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As the Islamic State gains control over vast amounts of territory in Iraq and Syria in hopes of creating a caliphate, it becomes an increasing threat to the Middle East, and potentially to the United States (Michek and Misztal). According to an overview given by the Bipartisan Policy Center, the radical jihadist organization has accrued an estimated 17,000 fighters since it was formed in 2000 (Michek and Misztal). A small, though significant, number of these fighters are citizens of the United States and several European nations (Michek and Misztal).

Investigation into how and why Westerners are joining ranks with ISIS has revealed the group's unprecedented ability to use various social media channels to disseminate recruitment and propaganda material.

A post on the Brookings Institute blog written by Javier Lesaca, a visiting scholar to George Washington University, elaborates, "Analysis of the digital audiovisual campaigns released by ISIS since January 2014 suggests that ISIS has established a new kind of terrorism, using marketing and digital communication tools not only for 'socializing terror' through public opinion as previous terrorist groups did, but also for making terror popular, desirable, and imitable." This "new kind of terrorism" constitutes a highly effective system of recruiting followers and spreading Jihadist sentiment. According to John G. Hogan, a psychologist studying terrorism at the University of Massachusetts at Lowell, ISIS targets their young audience by selling membership as a chance to be a part of something greater than oneself (Shane and Hubbard).

Besides its ability to make terror appealing, ISIS is effective on social media because of the scope and sheer volume of the material it produces. Between January 2014 and September 16, 2015, Lesaca tallied the release of 845 audiovisual campaigns, all developed by one of 29 audiovisual producers associated with ISIS. Three of these producers, including Al Hayat, target a global audience, while the remaining 26 target the areas already under ISIS control (Lesaca). In order to convey their messages effectively and attractively to such diverse audiences, media is shot in high-definition, accented by sophisticated graphics and released in several different languages on a variety of social media platforms (Becker).

ISIS' presence on Twitter, in particular, is extremely concerning in its reach. The group's network on the site, comprised of actual jihadists and their supporters, is made up of an estimated 60,000 accounts (Truvé). The users behind these accounts spread messages of hate and publicize brutalities such as prisoner executions by beheading and immolation (Gladstone). The subsequent media coverage of these horrific posts then draws further attention to the extremist propaganda (Gladstone). To amplify their Twitter capabilities, ISIS has even created an Android app called The Dawn of Glad Tidings that allows the group to tweet their messages through the accounts of thousands of their followers (Speri).

Twitter, however, is not the only social media domain over which ISIS has demonstrated mastery. The group regularly releases videos and images on other platforms such as Youtube and Instagram, including several created by Western fighters who have recently joined ranks with ISIS, others depicting gruesome crucifixions and beheadings, and still others showing fighters relaxing poolside or enjoying Snickers bars with newly made friends (Speri). In their online campaigning, ISIS has even engaged in the recent online trend of cat memes by posting several themselves (Speri).

ISIS' wide-ranging success on social media usage has raised enough concern that efforts to combat their online presence are taking shape on several fronts. The efforts of the United States government to battle online extremism began in 2011, when President Obama signed an executive order establishing the Center for Strategic Counterterrorism Communications (CSCC) in response to the growing online presence of al Qaeda. The CSCC, a small subset of the State Department consisting of 50 analysts, has since switched focus to the Islamic State (Berger). Judson Berger, a Fox News correspondent covering national security, quoted an official from the department describing the centerpiece of its efforts, a program called Think Again Turn Away, as a means of offering "alternate perspectives to the misguided ideological justifications for using violence." The campaign, launched in 2013, is currently taking place on Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and Tumblr. Though the some of the Think Again Turn Away accounts on these social sites have substantial numbers of followers or subscribers, their effectiveness cannot be accurately judged by a follower-count alone. **An examination of the output of Think Again Turn Away on various social media platforms, however, reveals its overall failure to accomplish anything of measurable worth.**

Since its creation, the Think Again Turn Away Twitter account in the English language has tweeted roughly 11,000 times to over 25,000 followers. In an effort to match the linguistic variety of ISIS' campaigns, Think Again Turn Away also includes Twitter accounts in Arabic, Punjabi, Urdu, and Somali (Berger). In a Think Progress article by Hayes Brown, a former contractor at the Department of Homeland Security, former State Department official Will McCants explains that these tweets are meant to overlay the radical Islamic material on the site and "blunt the recruitment pitches online." So far, this effort has consisted of a steady stream of news stories containing anti-ISIS messages.

The volume of output of the account, however, is marred by embarrassing exchanges and negative unintended consequences. Rita Katz, director of the SITE Intelligence Group for studying online extremist behavior, conducted a thorough examination of the methodology employed by the Think Again Turn Away campaign. The Twitter account is designed to act in two ways: by directly engaging with pro-ISIS accounts, or trolling and by tweeting counter-material (Katz). The first method of engaging extremists on Twitter is nonsensical. Each “Think Again Turn Away” tweet responding to ISIS propaganda provides Jihadists a platform to further articulate their ideas. Perhaps the most egregious example of one of these blunders occurred on August 6, 2015, when Think Again Turn Away responded to a tweet from a pro-ISIS account called Amreeki Witness, stating “IS has flaws, but the moment you claim they cut off the heads of every non-Muslim they see, the discussion is over” (Katz). Though the tweet was not addressed to the State Department, Think Again Turn Away tweeted back, “#ISIS tortures, crucifies & shoots some- ISIS also gives ultimatums to Christians: convert, pay or die- Some flaws u say?” (Katz). A lengthy “series of rebuttals” followed, providing Amreeki Witness a stage to expound on radical views. Katz explains, “The Think Again Turn Away account, instead of ignoring the claims of a pro-IS jihadist, dignified them by responding.” By engaging in “petty” Twitter wars with this and other similar accounts, the U.S. State Department is lending legitimacy to low-level Jihadists and aiding the promulgation of their extremist sentiment.

The second method employed by the Think Again Turn Away Twitter, disseminating counter-material, is marred by inaccuracy and a lack of evidence backing up claims. According to Joshua Keating, an international affairs reporter for Slate, the account has tweeted several stories based on flimsy evidence or containing false information since its inception (Keating). One such example is a May 12, 2015 tweet providing a link to a story about forced female

circumcision of two million women in Mosul, Iraq (Keating). The story was already one-year-old at the time, but beyond its lack of timeliness, the claim it makes had already been refuted by several journalistic sources in the area (Brown). Samuel Oakford, the UN correspondent for VICE News, cites a similar incident as further evidence of the account's inaccuracy. On May 11, 2015, Think Again Turn Away tweeted an unconfirmed British tabloid article stating that girls kidnapped by ISIS frequently commit suicide (Oakford). The only source for the article was an aid worker in Canada identified only by pseudonym and there was no follow-up reporting after the initial article (Keating). By circulating stories like these that are based on extremely limited evidence or are simply untrue, the State Department is damaging its own credibility and doing little to discredit ISIS.

In addition, advertising the violence and brutality perpetrated by ISIS on the Think Again Turn Away Twitter may encourage some to join ISIS, rather than serve as a deterrent. Keating suggests that highlighting atrocities, even when based solidly in fact, is at best harmless and at worst "may be selling points...for prospective ISIS members." Dr. Jeff Victoroff, a professor at the University of Southern California studying the psychology of terrorism, agrees, "There is a psychological error in trying to scare people off with threats that something might be exciting and thrilling...If you challenge a young adult, particularly a male, with the fact that something might be especially difficult or challenging, you're just exciting them" (Hansen). This phenomenon may be able to be explained in part by the pervasiveness of violence in current popular culture. Lesaca's analysis of the 845 campaigns released by ISIS between January 2014 and September 16, 2015 reveals that over 15% are "directly inspired" by barbaric films and video games such as *Saw*, *V for Vendetta*, *Call of Duty* and *Grand Theft Auto*. Evan F. Kohlmann, the chief information officer at the security consulting firm Flashpoint Global

Partners, explains that this and other U.S. efforts online fail to resonate with the target audience of moderates who may be on the fence of joining ISIS because “They don’t seem to have a clear picture of what audience they are trying to reach, or how to influence them” (Gearan).

Some content on the Think Again Turn Away Twitter feed may, however, have an opposite effect of generating an emotional response against what ISIS is doing. For example, Keating argues that a story posted about a young woman from the UK who came to deeply regret her decision to join ISIS once confronted with the extreme violence of the group could conceivably deter potential new members from joining with its appeal to pathos. The State Department account also regularly tweets about acts of extreme violence and brutality perpetrated by ISIS, as well as information regarding successful counter-measures. Just after the recent ISIS attack on Jakarta, Indonesia, the account tweeted about the successful arrests of several terrorists involved in the attack and retweeted a message with the trending Indonesian hashtag #KamiTidakTakut, meaning “we are not afraid” (@ThinkAgain_DOS). Measuring just how much repulsion from ISIS or hope in the face of their brutality is inspired by these tweets, however, is impossible. It is therefore indeterminable if the Think Again Turn Away Twitter produces any results to this effect.

In terms of potential positive effects of Think Again Turn Away on Twitter, simply making anti-ISIS material available on the web may be beneficial. In a defense of the Twitter account, McCants said, “The US government has to contest these kinds of [jihadist] messages, because what was happening prior to this was nothing...at least this way, we’re offering some American perspective and shooting down some of the more egregious examples... You see an evil, you see a poison, you have to counter it.” The coordinator for the CSCC expresses a similar sentiment, “We don’t give ourselves airs that we are a huge operation or that we are radically

shifting sentiment... But, at the very least, we are beginning to begin to present alternate points of view” (Alioto). While it is not outside the realm of possibility that the number of State Department sponsored tweets are making a small dent in countering extremist sentiment, it remains improbable. A study from 2012 demonstrated that similar efforts up to that point were fruitless in their attempts to shift the current conversation surrounding ISIS from its anti-American spirit – only four percent of posts by other Twitter users viewed the outreach positively (Brown). The difficulty remains that much of the target audience of the current Think Again Turn Away account already has such a strong anti-American bias that it will likely take much more than an American government-sponsored Twitter account to sway their opinion.

Unlike the The Think Again Turn Away Twitter account, the YouTube channel produces original material and has thirty-three uploads to date. The account made news on August 22, 2014 when it released a short satirical video titled, “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land.” Since the video was posted, it has been viewed almost 900,000 times, making it the most-viewed upload. The clip is a patchwork of news footage, closed-circuit TV and other forms of video set to ominous music. Depicted in the video are several crucifixions and a suicide bombing inside a mosque. In a highly inappropriate combination, this brutality is coupled with a flippant tone. Viewers are sarcastically urged, “Run do not walk to ISIS Land” and the video ends with the following quip: “Travel is inexpensive because you won’t need a return ticket” succeeded by images of dead fighters (“Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land (ISIS/ISIL)”). The common thread linking “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land” with other various clips featured on the account is extremely graphic violence.

The idea for “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land” came to Alberto Fernandez, former coordinator for the CSCC in the summer of 2014 (Miller and Higham). Inspired by the Monty

Python parodies of the Crusades, Fernandez asked his team to cull the most violent footage of ISIS available online to be included (Miller and Higham). Despite all of the effort that went into the making of the video, however, nothing much came of it. 900,000 views on YouTube is in no way impressive, considering the highest-viewed uploads on the site garner hundreds of millions of views. To make matters worse, the State Department admitted that only one percent of the 900,000 hits likely represents views by the target audience, the rest being journalists reporting on the video (Brown). Like the Think Again Turn Away Twitter account, the graphic material featured in “Welcome to the ‘Islamic State’ Land” is likely to do little to change the opinions of Islamic State radicals and may serve instead to cement their beliefs, or, in the case of moderates, entice them into joining ISIS. Richard Stengel, head of public diplomacy appointed by John Kerry, explains the potential danger as “the backfire effect: when you try to disabuse somebody who has a strongly held belief, more often than not it makes their belief even stronger” (Miller and Higham). Regardless of whether the video is strengthening Islamic extremism, the State Department has not been able to produce evidence to suggest that the video is doing its intended job of preventing people from joining the fight with ISIS in Syria (Miller and Higham). Similarly, to hope, prevention capability is another metric that is nearly impossible to measure, but an effort that yields no demonstrable results cannot be considered successful.

Another forum for the anti-extremist messages of the Think Again Turn Away campaign, Ask.fm, is far less graphic though equally as embarrassing and ineffective as both the YouTube channel or the Twitter account. The site is a question and answer style forum in which visitors to a user’s individual page can ask questions anonymously, used most commonly by teenagers in need of an anonymous outlet. One Gizmodo blogger describes the effort as follows: “Think Again Turn Away’s accounts are, to put it lightly, trash fires in a medical waste dump on Planet

You're Bad At Your Job, and Ask.fm is one of the worst" (Knibbs). And it seems that even the State Department itself came to realize the ineffectiveness of the account, as the last response was posted over one year ago. Questions and responses on the site ranged from useless to entirely irrelevant. For example,

Question: "Our deaths are in paradise while yours are in hell. Bloody greetings, Jihadi John."

Response: "As appalling as his actions are, Jihadi John likely has better English-language skills than what you have demonstrated."

Exchanges like this cannot serve any real purpose. This exchange neither provides any substantive information against ISIS nor bolsters the position of the U.S. Even more unproductive are completely irrelevant exchanges like the following:

Question: If you were an ice cream flavor, what would you be?

Response: This kind:



Surely discussing ice cream is not helping the anti-ISIS cause online. In the same fashion as the Twitter, the Think Again Turn Away Ask.fm engaged in petty exchanges or produced output completely extraneous to its goal.

Despite waging battle on several social media fronts, the U.S. State Department Think Again Turn Away program against ISIS has proven unfruitful. Some have argued that simply by making counter-extremist material available on the web, the campaign serves a worthy purpose. This effect and whether or not the material inspires hope, however, have yet to be proven. What is known is that the efforts on Twitter, YouTube and Ask.fm are embarrassing to the U.S. in their pettiness and irrelevance. Additionally, there may be an even more sinister result of actually encouraging moderates on the fence about ISIS to join. In an NPR interview on Think Again Turn Away, Fernandez was reminded of the saying, “never argue with a moron, they'll drag you down to their level and beat you with experience” (Goodwyn). Perhaps he should have taken these words to heart in designing Think Again Turn Away.