-extremism organisation. The think tank not only aims at to generate discussions to counter terrorism, but also provides evidence-based policy recommendations to governments, and is involved in actions that include building civil society networks and programmes to boost its projects and final aim of a more inclusive and plural future of our societies.</p> <p><i>Partner:</i> Verbalisation, a London based strategic communication Consultancy.</p>
<i>Year of implementation</i>	2015
<i>Campaign' contents</i>	<p>Storytelling, emotional video (1.41') accompanied by a short text that states: "Daesh are radicalising our brothers to fight in Syria. They are tearing families apart. Enough is enough. Sharing this film will show Daesh that their extremist views have no place in our community. No family should lose another loved one to such hatred. Not another child. Not another sister. #notanotherbrother"</p> <p>There also exists a longest version of this video, that goes more in detail in the story of this young British man and its deadly pathway to the so-called IS (3.49').</p> <p>Both videos end with a message: "Don't let your words turn our brithers into weapons" and the official hashtag of the campaign.</p>
<i>Campaign' message</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The video primarily aims to show the human costs of radicalisation and so-called IS call to arms - It underlines that there is no place for radicalisation and recruitment in our societies, and underlines the danger of propaganda - The story on the video emotionally put in evidence all lies of the so-called IS telling the story of a "brother" when it is too late (cruelty of terrorism)
<i>Target audience</i>	Young Muslims living in Western countries (focus: the UK) and at risk of radicalisation.
<i>Tool of implementation</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Dedicated websites and "Not Another Brother" video - Online video campaign and dedicated hashtag (#NotAnotherBrother)

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Primarily disseminated on Twitter (official account: https://twitter.com/notanotherbro) - Social Media & YouTube (short video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ljIQ0ctzyZE extended version: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ccv1o5uv4s0)
<i>Additional info</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the campaign was entirely produced by crowd funding (150 donors from 10 countries) - the video was also presented during offline initiatives, like the Quilliam Summer Ball in August 29, 2015 in London - the campaign received relevant press coverage, including The Guardian and The Huffington post
<i>Key findings</i>	The simple call to action of the video was to share the video, and it proven to be highly efficient (as of July 16, 2017 the shortest version of the video has 66.169 views on YouTube, while the short movie has 13.308 views)



Examples of images used during the campaign on Social Media to spread the video and its message.



III. Annexes
 III.I. Case Studies
 III.I.iii. Hero Factor

<i>Name of the initiative</i>	Hero Factor
<i>Provider</i>	Sulemain Bakhit (with the help of the Jordan government)
<i>Year of implementation</i>	The project started in 2011.
<i>Campaign ' contents</i>	Hero Factor is a graphic novel where positive heroes are protagonists of multiple stories in which they promote positive messages and fight against the misinterpreted world of extremists. It promotes positive heroes and positive messages, a whole counter narrative for young Muslims that need to be inspired by positive role models.
<i>Campaign ' message</i>	<p>Those heroes fight for the promotions of positive messages such as societal acceptance, tolerance, freedom, gender equality and openness, and fight against the inaccurate narratives of extremists group, by demonstrate the beneficial effects of an open and tolerant society.</p> <p>These graphic novels promotes a brand new super hero for young Muslims and focuses on the importance of the “hero” figures against the one proposed by extremists groups and a certain violent Islamist ideology.</p>
<i>Target audience</i>	Young Muslims, mainly in the Jordan area.
<i>Tool of implementation</i>	- Comics, graphic novel.
<i>Additional info</i>	<p>The graphic novel is produced with the financial help of the Jordan government.</p> <p>Latest figures released by the government shows that the novel sold over 1.200.000 copies in 2011 only.</p> <p>Copies of comics were also distributed to pupils in Jordan public schools.</p>
<i>Key findings</i>	<p>The enormous success of the campaign is due to several strategic choice and first of all because it fill in the need of an Arab/Muslim (positive) superhero for young Muslims (that actually do not have one).</p> <p>The novel also proposes female heroes and modern themes as gender equality, amongst others.</p> <p>Thus, the proposed heroes in these comics, are able to merge Islamic traditions and mythology, with brand new heroes and Western society characteristics. An example is the hero called “Naar” (in English: fire) that</p>

has the power of seven flames, which corresponds to an ancient beliefs following which fire has seven different types and colours.

Sulemain Bakhit is now expanding his actions also in online gaming, always to educate and keep away from any sort of radicalisms the Jordan – and overall Muslim – youth.

Sulemain Bakhit at the Oslo Freedom Forum (October, 2014):



Examples of Hero Factor characters:



III. Annexes
III.II. Interview

Face-to-face interview of July 5, 2017

Person interviewed: Mr Alessandro Di Maio

Short biography: Mr Di Maio is a Middle-East expert, journalist and Communication specialist. Currently he serves as Chief Communication Officer at COMECE (the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community), in Brussels.

Mr Di Maio has also lived, studied and worked as a journalist in Israel for almost ten years, before leaving for the capital of Europe.

After his studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem in “Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies”, he recently graduated again for its 3rd Master’s degree in the “advanced Master of Arts in Political Science, and Security Studies” at the Université Libre de Bruxelles, with a thesis about urban spaces and Islamic radicalisation in Europe.

The full curriculum vitae of Mr Di Maio is available at: <https://www.linkedin.com/in/alexdimaiio/>

Topics discussed during the interview (this list includes also topics that have not been included in the *corpus* of this study):

- Historical roots of Islam and radicalisation
- Big jihadi vs little jihadi
- Islam vs Islamism(s)
- Islam: religion and politics, peculiarities and differences with other religion in Western Societies and the Middle East
- Islam: traditions, modern age and current/future scenarios
- Point of view on nowadays evolution of Islam: Olivier Roy⁸⁹ vs Gilles Kepel⁹⁰. Briefly,

⁸⁹ Olivier Roy (1949) is an international expert in several fields, including Political Islam, Middle East, Islam in the West and comparative religion. Author of several books, he received in 1972 an “Agrégation de Philosophie” and has a Ph.D. in Political Sciences. During the early 90s he served different international organisations, headed the OSCE’s Mission for Tajikistan and was a Consultant for the UN Office of the Coordinator for Afghanistan. He has been heading the ERC funded project “ReligioWest” since 2011. Currently joint-chair at the Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies and Political and Social Sciences department of the European University Institute, he is active in such fields of research, he also wrote for several newspapers and magazines. For an in-depth analysis of his theories about Islam and current jihadi the author recommends a few articles easily accessible online, that have been used for the purpose of this study and are listed in bibliography, p. IX.

⁹⁰ Gilles Kepel (1955), is a political scientist specialised in the contemporary Middle East issues and Muslims in the West. Professor at the Faculty of « sciences Po » in Paris, he also serves as Chair of the Paris Sciences et Lettres Research University at the École Normale Supérieure of Paris. Author of several articles and books, he is an expert on issues such as Islamist movements and militant Islam, amongst others. Regular contributor of *Le Monde*, *The New York Times*, *La Repubblica*, *El País* and many other magazines in the Arab world, last year (2016) he was also appointed Chairman of the Program of Excellence on the Mediterranean and the Middle East at Paris Sciences et Lettres (PSL) University, based at École Normale Supérieure. Further readings for an in-depth knowledge on Kepel’s theories have been consulted for the purpose of this study and are available in the bibliography of this study, p. IX.

according to what explained by Mr Di Maio during our interview, the first theorises that young Muslim (and non-Muslims) mostly tend to radicalise because of some precondition such as unemployment, social exclusion, racism and so on, that lead the individual to see in the extreme jihadi message a way to escape from the misery of their life and be a hero. the latter is convinced that radicalisation is not an individual process, but a phenomenon that involves the real nature of Islam. In other words, he theorises that it is Islam itself that is in the middle of a real radicalisation process as a whole, due to the nature of this kind of religion itself.

- Urbanisation and radicalisation of young Muslims.
- Internet and new ways of radicalisation, the evolution of extremist's propaganda from rudimental Al-Quaeda videos, to the brand new online multi-channel strategy of the so-called Islamic State.
- Case studies he has analysed in one of his recent study:
 - the case of a Belgian young-girl that was recruited online after the death of her young boyfriend (in Syria) and how her family rescue her before he left for Syria.
 - the case of a young man in Mechelen (BE), who is dedicating his life to mapping online behaviours and pattern of recruitment online (finding of his research and differences with official data available in this field).
- How Israel is mapping extremists, recruiters and fake-news websites online (private-public partnership) and how is fighting Islamic terrorism on a daily basis.
- Islamic extremism and the new media.
- Other related topics.

The original recording of our face-to-face interview is available upon request (mp3 file format, 1h30'30'' - IT).

Counter-narrative' strategies VS online radicalisation.

The rise of so-called IS' online strategies and how to tackle their appeal for disenchanted young Europeans. Is communication enough?

IV. Bibliography

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Interview

Face to face interview with Mr Alessandro Di Maio of July 5, 2017. Abstract of the interview available at pp. VII - VIII, Annex II of this study. Recording of the interview is available upon request.

