Fighting for Influence in Open Societies: The Role of Resilience and Transparency

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ABSTRACT

This article uses the framework of message, messenger, and media from a forthcoming book, From Quills to Tweets: How America Communicates War and Revolutions, *to examine how influencers manipulate identity, reality, and perceptions to create such an outsize effect. By analyzing the challenges holistically through this lens, we can weave deep networks of resilience that include initiatives for radical transparency on sources and funding, build networks of resilience to manipulation through public-private initiatives, purge social media sites of inauthentic accounts and media that incites hatred and violence, and promote responsible communication of incidents to avoid amplifying the manifesto of attackers. However, one of the most difficult challenges to overcome will be the false comfort of algorithms that feed us what we want to read—ideas that confirm our own biases—and keep from us viewpoints that challenge our empathetic and cognitive bubbles.*

In his history of the Peloponnesian War, the thirty-year clash between Sparta, Athens, and their alliance systems, Thucydides argues that states go to war for reasons of fear, honor, and interests.[2] But his examination of great power competition also shows that nations march to war because of decisions made by people—wise leaders, shallow showmen, fickle mobs of citizens swayed by impassioned rhetoric, and manipulative envoys who know just when to twist the knife of mistrust. As Kori Schake wrote, Thucydides "demonstrates time and again that vibrant societies are brought to ruin by

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angry or enervated publics who ignore the moderating counsel of seasoned, educated elites."[3]

Small wonder in the twenty-first century that armed groups, private companies, regional powers, and states with global reach are all competing to manipulate individuals as part of the high-stakes competition over power, access, and influence. The ability to change the sentiments of the public, or even just the minds and the hearts individuals, brings with it the potential to influence policy, disrupt economies, incite violence, and even provoke civil war. To be clear, the competition to influence individuals is not a new phenomenon: diplomats, spies, revolutionaries, marketers, and politicians have always been on the front line of this contest. However, social media technologies and patterns of global conflicts have empowered a new group of super-influencers that have changed the stakes for the new battle for loyalty and identity.

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This article uses the framework of message, messenger, and media from a forthcoming book, *From Quills to Tweets: How America Communicates War and Revolutions*, to examine how influencers manipulate identity, reality, and perceptions to create such an outsize effect.[4] The examples include the role of Anwar al-Awlaki, an individual who inspired many others to violence, the use of social media by the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) for recruitment campaigns, and Russian campaigns to disrupt the U.S. elections in 2016. In all three cases, the skilled messenger whose messages manipulated identity played a vital role in the initial stages of attraction and indoctrination, and technology and social media amplified the message and reach of the manipulation. In the case of both ISIS and Russian campaigns, the medium of communication itself—social media—not only carried the message but distanced the human messenger from the target audience so successfully that it raises questions about the future of algorithmic influencers.

MESSENGER AND MESSAGE

Anwar al-Awlaki, the Yemeni-American Muslim cleric who was killed in a U.S. drone strike in Yemen in 2011 and has inspired multiple attacks

since, was particularly adept at reaching into the intersection of identities—the space between our outer-selves and inner-selves—and manipulating the struggle of individuals unable to reconcile the two. Scott Shane's book on al-Awlaki, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone,* examined al-Awlaki's ability to inspire those who listened to him and his own path towards radicalization in his lecture series, from "The Life of the Prophet" series to his "Hereafter" series that discuss the finer points of radicalized violent Salafism to his fiery "The Call to Jihad."[5] By 2016, the Counter Extremism Project had mapped his connection to multiple violent attacks in the United States, including Omar Mateen, who killed 49 people and injured 53 more at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Florida on June 12, 2016. In addition, al-Awlaki has been linked to: Syed Rizwan Farook (2015, San Bernardino) and Enrique Marquez who helped him prepare; Fort Hood shooter Nidal Hasan (2009); underwear bomber Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab (2009); and thwarted suicide bomber Minh Quang Pham (2012). Dzhokhar Tsarnaev (Boston Marathon bombings, 2013) listened to al-Awlaki as did Ahmad Khan Rahami (New York/New Jersey bombings, 2016) and Abdul Razak Ali Artan (Ohio State University attacks, 2016).[6]

What are these intersectional identities that al-Awlaki was so adept at manipulating and why are they so ripe for exploitation in the hands of charismatic individuals? Three overlapping concepts are foundational to understanding this phenomenon. First, in mapping out the notion of identity, the modern philosopher, Kwame Anthony Appiah writes:

> Identities come, first, with labels and ideas about why and to whom they should be applied. Second, your identity shapes your thoughts about how you should behave; and third, it affects the way other people treat you. Finally, all these dimensions of identify are contestable, always up for dispute: who's in, what they're like, and how they should be treated.[7]

Second, if we accept that societies are filled with labels and the rough and tumble of challenges to those identities, shouldn't we try to erase those labels and seek to erode the polarity of identity politics to destabilize societies and individuals? The legal scholar Professor Kimberle Crenshaw, in her seminal article on intersectionality and identity, argued, "The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend differences, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences."[8] Examining rather than erasing the complex layers of intersecting identities is vital to recognizing the interaction between the structures we build in our societies. To address inequities and strengthen

civil society we must first comprehend our political and cognitive habits of communication and how the structures we build around them create narratives that exclude, marginalize, criminalize, and silence groups within our complex societies.

The third conceptual layer that helps us understand identity manipulation resides at the individual level, which the literary critic Lionel Trilling describes as the tension between *sincerity* and *authenticity*.[9] In his elegant literary lectures, he wrote about the appeal and gradual curdling of sentiment towards *sincerity*. Shakespeare's admonishment in Hamlet—to thine own self be true—might be an ideal starting point, but humans quickly run afoul of reality when they face the challenge of both locating their own selves and displaying that self to the world.[10] Trilling writes, "If sincerity is the avoidance of being false to any man through being true to one's own self, we can see that this state of personal existence is not to be attained without the most arduous of effort."[11] In contrast, Trilling introduces the notion of *authenticity* as a path for individuals to put behind them the struggle of finding themselves and the struggle to decide what face to present to the world. Authentic people know who they are and what moral values they stand for and interact confidently with the world around them.[12]

Combined, these concepts from different intellectual disciplines shine a spotlight on how and why individuals like al-Awlaki can insinuate themselves into deeply personal internal dialogues on identity. As director of external operations for al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, by the time of his death, al-Awlaki had perfected his role as a reasonable and thoughtful messenger, struggling to reconcile his inward duty and the outward challenges of the world. How can a devout Muslim reconcile the internal duties he grew up with at home with the rules of a materialistic shallow insincere outward world? Al-Awlaki presented himself as an authentic messenger who drew his English-speaking audiences along a seductive path to reconcile their own doubts about their authentic identities and roles in the world.[13] Shane credits this approach and al-Awlaki's prolific number of recordings as being key to his draw. He was able to reach past the cognitive barriers of resistance of his listeners and bring them with him on a journey to not only justify but also perpetrate violence.[14]

In a digital world, al-Awlaki's legacy persists in the form of his many American accented English-language lectures and the online *Inspire* magazine with helpful articles in English explaining exactly how to construct bombs for readers around the world. After his death, ISIS incorporated al-Awlaki seamlessly into their own slick social media operations and used him to inspire and recruit individuals to his cause, including by naming an

English-speaking fighting brigade after him and editing his voice over ISIS recruitment videos.[15] But as Charlie Winter and Jordan Bach-Lombardo's analysis of the ISIS propaganda machine in early 2016 pointed out, ISIS also figured out how to extend its reach further into the communities from which it was actively recruiting. Indeed, they assessed that as an organization, ISIS had become effective and efficient at combining negative and positive themes to create a core narrative—of a successful model society—to a wide range of audiences around the world. Moreover, its central coordination office, or "Base Foundation," set a core message that was communicated by forty-eight dispersed media offices around the world and actively cultivated unofficial spokespeople who helped to connect ISIS messages to local audiences.[16] This global and local reach was amplified by ISIS spokesman Abu Mohammed al-Adnani's encouragement in 2016 to kill "disbelieving Americans or Europeans" and stay home in Western countries to do so.[17]

As discussed at the end of this article, despite the geographical defeat of ISIS, it is still vitally important for states to continue to counter al-Awlaki's and ISIS' influence operations outside of Iraq and Syria. As ISIS looks for a new geographical base—casting around in the Philippines, Afghanistan, and Libya for the space and resources to rebuild—it has continued to keep up its media, recruitment, and fundraising activities. Even as its strongholds in Syria and Iraq were being evacuated, it was encouraging ISIS sympathizers to carry out attacks in their homelands or defect from other armed groups as the quickest route to re-establishing the legitimacy of ISIS after the collapse of its geographical ambitions. Moreover, the legacy of ISIS continues to disrupt and undermine the rule of law in states that are coming to terms with the polarizing legal and social ramifications of their citizens who joined ISIS and now want to return, such as Shamima Begum (UK).[18]

MESSAGE AND MEDIA

When CEO of Facebook Mark Zuckerberg testified before Congress in 2018, the blinding flashes from cameras illuminated another dimension of influence operations—Russia's deliberate use of social media to influence and erode trust in democratic processes. Indeed, the declassified report from the Director of National Intelligence (DNI) stated:

> Russian efforts to influence the 2016 U.S. presidential election represent the most recent expression of Moscow's longstanding desire to undermine the U.S.-led liberal democratic order, but these activities

> demonstrated a significant escalation in directness, level of activity, and scope of effort compared to previous operations.[19]

As the Center for Strategic and International Studies mapped out in their *Kremlin Playbook*, the combination of activities that Russia has used to gain access and influence in central and eastern Europe have been aimed at "weakening the internal cohesion of societies and strengthening the perception of the dysfunction of the Western democratic and economic system."[20] Moreover, communications scholars such as Kathleen Hall Jamieson and practitioners who analyze Russia such as Andrei Soldatov argue that these attempts are nothing new for the Kremlin, but some of the peculiar characteristics of social media technology have significantly amplified its messages.[21] Indeed, the DNI argues that the Russian influence campaign in the United States blended "covert intelligence operations—such as cyber activity—with overt efforts by Russian Government agencies, state-funded media, third-party intermediaries, and paid social media users or 'trolls.'"[22]

The amplification of Russian destabilization efforts via social media came from the interaction of three elements particular to social media: the ability to target and reach very specific audiences, the velocity at which messengers were able to adapt messages, and the echo chamber created by algorithms that filter out stories we don't like and replenish those we do. For example, journalists Matea Gold and Elizabeth Dwoskin investigated the process and effect of political ads on Facebook in 2017 and estimated that Donald Trump's campaign started each day with "about 20,000 ad variations, testing different messages against a complex set of targeting factors such as age and device usage, as well as past actions such as recent donations," resulting in 40,000-60,000 ad variations running on Facebook each day.[23] In the process, we witnessed a communications evolution; broadcasting messages gave way to narrowcasting, which has given way to micro-casting with pinpoint accuracy. These legitimate political activities were part of the rapid feedback mechanism that social media now provides to political campaigns, which is used by campaign managers to refine messages and tailor messaging to very narrow and specific target audiences.

What happens if the creator of these messages is not a legitimate—or to use social media terminology, "authentic"—messenger? Who makes this determination and who decides on authenticity? Twitter and Facebook, two of the most influential social media platforms caught up in the Russian influence campaign, were able to track these activities after the fact. Mark Zuckerberg testified in April 2018 that approximately $100,000 was spent

on ads over a twenty-four-month period from "470 inauthentic accounts and pages," which their own analysis suggested "were affiliated with one another and likely operated out of Russia." These accounts were "promoting or attacking specific candidates and causes, creating distrust in political institutions, or simply spreading confusion."[24] Facebook's Chief Security Officer, Alex Stamos, noted that "the ads and accounts appeared to focus on amplifying divisive social and political messages across the ideological spectrum—touching on topics from LGBT matters to race issues to immigration to gun rights."[25] And as the Director of the Alliance for Security Democracy, Laura Rosenberger, testified in 2018, Russia's campaign continued across multiple social media platforms including Twitter, Reddit, 4Chan, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest.[26] In other words, Russia ran a deliberate operation to amplify divisive messages in the run up to the 2016 election and social media was both the conduit and the megaphone.

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This begs the question: what were Russian influence operatives hoping to achieve and why did they think it would be successful? Then House Intelligence Committee Ranking Member, Adam Schiff, argued in November 2017 that Russian intentions behind the twitter bots and Facebook clickbait—those irresistible headlines you just have to click—were to sow "discord in the U.S. by inflaming passions on a range of divisive issues."[27] The Russians did so by weaving together fake accounts, pages, and communities to push politicized content and videos, and to mobilize real Americans to sign online petitions and join rallies and protests.[28] Moreover, this deliberate strategy was further amplified by the unintended consequences of algorithms that learn to prioritize stories (and cat videos) that we like to read and deprioritize those we do not. We read more of what we agree with and less of what challenges our viewpoints, which creates a digital echo chamber that validates our point of view and amplifies our differences. Regardless of the outcome of the election, the basic social challenge of this process is that it provides no incentive or mechanism for basic empathy—the ability to understand and share the feelings of another with whom we may not agree—and thus puts yet more pressure on civil disagreements in civil society.[29]

MESSAGE, MESSENGER, AND MEDIA: RESILIENCE IN AN ERA OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Given the scale and scope of the deliberate attacks from charismatic messengers carrying incendiary messages and reaching us on increasingly accurate media, what are some of the threads of resistance—resilience antibodies—that can help weave individuals back into societies and strengthen against both these manipulations?

The most obvious approach, the early identification and interdiction of the messengers, presents a trade-off between the rewards of disrupting or degrading the charismatic influence of a future al-Awlaki with risks to free speech and political protest. Al-Awlaki's death in Yemen from a U.S. drone strike, moreover, has amplified his reputation as a martyr and has not prevented his message from motivating individuals far removed in space and time.

Other efforts at the early identification of key influencers include mapping who is listening, quoting, or sharing their ideas, similar to mapping social media influencers for more benign topics. As the Finnish example illustrates at the end of this article, this can be done inside legal frameworks that are already used by law enforcement agencies in many countries and can be integrated into a more robust deradicalization or prevention strategy.[30] Moreover, researchers investigating what factors might lead individuals and groups to choose *not* to use violence note that when people examined the strategic logic or the moral logic of using violence, they were sometimes able to move themselves or be persuaded away from a path towards violence. [31] In order to leverage these factors, both cognitive and emotional, it is necessary for us to understand both the message and the appeal of the messenger to others. This transparency and exposure of inconsistencies might also leverage peer pressure, another factor that diverted individuals from the use of violence and reframed grievances to be resolvable or better dealt with without violence.

If identifying who the messengers are and who is listening to them is a first step, a second might be to coordinate counter-messaging strategies. Laura Rosenberger at the Alliance for Securing Democracy concluded her testimony before the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence with recommendations for public-private cooperation. Rosenberger focused on the challenges of sharing intelligence between U.S. intelligence agencies and private companies and emphasized that tech companies, especially social media companies, must shift their perception of the challenges from reactive to proactive and coordinate with each other.[32] Citing a Facebook page

hijacked by Russian intelligence operatives to spread fake news in 2016, Rosenberger noted that it took print media intervention to question why the account was still active and the linked Twitter account still continued to be active months later.[33]

Given these kinds of disconnects, one of the bolder recommendations for operationalizing such a public-private partnership comes from Michael Ryan, whose book, *Decoding Al-Qaeda*, exposes the logical, theological, and scholarly inconsistencies of al-Qaeda's messages and messengers.[34] Ryan's latest publication, "Defeating ISIS and Al-Qaeda on the Ideological Battlefield: The Case for the Corporation Against Ideological Violence," argues for a new federal organization structured as a public-private entity dedicated to countering the spread of violent extremism messages and ideologies.[35] Ryan argues:

> Because thwarting radicalization must be a collaborative effort involving the participation of both private and government centers, a number of elements are needed to ensure successful collaboration. These include shared pain, a convener of stature, a clearly defined purpose, a common information base, a sense of movement, a formal charter, committed leaders of stature, and representatives of substance.[36]

The structure of Ryan's institution, the *Corporation Against Ideological Violence*, and nuanced local engagement with communities and individuals who have been targeted for recruitment, lends itself to countering a spectrum of violent ideology including the extreme right-wing messages that motivated the perpetrator of the March 2019 fatal attack on two mosques in New Zealand.

A third component to help weave resilience into our open societies includes the disruption of messages and media. For example, the Countering Extremism Project's (CEP) *Digital Disruption Campaign* was created to "end extremists' misuse of social media platforms to spread terrorist propaganda, radicalize and recruit new members, and incite others to violence."[37] CEP's primary focus is Twitter, which it identifies as a particularly powerful conduit for violent messages: "Vulnerable individuals are initially exposed to extremist content and extremist recruiters on Twitter's easily accessible platform. Recruits are then invited to interact with jihadists on other message boards and private messaging platforms."[38]

One of the notable successes of CEP that may set a precedent for social media behavior was its campaign to persuade Google's YouTube to remove recordings of al-Awlaki's lectures. By 2017, all of the tools of search engines that we take for granted—auto-complete, suggestions for

similar contents, and linked searches—were mobilized to remove Awlaki's contents from YouTube. As Scott Shane noted in the *New York Times*, the videos and recordings still live on in voiceovers and on individual web pages around the world, however, they are no longer an easy path to al-Awlaki's messages.[39]

The complexity of this challenge is evident in the attack on two New Zealand mosques that left fifty people dead. The attacker uploaded memes, images, and documents that are shorthand for white supremacist messages. His livestream video and reference to other touchstones of the white supremacist world seemed intended to complete the media conduction circuit to amplify and broadcast his ideas. Joan Donovan, Director of the Technology and Social Change Research Project, argues, "The extra attention that these ideas gain in the aftermath of a violent attack isn't just an unfortunate side effect of news coverage. It's the sound system by which extremist movements transmit their ideas to a broader public, and they are using it with more and more skill."[40]

Given this context of inflammatory hate speech and made-for-social-media memes, how should leaders and journalists handle these events? Whitney Phillips' 2018 report, *The Oxygen of Amplification*, provides a slew of recommendations for journalists and editors to help them decide what is newsworthy from internet sources, "how to situate bigoted or manipulative sources' statements historically and ideologically, and minimize the inclusion of euphemistic dog whistles," that promulgate hate speech.[41] This sounds possible in theory but difficult to attain in practice, given the competitive nature of news reporting. However, New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, was widely praised for her public communication strategy in handling the aftermath of the shooting. In her media statements, Ardern did not use the shooter's name or repeat his manifesto, denying him and his ideas the initial shot of oxygen he so obviously wanted.[42] Moreover, she quickly moved the focus of the news cycle on to those who had been killed and the issue of gun control in New Zealand.

Finally, many of the people and programs involved in countering fake news and helping to encourage social resiliency to radicalization attempts refer to transparency initiatives. Scientists working for the Center for Research and Evidence on Security Threats, which is funded by a consortium of British Universities and the Economic and Social Research Council, investigated this phenomenon in relation to anti-climate change messaging. They reported that two techniques were particularly successful in their experiments to increase skepticism towards disinformation campaigns. As simple as it seems, they argue, "people can be inoculated

against those disinformation efforts by presenting them with (1) a warning that attempts are made to cast doubt on the…consensus for political reasons, and (2) an explanation that one disinformation technique involves appeals to dissenting 'fake experts' to feign a lack of consensus."[43]

The scientists concluded that if "people are made aware that they might be misled before the misinformation is presented, there is evidence that people become resilient to the misinformation," which psychologists argue is part of the inoculation strategy that includes explaining that fake experts are engaged in disinformation strategies on a given topic. Of course, this is a knife that cuts both ways—these techniques were identified, among others, by a recent investigation into Russian media coverage of the poisoning of the Skripals in Salisbury, UK.[44] In addition to casting doubt on whether the poisonings even took place, the report catalogued multiple shaping narratives on programs broadcast by *RT* and *Sputnik* about the untrustworthiness of the experts, the occurrence of the event, and the perpetrators.[45]

Finland's approaches to defending against the cyber strategies originating in Russia and to inoculate its people against fake news is consistent with this strategy of transparency and has been widely touted as an ongoing success. The European Center of Excellence for Countering Hybrid Threats was established in Helsinki in 2017 to coordinate strategies against the range of challenges Russia presents to Europe, from tanks to bots.[46] Finland also runs workshops for its government officials and media to identify fake news strategies and has developed of a network of specialists across the government to facilitate intra-agency information sharing and to coordinate responses to attacks. Moreover, Finland has not shied away from focusing on the strength of its own national identity. Mackenzie Weigner, a journalist who reported on the initiative with cooperation from the Finnish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, characterized it this way: "they have also tried to promote a strong national narrative to counter Moscow's claims. In broad strokes, this narrative emphasizes Finland's democratic values, excellent education system and even the saunas that are beloved in Finnish culture."[47]

CONCLUSION

Influence operations through social media in which individuals, organizations, non-state actors, and states attempt to reach into our open societies to manipulate loyalties and to incite violence and hatred is a phenomenon that is here to stay. Moreover, charismatic messengers such

as al-Awlaki will continue to tap into underlying grievances and search for ways to exploit complex loyalties and identities. New groups will edit and repurpose old hatreds to fit their agendas, and states will continue to weaponize news on the leading edge of their fight for advantage. However, the argument in this article is that by analyzing the challenges holistically through the lens of message, messenger, and media, we are better posed to craft resilience strategies that are deeply woven into our societies rather than shallow reactionary responses.

Some of the most important initiatives to counter these trends include transparency on sources of information and funding on political advertising, purging social media sites of inauthentic accounts and media that incites hatred and violence, and responsible reporting of violent incidents that does not amplify the manifesto of attackers. While no single message or messenger and no single modern media outlet can inject resiliency into our societies, we already have a web of vigilant and motivated organizations and people who have begun to identify, cooperate, and navigate the balance between vigilance and surveillance and hate speech and freedom of speech. However, one of the most difficult challenges to overcome will be the false comfort of algorithms that feed us what we want to read—ideas that confirm our own biases—and keep from us viewpoints that challenge our empathetic and cognitive bubbles. ***f***

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ENDNOTES

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