



NETWORK OF EXCELLENCE FOR RESEARCH
IN VIOLENT ONLINE POLITICAL EXTREMISM

DRAFT

**VIOLENT EXTREMISM
AND TERRORISM**

ONLINE IN 2016:

THE YEAR IN REVIEW

Maura Conway
Dublin City University

Email info@voxpath.eu
www.voxpol.eu

Introduction

The use of the Internet, including social media, by violent extremists and terrorists and their supporters has been a source of anxiety for policymakers and publics for a number of years. This is based on the idea that there is a connection between consumption of and networking around violent extremist and terrorist online content and adoption of extremist ideology (i.e. so-called 'online radicalisation') and/or recruitment into violent extremist or terrorist groups or movements and/or attack planning and preparation and/or, ultimately, engagement in violent extremism and terrorism. Concerns have been raised, in particular, regarding easy access to large volumes of potentially influencing violent extremist and terrorist content on prominent and heavily trafficked social media platforms.

Significant changes in the extremist online scene have taken place in 2016 affecting the availability of such content however. These changes arose from, amongst other things, a.) external or 'field' factors that impacted on the volume and frequency of extremist and terrorist content being uploaded and circulated and b.) activity undertaken by social media and other Internet companies to disrupt extremists and terrorists and their supporters' use of their platforms.

IS' Online Content Production and Circulation Capabilities Degraded in 2016

Supply-side Issues

External effects, including increased pressure on so-called 'Islamic State's' (IS) territory and manpower and direct targeting by Western forces of IS' social media 'experts' and strategists (e.g. the separate August 2016 drone killings of 21-year old Briton Junaid Hussein a.k.a. Abu Hussain al-Britani¹ and IS' second-in-command, Syrian-born Abu Muhammad al-Adnani² and, in September, IS's 'Minister of Information' Wa'il al-Fayad³) and their cyber apparatus have contributed to a decrease in production of IS online content.

This degradation in IS's online content supply capabilities was already apparent in early 2016. Images, including photo reports, infographics, posters, and claims regarding operations, are the most prevalent type of official online content produced by IS. Between December 2015 and July 2016, IS' central and provincial media outlets (not including *Amaq* 'news agency') issued c.11,000 separate official images (oftentimes combined into 'photo reports' containing multiple images). The number of such images being produced daily declined steeply in the December 2015 to July 2016 period, falling from an average of 60 per day in December to an average of 20 per day by the beginning of July. In the latter part of the year, the dynamic changed again however with the rate of content production rebounding somewhat through July 2016, but declining again in August. ⁴ A

¹ Adam Goldman & Eric Schmitt. 'One by One, ISIS Social Media Experts Are Killed as Result of F.B.I. Program.' *New York Times* 24 November 2016: <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/11/24/world/middleeast/isis-recruiters-social-media.html>.

² Joby Warrick. 'Targeted Killings Thin ISIS's Top Ranks.' *Washington Post* 29 November 2016: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/isis-second-in-command-hid-in-syria-for-months-the-day-he-stepped-out-the-us-was-waiting/2016/11/28/64a32efe-b253-11e6-840f-e3ebab6bcdd3_story.html?utm_term=.1a783929f6f8.

³ BBC. 'US Says it Killed IS Information Minister al-Fayad.' *BBC News* 16 September 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-37390408>.

⁴ WNYC. 'The ISIS Propaganda Slowdown.' 14 October 2016: <http://www.wnyc.org/story/isis-propaganda-slowdown/?hootPostID=491ebdcbe2426fa1aa1c53719fd0a9ca>; Charlie Winter. 'The ISIS Media Decline.' VOX-Pol Lunch Briefing Series, Brussels, 22 November 2016.

steady decline in IS's video output also became apparent over the course of the first half of 2016, which transformed into a precipitous decline in September 2016.

An Iraqi-led coalition offensive to retake the Northern Iraqi city of Mosul from IS began on 17 October 2016. IS released what's been described as "a fusillade of propaganda" in a 72-hour period at the beginning of the offensive, when it published 69 Mosul-focused operation claims, videos, and photo reports.⁵ Content supply has fluctuated fairly wildly since, with 3 – 5 items appearing on some days in October and November and 15 – 20+ published on others. A steady stream of Mosul-related infographics has appeared, for example, but the production of both still images and videos are far from rebounding to the levels of 12 months ago. In 2015 a number of themes prevalent in IS' online content were identified.⁶ By mid-2016, a significant decline in previously prominent themes, such as the victimhood and the 'caliphate' as utopia narratives, and a substantial uptick in the war theme was observable. Both the victimhood and utopia narratives are somewhat resurgent in the context of Mosul however, with—obviously contradictory—still images and video appearing of, on the one hand, the aftermath of air attacks on schools and hospitals and, on the other, scenes from an allegedly tranquil and fully-functioning city.⁷

Also important to note is the central role played by IS' *Amaq* 'news agency' in 2016, when it took a very prominent role in global news coverage, and the surrounding social media buzz, of IS terrorist attacks. On its establishment in 2014, *Amaq* was judged not to be an official IS media outlet; despite continuing to refer to itself as "unofficial" however, it is now judged an official outlet.⁸ The release or not of claims of responsibility by *Amaq*, the time these take to appear post-attack, and the words employed in them are all subject to close analysis online and in the traditional mass media. In this way, *Amaq* claims have come to be news events in themselves. *Amaq's* most stable—albeit still subject to disruption—present incarnation is its collection of Telegram channels, which are available in a diversity of languages, including Arabic, English, and French. In the past, *Amaq* has also employed dedicated websites (running WordPress) and had a presence on Tumblr.

Online Magazines

Of continued interest from a European perspective is that, in addition to publishing three new issues of its *Dabiq* online magazine⁹ in multiple languages, including English and German,¹⁰ in January (Iss.13), April (Iss.14), and July (Iss.15), and three new issues of its dedicated French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam* in February (Iss.8), April (Iss.9), and August (Iss.10) 2016, IS also began production of a new magazine, *Rumiyah* (i.e. Rome) in September 2016. Three issues of the magazine were released by IS' Al-Hayat Media Centre, again in multiple languages, including

⁵ Charlie Winter. 'How the Islamic State Is Spinning the Mosul Battle.' *The Atlantic* 20 October 2016: <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/10/isis-mosul-propaganda-iraq-kurds-peshmerga/504854/>.

⁶ Charlie Winter. 2015. *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam): <https://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf>.

⁷ Daniel Milton. 2016. *Communication Breakdown: Unraveling the Islamic State's Media Efforts* (Westpoint: CTC), pp.'s 21-43: <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/communication-breakdown-unraveling-the-islamic-states-media-efforts>

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁹ The first issue of *Dabiq* appeared on 5 July, 2014. The magazine's name refers to a Syrian town, a few miles from the Turkish border, which is the site of a prophesied apocalyptic battle between Muslims and non-Muslims, and that was retaken from IS by a Syrian rebel coalition in mid-October 2016.

¹⁰ These issues or portions of them are also available in Bahasa (i.e. Indonesian) and Malay and may be available in other languages.

English, French, and German,¹¹ in quick succession: the first on 6 September, Iss.2 on 4 October, and Iss.3 on 11 November 2016.

The latest issue of *Rumiyah* praises the 2016 Bastille Day attacker in Nice, and includes an article calling on US- and Europe-based lone actors to use trucks to target outdoor activities and events, such as crowded streets, markets, festivals, and parades, and provides suggestions on "ideal vehicles" to use and how to acquire them. This builds upon the article published in Iss. 2 of *Rumiyah* explaining to Western supporters the best way to carry out knife attacks and is in keeping with IS's more recent exhortations, not just in their magazines, but also in online videos and other content, for Western-based supporters not to make *hijra* (i.e. emigrate to the 'caliphate'), but instead to carry out attacks in their home countries.

Dar al-Islam is IS's French-language only magazine. It's most recent issue opens with "Excerpts from Abballa Larossi's speech after he killed a policeman and his wife at Magnanville."¹² It also includes a dense nineteen-page article arguing the Islamic legitimacy ("*la légitimité islamique*") of the November 2015 Paris and St. Denis attacks and the March 2016 Brussels attacks. Other articles include one targeted at women and another addressing mobile telephone and information security. The preceding issue (Iss.9), again addresses the Brussels attacks, describing them as "a true master stroke" ("*un vrai coup de maître*"), and information security issues. Recurring sections are 'Security Database,' which identifies French(-based) Muslims whose commitments are at odds with those of IS and appears to solicit their murder and 'Islamic State in the Words of the Enemy' ("*L'État Islamique dans les Mots de L'Ennemi*"), which in Iss.9 features Prof. Scott Atran, Director of Research in Anthropology at Paris' *Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*.

The most recent issue of IS's *Dabiq* magazine is titled 'Breaking the Cross' and is focused on discrediting both Christianity and Western secularism. Whilst previous issues were primarily targeted at Muslim publics, Iss.15 is aimed at attracting non-Muslims to Islam. Sections include 'Why We Hate You and Fight You' and a conversion story, 'Why I Came to Islam,' by a female Finnish former Christian. In addition to praising the terrorists who carried out the 22 March attack on Brussels airport, Iss. 14 of *Dabiq* features a call to IS supporters to kill identified Western-based Muslim leaders. Iss. 13 features a full two-page obituary for the UK 'foreign fighter' known as 'Jihadi John,' in the recurring section 'Among the Believers are Men.'

Social Media Crackdown and Re-location

In addition, to supply-side issues, IS and its supporters also faced increased vigilance on the part of social media and other Internet companies in 2016 as regards the former's use of their platforms.

In a February blog post titled 'Combating Violent Extremism,'¹³ Twitter stated that they had suspended over 125,000 accounts for threatening or promoting terrorist acts, primarily related to IS, since mid-2015. In a follow-up blog post in August, Twitter described suspending an average of c.40,000 IS-related accounts per month in the period between mid-February and mid-July 2016.¹⁴ Berger and Perez (2016) found that English-language users who repeatedly created new pro-IS Twitter accounts after being suspended "suffered devastating reductions in their follower

¹¹ Issues of *Rumiyah* are also claimed to be available in Bahasa, Pashto, Russian, Turkish, and Uyghur versions, and potentially others.

¹² Original: "*Extraits du discours d'Abballa Larossi après avoir tué un policier et sa femme à Magnanville.*"

¹³ See <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/combating-violent-extremism>.

¹⁴ Twitter. 'An Update on Our Efforts to Combat Violent Extremism.' *Twitter Blog* 18 August 2016: <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/an-update-on-our-efforts-to-combat-violent-extremism>.

counts.”¹⁵ The overall amount of pro-IS content available on Twitter is also negatively affected by account suspensions as all of a user’s tweets are deleted when his/her account is suspended. By late 2016, explicitly pro-IS Twitter accounts, such as those using an image of a prominent IS figure (e.g. al-Adnani, al-Baghdadi) for their profile picture or bearing similarities to previously suspended accounts, can be exceedingly short-lived, oftentimes lasting only hours and some just minutes.

Many former Twitter account holders have therefore relocated to Telegram (estbd. August 2013), which enables its users to have one-to-one and group conversations that are encrypted end-to-end. Whilst previously more akin to WhatsApp, the introduction of its ‘channels’ feature in September 2015 rendered Telegram akin to a slightly more obscure, but encrypted Twitter.¹⁶ In their FAQ, Telegram states, in response to the question “There’s illegal content on Telegram. How do I take it down?,” “[a]ll Telegram chats and group chats are private amongst their participants. We do not process any requests related to them.” They do however remind users that channels are publically available and illegal content on these should be reported to Telegram. Also in their FAQ, Telegram explicitly states, in response to the question “Wait! 0_o Do you process take-down requests from third parties?,” “we do block terrorist (e.g. ISIS-related) bots and channels.”¹⁷ Official IS Telegram channels are particularly subject to disruption, but generally reappear. There are however numerous official, semi-official, and IS fan channels in a range of languages currently active on Telegram, many of which have thousands of followers.

The above notwithstanding, some IS supporters are still quite wedded to Twitter and view themselves as involved in a ‘war’ to maintain a pro-IS Twitter presence. Numerous exhortations by IS fans to reclaim the Twitter (and Facebook) ‘battlefield’ were penned in 2016.¹⁸

No social media platforms or other online spaces are entirely self-contained and very few social media users maintain an account on just a single site. In a recent exploratory analysis, we found the top linked-to platforms by pro-IS accounts from Twitter were YouTube and JustPaste.It. The latter is a relatively little known document sharing site that is nonetheless heavily favoured by IS and their supporters for online content release and dissemination purposes. Other prevalent links were to mainstream news outlets (e.g. Reuters, Al-Jazeera, BBC, etc.), academic data archives and blogs (e.g. Jihadology, War on the Rocks), and a diversity of other online spaces, including Google Drive and Facebook.

To sum up, together events on the ground and initiatives taken by social media companies and other online actors have resulted in a fairly serious albeit certainly not fatal degradation of IS’ online, particularly social media, presence in 2016.

‘Remote Control’ Attacks?

In addition to its channels, Telegram also has a group chats function. Group chats are, as mentioned above, entirely private amongst their participants. Telegram group chats appear to have been used

¹⁵ JM Berger and Heather Perez. 2016. *The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter: How Suspensions are Limiting the Social Networks of English-speaking ISIS Supporters* (Washington DC: George Washington University Program on Extremism), p.4: https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.

¹⁶ In February 2016, Telegram reported having more than more than 100 million monthly active users. At the end of June 2016, Twitter had 313 million active users monthly.

¹⁷ See <https://telegram.org/faq#q-there-39s-illegal-content-on-telegram-how-do-i-take-it-down>. See also Berger and Perez, *The Islamic State’s Diminishing Returns on Twitter*, pp.’s 18 – 19.

¹⁸ Cole Bunzel. “‘Come Back to Twitter’: A Jihadi Warning Against Telegram.’ *Jihadica* 18 July 2016: <http://www.jihadica.com/come-back-to-twitter>.

in an operational capacity by IS in 2016.¹⁹ This is a function somewhat distinct from the production and sharing of public online content described above.

French-born Rachid Kassim is, for example, believed to have been instrumental in several terrorist attacks and plots in France. Kassim's Telegram channel, *Sabre de Lumière* (i.e. Sword of Light) went offline in early October, but prior to this he used it to call for attacks in European countries and was linked via Telegram to a number of 2016's IS-inspired and/or directed attackers. These included Larossi Abballa, who stabbed to death a policeman and his wife in Magnanville in June; the two 19-year-olds, Adel Kermiche and Abdel Malik Petitjean, whom in July killed an 85-year-old Roman Catholic priest in his Normandy church; and a group of women plotting to car bomb Notre Dame cathedral in September.²⁰ Kassim's exact role in these events remains unclear. Doubtless, he inspired attacks in France, but whether he was officially tasked to do so by IS's leadership remains unknown.

In 2016, Europe's Online Extreme Right Continued to Gain Confidence and Grow

In contrast to IS, the European extreme right online scene is buoyant and growing.

Having said this, the volume and frequency of production of European extreme right online content cannot be measured in the same way as that of IS as the European extreme right is not a single organisation or even a franchise operation, but instead a complex overlapping of individuals, groups, and movements espousing extreme nationalist, National Socialist/Nazi, fascist, white supremacist, and/or so-called 'Alt-right' ideology,²¹ including significant anti-immigration/refugee and/or anti-Islam and/or anti-jihadi sentiment.

Important to acknowledge here also is the increasing difficulty of differentiating social media accounts espousing more traditionally violent extremist views (e.g. neo-Nazi) from users who hold more radical populist views around anti-immigration and Islam—or what some analysts have referred to as the broader "counter-jihadi nebula."²² In fact, distinguishing between democratic

¹⁹ This is not unheard of, Twitter, Skype, and other applications were used operationally in a number of attacks previously; see Maura Conway and Joseph Dillon. 2016. *Case Study: Future Trends—Live-streaming Terrorist Attacks?* (accompanying this report).

²⁰ Amarnath Amarasingam. 'An Interview with Rachid Kassim, Jihadist Orchestrating Attacks in France.' *Jihadology* 18 November 2016: <http://jihadology.net/2016/11/18/guest-post-an-interview-with-rachid-kassim-jihadist-orchestrating-attacks-in-france>. See also Stacy Meichtry and Sam Schechner. 'How Islamic State Weaponized the Chat App to Direct Attacks on the West.' *The Wall Street Journal* 20 October: <http://www.wsj.com/articles/how-islamic-state-weaponized-the-chat-app-to-direct-attacks-on-the-west-1476955802>.

²¹ Short for 'alternative right,' the so-called 'alt-right' is a term used to refer to people subscribing to one or more of a wide range of beliefs, such as white nationalism, white supremacy, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, anti-feminism, and men's rights, but who generally share a disdain for mainstream Conservatism and suspicion of 'elites.' It has a significant online component.

²² Benjamin Lee. 2015. 'A Day in the "Swamp": Understanding Discourse in the Online Counter-Jihad Nebula.' *Democracy and Security* 11(3): 248-274; Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Hans Brun. 2013. *A Neoliberalist Network: The English Defence League and Europe's Counter-jihad Movement* (London: ICSR): <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/ICSR-ECJM-Report-Online.pdf>.

opposition and extremist groups and rhetoric is not just a problem for researchers seeking to measure the latter's online activity, but increasingly for authorities also.²³

External factors, including the refugee crisis; terrorists attacks in Belgium, France, Germany, and elsewhere in Europe; the UK's pro-Brexit referendum vote; and the US presidential election campaign and outcome have all contributed to the infiltration of extreme right concepts and discourse into the European political mainstream and a concomitant increase in online hate speech.

In November 2016, the German Ministry of Justice Ministry released figures for its 2015 criminal investigations into accusations of hate speech, which showed an increase of 130% from 2014. Of the 5,700 such investigations conducted in 2015, 2,300 were based on online hate speech, as compared to only 500 such cases in 2014.²⁴ The reported increase in criminal investigations into such hate speech did not result in an increase in prosecutions however, as Germany's Ministry of Justice was reportedly forced to dismiss 9,400 cases because no perpetrators could be identified, often because they were anonymous online posters.²⁵ These figures may be expected to be eclipsed in 2016.

Whilst jihadi online forums were once preferred, they're numbers have been eroded by a shift to social media; the Extreme Right are still committed to the use of both general and dedicated online forums however. The Norwegian extreme right terrorist Anders Breivik was a contributor to the dedicated US-based 'white nationalist' online forum known as Stormfront. Stormfront hosts a number of European country-specific sub-forums. These include, in order of their popularity measured by number of posts on 30 November 2016, 'Stormfront Britain' (993,318), 'Stormfront Nederland & Vlaanderen' (343, 288), 'Stormfront Italia' (249,098), and 'Stormfront en Español y Portugués' (229,974). A diversity of more general online forums or forum-like online spaces also host increasing amounts of extreme right content. These include the popular social news aggregation, web content rating, and discussion site Reddit and image-based bulletin board and comment site 4chan.

On 23 November, 2016, the UK courts sentenced Thomas Mair to a whole-life term for the shooting and stabbing murder of Labour party Member of Parliament (MP) Jo Cox in June 2016. This is an interesting case from a number of perspectives, one of which is the way in which it illustrates the diversity of 'real world' and online spaces and sources that may be relied upon by violent extremist and terrorist plotters and attackers. Mr. Mair used computers in public libraries to visit extreme right websites, including the US-based extreme right website *The Daily Stormer*, and to obtain information on Ms. Cox via Wikipedia.²⁶ Extreme right activity is also prevalent on a range of high-profile social media platforms. In a study of c.53,000 tweets published between June 2016 and July 2016, researchers found that Mair was routinely praised on Twitter as a "hero" and "patriot" for murdering Jo Cox. This included the generation and use of a dedicated hashtag #HeroMair.²⁷ Ms. Cox, on the other hand, was framed as a "traitor" and supporter of jihadi terrorism via her

²³ Ben Knight. 2016. 'Right-wing Populism Poses New Problem for German Intel.' *Deutsche Welle* 22 November: <http://m.dw.com/en/right-wing-populism-poses-new-problem-for-german-intel/a-36484982>.

²⁴ Wolfgang Janisch. 'Ausländerfeindliche Hetze im Internet nimmt dramatisch zu.' *Süddeutsche Zeitung* 28 November 2016: <http://www.sueddeutsche.de/politik/bundesamt-fuer-justiz-auslaenderfeindliche-hetze-im-internet-nimmt-dramatisch-zu-1.3268733>.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ BBC News. 'Jo Cox Suspect Thomas Mair "Watched YouTube Gun Video."' *BBC News* 21 November 2016: <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-38051593>.

²⁷ Imran Awan and Irene Zempi. 2016. *Jo Cox "Deserved to Die": Cyber Hate Speech Unleashed on Twitter* (London: HOPE not hate): <http://www.hopenothate.org.uk/cyber-hate>.

campaigning for the rights of Syrian refugees and somebody who “deserved to die” because “she supported [Muslim] rape gangs,” a reference to a child sexual exploitation scandal in South Yorkshire, UK.²⁸

Twitter’s ‘Hateful Conduct Policy’²⁹ prohibits “specific conduct that targets people on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, religious affiliation, age, disability, or disease.” In mid-November 2016, Twitter announced that they were implementing a more direct way to report such conduct on their platform.³⁰ A number of high profile so-called ‘alt-right’ figures had their accounts suspended shortly thereafter. The highest profile of these was Richard Spencer, one of the movement’s founders, the account of whose ‘think tank,’ the National Policy Institute, and online magazine were suspended along with his verified personal account. Spencer subsequently posted a video entitled ‘The Knight of Long Knives’ to YouTube berating Twitter for their actions.³¹

YouTube was the top linked-to platform from Twitter in our exploratory analysis of all out-links from a sample of 175 European extreme right Twitter accounts. The next most prevalent links were to a selection of ideologically consistent news websites, including express.co.uk, dimissionietuttiacasa.com, breitbart.com, dailymail.co.uk, and rt.com. Similar to the pro-IS out-links, traditional mass media outlets, particularly newspapers, were identified as prominent nodes in the European extreme right online scene; blogs also remain conspicuous components of the same scene.

Discussion

Research on the intersections of violent extremism and terrorism and the Internet are increasingly concerned with social media and oftentimes narrowed further to a singular focus on Twitter because of its particular affordances (e.g. ease of data collection due to its publicness, the nature of its API), which is problematic.³² A wide range of other social media platforms and online spaces need to be researched in this context also. EUROPOL’s Internet Referral Unit has, for example, reported that by mid-2016, they had identified “70 platforms used by terrorist groups to spread their propaganda materials.”³³

The prominence of links to the online versions of traditional mass media outlets, particularly newspapers, in our exploratory analyses of both pro-IS and extreme rights tweets is also worth underlining as the role of these online content providers is largely overlooked in discussions of online radicalisation to-date.

Also in our exploratory analysis, YouTube was the top linked-to platform by both pro-IS accounts and extreme right accounts, which is indicative of the prominent and growing role for online video

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See <https://support.twitter.com/articles/20175050>.

³⁰ Twitter. ‘Progress on Addressing Online Abuse.’ *Twitter Blog* 15 November 2016: <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/progress-on-addressing-online-abuse>.

³¹ See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qiADHzBOqZ0>.

³² Maura Conway. 2016. ‘Determining the Role of the Internet in Violent Extremism and Terrorism: Six Suggestions for Progressing Research.’ *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* [online pre-publication]: p.9, 12.

³³ EUROPOL. 2016. *EU Internet Referral Unit: Year One Report* (The Hague: EUROPOL), p.5: <https://www.europol.europa.eu/publications-documents/eu-internet-referral-unit-year-one-report-highlights>.

generally, including in extremist and terrorist online milieus. JustPaste.It, on the other hand, which was the second most linked-to site from pro-IS accounts, appears just once in the nearly 7,000 live links contained in the extreme right tweets we analysed. It is a good example of the way in which a relatively obscure website can come to have a prominent role within a specific online community. The Internet Archive continues to play a similar role in the jihadi online scene.

It is worth pointing out here too that government initiatives to counter online violent extremism and terrorism via content takedown are not without their detractors, many of whom are concerned with the impacts of these on rights to freedom of expression and privacy. In November 2016, for example, the Global Network Initiative (GNI) released a policy brief on 'Extremist Content and the ICT Sector,'³⁴ which underlined that:

"Governments must ensure that laws and policies prohibiting incitement to terrorism use clear and precise language. They should only target unlawful speech that is intended to incite the commission of a terrorist offense and that causes a danger that a terrorist offense or violent act may be committed" (p.4).

The GNI are particularly concerned with ensuring that governments' content referrals do not circumvent legal procedures. They warn against governments using consumer-facing reporting tools to make anonymous referrals and advise that if they make content referrals, governments should be transparent about and accountable for these (pp.'s 6-7).

The diversity of government initiatives to counter online violent extremism and terrorism, not just via content takedown, but including online CVE campaigns and other activity, and the consequences, intended and unintended of these, has not yet received enough attention from researchers.

Conclusion: Future Trends – 2017

Both IS and the extreme right, including the European extreme right, are currently in states of flux. The online environment is also a very fast changing one. Taken together, this means that the online activities of IS and the extreme right in 2017 are difficult to predict. The most likely outcome is that IS's content production and circulation capabilities will continue to come under pressure and will thus continue to wane whilst the mainstreaming of extreme right views will contribute to an increase in volumes of online hate speech and, despite pushback from major social media companies, increasing amounts of extreme right content appearing on mainstream platforms. The establishment of new online spaces receptive to extreme right postings is also foreseen.

From a research and policy perspective, more insight into IS's Telegram activity and its impacts is required. Also worth noting is that on 22 November, Telegram announced the launch of Telegraph, its new anonymous blog-like publishing tool that is optimised for posting to Telegram, but links to which can be shared anywhere online.³⁵ This has the potential to be quite attractive to IS and their supporters and potentially also a range of other extremists. Gab (estbd. 2016) was signalled by Richard Spencer, in his aforementioned YouTube video, as being hospitable to white nationalists and others on the extreme right. Gab has been described as "a hybrid of Twitter and Reddit—posts

³⁴ See <https://www.globalnetworkinitiative.org/sites/default/files/Extremist-Content-and-ICT-Sector.pdf>.

³⁵ Jon Russell. 'Secure Messaging App Telegram Now Offers its Own Anonymous Blogging Platform.' *TechCrunch* 22 November: <https://techcrunch.com/2016/11/22/telegram-telegraph>.

are capped at 300 characters, and the crowd votes to boost or demote posts in the feed.”³⁶ A number of prominent extreme right figures evicted from Twitter have reappeared on Gab and its profile is likely to continue to rise in 2017.

An interesting development as regards content moderation took place on 22 September, 2016 when YouTube published a blog post entitled ‘Growing our Trusted Flagger Program into YouTube Heroes.’ Google’s Trusted Flagger programme (estbd. 2012), allowed a select group of originally c.200 people and organisations access to a tool that allowed for reporting up to 20 videos at once that the latter perceived as violating YouTube’s Community Guidelines. The Guidelines prohibit, amongst other things, ‘Violent or Graphic Content,’ ‘Hateful Content,’ and ‘Threats.’ The original Trusted Flagger cohort included the UK police’s Counter-terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU), the remit of which is to seek review and removal of online content deemed by them to contravene the UK Terrorism Acts.³⁷

YouTube says that Trusted Flaggers’ reports “are accurate over 90% of the time. This is three times more accurate than the average flagger.”³⁸ They therefore decided to extend the programme to “a select group of contributors from across the globe who have histories of high quality community contributions,” and to reward participants by allowing them “to earn points and unlock rewards to help them reach the next level.”³⁹ Hero Level 3 status will allow participants to flag multiple videos at once. The Heroes programme received a highly negative reaction from the YouTube community when first unveiled largely, it appears, due to misunderstandings about its workings;⁴⁰ it is an interesting gamification⁴¹ of the flagging process however, and bears watching.

Finally, live video streaming surged in popularity in 2016 and is expected to grow further in 2017. Larossi Abballa, who murdered a policeman and his partner, in Magnanville, France in June, 2016, used Facebook Live to broadcast and justify his actions whilst holding the couple’s young child hostage. It is the first time a terrorist has used a live-streaming service in the midst of an attack; it is unlikely to be the last.

³⁶ Amanda Hess. ‘The Far Right Has a New Digital Safe Space.’ *New York Times* 30 November 2016: <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/arts/the-far-right-has-a-new-digital-safe-space.html?smid=tw-nytimes&smtyp=cur>.

³⁷ Alistair Barr and Lisa Fleisher. ‘YouTube Enlists “Trusted Flaggers” to Police Videos.’ *The Wall Street Journal* 17 March 2014: <http://blogs.wsj.com/digits/2014/03/17/youtube-enlists-trusted-flaggers-to-police-videos/>.

³⁸ See <https://youtube.googleblog.com/2016/09/growing-our-trusted-flagger-program.html>.

³⁹ *Ibid*.

⁴⁰ Fruzsina Eordogh. ‘YouTubers Fear Mob Rule With New YouTube Heroes Initiative.’ *Forbes* 26 September 2016: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/fruzsinaeordogh/2016/09/26/youtubers-fear-mob-rule-with-new-youtube-heroes-initiative/#7fda28b6389e>.

⁴¹ ‘Gamification’ is the application of elements of game play (e.g. point-scoring, competition with others, rules of play) to other areas of activity, oftentimes as an online marketing technique to encourage engagement with a product or service.