Beating ISIS in the Digital Space: Focus Testing ISIS Defector Counter-Narrative Videos with American College Students

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Abstract

ISIS recruits on a 24/7 basis in over 21 languages over the Internet using videos, memes, tweets and other social media postings and swarming in on anyone that retweets, likes or endorses their materials to try to seduce them into the group. Their unprecedented social media drive has resulted in over 30,000 foreign fighters from more than 100 countries migrating to Syria and Iraq. ISIS recruitment in the U.S. is for the most part Internet based and has resulted in the actual and attempted recruitment of over 100 individuals residing in the U.S. with over 200 Americans traveling to Syria to join terrorist groups. To date very little counter-narrative material exists and most of it is cognitive versus emotionally impactful. The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) Breaking the ISIS Brand – the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project has managed to collect 43 ISIS defector interviews and thus far produce two video clips of ISIS defectors denouncing the group which were focus tested in this research in a small normative college student sample of 75 undergraduate students. The results demonstrate that American college students find the videos authentic, disturbing and turn them away from ISIS, fulfilling the goals that the project is aiming for in producing counter-narrative materials.

Keywords: Counter-Narrative, Defectors, ICSVE, ISIS, Social Media

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Introduction – ISIS and the Need for Counter-Narrative

Since establishing its reign of terror, or "Caliphate" as they prefer to call it, ISIS has unleashed an unprecedented social-media recruiting drive that has attracted more than 30,000 foreign fighters to Syria and Iraq, coming from more than 100 countries (Speckhard, 2016). While ISIS is currently being beaten back on the battleground and quickly losing territory, it continues to be successful in the digital space, escalating its calls for attacks on Western targets and inspiring homegrown and foreign fighter attacks in cities ranging from Istanbul, Paris, Brussels, Nice, and Berlin, to name a few.

As ISIS continues to stretch its reach beyond borders, breeding homegrown militant jihadi killers wherever possible, discrediting the group's ideology is essential. Despite the fact that ISIS is rapidly losing its "Caliphate", a complete military conquest or a political solution in war-torn Syria and Iraq will take time, while ISIS cadres flee to new havens and continue to seduce others into its ranks. The second flank in the battle against ISIS is in the digital space—it's long past due to mount the digital battle against ISIS.

Most experts agree that the most effective tool to discredit both ISIS and their militant jihadi ideology is using the voices of disillusioned ISIS cadres themselves (Speckhard, 2016). Speckhard (2016) stated, "ISIS issues thousands of recruiting videos, memes and tweets with little online content countering them". Klausen (2015) further confirmed that social media has proved to be prominent platform for jihadist insurgents in Syria and Iraq. According to Berger & Morgan (2015), from September to December 2014, more than 46,000 Twitter accounts were utilized by ISIS supporters. Further, each Twitter account of an ISIS supporter had on average over 1,000 followers which is of a much higher level in comparison to a "typical" twitter account (Berger & Morgan, 2015). Facebook also had a strong ISIS presence, as did Youtube. Despite monitoring and take down policies, both platforms continue to host ISIS ideologues, recruiters and propaganda videos that are often not taken down by the sites for weeks if not months. Indeed, in a recent ICSVE study and intervention

on Facebook, 50 Albanian and English language accounts of ISIS endorsers were easily identified.

It's clear that ISIS is utilizing social media accounts to assist in their recruitment methods. In response, Twitter, Facebook and Youtube have all been active since 2014 in suspending accounts related to ISIS propaganda. However, as terrorist groups tend to morph in response to counter-measures, ISIS supporters also started to implement countermeasures to rebuild their follower networks (Berger & Perez, 2016). Some of these countermeasures involved resorting to the use of other platforms such as Instagram, Whatsapp and Telegram. The Islamic State's presence on Telegram received extensive media coverage following the use of its official Arabic-language channel to claim credit for the November 2015 attacks in Paris (Berger & Perez, 2016, p. 18) and many journalists and researchers continue to monitor ISIS sponsored Telegram channels. Telegram began to suspend public Telegram channels following the Paris attacks, but does not intercept private communications (Berger & Perez, 2016) claiming they are not and should not be monitored by the platform. For anyone with the skills for monitoring Telegram, it is not difficult to find that ISIS continues to host chat rooms there.

Whiteside (2016) insists that ISIS has created and maintained a "prolific media enterprise" regardless of account suspensions:

> The Islamic State's media machine went from producing 1000 events a year in 2007 to producing that much a month in 2015 in a variety of forms in dozens of new platforms and formats. More than half of these products depicted utopian images of life in the 'caliphate,' stressing economic activity, law and order, and the ability to worship according to the 'correct method' without interference (Whiteside, 2016; Winter, 2015).[4]

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[4] This quote from Whiteside (2016) includes an error about the assumed founding year of ISIS, which is not 2007.

The globalization of technology has allowed ease of online access for all individuals, even terrorists. According to Bertram (2016), terrorist organizations are able to utilize social media via communication methods (including recruitment/radicalization process), as well as operational digital action (intended to spread fear among individuals). Communication methods refers to those Internet applications where terrorist organizations can post propaganda and engage in conversations with others in an attempt to recruit those vulnerable individuals into their terrorist organization; whereas operational digital action refers to "cyber-based sabotage of infrastructure, or propagating fear of attack through threat" (Bertram, 2016, p. 226). Through case examinations it has been determined that terrorist groups' use of the Internet:

> 1. Creates more opportunities for users to become radicalized;
>
> 2. Acts as an "echo chamber" for those drawn in;
>
> 3. Accelerates the process of radicalization compared to simple face-to-face recruitment;
>
> 4. Allows radicalization to occur without physical contact and
>
> 5. Increases the opportunity for self-radicalization (Von Behr, Reding, Edwards, & Gribbon, 2013).

Yet social media is a two-way road, meaning that not only can terrorists access social media, but those seeking to counter terrorists messaging can also make use of social media to fight them. Bertram writes:

> If counter-narrative messages are to be effective in engaging an audience, the interactive and adaptive nature of social media must be the delivery mechanism through which these counter-narratives are delivered. Platforms such as Facebook and Twitter are interactive by design and encourage exchange between audience and transmitter, as well as being dynamic in meeting the needs of a changing target audience (Bertram, 2016, p. 244).

Likewise, Ross Frenett (2016) and his Moonshot group working with Google's Jigsaw recently reported their findings of doing an intervention study on Facebook with ISIS endorsers which led them to enthusiastically conclude that those who wish to fight against terrorist groups can reach the same digital audiences that terrorists do to intervene in various ways including to pitch them counter-narrative materials. Which counter-narrative materials actually work in such interventions is still not well determined (Frenett & Dow, 2015; Frenett, 2016).

Our ultimate goal of this study is to help expand our research to understand the best counter-narrative materials by "engaging in more comparative research, not just across ideologies, but also groups, countries, languages, and social media platforms" (Conway, 2016). While this study only focuses on American university participants, it is one of the first focus-group studies conducted by ICSVE to begin exploring how our specific counter-narrative videos affect individuals. Future focus groups will continue to focus on different locations both domestically in the United States, internationally, as well as various ideological groups. Our hypothesis that real-life ISIS defectors who speak from personal experience about what life is really like as a fighter for the Islamic "Caliphate" are the most influential means to dissuade others from falling captive to its message (Speckhard, 2016), will continue to be explored globally.

Breaking the ISIS Brand - the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project

The International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism (ICSVE) team, have spent the last year and a half capturing ISIS defectors stories on video in their Breaking the ISIS Brand – the ISIS Defectors Interviews Project. Thus far ICSVE staff have collected 43 stories of defectors and twelve of parents of ISIS fighters. All ISIS defectors were briefed regarding this project and all went through a human subject ethical consent process. Those individuals that did not want to provide their names gave verbal ethical consent; whereas the rest of the individuals provided signed consent. The sample was collected in the time frame of

November 2015 to February, 2016 from returnees of Western European and Balkans countries as well as Central Asian actors and from Syrians fleeing ISIS by escaping into Turkey.

Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner, allowing the defectors to tell their stories of being recruited into the group, serving and then defecting followed by in-depth questioning involving a series of twenty-five questions, going in-depth on topics they had personal experience with inside the group. The defectors were not asked to give their names and were judged to be genuine on the basis of four things: referral from prison authorities and prosecution records, referral from defectors who knew them from inside the group, insightful knowledge about experiences inside the group, and intense posttraumatic responses during the interview evidencing they had been present and taken part in events they were describing. The subjects were contacted via smugglers, other defectors, personal introductions and via prison authorities; thus the sample is entirely nonrandom. The defectors did not give their real names except for those in prison or already prosecuted and were told not to incriminate themselves during the interviews. From the 13-year-old child soldier who watched other young boys behead prisoners as a part of their induction as ISIS fighters (and he likely did the same), and left because children were being tricked into dying in suicide bombings, to a European bride of ISIS who, widowed while pregnant, was rescued by her father when ISIS demanded that she give up her baby to the "caliphate" before leaving — they have all described the horrific realities of life inside ISIS.

Four short video clips have thus far been produced from the longer videotaped interviews. The process is to edit the interview down to its most damaging, denouncing and derisive content and add to the speaker's presentation emotionally evocative video footage and pictures taken from actual ISIS content to graphically illustrate what the speakers are saying. The finished video clips are named with pro-ISIS names and start with an opening screen that mirrors ISIS materials so that an individual looking for and viewing ISIS recruiting videos might accidently watch an ICSVE video and be surprised to encounter an ISIS defector

denouncing the group. The video clips are also being subtitled in the 21 languages that ISIS recruits in from French, Dutch, German, Uzbek to Malay and then once produced, uploaded to the Internet with the hope of catching the same audiences that ISIS is daily recruiting on a 24/7 basis. Recently, ICSVE staff have also begun experimenting with targeting placement of the videos on the social media accounts of those endorsing and promoting violent extremism.

Former extremists have been used effectively in doing CVE work including undercover infiltration of terrorist groups, such as the case of Mubin Shaikh and Morten Storm. Google created a formers network and a recent Jigsaw sponsored study by Frenett and Dow (2015) used formers to try to dissuade jihadist endorsing Facebook holders away from their views. In some cases, there have been reversions from forward motion on the terrorist trajectory and in the cases of using them as undercovers—prosecutions and drone kills.

Problems working with formers include issues of trust and reliability. Some formers find it stressful to speak about their experiences and others simply refuse. Others are not trusted enough by law enforcement to be used in that capacity as they vacillate in their opinions about the terrorist group they formerly endorsed or belonged to. Not surprisingly many are not psychologically healthy having been seduced into the group because of needs they hoped the group would meet and as a result of posttraumatic stress after serving in conflict zones inside a horrifically brutal organization.

In the case of the ISIS Defector videos the testimonies are not fluid as with a former giving a lecture or working face-to-face with vulnerable audiences and there is no danger of the defector saying anything to the subjects watching the testimonies that would sow doubt about denouncing ISIS as his testimony is already pre-vetted and set. If the defector later changed his mind and reverted back to the group the viewer is not made aware and negatively influenced, so that danger in using "formers" is removed.

In the four elements making up the lethal cocktail of terrorism identified by Speckhard (2012, 2016) which include: the group, its ideology, social support for terrorism and individual vulnerabilities and motivations, only the first three are addressed by the ISIS defector videos. The defectors denounce and delegitimize both the group and its ideology and thereby reduce social support for both, but they do nothing to address the underlying individual needs and vulnerabilities that first led to the individual resonating to the terrorist group and its ideology. This is a drawback of most counter-narrative messaging in fact and points to the need to have follow-up or links taking the disillusioned viewer to help for addressing those needs and desires.

The defector's testimonies deal with disillusionment in the Islamic nature of ISIS, and its so-called utopian "Caliphate," referring to corruption, brutality, inescapability and the criminal nature and terrifying practices of its members, thereby creating disgust, fear and disillusionment in the viewer who may have been gravitating toward ISIS.

Prior Counter-Narrative Research

Counter-narrative material produced up until recently has suffered from lack of emotional impact. For instance, during the last fifteen years the UK Home Office commissioned website and groups to argue against al-Qaeda's use of "martyrdom" and calls to militant jihad using Islamic scriptures and logical arguments and also presenting moderate views of Islam. These however, fell flat particularly in the face of al-Qaeda's use of emotionally evocative pictures, videos and graphic images arguing that Islam, Islamic people and Islamic lands are under attack by the West and that jihad is an obligatory duty of all Muslims and "martyrdom" missions are called for in Islam (Speckhard, 2015). Likewise, ISIS's creative and emotionally evocative use of video alongside of their leverage of social media feedback mechanisms made counter-narratives that are based on logical arguments versus emotionally evocative counter stories pale in comparison.

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The ISIS defector videos in our research by contrast were created by seasoned professional storytellers with experience in Hollywood and documentary film production and with an eye for capturing emotions. To produce them, the researchers first worked through the time transcript of the entire article and selected out emotionally compelling material to denounce ISIS. Likewise, the defectors had been asked at the end of their interviews to give advice to anyone thinking of joining ISIS—a time when they strongly and emotionally denounced the group and warned others of the dangers and disappointments of joining. Further, emotionally evocative ISIS video and images were used to illustrate what the defectors were narrating—to make their stories come alive and also to turn ISIS back on itself.

Currently there are no comprehensive guidelines or toolkit to officially establish effective counter-narratives. Braddock & Horgan (2015) provide support that the creation of a counter-narrative is to contain the following four criteria: "revealing incongruities and contradictions in the terrorist narratives and how terrorists act, disrupting analogies between the target narrative and real-world events, disrupting binary themes of the group's ideology, and advocating an alternative view of the terrorist narrative's target" (Braddock & Horgan, 2015, p. 397). Braddock & Dillard (2016) defined a narrative as "a cohesive, causally linked sequence of events that takes place in a dynamic world subject to conflict, transformation, and resolution through non-habitual, purposeful actions performed by characters" (p. 2). Through their study, they were able to conclude that narratives can significantly impact the "beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and behaviors" of its audience as the messengers already believe (Braddock & Dillard, 2016, p.18). Based upon this study, it provides strong support that there is a need to address these narratives through counter-narratives.

Davies et al. (2016) maintained that there is a significant consensus regarding the impact of "ideological-based narratives" (p. 51) which play a role in increasing radicalization; yet the role of mitigating these narratives continues to be debated. As Speckhard (2015) maintained, the emotional evocative counter stories are impactful. Davies et al. (2016) provides additional

support that not only do we have to take into account the specific content of counter-narratives, "but also take into account why these narratives have resonance for particular individuals" (p. 51). Further, it is suggested that counter-narratives need to be theory-based and effectively accessed. This study begins to attempt to access the impact of the counter-narratives produced.

The current research is part of an initiative to test the effects of these defectors stories in more controlled venues, from mosques to universities and in different countries and cultures. This report focuses on testing the videos on a sample of ordinary American college students, some who could fall prey to the group—most who simply grew in their disgust for it.

ISIS in America

ISIS has managed through its high-volume Internet recruiting, via videos, memes, Tweets, Facebook, WhatsApp and Telegram accounts to contact and penetrate across international boundaries to recruit Americans. According to the FBI, ISIS recruitment in the U.S. has resulted in the actual and attempted recruitment of over 200 individuals residing in the U.S. traveling to Syria to join them (Comey, 2015). While face-to-face recruiting does not, according to the FBI, yet occur in the U.S. except when one person is radicalized and then turns to recruiting his friends, Skype and other social media applications make Internet seduction almost as powerful as face-to-face personal connections. The usual method of recruiting in the U.S. is to observe, through the feedback mechanisms of social media, who is asking questions about ISIS, tweeting, liking or otherwise endorsing the group and then to swarm in on the person with a great deal of personal attention paid via the Internet (see Callimachi, 2015 and Driscoll, 2015 for examples of how this works). When an American is seduced into the group they are invited to go offline into encrypted apps where they either are talked into mounting a homegrown attack or seduced into traveling to Syria and Iraq to join the group. Since March 2014 until January 2016, "113 individuals have been charged in the U.S. with offenses related to the Islamic State (also known as IS, ISIS, and ISIL)" (GW

Extremism Tracker, 2016). From all available analysis, it appears that the profile of Americans who are vulnerable to ISIS Internet seduction are U.S. male citizens within the age group of 18 to 20-year-olds (GW Extremism Tracker, 2016). The second largest age group based upon their age (when criminally charged) is 24 to 26-year-olds, followed by 21-23 year olds (GW Extremism Tracker, 2016). This provides support that the radicalization process within the U.S. is typically during that designated "college" time frame also selected for this research, although there are those not in college who are also seduced.

Further, it is important to note that while it is more likely that males are vulnerable to radicalization, there is support that females also fall vulnerable to radicalization (Schweitzer, 2006; Speckhard & Akhmedova, 2006, 2008; Speckhard, 2008, 2009, 2015, 2016; Bloom, 2011). "ISIS is now pursuing a chilling new strategy: recruiting teenage girls online" (Storey, 2016). Likewise, Speckhard and Yayla (2015, 2016) found that ISIS uses females to act as Internet recruiters. Hoda Muthana is an example of an American female who was enrolled in college during the time that she decided to travel to Syria to marry an Australian foreign fighter. Even though her husband was killed shortly after their marriage by an airstrike, she continues to provide propaganda in support of ISIS messaging through the online battlefield (Vidino & Hughes, 2015). Mohammad Oda Dakhlalla (22-years-old) and his wife Jaelyn Delshaun Young (19-years-old) traveled to Syria to join ISIS during their enrollment at Mississippi State University (Vidino & Hughes, 2015).

Methods

In this study the authors did not yet attempt to reach or replicate the vulnerable population that ISIS aims at, but instead opted for a convenience sample from a normative group of college students attending a private college in a northeastern state, hitting the age range and isolation from family but not for necessarily all the other vulnerabilities that ISIS aims. According to the main recruitment handbook of ISIL/AQ, "A Course in the Art of Recruiting

by Abu Amru", "the university is like a place of isolation for a period of four, five, or six years and is full of youths (full of zeal, vigor, and anti-government sentiments)" (Amru, 2010). The sample of this study was 75 undergraduate students attending social science courses at a private university/college in the northeastern United States. The average age of the participants was 20-years-old, with the range being from 18 to 23-years-old. The gender split was equal with 35 females and 35 males (and five participants declining to provide their gender). There was no pre-testing of ISIS opinions among the participants as the authors were aware that prior attitudes do not always predict behavior (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2014); yet we do plan to gather prior ISIS opinions in future focus groups to account for any bias related to their opinions.

All participants were provided with a description of the study as well as an overview of the minimal risks involved and were required to sign a consent form. Upon consent, the participants were advised that if they found any of the material disturbing or difficult to watch, that they may leave the room and elect to not watch the videos. No participants elected to leave the room and rather stayed the entire time to watch the two ISIS defector videos entitled: "The Glorious Cubs of the Caliphate" and "A Sex Slave as a Gift for you from Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi".[5] Upon watching the videos, the participants were instructed to complete survey-related questions. Additionally, participants were informed that they could skip any questions they did not feel comfortable answering and/or cease total participation in the study at any time without consequences. None of the participants elected to stop participation once they began the survey questions. Further, no participants to date have claimed any psychological issues since participating in the study.

After their viewing, participants were provided with a survey style list of questions to capture their immediate anonymous responses to the videos including the possibility to answer open-ended questions at the conclusion of the survey. Unlike traditional focus groups that take

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[5] (available for reader's viewing here https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tpwnWdpS2-o&list=PLqpy96DXqN-cgA3zDTdQiP4ragPjkq4zF)

place in an open discussion format, it was determined that in order to get truthful and thoughtful responses from as many participants as possible in a large classroom setting, that this study would utilize a survey-style focus group. This format allowed the researchers to obtain 75 individual responses that provided a wide-range of information regarding the two ISIS defector videos.
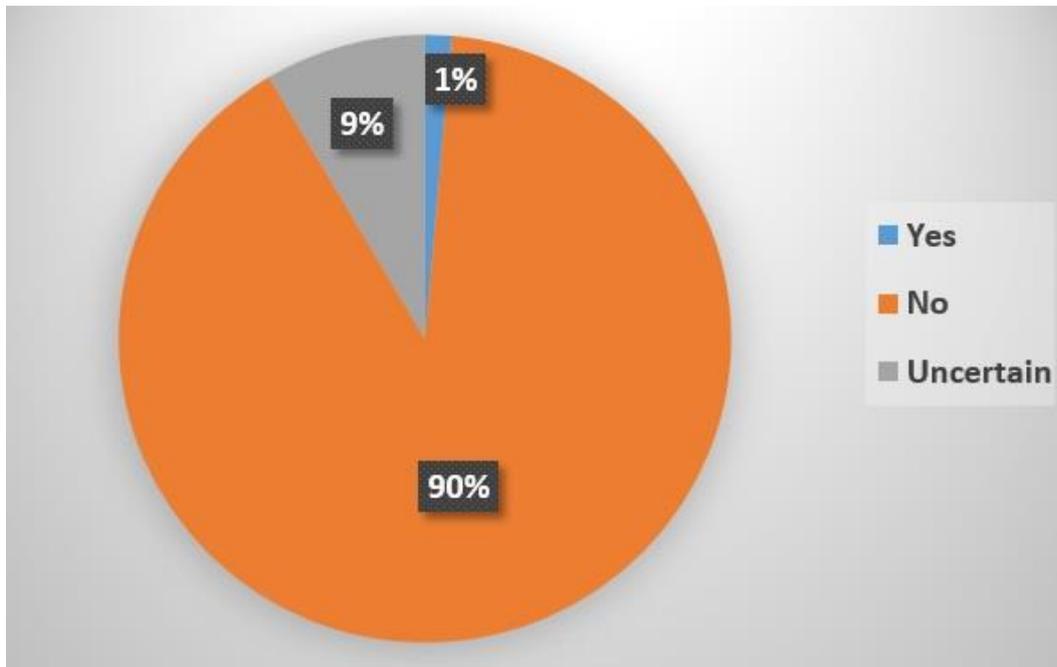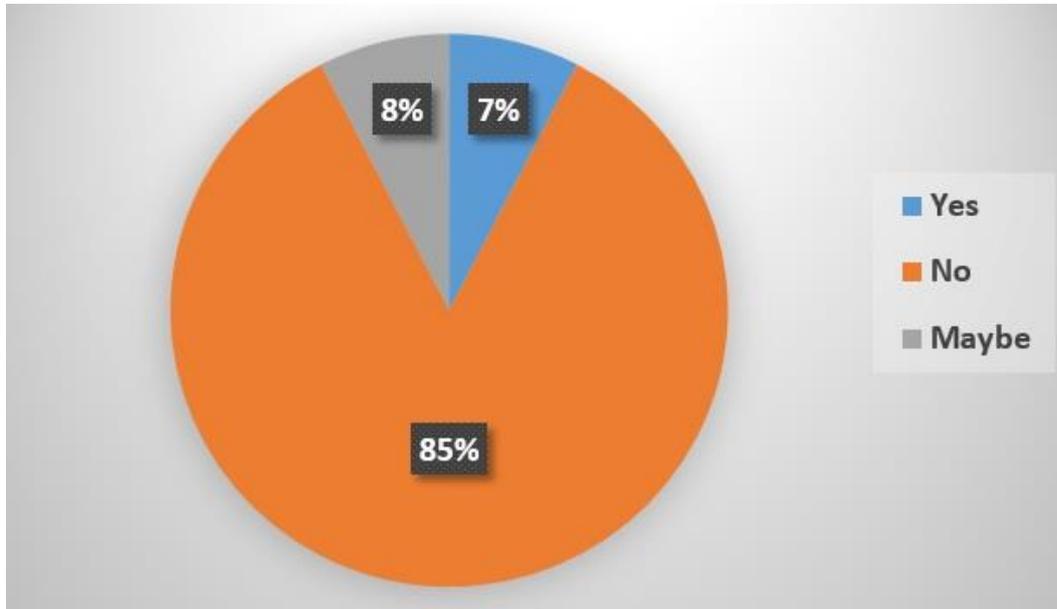
Results

1. *Do you believe the speaker?*

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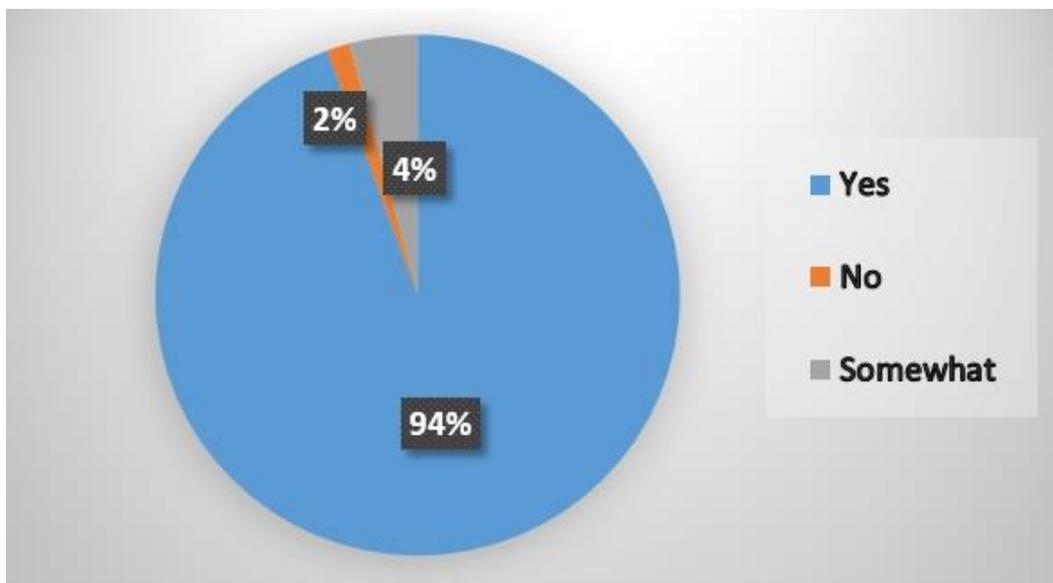
2. *Do you think the speaker's account is accurate?*
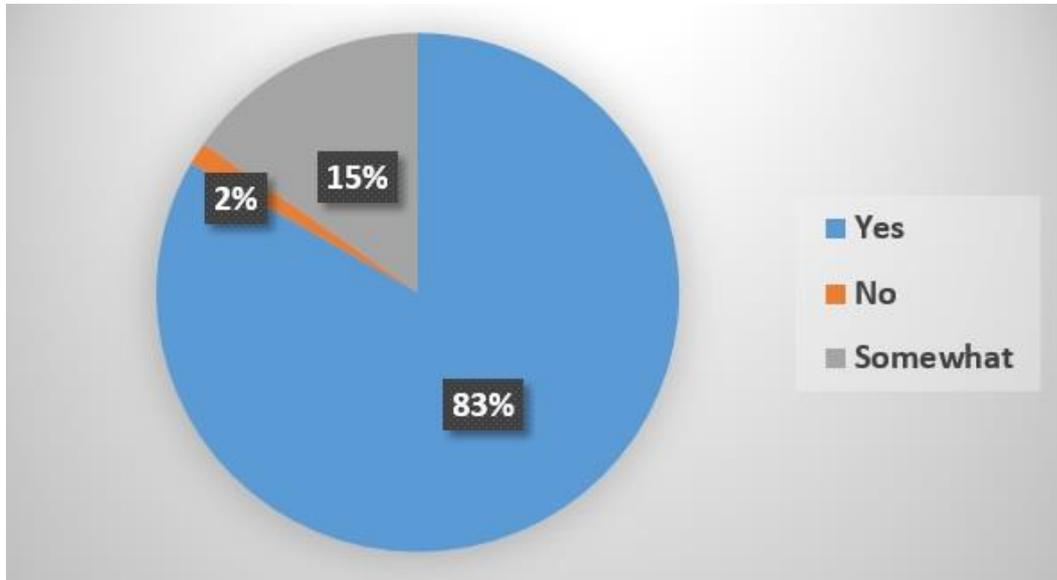
3. *Do you think ISIS is practicing the real Islam?*

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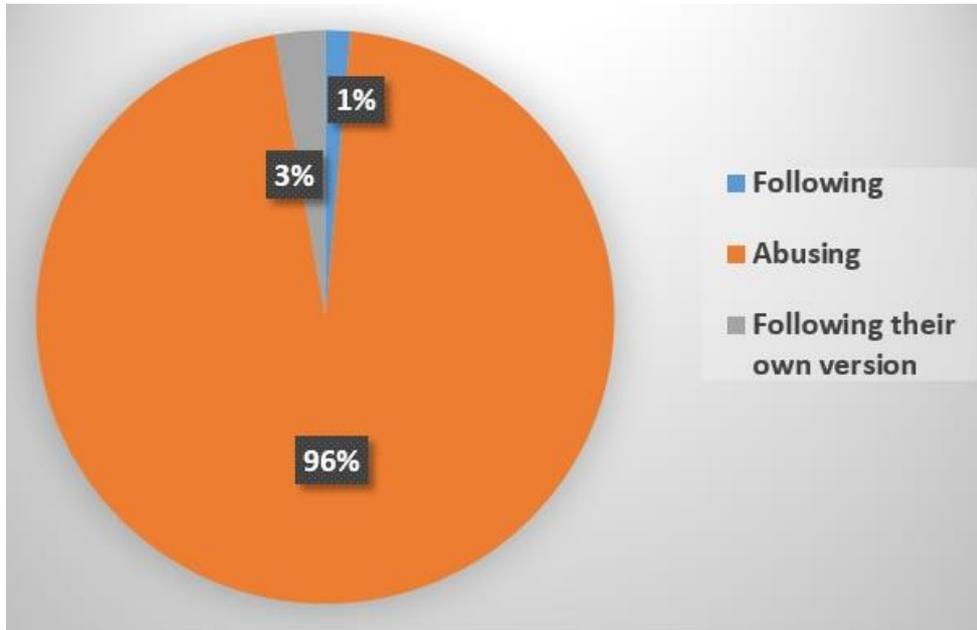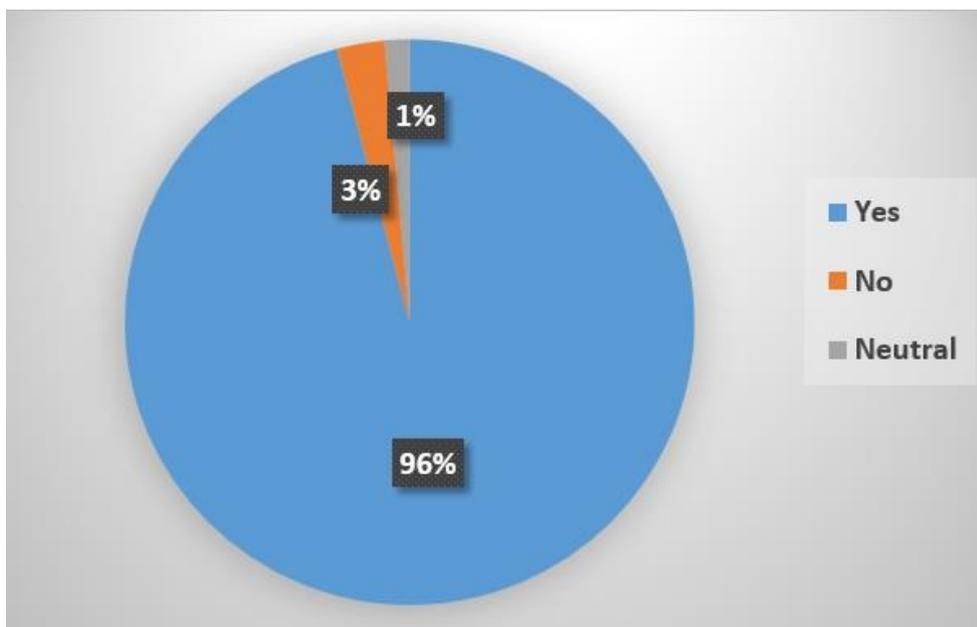
4. *Is the Islamic State righteous?*

5. *Are their behaviors as described here righteous or wrong?*
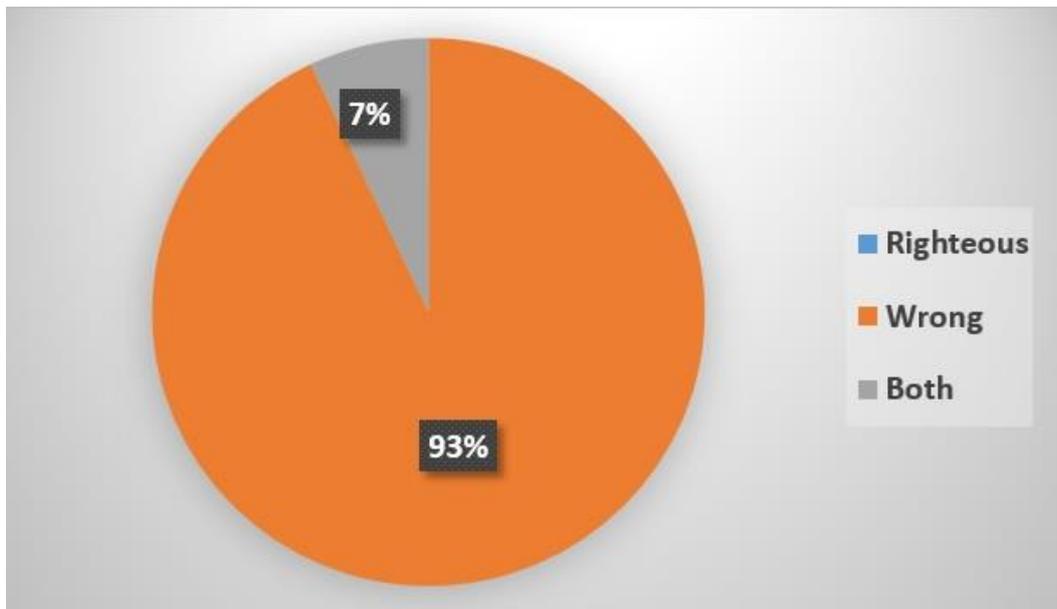
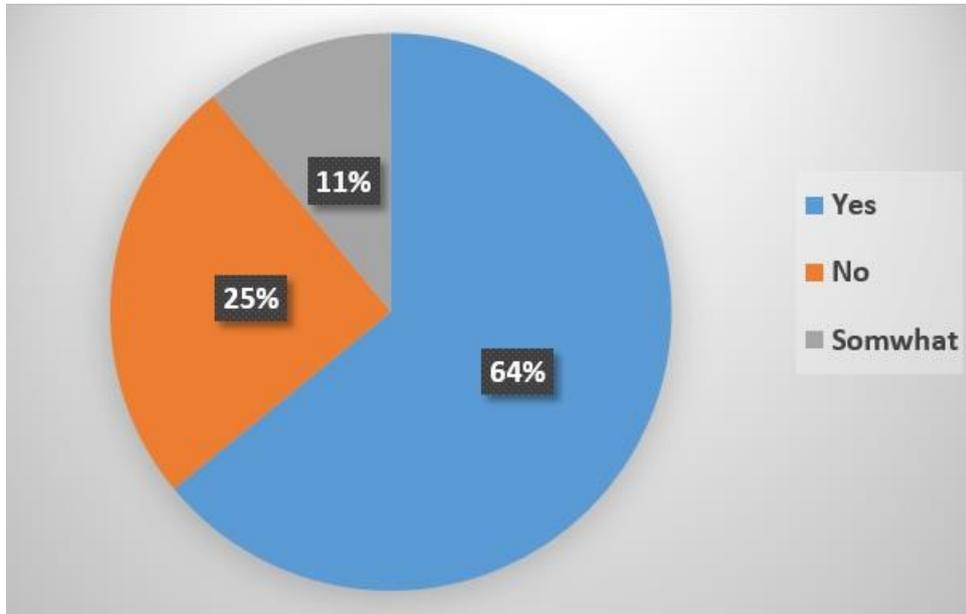6. *Is ISIS following the Quran or abusing it?*

7. *Do you consider ISIS a terrorist organization?*

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8. Does this video affect or change how you feel about ISIS?

9. Do you think this video could convince someone thinking of joining ISIS not to do so?

McDowell-Smith, Speckhard & Yayla: Beating ISIS in the Digital Space
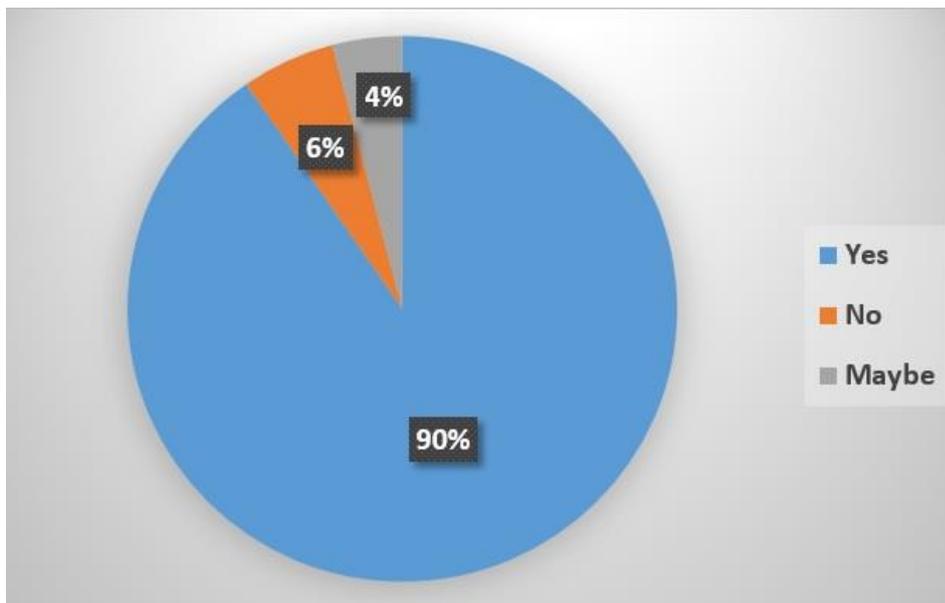
The survey also queried in open-ended format, "What do you think of this video?" with the responses to this question ranging from informative to intense to disturbing as shown below in Table 1. Each of the adjectives listed contains the number of participants that utilized that specific adjective in their response.

Table 1: Adjectives used to describe thoughts of the videos.

- Crazy (5)	- Informative (9)	- Shocking (3)
- Depressing (1)	- Intense (3)	- Surreal (3)
- Difficult (1)	- Interesting (2)	- Terrible (1)
- Disturbing (3)	- Moving (2)	- Tragic (1)
- Effective (1)	- Powerful (4)	- Unbelievable (1)
- Eye-Opening (3)	- Real (2)	- Unsettling (1)
- Heartbreaking (1)	- Saddening (5)	- Wrong (1)
- Horrible (1)	- Scary (2)	- Impactful (1)

When asked also in open-ended format, "How does it make you feel?" the participants also responded with very strong reactions. There was a significant amount of anger, disgust, and sadness expressed about the actions of ISIS members and how they treat others (including women and children). Some participants expressed concerns that ISIS has been "allowed" to get away with these actions and have not yet been stopped. The participants wanted ISIS's actions to be condemned and defeated; yet they also expressed feelings of hopelessness that they personally cannot defeat the group. As shown below in Table 2, each adjective contains the number of participants that utilized that specific adjective in their response to "How does it make you feel?"

Table 2: Adjectives used to describe feelings engendered by the videos.

- Aggravation (1)	- Disgusted (5)	- Scared (9)
- Anger (9)	- Hared (3)	- Sickened (3)
- Concerned/Worried (4)	- Hopeless/Useless (6)	- Uncomfortable (3)
- Confused (2)	- Mad (2)	- Upset (9)
- Depressed (2)	- Sadness (14)	

An additional open-ended question that was asked of the participants was "What do you think of the defectors? Are they wrong to join ISIS or wrong to defect?" Lastly, there was space provided for the participants to provide any "spontaneous comments".

Discussion

After reviewing the results, there are some very strong conclusions that can be drawn. Approximately 94% of the participants believe the ISIS defectors in the ICSVE videos; which lends great support to quality and impact of the video material. A concern in producing the materials was that since the defectors often hid their faces from the camera, that they might not be seen as credible or that viewers might think the videos were contrived. In this American sample confidence in the authenticity of the ISIS defectors was confirmed. Further, 83% of the participants believe that the ISIS defectors are providing an accurate account of their experience, whereas 15% believe some of their account. For the majority of these participants, this was their first time watching any type of firsthand account of ISIS defectors.

The participants' beliefs about ISIS as a whole were also examined. As expected among a normative American sample, over 95% of the participants viewed ISIS as a terrorist organization with 90% believing that ISIS is not practicing the real Islam. 95% believe that ISIS is abusing the Quran and 93% believe that the behaviors of ISIS are considered wrong versus righteous. There were approximately 7% of participants that felt the behaviors of ISIS were both righteous and wrong, as they claimed it depended on how an individual viewed their behaviors. For example, some participants felt ISIS is following their own version of the Quran and in the minds of ISIS members, they are following it correctly which makes their behavior righteous. It would have been interesting to query these subjects more but the anonymous nature of the survey made that impossible.

In response to the open-ended question asked of the participants, "What do you think of the defectors? Are they wrong to join ISIS or wrong to defect?" there were two common themes

that showed throughout all of the responses to this question. First that they were wrong to join ISIS, but right to defect, and secondly that they were brave and courageous for leaving ISIS. Many were also glad that the defectors were now willing to denounce and destroy ISIS to the best of their abilities. These responses lend support to that the participants believed the defectors and were willing to listen to their stories.

In the spontaneous comments section, all of the comments were negative in nature and expressed various forms of complete disgust for the actions of ISIS members. Many participants also commented that they had developed a greater dislike for ISIS after viewing the videos. Some of the relevant spontaneous comments received were as follows:

"No one should have to fear for their lives if they disagree with something."

"The accounts were most likely worse than they described."

"ISIS is a bunch of cowards."

"They're soul-less monsters."

"ISIS is bad and this adds more disturbance to my thoughts on ISIS."

"Don't join ISIS! Just hate them even more. ISIS is bad = hell."

"If you are not informed, then you do not really know how bad ISIS is if you want to join."

The overall goal of this focus group was to access the validity of the videos and their impact in a normative American college student sample. The last two questions that the participants were asked were regarding how the videos changed their views on ISIS and how the videos may change the views of others. These results were very promising. In regard to whether the participants' views of ISIS changed after viewing the videos, approximately 64% of the participants claimed the videos did not alter their already negative views of ISIS. The majority of the participants indicated that their views did not change as they had already known how "bad" ISIS was. 33% of the participants claimed the videos did change their minds by providing evidence that ISIS was even worse than they had suspected. The last question regarding change of views was to gauge their opinion on whether or not they felt

these videos would be beneficial in convincing others who were thinking of joining ISIS to no longer join ISIS. 90% said yes these videos would help prevent others from joining ISIS, and 4% said that there was a possibility that these videos would help. Of the 5% that said no, they stated that individuals who seek to join ISIS are already "too mental" or "too far gone" to be helped. It is important to note that the goal of the ICSVE videos is to be able to prevent those who are considering joining ISIS; therefore, this study result is encouraging to the overall ICSVE goal of these videos.

Limitations

It is necessary to fully understand the limitations of this study prior to making any generalizable results. Based upon the participants selected for this study, it is likely that most (if not all participants) already had a negative viewpoint of ISIS and thus there was a strong initial negative bias related to "ISIS". However, this is expected of a typical American university sample as most within the U.S. condemn the actions of ISIS and view ISIS as an organized terrorist network. Second, the participants of this study were recruited within a university setting. Thus, participants may have been influenced by the professor to act "accordingly" with traditional American anti-ISIS views; yet it is important to note that the professor who distributed this study advised the students that responses would be completely anonymous and then left the room to allow the students adequate time to complete the study. The last significant limitation of this study was that it only looked at the counter-narratives as either being effective in supporting or increasing existing negative attitudes towards ISIS but not at any possibility of interesting them further in ISIS. Likewise, no control or comparison group was utilized. Since the participants of this study were from an American university in the Northeast, it did not evaluate behavior of different audiences ranging from those who were likely already radicalized, to those who are at risk to the ISIS ideology, and/or those who were neutral to this topic. This sample focused primarily on individuals who likely already had a negative viewpoint towards ISIS

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Conclusion

This study demonstrates that videos of ISIS defectors denouncing the group can function as powerful counter-narrative to the seductive call of ISIS. While an American college student sample is unlikely to contain many individuals who are actually vulnerable to ISIS recruitment, it's important that given ISIS recruitment in the U.S. is occurring via Internet seduction, that in a normative American sample of the target age group for ISIS recruitment, the authenticity of the defectors was accepted and that their messaging increased disgust for the group. Comparative samples should now be engaged in other cultures and language groups and also trying to focus on vulnerable populations.

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