

Announcement of the TRI Thesis Award 2018

The Terrorism Research Initiative (TRI) seeks to enhance the quality of research in the field of terrorism studies. For this purpose, TRI established in 2014 an annual award for the 'Best Doctoral Thesis in the Field of Terrorism- and Counter-Terrorism Studies'. The jury consists of Prof. Edwin Bakker (Leiden University), Prof. James J.F. Forest (University of Massachusetts at Lowell), Prof. Clark McCauley (Bryn Mawr College) and the undersigned. Among the submitted Ph.D. theses received by the jury at the end of March of this year, the jury identified three finalists and from these a winner. The winner receives an award of US \$ 1,000, while the other two finalists receive a Certificate of Achievement.

The jury has just awarded the prize for the best thesis submitted or defended in 2018 to

Dr. Kenneth Patrick Reidy for his thesis '*The Accidental Ambassadors: Implications of Benevolent Radicalization*' (University of Northumbria, Newcastle upon Tyne).

The other two finalists are:

Dr. Caitlin E. Ambrozik, author of '*Countering Violent Extremism Locally*' (Cornell University, N.Y.) and

Dr. Simone M. Friis, author of '*Virtual Violence: Militant Imagery, Online Communication and the Islamic State*' (University of Copenhagen).

The author of this year's winning thesis has summarised some of his findings in the opening article of the current issue of *Perspectives on Terrorism*. The Abstracts of the theses of the other two finalists can be found below in an Appendix.

The jury was impressed by the quality of the work of all three finalists. Dr. Ambrozik's thesis impressed the jury by its careful empirical analysis of the difficulties in implementing programmes to counter violent extremism. Dr. Friis broke new methodological ground by creating a sophisticated framework for the analysis of the visual propaganda of the Islamic State.

In the end, the jury decided to grant the award to Dr. Ken Reidy for the originality of his thesis. He conceptualised—and empirically tested—radicalisation as a vector which can go in a malevolent as well as a benevolent direction, the first ending in extremism and/or terrorism while the second manifesting itself, for instance, as 'aid-in-extremis', risking one's own life to save others as in the case of Muslim humanitarian aid workers in jihadist conflict theatres. As one member of the jury pointed out: 'This thesis can make a big contribution to preventing terrorism and perhaps also to de-radicalisation. It is not easy to prevent radicalisation to violence using moral and practical arguments; maybe it is easier to prevent radicalisation to violence by pointing to living examples of benevolent self-sacrifice for the victims militants claim to represent.' The jury was also impressed by Dr. Reidy's encyclopedic knowledge of the literature on radicalisation and jihadist terrorism.

On behalf of all members of the jury, the chairman congratulates the winner Dr. Reidy, and the two other finalists, Dr. Ambrozik and Dr. Friis for their achievement.

About the Author: Alex P. Schmid is Chairman of the TRI Award Jury.

Appendix

Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis of Caitlin E. Ambrozik 'Countering Violent Extremism Locally' (Cornell University, N.Y., 2018).

In 2011, the Obama administration announced a national countering violent extremism (CVE) strategy,

which tasked local communities to work together to design and implement their own CVE programs to help prevent the threat of violent extremism. Seven years later, the majority of Americans do not know what “CVE” is and few programs exist at the local level. This project examines the U.S. approach to CVE and the challenges local stakeholders faced while attempting to design and implement “community-led” CVE programming. In examining these challenges, I explore why only some communities have responded to the federal government’s call for action to design and implement CVE programming and created what I term CVE governance networks. I find that three factors - community stakeholder interest in CVE, capacity to mobilize and facilitation- explain the variation in mobilization at the local level in the United States. However, the creation of a CVE governance network does not necessarily mean that the network will develop and implement CVE programs. Local community stakeholders face numerous challenges throughout the policy-making process, which ultimately hinders implementation efforts. Often, governance networks succumb to internal political conflicts that are fuelled by stakeholder disagreements over how CVE programming should be implemented within their communities. Given this, I find that networks with a local leader who is able to both facilitate coordination and make final implementation decisions tend to be more successful in implementing collaborative programming. Evidence from interviews and surveys of stakeholders involved in the CVE policymaking process lends support for my theory of local level collaborative policymaking and reveals the intricacies of the CVE policymaking process.

Abstract of Ph.D. Thesis of Simone Molin Friis ‘Virtual Violence: Militant Imagery, Online Communication and the Islamic State’ (University of Copenhagen, 2018).

This dissertation concerns the Islamic State’s use of militant imagery and online communication. Militant groups have produced visual communication displaying and promoting violent methods as part of their political struggles for decades, if not centuries. Yet, in recent years, the transformation of the communication and information environment has introduced significant changes in how militant imagery functions on the global stage. Today, modern multiple media and digital technology provide militant groups with new opportunities for shaping their public image and reaching audiences across the globe through dynamic online networks. The Islamic State has exploited and accelerated the communicative possibilities of the Web 2.0 era as part of its violent political struggle. In many ways, the political significance of the Islamic State lies not only in the group’s territorial conquests, but also in its communicative and symbolic power and its ability to shape public imaginaries and reach a global audience through spectacular and violent imagery. Hence, the Islamic State provides a critical case for exploring the transforming security landscape in an increasingly interconnected, digital, and image-saturated world. To examine the Islamic State’s use of militant imagery and online communication, the dissertation conducts a problem-driven, multi-level analysis consisting of four sub-studies, which build on a mixed set of methods and data collection techniques. The first sub-study conducts a mapping of the overall characteristics of the Islamic State’s media campaign and online network, focusing on strategy, structure, output, and circulation style. The second sub-study examines the Islamic State’s use of public displays of violence, focusing on the group’s execution videos. The third sub-study addresses the debate on online radicalisation by exploring the Islamic State’s online mobilizing techniques aimed at European citizens. Finally, the fourth sub-study examines the measures aimed at countering the Islamic State’s online activities and discusses the strategic and democratic challenges of the fight against militant imagery in the digital age. Through these studies, the dissertation contributes to contemporary academic debates and policy issues on the role of imagery in contemporary security politics, the propaganda strategies of jihadist groups, the virtual dimension of mobilization to violence, and the role of online communication in contemporary warfare.

N.B. The deadline for the next round of submissions (Ph.D. theses submitted or defended in 2019) for the annual TRI Thesis Award is 31 March 2020.