VIOLENT EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM ONLINE IN 2017:
THE YEAR IN REVIEW

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Introduction[1]

The use of the Internet, particularly social media, by violent extremists and terrorists and their supporters received an increasing amount of attention from policymakers, media, Internet companies, and civil society organisations in 2017. In addition to politicians stepping-up their rhetoric regarding the threat posed by consumption of and networking around violent extremist and terrorist online content, prominent and heavily trafficked social media platforms also took a stronger stand on the issue this year, which caused civil liberties organisations considerable disquiet. This report treats developments in the violent extremist and terrorist online scene(s) and responses to them in the 12-month period from 1 December 2016 to 30 November 2017.[2] It is divided into two parts: Part I focuses on the online activities of both the so-called 'Islamic State' (hereafter IS) and the extreme right; Part II details the responses of major social media companies to this activity. Concerns surrounding freedom of expression are addressed throughout.

PART I. VIOLENT EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST ONLINE ACTIVITY IN 2017

IS's Online Content Production Capabilities Degraded Further in 2017

IS's online content production and circulation capabilities had already begun to degrade in 2016. They were damaged further in 2017. In particular, 'real world' factors appear to have impacted on the volume and frequency of IS content uploaded in the 12 months under review. Having said this, IS has a massive archive of content still accessible across a diversity of online spaces. Also there is no certainty that their levels of media production cannot rebound in the short, medium, or long term.

External Impacts and Supply-side Issues

Increased pressure on IS territory and manpower and direct targeting by Western forces of IS' social media 'experts' and strategists[3] and their cyber apparatus had already begun to impact IS's online content supply from early 2016.[4] The loss of their Iraqi and Syrian 'capitals' of Mosul in Iraq and, especially, Raqqa in Syria—in June and October 2017 respectively—hastened this decline. The most up-to-date analysis of IS's online media output for the period under review herein, was published by *BBC Monitoring* on 23 November, 2017. It quantifies and analyses the daily output of statements, pictures, videos, and infographics by IS via the group's Telegram channels from 22 November 2016 until 22 November 2017.[5] The Monitoring team had this to say regarding IS's response to the summer attacks in the UK:

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[2] VOX-Pol's *Year in Review 2016* addressed developments in violent extremism and terrorism online from 1 January 2016 to 31 November 2016. It is free-to-access online at http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-In-Review-WEB.pdf.
[3] For example, the separate August 2016 drone killings of 21-year old Briton Junaid Hussain a.k.a. Abu Hussain al-Britani   and IS' second-in-command, Syrian-born Abu Muhammad al-Adnani and, in September, IS's 'Minister of Information' Wa'il al-Fayad. Hussain was reportedly targeted leaving an Internet café in Raqqa. See 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.
[4] See, for example, EUROPOL. 2017. EU Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2017 (The Hague: Europol), pp.'s 29-30: https://www.europol.europa.eu/activities-services/main-reports/eu-terrorism-situation-and-trend-report-te-sat-2017.
[5] BBC Monitoring. 'Analysis: Islamic State Media Output Goes Into Sharp Decline.' *BBC Monitoring*, 23 November 2017: https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dnnj2k. It should be noted that the BBC Monitoring team counted each IS picture 'album' as one item, rather than recording each image as a separate item. Translations were also not

"For an organisation as media savvy as IS, it might be expected that its official media activity would have been ramped up in the aftermath of high-profile attacks in the West. But our data indicates that such attacks have generally not seen a boost to the group's media output...This is in contrast to the centrally-coordinated media campaigns of 2015 and 2016 that IS launched following high-profile attacks in the West, such as the Paris attacks of 13 November 2015 and the Brussels bombings of 22 March 2016. Those campaigns featured series of videos—often numbering around a dozen—issued by IS's various geographic branches. They all followed a similar format and were issued within a matter of hours or a day of each other."[6]

This downturn in output was not just apparent with respect to the UK attacks: a slight but steady overall downward trajectory can be apprehended over the course of 2017, with a precipitous decline on the October loss of its *de facto* capital, Syria's Raqqa (see Figure 1).
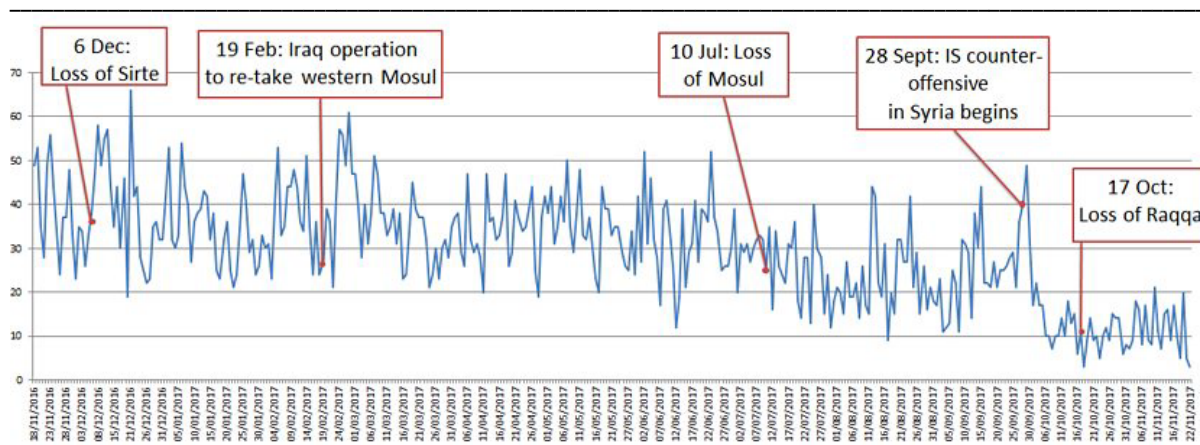

Figure 1. IS's Daily Media Output: 22 Nov. 2016 to 22 Nov. 2017 (Source: *BBC Monitoring*)

IS's online media output dropped to a new low within just hours of IS losing Raqqa on 17 October. On 18 October, for example, just 4 items were released, the lowest number of items published on any given day over the period of *BBC Monitoring's* research. On average, the number of media products released fell from 29 per day to just 10 daily thereafter. *BBC Monitoring* show that this marked decline applies across all online content types:

- The number of Amaq statements fell from 421 in September to 193 in October;
- The number of Amaq videos fell from 52 in September to 11 in October;
- The number of statements issued by IS's central and regional media outlets fell from 138 in September to 52 in October,
- The number of picture 'albums' fell from 175 in September to 81 in October;
- The number of videos released by IS's central and regional media outlets fell from 15 in September to 4 in October (see also Figure 2).[7]

This appears to confirm that a large part of IS's media operations were based out of Raqqa. Also impacted were two other core IS media products, their monthly *Rumiyah* magazines and *al-Bayan* radio broadcasts. The content of all 2017 issues of the magazines and its recent publication interruption are detailed in Box 1. Regarding *al-Bayan*, its radio bulletins: "had been a staple of IS's daily output since April 2015, became intermittent following the group's loss of Raqqa, before coming to a halt on 25 October. Although they resumed online on 11 November, they became intermittent again 10 days later." Also, the re-started service (i.e. from mid-November to 20 November) relied on recorded programming and not live transmissions, as

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included as separate items (e.g. an *Amaq* attack claim published in Arabic, but translated into multiple other languages was counted as just one item).

[6] *Ibid.*

[7] *Ibid.*

previously. Furthermore, between 22 and 23 November, what *BBC Monitoring* termed "an unprecedented 24-hour hiatus" in all official IS online media output occurred.

The fall in the number of videos released is particularly noteworthy as these have been a centerpiece of IS's online media strategy. Images, including individual still images and multiple photos combined into 'albums,' infographics, posters, and claims regarding operations, remain the most prevalent type of official online content produced by IS (see Figure 2). In 2015 the dominant themes within these images were identified as mercy, belonging, brutality, victimhood, war, and utopia.[8] In 2017, a significant decline in previously prominent themes, such as the victimhood and 'caliphate' as utopia narratives, and a substantial uptick in the war theme was observable, with the latter comprising some 90% of official content in October and November. It's this theme that's also at the heart of a new *Flames of War* video, the sequel to *Flames of War: The Fighting Has Just Begun*, a 55-minute long video released on 19 September 2014. The 58-minute *Flames of War II: Until the Final Hour*, was released on 29 November, 2017. Narrated, like the first release, by an American-accented jihadi, *Flames of War II* characterises US President Trump as "a new pharaoh even more foolish than his predecessor" and describes Americans as having "equated their safety with the destruction of Islam and its people." The *al-Hayat*-produced video also appears, once again, to claim the Las Vegas shooting for IS, but still without any supporting evidence.
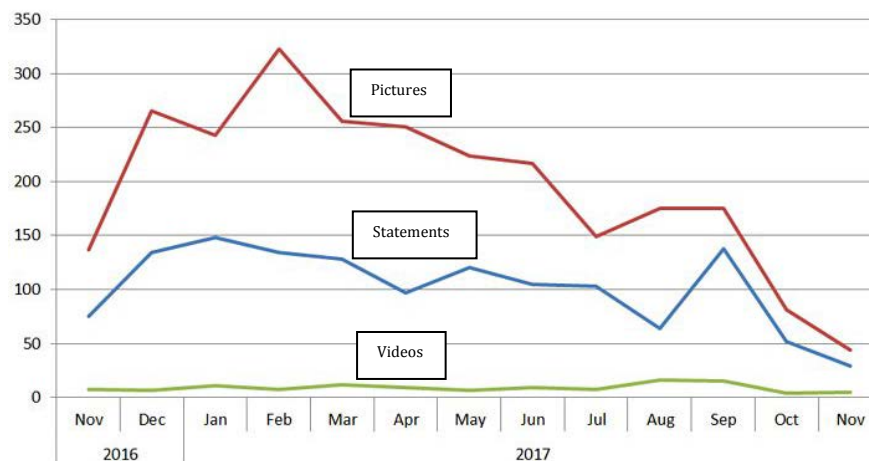

Figure 2. IS's Monthly Media Output (excluding *Amaq*): November 2016 to November 2017
(Source: *BBC Monitoring*)

A Dip in Content Production Does Not Spell the End of the 'Virtual Caliphate'

The release of a major new IS video production is a reminder that while there has been a decline in IS online content production, it is a.) certainly not ended, but also b.) IS's media production activity since 2014 has been such that the latter have a very large archive of content to fall back on should new content not be forthcoming at the same rate as previously. Thus while IS's presence in the physical world is in decline and this is presently also reflected in a decline in online media output, they maintain a diffuse but still robust online presence, able to influence disaffected people globally to act on their behalf. The accused attacker in the 31 October New York truck attack claimed to have been inspired by IS videos he watched on his mobile telephone, for example. A court-ordered search of two mobile phones found in Sayfullo Saipov's rented truck found 90 videos and 3,800 IS-related propaganda photos.[9]

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[8] Charlie Winter. 2015. *Documenting the Virtual Caliphate* (London: Quilliam), pp.'s 17-37: http://www.quilliaminternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/FINAL-documenting-the-virtual-caliphate.pdf.

[9] US Department of Justice. *Complaint in U.S. v. Sayfullo Saipov* (Southern District of New York: US Attorney's Office), 1 November 2017: https://www.justice.gov/usao-sdny/pr/complaint-us-v-sayfullo-saipov.

The *BBC Monitoring* team, like others seeking to collect IS content for analysis purposes, described accessing IS content primarily through its Telegram channels.[10] Whereas Twitter was once the most obvious gateway to the IS online scene, there is little doubt that Telegram (estbd. August 2013) is now the hub of IS activity. In 2016, the latest year for which figures are available, Telegram claimed to have roughly 100 million monthly active users, to deliver 15 billion messages daily,[11] with Telegram channels receiving 400 million views per day.[12] Telegram enables its users to have one-to-one and group conversations that are encrypted end-to-end. Whilst originally akin to WhatsApp, the introduction of its 'channels' feature in September 2015 rendered Telegram akin to a slightly more obscure, but encrypted, Twitter.[13] In addition to exploiting the channels feature, IS began to take advantage of Telegram's groups function in summer 2017. Channels allow for only one-way broadcast to an unlimited number of subscribers, but supergroups allow for intra-group communication amongst up to 30,000 members.[14] Also, group chats are private amongst participants; Telegram does not process any requests related to them per their FAQ,[15] but through tight management they can be made to operate in much the same way as channels. IS themselves claimed to be operating more than 300 groups and channels in summer 2017, which is not implausible.

IS's *Amaq* 'news agency' continued to play a prominent role in 2017, post-attack claims of responsibility by *Amaq* having 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. *Amaq* also employs dedicated websites and has had an on-again-off-again presence on Tumblr. Its dedicated site had at least five URLs between February and April 2017 due to each domain name being rapidly taken down, but it has always re-emerged.[16] *Amaq's* most recent Tumblr account, which was prominently advertised on its official website, was active from at least mid-August to the end of September 2017 (when it was apparently taken down following inquiries by a *Newsweek* journalist).[17]

Recent research into out-links from both pro-IS Twitter[18] accounts (see Table 1) and Telegram[19] channels shows that content is still accessible on a range of large and high-profile platforms, including YouTube and a number of other Google companies. Worth underlining here too is that it's not just heavily trafficked and/or high profile social media platforms that are integral to jihadist online networks, but a host of other file, text, and video upload sites are also crucial nodes, as are a diversity of other spaces such as, for example, traditional websites. Already in

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[10] BBC Monitoring. 'Analysis: Islamic State Media Output,' 23 November 2017. See also Martyn Frampton *et al.* 2017. *The New Netwar: Countering Extremism Online* (London: Policy Exchange): https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/The-New-Netwar-1.pdf.

[11] Telegram Team. '100,000,000 Monthly Active Users.' Telegram Blog, 23 February 2016: https://telegram.org/blog/100-million.

[12] Telegram Team. 'Channels 2.0 and More.' Telegram Blog, 24 February 2016: https://telegram.org/blog/channels-2-0.

[13] For comparison, at the end of September 2017, Twitter had 330 million monthly active users.

[14] Telegram. 'Q: What's the Difference Between Groups, Supergroups, and Channels?' *Telegram FAQ*, n.d.: https://telegram.org/faq#groups-supergroups-and-channels.

[15] Telegram. 'Q: There's Illegal Content on Telegram. How do I Take it Down?' *Telegram FAQ*, n.d.: https://telegram.org/faq#q-what-are-your-thoughts-on-internet-privacy.

[16] Maura Conway *et al.* 2017. *Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts* (Dublin: VOX-Pol), p.36: http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/DCUJ5528-Disrupting-DAESH-1706-WEB-v2.pdf.

[17] Interestingly, *Newsweek* reported that Twitter disallowed sharing of the Tumblr link in either direct messages or tweets and they themselves were unable to send the link via DM on Twitter, being met by a warning in red text that stated "Your message could not be sent." Jack Moore. 'Tumblr Has Been Hosting the ISIS News Agency Amaq for Six Weeks and Counting.' *Newsweek*, 27 September 2017: http://www.newsweek.com/tumblr-still-hosting-isiss-news-agency-amaq-after-six-weeks-672460.

[18] Conway *et al.* 2017. *Disrupting Daesh*, pp.'s 33-35.

[19] Frampton *et al.* 2017. *The New Netwar*, pp.'s 49-51.

2016, IS and others were seeking out small, new, and/or obscure platforms for their content hosting and distribution purposes, as noted by Europol in their *Terrorism Situation and Trend Report (TE-SAT) 2017*:

"The efforts made by numerous online platforms to remove inappropriate content have driven supporters of terrorist groups to simultaneously use multiple platforms to promote terrorism and incite violence. They have also been searching for new service providers to make sure their messages reach potential supporters. A growing interest for platforms that do not require identification can be witnessed."[20]

Jihadis, particularly IS's, contemporary reliance on content upload sites, like JustPaste.It and others, has a number of interesting potential upshots however. Some content upload sites are not searchable (either by e.g. Google or internally), for example, and their content can therefore only be accessed by possession of dedicated URLs, which limits its wider availability. Many content upload sites also have no or only very rudimentary recommender capabilities versus their social media counterparts. These are drawbacks from the perspective of jihadists seeking to engage in wide online public outreach.

Table 1. Top 10 Other Platforms Based on Out-links from Pro-IS Twitter Accounts*		
Platform	*Number of Outlinks*	*% of All Pro-IS Tweets*
1. YouTube	1,330	2.3%
2. Google Drive	792	1.4%
3. JustPaste.It	472	0.82%
4. Google Photos	431	0.75%
5. Sendvid	410	0.71%
6. Archive.org	353	0.61%
7. Archive.is	243	0.42%
8. Bahasa IS fan site	198	0.34%
9. Medium	155	0.27%
10. Unofficial Arabic IS news site	139	0.24%

* Based on out-links contained in a dataset of 57,574 tweets drawn from 722 'Pro-IS' accounts with at least one follower active on Twitter between 1 February and 7 April 2017. (In 2014, it was estimated that one in every 2.5 pro-IS tweets contained a URL. Most links in this dataset were in-links (i.e. within Twitter), just 1 in 8 (around 13%) contained non-Twitter URLs or out-links) (Source: Disrupting Daesh).

What Does the Future Hold for the 'Virtual Caliphate'?

Some commentators are of the view that the online realm will increase in importance for IS with their loss of 'real world' territory. The authors of a recent Policy Exchange report observed, for example:

"…the jihadist movement attaches as much importance to the online space as it does to the physical world. The internet functions as another front (*ribat*) on which they engage—one that often grows in importance as their 'real world' presence is diminished. Hence, prior to 2011, at a time when its influence had been reduced offline, al-Qaeda established a 'jihadist cloud' which, allowed it to remain resilient within 'its virtual spaces and niches on the Internet', irrespective of physical setbacks."[21]

A similar point was made by the *BBC Monitoring* team:

"For a group whose effectiveness is often measured by its media operation, upholding that reputation is crucial for its brand and survival. So while its output is unlikely to return to previous levels any time soon, IS's loss of its 'caliphate' on the ground makes it ever more important that it has a strong online presence. This is not only to compensate for territorial losses and to keep supporters on board, but to ensure that IS keeps its high international news profile and that its brand is not forgotten."[22]

Others point out however that maintenance of a vibrant and influencing online presence may be quite tightly linked to 'real world' issues, particularly an actually existing 'Islamic State,' IS's so-

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[20] EUROPOL. 'EUROPOL Coordinates EU-wide Hit Against Online Terrorist Propaganda.' Press Release, 2 May 2017: https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-coordinates-eu-wide-hit-against-online-terrorist-propaganda.

[21] Frampton *et al.* 2017. *The New Netwar*, p.31.

[22] BBC Monitoring. 'Analysis: Islamic State Media Output,' 23 November 2017. See also Tore Hamming. 'The Wider Jihadi Movement Will Take Over Where the Islamic State Left Off.' *World Politics Review*, 29 November 2017: https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/23696/the-wider-jihadi-movement-will-take-over-where-the-islamic-state-left-off.

called 'caliphate' in Iraq and Syria. What happens if "there is no longer a living society to join"? According to J.M. Berger and Amarnath Amarasingam:

"While some have written about the appeal of a 'virtual caliphate,' there's no substitute for bricks and mortar. The virtual extension of the Islamic State's reach served to bolster the reality of its offline analogue. Without the offline component, there is not much to bolster."[23]

Box 1. Online Magazines
Jihadi magazines have a long pedigree, are the subject of extensive media coverage and scholarly analysis,[24] and are still easily accessible online.

Just one issue of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's (AQAP) *Inspire* magazine appeared in 2017[25]; Issue 17 was published on 13 August. IS's *Dabiq* magazine[26] was replaced by a new flagship publication, *Rumiyah* (i.e. Rome), from September 2016. Ten issues of the latter were released by Al-Hayat Media Centre, an officially recognised IS media outlet specialising in propaganda in languages other than Arabic, in the period under review (Dec. 2016 – Nov. 2017). These appeared on a monthly basis from December 2016 (Iss.4) to September 2017 (Iss.13), not just in English, but in 10 other languages, including French, German, Russian, and Turkish. Worth noting here however is, unlike *Dabiq*, large portions of *Rumiyah* were translations of articles published previously in Arabic in IS's *al-Naba'* weekly 'newspaper.' The non-appearance of *Rumiyah* in October 2017 for the first time since its launch in September 2016 coincided with the fall of Raqqa; no new issues have appeared since. Also no new issues of IS's dedicated French-language magazine *Dar al-Islam* were published in 2017. On the other hand, the group's weekly Arabic-language newspaper *al-Naba'* has continued to appear.

The single issue of *Inspire* appearing in 2017 received considerable media attention due to its focus on train derailment as an attack option. Issue 17 covers this topic in considerable historical and operational detail. The historical context of trains as a means of transportation in the UK, France and the US is provided to emphasise how trains have been the core infrastructure for economic development and thus how disrupting these networks is to hit at the heart of IS's enemies. The magazine outlines the extent of the rail networks in these countries in kilometre terms to emphasise that, unlike airports and other high value targets, the rail network is essentially unsecured, providing many opportunities for attacks. In terms of detail, the magazine specifies the tools that can be used for train derailment purposes, including pointing out that the same tool can be used to target either high or low speed trains. The names of the popular high-speed trains in the UK, France, and the US are also drawn attention to. It is claimed in this issue too that several high-profile attacks were inspired by the content of previous issues of the magazine, including the July 2016 Nice truck attack and March 2017 Westminster attack.

As regards the types of attacks advocated by IS, Issue 9 of *Rumiyah* draws attention to the fact that Europe's porous borders create a gun control problem that can be exploited by jihadists. It |

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[23] J.M. Berger and Amarnath Amarasingam. 'With the Destruction of the Caliphate, the Islamic State has Lost Far More than Territory.' *Monkey Cage*, 31 October 2017: https://www.washingtonpost.com/amphtml/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/10/31/the-caliphate-that-was/.

[24] See, for example, Brandon Colas. 2017. 'What Does Dabiq Do? ISIS Hermeneutics and Organizational Fractures within *Dabiq* Magazine.' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(3): 173-190; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie. 2017. "Mapping the Thematic Landscape of *Dabiq* Magazine." *Australian Journal of International Affairs*, 71(6): 591-620; Haroro J. Ingram. 2017. 'An Analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State's Propaganda War,' *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 40(5): 357-375; Katharina Leimbach. 2017. "Die (De-)Konstruktion eines extremistischen Weltbildes. Eine Mixed-Methods Analyse von Al-Qaidas Online Magazin *Inspire*.' *Journal of Deradicalization* 11: 148-218.

[25] Two issues of *Inspire* appeared in 2016 (Iss. 15 in May and Iss. 16 in November).

[26] The first issue of *Dabiq* appeared on 5 July, 2014; the final issue (no. 15) in July 2016. The magazine's name referred to a Syrian border town, which is the site of a prophesied apocalyptic battle between Muslims and non-Muslims.

is explained that Europe's proximity to various conflict zones facilitates uncomplicated acquisition of firearms via underground criminal networks to obtain weaponry for attacks. Drawing further attention to Britain, as a high value target, they explain that guns are freely available "on the streets of Britain, though not to the [same] extent as they are in other European Countries." Supporters are also reminded of the simplicity and powerfulness of knife attacks in the same issue. It presents the case of an attack on a Russian military base in Grozny, Chechnya, where the knife-wielding attackers managed to seize the soldiers' weaponry. It is emphasised that if overrunning a military base using knives is possible, how much easier it would be to carry out knife attacks in public settings in most Western countries. The US, Europe, Canada, the UK, and Australia are explicitly mentioned in this context.

Generally, in their magazines, both AQAP and IS have tended to limit the extent to which they call upon supporters to target particular countries, locations, and landmarks. Focusing, instead, on the types of attacks preferred is probably, in part, a strategy to retain scope to claim attacks as they happen. The magazines therefore focus on specific target sites largely in the context of past events, such as the December 2016 Berlin Christmas market and August 2017 Barcelona attacks—an infographic about which is included in Issue 13 of *Rumiyah*—rather than call for targeting of specific locations in future attacks. Their emphasis in these publications is on inspiring followers to carry out attacks wherever they happen to live, but also providing some specifics in terms of tangible instructional content that can be useful generally. Having said this, the most recent issue (Iss. 13), mentions the White House, the Kremlin, and London as favoured targets. Also, whilst not directly calling on jihadis to strike the European Central Bank headquarters in Frankfurt, a photo of the ECB is included in Issue 11 (July 2017) with a caption calling jihadis to "strike the economies of the kuffar." Consistent with the general inspirational emphasis of the magazines, the countries most likely to be mentioned in conjunction with instructions in 2017 were the US, France, and Britain, which were also the countries most mentioned overall per Figure 3.

It is important to note that the approach adopted in the magazines is distinct from that espoused in semi-official and 'fan' content, which can be very specific as regards preferred targets, some going so far as encouraging targeting of named individuals. (*Michael Courtney*)

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Figure 3. Number of Mentions* of European Countries/Capitals (+ Australia and USA for Comparison) in *Rumiyah* (Issues 4 – 13) and *Inspire* (Issue 17), Dec. 2016 – Oct. 2017
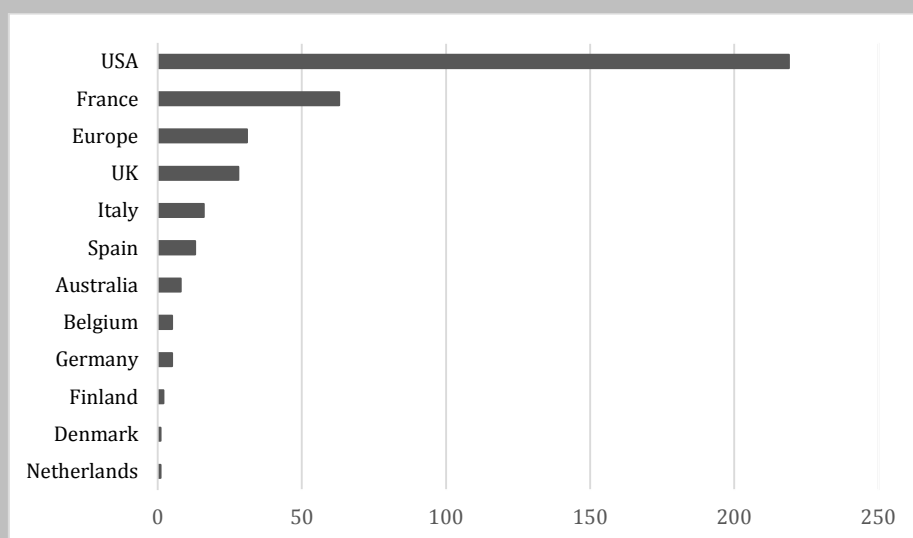
* This refers to all mentions, in whatever context, not just regarding instructions or targeting.

The Online Extreme Right Faced Upheaval in 2017, but Continues to Grow

In contrast to IS, the extreme right online scene is buoyant and growing albeit they had somewhat mixed fortunes in 2017, the 'real world' events in August in Charlottesville, USA, being particularly impactful as regards extreme right online activity.

Two points regarding the nature and workings of the contemporary extreme right are worth underlining here before proceeding further. First, the volume and frequency of production of extreme right online content cannot be measured in the same way as that of IS as the extreme right scene is not dominated by a single group or a small number of franchises or groups as is the case with violent jihadism. Instead, the extreme right is a complex overlapping of individuals, groups, and movements espousing extreme nationalist, National Socialist/Nazi, fascist, white supremacist, and/or so-called 'Alt-right' ideology,[27] including significant anti-immigration/refugee and/or anti-Islam and/or anti-jihadi sentiment. Important to acknowledge, second, is the difficulty of differentiating users, social media accounts, sites, etc., espousing more traditionally violent extremist views (e.g. Nazi or neo-Nazi) from users who hold more radical populist views around anti-immigration and Islam.

The election of Donald Trump to the US presidency following a divisive presidential campaign bolstered the extreme right, particularly its "alt-right" variant, not just in the US, but globally. A manifestation of this movement's increasing boldness was the 11 and 12 August 2017 'Unite the Right' rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, USA, which featured a diversity of extreme right figures and groups, including significant cohorts of Neo-Nazis. The rally culminated in the death, on 12 August, of Heather Heyer, when a car rammed a group of counter-protesters. The fallout from this event was considerable and significantly impacted the online extreme right.

On 23 November, 2016, the UK courts convicted Thomas Mair for the murder of Labour party Member of Parliament (MP) Jo Cox. Mr. Mair frequented a variety of extreme right websites, including the US-based *The Daily Stormer*.[28] *The Daily Stormer* and its founder Andrew Anglin gained widespread notoriety in the wake of Charlottesville when he wrote and published an article on the site mocking and abusing Ms. Heyer, which was compounded by a series of follow-up articles, including one calling for harassment of mourners at Heyer's funeral. The web-hosting firm GoDaddy swiftly removed the site from its domain.[29] With Google, Tucows, and Zoho also refusing to host the site, and Cloudflare refusing security services, it could not remain on the open Internet and retreated to the Dark Web. Following failed attempts immediately post-Charlottesville to utilise '.al' (i.e. Albania), '.is' (i.e. Iceland), and '.ru' (i.e. Russia) domain names, in November 2017 the website again sought to relocate to the open Web using a ".hk" (i.e. Hong Kong) domain. Hong Kong's domain registrar was reported on 27 November to be "reviewing the situation."[30]

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[27] 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 supremacism, 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. For an accessible accounting of its origins and contours; for more, see Angela Nagle. 2017. *Kill All Normies: Online Culture Wars from 4chan and Tumblr to Trump and the Alt-right* (London: Zero Books).

[28] For more, see Maura Conway. 2016. *Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2016: The Year in Review* (Dublin: VOX-Pol): http://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/Year-In-Review-WEB.pdf.

[29] Jake Davies. 'Neo-Nazi Daily Stormer Site Ban Provokes Debate Over Online Censorship.' Deutsche Welle, 8 August 2017: http://www.dw.com/en/neo-nazi-daily-stormer-site-ban-provokes-debate-over-online-censorship/a-40383158.

[30] Tom Grundy. 'Embattled US Neo-Nazi Site The Daily Stormer Finds a Home in Hong Kong, as Domain Registry Promises Review.' *Hong Kong Free Press*, 27 November 2017: https://www.hongkongfp.com/2017/11/27/embattled-us-neo-nazi-site-daily-stormer-finds-home-hong-kong-domain-registry-promises-review/.

In addition to websites, the extreme right are still committed to the use of both dedicated and general online forums. The dedicated Florida-based 'white nationalist' online forum Stormfront is the longest running of its sort having been established in 1995 and recording over 12.6 million posts to-date.[31] The forum, to which Norwegian extreme right terrorist Anders Breivik was a contributor, came under scrutiny, like *The Daily Stormer*, post-Charlottesville. It too lost its domain host in late August, but was back on the clear web, using its standard '.org' URL by early October 2017. Companies that refused service to *The Daily Stormer* appear to be supplying services to Stormfront; this includes Tucows, Stormfront's new domain host.[32]

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 sites 4Chan and 8Chan. In a case study of extreme right online activity in the lead-up to the German federal elections, which took place on 24 September, 2017, Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner found that Reddit, 4Chan, and 8Chan were crucial platforms for organising and coordination. It was from these that information on strategies to infiltrate mainstream debates and flood social media with memes and hashtags in support of the far-right *Alternative für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany – AfD) party and against 'establishment' parties, was generated and then shared across European extreme-right and American alt-right online spaces.

Closed online fora were also instrumental in this campaign. For example, the *Reconquista Germania* and *Infokrieg* (infowar) channels on the gamer forum Discord were found to be central in terms of providing instructions for coordinated social media campaigns.[33] *Reconquista Germania* released a video on YouTube proclaiming that a campaign to get the AfD into the *Bundestag* (i.e. German Parliament) would start on 1 September and end on election day (i.e. 24 September 2017), and comprise attacks on the "old" established parties and championing of AfD. Included were instructions for "raids" on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, whereby scheduled tweet storms and hashtags were agreed upon in advance, and trolling and spamming of comments sections were also encouraged. Members were also encouraged to post about other topics besides their far-right politics to avoid suspicion and evade take-downs.[34]

Davey and Ebner observe that in the two weeks leading up to the election, pro-AfD hashtags appeared as the top five trending hashtags in Germany on multiple occasions, indicating a successful campaign on the part of the right-wing activists. Using geo-tagging, the authors also analysed the *#Merkelmussweg* ('Merkel has to go') hashtag, and discovered that whilst over 60% of the tweets containing this hashtag originated from Germany, tweets containing this hashtag were also posted from other European countries and the US, as well as Indonesia.[35] In the lead up to the election, the alt-right also flooded Twitter with the #MGGA ('Make Germany Great Again') hashtag and a barrage of Pepe the Frog memes, in a direct nod to the tactics employed during the 2016 US election. In fact, Davey and Ebner's data shows *The Daily Stormer* domain making the fourth most frequent use of the #MGGA hashtag worldwide.[36]

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[31] Stormfront hosts a number of European country-specific sub-forums. These include active sub-forums, in order of their popularity measured by number of posts on 27 November 2017, 'Stormfront Britain' (1,034,494), '*Stormfront Italia*' (256,879), '*Stormfront en Español y Portugués*' (235,742), and '*Stormfront en Français*' (130,438). In the 12-month period under review, the British, Italian, and Spain and Portugal sub-forums recorded 41,176; 7,781; 5,768 posts respectively.

[32] See https://www.whois.com/whois/stormfront.org.

[33] Jacob Davey and Julia Ebner. 2017. *The Fringe Insurgency: Connectitivty, Convergence and Mainstreaming of the Extreme Right* (London: ISD), pp.'s 19-20: https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-Fringe-Insurgency-221017_2.pdf.

[34] *Ibid.*, pp.'s 21-22.

[35] *Ibid.*, pp.'s 22-23.

[36] *Ibid.*, p.20.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the increasing inhospitableness of major social media and other online platforms to extreme right content and activity has resulted in right-wing US activists establishing their own platforms that welcome, indeed encourage, just such content and activity. Pronounced in a 17 August tweet by the company as seeking "to make speech free again and say F*CK YOU Silicon Valley elitist trash," Gab (estbd. 2016) has been described as "a hybrid of Twitter and Reddit" in which users vote to boost or demote posts that are capped at 300 characters (or c.50 words).[37] The tweet was in respect of a GoFundMe campaign initiated by the company in the wake of their removal by Google from its Android Play Store for "hate speech." No longer available for download onto Android devices, Gab was never available in Apple's App Store having been repeatedly refused for "objectionable content." [38] It has since come under fire from its base however for banning infamous neo-Nazi troll Andrew Auernheimer a.k.a. Weev after he made a post calling on Jews to be 'taught a lesson' and going on to reference Timothy McVeigh, responsible for the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing.[39]

In terms of fundraising, Patreon (estbd. 2013) is "a membership platform that makes it easy for artists and creators to get paid." It allows 'creators' to easily set-up subscription content services, as well as make connections with their subscribers or 'patrons.' Its extreme right corollary is Hatreon (estbd. 2017), set-up explicitly to facilitate funding of those denied access by other platforms—*The Daily Stormer's* Anglin was jettisoned by PayPal as far back as 2014—due to their extremist speech and activity.[40] Cody Wilson, the site's founder, describes himself as "an old school anarchist" and is a high profile US second amendment (i.e. gun rights) activist who publishes open source gun designs suitable for 3D printing. In addition to naming his site 'Hatreon' in response to Patreon's policing of hate speech on its site, he told a *Newsweek* journalist "My best hope for it right now is it will piss off Germany and we can have a showdown with European internet law."[41] He followed-up by describing the site, in a Twitter thread, as "My love letter to the failure of the European Union."[42]

PART II. SOCIAL MEDIA COMPANIES RESPONSES TO VIOLENT EXTREMIST AND TERRORIST ONLINE ACTIVITY IN 2017

Somewhat of a turning point was reached in 2017 as regards developments in tackling violent extremism and terrorism online, with major tech companies displaying an increased willingness to take down certain content from their platforms due, at least in part, to reputation and economic damage arising from attention to this content and the European Union and some of its member state governments exhibiting decreased willingness to proceed at the tech companies' pace, and instead start implementing legislation that restricts the dissemination of extremist

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[37] 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.

[38] Madison Malone Kircher. 'Alt-Right-Friendly Social Network Gab Raises $1 Million to "Say F*CK YOU Silicon Valley Elitist Trash."' *New York Magazine*, 17 August 2017: http://nymag.com/selectall/2017/08/alt-right-gab-raises-usd1-million.html; Clare O'Connor. 'Google Drops Alt-Right Favorite Gab From Play Store As Internet Hate Speech Purge Continues.' *Forbes*, 18 August 2017: https://www.forbes.com/sites/clareoconnor/2017/08/18/google-drops-alt-right-favorite-gab-from-play-store-as-internet-hate-speech-purge-continues/#1595c27461c5.

[39] Michael Edison Hayden. 'Nazis on Gab Social Network Show There is No Such Thing as a Free Speech Internet.' Newsweek, 22 September 2017: http://www.newsweek.com/nazis-free-speech-hate-crime-jews-social-media-gab-weev-668614.

[40] Other extreme right crowdfunding sites include Counter.Fund ("…a crowdfunding platform built by and for the wider Alt-Right counter-culture") and WeSearchr ("Crowdfunding the Truth: Objective journalism is a lie. The truth is worth paying for").

[41] William Hicks. 'Meet Hatreon, the New Favorite Website of the Alt-right.' Newsweek, 4 August 2017: http://www.newsweek.com/hatreon-alt-right-richard-spencer-andrew-anglin-white-nationalism-white-644546.

[42] Cody R. Wilson (@Radomysisky). 23 October 2017, 3.07am. Tweet (thread): https://twitter.com/Radomysisky/status/922283417617739777.

content online. In this section, the responses of the three major social media companies, Twitter, YouTube, and Facebook, along with Telegram and Cloudflare, to violent extremism and terrorism on their platforms is detailed. Prior to the separate treatment of each of these platforms however, the cooperative work of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism is described.

Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT)

On 26 June 2017, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter, and YouTube jointly announced, via an agreed text posted on each of their company's official blogs, the establishment of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT).[43] They described the purpose of the GIFCT as "help[ing] us continue to make our hosted consumer services hostile to terrorists and violent extremists" and went on to state: "We believe that by working together, sharing the best technological and operational elements of our individual efforts, we can have a greater impact on the threat of terrorist content online."[44] The initial work of the Forum was identified as five-fold:

1.) To develop and improve technological solutions, such as the Shared Industry Hash Database;
2.) To Commission research "to inform our counter-speech efforts and guide future technical and policy decisions around the removal of terrorist content";
3.) To engage in knowledge-sharing with a.) counter-terrorism experts in government, civil society, academia, and other companies and, in a joint partnership with the UN Security Council Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UN CTED) and ICT4Peace Initiative b.) smaller companies to help them develop appropriate technologies and policies for responding to extremist and terrorist online content;[45]
4.) To develop best practices, in conjunction with freedom of speech and privacy advocates, to counter extremism and online hate;
5.) To learn from and contribute to each other's ongoing counter-speech activity, and determine how to further educate and empower individuals and civil society groups engaged in similar work.[46]

Whilst none of this activity or these various initiatives were in themselves new, the GIFCT formalises the companies and others' cooperation around them and institutes a process for surfacing new activity and initiatives going forward.

Twitter

In March of 2017, Twitter introduced a new section in its tenth *Transparency Report* covering government requests to remove content on the basis of Twitter's prohibition of the promotion of terrorism. In that report, which covers the latter half of 2016, Twitter reported that representatives of national governments submitted 716 non-legal requests about content posted to 5,929 separate accounts that they claimed violated Twitter's rules against the promotion of terrorism, 85% of which were subsequently "actioned."[47] According to Twitter's

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[43] Facebook. 'Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube Announce Formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism.' *Facebook Newsroom*, 26 June 2017: https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/global-internet-forum-to-counter-terrorism/.
[44] *Ibid*.
[45] See https://www.techagainstterrorism.org/.
[46] Facebook. 'Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube Announce Formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism,' 26 June 2017.
[47] Jeremy Kessel. 'Our tenth Twitter #Transparency Report.' *Twitter Blog*, 21 March 2017: https://blog.twitter.com/en_us/topics/company/2017/our-tenth-twitter-transparency-report.html.

eleventh *Transparency Report*, published on 19 September 2017, in the period 1 January to 30 June, 2017, representatives of national governments submitted 338 non-legal requests about 1,200 accounts that they claimed were promoting terrorism, 92% of which were subsequently "actioned."[48] The report states in the section 'Combating violent extremism' that over the same months:

"...a total of 299,649 accounts were suspended for violations related to promotion of terrorism, which is down 20% from the volume shared in the previous reporting period. Of those suspensions, 95% consisted of accounts flagged by internal, proprietary spam-fighting tools, while 75% of those accounts were suspended before their first tweet. The Government TOS reports included in the table above represent less than 1% of all suspensions in the reported time period and reflect an 80% reduction in accounts reported compared to the previous reporting period."[49]

All told, Twitter claim to have suspended a total of 935,897 accounts for terrorism and violent extremist-related activity in the period from 1 August, 2015 to 30 June, 2017. This is in keeping with recent VOX-Pol research that challenged the notion that Twitter remains a conducive space for IS-associated accounts and communities to flourish, although IS continues to distribute propaganda through the platform. We also pointed out in our research that not all jihadists on Twitter are subject to the same high levels of disruption as IS.

Our analysis rests on a dataset collected between 1 February and 7 April 2017 containing 722 pro-IS accounts with at least one follower that sent a total of 57,574 tweets and a convenience sample of 451 other jihadist accounts, including those supportive of Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), Ahrar al-Sham, the Taliban, and Somalia's al-Shabaab that tweeted some 62,156 times.[50] We found that pro-IS accounts faced substantial and aggressive disruption, particularly those linking to official IS content hosted on a range of other platforms. In a case study of accounts posting links to official IS content in a 24-hour period on 3 and 4 April 2017, 153 accounts were identified. A subset of 50 of these were 'throwaway accounts' (i.e. accounts specifically created on 3 April to disseminate IS propaganda with no expectation that they would stay online for any significant period of time and not part of our core dataset as they had no followers). Together these accounts sent a total of 842 tweets with out-links to IS propaganda on other online platforms. Within this 24-hour period, 65% of accounts were suspended within the first 17 hours (07.00–00.00 GMT). The 50 throwaway accounts suffered even higher levels of disruption, with a 75% suspension rate during the same time period. [51] An even more stark comparison is between median figures for contemporary pro-IS accounts versus those recorded for similar accounts in 2014.[52] The median number of followers for contemporary pro-IS accounts was 14 versus 177 in 2014, a decrease of 92%. The median number of accounts followed by IS supporters in 2014 was 257, while we recorded a median of 33 'friends' per pro-IS account – a decrease of 87%.[53]

We also compared the suspension rates of pro-IS accounts versus other jihadist accounts and found that while more than 25% of pro-IS accounts in our dataset were suspended within five days of their creation; a negligible number (less than 1%) of other jihadist accounts were subject to the same rapid response. Of those accounts in our dataset that were eventually suspended (i.e. 455 pro-IS accounts and 163 other jihadist), more than 30% of pro-IS accounts were suspended within two days of their creation; less than 1% of other jihadist accounts met the same fate. Their longer life meant that non-IS Jihadist accounts had the opportunity to send

[48] Twitter. 'Government TOS Reports: January to June 2017.' *Twitter Transparency*, n.d.: https://transparency.twitter.com/en/gov-tos-reports.html
[49] *Ibid*.
[50] Conway et al. 2017. Disrupting Daesh, pp.'s 15-16.
[51] *Ibid*., pp.'s 22-26.
[52] J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan. 2015. *The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter* (Washington DC: Brookings), pp.'s 30-33: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf
[53] Conway *et al*. 2017. *Disrupting Daesh*, pp.'s 26-27.

six times as many tweets, follow or 'friend' four times as many accounts and, critically, gain 13 times as many followers as pro-IS accounts.

Twitter is also routinely criticised for their attitude to extreme right activity on their platform. Global media attention became focused on this issue when, on 29 December, US President Trump re-tweeted three tweets, containing videos, by Britain First's deputy leader, Jayda Franzen. The three videos purported to show a group of Muslims pushing a boy off a roof, another of a Muslim destroying a statue of the Virgin Mary and, finally, an immigrant Muslim beating a Dutch boy on crutches. The authenticity of the videos was almost immediately cast doubt upon when the Dutch embassy in Washington claimed the culprit in the final video had been born and raised in the Netherlands and the man destroying the statue of the Virgin Mary was subsequently identified as a prominent member of IS. The retweets earned President Trump an unusually strong condemnation from Theresa May, along with denunciation by Brendan Cox, the murderer of whose wife, MP Jo Cox, was heard to shout 'Britain First' just prior to the attack. Earlier in November, controversy arose when Twitter verified the account of alt-right activist and 'Unite the Right' organiser, Jason Kessler. This caused such an outcry that Twitter, whilst insisting that a blue tick (i.e. the verification symbol) simply establishes that a user is who they claim to be and is not an endorsement, are now "working on a new authentication and verification program." In the meantime, Twitter are "conducting an initial review of verified accounts and will remove verification from accounts whose behavior does not fall within these new guidelines" and "are not accepting any public submissions for verification."[54]

YouTube

Consistent with the approach of other major social media companies, in 2017 YouTube also began to take a more forceful approach to jihadi content on its platform. This was almost certainly partially prompted by a March article in *The Times* (UK) newspaper, which described videos promoting Combat 18, IS, and al-Qaeda-aligned hate preachers running ads from brands such as Marie Curie, the UK hospice charity, and Mercedes-Benz,[55] which ultimately caused a swathe of advertisers on both sides of the Atlantic to pull their advertising from the platform.[56]

On 18 June, a representative of YouTube's parent company, Google, wrote that "While we and others have worked for years to identify and remove content that violates our policies, the uncomfortable truth is that we, as an industry, must acknowledge that more needs to be done."[57] The company therefore pledged to take four additional steps to fight terrorism online:

1. Increasing their "use of technology to help identify extremist and terrorism-related videos";.
2. "[G]reatly increase the number of independent experts in YouTube's Trusted Flagger programme";
3. "[T]aking a tougher stance on videos that do not clearly violate [their] policies — for example, videos that contain inflammatory religious or supremacist content";

[54] Twitter Support (@TwitterSupport). 4:03pm, 9 Nov. 2017. Tweet (thread): https://twitter.com/twittersupport/status/928654369771356162?lang=en.

[55] Alexi Mostrous . 'Google Faces Questions over Videos on YouTube.' *The Times (UK)*, 9 February 2017: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/google-faces-questions-over-videos-on-youtube-3km257v8d?t=ie.

[56] Olivia Solon. 'Google's Bad Week: YouTube Loses Millions as Advertising Row Reaches US.' *The Guardian*, 25 March 2017: https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2017/mar/25/google-youtube-advertising-extremist-content-att-verizon.

[57] Kent Walker. 'Four Steps We're Taking Today to Fight Terrorism Online.' *Google Blog*, 18 June 2017: https://www.blog.google/topics/google-europe/four-steps-were-taking-today-fight-online-terror/.

4. "[W]orking with Jigsaw to implement the "Redirect Method" more broadly across Europe.

With respect to (1.), Google said they had used "video analysis models" to locate and assess 50% plus of the terrorism-related content they removed in the December 2016 to June 2017 period and would invest more technical resources to train new content classifiers in order to identify and take down "extremist and terrorism-related content" faster. As regards (2.) above, Google underscored that Trusted Flagger reports are accurate over 90% of the time and "help us scale our efforts and identify emerging areas of concern." They therefore committed to expand the programme, adding 50 appropriate NGOs (e.g. the Anti-Defamation League, No Hate Speech Movement, Institute for Strategic Dialogue, etc.). to the 63 organisations that are already part of the programme and supporting them with "operational grants." Regarding grey content (3.), Google committed to preventing creators of this type of content from profiting from their videos, accompanying these videos with warnings, not recommending them, and making them ineligible for comments or user endorsements, which means "these videos will have less engagement and be harder to find." They went on to point out that "We think this strikes the right balance between free expression and access to information without promoting extremely offensive viewpoints." Google described the so-called 'Redirect Method' as a:

"...promising approach [that] harnesses the power of targeted online advertising to reach potential Isis recruits, and redirects them towards anti-terrorist videos that can change their minds about joining. In previous deployments of this system, potential recruits have clicked through on the ads at an unusually high rate, and watched over half a million minutes of video content that debunks terrorist recruiting messages."

Finally (4.), it was stated that YouTube would expand its counter-radicalisation efforts by implementing the "'Redirect Method' more broadly across Europe."[58]

A little over a month later, on 1 August, a post entitled 'An Update on Our Commitment to Fight Terror Content Online' appeared on YouTube's official blog.[59] A number of areas of positive progress were highlighted in the post, including increased speed, efficiency, and accuracy, described as follows:

"**Speed and efficiency**: Our machine learning systems are faster and more effective than ever before. Over 75 percent of the videos we've removed for violent extremism over the past month were taken down before receiving a single human flag.
Accuracy: The accuracy of our systems has improved dramatically due to our machine learning technology. While these tools aren't perfect, and aren't right for every setting, in many cases our systems have proven more accurate than humans at flagging videos that need to be removed."

In the meantime however, a range of individuals and groups, particularly those working on documenting human rights abuses in Syria, had begun to notice takedown of videos they had archived. For example, in a blog post, WITNESS,[60] a non-profit organisation that trains and supports people using video in their fight for human rights, detailed how one of their partners, Syrian Archive,[61] had not only verified and archived thousands of videos documenting abuses taking place in Syria, but also issued reports examining and verifying videos of chemical attacks and other atrocities that relied on YouTube-hosted content.[62] Groups like WITNESS, Syrian Archive, and many others, are hopeful that this content may be utilised in prosecutions at some future date, given that on 15 August, 2017 the International Criminal Court issued its first 'public warrant of arrest,' in relation to war crimes in Libya, based mostly on video evidence and

[58] *Ibid.*
[59] YouTube. 'An Update on Our Commitment to Fight Terror Content Online.' *Official Blog*, 1 August 2017: https://youtube.googleblog.com/2017/08/an-update-on-our-commitment-to-fight.html.
[60] See https://witness.org.
[61] See https://syrianarchive.org.
[62] Dia Kayyali and Raja Althaibani . 'Vital Human Rights Evidence in Syria is Disappearing from YouTube.' *Witness*, n.d.: https://blog.witness.org/2017/08/vital-human-rights-evidence-syria-disappearing-youtube/

social media posts.[63] Whilst YouTube is now working with WITNESS and others to remedy mistakes, and the Syrian Archive content has been reinstated, others continue to flag removals of content that could be of invaluable future prosecutorial worth. This is unsurprising to the Electronic Frontier Foundation, a champion of digital liberties, which has observed that "companies' efforts to moderate online content almost always result in overbroad content takedowns or account deactivations."[64]

YouTube's final major decision impacting the terrorism and violent extremism domain in the period under review was their large scale November 2017 takedown of videos featuring Anwar Al-Awlaki. The US-raised and fluent English speaker Al-Awlaki was killed in a US drone strike, along with three other members of Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), in September 2011. While Al-Awlaki himself was not known to have ever directly engaged in terrorism, the online content for which he was responsible, including not just his video 'sermons,' but also AQAP's *Inspire* magazine, are believed to have been a major influence on numerous terrorist attackers, including Nidal Hassan, the 2009 Fort Hood gunman; the 2013 Boston Marathon bombers; and Syed Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik, the perpetrators of the 2015 San Bernardino shooting; amongst others. An interesting aspect of Al-Awlaki's influence is that it did not wane, but is said to have increased, after his death. Specifically, it was claimed in a *New York Times* article that "the number of videos on YouTube presenting or celebrating his work more than doubled from 2014 to 2017."[65] The same *New York Times* article goes on to say:

A search for 'Anwar al-Awlaki' on YouTube this fall found more than 70,000 videos, including his life's work, from his early years as a mainstream American imam to his later years with Al Qaeda in Yemen.
        Today the same search turns up just 18,600 videos, and the vast majority are news reports about his life and death, debates over the legality of his killing, refutations of his work by scholars or other material about him.[66]

Facebook

In May 2017, Facebook CEO, Mark Zuckerberg, announced plans to add 3,000 people to monitor reports of inappropriate material on its site. Videos of murders, suicides, and child exploitation are thought to be a core purpose of this addition to the 4,500 people that Facebook already has reviewing posts that may violate its terms of service, but Zuckerberg also mentioned "hate speech" in his post. The announcement may also have relevance in a counterterrorism context however, given that Facebook Live was the application used during the June 2016 Magnaville attack.

In June 2017, Facebook went a step further and publicly clarified its approach to terrorism content and hate speech on its service. It did so in two blog posts in their 'Hard Questions' series, with one subtitled 'How We Counter Terrorism' and a follow-up sub-titled simply 'Hate Speech.' A follow-up post in the 'Hard Questions' series was published in November, this time addressing the question 'Are We Wining the War on Terrorism Online?'

In the first post on 15 June,[67] Facebook stated that their use of artificial intelligence (AI) to identify terrorist material is quite recent and that their most cutting-edge techniques are focused on ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their affiliates. The AI component of their approach, they

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[63] International Criminal Court. Situation in Libya: In the Case of the Prosecutor v. Mahmoud Mustafa Busayf Al-Werfall. *Public Arrest Warrant*, 15 August 217: https://www.icc-cpi.int/CourtRecords/CR2017_05031.PDF.
[64] Sophia Cope, Jillian C. York, and Jeremy Gillula. 'Industry Efforts to Censor Pro-Terrorism Online Content Pose Risks to Free Speech.' *EFF Deeplinks*, 12 July 2017: https://www.eff.org/deeplinks/2017/07/industry-efforts-censor-pro-terrorism-online-content-pose-risks-free-speech.
[65] Scott Shane. 'In "Watershed Moment," YouTube Blocks Extremist Cleric's Message.' *New York Times*, 12 November 2017.
[66] *Ibid.*
[67] Monica Bickert and Brian Fishman. 'Hard Questions: How We Counter Terrorism.' *Facebook Newsroom*, 15 June 2017: https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/how-we-counter-terrorism.

explained, incorporates image matching for photos and videos linked to known terrorist content, language advocating for terrorism, removing fan pages and other manifestations of terrorist clusters, fake account detection to hinder recidivism (i.e. new fake accounts), and cross-platform collaboration so that terrorist material which has been banned on Facebook does not re-appear on other Facebook-owned platforms (e.g. WhatsApp, Instagram). Facebook was careful in this blog post to underline that "algorithms are not yet as good as people when it comes to understanding this kind of context" and drew attention to the growth in their "team of counterterrorism specialists," saying that Facebook now has "more than 150 people…exclusively or primarily focused on countering terrorism as their core responsibility."

In the second 'Hard Questions' post, on 27 June, the issue of hate speech was addressed.[68] The purpose of the post was described as "to explain how we define hate speech and approach removing it — as well as some of the complexities that arise when it comes to setting limits on speech at a global scale, in dozens of languages, across many cultures." The question "when does something cross the line into hate speech?" was then posed, with the following response:

> Our current definition of hate speech is anything that directly attacks people based on what are known as their "protected characteristics" — race, ethnicity, national origin, religious affiliation, sexual orientation, sex, gender, gender identity, or serious disability or disease.
>   There is no universally accepted answer for when something crosses the line. Although a number of countries have laws against hate speech, their definitions of it vary significantly.
>   In Germany, for example, laws forbid incitement to hatred; you could find yourself the subject of a police raid if you post such content online. In the US, on the other hand, even the most vile kinds of speech are legally protected under the US Constitution.

This explicit recognition of the widely differing attitudes to and legal ramifications of online hate speech in Germany—and, indeed, a large number of other EU member states—versus the US draws attention to the difficulties of uniformly responding to hate speech, even in just a 'Western' context.[69] The importance of context and the fast changing nature of language and the word meanings are also drawn attention to in the post. All this being said, in April and May, Facebook claims to have deleted an average of c.66,000 posts reported as hate speech per week or c.288,000 posts a month globally, whilst also acknowledging that "[t]he numbers vary dramatically over time due to offline events (like the aftermath of a terror attack) or online events (like a spam attack)." Regarding the use of AI in this context, the post states "we're a long way from being able to rely on machine learning and AI to handle the complexity involved in assessing hate speech" and instead reaffirms the importance of "the eyes and ears of everyone on platform" [*sic*] to report potential hate content.

Those "eyes and ears" and are apparently no longer as necessary in the counter-terrorism domain as the third relevant post in the 'Hard Questions' series, which was published on 28 November, this time addressing the question 'Are We Wining the War On Terrorism Online?,' made clear.[70] Facebook announced in this post that it is able to remove 99% of IS and Al-Qaeda material prior to it being flagged by users "primarily" due to advances in AI. Once Facebook becomes aware of a piece of terrorist material, it removes 83% of "subsequently uploaded copies" within an hour of their being uploaded, the company said. Missing from the update however were figures on how much terrorist content (e.g. posts, images, videos) is removed from Facebook on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis. The post also pointed out that while photo

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[68] Richard Allen. 'Hard Questions: Hate Speech.' *Facebook Newsroom*, 27 June: https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/06/hard-questions-hate-speech/.

[69] Two academic projects on speech issues are mentioned in the post as being followed by Facebook; these are Timothy Garton Ash's Free Speech Debate website, which seeks to address these issues from a cross-cultural perspective and Susan Benesch's Dangerous Speech Project, which investigates the connection between speech and violence. See http://freespeechdebate.com/en/ and https://dangerousspeech.org/ respectively.

[70] Monica Bickert and Brian Fishman. 'Hard Questions: Are We Winning the War On Terrorism Online?' *Facebook Newsroom*, 28 November 2017: https://newsroom.fb.com/news/2017/11/hard-questions-are-we-winning-the-war-on-terrorism-online/.

and video matching and text-based machine learning are "showing promise," "[d]eploying AI for counterterrorism is not as simple as flipping a switch. Depending on the technique, you need to carefully curate databases or have human beings code data to train a machine." The focus in terms of identification and takedown of content, it is acknowledged by Facebook, remains on IS and Al-Qaeda and their affiliates' material because these terrorist groups "pose the biggest threat globally, in the real-world and online." The expansion of the use of automated systems to "detect content from regional terrorist organizations" is nonetheless also foreseen.

Telegram

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."[71] Official IS Telegram channels are particularly subject to disruption, but generally reappear.

Table 2. Number of IS Bots and Channels Banned from Telegram: December 2016 – November 2017*	
Month	*Number of Bots and Channels Banned*
1. December 2016	2,652
2. January 2017	3,044
3. February 2017	2,566
4. March 2017	4,149
5. April 2017	2,984
6. May 2017	3,942
7. June 2017	7,165
8. July 2017	7,303
9. August 2017	9,078
10. September 2017	8,553
11. October 2017	9,270
12. November 2017	7,552
TOTAL	**68,258**
* Per data supplied on Telegram's official 'ISIS Watch' Channel.	

There are also large numbers of quasi- or semi-official and IS fan channels, in a range of languages, currently active on Telegram, many of which have thousands of followers. A range of other jihadi groups and figures also maintain presences on Telegram. In December 2016, Telegram established a dedicated 'ISIS Watch' channel, which provides a running tally of numbers of "ISIS bots and channels banned" (see Table 2). As already pointed out however, IS now have a heavier reliance on groups than they once did and these are not subject to takedown.

On 14 July 2017, Indonesia blocked 11 of Telegram's web-based service's Domain Name Systems (DNS) because, the authorities said, it hosted channels "full of radical and terrorist propaganda."[72] The threat of a full shutdown by Indonesia caused Telegram's founder, Pavel Durov, to travel to the country to engage in talks with the government. In a joint news conference Rudiantara, the Indonesian Minister of Communications and Information Technology, Durov said "We have discussed ways to block publicly available propaganda of

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[71] Telegram. 'Q: There's Illegal Content on Telegram. How Do I Take it Down?' *Telegram FAQ*, n.d.: https://telegram.org/faq#q-there-39s-illegal-content-on-telegram-how-do-i-take-it-down. See also 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),   pp.'s   18-19: https://cchs.gwu.edu/sites/cchs.gwu.edu/files/downloads/Berger_Occasional%20Paper.pdf.
[72] Reuters Staff. 'Indonesia to Lift Ban on Telegram Message Service Over Security.' *Reuters*, 1 August 2017. https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-security-apps/indonesia-to-lift-ban-on-telegram-message-service-over-security-idUSKBN1AH40K.

terrorism on Telegram, which is something we have committed to do globally, and particularly in Indonesia."[73] He also said that Telegram's lines of communication with the Indonesian government would be improved, given that Telegram was unaware of email requests from the Communications Ministry to shut certain channels. A team of Indonesian speakers has also been formed in the company, according to Durov. It is not known whether the increase in IS bots and channels banned from Telegram from August is connected with Durov's agreement with the Indonesian authorities.

Cloudflare

Cloudflare is not a social media, but a security company, which ensures content loads quickly and is protected from attack, particularly Distributed Denial of Service (DDoS) attacks. Cloudflare is also an authoritative domain name service (DNS) provider; it resolves the domains of sites, in other words. Cloudflare provided its services to all-comers, including a swathe of extreme right websites, on a wholly content neutral basis up until the Charlottesville's 'Unite the Right Rally.' One of the websites Cloudflare had been providing service to was *The Daily Stormer*. After Andrew Anglin's post praising Heather Heyer's killer, Cloudflare's CEO, Matthew Prince, terminated *The Daily Stormer's* Cloudflare account. In a post on their official blog on 16 August, Prince said "The tipping point for us making this decision was that the team behind Daily Stormer made the claim that we were secretly supporters of their ideology… We could not remain neutral after these claims of secret support by Cloudflare."[74] The bulk of the post, entitled 'Why We Terminated Daily Stormer,' is taken up with "why it's so dangerous."[75] In particular, Prince points out that sites requiring security protections such as those supplied by Cloudflare oftentimes will be knocked offline by the frequency and intensity of attacks without them. Also, he says, soon it is likely that there will only be a small number of companies capable of providing content hosting services, which will essentially hand them the power of determining what can and cannot appear online. Prince underlines that, for him, this is not a free speech issue, but an issue of due process:

> "The issue of who can and cannot be online has often been associated with Freedom of Speech. We think the more important principle is Due Process. I, personally, believe in strong Freedom of Speech protections, but I also acknowledge that it is a very American idea that is not shared globally. On the other hand, the concept of Due Process is close to universal. At its most basic, Due Process means that you should be able to know the rules a system will follow if you participate in that system."[76]

The EFF's Danny O'Brien has made similar observations, noting that already only a few hundred companies globally offer domain hosting services. This means that if a site is blacklisted by most or all of these (i.e. cannot find a host), there's the possibility that it ceases to exist, certainly on the open web. "The issue is not 'we won't let this person into our home,'" O'Brien says; "[i]t's more 'we won't offer you electricity or plumbing,' the things that run your house in the first place."[77] This is essentially the situation *The Daily Stormer* currently finds itself in, which is causing significant disquiet amongst free expression advocates.

Conclusion: Future Trends – 2018

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 2018 are difficult to predict. The most likely

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[73] *Ibid*.
[74] Matthew Prince. 'Why We Terminated Daily Stormer.' *Cloudflare Blog*, 16 August, 2017: https://blog.cloudflare.com/why-we-terminated-daily-stormer/
[75] *Ibid.*
[76] *Ibid.*
[77] Hayden. 'Nazis on Gab Social Network Show There is No Such Thing as a Free Speech Internet,' 22 September 2017.

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 online. A particular 'one to watch' will be Twitter's expected purge of extreme right content arising from updates to their rules and systems for dealing with hate and abuse announced in November and expected to impact on the platform from December 2017.[78] Significant legislative developments in Germany and the UK, with similar moves being mooted at the European level, means that the legal environment regulating extremist and terrorist online content is likely to become much more restrictive in 2018, with all eyes on Germany from 1 January when its new Act to Improve Enforcement of the Law in Social Networks or Network Enforcement Law (i.e. *Das Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz* or *NetzDG*) will come into full force.[79] The establishment of more platforms receptive to extreme right postings is nonetheless foreseen, which is also a possibility in the jihadi online scene.[80] The relative 'successfulness' of such platforms, including issues around online hosting, payment processing, and related, will bear watching however.

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[78] Twitter Safety (@TwitterSafety). 4:00pm, 17 Nov. 2017. Tweet (thread): https://twitter.com/TwitterSafety/status/931552531167166469.

[79] The full text of the law, in German, is available at http://www.bundesrat.de/SharedDocs/drucksachen/2017/0501-0600/536-17.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=1. An official English-language version of the law is provided by the Federal Ministry of Justice and Consumer Protection at https://www.bmjv.de/SharedDocs/Gesetzgebungsverfahren/Dokumente/NetzDG_engl.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&v=2.

[80] EUROPOL. 'EUROPOL Coordinates EU-wide Hit Against Online Terrorist Propaganda.' Press Release, 2 May 2017: https://www.europol.europa.eu/newsroom/news/europol-coordinates-eu-wide-hit-against-online-terrorist-propaganda.

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