

---

## Countering violent extremism via de-securitisation on Twitter.

Anna Warrington<sup>a1</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Master Student, University of Copenhagen

### **Abstract**

The case of a civil society actor on Twitter entering a securitized discourse on terrorism illustrates the transformative theoretical potential that emerges from new forms of communication online. Through a qualitative analysis of tweets from the Average Mohamed profile, the potential to change a negative narrative of violent extremism operating within a securitised discourse of Islamic terrorism, is discussed in an online context. The arguments forming from this analysis offers a new approach to studying online counter narratives by linking a theoretical framework of securitisation and de-securitisation to recent political efforts Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE). Through the inclusion of a civil society Twitter account as an illustrative case, this paper explores how social media can challenge existing assumptions of who can be a de-securitising actor within security theory by blurring the lines between political and societal sectors in a securitised threat from Islamic terrorism. If and how a civil society actor can loosen the dichotomous discursive relationship between Self/Other relations within a contemporary discourse on terrorism becomes relevant for a theoretical discussion by presenting an argument suggesting that online CVE polices are more effective within the sphere of 'normal' politics rather than within the realm of securitization. This theoretical perspective offers an analytical framework including a wide range of actors involved in counter narratives policies which is useful for further CVE research.

### **Article History**

Received April 11, 2017

Accepted June 4, 2017

Published June 30, 2017

**Keywords:** Terrorism, security studies, radicalisation, Islamic terrorism, securitisation, de-securitisation, counter narratives, CVE, PVE

### **Introduction**

A new battleground for competing narratives is emerging on social media. The Islamic State (IS) have utilised this technology in an unprecedented manner making it possible to reach anyone with access to the internet with messages of military, political and religious

---

<sup>1</sup> Corresponding Author Contact: Anna Warrington, Email: [anna-warrington@hotmail.com](mailto:anna-warrington@hotmail.com) University of Copenhagen Faculty of Social Sciences, Øster Farimagsgade 5, 1353 Copenhagen K

content (Zelin 2015). Executive director of the Muflehun<sup>2</sup> think tank, Humera Khan, is concerned by this development, since ‘in terms of recruiting, ISIS is one of the loudest voices. Their message is sexy, and there is very little effective response out there’ (Talbot 2015).

Governments have attempted to tread the waters of counter narratives to eliminate the threat from terrorism online with little to no luck. Recent online responses in the form of counter narratives are criticized for lacking an element of dialogue and governments are criticized for imposing a ‘counter narrative ideology’ in online campaigns clashing with research showing that specific ideology or Islamic theology is rarely a focal point for those attracted to extremism<sup>3</sup> (Roy 2008: 11f). These narratives are not just a battle of words as they become political when shaping the possibility for actions within discursive realms (Jackson 2007: 420f). There are two main aspects of these discursive representations; content and sender. I focus on the aspect of who is sending the message and secondly on content.

A small Twitter profile operated by an American–Somali man, working at a gas station in Minnesota, has made it his life's mission to counter what he sees as misrepresentations of Islam by extremists influencing youth towards violent extremism (Average Mohamed 2016). He attempts to prevent the spread of radical ideas among those who adhere to a (perceived) threat from Islamic extremism and ultimately prevent violent acts based on such ideas. This case is understood within a context of a securitized discourse on terrorism and within the technological sphere of cyberspace - creating new forms of communication between political and civil society actors. The question becomes; *Can he reach his target audience and successfully change attitudes with his counter narrative?*

---

<sup>2</sup> Muflehun is Arabic for “those who will be successful”. The think tank is based in Washington, D.C (Talbot 2015).

<sup>3</sup> Why a process of radicalization occurs or specifically how is however not the central point of this paper (see Dalgaard- Nielsen 2010: 800f and Crone 2016: 588f). Hemmingsen et al. also argues that within certain communities a normalisation of violence among youth can create an increased like hood of seeing life within IS as desirable as violence is a mean of realizing objectives in both spheres of social life. For counter narratives to have the desired impact among at risk youth, the source of a collective identity being a form of politicization of violence must be at the centre of the messaging rather than trying to counter religious or ideological points made by IS (Hemmingsen et al. 2015: 3).

---

I argue, that linking current political efforts in Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) with the theoretical framework of securitisation and de-securitisation opens a new approach for studying the phenomena of radicalisation online where civil society actors can play a key role in communicating narratives.

### Literature review and key concepts

The role of the internet in countering and preventing violent extremism has become the centre of many academic studies and the emerging field of CVE and PVE online has challenged scholars within classic security theory and those working within the digital sphere.

Yet little research has been done on the potential of civil society actors engaging in online messaging through a theoretical framework of de-securitisation. This paper suggests a new approach discussing who can be a de-securitising actor and if this can strengthen CVE policies online.

A recent qualitative study by Koehler (2016)<sup>4</sup> found that the internet can be an accelerating factor in transforming ideas supporting violent extremism into violent actions. Similar points are made by Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai (2017) and Davies et al. (2016) arguing that social media can foster like-minded communities of extremist ideologies which has also been found in studies of the so-called ‘filter bubble’ (Pariser 2012). This new arena has called for new policies. Counter narratives presented by governments are however not new or unique to counter-terrorism policies. De Graaf (2009)<sup>5</sup> conducted a historic overview of Western governments use of counter narratives and potential unintended consequences and Brigs and Feve (2013) has written an overview of counter narratives used in a Western context.

In recent years, online policies aimed at countering the threat from what is perceived as Islamic Terrorism is used by many Western governments. The global nature of a ‘threat of ideas’ poses challenges to such policies; understanding how to counter and prevent such a

---

<sup>4</sup> Koehler, D. (2016).

<sup>5</sup> De Graaf, B. (2009)

---

threat from materializing; selecting who is a targeted audience, reaching this intended audience and ensuring that the narratives put forward have the desired effect of reverting ideas of extremism (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017: 53ff).

The use of such narratives suggests a perception of radicalization as something that can be changed. The content of narratives varies in different contexts. However, there appears to be a consensus that radicalization is a process indicating a development of escalation towards something – often referring to violence defined as terrorism (Koehler 2014: 125) (Christmann 2012: 10) (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017: 14). A study conducted on fighting the Islamic State online by Talbot (2015) argues that current online state lead initiatives lack a focus on dialogue with the target audience. Other studies also argue that counter narratives by government actors are often implemented without sufficient knowledge about the target audience or the radicalisation processes in that specific context (Hemmingsen and Castro 2017: 31f)<sup>6</sup> (Gemmerli 2015: 2).

Although approaches, focus areas and conclusions vary, a consensus on the internet facilitating an increased complexity within CVE and PVE policies appears to be widespread across the academic world (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017: 38f). The potential to reach a widespread of actors complicates reaching a target audience and makes state lead initiatives vulnerable to the criticism of simply ‘preaching to the choir’ (Gemmerli 2016: 3).

Changing attitudes among an audience is thus no easy task and can take many forms. For such policies to be successful, Talbot (2015) argues that; ‘we need better ways of identifying the people most at risk of being persuaded by extremist messages and more reliable ways to communicate with them’. Another study attempts to measure an effect of government campaigns. The quantitative findings on narratives, perception and belief change suggests that nonfictional narratives are not as effective as fictional narratives are<sup>7</sup> (Braddock

---

<sup>6</sup> Hemmingsen, A.S and Castro Møller, K (2017)

<sup>7</sup> ‘The overlap in the respective credibility intervals suggested that there was no significant difference between fictional and nonfictional stimuli in their capacity to change attitudes. However, these results are complicated by the fact that the credibility interval associated with nonfictional stimuli included zero, whereas the credibility interval associated with fictional stimuli did not. This suggests that fictional narratives are an effective means of inducing attitude change, but nonfictional narratives are not’ (Braddock and Dillard 2016: 558).

---

and Dillard 2016: 458). These are noteworthy in a CVE context, as most government campaigns centre their content<sup>8</sup> on nonfictional stories with a factual focus on for instance ‘exposing the falsehoods that lie at the heart of Dash’s ideology and to present a positive, alternative future for the region’ (The Global Coalition Against DAESH 2017). Fact-based approaches are also subject to qualitative critique from Gemmerli (2016) and Gemmerli (2014) arguing that ‘factual narratives’ can potentially fuel the authority-opposing identity relations driving extremist ideologies online. Other government campaigns focus on ‘alternative narratives’ as a political strategy (Brigs and Feve 2013) (Gemmerli 2015).

In this paper, ‘counter narrative’ is used in a broad sense arguing that while this might not be the intention of Average Mohamed to construct a ‘cohesive and coherent story’ throughout his tweets, his objective to ‘talk plainly to humanity – to all of you. Issues of race, religion, and “fitting in” affect all of us, and often lead our children to extremism’ (Average Mohamed 2016) can be viewed as a counter narrative. This is in line with Braddock and Horgan (2015: 385) understanding counter narratives as the development and dissemination of ‘narratives designed to contradict potentially radicalizing themes intrinsic to terrorist narratives’.

A narrative<sup>9</sup> is in itself be defined as ‘a story that contains information about setting, characters, and their motivations’ which often contains an element of conflict and transformation within a specific context (Braddock and Dillard 2016: 446f). Another definition, inspired by Hinyard and Kreuter (2007), is found in a 2015-study by Braddock and Horgan focusing on theorizing the use of counter narratives in the context of CVE where

---

<sup>8</sup> Some research centres more around the receiver of messages such as the drivers of radicalisation and political, societal, psychological and historical trends in what makes someone become violent extremists (Stern 2016) (Dawson and Amarasingam 2016). The European scholar Crone (2016) also focuses on drivers of radicalisation while arguing that to understand this topic, scholars must supplement an individual focus with a focus on extremist milieus, gangs and groups as preconditions for turning to political violence (Crone 2016: 598). A recent US study systematically comparing profiles of street gang members and domestic extremists found the groups to be vastly different. The study did however find commonalities in group dynamics such as being with like-minded peer communities and having poor employment history. Still, gang members rarely become radicalized or commit acts of terrorism according to Lafree, Decker and James (2017).

<sup>9</sup> Ryan (2007) defined 8 characteristics to analytically define a narrative. For more in-depth studies on narratives in Braddock and Dillard (2016: 447).

---

narratives are defined as; ‘any cohesive and coherent account of events with an identifiable beginning, middle, and end about characters engaged in actions that result in questions or conflicts for which answers or resolutions are provided’ (Braddock and Horgan 2015: 382).

Theoretically, the threat from Islamic terrorism relies not only on physical acts but also on the potential of such acts occurring. The element of the *potential* is a key part of the concept of radicalisation which is typically understood as a passive ideology or as an active process where someone develops ‘radical’ views. Dalgaard-Nielsen (2010: 798) understands a radical as ‘a person harbouring a deep-felt desire for fundamental socio-political changes and radicalization is understood as a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order’. The concept often refers to Islamic terrorism at an individual or collective level (Gemmerli 2014: 9f).

Some argue that radicalization itself is not a problem. Viewing the world through lenses of extreme ideology is however a problem for a state when it leads to violent actions – often driven by political motivations. The ideas develop into; ‘a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts’ (Dalgaard-Nielsen 2010: 798). It is thus likely both the online support for such acts and the active engagement in them which can constitute a security concern from a state perspective.

Within this paper, the focus lies on a civil society Twitter account as an actor rather than the state being the primary actor as seen in most of the literature above. Entering a conversation on a civil society actor engaging in potentially attitude changing communication on social media brings into play a complex interplay of Self/Other identity relations which, in this paper, interact within the context of an institutionalised<sup>10</sup> security threat of Islamic terrorism (Hansen 2012: 532).

### **Theory: securitisation and se-securitisation**

---

<sup>10</sup> Referring to the securitisation of Islamic terrorism as institutionalised means that this threat has become so much a part of a dominant discursive understanding among a specific audience that the threat can be referred to without securitising actors initiating a new securitisation process – as Islamic terrorism is already widely accepted as an existential threat towards the broader Western ‘Self’ (Hansen 2012: 532).

---

Security as a field of studies within IR has taken different paths since the Copenhagen School expanded the traditional understanding of who and what can become a threat to whom. Their basic framework analyses security as a self-referential discursive practise where a broad range of referent objects can be existentially threatened through the construction of a threat in the process of securitisation (Buzan et al. 1998: 26f). I however align myself with Hansen who embarks on a deconstructive path focusing on linguistic representation of identities within political discourses (Hansen 2006; Hansen 2012). This leads to an acceptance of the lack of objective/material definition of threats. Relatively stable constructions of threats towards certain referent objects can be viewed through analytical lenses of sectors (Buzan et al. 1998: 7f) This element of objectivism requires an accept to view this analysis as a ‘frozen snapshot’ of discourses.

I operate with the assumption that a securitisation process of a threat from Islamic Terrorism has already taken place (Mavelli 2013: 163). This securitisation has discursively linked Islam with acts of terrorism<sup>11</sup> (Jackson 2007: 405). The securitisation, I argue, entails elements of institutionalisation making new securitisation processes redundant in convincing the audience (Hansen 2012: 532). The threat is thus immediately accepted as placed within the broader securitised discourse of an Islamic Other threatening the Western Self and its ‘way of life’ (Mavelli 2013: 165f). The Self and Other identities are linked through markers of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ within a dichotomous relationship constructed through opposition (Hansen 2006: 41).

The internet is said to be the biggest factor to the process of radicalisation through selected exposure to extremist messaging supporting such an opposition (Davies et al. 2016: 53). Through increased exposure to certain messages, the internet can create ‘micro communities’ where individuals are presented with one-sided (extremist) views (Meleagrou-

---

<sup>11</sup> I understand terrorism in line with a de-constructive approach where terrorism is understood as a discursive construction conceptualised as a specific type of violence with political motivation – referring to incentives by attackers and to the political motivation when defining certain acts of violence as terrorism (Richards 2014: 222f; Collins and Glover 2002: 157).

Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017: 35). If so, counter narratives can potentially reinforce a gap between ‘us’ and ‘them’. The opposing Self/Other relations maintaining a securitised discourse can then be part of what is fostering processes of radicalisation. Accepting this line of argument opens the door for de-securitization framework.

Security speech acts can be analysed as partial elements of discourses - understood as structures of language constructed intersubjectively resulting in *meaning* being prescribed to certain issues creating opportunity for certain actions within a specific context (Wæver 2002: 28). Securitisation is thus performative. I argue, that de-securitisation is also performative. Expanding the scope on who can be a securitising actor, I move away from security being a concept performed by states making it possible for civil society actors to ‘speak’ de-security.

In the case of Average Mohamed, it is noteworthy that he does not pay much attention to defining motives of his Other counterpart in his Twitter profile. Instead, he emphasizes the Self by seemingly attempting to diminish the power of the Other in strengthening and broadening the Self into a wider, value based identity. An ‘extreme and radical Other’ in opposition to the ‘normal Self’ is created within an online performative securitisation. For Mohamed’s de-securitisation to be successful, a non-threatening identity of the Other must be constructed and accepted by a target audience (Hansen 2012: 533).

Three strategies of de-securitisation have been articulated by Wæver (2000: 253). Placing a securitized issue from the realm of security to the realm of normal politics, to manage the threat so securitization fails and to refrain from having a discussion on the issue. While these strategies are somewhat policy oriented, the framework of Hansen refers to de-securitisation as discursively loosening the dichotomy between the Self and the Other. Concretely, it can be conceptualised as the creation of new paths of ‘sameness’ and ‘otherness’ since constructing a new understanding of the Other impacts the Self and vice versa (Hansen 2006: 42).



---

Hansen suggests three dimensions<sup>12</sup> of analytical constructions for analysing Self/Other identities: spatial, temporal and ethical. I argue that Self/Other identities incorporate all three dimensions, consequently blurring the lines of these dimensions. Theoretically, the spatial dimension of the counter narrative by Average Mohammed is muddled by the internet's fluid communication flows (Coleman and Freelon 2015:22). However, not all Selves need spatial boundaries. They are also linked through temporal ideas of 'who we are. This abstract dimension is highly prevalent in social media where belonging to a community transcends physical boundaries. Including an ethical dimension to the mix of complex concepts of constructing a Self, this dimension is concerned with 'the discursive construction of ethics, morality and responsibility' within a given discourse (Hansen 2006: 50). Ethics vary in the narrative put forward by Average Mohamed and the narrative from Islamic State.

This is not only interesting from a theoretical standpoint. Incorporating research on various dimensions of counter narratives is essential for empirical CVE, argues Ashour (2011). The number of violent incident related to online radicalization is rising and this field requires extensive cross-country research and information sharing in the years to come (Ibid.).

I argue, in line with Aradau (2004), that de-securitization must be understood through the political (Aradau 2004: 389). The concept of politics is inspired by Arendt where 'the political' is understood as a productive, plural and interactive sphere of unpredictable actions (Wæver 2011: 468). This understanding leads to the notion that any normative 'meaning' cannot be understood a-priori to any act. It also means that de- securitization is viewed through lenses of politics referring to change and negotiation which results in a context dependent interpretation<sup>13</sup>. Within this framework, the sphere of 'normal' politics is normatively preferable to the sphere of security (Buzan et al. 1998: 29). I take the liberty of arguing that CVE polices could potentially be more effectual within the sphere of 'normal'

---

<sup>12</sup> Within a foreign policy discourse, all elements are present in prominent ways depending on the subject of analysis (Hansen 2006: 46ff).

<sup>13</sup> A definition of 'normal' will in any analysis be contingent upon the context in question where political measures that are not considered extraordinary are used as answers to arising issues (Buzan et al. 1998: 29).

---

politics compared to the sphere of the securitized where a sense of urgency rather than negotiation is dominant (Ibid.).

### **Methods: Twitter as an analytical sphere.**

Average Mohamed operates on Twitter which, given tweets in analyses is a new field within IR, there are methodological limitations for generalizing conclusions. A new field thus requires new ways of adapting theory to specific cases. I acknowledge that underlying algorithmic structures mediates communication flows between actors which interacts with the discourses in play. This technical context is however not the focal point of this analysis. For studies on the potential political implications of technical structures of social media, see Pariser 2012.

Twitter is highly political in terms of the users who are active in the Twitter sphere. Political activists and civil society actors use their profiles to inform other users about political issues, to mobilize and engage users for physical or online events and to generate added attention to specific topics, often of a political nature (Jungherr 2014: 241f). The structure of Twitter allows for open interaction as any profile can be followed, so that tweets appear in your feed, without having to be followed back – such is the more closed structure of Facebook where a friend request needs to be accepted before you can view other users' feeds. This means, in theory, that all actors have the possibility to become part of a political discourse (ibid. 254).

The predominant work on social media is quantitative where tweets are analysed as big data in statistical regression models (Freelon and Karpf 2015<sup>14</sup>) (Griffin et al. 2014)<sup>15</sup>. I went in the opposite direction to gain an in-depth understanding through a qualitative analysis of a sample of tweets from a single profile as I argue, that a civil society actor within

---

<sup>14</sup> Freelon, D., & Karpf, D. (2015).

<sup>15</sup> Griffin, C., Squicciarini, A and S. Styer (2014)

---

securitized terrorism discourse illustrates the transformative potential which social media provides for communication.

To get an overview of how Average Mohamed creates a ‘counter narrative’, a scrapping of data from October 1st to December 1st, 2016 has been conducted where all tweets and how they interact with other users, was noted. Twitter allows layers of interaction as any tweet can be liked and re-tweeted by other users and interact with other forms of media by including a link to a Youtube video, an image or another website in a tweet. This creates interactive communication which encourages instant engagement (Jungherr 2014: 250f).

Given the limited content of tweets being 140 characters, I argue that Hansen’s model for discourse analysis is not relevant for my case in its totality (Hansen 2006: 37ff). I explored tweets from the profile of Average Mohamed in a limited timeframe looking for markers of identity referring to a Self or an Other in the context of Islamic terrorism to discuss if and how the dichotomous relationship becomes loosened.

In the Average Mohamed tweets, I looked for markers of sameness and otherness of the Self and Other within the context of Islamic terrorism – as typically presented in Western media (Jackson 2007: 400f). Laustsen and Wæver (2005: 719) in Gunning and Jackson (2011: 375) argue that religion turns political when tied to ‘this worldly struggles’ and can threaten a sense of being. In the context of terrorism, the referent object can thus be viewed through a societal and political sector (simultaneously). Security speech acts within a societal sector often present the threat on behalf of a collective sense of shared identity (Roe 2004: 289). The abstract Western identity being ‘free and democratic’ and perceived as threatened by Islamic terrorists (Jackson 2007: 395). This securitization is difficult to change as it involves both an individual and collective identity (Buzan et al. 1998: 122f).

Nearly every other tweet included references to ‘democracy’ or ‘freedom’ indicating an intentional focus on a broader Self beyond religion, bound by democratic values. Average Mohamed emphasizes this ‘we’ by referring to shared values. He does not define either concept which can be argued to both strengthen and weaken the messaging. By leaving it open for interpretation, more users could be likely to find the narrative relatable which thus

---

expands the audience. Such a strategy can furthermore invoke many of the same characteristics of religious markers as shared values. Sheikh argues, that ‘doctrines of secularism or freedom, as they are often represented in a Western context, draw on strong myths (Sheikh 2012: 398). Mythological narratives tend to be easier to securitize, as they invoke a sense of identity and ‘who we are’ (Sheikh 2012: 390). I thereby argue that this could be the case of de- securitization.

### **A Twitter community?**

There are two main parallel discourses with opposing ideas operating within the same empirical cyber sphere. So how can the narrative put forward by Average Mohamed reach audience affected by the securitised threat of Islamic terrorism?

Some scholars argue that civil society can (and should) play a bigger role in CVE through community resilience referring to the capability of finding a solution to an issue threatening societal functions to restore a sense of normality (Dalgaard-Nielsen and Schack 2016: 311). The argument is typically presented within a physical context but I argue that it can also be used online.

Macnair and Frank (2017) argue in their case study of a grassroots, student-lead campaign countering violent extremism, that a community lead approach can be effective despite limited resources and Aradau (2003: 20 in Roe 2004: 287) highlights the local level as ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ relations between communities can be (re)negotiated ‘reciprocally’. By creating a broader Self on Twitter, Average Mohamed gains access to a potentially large audience from a local perspective and since information is not always available to a community, it can be hard to mobilise de-securitisation (Hansen 2012: 532). In this sense, he represents a bottom up approach reaching a large audience. However, a broader Self might include more actors but there is no loosening of the ‘friend’ and ‘foe’ relations simply by expanding the Self.

On the one hand, arguing for social media as a public sphere in line with Habermas, Twitter functions as a sphere of unhindered civil engagement where public opinion is constructed through engagement, for instance via re-tweets (Coleman and Freelon 2015:19f). This creates enhanced participation as the political discourse is not solely for political leaders. Within such an argument, the possibility of de- securitisation is open as discourses are ever-evolving (Hansen 2006: 35).

On the other hand, social media cannot be a ‘public sphere’ as Twitter users are biased demographically towards middle and higher income Western citizens with higher education levels than the average population in their home countries (Jungherr 2014: 254f). Furthermore, the argument of an actor like Average Mohamed challenging identities within the securitised discourse through social media can be challenged by arguing for the concept of the ‘filter bubble’. Pariser argues that ‘democracy requires citizens to see things from another’s point of view, but instead we are more and more enclosed in our own bubbles. Democracy requires a reliance on shared facts; instead we are being offered parallel but separate universes (Pariser 2012: 8). The engagement by civil society actors in political discussions online is mediated through the filter bubble which is not transparent for the average user of the internet (ibid.). These structures of asymmetric information and underlying economic interests which drive social media leads to asymmetric power relations online (Coleman and Freelon 2015: 26). This creates closed bubbles and not open deliberative spheres which limits the opportunity for de-securitisation as a political performative act to take place (Aradau 2004: 389).

Given the relational and relative nature of identities, the Average Mohamed profile does exactly what the theoretical definition of de-securitisation is: he opens the doors to a negotiation on identity (Hansen 2012: 533). In his tweets, Average Mohamed attempts to remove the fixed nature of the identity of the Self in the current securitised discourse. He does so by removing the negative markers of identity associated with being Muslim and instead attempt to create a broader and Self based on the vague, positive markers such as ‘freedom’

and ‘democracy’ which exemplify a shared identity of both Western and Islamic Selves where violence and extremism remains the stable Other.

The act of de-securitisation can be argued to have a greater chance of being accepted by an audience when definitions are broad and vague as well as presented as normatively ‘good’. Because who does not want to be on the side of the ‘good’? However, tweets by Average Mohamed appear somewhat unclear and there is no dialogue between the tweets themselves. In this regard, the window for deliberating the values serving as identity markers thus remains closed and the threat from Islamic Terrorism does not move into the realm of normal politics but remains in the fixed discursive narrative of securitization where the Self/Other relations are not transcended or loosened.

The aim of the Average Mohamed profile is to present a counter narrative of what it means to be a Muslim on an aggregated level where markers of identity are broad, value based and not presented with many nuances. To go into detail at an individual level including lived experiences of ideology becomes a greater theoretical and empirical task raising new methodological considerations. This could be included in further analyses.

### **Reaching a target audience**

Average Mohamed appears to target his message to youth from all over the world by presenting a counter identity to what he perceives to be the identity of Islamic terrorism. He focuses on countering a perception of what it means to be a Muslim by presenting a peaceful and democratic version of an average Muslim man or woman (Average Mohamed 2016).

This approach might fail in its infancy. On one hand, he has received a considerable amount of attention by traditional media and his messages have reached many people. The interaction between the relatively small Twitter account of 698 followers (as of January 2017) and the featured attention on other social media platforms and in traditional media is rather large (Daily Mail 2015). On the other hand, most of the attention appears to be in Western media making it possible that he is simply ‘preaching to the choir’ and not reaching those

whom he intended to create his message for – youth at risk of becoming radicalised by Islamic terrorist groups (Average Mohamed 2016).

Islam is often presented as an inherently violent religion as there is no clear distinction between the political and the religious realm. Many references to terrorism in current discourses restore this assumption through markers of identity linked to Islamic extremism (Jackson 2007: 403). If such cultural stereotypes of Islamic extremism are the underlying within the Average Mohamed profile, he is reinforcing the existing gap between the Self and Other when entering the securitised discourse with his tweets.

The narrative on radicalisation of youth furthermore often assumes a generalising link between social inequality and violent movements (Bayat 2010: 174). But what if violence and not religion was at the centre of analysis? The concept of radicalisation is contested within IR studies. Hemmingsen et al. (2015: 3) argue that the normalisation of violence within communities play a bigger role for youth being attracted to a life within the Islamic State where violence is a mean to realize objectives. The politicisation of violence as a source of collective identity is thus what should be targeted in counter narratives – not Islam as a religion. If this argument is accepted, new perspectives arise. The structure of social media, which transcend physical borders, creates collective identities and communities online. One could contemplate that youth who may not be all that interested in religion offline find communities of shared interests, of for example violence, and thereby end up subscribing to a more violent and extremist version of Islam. This parallel discourse is not targeted by the Average Mohamed profile which has little engagement with the concept of violence.

One could thereby argue, that the potential for a de-securitisation of the threat of Islamic terrorism would be more likely to gain a broader acceptance if the profile of Average Mohamed engaged more critically in the interconnectedness of political discourses on religion where ‘Islam’ has become synonymous with ‘terrorism’ (Mavelli 2013: 165). The blindness of the construction of such concepts as contingent upon context and political interests in play can be argued to limit the scope of the Average Mohammed project online.

---

Given the algorithmic structure of Twitter, it is also impossible to assess a concrete discursive impact of a profile such as Average Mohamed as each user may be exposed to his messages differently and in different context. The specific nature of Twitter can facilitate user involvement which can create an opportunity for many voices to be heard in the online sphere. This also creates methodological challenges for creating analytical frameworks which can grasp the rapid share of data and information as well as interactive communication in networks. The high salience of the case discussed in this paper, highlights the need for future work of security theory studies to adapt to this diverse and complex field of social media.

## Conclusion

*'It takes an idea to defeat an idea'*. The tagline of Average Mohamed offers some insight into a normative goal. Linguistically creating a playing field for two parallel ideas, Average Mohamed illustrates a, some might say, ambitious goal of defeating ideas of those he perceives as being radicalised extremists. By doing so, he places his own narrative as a counterpart to the extreme as the moderate and 'average'.

Does the project stand a chance? Civil society actors have previously tried to change political discourses and policies outcomes within the realm of conflict (Bayat 2010: 172f). 'The reinvigoration of the public sphere, that de-securitisation implies, facilitates the engagement of a wider range of actors than if an issue is constituted as one of securitisation. But a de-securitising move might not 'only' expand the number and kind of actors, but also 'transform the identities and interests of Self and Others' (Hansen 2012: 533). Following this argument, Average Mohamed can theoretically become a de-securitising actor on Twitter.

In this paper, I discussed the seemingly impossible task of this 'average' American-Somali man de-securitising the threat from Islamic Terrorism by challenging the complex interplay of Self/Other identities on Twitter and thus countering the radicalisation process in the early stages. Average Mohamed hereby becomes an illustrative case highlighting the theoretical opportunities that can emerge on social media. By creating virtual communities



bound together by shared normative values vaguely presented as ‘freedom’ and ‘democracy’, the lines between the analytical sectors of the political and social referent objects within the Copenhagen School are blurred.

Theoretically, Average Mohamed can reach anyone with access to the internet and by creating input via his tweets, into the discourse on Islamic terrorism, the profile can theoretically make slight changes to the discourse. The tweets however showed a lack of deliberating the presented values serving as identity markers which indicates that a threat from Islamic Terrorism is not moved into the realm of normal politics and remains in the relatively stable discourse of securitization where the broadened value based Western Self and the Islamic terrorist Other relations also remain stable.

Through this case, I showed that counter narratives as political policies aimed at Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) and Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) can be linked to a theoretical framework of de-securitisation. This provides researchers with a new approach for studying processes of radicalisation online where not only states but also civil society actors can play an active part in enacting CVE policies. Using the logic of classic security theory, the CVE and PVE policies are argued as more effective in changing the minds of a target audience within the sphere of ‘normal’ politics rather than within the sphere of the securitized. Arguing that CVE policies can be more effectual if civil society actors engage in counter extremist messages to prevent early radicalization as a de-securitizing move, is perhaps bold. Yet, the argument broadens the theoretical possibilities of who and how a security discourse can be influenced online.

Researchers must however still consider the algorithmic structure of social media creating ‘filter bubbles’ of likeminded communities, as shown in the cited studies, which indicates that markers for sameness and otherness are re-enforced through counter narratives – regardless of actors being governments or civil society. The question of reaching specific target audiences thus remains, as does concerns on the lack of social capital by a civil society actor compared to a government official in making narratives visible (and accepted) in the muddled context of cyberspace.

## References

- Aradau, C. (2004) *Security and the democratic scene: desecuritization and emancipation*. Department of Government and Politics, Faculty of Social Sciences. Walton: The Open University, 388-413
- Ashour, O. (2011). *Online De-Radicalization? Countering Violent Extremist Narratives: Message, Messenger and Media Strategy*. *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 4(6), 15-19.
- Average Mohamed (2016). (online). Available at: <https://twitter.com/AverageMohamed>  
Published November 2016, localised December 20, 2016
- Bayat, A. (2013) “Does radical Islam have an urban ecology?” In *How Ordinary People Change the Middle East*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 171- 185
- Braddock, K. and J. Price Dillard (2016) *Meta-analytic evidence for the persuasive effect of narratives on beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors*, *Communication Monographs*, 83:4, 446-467.
- Braddock, K., and Horgan, J. (2015). *Towards a guide for constructing and disseminating counter-narratives to reduce support for terrorism*. *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 39(5), 381-404.
- Briggs, R., & Feve, S. (2013). *Review of Programs to Counter Narratives of Violent Extremism*. Institute for Strategic dialogue. (online). Available at [www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/444](http://www.counterextremism.org/resources/details/id/444), localised June 16, 2017
- Buzan, B., O. Wæver & J.D. Wilde (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1-239
- Christmann, K. (2012). *Preventing Religious Radicalisation and Violent Extremism. A Systematic Review of the Research Evidence*. Youth Justice Board. (online). Available at: [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/396030/preventing-violent-extremism-systematic-review.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/396030/preventing-violent-extremism-systematic-review.pdf), localised June 17, 2017
- Coleman, S. and D. Freelon (2015) *The Internet as a Civic Space* in *Handbook of Digital Politics*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 18-34.
- Collins, J. and R. Glover (2002) “Terrorism” in Collins, John and Ross Glover *Collateral Language: A User’s Guide to America’s New War*, New York University Press, 155-173
- Crone, M. (2016). *Radicalization revisited: violence, politics and the skills of the body*. *International Affairs*, 92(3). p. 587–604.

DailyMail (2015) *Average Mohamed counters terror message with cartoon videos*. Daily Mail. (online). Available at: <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/wires/ap/article-2900054/Average-Mohamed-counters-terror-message-cartoon-videos.html#ixzz4PvB1dcuf>

Published January 7 2015, localised December 17 2016

Dalgaard-Nielsen, A. and P. Schack (2016) *Community Resilience to Militant Islamism: Who and What? An Explorative Study of Resilience in Three Danish Communities*, Democracy and Security, 12:4, 309-327

Davies, G., Neudecker, C., Ouellet, M., Bouchard, M., & Ducol, B. (2016). *Toward a Framework Understanding of Online Programs for Countering Violent Extremism*. JD Journal for Deradicalization, 6 (Spring 2016), 51-86

Dawson, L.L. and Amarasingam, A. (2016) *Talking to Foreign Fighters: Insights into the Motivations for Hijrah to Syria and Iraq*, Studies in Conflict & Terrorism, Routledge, 1-21

De Graaf, B. (2009) *Counter-Narratives and the Unrehearsed Stories Counter-Terrorists Unwittingly Produce*. Perspectives on Terrorism. Vol 3. Nr. 2

Freelon, D., & Karpf, D. (2015). *Of big birds and bayonets: hybrid Twitter interactivity in the 2012 Presidential debates*. Information, Communication & Society, 18(4). p. 390-406.

Gemmerli, T. (2016) *Avoid the pitfalls of counter narratives*. Danish Institute for International Studies, Policy Brief, November 2016. (online). Available at <https://www.diis.dk/node/6900>, localised June 15, 2017

Gemmerli, T. (2015) *The fight against online radicalisation starts offline*. Danish Institute for International Studies, Policy Brief, April 2015. (online). Available at <https://www.diis.dk/node/4868>, localised June 14, 2017

Gemmerli, T. (2014) 'Radicalisation: a battle between politics and science' in *Theme: foreign policy radicalization*. Danish Foreign Policy Society, December, 4-15. (online). Available at [http://udenrigs.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Udenrigs\\_3\\_2014\\_Web.pdf](http://udenrigs.dk/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Udenrigs_3_2014_Web.pdf), localised June 14, 2017

Griffin, C., Squicciarini, A and S. Styer (2014) *Identifying Multi-Regime Behaviors of Memes in Twitter Data*. Science and Information Conference 2014 August 27-29, 2014, London, UK

Gunning, J. and R. Jackson (2011) *What's so 'religious' about 'religious terrorism'?* Critical Studies on Terrorism 4.3, 369-388

Hansen, L. (2006) *Security as practice*, The New International Relations Series, 1-255

---

Hansen, L. (2012) *Reconstructing De-securitisation: The Normative-Political in the Copenhagen School and Directions for How to Apply It*, *Review of International Studies*, vol. 38, no. 3, 525–546

Hemmingsen, A, M. Crone and J. P. Witt (2015) *The politicisation of violence: an alternative to radicalisation*. Danish Institute for International Studies, DIIS policy brief (online). Available at: [http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/284689/PB\\_Terrorism\\_or\\_crime\\_WEB.pdf](http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/284689/PB_Terrorism_or_crime_WEB.pdf)  
Published September 2015, localised May 22, 2017

Hemmingsen, A.S and Castro Møller, K (2017) *The Trouble with counter narratives*. Danish Institute for International Studies, Report 2017: 1. (online). Available at [http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/784884/DIIS\\_RP\\_2017\\_1.pdf](http://pure.diis.dk/ws/files/784884/DIIS_RP_2017_1.pdf), localised June 10, 2017

Jackson, R. (2007) *Constructing Enemies: 'Islamic Terrorism' in Political and Academic Discourse*. *Government and Opposition*, Vol. 42, No. 3, 394–426

Jungherr, A. (2014). *The Logic of Political Coverage on Twitter: Temporal Dynamics and Content*. *Journal of Communication* 64.2, 239-59.

Koehler, D. (2014). *The Radical Online: Individual Radicalization Processes and the Role of the Internet*. *Journal for Deradicalization*, Winter (2014/15), 116-134.

Koehler, D. (2016). *Understanding Deradicalization. Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* Oxon/New York: Routledge.

Lafree, G. Decker, S.H. and P.A. James (2017). *Cut from the same cloth? A comparative study of domestic extremists and gang members in the United States*. *Justice Quarterly* Vol. 0 , Iss, 1-32

Macnair, L and R. Frank (2017) *Voices Against Extremism: A case study of a community-based CVE counter-narrative campaign*. *JD Journal for Deradicalization*,10 (Spring 2017), 147-174

Mavelli, L. (2013) *Between Normalisation and Exception: The Securitisation of Islam and the Construction of the Secular Subject*. *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 41(2), 159–181

Meleagrou-Hitchens, A and N. Kaderbhai (2017). *Research Perspectives on Online Radicalisation: A Literature Review 2006-2016*. Kings College London, 1-74 (online). Available at <http://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/ResearchPerspectivesonOnlineRadicalisation.pdf>, localised June 15, 2017

---

Pariser, E. (2012) *The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web is Changing What We Read and How We Think*. Penguin Books, 1-55.

Richards, A. (2014) *Conceptualizing Terrorism*, *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 37:3, 213-236

Roe, P. (2004). *Securitization and minority rights: Conditions of desecuritization*. *Security Dialogue* 35, (3), 279- 94.

Roy, O. (2008) 'Radicalisation and De-radicalisation', in *Perspectives on Radicalisation and Political Violence - Papers from the First International Conference on Radicalisation and Political Violence*, The International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 8-14

Sheikh, M.K. (2012) *How does religion matter? Pathways to religion in International Relations*. *Review of International Studies*, Volume 38, Issue 02, April 2012, 365 – 392

Stern, J. (2016) *Radicalization to Extremism and Mobilization to Violence: What Have We Learned and What Can We Do about It?* *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 668:1 (2016), 102-117

Talbot, D. (2015) *Fighting ISIS Online*. MIT Technology Review. (online). Available at: <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/541801/fighting-isis-online/> Published September 30, 2015, localised May 19, 2017

The Global Coalition Against DAESH  
<http://theglobalcoalition.org/en/countering-daeshs-propaganda/?lang=en>, localised June 18, 2017

Wæver, O. (2000) "The EU as a Security Actor: Reflections from a Pessimistic Constructivist on Post-Sovereign Security Orders." In *International Relations Theory and the Politics of European Integration: Power, Security, and Community*, Morten Kelstrup and Michael C. Williams, 250-294. London: Routledge, 250-294

Wæver, O. (2002) "Identity, communities and foreign policy: Discourse analysis as foreign policy theory" I: Lene Hansen & Ole Wæver (eds.), *European Integration and National Identity*. London: Routledge, 20-49

Wæver, O. (2011) *Politics, security, theory*. Centre for Advanced Security Theory, Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen, Denmark. *Security Dialogue* 42(4-5), 465–480

Zelin, A. (2015) *Picture Or It Didn't Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State's Official Media Output*. Perspectives on Terrorism. (online). Available at: <http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/445/html> Published November 2015, localised December 15, 2016

### About the JD Journal for Deradicalization

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is the world's only peer reviewed periodical for the theory and practice of deradicalization with a wide international audience. Named an [“essential journal of our times”](#) (Cheryl LaGuardia, Harvard University) the JD's editorial board of expert advisors includes some of the most renowned scholars in the field of deradicalization studies, such as Prof. Dr. John G. Horgan (Georgia State University); Prof. Dr. Tore Bjørgo (Norwegian Police University College); Prof. Dr. Mark Dechesne (Leiden University); Prof. Dr. Cynthia Miller-Idriss (American University Washington); Prof. Dr. Marco Lombardi, (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore Milano); Dr. Paul Jackson (University of Northampton); Professor Michael Freeden, (University of Nottingham); Professor Hamed El-Sa'id (Manchester Metropolitan University); Prof. Sadeq Rahimi (University of Saskatchewan, Harvard Medical School), Dr. Omar Ashour (University of Exeter), and Prof. Neil Ferguson (Liverpool Hope University), Prof. Sarah Marsden (Lancaster University), and Dr. Kurt Braddock (Pennsylvania State University).

For more information please see: [www.journal-derad.com](http://www.journal-derad.com)

Twitter: @JD\_JournalDerad

Facebook: [www.facebook.com/deradicalisation](http://www.facebook.com/deradicalisation)

The JD Journal for Deradicalization is a proud member of the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ).

ISSN: 2363-9849

Editors in Chief: Daniel Koehler, Tine Hutzel