# Introduction to the Special Issue: Islamic State's Online Activity and Responses, 2014–2017

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INTRODUCTION

# Introduction to the Special Issue: Islamic State's Online Activity and Responses, 2014–2017

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The ten articles in this special issue were selected from those delivered at an international conference on terrorism and social media (#TASMConf) held at Swansea University, U.K., on 27–28 June 2017. Organized by Swansea University's Cyberterrorism Project (www.cyberterrorism-project.org), the conference was attended by 145 delegates from fifteen countries across six continents. In addition to academic researchers, these delegates included representatives from a range of nonacademic stakeholders including Facebook, Tech Against Terrorism, law enforcement, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence, the U.K.'s Home Office, the U.S. State Department, and the BBC. Six keynote presentations were delivered, videos of which are available free-to-access online.[1] The keynote speakers were Max Hill QC (the U.K.'s Independent Reviewer of Terrorism Legislation), Dr. Erin Marie Saltman (Facebook Policy Manager for Europe, the Middle East and Africa on Counterterrorism and Countering Violent Extremism), Sir John Scarlett (former head of MI6), and Professors Maura Conway (Dublin City University), Philip Bobbitt (Columbia Law School), and Bruce Hoffman (Georgetown University). In addition, a total of fifty-three other speakers presented their research into terrorists' use of social media and responses to this phenomenon. These speakers were drawn from a range of academic disciplines including law, criminology, psychology, security studies, politics, international relations, media and communication, history, war studies, English, linguistics, Islamic studies, and computer science. This emphasis on interdisciplinarity is evident in the articles in this special issue. A number of the speakers were also early career researchers or postgraduate research students; this emphasis on nurturing young researchers is also reflected in the contents of this special issue.

The articles chosen for inclusion in the special issue have a focus on the so-called Islamic State (IS) and their online activity. Not all the articles have IS as their exclusive focus, but all those with, for example, a comparative remit have IS as one of the comparator cases. The TASM conference took place at around the same time as IS's loss of their Iraqi "capital" of Mosul, but some months prior to the loss of their Syrian "capital," Raqqa. A slight but steady overall downward trajectory in IS's online content output could be apprehended over the course of 2017, with a precipitous decline on the October loss of Raqqa.[2] Output quantities have since rebounded, although not (yet?) to

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the levels of 2015 and 2016.[3] Many of the articles in this special issue treat aspects of IS's online activity, including the content and nature of their magazines and videos, their online targeting of females, strategies of online disruption targeted against them, in the period 2014 to 2017. Together therefore the collected articles supply a useful accounting of IS's online "golden age."

In the opening article, doctoral candidate Maxime Bérubé and Benoit Dupont draw from social movement theory, particularly Charles Tilly's concept of "action repertoire," to devise the concept of "communicative action repertoire," which is then elucidated through an analysis of the evolution of the global *jihadist* movement's network of actors, the contexts in which its communications are undertaken, and its adaptation to new communication technologies. The role of Twitter is, of course, mentioned in the latter and is the core subject of the second article in the collection. In this article, Gunnar Weimann details how and why Jabhat al-Nusra and IS shifted from their previously heavy reliance on online forums to Twitter in the 2013–2014 period. His argument, based on Arabic language statements by the two groups, along with those by *jihadist* forum administrators and other online activists, is that the "real world" conflict playing out at that time between Jabhat al-Nusra and IS accelerated the migration to social media. Despite their schism, Jabhat al-Nusra and IS clearly share a set of core commitments. Less obvious perhaps are the overlaps between IS and a group such as Australia's United Patriots Front (UPF). Nonetheless, in her article, early career scholar Imogen Richards examines how UPF has attempted, since its establishment in 2015, to legitimize itself through dialectical interactions with domestic and international politics, including IS. In particular, she analyzes publicly available online content produced by prominent UPF members and posted to their Facebook pages, YouTube channels, and Twitter accounts, through the lens of dialectical theory. She finds both implicit and explicit conflation by UPF of the Islamic religion with IS terrorism.

Into her TASM Conference keynote speech, Prof. Maura Conway underlined that more research needed to be conducted in extremist visuals, including especially video productions. In their article, Mark D. Robinson and Cori E. Dauber seek to provide researchers with a template for accomplishing exactly that. Robinson and Dauber, a media production professional and Professor of Communication respectively, describe their method for systematically grading the quality of extremist videos based on technical production criteria, which they then apply to a number of IS video productions, revealing periods when IS production capacity was debilitated (Fall 2015) and when it rebounded (Spring 2016). They advocate use of their method for, at a minimum, evaluating propaganda video output across time for not just IS, but a variety of other extremist and terrorist groups. Women are largely absent from IS videos, but were nevertheless an integral component of the overall "caliphate" project. Lauren R. Shapiro and Marie-Helen Maras apply social learning theory to data gained from open sources, largely court transcripts, in order to examine how thirty-one American females were radicalized by IS and their actions thereafter. Included in their findings are that a majority of the women used the Internet to begin (77 percent) and throughout (68 percent) their radicalization processes with, in terms of social media, Facebook and Twitter being the most heavily used platforms. Not only women but also children were a key component of the IS project. In their article, Ph.D. students Amy-Louise Watkin

and Seán Looney report the findings of their analysis of the ninety-four photographic images of children that appeared in four terrorist groups' online magazines published between 2009 and 2016. The magazines were Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula's *Jihad Recollections* and *Inspire*, IS's *Dabiq*, the Taliban's *Azan*, and Somali Al-Shabab's *Gaidi Mtanni*. *Dabiq* contained the largest number of child images, with their focus changing over time from an initial emphasis on child victims of Western-backed warfare to portrayals of "fierce, prestigious child soldiers." *Dabiq* was, furthermore, the only publication to exploit both genders in their images, using photographs of girl children to represent the "caliphate" as a safe and agreeable place to live.

Much of the content described and discussed in the first six articles in this collection is no longer as easily accessible as it once was. Significant pressure has been brought to bear in recent years by policymakers, media, and publics on Internet companies to "clean up" their platforms. The most significant disruption activity has been targeted at IS, as evidenced in Conway et al.'s article. The focus of the latter is the levels of disruption experienced by IS supporters on Twitter as compared to that experienced by "Other *Jihadists*." According to Conway et al., Twitter is no longer a conducive space for pro-IS accounts and communities to flourish. They also point out that not all *jihadists* on Twitter are subject to the same high levels of disruption as IS however, but that there is differential disruption taking place. IS's and other *jihadists*' online activity was never solely restricted to Twitter, of course; it is just one node in a wider *jihadist* online ecology, which is addressed in the article too. Content and account take-down is certainly not the only, and perhaps not even the best, way to respond to extremists and terrorists' use of the Internet. CREST's Benjamin J. Lee advocates for informal or grassroots countermessaging in his article, some of the benefits of which, including increased legitimacy and more aggressive messaging, he highlights. Lee is cognizant of the perils of such informal approaches too, however, and draws attention to, for example, serious potential backlash against its producers.

So major social media companies increasingly recognize the importance of preventing violent extremist and terrorist content from proliferating on their platforms, but less attention is paid to their fund-raising role. As well as presenting a threat, say RUSI's Tom Keatinge and Florence Keen, the movement of terrorist fund-raising activities online creates a disruption opportunity. Their article argues that social media companies need to do at least two things to capitalize on this: (1) display greater awareness of their vulnerability to supporting terrorist financing and (2) collaborate more with law enforcement and financial service providers to improve the system in the face of abuses. Finally, a common question for researchers interested in the terrorism–Internet nexus is "what's the next big thing?" Or "where are we going from here?" Extremists and terrorists' use of crypto-currencies is often now raised in this regard—as it is by Keatinge and Keen, admittedly to point out its little use to-date—although less attention has been paid thus far to blockchain technologies more generally. Gareth Mott seeks to remedy this by reflecting on the implications of "the blockchain" and peer-to-peer social networks in violent extremism and terrorism, including mitigation of the latter. He focuses, in particular, on the potential uses and abuses of the micro-blogging platform known as Twister. The latter's users operate a blockchain combined with DHT = Distributed Hash Table- and BitTorrent-like protocols to make posts, receive entries from other users, and send private messages. The uptake of

this or similar decentralized social networks by extremists and/or terrorists would present significant challenges for current counterextremist practices, such as content takedown.

## Notes

1. Recordings of the keynote presentations are available at www.cyberterrorism-project.org/tasm-conference-2017.
2. BBC Monitoring, "Analysis: Islamic State Media Output Goes Into Sharp Decline," *BBC Monitoring*, 23 November 2017, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dnnj2k.
3. BBC Monitoring, "IS Media Show Signs of Recovery After Sharp Decline," *BBC Monitoring*, 23 February 2018, https://monitoring.bbc.co.uk/product/c1dov471.

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