



Empowering ISIS Opponents on Twitter

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Despite recent losses on the battlefields in Syria and Iraq, the Islamic State (ISIS) remains a potent threat as it continues to gain followers and inspire terrorist attacks in the West and around the world. Social media platforms, such as Twitter, have played a critical role in the success of ISIS, as it has used these channels to propagate its message, connect with new and established audiences, and encourage attacks. In 2015, the RAND Corporation funded a study to examine the networks of ISIS supporters and opponents on Twitter, the results of which were published in 2016.¹ That study found that, despite overwhelming numbers, opponents to ISIS are deeply fractured along both sectarian and national lines, while ISIS supporters, though fewer in number, are more coordinated and sophisticated in their use of social media.

In our previous analysis of more than 23 million tweets from more than 770,000 different user accounts from July 2014 through May 2015, we found that ISIS opponents outnumbered supporters

six to one, with that ratio growing to 30 to one toward the end of May 2015. Unfortunately, despite the larger number of opponents, ISIS supporters are still perceived to dominate Twitter. This perception is based in part on the fact that ISIS supporters routinely “out-tweet” opponents, as they on average produce 50 percent more daily tweets. Furthermore, they employ sophisticated social media strategies, mobilizing their followers to spread their content quickly and effectively. For example, ISIS media offices produce content tailored to many different audiences in different languages, ranging from simple text to highly produced, almost theatrical videos. Their tweets routinely include phrases such as “breaking news,” “spread,” “link,” “now released,” and “pictorial content,” terms that are missing from the ISIS opposition tweets.

Opponents to ISIS, on the other hand, are divided along both sectarian and national lines. Drawing on network and lexical analysis, we discovered four large metacommunities: three mostly opposing ISIS (Sunni, Shia, and Syrian mujahideen) and one sup-

porting ISIS. Each of these groups employs different language to talk about ISIS and the issues that concern them. Examining these distinct resonant themes, it is clear that countermessaging efforts must be tailored to match the key concerns of each community. A one-size-fits-all message (e.g., “ISIS is evil”) will fall flat.

This Perspective presents options for operationalizing our recent findings about ISIS opponents and supporters on Twitter, combining them with existing research on leveraging influencers and tailoring messages to design a data-driven, actionable countermessaging strategy for Twitter. This paper formulates a countermessaging approach for two main communication pathways. First, we articulate an approach for working with influential Twitter users in the Arab world to promote bottom-up and authentic counter-ISIS messaging. Second, we highlight ways that the U.S. and partner governments and nongovernmental organizations can use our analysis to more effectively implement top-down messaging to directly counter ISIS support on Twitter.

Bottom-Up Messaging: Influencers

A key observation from our previous study is the vast abundance of ISIS opponents active on Twitter. These ISIS opponents represent

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a critical ingredient to a counter-ISIS campaign. The U.S. government is unlikely to be a credible messenger among the populations that are most at risk of radicalization and recruitment.² In contrast, Arabic-speaking peers within a community can likely target extremism and extremist ideology in a way far more credible than government-sponsored message campaigns alone. Such communicators are also not constrained in directly addressing the thorny theological roots of extremism. And, given the viral nature of social media, such messages have the opportunity to emanate into multiple and diverse social networks.

This observation is supported by a host of data within the commercial marketing sector. Individual word of mouth (i.e., brand recommendations by friends, family, and trusted experts) is much more likely to influence purchase decisions than conventional corporate advertising. For example, Nielsen recently conducted a survey that showed that 83 percent of online respondents surveyed trust recommendations from friends and family they know.³ Other industry surveys suggest the potential of social media–based recommendations. McKinsey, for example, found that 26 percent of purchases across a number of product categories were influenced by recommendations on social media.⁴

Despite the increased credibility of these ISIS opponents, they do suffer several key limitations. In comparison with ISIS supporters, ISIS opponents produce 50 percent fewer tweets per day (40 on average, compared with supporters’ 60), suggesting that the community is not fully galvanized in the anti-ISIS fight. In addition, lexical analysis of the metacommunity of ISIS supporters demonstrate that they more actively adhere to effective social media strategy by being proactive about encouraging fellow supporters to “spread,” “disseminate,” and “link” messages to expand their reach

and impact.⁵ Thus, despite their numbers, ISIS opponents remain at a comparative disadvantage.

We argue that this disadvantage can be at least partially reversed. We draw this conclusion from the commercial marketing sector, where businesses have developed a number of programs designed to generate positive word of mouth and enhance the influential potential of their own support networks. For example, the arts and crafts firm, Fiskars, employs a brand ambassadorship program in which it works with local arts and crafts enthusiasts to help them tell their story about using Fiskars products. The campaign reportedly generated a 600-percent increase in online conversations.⁶ SAP, a business software firm, has developed and executed a plan for engaging with various trusted experts to include professors, business analysts, and software bloggers.⁷ Pabst Blue Ribbon benefited from a strategic word-of-mouth program. This program, which targeted the millennial demographic in Portland, Oregon, is often credited with generating a complete turnaround of the brand.⁸

We believe that an examination of these commercial word-of-mouth practices, in conjunction with a close assessment of our network findings, can point to operations that can enhance the number and impact of the ISIS opposition community. How can a marketing program designed to help sell business software and beer address a thorny and complex problem such as radicalization? Of course, word-of-mouth marketing has not been limited solely to selling more products; it has also been used to promote teen anti-cigarette campaigns and counter sex trafficking.⁹ At its core, word-of-mouth marketing is about igniting social movements: getting more people to share their opinions about a particular topic and to do so in a more influential, authentic, and credible manner. Achiev-

ing such an outcome as part of a counter-ISIS campaign could isolate ISIS supporters, reduce the acceptability of their message, and provide more positive inspiration to those at risk of radicalization.

We identify an approach in this Perspective that relies on Twitter as the primary mechanism for understanding and identifying potential influencers. However, we hope that the recommended approach would have much broader implications. In theory, influential Twitter users would also be influential on other social media channels as well as in their offline lives. Thus, finding and training Twitter influencers will have an impact far beyond Twitter.

We draw the following lessons from the growing body of business literature that recommends approaches to enhance word of mouth.

Listen to the Conversation on Twitter

Market research is a basic first step in any effective marketing campaign. In performing market research for influencer campaigns, marketers try to understand how experts and both fans and detractors of a brand talk about the brand.¹⁰

This basic idea stimulated our research of examining ISIS supporters and opponents on Twitter. We believe that such an

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analysis can critically inform an influencer-outreach campaign. By isolating individuals who frequently used the Arabic term *Daesh* and/or the term *Islamic State* (in Arabic), we were able to lexically analyze the key themes used by both camps. These themes (as well as those specific to Sunni nationalist communities) are not only useful in direct countermessaging efforts (see “Top-Down Messaging: Communities,” page 8) but also inform an avenue for influencer outreach (see “Engage Influencers,” page 5). We were also able to track the frequency with which these two communities post content on Twitter, thus providing a putative measure of the competitive state of the debate. Finally, the analysis helped identify at least one exogenous event (the killing of the Jordanian pilot Muath al-Kasasbeh) that significantly galvanized the anti-ISIS community. The analysis also identified what appeared to be a significant reduction in the activity of ISIS supporters, possibly caused by the Twitter suspension campaign.¹¹

Other information would also be useful. Critically, such an analysis can identify key anti-ISIS influencers in the debate. It can also identify the most influential anti-ISIS content by tracking retweet and mention data. Such an analysis would identify not only influential message themes (e.g., content themes and topics most common to highly shared tweets) but also determine the relative value of tweet text, video, and web links (i.e., examine retweet content to determine the relative popularity of videos, images, or text tweets).

Select Influencers

Identifying influencers for outreach is a relatively straightforward analytic task on Twitter. With commonly available social network analytic tools, it is possible to rank specific Twitter users accord-

ing to different measures of social influence called *centrality*.¹² The key is to find Twitter users within the network that score high on several measures of centrality, so that we are not just identifying prolific accounts, but rather those that occupy an important position within the conversation and potentially connect different groups. From this pool of highly central user accounts, individuals can be further vetted for suitability. The advantage of this approach is that it automates the process of identifying a smaller set of potential influencers for further investigation and validation from human analysts. For programs with limited access to social network experts, it is also possible to use commercially available tools, such as Klout or Kred.¹³

Two additional factors need to be considered. First, network analysis can allow planners the opportunity to identify the specific communities they wish to target for influencer engagement. In the previous study, we used community-detection algorithms to identify communities of Twitter users who are closely connected with one another. By lexically analyzing these specific communities, we were then able to identify not only the general participants of those communities but also the unique discourse themes of those communities. The Sunni metacommunity, for example, uniquely comprised a host of smaller communities that appeared organized around Middle East and North African nation-states (i.e., Egyptian, Jordanian, Tunisian, Saudi, and Libyan identities). Planners can then select the communities they wish to target for influencer engagement.¹⁴ The process serves as a kind of segmentation analysis. Once communities are selected, it is a relatively simple matter to apply network-analysis tools to identify the right influencers for engagement—that is, a set of potential influencers for each community.

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Second, it is important to consider the anti-ISIS stance of individual influencers. For a general campaign, it appears evident that there is little value in working with users who either have no history of posting anti-ISIS content or those who rank very low on centrality measures.¹⁵ The ideal influencers will be those who already actively post relevant anti-ISIS content and have high centrality scores. However, it may also be possible to work with ardent ISIS opponents who only score moderately high on centrality measures if the goal of the campaign is to help these individuals be more influential. Or one could work with highly influential but less-ardent ISIS opponents if the goal is to motivate established influencers to more frequently tweet anti-ISIS content.¹⁶

Engage Influencers

Through active engagement, organizations seek to build a relationship with influencers, enhance their influence skills, and help them disseminate highly sharable content. The true challenge of working with influencers is that they derive credibility from their independence and authenticity. Ham-fisted efforts, such as paying influencers quid pro quo to post party-line content, can subvert their authenticity and risk making them less influential.¹⁷ Government and nongovernment organizations that seek to work with influencers must consequently engage potential influencers carefully to avoid appearing manipulative. We identify three key steps in this process.

Build Relationships

First, organizations must work to build a relationship with key influencers. A key step in this process includes careful market research that identifies influencer likes and dislikes and Twitter discourse themes. Planners can then reach out to influencers on a friendly basis and share their content, comment on their posts, and engage with them in authentic online conversations.¹⁸ A number of marketers note that showing genuine interest in influencer opinions can be a very powerful marketing tool, one that “dignifies their voice” and makes them feel appreciated and empowered.¹⁹ For those individuals who are particularly influential, it is possible to connect offline via one-on-one meetings, conference events, or other venues. Some companies, for example, have even gone a step further to invite influencers to the corporate headquarters to give them sneak peeks at products, provide factory floor tours, or invite them to speak directly with company executives.²⁰ Such actions can excite influencers who are already fans of the corporate brand and give them new experiences to share with their online communities. A key rule in this engagement process is that it must be sustained; engagement is not a one-off event or a process that stops when the relationship is solidified. Consequently, some researchers argue for brands to assign influencer managers who help manage relationships with a limited portfolio of influencers.

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Build Capacity

Next, it is possible to conduct a series of engagements with the chosen influencers to build their capacity for more effective influence. Such training programs have become common for brand-ambassador and employee-advocate programs. For example, Dell Computers has provided social media training to thousands of its employees as part of its Social Media and Community University.²¹ These efforts not only support Dell's marketing, but also help the company recruit and retain new talent. Social marketer Rebecca Bouchebel notes that such training can help participants know who they are targeting, how to target them, and how to, for example, craft effective messages on Twitter with a 140-character limit. Other aspects of training can include developing a proper social media strategy, using analytics that help determine the reach and effectiveness of outreach campaigns, and improving execution.²² And training does not need to just focus on messaging skills. A key goal of brand ambassadorship training is to better help influencers understand and appreciate the firm's brand so that they will be more eager to talk about the brand.²³

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firms specialize in developing tailored training programs that could easily be administered through an e-learning program. Live training can also be administered to attendees at local and regional counter-violent extremism conferences, with the latter providing enhanced opportunity for participants to network. Critically, social media training should teach Internet safety techniques to help trainees address and mitigate some of the risks that may ensue from speaking out against extremism. It should also include training on a variety of social media platforms as well as techniques for offline influence, such as grassroots organization building. In addition to training, it may also be possible to empower influencers with relevant information and data analytics. For example, analyses that identify the most influential type of content for particular social networks could be disseminated to influencers to help them specially tailor the content that they share.

Indeed, it will be key to motivate these influencers to participate in such a training program. Careful engagement in the relationship-building step described will be critical. Influencers must trust the agencies, organizations, and interlocutors who engage them for this training. It is also critical that they see such training as having personal value. To this end, Cari Guittard, an expert in strategic communications, advocates for a master-class approach, in which individuals who receive training “perceive the exercise as one that is helping them build essential skills that they can continue to leverage” in their professional and personal lives. She argues that the endeavor will ultimately fail if it is not “incentivized and framed for their individual benefit.”²⁵

Provide Access to Sharable Content

Next, it is critical to provide influencers access to sharable content—content that has the potential to be transmitted or shared by a third party.²⁶ There is a burgeoning science on the character of highly sharable content. For example, in a review of *New York Times* online content, University of Pennsylvania professor Jonah Berger found that content that produces high arousal emotions—such as awe, anger, and anxiety—tends to be more viral than content that evokes low arousal emotions, such as sadness.²⁷ Others similarly argue that highly sharable content is novel, exciting, or surprising because it violates expectations in some way.²⁸ The sharability of content also depends on the sharer. Some individuals share content to help people, while others share content because they want to be seen as “in the know.” For these people, sharing is a means of social currency. Regardless, it will likely be critical to provide influencers with access to a range of content that will match different influencer styles and the audiences they themselves seek to reach.²⁹

There are several recommendations for increasing access to sharable content. First, it is possible for coalition governments or nongovernmental organizations to develop their own content, such as videos or photographs that help promote key anti-ISIS themes. For example, one such content-development strategy—already employed to some extent—is to release raw video footage from Iraq and Syria to help tell the story of ISIS brutality or defeat, including footage of interviews with ISIS defectors. Government or nongovernment funders could also commission specific work by digital and nondigital artists, including those working in film, poetry, and music, to tell a meaningful and engaging tale.

A great amount of content has already been created; a key task is to collect and curate this existing content and make it easily accessible to influencers. This could take the form of a website that offers curated content, a daily distribution list to participating nongovernmental organizations and civil-society influencers, or active crosspollination of content across important but otherwise disconnected networks of users. It is also possible to help to give influencers access to experiences that help them tell their own story. An example of this might be allowing influencers an opportunity to interview ISIS dropouts or an anti-ISIS mujahideen fighter, which in turn gives them great content to share with their audiences.

Permit Criticism

Working with anti-ISIS influencers is inherently risky. To be effective, these influencers must tell their own story and advocate their own message. Many brand-ambassador programs are aware of this and thus do not forbid ambassadors from criticizing the brands and products for which they otherwise are advocates. For example, Fiskateers, the brand ambassadors of Fiskars, are allowed to criticize Fiskars products as they deem necessary. Such criticism is important, as Fiskars uses the critiques to improve the quality of their products; the criticism only adds credibility to the otherwise loyal brand advocates.³⁰

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Likewise, the U.S. government should not expect the influencers with whom it works to toe a party line about ISIS or U.S. policy. *Atlantic* writers Charlie Winter and Jordan Bach-Lombardo argue that local actors need to be given the freedom to wrap anti-ISIS messages as they see fit. They note, for example, that if anti-ISIS messengers must tune their messages to fit the “Islamic-State-is-a-Western conspiracy’ trope that is so widely accepted in the Middle East,” then so be it.³¹ If it must be wrapped in criticisms of Israeli settlements, then that must be acceptable too.³² Such “criticisms” will only make their messages more credible among key target audiences.

U.S. and other governmental agencies will need to carefully vet potential influencers for suitability. For instance, an influencer who opposes ISIS but supports other violent organizations would not make a suitable partner. However, such vetting should not be taken to the extreme and require party line agreement on all aspects of U.S. policy.

Top-Down Messaging: Communities

To understand their audience, “marketers developing a social media strategy must first listen to what online communities are saying about their products and where they are saying it.”³³ Analysis that provides data-driven market segmentation is key to this step, and the method outlined in our previous study provides a rigorous approach that could be leveraged to understand ISIS opposition online.

Understand the Audience

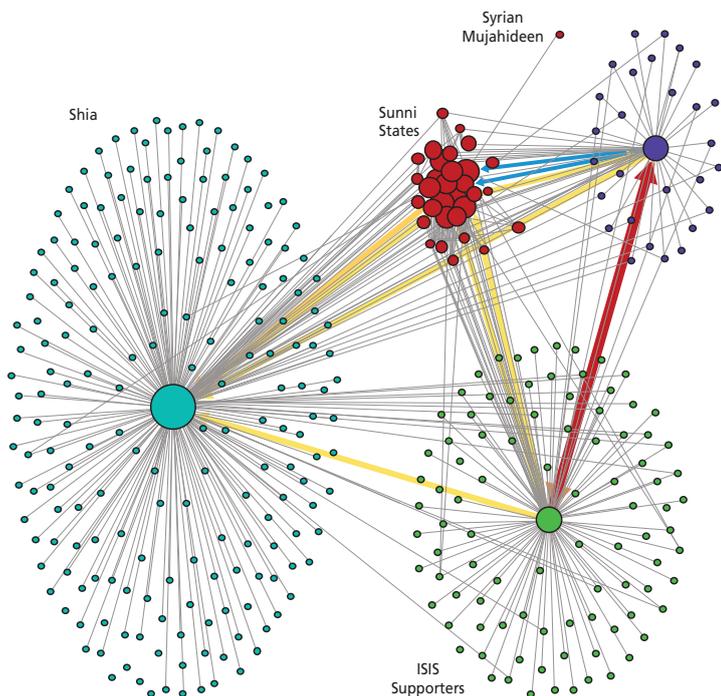
As previously mentioned in the “Bottom-Up Messaging: Influencers” section, before designing a social media campaign, orga-

nizations must first understand their audience. In particular, a data-driven analytic approach is needed to identify both the communities and the resonant themes associated with each. A data-driven approach can also be used to identify community behavior—what hashtags are commonly employed, whether there are common media outlets that are frequently retweeted, who are the main participants and key influencers in each community, etc. It is possible that different communities may have different types of influential content; some may respond more often to photos and videos while others respond better to carefully crafted religious tracts. The network and lexical approaches used in the previous study can help with understanding the audience; it serves to define the lines between communities that can then be further analyzed to determine unique community behavior and design an appropriately tailored countermessaging strategy.

Using this approach for an anti-ISIS campaign, we see the four metacommunities that comprise the conversation about ISIS on Twitter, as shown in Figure 1.

A lexical analysis of each group in the previous study determined that the Shia group uses historical Islamic terms to condemn ISIS and links the group to Saudi Arabia, while in general supporting the international coalition against ISIS. In contrast, the Syrian mujahideen group is suspicious of the international coalition, believing it to support the Syrian regime. The Sunni group, as is clear from its radically different structure, is very divided, with different resonant themes for each subcommunity. Some of these subcommunities are strongly anti-ISIS, but for distinct reasons. For example, the Saudi Arabian subcommunity is very concerned about ISIS expansion into Saudi Arabia and the threat to Islam posed by Iranian Shiism, while the Egyptian subcommunity is focused on

Figure 1. Community of Communities (Metacommunities) Network



SOURCE: Bodine-Baron et al., 2016. Based on RAND analysis, Twitter data from July 2014 to May 2015.

NOTE: In this figure, each node represents a community, with the size of the node indicating the size of the community (i.e., the number of user accounts belonging to that community). Nodes are grouped and colored by metacommunity. Edge color indicates relative number of tweets between communities, with red indicating very large, orange large, yellow moderate, and gray small.

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Egyptian nationalism, mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood, and frustration with U.S. policies. Such anti-ISIS themes as support for the international coalition might work with the Jordanian subcommunity as well as the Shia metacommunity, but would fail miser-

ably for the Egyptian subcommunity. Table 1 highlights some of the distinct themes within the Sunni metacommunity.

A counter-ISIS campaign that uses generic messaging to stimulate ISIS opposition and degrade ISIS supporters will not work in this fragmented landscape. The various themes that resonate within

Table 1. Key Message Themes in Sunni Communities

Sunni Community	Message Themes
Saudi Arabia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ISIS support and expansion in Saudi Arabia – Threats to Islam posed by Iranian Shiism, secular nationalism, international community
Egypt	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nationalism – ISIS opposition – Mistrust of the Muslim Brotherhood – Frustration with U.S. policies
Jordan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nationalism – Muath al-Kasasbeh – Support for international air campaign
Libya	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Nationalism – ISIS opposition – Distrust of Libyan politicians, militants, and the West
Yemen	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – ISIS support – Criticism of Saudi intervention
ISIS provocateurs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Insults
Tunisia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Spam (pro- and anti-ISIS, selling unrelated services) and bots using hashtags related to Tunisia
GCC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Mostly anti-ISIS spam

SOURCE: RAND analysis, Twitter data from July 2014 to May 2015.

the different communities point to a need for tailoring messages and developing strategies to approach each community.

Cultivate the Audience

Once the online landscape has been mapped and analyzed, organizations can begin to tailor messaging and cultivate potential audiences. In this particular case, it will also be important to understand that non-U.S.-branded content is viewed as far more credible by Arab audiences than content directly disseminated from U.S. sources.³⁴ Rather than bemoan this fact, organizations should use it to their advantage and pursue efforts to build the capacity of partner-nation and nongovernmental organization messaging centers. These centers will be a critical avenue for top-down messaging. For example, as part of the U.S.-led “Global Coalition Against Daesh,” Malaysia recently launched a regional center to counter ISIS messaging modeled after the Sawab Center in Abu Dhabi.³⁵ The Sawab Center, a partnership between the United States and the United Arab Emirates, focuses on direct online engagement to counter propaganda and plans to “increase the intensity of online debate by presenting moderate and tolerant voices from across the region and amplifying inclusive and constructive narrative.”³⁶

As the U.S. Department of State shifts from direct messaging to engaging partners through the Global Engagement Center, these centers in various countries will become even more important venues for pursuing a top-down messaging strategy aimed at different communities. In particular, messaging centers can work to cultivate followers in relevant communities so that there will be eager audiences for niche content distribution, along the lines of the bottom-up strategies outlined earlier.

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Regardless of which organization does the messaging, one technique that can be very useful to reach specific communities is hashtag targeting. Using a data-driven approach, organizations first identify the hashtags that are commonly employed by a particular community. Messages can then be tagged and will automatically reach users in that community, whether because they follow those hashtags or because influencers in that community that they follow use those hashtags. In anticipation of this specific reach, organizations should shape content for specific communities using the resonant themes identified in earlier community characterization. Furthermore, they can and should employ the type of content (videos, images, text) that is most often retweeted and replied to, as identified by data-driven community analysis.

By understanding and cultivating particular audiences, the United States and its partners can ensure that it is effectively communicating, in a nuanced and focused way, to particular audiences, rather than communicating on general topics that may be of interest to few recipients.

Conclusions

While social media is still relatively new (Twitter launched in 2006), many of the best practices for using it are based on well-understood marketing approaches. The first, and perhaps most important, lesson is that a social media campaign must be part of a broader marketing strategy, whether to sell more shoes of a particular brand or to convince at-risk populations not to engage in violent extremist behavior. Thus, our recommended approaches for using Twitter must ultimately be tied to an overarching campaign that seeks to undermine extremism.

Social media in particular can be leveraged to “[create] conversations with consumers rather than one-sided strictly persuasive . . . brand messages.”³⁷ Working with influencers, engaging them in such a way that their impact increases without degrading their credibility, helps to create this conversation in a more genuine way than purely top-down messaging.

Tailoring top-down messaging by targeting specific themes to different communities also helps facilitate the social conversation by providing distinct content that resonates with the issues that various communities face. Using data-driven market segmentation and analysis, organizations can listen to and learn from the existing ISIS opposition to create more effective countermessages.

Finally, countermessaging strategies and specific efforts should be analyzed to measure impact and modify approaches as needed. Various methods exist for measuring marketing impact, including social media–specific key performance indicators. Evaluating these are beyond the scope of this Perspective, but we mention them here as a key ingredient for designing and evaluating a countermessag-

ing campaign. In particular, they should be tied to specific goals and objectives, rather than evaluated for their own use.

We offer these observations and recommendations for several key audiences, including U.S. agencies charged with countering ISIS influence, agencies of allied governments, and many nongovernmental organizations that seek to counter ISIS influence. The U.S. Department of State’s Global Engagement Center is one key organization: It plays a central role in U.S. efforts to motivate and empower influencers and disseminate key anti-ISIS content.³⁸ We have not conducted an assessment of the Global Engagement Center or other agency efforts and so do not know the extent to which its current practices adhere to our specific recommendations. However, the organization would play a central role in managing and orchestrating such a campaign. This would not only include effective management of its own operations (to include direct messaging on Twitter and direct outreach to influencers) but also coordination and capacity building of partner government and nongovernmental organizations.

We must point out that the execution of a top-down/bottom-up campaign would require significant pools of talent from marketing and advertising experts who are well versed in crafting and

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deploying messages strategically and managing word-of-mouth campaigns. Drawing on her experience coordinating Middle East engagement at the U.S. Department of State following the September 11 attacks, Guittard noted that even the best-developed strategy can fall flat if it does not take advantage of expert, professional communicators.³⁹

A data-driven counter-ISIS media campaign that carefully leverages key influencers and tailors messages to different communities has the potential to deny ISIS critical platforms for spreading propaganda and recruiting fighters. Such an effort will contribute to the counter-ISIS fight and help develop tactics to not only degrade ISIS online now, but also combat future extremist adversaries.

Notes

¹ Elizabeth Bodine-Baron, Todd Helmus, Madeline Magnuson, and Zev Winkelman, *Examining ISIS Support and Opposition Networks on Twitter*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-1328-RC, 2016. As of March 7, 2017: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1328.html

² Todd Helmus, Erin York, and Peter Chalk, *Promoting Online Voices for Countering Violent Extremism*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-130-OSD, 2013. As of March 7, 2017: http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR130.html. The 2001 White House strategy for countering violent extremism also shared the view that messaging by the U.S. government might not be viewed as credible. The strategy document argues that the United States must empower credible, authentic, and constructive online Muslim voices who will in turn play a leading role in helping to counter support for extremism. White House, “Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” press release, Washington, D.C., August 3, 2011a. As of March 7, 2017: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/08/03/empowering-local-partners-prevent-violent-extremism-united-states>; and White House, “Strategic Implementation Plan for Empowering Local Partners to Prevent Violent Extremism in the United States,” press release, Washington, D.C., December 8, 2011b. As of March 7, 2017: <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/12/08/strategic-implementation-plan-empowering-local-partners-prevent-violent>

³ This compares with approximately 60 percent who report that they trust traditional paid television, radio, and magazine advertisements. Nielsen, “Recommendations from Friends Remain Most Credible Form of Advertising Among Consumers; Branded Websites Are the Second Highest Rated Form,” September 28, 2015. As of October 12, 2016: <http://www.nielsen.com/us/en/press-room/2015/recommendations-from-friends-remain-most-credible-form-of-advertising.html>

⁴ Jacques Bughin, “Getting a Sharper Picture of Social Media’s Influence,” *McKinsey Quarterly*, July 2015. As of October 12, 2016: <http://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/marketing-and-sales/our-insights/getting-a-sharper-picture-of-social-medias-influence>

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⁶ “Fiskateers,” brainsonfire.com, undated. As of October 10, 2016: <http://brainsonfire.com/work/fiskars>; Robin Phillips, Greg Cordell, Geno Church, and Spike Jones, *Brains on Fire, Igniting Powerful, Sustainable, Word of Mouth Movements*, Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2010.

⁷ Kimberly Smith, “Influencer Marketing Success Stories: How 13 Companies Are Activating Advocates and Influencers to Promote Their Brands,” MarketingProfs LLC, 2011, p. 30. As of April 13, 2017: http://www.mcbru.com/downloads/MProfs_InfluencerCSC_Altium.pdf

⁸ Rob Walker, “The Marketing of No Marketing,” *New York Times*, June 22, 2003. As of March 7, 2017: <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/06/22/magazine/the-marketing-of-no-marketing.html>

⁹ Phillips et al., 2010.

¹⁰ Paul M. Rand, *Highly Recommended: Harnessing the Power of Word of Mouth and Social Media to Build Your Brand and Your Business*, 1st ed., New York: McGraw-Hill Education, September 20, 2013.

¹¹ Twitter, “An Update on Our Efforts to Combat Violent Extremism,” August 18, 2016. As of March 7, 2017: <https://blog.twitter.com/2016/n-update-on-our-efforts-to-combat-violent-extremism>

¹² There are several ways to measure the centrality of a node in a network, each indicating a different notion of social importance or influence. *Degree centrality* measures the number of connections (incoming, outgoing, or both) that each node has. *Betweenness centrality* measures, in essence, the degree to which a given node connects otherwise disconnected groups, serving as a “bridge” or control point for information flow through the network. Specifically, it counts the number of shortest paths between all pairs of nodes that include the given node. *Eigenvector centrality* assigns relative centrality scores to every node based on the concept that connections to high-scoring nodes contribute more to the score of the node in question than equal connections to low-scoring nodes. *Flow centrality* is similar to betweenness centrality but assumes that actors will use all pathways that connect them, proportionally to the length of the pathways. The centrality score is then measured by the proportion of the entire flow between two actors (that is, through all of the pathways connecting them) that occurs on paths of which a given actor is a part (Robert Hanneman and Mark Riddle, *Introduction to Social Network Methods*, Riverside, Calif.: University of California, 2005). *Closeness centrality* measures how close each node is to all other nodes in the network. This metric is calculated by first determining the “farness” of each node: the sum of lengths of the shortest paths from a given node to all other nodes (out-farness) or to a given node from all other nodes (in-farness). Closeness is then the reciprocal of farness.

¹³ Klout scores are developed by monitoring various social media channels to calculate an individual’s reach, likelihood of amplification, and network value. Kred provides metrics for influence, defined as the ability to inspire action and outreach, which articulates the degree to which an individual engages with others. Brian Solis and Alan Webber, “The Rise of Digital Influence: A ‘How To’ Guide

for Businesses to Spark Desirable Effects and Outcomes Through Social Media Influence,” Altimeter Group, March 21, 2012. As of March 7, 2017: <https://www.slideshare.net/Altimeter/the-rise-of-digital-influence>

¹⁴ It is also possible to use geo-inference techniques to isolate a body of geographically constrained Twitter users, whose influencers can then be identified. The benefit of using geo-inference is that it is not necessary to conduct community-detection analysis. However, it may limit the amount of data that can be analyzed, since not every tweet or user can be accurately geo-inferenced with existing tools and methods.

¹⁵ We caveat this statement by saying that there may indeed be value in working with a select number of extremely influential users who do not post anti-ISIS content. Such individuals, through careful engagement, could be motivated to speak out against ISIS.

¹⁶ Solis’s highly influential report addresses three key and desired characteristics of an influencer: reach, relevance, and resonance. *Reach* refers to the size of an influencer’s social network and the distance information can travel across that network. Centrality scores can measure an individual’s reach. *Relevance* refers to the degree to which an influencer’s content aligns with the campaign’s brand. An anti-ISIS campaign would require anti-ISIS influencers. Finally, *resonance* is the “culmination of reach and relevance.” It is the degree to which an audience interacts with and share’s an influencer’s content (Solis, 2012).

¹⁷ Numerous analysts warn against paying influencers to post positive content about brands in a quid pro quo fashion. See, for example, Kim Celestre, “If You Are Thinking About Paying Your Influencers . . . Stop,” Forrester, September 10, 2014. As of November 30, 2016: http://blogs.forrester.com/kim_celestre/14-09-10-if_you_are_thinking_about_paying_your_influencersstop

¹⁸ As one lessons-learned report put it:

Before you start asking for favors, it’s important to build a working relationship with people based on mutual respect. Begin by developing an understanding of your influencers’ and advocates’ interests and preferences. Interact with them on a friendly basis, comment on their posts, share their content, and join their online conversations. Acknowledge them, solicit their feedback on company initiatives and industry trends, and aim to learn which approaches, topics, and activities would most inspire them to speak and share on your brand’s behalf (Smith, 2011).

¹⁹ See, for example, Paul M. Rand, 2013; Kimberly Smith and Erik Bratt, “The Obama Playbook How Digital Marketing and Social Media Won the Election,” MarketingProfs LLC, April 1, 2009. As of October 10, 2016: https://cdn2.hubspot.net/hub/93656/file-1912674360-pdf/docs/obamaplaybook_vc.pdf; and

Ted Wright, *Fizz: Harness the Power of Word of Mouth Marketing to Drive Brand Growth*, New York: McGraw-Hill Education. November 11, 2014.

²⁰ Michael Bush, “How Marketers Use Online Influencers to Boost Branding Efforts,” *Advertising Age*, December 21, 2009. As of October 15, 2016: <http://adage.com/article/digital/marketers-web-influencers-boost-branding-efforts/141147/>

²¹ Paul Petrone, “How Dell Turned Its Workforce into an Army of Recruiters,” LinkedIn Talent Blog, June 30, 2015. As of October 15, 2016: <https://business.linkedin.com/talent-solutions/blog/2015/06/how-dell-turned-its-workforce-into-an-army-of-recruiters>

²² Rebecca Bouchebel, as originally cited in Helmus, York, and Chalk, 2013.

²³ Phillips et al., 2010.

²⁴ Mufflehun is a U.S.-based civil-society organization that has significant experience in providing social media and other “influencer” training to youth opposed to extremism. As part of its youth empowerment program, Viral Peace, Mufflehun has sought to enhance the capabilities of youth activists, changemakers, and young leaders by helping them in developing programs and campaigns that seek to counter extremism. Viral Peace trains youth to strategically use social media and online communication tools to build their own narratives and organically create communities to stand up against hate, extremism, and violence. It will also incentivize participants to develop and execute their own anti-extremism campaigns. The program has a long history and has been implemented in the Philippines, Malaysia, Singapore, Sri Lanka, the Maldives, and Jordan.

²⁵ Cari Guitard, personal communication with authors, November 14, 2016.

²⁶ Jason DeMers, “What Makes Content Shareable and Why It Matters for SEO,” Search Engine Watch, August 4, 2014. As of March 7, 2017: <https://searchenginewatch.com/sew/how-to/2358558/what-makes-content-shareable-why-it-matters-for-seo>

²⁷ Jonah Berger and Katherine Milkman, “Social Transmission, Emotion, and the Virality of Online Content,” 2010. As of October 15, 2016: <http://opim.wharton.upenn.edu/~kmilkman/Virality.pdf>

²⁸ Andy Sernovitz, *Word of Mouth Marketing: How Smart Companies Get People Talking*, New York: Kaplan Business, November 1, 2006.

²⁹ Dave Chaffey, “Ten Types of Online Influencers [Infographic],” Smart Insights, August 13, 2015. As of November 30, 2016: <http://www.smartinsights.com/online-pr/online-pr-outreach/types-of-influencers/>

³⁰ “Fiskateers,” undated. Phillips et al., 2010.

³¹ Charlie Winter and Jordan Bach-Lombardo, “Why ISIS Propaganda Works: And Why Stopping It Requires That Governments Get Out of the Way,” *The Atlantic*, February 13, 2016. As of March 7, 2017: <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/02/isis-propaganda-war/462702/>

³² Winter and Bach-Lombardo, 2016.

³³ Edward Moran and Francois Gossieaux, “Marketing in a Hyper-Social World: The Tribalization of Business Study and Characteristics of Successful Online Communities,” *Journal of Advertising Research*, Vol. 50, No. 3, September 2010.

³⁴ Helmus, York, and Chalk, 2013; White House, 2011a; White House, 2011b.

³⁵ Prashanth Parameswaran, “Malaysia to Launch New Center to Counter Islamic State Messaging in May,” *The Diplomat*, January 27, 2016. As of March 7, 2017: <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/malaysia-to-launch-new-center-to-counter-ISIL-messaging/>

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, “Launch of the Sawab Center,” press release, Washington, D.C., July 8, 2015. As of March 7, 2017: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/07/244709.htm>

³⁷ Quesenberry, 2016.

³⁸ The Global Engagement Center mission is twofold. First, it has as a key responsibility for coordination and synchronization of U.S. government communication efforts against the Islamic State. Second, rather than serve as a central hub for U.S. government-directed communications, the Global Engagement Center seeks to help partner governments and civil society actors to create and disseminate their own content in support of U.S. counterterrorism objectives (“Developing an Integrated Global Engagement Center to Support Government-wide Counterterrorism Communications Activities Directed Abroad and Revoking Executive Order 13584,” Presidential Documents, Executive Order 13721 as of March 14, 2016, *Federal Register*, Vol. 81, No. 52, March 17, 2016. As of March 28, 2017: <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-03-17/pdf/2016-06250.pdf>

³⁹ Cari Guitard, personal communication with authors, November 14, 2016.

About This Perspective

This Perspective presents options for operationalizing recent RAND Corporation findings about ISIS opponents and supporters on Twitter. We formulate a countermessaging approach for two main communication pathways. First, we articulate an approach for working with influential Twitter users in the Arab world to promote bottom-up and authentic counter-ISIS messaging. Second, we highlight ways that the U.S. and partner governments and nongovernmental organizations can use our analysis to more effectively implement top-down messaging to directly counter ISIS support on Twitter. Our original study found that there are six times the number of ISIS opponents than there are supporters on Twitter. We argue that it is critical to empower these influencers by drawing on lessons from the commercial marketing industry. We consequently highlight approaches to identify influencers on social media and empower them with both training and influential content.

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