Media and Information Literacy: Reinforcing Human Rights, Countering Radicalization and Extremism

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Youth Radicalization

in Cyberspace:

Enlisting Media and Information Literacy in the Battle for Hearts and Minds

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Media and information literacy (MIL) transcends boundaries – geographically, and across subjects and disciplines – yet it provides a process that serves as a catalyst for analysis, discussion, creation and participation. (Wilson and Jolls, 2015) Through a consistent global framework, it is possible to devise a coherent and replicable strategy that can be measured and scaled. MIL offers an effective counter-strategy to tactical radicalism and extremism, and is one that can be readily employed and that has demonstrated its effectiveness in winning hearts and minds when applied for pro-social purposes. Most importantly in light of the urgency of countering terrorism globally, training and implementation of MIL programs can be done efficiently in a timely manner.

In light of the above perception, this paper will:

- *– explore the research related to the power and effectiveness of MIL education*
- *– explore the importance of a conceptual framework for MIL*
- *– present several case studies that illustrate the relevance of MIL when dealing with issues such as human*

  rights, propaganda, indoctrination and extremism

- *– discuss how taking MIL "global", and make a place for media and information literacy for key groups*

and stakeholders is essential as we address the current global challenges facing MIL and human rights.

Introduction

Education is a powerful catalyst for change, and it is also a predictor of who engages in participatory politics – the more education, the more likely a citizen is to be politically active. Today, when looked at through the prism of educational attainment, college students are the most active in the participatory politics realm, which is defined as interactive, peer-based actions through which individuals and

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groups seek to exert both voice and influence on issues of public concern (Cohen & Kahne, 2012).

That targeting such politically active college and high school-aged youth is a strategy employed by ISIS and other radical extremists is acknowledged through anecdotal reports and at top levels of government:

"UK surveillance chief Robert Hannigan has said ISIS and other extremist groups use platforms like Twitter, Facebook and WhatsApp to reach their target audience in a language it understands. 'Their methods include exploiting popular hashtags to disseminate their message,' he said.

'ISIS also uses its Western recruits to promote the cause to other people like them back home.' "And the extremist group is putting a particular focus on girls, analysts say.' We're seeing young women from across Western countries both expressing their support for and migrating to Syria now in totally unprecedented numbers,' said Sasha Havlicek, chief executive of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. 'And I would say this is the result really of an extremely sophisticated propaganda recruitment machinery that's targeting young women very specifically' "(Mullen, 2015).

Evidence such as this emphasizes the growing need—some might say urgency— of media and information literacy (MIL) education. MIL, with its focus on key competencies, can work to provide young people with the skills, knowledge and attitudes they need to understand: how all media, including social media, operate; how they can be used, by whom and for what purposes; and how to evaluate the information they present.

Background to the Crisis

Between 27,000-31,000 foreign recruits from at least 86 countries have traveled to Syria and Iraq to join the Islamic State as of December, 2015 -- a significant increase from the 12,000 foreign fighters from 81 countries reported in June, 2014. Western Europe, Russia and Asia have also seen significant increases in recruitment; the U.S. has remained flat, with most recruitment in the U.S. occurring through social media. The average rate of returnees to Western countries is between 20-30%. (Soufan Group, 2015). This data indicates that much remains to be done to discourage alle- giance to the Islamic State and a long list of other terrorist organizations throughout the world – Hezbollah, Boko Haram, Al-Queda, Abu Sayyaf, and on and on.

Understanding the role that the Internet is playing in the grooming and recruit- ment of young extremists is key to identifying an effective strategy for challenging the jihadist propaganda. In a 2013 study (von Behr, Reding, Edwards & Gribbon, 2013) of 15 extremist and terrorist cases identified through the UK Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and UK Counter Terrorism Units (CTU), researchers from Rand Europe stated that "for all 15 individuals we researched, the internet has been a key source of information, of communication and of propaganda for their extremist beliefs... this access to people online may provide greater oppor-

tunity than the offline world to confirm existing beliefs and avoid confrontation with information that would challenge them." Rand Europe analyzed and compared five hypotheses regarding internet use by radicals; the hypotheses were identified through a literature review and are shown in the table below. Rand Europe then compared these hypotheses to the primary data contained in the 15 terrorist cases, with the following results:

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Literature Hypotheses	Does the primary data support the hypotheses?
1. The internet creates more opportunities to become radicalized.	Yes in all of these cases.
2. The internet acts as an 'echo chamber'.	Yes in the majority of these cases.
3. The internet accelerates the process of radicalization.	While there is no agreed length of time or template for radicalization, it is not clear that the internet would have accelerated this process in the majority of our cases: in these cases the internet appears to enable rather than necessarily accelerate radicalization.
4. The internet allows radicalization to occur without physical contact.	Not in the majority of these cases: most cases involve offline activity that could have played a role in the individual's radicalization.
5. The internet increases opportunities for self-radicalization.	Not in the majority of these cases: most cases of so-called 'online self-radicalization' involve virtual communication and interaction with others.

These findings strongly support the notion that the internet plays a unique and unprecedented role in the recruitment process, from creating opportunity to connect with others, to reinforcing radical beliefs in a virtual "echo chamber"(Shane, Apuzzo and Schmitt, 2015). However, personal contact in the offline world also plays an important part in radicalization, and why and how these connections are made also must inform strategies for combatting terrorism.

According to Olivier Roy, a professor at the European Institute in Italy and well-known analyst of Islamic terrorism, "Radicalisation is a youth revolt against society, articulated in an Islamic religious narrative of jihad. It is not the uprising of a Muslim community as victims of poverty and racism: only young people join, including converts who did not share the 'sufferings' of Muslims in Europe. These rebels without a cause find in jihad a 'noble' and global cause, and are consequently instrumentalised by a radical organization (Al Qaeda, ISIS), that has a strategic agenda" (Swanson, 2015).

Beyond increasing their intelligence capacity, governments and society "need to debunk the myth that radical terrorists are heroes, and subvert the idea that the

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Islamic State is successful and impervious to our attacks," according to Roy. "What's more, we need to foster the idea that Islam is a normal part of society, not a dangerous or oppressed minority. Instead of 'exceptionalizing,' we should 'normalize' ".

Youth and the New Media Culture

At the heart of the matter – the emotional heart – are issues of identity that have long driven youth behavior. "...strip away all the grievances and myriad individual triggers that might drive an individual to join an extremist group, and you find underlying issues of identity and belonging. None of this is new," said Shiraz Maher, senior research fellow, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence (Maher, 2015).

Certainly, the commercialization of youth identity has long been a focus of expensive and endless studies and marketing campaigns, with companies targeting youth to tune into movies, television, music, smartphones, online apps and plat- forms in an effort to sell their merchandise to them– and even encouraging youth to share their "friends" contact information so that they too can be targeted by the corporation. Nor is the appeal to be "exceptional" new in the commercial arena: Remember the classic 1997 Apple campaign admonishing youth to "Think Different"? (Hormby, 2013)

Today, the co-opting of youth identity has shifted to the more sophisticated and consequential ideological realm, where girls speak of "leaving behind an immoral society to search for religious virtue and meaning," (Bennhold, 2015) and boys "are motivated by the desire to be a hero, to do violence or get revenge." (Swanson, 2015). Social contagion is also a factor, with copycat behavior that sometimes results in clusters of young friends and/or family joining in jihad. (Bennhold, 2015; Mate 2015). Destructive and even suicidal copycat behaviors are not new. Documented cases of youth suicides incited through media go back to the publication in 1774 of Wolfgang von Goethe's sensational book, "*The Sorrows of Young Werther*." (Furedi 2015) Werther, the book's main character, kills himself with a pistol after being rejected by his lady love, and upon publication of the book, there was a notable uptick of young men committing suicide through the same means, leading to a type of suicidal social contagion called the "Werther effect".

Whether recruiting boots on the grounds or brides for recruits, ISIS is relent- lessly and effectively employing its army online in fighting the global battle for hearts and minds. ISIS has mobilized a decentralized media empire which relies on followers world-wide to distribute messages in at least half a dozen languages. (Stewart & Maremont, 2016) The scope of the ISIS effort is daunting: Twitter alone "removed more than 26,000 suspected pro-Islamic State accounts in March (2016), nearly four times the number erased in September, according to an anal- ysis conducted for The Wall Street Journal by Recorded Future, Inc., a threat-in- telligence firm based in Somerville, Mass. Islamic State supporters have tried to

keep pace, establishing more than 21,000 accounts in March (2016), compared with about 7,000 in September, the analysis found".

Although signs of ISIS' and other radicals' online "success" include depictions of beheadings, enslavement of women, purging of Christians and ethnic minorities and other barbarous physical acts that are all-too-familiar litanies of war, the battles fought online represent utilizing new technologies and strategic employments that are inevitably part of war —except that this time it is the online war which military forces are ill-equipped to fight, globally and locally.

Yet the battle must be fought – and won – using the very technologies and media and information that the radicals also employ. However, it is not enough to rely on Twitter, Facebook or government counter-terrorism units to filter out terrorist-inspired messages. According to an intelligence brief issued by Stratfor, a global intelligence consulting firm: "Ordinary citizens exercising situational aware- ness can and have saved lives...It is unrealistic to expect the government to uncover and thwart every plot. There are too many potential actors and too many vulner- able targets. Individuals need to assume some responsibility for their own security and the security of their communities. This does not mean living in fear and para- noia, but

rather living with a relaxed level of situational awareness, being cogni- zant of potential dangers and alert to indicators of them. People who accept the responsibility and who practice this awareness are the true grassroots defenders" (Stewart, 2013).

The Role of Media and Information Literacy

With ideology being the focus of jihadist and terrorist recruiting, and with their "weapon of choice" for recruitment being the Internet and social media, the need for media and information literacy (MIL) education globally is now imperative.

Like centuries of old, the battle by grassroots defenders must be fought and won by youth who provide the boots on the ground. But this time, these youth must be armed with a critical understanding of the media they use. Since the politicians and generals have no direct control over online activities and operations; they must rely on the smarts and the hearts of young people to bring a critical lens to the representations and message about their world, and the threats to that world. The "boots on the ground" now traverse the virtual world, and still encounter an enemy as threatening as those found on the battlefield.

In today's global village, the media provide a culture that has gone beyond blue jeans and rock'n'roll. Today, the global and the local are often merged, yet global media convey values, lifestyles or points of view that may not be consonant with local values. Sometimes the global and the local inform each other and sometimes not; sometimes local culture influences the interpretation of global media; some- times global media is adapted to fit local cultures or conversely, local culture influ- ences global media. Youth are often rudderless, navigating the online universe with little adult guidance or institutional anchoring (Walkosz, Jolls and Sund, 2008).

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Preparedness to navigate the global village – providing youth with an understanding of human rights and dignity, and of the importance of rule of law to freedom and economic prosperity -- comes in this new arena through media and information literacy education.

Youth primarily get their news and information through media outlets such as YouTube or Instagram, often spending more than eight hours each day with media. (Common Sense Media, 2015) In the media world of powerful images, words and sounds, media *is* youth culture.

But youth still need filters (and more!) for all kinds of purposes, from internet safety to having the ability to select credible information sources. They (and we) need a mindset to go with the headset – an internalized filtering system that can be used anytime, anywhere; that is commonly shared; and that transcends cultural and national boundaries. We need algorithms for our brains, to use as we both consume and produce media, and participate in a globalized society.

Media and information literacy offers both offensive and defensive tools of discernment and expression to advocate for positive human values and for political action, and to recognize and to mitigate harmful media messages and effects. MIL education has long shown how it is one of the most viable intervention strategies to minimize media's negative consequences and maximize its positive influence on children's beliefs, attitudes and behaviors. An extensive meta-analytic review of studies in this area conducted over the past three decades found that media literacy interventions counteract media effects related to risky and

anti-social behaviors, including violence and aggression, alcohol and tobacco use, body image and eating disorders and commercialism (Jeong, Cho & Hwant, 2012). Additionally, MIL positively impacts children's knowledge acquisition skills, attitudes and behaviors about the nature of media and its influence, an awareness of persuasive techniques used to influence audiences, and their ability to assess the realism of media representations.

These MIL skills directly address the profile of online radicalization described by the U.S. Department of Justice's Community-Oriented Policing Services:

"Generally, as individuals immerse themselves in online extremist content, they begin to develop a skewed sense of reality in which their views no longer seem radical. Online interactions with like-minded individuals can substitute for an indi- vidual's physical community and create an online social environment similar to that of a gang in which deviant behavior and violence are the norm. Consumers of online extremist content can also develop or increase feelings of superiority, moral outrage, desensitization to violence, and willingness to commit acts of violence in further- ance of a particular cause" (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2014).

MIL education has proven itself as an effective intervention strategy for violence prevention: an extensive longitudinal study conducted by UCLA, (Fingar & Jolls, 2013) evaluating the Center for Media Literacy's framework and violence prevention curriculum, *Beyond Blame, Challenging Violence in the Media,* found concrete results from a cognitive intervention that called upon middle school students' critical understanding and expression. The study found that students were able to discern the Four Effects of Media Violence -- increased aggression or

imitation, a heightened sense of fear for one's own safety, desensitization toward the pain and suffering of others, and habituation. Additionally, they came away with stronger beliefs that media violence affects users and that people can protect them- selves by using less. Students' rates of aggression slowed during the course of the study, and specific behavioral changes included students' consuming less violent media, fewer incidents of pushing or shoving other students, or threatening to hit or hurt someone.

Yet providing media and information literacy education is a demand as yet unmet inside and outside of classrooms, as youth themselves attest: 84% of youth respondents in a 2012 study reported that they would benefit from learning how to judge the credibility of what they find online (Cohen & Kahne, 2012). How accurate and factual is the information? What worldview is represented? Who and what are left out? Who benefits (or not), and how? Is there anything that can be done, or should be done? What is our individual and collective responsibility? Making these types of judgments requires textual and contextual readings that are based upon an ethical framework for analysis and evaluation – and with social media and media production, applying these frameworks to creative content that youth themselves produce.

Since all media are representations that are constructed by an author(s) for a particular purpose, and for a particular audience, the Core Concepts of Media Literacy – like Newton's laws of gravity – describe in a consistent, systematic way how media are constructed in every genre, every time. (Wilson & Jolls, 2015) These Core Concepts apply to both deconstruction (reading) and construction (writing) of media. They are foundational to understanding media and to critically analyzing media for both consumers and producers of media messages, who "represent" or re-present, reality to audiences.

To deepen the exploration of the nature of the Core Concepts and represen- tation, the Center for Media Literacy's Questions/TIPS (Q/TIPS) framework is an example of an evidence-based practice that enables a process of inquiry. This inquiry can be applied to any media, anytime to interrogate the media's authorship, purpose, techniques, framing of values and biases and audience targeting (Jolls & Wilson, 2014). Through applying and practicing this process of inquiry, media users develop an internalized filtering system – or heuristic – that may be used for discernment and for informing decisions. In turn, this analysis is part of a deci- sion-making process of Awareness, Analysis, Reflection and Action – an Empower- ment Spiral that

provides a basic heuristic for breaking down the steps followed in determining whether to take action, or not.

For example, a deeper understanding and application of Core Concept #5, "Most media messages are organized for profit and/or power," is particularly rele- vant to combatting terrorism and jihadism, since users would be encouraged to explore the financial or ideological implications of messages they engage with. Core Concept #4, "Media have embedded values and points of view," helps users to see how messages are framed, to observe what is contained or omitted in the message, and to understand the lifestyles, values and points of view that contribute to the content and inevitable bias in the message. These Concepts help illuminate a

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process of inquiry that can take a media user well beyond the surface meaning or message conveyed.

An example of putting these Core Concepts to work can be found in identi- fying the root causes of the Arab Spring, which began in 2010 when a Tunisian man named Mohamed Bouazizi set himself on fire and millions of people took to the streets across the Middle East. The news media reported heavily on the use of social media in the demonstrations, but social media was not the root cause of people taking to the streets: "In the end, everybody, I think, does understand at some level that this has always been a situation of despair. The guys who did the twittering and the Facebooking may have received a lot of the publicity in the Arab Spring," Hernando de Soto, founder and chairman of the Institute for Liberty and Democ- racy, said. "People understand that social media makes news travel faster, but that the substance of the news comes from someplace else. It's not that I believe that economics is the whole explanation for what happened, but it is the missing ingre- dient (in the news coverage)." DeSoto's diagnosis of the causes of the revolution is that small vendors like Mohamed Bouazizi have no property rights and no redress; when the government takes away their property, they have nothing; they are liter- ally facing starvation, with no future. Despair is what's left. De Soto should know: he is a veteran of helping to defeat the Shining Path Maoist terrorist organization in Peru, and his Institute conducted in-depth interviews and research into the circumstances surrounding Mohamed Bouazizi and the 49 other individuals who self-immolated within 60 days of Bouazizi (McKinsey on Society, 2016). Clearly understanding the context of the media commentary gives the situation a whole new meaning

Recommendations: Heeding the Call

Calls for media and information literacy education are being made by important organizations across the globe. The UN Security Council's Counter-Terrorism Committee (Counter-Terrorism Committee, 2016), has called for "creating avenues for the voices of women and youth...and developing education programmes to promote critical thinking and understanding of other cultures." UNESCO has long supported media literacy and intercultural dialogue through its Media and Infor- mation Literacy initiative. Through the UNESCO-initiated Global Alliance for Media and Information Literacy (GAPMIL), active chapters are working toward the promotion of MIL throughout the world. UNESCO recently released *A Teacher's Guide on the Prevention of Violent Extremism*, and addresses the topic of "online media literacy" as a means to "help learners use the Internet and social media in a safe and effective way" (UNESCO, 2016). A major strategy report (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2009), specifically called for the UK government to "empower online communities" and "reduce the

appeal" of radicalization, saying that "more attention must be paid to media literacy, and a comprehensive approach in this area is badly needed". Although its focus was

primarily education reform, an Aspen Institute report called "Learner at the Center of a Networked World" (The Aspen Institute, 2014) called for media literacy and social/emotional literacies to be at the heart of

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Yet politicians and mainstream media have not joined this call: "The gulf between the political set and the ordinary members of society is vast," according to the World Editors Forum (Mukuka, 2016). "So too is the disconnect between the mainstream media and ordinary people, particularly the young."

Universities and other temples of learning have also failed to prioritize MIL education: with the erosion of free speech on many campuses and the censorship of content, too few youth understand that one person's offense can be another's expression of truth to power (Gillman and Chemerinsky, 2016). University schools of education have sadly neglected media and information literacy, nor is MIL a required competency for gaining a teaching certificate. (ABCTE, 2016)

Technology companies have not stood up for increased user discernment through MIL: while media production has been democratized through the promo- tion and use of social media, media and information literacy becomes even more essential in a media climate where algorithms are the new editors that may limit users' access to important information by censoring, and where companies profit by selling personal data, while running on users' content and online preferences and histories (Herbst, 2016).

While report after report from practitioners across the globe has laid out paths for providing MIL education – from the Grunwald Declaration in 1982 (UNESCO, 1982) to the present (The Aspen Institute, 2014; Cohen & Kahne, 2012; Hobbs, 2010; Turner, *et.al*. 2016), MIL remains marginalized as a solution to important world problems and as a movement worthy of encouragement and investment. This neglect should be a shameful embarrassment for leaders the world over, who stand by as citizens lack the competencies to stand up to dangerous worldviews and the powerful omissions and commissions that the media perpetuate. "Media literacy is an all-hands-on-deck issue. We need to wake up," said Kevin Stratton, Republican member of the Utah House of Representatives (Stratton, 2015).

Media and information literacy transcends boundaries – geographically, and across subjects and disciplines – and it provides a process that serves as a cata- lyst for analysis, discussion, creation and participation. (Wilson & Jolls, 2015) Through using a consistent global framework, it is possible to devise a coherent and replicable strategy that can be measured and scaled. It offers a strategic count- er-strategy to tactical radicalism and extremism that can be readily employed and that has demonstrated its effectiveness in winning hearts and minds when applied to pro-social purposes (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, 2009).

This heuristic-oriented approach to MIL education places trust in the judg- ment, decisions and actions of individuals and communities. It is a democratic approach, where individuals and groups are empowered to use tools of discernment and persuasion to work towards their own goals. It is not directive or top-down; it relies on a process of inquiry that raises questions about values, motives and

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purpose; it provides a sense of ownership and agency for decisions and actions that individuals may take as a result of employing MIL competencies in any subject area. MIL education can contribute to solutions to problems of global proportions that are happening *now*. The need for media and information literacy education is urgent. Most importantly in light of the urgency of countering terrorism globally, training and implementation of MIL programs can be done efficiently in a timely manner (Fingar & Jolls, 2013). Learning about MIL is not a linear abstract process – it is an experiential process. Training programs for teachers taking less than one day have been effective in providing a foundation for MIL education (Fingar & Jolls, 2013). Furthermore, since a media and information literacy framework can be applied to any

message, anywhere, anytime, using such a framework is highly flexible, portable and timely. The foundational skills of MIL are necessary as a plat- form upon which to build citizenship skills, workplace competencies and healthy

life decisions.

The rise of ISIS and other extremist groups is confirmation of what we in MIL education have long said: that using new media technology effectively is about more than learning to click or create at the touch of a finger. The stakes are high, and understanding the nature and the use of representation through media and information literacy is essential: "How we are seen determines in part how we are treated; how we treat others is based on how we see them; such seeing comes from representation." (Dyer, 1993).

Minds, hearts -- and lives -- must be won over, in a way that exemplifies universal human values. We must act now.

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