

Making 'Noise' Online: An Analysis of the Say No to Terror Online Campaign

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Abstract

A consideration of terrorism as communication necessarily draws attention to the development of counter narratives as a strategy for interrupting the process by which individuals become radicalised towards violent extremism. As the Internet has become a critical medium for psychological warfare by terrorists, some attempts have been made to challenge terroristic narratives through online social marketing and public information campaigns that offer alternative narratives to the terrorists' online audiences. 'Say No to Terror' is one such campaign. This article reports on a study that examined the master narratives in the 'Say No to Terror' online campaign and applied concepts of 'noise' and persuasion in order to assess whether the key elements of the 'Say No to Terror' campaign align with the application of "noise" as a counter strategy against terrorists' appeal on the Internet. The study found that while the master narratives of 'Say No to Terror' align with suggestions based on empirical research for the development of effective counter campaigns, the campaign does not meet the essential criteria for effective noise.

Keywords: *Narrative, counter-narrative, countering extremism, strategic communication*

Introduction

Terrorism has often been described as a form of communication by weak actors using violence as an instrument of last resort for communicating their cause. While psychologists argue violence communicates internal conflict in the perpetrator [1] some scholars of terrorism studies argue that terrorism cannot be viewed as a matter of individual psychology. Rather, the use of violence by terrorist actors is a strategic choice to communicate, through violence, that problems exist.[2] Terrorists use violence as a communication strategy to provoke effects that are not necessarily directly connected to the victim population. The effectiveness of violence lies not in the violence itself (the capacity for destruction) but in propaganda generated through the act and through the various communication protocols adopted by terrorist groups to influence and coerce target audiences. Among those communication protocols, terroristic narratives that use the Internet to reach large and disparate audiences have attracted considerable attention. The role of Internet disseminated propaganda in the process of radicalisation has been questioned in prominent cases where it has been established that terrorist or extremist actors have been, at least in part, influenced by their online activities. Despite recognition that the Internet plays a role in the radicalisation process, there is still little evidence available to assess the assumption of causality between exposure to terroristic narratives on the Internet and radicalisation to violent extremism. A study by the RAND Corporation tested five assumptions in the literature with regard to Internet radicalisation and found that empirical evidence existed to support the assumption that the Internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised and serves as a space for individuals to find support for their ideas among like-minded individuals. The study also found that assumptions that the Internet accelerates the process of radicalisation and promotes self-radicalisation without physical contact were not supported.[3]

The body of work that examines terrorist activity online approaches the problem by examining both terroristic content (including the ways in which terrorist content appears online) and the ways in which the terroristic narrative appeals to certain groups of users. Though the first has been given far more consideration

in the literature, there is an emerging interest in understanding why and how terrorist narratives are so seductive to particular targets. Aly argues for an approach to understanding the appeal of Jihadi-Salafist terroristic narratives that recognises the role of the audience as active players in the process of message transfer, influence and indoctrination. She offers a model for understanding the appeal of the online narrative that takes into account how needs that are shaped by social roles are gratified by the attributes, content and the context of different media platforms.[4]

Weimann and von Knop posit that the social situation of diaspora communities that may be socially alienated, disenfranchised and in search of social bonding, creates a condition of emotional need that is served by the terroristic narrative. They identify several stages of engagement with terroristic narratives online: the searching phase; the seduction phase; the captivation phase; the persuasion phase and the operation phase. Understanding the process of engagement and radicalization allows for an identification of phases where the user is still vulnerable to ideas or messages that challenge those embedded in the terroristic narrative. Such counter messages can act as “noise” that interferes with or disrupts the process of radicalization.[5]

How Noise Works

In communication theory, noise is that which distorts the signal on its way from transmitter to recipient. Noise interferes with the communication process as it keeps the message from being understood and prevents it from achieving its desired effect. The concept of noise was first introduced in communication theory in the 1940's by Shannon and Weaver.[6] They were mostly concerned with mechanical noise, such as the distortion of a voice on the telephone or interference with a television signal producing “snow” on the TV screen. In the succeeding decades, other kinds of noise have been recognized as potentially important problems for communication:[7]

- Physical Noise is any external or environmental stimulus that distracts us from receiving the intended message sent by a communicator.
- Semantic noise occurs because of the ambiguities inherent in all languages and other sign systems.
- Cultural noise occurs when the culture or subculture of the audience is so different from that of the sender that the message is understood in a way that the sender might not have anticipated.
- Psychological noise results from preconceived notions we bring to the communication process, such as racial stereotypes, reputations, biases, and assumptions.

While the concept of noise was first perceived as relevant only to interference with the transmission of a message, it later became recognized as a crucial element in the communication process, potentially affecting each stage of the process. The concept of noise in communication theory and research has often been treated as a negative element, damaging the communication process. In fact, most empirical uses of the concept were directed at reducing or minimizing noises to improve the flow of communication. However, today noise is breaking away from the status of undesirable phenomenon bestowed upon it by traditional communications theory. No longer merely an undesirable element to be eradicated so as to retain the purity of the original signal, noise can be regarded as a more complex and even desired element. When it comes to the terrorist (or any other illegal, harming, and dangerous communication), one may question the instrumentality of creating noise that may reduce the communicator's efficiency and success. Creating and using semantic, psychological, cultural, and physical noises may describe a rich variety of counter measures and organize

them in a strategic framework. Thus, noise could become a key conceptual and theoretical foundation in the strategy of countering terrorism online.

Noise in Counterterrorism Communication

In their article “Applying the Notion of Noise to Countering Online-Terrorism”, Weimann and von Knop suggested applying various “noises” in counterterrorism campaigns.[8] Later, Weimann developed a strategic communication plan for the disruption of terrorist communication, based on the use of Mechanical/Technological Noises and Psychological/Social Noises.[9]

Applying Mechanical/Technological Noises refers to the technological disruption of the flow of communication. The mechanical/technological tactics include a rich variety of interventions from the damaging of websites and the defacing and redirecting of users to the spreading of viruses and worms, blocking access, hacking, and total destruction. These deviant measures can be adopted and used against online terror and to minimize their reach and impact. In the most severe cases, hacking the websites may be the most extreme measure, though not always the most efficient one in the long run. Such disruptive counter-attacks on terrorist online platforms are not new: Secretary of State Hillary Clinton revealed that the U.S. government has been hacking al-Qaeda websites in an effort to sabotage the terrorist group’s activities. [10] Such attacks have had very limited effects since the terrorists easily manage to re-establish their online platforms and re-emerge in cyberspace. A more sophisticated “mechanical noise” is the optional use of Trojan Horses, viruses, and worms against terrorists. The common distinction among the three is that a Trojan horse is a program that does something malicious when run by an unsuspecting user; a worm is something that replicates; and a virus is a worm that replicates by attaching itself to other programs.

Applying Psychological/Social Noises involves various psychological and social operations and counter propaganda. Different terms relate to Psychological/Social Noise: Information Warfare, Information Operation (IO), and the current doctrine of Military Information Support Operations (MISO). In 2010 the US Army dropped the Vietnam-era name “psychological operations” for its branch in charge of trying to change minds behind enemy lines, acknowledging the term can sound ominous. The Defense Department picked a more neutral name “Military Information Support Operations,” or MISO. MISO are planned operations to convey selected information and indicators to audiences to influence their emotions, motives, objective reasoning, and ultimately the behavior of governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.

As a communication medium and vehicle of influence, the Internet is a powerful tool for psychological campaigns. In many ways, terrorists launch their online campaigns in the same way legitimate political campaigns use the Internet. Both attempt to attract users, to seduce them by engaging them in a sensory experience, trying to manipulate their needs, suggesting the fulfilment of a goal, and inspiring and guiding the users to make a choice by providing a higher-level motivation. Campaigning via the interactive Internet often provides social bonding and replicates feelings of personal contact. These elements, frequent also in terrorist websites, can be used in counter campaigns too. However, before such campaigns are launched, the agencies involved should know the psychographic profiles of those susceptible to recruitment, and secondly, the messages that most likely affect them. They also need to understand how these individuals are influenced: what channels are meaningful to them, whom they listen to, the effect of peer networks, and how to reach them most effectively.

Counter Narratives, Noise and Persuasion

The reasons why an individual becomes radicalized are not yet fully understood. The fact that an individual embraces the terrorists' narrative does not necessarily mean he/she will join Jihad against the West and/or actually engage in any terrorist activity. Yet progress in counterterrorism appears to be related to both establishing a credible narrative and damaging the terrorist narrative. The role of narratives is relatively new to the examination and analysis of terrorism. Studies that have been undertaken have contributed to understanding how terroristic narratives are used strategically by violent extremists to establish and influence target audiences. Based on this knowledge, other studies apply understandings of the terroristic narrative to the construction of counter narratives that challenge the messages embedded in terroristic texts. Casebeer and Russell, for example, suggest that the most effective way to counter terrorism is by developing a 'better story' to replace "their" narrative. For this purpose, in Britain, a special communication unit, the Research, Information and Communication Unit (RICU) was set up in Whitehall in 2007. Its task was specifically to "use messaging to disrupt the al-Qaeda narrative".[11] In the US, a Presidential Task Force report also argues for "rewriting the narrative".[12]

The construction of a counter narrative to violent jihad should be seen as part of a long-term strategy to combat radicalization and recruitment into violent extremist groups. The counter narrative differs from a counter information campaign in that, more than simply maligning the enemy or challenging its message, it offers an alternative vision to which one opts in; a storyline that gives meaning to the actions it is requesting of the subscriber. This narrative, then, must discredit that of the jihadists—most importantly de-legitimizing the violence they promote—while at the same time making a compelling case for forms of non-violent activism and civic participation. In the United States much of the Internet-based campaigning that has appeared in opposition to the jihadi narrative has been negative, formulated by groups and organisations with an anti-Islamic agenda. The same can be said of the Australian context where anti-Islamic groups such as the Australian Defence League have established a web presence that is as problematic as those of the jihadists.

In her Op-Ed article on "Future Terrorists," Jane Harman argued that "we need to employ the best tools we know of to counter radicalizing messages and to build bridges to the vulnerable. (...) Narratives can inspire people to do terrible things, or to push back against those extremist voices." [13] To run such a strategy, a political Internet campaign against terrorism must use tactics which have proven to be successful and which can be applied to the counterterrorism arena. Finding such effective tactics was at the heart of discussions at the Riyadh Conference on the "Use of the Internet to Counter the Appeal of Extremist Violence." Co-hosted by the United Nations Counterterrorism Implementation Task Force (CTITF) and the Naif Arab University for Security Sciences in Riyadh in partnership with the Center on Global Counterterrorism Cooperation (January 2011),[14] the conference brought together around 150 policy-makers, experts, and practitioners from the public sector, international organizations, industries, academia, and the media. The conference focused on identifying good practices in using the Internet to undermine the appeal of terrorism, expose its lack of legitimacy and its negative impact, and undermine the credibility of its messengers. Key themes included the importance of identifying the target audience, crafting effective messages, identifying credible messengers, and using appropriate media to reach vulnerable communities.

There is an important source for counter-terrorist narratives: learning from those who have decided to leave terrorist organizations. As suggested by Jacobson, in order to determine what kind of counter-narrative might be effective among those seemingly hardened individuals already in terrorist organizations or those well along the path to radicalization, it is useful to study people who have voluntarily walked away from these paths.[15] Determining the reasons for such a change in perspective could help crafting messages designed to

pull people away from terrorist organizations.

Say No to Terror

Say No to Terror is a comprehensive communication campaign comprising a website, media and social media presence. The campaign uses a variety of mechanisms including short videos and posters for communicating a counter narrative to selected elements of the terroristic narrative. The website is entirely in Arabic and hosts information content (Mission Statement/ About Us) as well as videos, forums, posters and links to social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter). Users who register on the website can post comments about the videos as well as other material.

Say No to Terror is specifically aimed at a Muslim Arabic audience; this is underscored by the campaign's slogan "Terrorism. I am Muslim: I am against it" and its language of delivery. According to the website, "Terrorism is a criminal act targeting innocent people, and it deserves to be fought by all means and to have its claims and its devastating effects on our society disclosed."

The "About Us" section of the full website describes the website creators as believers in the justice of true Islam and defenders of the greatness of Islam. Their mission is to:

"expose the claims of terrorist agitators and unveil their crimes, to encourage all those who have a conscience to reject their criminal acts and destructive ideas and to fight them in order to protect our society from their wrongs and their destructive impact on all levels."

Attempts to identify the source of the website have not yielded any significant insights- a domain search reveals that the domain is shielded behind a Washington based anonymity protection service. The website is hosted in Montenegro in what may be an attempt by the creators to circumvent attitudes of mistrust of American-sponsored communication in the Arab world. However, a close analysis of the website content suggests that affiliations lie with or are at least sympathetic to Saudi Arabia. The campaign videos are also posted on YouTube and repeatedly aired as public service announcements on the Pan-Arab Middle East Broadcasting Center (MBC) and Al-Arabiya channels, both Saudi-owned. Posts that refer to specific religious tenets or situations (such as the Syrian conflict) are consistent with Saudi Arabia's stated position on such matters. These posts give precedence to the Saudi Arabian monarchy, "The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques", as the legitimate authority in Islam and emphasise the monarchy's efforts to counter terrorism. In order to provide context and information about the website, a comprehensive translation and analysis of the website content was undertaken.

The methodology involved an initial translation of the website content and videos from Arabic to English. The translation was undertaken by one of the authors (Aly) and a bilingual research assistant. Aly's translations of the videos applied to both the visual elements (characters, setting, use of symbols) and the textual elements (spoken and written). This was followed by a qualitative content analysis of the written and visual texts to explore the content, structure and function of the messages embedded in the texts. The analysis was constructed around a grounded theory model, based on the one first developed by Glasser and Strauss.[16] This model involved an initial reading of the data to code for as many categories as possible. These categories originated in concepts borrowed from content analysis of terroristic narratives available in the literature (for example: *jihad*, *martyrs*, *caliphate*) as well as the researcher's own knowledge of the cultural and linguistic setting and the significance of particular concepts within this setting (for example: *zakat*, *takfir*, *sectarianism*). The initial open coding of the data [17] highlighted themes in the videos and posts for further analysis. The salient themes from the analysis of the videos and posters were then collated and integrated.

The final stage of the coding process produced four thematic categories or master narratives used in *Say No to Terror* to construct narratives about terrorism, its place in Arab society and its consequences. The master narratives, their attributes and the themes that comprise them are summarised in the following table:

Master narrative	Descriptive content	Themes
Terrorism is a dangerous threat	Terrorism destroys individuals and families. Those who join terrorist groups are misled and the terrorist lifestyle is damaging.	Jihad, Extremism, Sectarianism, Consequences of Terrorism.
Terrorists are the enemy	Terrorists are the real oppressors and attempt to brainwash children and youth. Muslims are suffering at the hands of terrorist criminals who kill other Muslims.	Takfir, Extremism, Manipulation and lies, “Enemies of Islam”.
Undermining terrorist leaders	Terrorists are liars and manipulators who use Islam to serve a personal agenda.	Takfir, Extremism, Jihad, Manipulation and lies, Enemies of Islam.
Muslim obligation	All Muslims have a duty to be vigilant against terrorist manipulators and to protect themselves and their families from the scourge of terrorism. Muslims have a duty to ensure that they are not inadvertently supporting terrorism. Those who support terrorism are also terrorists.	Extremism, jihad, Consequences of terrorism, Vigilance against terrorism, Manipulation and lies.

While there would also be value in a quantitative analysis of aspects that may serve as indicators of the campaigns reach and/ or effectiveness, a quantitative analysis was considered beyond the scope of this particular study. Rather, the task undertaken in this case was to identify the master narratives of the texts and the persuasive elements embedded in these narratives: the purpose being to evaluate whether and how the master narrative of *Say no to Terror* forms a counter-narrative to the al-Qaeda master narrative. Finally, the master narrative and related messages of *Say No to Terror* were analysed through the framework of noise proposed by Weimann and Von Knopp . It describes five elements of a successful noise strategy: credibility; terminology; traditions; partners; and act local, think global. As the website is constantly updated, the analysis included all 15 videos available for viewing on the website at the time of writing and a selection of website content during the period February thru August 2013.

Videos

The analysis of the 15 videos on the *Say No to Terror* website highlighted the following themes that appeal to either logic and reason (systematic persuasion) or habit and emotion (heuristic persuasion):

1. Consequences of joining terrorism;
2. Manipulation and lies;
3. The “enemies of Islam”;

4. Vigilance against terrorism.

Importantly, these themes are constructed around familiar concepts in traditional Arab/ Muslim culture. The videos use Quranic verses and popular *hadiths* to accompany images and rely on Arab/ Muslim traditions that value family and the collective good over individualism. In this respect, the videos present a narrative that mirrors elements of the terroristic narrative that construct the call to armed jihad as an altruistic obligation for all Muslims for the sake of the greater good.[18]

A salient theme in the website videos is that of exposing the agenda and manipulative techniques used by terrorist organisations. Several videos depict terrorist organisations as criminal and warn viewers against being manipulated by the terrorist narrative, while others use the testimony of former terrorists to expose “the enemies of Islam”. “The Misguided Terrorist” is presented as based on real events as a young man narrates an account of his arrest for terrorist activities. “The Enemy Within” picks up similar themes exposing terrorists for killing Muslims, while other videos such as “The Scream”, “I am Innocent of Your Crimes” and “No Life Flourishes where there is Terrorism” all draw on images of innocence juxtaposed against images of terrorism. These three videos use visuals of children and/or childhood symbols to draw attention to the injurious effects of terrorism. “The Road of no Return” is more explicitly focussed on sectarian violence, suggesting that the video is targeted at an Iraqi audience. The video exposes sectarianism as a vulnerability that extremists exploit: “Sectarianism makes you enter the prison of extremism, and so you become a prey for agitators seeking to achieve their political goals. It is not through sectarian extremism that you defend your religion, but you defend your religion through protecting it from sectarian extremism.”

Drawing on Arab/ Muslim social constructs of collective good, several videos urge viewers to be vigilant about terrorism and its influence. These include the video titled “An eye that watches is better than an eye that cries”, which warns viewers that “The Internet is a way to communicate and a gateway to knowledge. But the terrorists also see it as a window /path to our children, to brainwash their young minds and to convince them of their criminal principles. Our duty is to protect our children from danger and deception, not only in the schools and on the roads, but also within the sanctity of our homes. Terrorists are determined to mislead our children.”

“The Clowns” also calls for vigilance but targets public support for terrorism by encouraging viewers to speak out against terrorism. Two videos titled “*Zakat*” and “Good Charity/ Bad Charity” attempt to raise public awareness of terrorist financing operations posing as valid charities. Both videos call on viewers to take personal responsibility for ensuring that charitable donations and *zakat* (Muslim obligatory charity) do not end up funding terrorist activities.

Posts

While the website videos tend to avoid reinterpretation of religious concepts that challenge the Jihadi- Salafi ideology, the posts and other website content take a more direct approach either through the images posted or by means of links to articles and opinion pieces that challenge the Jihadi- Salafi construction of key Islamic concepts. An analysis of the website posts during the period of examination reveals four themes:

1. Extremism (mainly in a context marked by sectarianism)
2. *Takfir* (accusing other Muslims of apostasy)
3. *Jihad*

4. Terrorism

For each of these themes, the website posts present an alternative construction and a world view that counters that found in terroristic master narratives.

Sectarianism: The danger of sectarianism is regularly highlighted in the website with sectarian divisions a common theme. Sectarian strife such as in Iraq presents the ideal context for extremism to flourish and provides fertile ground for terrorist organisations such as al-Qaeda to establish in a region /country.

Extremism: Extremism is described as the first step towards terrorism. Website posts aim to discredit extremists and their motives stating that extremists (specifically the Taliban and al-Qaeda) use jihad to justify killing innocent Muslims and non-Muslims. Specific posts denounce the hypocrisy of extremist Islamic scholars expressing cynicism of Sheikhs who issue *fatwas* about the obligation of jihad in Iraq and elsewhere and stating that their motives are financial gain among other things. A good example is the cartoon posted by the website administrators depicting a cleric telling his son “I will send you to the US to study and get a high-ranking job “ and then telling another young man “I will send you for Jihad in Syria so that God willing you get into heaven” (posted 23 July 2013).

Other posts denounce the misleading discourse of incitement to violent jihad by preachers of extremism and the influence mechanisms they use. Islamic extremists are the enemies of Islam (they hold the image of Islam as hostage) and they feed Islamophobia. The reference to Islamophobia is particularly interesting and suggests an attempt to re-construct an understanding of Islamophobia that turns a lens onto extremism.

An image posted on the website on 5 July 2013 shows terrorists holding Islam (represented by the image of a man dressed in traditional Arabic clothing) hostage. The cartoon bears the title *Islamic extremists are the real enemies of Islam* and is accompanied by the text “No one feeds Islamophobia with as much destruction and strength as do these Islamic extremists. They are the real Islamophobes.” The post links to an article published in the Opinion pages of *Al Hayat* news website that describes Islamophobia not as an attack on the teachings of Islam, but an attack on Muslims living in the West designed to limit their ability to actively engage with and contribute to the societies in which they live. As such, Islamophobia is most potently perpetrated by Islamist extremists who provide Western Islamophobes with justifications for their hostility towards Muslims. [19]

Takfir (accusing other Muslims of apostasy) is challenged through website posts, not through religious reconstruction or debate on the concept but by criticising its use to serve certain political agendas—namely those of Salafi groups. In the context of the Arab Spring, website posts makes some comment criticising authors supportive of political Islam movements who resort to *takfir* and who propagate al-Qaeda’s ideology.

Terrorism and Jihad: A consistent message in the website posts is the denunciation of terrorism as a manipulation of religious doctrine. Terrorists are constructed (both visually and discursively) as menacing figures who kill innocents, kidnap civilians and send the *Ummah’s* youth to perdition. The poster titled *Youth in the hands of preachers of extremism* is accompanied by the text: “Who are these people who are misleading youth? They are a category of people who mix, in their methods and rhetoric, between old means of agitation and new ones. Sometimes they try to hide behind religious or ideological slogans and sometimes behind popular claims or appeals or slogans, in order to justify terrorism and call for more of it and incite young people to practise it. It has become clear that the misleading discourse of incitement uses a set of means and mechanisms” (Posted 29 April 2013).

Master Narratives of ‘Say No to Terror’ and the al-Qaeda Master Narrative

Halverson et al introduced the concept of ‘master narratives’ that are employed by violent Islamist extremists in their ideological discourse. Unlike narratives, master narratives transcend localised differences, are deeply embedded in culture and, importantly, are constantly re-interpreted according to the historical context. According to Halverson et al, the violent extremist Islamist narrative commonly draws on sacred texts and Islamic history. One example is the Pharaoh master narrative which violent jihadists use to propagate their own struggles against regimes and to reinforce divine sovereignty. Similarly, the Battle of Badr, the first major battle between the Muslims and Quraysh, the most powerful tribe in Mecca, provides a powerful metaphor for contemporary conflicts reinterpreted as modern jihad.

A report by the Open Source Centre identified the following elements of the al-Qaeda master narrative:

- *War on Islam:* There is a war going on against Islam, and the West is a major enemy.
- *Agents of the West:* Muslim rulers are agents of the West.
- *The Nakba:* The establishment of Israel is a humiliation and an injustice that Muslims must rectify.
- *Violent Jihad:* Muslims have a duty to wage violent jihad in order to achieve justice.
- *Blood of the Martyrs:* Self-sacrifice is the route to victory.
- *Restoring the Caliphate:* Ending injustice and suffering requires restoring Islamic rule according to al-Qaeda’s version of Islamic law.[20]

Collectively, these six master narratives construct a salient argument that defines the problem, the solution and the required course of action. They employ both systemic and heuristic persuasion techniques appealing to emotion by constructing the problem as a gross humiliation and injustice to the Muslim world and to logic by drawing on historical evidence. Importantly, they also divert existing attitudes around issues such as the establishment of Israel into contemporary directions that call for action. This process known as “canalization”[21] which involves the channelling of existing motives, needs and values to new directions. According to Wallack, a communication campaign that calls for a change in behavior congruent with existing attitudes—or canalization—is more likely to succeed.[22]

The al-Qaeda master narratives “ emphasize themes of shared humiliation, injustice, faithful duty, and the promise of re-establishing a golden age. Further, they draw on a robust set of historical evidence — from the earliest days of Islam to today’s hot zones — applicable to diverse audiences and geographies, giving al-Qaeda communicators the flexibility they need to use these master narratives across varied strategic and communications fronts. Historical depth and geographic breadth makes these stories enduring, dramatic, and highly resilient.”[23]

Collectively, the four master narratives of *Say No to Terror* form a coherent argument for resisting terrorism tailored to an Arabic audience. These narratives emphasise themes of familial and national loyalty and social well-being, drawing heavily on cultural dimensions of the Arabic collective society.

As a counter marketing campaign, *Say No to Terror* employs mechanisms that communicate incentives and benefits for resisting terrorism that appeal to the cultural values of the target audience. These mechanisms are important for assessing how the campaign operates as a counter marketing strategy. Even more important is that master narratives in the campaign, like the violent Islamist narrative, are deeply embedded in Islamic cultural history and they challenges elements of the al-Qaeda master narrative by offering alternative

constructions and understandings of contemporary affairs.

The master narratives of *Say No to Terror* comprise elements derived from sacred texts. Quranic verses that directly or indirectly challenge violent extremist interpretations of key Islamic doctrines such as *jihad* and *takfir* are used to expose and undermine the political agenda of violent extremists. In doing so, this narrative reconstructs terrorists—not the West—as the most threatening enemy of Islam and attempts to manipulate the intersubjective world view of Muslims that positions the West as a force that is actively engaging in an ongoing war to undermine Islam. While the master narratives of al-Qaeda impose on Muslims a religiously sanctioned moral obligation to wage violent jihad, the master narratives of *Say No to Terror* impose a religiously sanctioned moral obligation to protect themselves and their communities from extremism and terrorism. While the master narratives of al-Qaeda construct Muslim rulers as agents of the West and call for a restoration of justice through the imposition of Islamic rule, the master narratives of *Say No to Terror* emphasise the ordained authority of “The Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques”.

In constructing a counter narrative that primarily aims at challenging the validity of terrorism, the justification of violent jihad and the authority of terrorist leaders *Say No to Terror* presents a counter campaign that aligns with Jacobsen’s suggestions for the construction of an effective counter narrative. Drawing on lessons learned from cases of former terrorists, Jacobson suggested several motives for counter-narrative:

1. Undermine terrorist leadership: From the various terrorist dropout cases, it seems clear that a general lack of respect for a group’s leadership has often been a factor in dropping out of terrorist group or path. Thus, undermining terrorist and extremist leadership, should constitute one part of the tactic. Crafting messages that significantly detract from leaders’ authority and credibility is vital.
2. Highlight civilian/Muslim suffering, hypocrisy of the Islamist narrative: An effective counter-narrative should also demonstrate civilian and Muslim victimization by extremism and terrorism. Disillusionment with the terrorists’ strategy and actions has been found to play a major reason people have left such groups.
3. Portray terrorists as criminals: Many terrorist groups, including al Qaeda, are increasingly involved in a variety of criminal activities. These include a wide array of criminal activity, ranging from cigarette smuggling to selling counterfeit products, from identity thefts to production and selling of drugs. According to the [American] Drug Enforcement Administration, 19 of 43 U.S.-designated Foreign Terrorist organizations are definitively linked to the global drug trade, and up to 60 percent of terrorist organizations are suspected of having some ties with the illegal narcotics trade. Painting terrorists as common criminals may help demonstrate the impurity of their motives, ideology and supposed religious conviction.
4. Focus on life as a terrorist: The reality of life for a terrorist has often driven people out of them. Through studying the personal stories of terrorist dropouts, it can be discerned that the individual operatives’ perceived lack of respect from leaders was influential in their decision to break from the radical group. If people are joining because the terrorist lifestyle seems glamorous or because they believe they are fulfilling some larger purpose, demonstrating the reality will help to dispel these myths. This may involve the use of former members that can describe their unsatisfying lives as members of a terrorist organization, emphasizing that it simply does not live up to the hype.[24]

Jacobsen’s model for developing counter narratives also comes with an important caveat: “Another critical element of devising a successful counter-narrative strategy is recognising that governments are not always the

most effective messengers for presenting the counter-narrative... There are many cases, however, where other actors may make more effective and credible messengers.”[25]

Say No to Terror as Noise

Analyses of the *Say No to Terror* master narratives or its persuasive elements do not necessarily yield any insights as to the effectiveness of the campaign as an online counter-terrorist narrative. An analysis of 281 YouTube comments in response to the campaign videos by Al-Rawi found that 60% were negative, characterised by anger, mistrust and threats against the campaign sponsors. While this finding cannot be considered indicative of the overall response to the campaign given that those most likely to comment are those who feel either strongly negative or strongly positive, it does provide some indication as to the kinds of responses the campaign elicits. According to Al-Rawi’s analysis, the negative response to the videos is largely driven by suspicion about the authenticity and motives of the sponsors. Al Rawi also suggests that the campaign may have motivated a wave of counter efforts on YouTube. Inspired by the campaign’s catchphrase, videos entitled or tagged “Jihad, I’m Muslim: I’m with it” and “Occupation, I’m a Muslim; I’m against it” now vastly exceed the number of *Say No to Terror* videos on YouTube.[26]

Weimann and Von Knop argue that an effective communication strategy should combine both hard and soft power elements. In terms of noise, mechanical noise such as hacking incorporates elements of a hard power approach while social and psychological noise are characteristic of a soft approach. Weimann and von Knop suggest five elements of a successful noise strategy: credibility; terminology; traditions; partners; act local, think global.[27]

Credibility of the source is a decisive factor for ensuring the persuasiveness of any communication. Terroristic narratives derive their authority from the master narrative that draws on sacred texts. Religious authority in Islam is, however, flexible and contentious, allowing for counter narratives to similarly draw on sacred texts to establish credibility—particularly on the Internet.

The fragmentation and decentralisation of religious authority in Islam has been noted by Eickelman and Piscatori. They argue that “the ulama no longer have, if they ever did, a monopoly on sacred authority. Rather, Sufi Shaykhs, engineers, professors of education, medical doctors, army and militia leaders, and others compete to speak for Islam.”[28] The Internet has both intensified and delegitimised traditional structures of religious authority creating a virtual marketplace of religious ideas and interpretations where epistemic authority in Islam is highly dependent on the perception and acceptance of authority by the social network. [29] Weimann makes this point in relation to the issuing of jihadist fatwas [religious edicts] on the Internet: “The authors of jihadist fatwas come from diverse backgrounds. Some are scholars, some are religious authoritative figures, and others are political leaders of radical movements who are not seen in the wider Islamic world as having authority to provide fatwas, but are accepted as authorities by their followers.”[30] Several authors have observed that the Internet has challenged traditional structures of religious authority[31] by creating a competitive market where individuals can access religious texts, assemble their own religious guides and accept the religious authority of online experts. As such, the construction of religious authority is as central to the terroristic narrative as it is to any attempts to counter this narrative.

In marketing, the practice of masking sponsors of a message in order to garner public support for a cause is referred to as astroturfing. Political astroturfing is often used to influence public opinion on issues that serve a particular political agenda by lending credibility to the source of the message.[32] Religious credibility in the *Say No to Terror* campaign should be established through the master narrative that draws on similar sacred text elements to the terroristic narrative but that also relies on damaging the credibility of the

terroristic narrative. As Weimann and Von Knop propose, an effective counter strategy involves undermining the terrorists' credibility while simultaneously introducing an alternative credible source.[33]

Terminology plays a significant role in the effective application of noise. A consistent theme of *Say No to Terror* is the undermining of terrorists' use of Islamic concepts like *takfir*. Interestingly, the campaign does not challenge the theological interpretations of key terminology, *takfir* and *jihad*, by replacing the terms with nonviolent interpretations. However, it criticises the use of the terms to serve the terrorists' violent agenda and exposing their manipulative uses. Specific posts for example openly denounce the hypocrisy of scholars and express cynicism towards sheikhs who issue fatwas about the obligation of violent jihad, ascribing their motives to financial gain.

Traditions form the basis of the violent extremist Islamic master narrative. Thus, a key element of a viable counter narrative campaign should also draw on solutions from within Islamic cultural and religious traditions, symbols and values. Effectively, the strategy of utilising existing cultural traditions, attitudes and shared values constitutes canalization. *Say No to Terror* does not impose unfamiliar knowledge or social constructs. Instead it canalizes existing attitudes towards the West and socially embedded understandings of religious and moral obligations to new directions that motivate desired changes in behaviour—most notably those associated with identification of the enemy as violent extremists, renewed confidence in the traditional authority of the Saudi Arabian monarchy and increased vigilance such as taking responsibility for ensuring that charitable donations do not fund terrorist activities.

Partners from within the target communities should be actively involved in online counter campaigns to ensure legitimacy and appeal to the target audiences. As mentioned, the source of *Say No to Terror* remains unidentified and anecdotal evidence suggests that there is some suspicion among Arab communities that the actual source and motive for the campaign originates in the United States. Though this suggestion requires validation, it is important to ensure that the legitimacy of the campaign is not undermined by such allegations and that, even if proven correct, the perceived affiliation with regional partners does not become perceived as an example of Western attempts to influence Arab affairs.

Co-opting additional agents of change in ways that promote the concept of “act local, think global” is a necessary measure for long-term success. Supporting actors include education institutions, social welfare groups and non-government organisations. There is no evidence to suggest that *Say No to Terror* has transferred from the virtual to the real world through any form of local activism. However, should the campaign continue to expand, there are opportunities for schools and universities both within the Arab world and beyond to utilise *Say No to Terror* as an education resource and a platform for engaging discussion.

Conclusion

The *Say No to Terror* website and web-based resources represent a novel attempt at disrupting online radicalisation by applying elements of social marketing to attitudinal and behavioural change objectives. From the perspective of noise, the campaign offers an opportunity to explore how noise strategies may be delivered through online counter narratives. A textual analysis of *Say No to Terror* offers some insights into how the elements that comprise a successful noise strategy may be applied in an online counter narrative campaign: credibility, terminology, traditions, partners; and act local, think global.

The master narrative of *Say No to Terror* reconstructs several key concepts that are central to the al-Qaeda master narrative in ways that challenge and undermine the Jihadi-Salafist narrative but that are also deeply embedded in Islamic cultural tradition. Theoretically, the salient themes in *Say No to Terror* comprise what

should be an effective counter narrative: undermining the terrorist leadership (and reinforcing tradition Islamic leadership models); highlighting the hypocrisy of the Jihadi-Salafist narrative; portraying terrorists as criminals (and highlighting that support for terrorist activity, whether witting or unwitting, is also criminal); and focussing on the negative lifestyle of terrorists. However, the obscurity surrounding the origins and motives for *Say No to Terror* detracts from an essential element of successful noise-credibility. Credibility remains critical to ensuring the effectiveness of any communication, yet it is becoming increasingly challenging in the context of new media technologies that have had a transformative impact on how religious authority is established. One of the most significant challenges to an effective counter narrative is that traditional structures of religious authority in Islam are increasingly undermined and delegitimized by the Internet. Religious authority therefore becomes a matter of individual agency as individuals are able to assemble their own religious guides accepting those that conform to a certain world view and rejecting those that do not.

Whether or not *Say No to Terror* is an effective communication strategy can only be determined through a long-term, measured assessment of the target audience responses (attitudinal and behavioural) to the campaign's embedded narratives. A consideration of the audience, their everyday lives and the contexts within which users engage with Internet-based content, has often been lacking in analyses of terroristic narratives. It should be a primary consideration in the development of effective counter communication strategies.

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