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Countering the Daesh Narrative

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Countering the Daesh Narrative

Cheryl Phillips

In the information war against Daesh, communication professionals must understand how the enemy's narrative is constructed and promulgated. Only then can the United States and its partners offer alternative narratives. The West must also create a marketplace of ideas where these alternative narratives are discussed and debated and compete with Daesh for influence. These actions will counter Daesh's propaganda and narrative that continue to attract recruits, sympathizers and supporters to its ideology.

Expressing his dissatisfaction with current efforts to defeat Daesh, President Donald Trump in January signed a Presidential Memorandum calling for the Department of Defense (DOD) to deliver a preliminary plan within 30 days that included information operations and other means to "isolate and delegitimize ISIS and its radical Islamist ideology."^[i] This effort illustrates the Trump administration's view of the importance to national security of undermining the Daesh narrative.

The DOD plan, delivered the end of February, draws on all elements of national power – "diplomatic, financial, cyber, intelligence [and] public diplomacy, and it's been drafted in close coordination with our interagency partners."^[ii] Administration officials continue to make Daesh's defeat the centerpiece of national security strategy. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson later in March will host the foreign ministers and senior leaders of the Global Coalition to defeat Daesh, accelerating international efforts to destroy the extremist group militarily and starve it of funding, weapons and fighters.^[iii] Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition, views the fight against Daesh as an "unprecedented challenge."^[iv] General Joseph Dunford, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, believes that Daesh remains a threat to the nation and its citizens, partners and allies.^[v]

The focus of the previous administration's plan to counter extremist messaging is the work of the Global Engagement Center. Established in March 2016, it replaced the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications which was unable to successfully counter violent extremist propaganda during its six years of existence. A past National Security Council spokesman acknowledged that "the [Obama] administration's initial strategy responding to the Islamic State's messaging blitz wasn't successful and needed to change."^[vi]

Despite the prior administration's strategy, statements and reorganization efforts, "our narrative is being trumped by ISIL's."^[vii] Then Undersecretary of Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department, Richard Stengel made that pronouncement in a June 2015 internal assessment of actions by the Obama administration to combat the Daesh propaganda machine.

Although Daesh has recently lost large swaths of territory in Iraq and Syria and has steadily lost some of

its appeal, the group is still has a potent propaganda machine. Despite setbacks, Daesh has expanded its reach to Yemen, Egypt, Turkey, Libya, Somalia, Tunisia and the Philippines. Since its inception, Daesh's message globally attracts thousands of recruits and supporters, both physically and virtually. U.S. Congressional testimony and media reports put the number at more than 40,000 foreign fighters who have answered the call and flowed into Syria and Iraq since 2011.^[viii] The Soufan Group, a strategic security consultancy, reported that the number of foreign fighters traveling to Syria more than doubled between June 2014 and December 2015.^[ix]

Identities and Narratives

To begin any discussion of efforts to counter Daesh's ideology and its promotion of terrorist acts, it is necessary to understand the concepts of individual and collective identities. An individual identity is constituted through social ties, or interacting relational networks. Different relationships with overlapping networks result in multiple identities – a lawyer can be a friend and a terrorist. An individual also has a collective identity gained from association with a group's identity, whether religious, ethnic, national or the like.^[x]

It is equally important to understand the concept of narrative. It is easy to think of a narrative as a story, especially when references to narratives as stories are frequently found in government documents, academic articles and the media. While narratives are empowered by “the art of telling stories,”^[xi] Cristina Archetti argues that this analogy is too simple: “narratives are more complex than a story.”^[xii]

The network of relationships shape an individual's worldview, how information is interpreted, his or her behaviors and comprise an individual narrative. Archetti describes an individual narrative as the “unique perspective that an individual has on the world from his/her ‘corner’ of social reality.”^[xiii]

Archetti borrows from relational sociology, actor network theory and social movement theory which maintain that narratives have deep cultural roots and are socially constructed over centuries. They “arise from a specific constellation of relationships – a social network.” Groups have their own collective narratives, such as a sense of belonging to a democracy, to which an individual comes into contact.^[xiv]

A person's individual narrative can be influenced by other narratives within that individual's social network – a collection of relationships. A person comes into contact with other actors' individual narratives, like friends for example, and collective narratives, like the sense of being a member of a democracy. Alberto Melucci states that terrorist groups “offer individuals the collective possibility of affirming themselves as actors and of finding an equilibrium between self-recognition and hetero-recognition.”^[xv]

A person may or may not join an extremist group depending on whether his or her narrative is compatible with that of the group's. Individuals who are members of the extremist's network accept and align their own narrative with the collective Daesh narrative if it resonates and is relevant to their particular identity and situation.^[xvi]

Individuals do not substitute their narrative for an external narrative. Being a member of a group means sharing a common collective narrative while at the same time having an individual narrative that is compatible with it.^[xvii] “What matters is that terrorist action is the outcome of an identity and a corresponding narrative that legitimizes violent action.”^[xviii]

An individual will filter incoming information through his or her narrative. Over time this might lead to a change in the individual's worldview, relationships, identity, narrative and behavior in a continuous cycle. This is critical to understanding how to disrupt potential terrorist behavior or support.^[xix] If an individual

considers a differing narrative from that offered by Daesh, it may displace the terrorist ideology with an alternative that promotes positive political action rather than terrorist acts or tacit support to achieve societal change.

Archetti states that “where there is a narrative there must be a network.”^[xx] Daesh uses relational networks to promote its propaganda, ideology and narrative, where it is continuously retold and reinterpreted by various actors to different intended audiences.^[xxi] Social media makes it even easier for Daesh and its followers to retell the narrative.

Western governments fixate on finding the right message that can be sent audiences to counter the extremist narrative. This line of thinking assumes a “silver bullet” approach to communication that expects individuals to receive and accept a particular message. As said earlier, where there is a narrative there must be a network. Sending a counter-narrative message “into the information environment... without there being a network to convey it and re-convey it could be compared to sending a message into outer space.” ^[xxii]

The Daesh Narrative

Daesh has created and promoted its ideology through a narrative “linked to an overarching strategic goal ‘to win hearts and minds’ and to provide a clear meaning to confusing events.” In actuality, the Daesh narrative is an instrument of psychological warfare.^[xxiii] Certainly the 15-plus years of war in the Middle East have created confusion, marginalization, experiences of discrimination and grievances in the affected populations that can become easily drawn to Daesh’s narrative.

Vulnerable individuals are attracted to a narrative that attempts to make sense of the world where their own community is mythologized, enemies are degraded, and conspiracy theories and salvation themes abound. “A narrative is thus a powerful, culturally embedded story, which consists of a mosaic of coherent stories and employs all semiotic levels.” Understanding their audiences, Daesh makes use of symbolisms, emotive images and music, popular stories and authoritative theology and ideology.^[xxiv]

Academics agree that in general a narrative has a beginning, middle and conclusion. According to Quiggin, the beginning contains the grievance and an antagonist; the middle has a protagonist; the conclusion reveals the solution or calls on audiences to act on the problem. “This tri-part structure of a set-up, a climax and a resolution is a recurring theme.”^[xxv]

David Betts maintains that the terrorist narrative the United States must counter goes something like this:

- “Islam is under general unjust attack by Western crusaders led by the United States;
- “Jihadis, whom the West refers to as ‘terrorists’ are defending against this attack;
- “The actions they take in defense of Islam are proportionally just and religiously sanctified; and, therefore,
- “It is the duty of good Muslims to support these actions.”^[xxvi]

Further, Daesh adapts its narrative to account for local conditions in countries where it has or is planning to establish a presence, such as Libya, Afghanistan, Egypt, Somalia, Algeria and Yemen. Daesh appeals to disillusioned individuals globally by offering a close community with a potent identity. The collective Daesh narrative feeds into these individuals’ identities, “giving them a sense of serving a sacred mission.”^[xxvii]

The Alternative Narrative

Informed by an understanding of Daesh’s narrative, Western communicators can craft an effective

strategy to counter the propaganda. An alternative message will undercut Daesh's narrative by providing other avenues for action rather than brutal acts to achieve political and social objectives. While alternative narratives typically do not directly challenge extremist messaging, "they instead attempt to influence those who might be sympathetic towards (but not actively supportive of) extremist causes, or help to unite the silent majority against extremists by emphasizing solidarity, common causes and shared values."[\[xxviii\]](#) Alternative narratives focus on what we are "for" rather than what we are "against."[\[xxix\]](#)

An example of a positive alternative narrative is former President Barack Obama's 2009 Cairo speech. In it he reframed "the history between Islam and the West as one of shared progress." This counter-narrative had a beginning, middle and end and "provided a positive, alternative vision or social construction of the world...that is equally plausible and equally parsimonious as the narrative it disputes."[\[xxx\]](#) Unfortunately, Obama's positive alternate narrative was unable to effectively counter Daesh's and other extremist groups' narratives.

It is important to provide many alternative messages and choices to dissuade those attracted to Daesh's ideology. The more alternatives available to potential recruits, the greater their freedom and the less vulnerable they are to extremist narratives. "Having these choices will help reduce the likelihood that the terrorists' and extremists' global narrative – that the West is at war with Islam – resonates in individual psyches."[\[xxxi\]](#)

Voices From Within

One of the strategic principles of the effort to undercut Daesh's ideology and narrative is that to be effective, the alternative message should arise as much as possible from within the Muslim world. A possibly more promising approach is for the United States to bolster the voices of local and regional individuals who can promote a viable alternative narrative. The U.S. government should support and facilitate civil society efforts to design and deliver alternative narratives and take advantage of their social and cultural knowledge.[\[xxxii\]](#)

The United States should build capacity among those who can be the best counter-narrative messengers. There are a variety of alternative narratives that can be activated by a range of actors: inter-faith and inter-community networks, religious and secular opinion and community leaders, entrepreneurs, sports personalities, pop artists, writers, business people, media personalities and students. These voices can come together to create a marketplace of ideas where Muslims can talk among themselves and devise ways to diminish the influence of Daesh.[\[xxxiii\]](#)

A marketplace of ideas is the space and culture of questioning, debating and challenging the local grievances and solutions promoted by Daesh. Here competing ideas and visions can be heard and fostered, and Daesh's inconsistencies can be exposed. A forum for this marketplace of ideas can occur in civic spaces such as town hall meetings, free associations, non-governmental universities and other places where people can gather. Virtual spaces can also serve as important forums for exchanging ideas, including newspapers, television, chat rooms and Internet blog sites. In authoritative regimes where civic space and freedom to assemble is restricted, virtual meeting places provide a viable alternative.[\[xxxiv\]](#)

The important issue for the West is how it can stimulate and shape a debate among Muslims about the extremist ideology promoted by Daesh. The goal is to help amplify diverse voices.[\[xxxv\]](#)

A counter-narrative campaign should be integrated at the outset of U.S. and ally government policy and strategy design, not as an afterthought. These programs should include a communication component that outlines how the initiative will support and enable U.S. objectives.

Conducting a thorough Target Audience Analysis is critical. Communicators need to develop a comprehensive list of the target audiences' vulnerabilities and susceptibilities, which include grievances and motivations in the context of local and regional conditions.

There are differing views as to whom to target with an alternative counter-narrative, whether those who are already active extremists, somewhere along the radicalization path, sympathizers or passive supporters. Aiming alternative narratives at existing extremists is likely to be unsuccessful, given they have already made up their minds. The United States should instead target the radical network of relationships, rather than an individual. By altering an extremist's network and the embedded narrative, the extremist's identity can gradually change, "to a point perhaps in which the person is no longer an extremist."[\[xxxvi\]](#)

The United States should also target those who sympathize or actively support Daesh, either by acts of omission or commission. This includes moderate Muslims who do not speak up against Daesh because of fear and timidity.[\[xxxvii\]](#) Again, the efforts should be targeted to the networks of these individuals.

One Size Does Not Fit All

Of important consideration is that one size does not fit all. The Qatar International Academy for Security Studies report "Countering Violent Extremism: The Counter Narrative Study" emphasized that "each region, country and community requires a unique approach to countering the call to terrorism because violent extremism is a fundamentally local issue, one commonly sparked by local grievances."[\[xxxviii\]](#) In fact, Daesh adroitly uses this approach to tailor narratives that take advantage of the grievances of a particular region. Additionally, the United States must take a whole-of-government approach, coordinating and synchronizing with other entities the government and with international partners to ensure message coherence.

The credibility of the messenger should be considered, something the United States lacks with many audiences in the Middle East. It must be kept in mind that credibility should be viewed from the perspective of the audience. As stated earlier, the U.S. government should consider developing relationships with credible local actors such as young religious leaders, community activists, educators, journalists, role models and youth leaders who can deliver believable counter-narratives. Other credible voices are former jihadists, Daesh defectors, victims of terrorism, family members, neighbors and friends.

Multiple media platforms, both online and offline, should be used simultaneously to communicate positive alternative narratives. While there has been a lot of attention on Daesh's communication through social media, that is not the only medium available. Knowing the audience preferences for media consumption will ensure the message reaches them.

The United States should take a long-term perspective and look for communication effects over an extended period of time. This means that counter-narrative efforts must be continually evaluated and assessed, with changes made to the message, audience, messenger and media based on their effectiveness in achieving the United States' objectives.

A counter-narrative campaign may be most effective when the United States and its coalition partners are making significant military gains and Daesh is losing territory as is currently the situation, and its recruiting is faltering. Other measures of success are when there is growing popular backlash against its narrative, vision and tactics, and when more positive narratives spread. Thus, the United States must be flexible and adapt the counter-narrative to account for evolving conditions on the ground.

Finally, the United States can stop feeding Daesh's narrative by closing the say-do gap by aligning words

and actions. “Ultimately, competing with the mobilizing power of an opponent’s narrative involves increasing one’s own appeal.” The use of torture and extraordinary rendition are just two examples that are contrary to American values and respect for human rights. They serve to reinforce the Daesh narrative that the West is involved in a crusade against Islam. The goal is consistency between words and deeds, what Betz calls “narrative alignment.”^[xxxix]

Conclusion

The conflicts in Syria and Iraq will not end soon. Although Daesh is under pressure on the ground, it is likely to survive for some time and it will conduct more lethal operations, continue to morph its message and spread its propaganda and ideology to attract more recruits and supporters. It must be remembered that terrorism is about ideas. Even if Daesh is diminished militarily, its ideology will live on. It is possible that Daesh as a lethal idea will live on long after it is driven out of Mosul and Raqqa. The 9/11 Commission concluded in its final report that eliminating the threat of terrorism requires “prevailing in the longer term over the ideology that gives rise to Islamist terrorism.”^[xl]

There can be no compelling counter-narrative until Daesh’s narrative is understood. “If, over time, the collective and individual narratives, in their continuous evolution, come to diverge, the dissonance between them will lead the individual to not identify any longer with the group.”^[xli]

Having a greater understanding of the complexity of a narrative can make communication professionals’ efforts to counter Daesh’s communication more effective. Only then can the United States develop feasible options to contest Daesh’s demented view of the world. Masterfully using strategic communication to counter the Daesh narrative will diminish its aura, legitimacy, ideology and appeal. This is crucial to the overall information war against Daesh.

End Notes

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