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Reconceptualizing Radicalized Groups
and Their Messages

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On the cover: Terrorists use social media sites to recruit and radicalize new members. SOURCE: KOM_PORNNARONG/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.

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RECONCEPTUALIZING RADICALIZED GROUPS AND THEIR MESSAGES

Introduction

As the United States enters a decade and a half of sustained conflict against terror groups, boundary lines between ideologies, organizations, and individuals becomes more blurred by the day. One group dissolves only to emerge as another, with an omnipresent leadership challenge on how to combat both political violence and supporting messages by individuals consistently shifting allegiances. Compounding this challenge are a slew of failed nation-states and rebel groups, ones with opportunistic ties to radicalized individuals and their causes. Special Operations Forces (SOF) remain the force of choice to address these realities. Logistically they are agile enough to adapt to changed enemy configurations and organizations, and capable of careful insertion or removal as a nation's stability ebbs and flows around them.

What this occasional paper explores are alternative approaches for SOF to engage with radicalized groups. As an example, at present, mainstream defense and intelligence analysts proclaim the prowess of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in social media—a result of both reach and authenticity.¹ The solution? Comprehensive engagement in the narrative space to defeat the effects of ISIS in the psychological and sociological aspects of the human domain.² The Department of State's recently activated Global Engagement Center (GEC) is tasked with an arguably overdue role in coordinating U.S.-wide, counter-violent-extremist communication efforts.³ The GEC not only aims to reduce duplication of effort, it likewise aspires to identify nationwide priorities and ways and means for agencies to complement each other's counter-narrative efforts by comparing notes across those agencies.⁴

Even with improved coordination and perspective, communication narratives can never tell an entire political violence or radicalization story. For example, research finds that individuals pre-disposed to causing harm are more vulnerable to terrorist recruitment.⁵ Also, assessment of narratives and/or social media data ignores the impact/effect of a growing female recruitment base on vulnerable

1. Steven Metz, "Countering the Islamic State in the Asymmetric Social Media Battlefield," *World Politics Review*, 19 June 2015, <http://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/16042/countering-the-islamic-state-in-the-asymmetric-social-media-battlefield>.

2. Charles L. Moore et al., *Strategic Multilayer Assessment White Paper: Maneuver and Engagement in the Narrative Space* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, January 2016), <http://www.soc.mil/swcs/ProjectGray/Maneuver%20in%20the%20Narrative%20Space.pdf>.

3. "Global Engagement Center," Department of State, accessed on 30 March 2017, <https://www.state.gov/r/gec/>.

4. Paul S. Lieber and Peter J. Reiley, "Countering ISIS's Social Media Influence," *Special Operations Journal* 2, no. 1 (1 June 2016): 47–57.

5. Paul S. Lieber, Yael Efreom-Lieber, and Christopher Rate, "Moral Disengagement: Exploring Support Mechanisms for Violent Extremism among Young Egyptian Males" (paper presented at 1st Australian Counter Terrorism Conference, Perth, Western Australia, 30 November 2010), <http://ro.ecu.edu.au/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1008&context=act>.

males.⁶ Therefore, it's important to think wider and deeper. Rethinking this problem from a joint social psychology—notably realistic conflict theory (RCT)—and social network analysis approach can yield unprecedented insights on the inner workings of radicalized groups and their penchant for political violence. Specifically, it extends the understanding of an organization's true threat beyond the immediate, and with it, how SOF can be effective in countering them long-term.

Since its inception at the dawn of the 20th century, the field of social psychology has aspired to understand intergroup relationships. Along the way, this field yielded several classic studies that revealed deep insights into understanding the human connection to group membership, to include relationships between members within a group (in-group members) and behavior toward individuals outside of it (out-group members). This field of research has direct applicability to understanding and countering the social radicalization of young adults, ones directly taught to commit acts of political violence against out-group members to show loyalty and love toward the in-group.

Realistic Conflict Theory and the Robber's Cave

RCT, developed by Muzafer Sherif, is a method of understanding relationships and competition between groups of equal or unequal status.⁷ RCT posits that competition occurs when two groups of equal footing compete for a valued resource, leading to deep in-group loyalty and hostility toward the out-

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group. When two groups of unequal status compete for a valued resource, one group seeks to dominate the other, which can lead to two alternate responses. One response is oppression by and acceptance of the domination of the in-group by the out-group, in which the out-group adopts the culture, attitudes, and values of the in-group to avoid further conflict. The other

outcome is rejection of the oppression and ensuing hostilities, which may lead to alternate responses from the dominating force, or in-group. This, of course, closely mirrors many current engagements for SOF, ones where ethnic conflict and large refugee numbers can lead to near-continuous in- versus out-group hostilities. These situations become even more difficult when SOF are tasked with protecting or diminishing sovereignty of a host nation.

In this second response, the in-group may view the out-group's rejection of their domination as either justified or unjustified. If the rejection is viewed as justified, the in-group may acquiesce to some of the out-group's demands, leading to a possible cessation of hostilities and a return to stability. If the in-group, however, views the rejection as unjustified, this will likely further hostilities.

A real-world example of an out-group's rejection of dominance by an in-group is in the founding of the modern state of Pakistan, where the out-group was met with some concessions, but also with

6. Anne Speckhard. "Brides of ISIS," *USA Today Magazine* 144, no. 2844 (September 2015): 18.

7. Muzafer Sherif, "Socio-Cultural Influences in Small Group Research," *Sociology and Social Research* 39 (1954): 1–10; Muzafer Sherif. "Superordinate Goals in the Reduction of Intergroup Conflict," *American Journal of Sociology* 63 (1958): 349–356.

continued hostility by dominant in-groups that viewed the nation-state of Pakistan's rejection of domination as unjustified.

RCT has many applications toward understanding the process whereby a young adult becomes radicalized and indoctrinated by an extremist group to hate, despise, and potentially act out against, another culture. Whether this youth is part of a marginalized or more dominant group, we can utilize RCT to understand the processes leading to in-group identification and out-group hostility. The famous Robbers' Cave experiment, conducted by Sherif, demonstrated the basic processes as well as methods for countering the ensuing hostility and restoring a spirit of cooperation.⁸ Within this experiment, Sherif illustrated the three phases of group formation that eventually lead to deep identification with an in-group, conflict with an out-group, and eventual cooperation between two once-hostile groups.

In phase 1, a group of individuals (in the case of the experiment, 11-year-old boys at a summer camp) from similar socio-economic and cultural backgrounds are given time to bond with each other through shared activities and events. These individuals have minimal to no contact with the other group, or out-group, and spend the vast majority of their time with their own group, or in-group. Over time, the groups created a group name along with uniquely identifying symbols and gestures. During this phase, the in-group members become closely bonded with each other, forming a shared identity.

Phase 2 involved formally introducing the two groups to each other through a series of competitions. The two groups competed for a scarce resource (in this case, points used for rewards and prizes). After only a short amount of time, hostility toward and taunting of the out-group emerged, including name-calling, development of offensive names and songs for the out-group, and sabotage. Hostilities progressed to the point that in-group members refused to sit near or be around out-group members during periods of non-competition, such as lunch or dinner. Eventually, the hostility progressed into outright physical aggression, leading the experimenters (at the time) to stop competitive activities between the groups, as it was deemed no longer safe.

Phase 3, the most critical aspect of the Robber's Cave experiment, demonstrated how tensions between competing groups can be reduced through cooperation (see fig. 1). Cooperative goals were created by letting the two groups know of a problem that mutually impacted both and could not be resolved successfully by only one group (disruption of their camp water supply and mention of previous tampering by outside vandals). Basically, the two groups now had a superordinate goal—a shared goal that required mutual participation and problem solving for the achievement of mutual rewards. This concept of a superordinate goal is the key to the reduction of hostility and eventual development of productive connections between competing out-groups. A superordinate goal is non-competitive and mutually beneficial, but also more labor intensive, shared, and participatory than simple non-competitive interactions. By emphasizing

Basically, the two groups now had a superordinate goal—a shared goal that required mutual participation and problem solving for the achievement of mutual rewards.

8. Muzafer Sherif et al., *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation: The Robbers Cave Experiment* (Norman, OK: University Book Exchange, 1961).

superordinate goals via information operations and/or public affairs, SOF can potentially and positively shape an environment before action is needed.

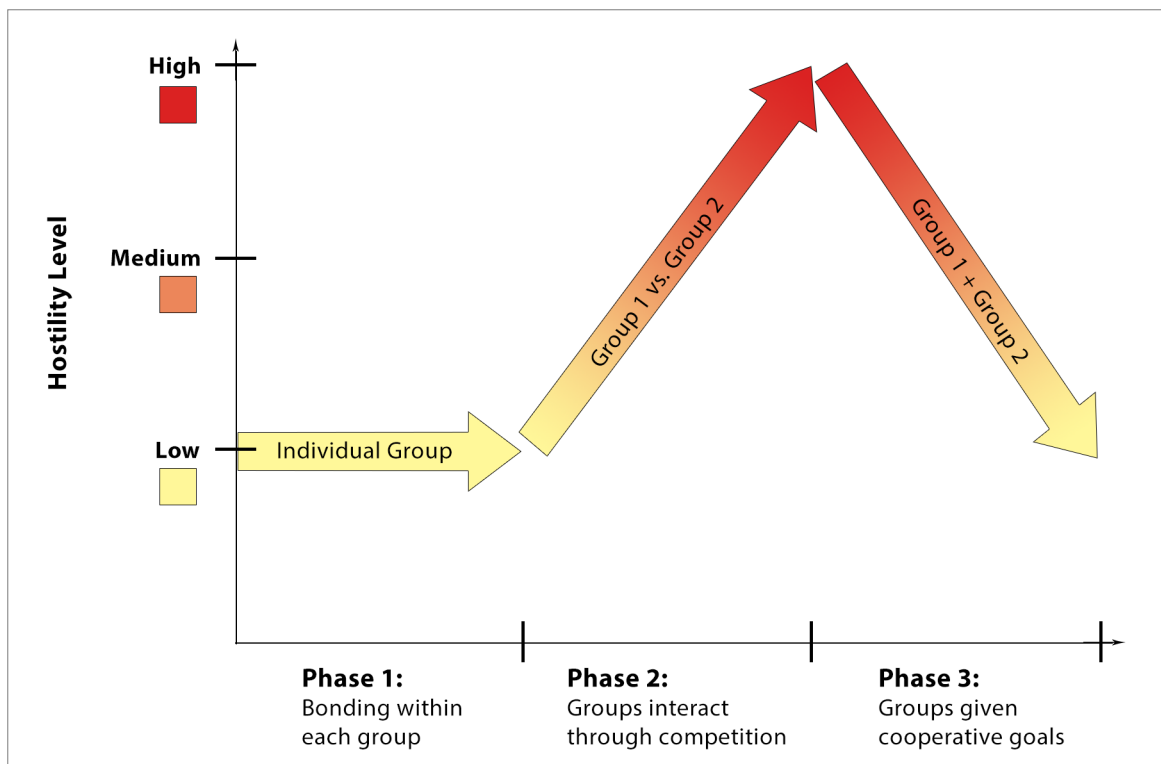


Figure 1. The three phases of realistic conflict theory, as evidenced in the Robber's Cave experiment. JSOU GRAPHIC BASED ON MUZAHER SHERIF ET AL.⁹

Rethinking 'Radicalization' via Group Identification

In general, radicalization, and hopefully de-radicalization, may be said to follow a similar process whereby groups that are culturally, religiously, and/or racially diverse perceive each other as in competition for scarce resources such as employment, housing, education, and benefits. As groups increasingly spend less time with the out-group and more time with the in-group, hostilities deepen towards the perceived out-group, or competition. As the Robber's Cave experiment showed, this could lead to violence.

In particular, if the in-group perceives themselves as "oppressed" by a supposedly dominant out-group, they increasingly may come to reject the out-group's value system, ideals, beliefs, and culture in favor of the in-group's (phase 1). The out-group may stoke those flames through increasing its hostility and prejudice toward the in-group (phase 2), individuals who are now seen as "unjustified" in their belief of being dominated or oppressed. For example, in Lebanon, a re-enactment of the

9. Sherif et al., *Intergroup Conflict and Cooperation*.

Robber's Cave experiment needed to be terminated completely, as hostilities reached remarkably dangerous levels.¹⁰

Ultimately, the use of mutual superordinate goals (phase 3) can lead to reduced tensions and great connection and friendship between groups. More valuable than simply living in the same neighborhood and shopping at the same stores, or even attending the same schools, children who are exposed to cooperative problem-solving for shared beneficial goals will be more likely to develop deep connections with the out-group and view their own identity in a more fluid fashion.

This notion runs counter to populist ideas promoting boycotts and isolation between competitive and hostile groups (e.g., the Palestinian Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement's campaign against Israel, started in 2005, which compares competition between the two groups to South African apartheid).¹¹ Such policies increase hostilities and tensions as in-groups become more isolated and less exposed to alternative viewpoints and individuals. This isolation, in turn, leads to greater in-group identification and out-group hatred, not only from a lack of contact, but also from an increasing inability to perceive that superordinate or shared goals may exist between the groups.

Social Media within Radicalized Groups

When assessing in- and out-group relationships, communication is paramount. By emphasizing, condoning, or renouncing particular perspectives, social media provides an unprecedented ability to improve hostilities in phase 2 of RCT, and to locate the mutual values and beliefs that comprise phase 3. This means it can serve as the gateway between politics and violent action.

The vast majority of current research on the impact of social media on both radicalization and de-radicalization is on a phase-2-centric role of the narrative¹²—one the U.S. is seen as “losing.”¹³ Terrorist-generated influence messages and images are believed to be enormously effective in highlighting existing grievances, exacerbating out-group self-identification, and in endorsing hostilities against anyone affiliated with the in-group. Within this social media space, the most active individuals and messages are often deemed the most important. This, however, is a fallacy: influence is a qualitative concept, and social media platforms and quantitative measures of success are best used as starting points versus measures of effectiveness.¹⁴

10. L.N. Diab, “A Study of Intragroup and Intergroup Relations among Experimentally Produced Small Groups,” *Genetic Psychology Monograph* 82 (1970): 49–82.

11. Mitchell G. Bard and Jeff Dawson, “Israel and the Campus: The Real Story,” The American-Israeli Cooperative Enterprise, Fall 2012, accessed 8 Aug 2017, <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/IsraelonCampusReport2012.pdf>.

12. Lieber and Reiley, “Countering ISIS's Social Media Influence.”

13. Mark Mazzetti and Michael R. Gordon, “ISIS Is Winning the Social Media War, U.S. Concludes,” *New York Times*, 12 June 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/world/middleeast/isis-is-winning-message-war-us-concludes.html>.

14. Damien Basille, “Social Media Influencers Are Not Traditional Influencers,” *@Brian Solis*, 5 November 2009, accessed 30 March 2017, <http://www.briansolis.com/2009/11/social-media-influencers-are-not-traditional-influencers>; Ben Straley, “How To: Target Social Media Influencers to Boost Traffic and Sales,” *Mashable*, accessed 30 March 2017, <http://mashable.com/2010/04/15/social-media-influencers/>.

In addition, while grievances and sister strain theory—perceived pressures on an individual to achieve socially accepted goals, resulting in criminal activity to attain them¹⁵—are correlated to in- versus



Figure 2. The symbolism of a graphic, such as the ISIS flag, may be different for different people. SOURCE: RAILWAY FX/SHUTTERSTOCK.COM.

out-group self-identification, they cannot be perfectly accounted for in messages sporting character and convention limits. An emoji or meme is not a call to action, and even the most graphic video can be independent from intent—even the most descriptive visual can take on different meanings, depending on the viewer. This is especially true for visuals derived from symbolism, such as an ISIS flag (fig. 2). In this instance, the symbolism may be representative

of an array of other grievances, which may differ considerably among members of the group displaying it.

Similarly, SOF media analysis tools and approaches tend to oversimplify the path from phase 1 to phase 2, and see pathways of messages parallel to radicalization. By design, social network analyses emphasizing nodes and word clouds emphasize individuals who communicate the most ... and to whom. These analyses carry with them three assumptions: 1) individuals communicating the most online are doing the same offline ... and to always influential peers; 2) online communication encapsulates offline communication and should be treated as such; and 3) individuals in positions of online influence are equally as influential offline, and vice versa.

These three assumptions all fail to account for communication and social cultures. Sherif's RCT¹⁶ rightly places prominence on self-identification (within in- and out-groups). This identification logically impacts both communication frequency and the value of messages originating from within perceived in- and out-groups. Noelle-Neumann's Spiral of Silence theory¹⁷ captures this majority versus minority, self-identification perfectly. Specifically, Spiral of Silence theory reasons that individuals who perceive themselves to be in the majority opinion group are more likely to speak up, and vice versa for those in the minority. In social media networks, lines between in- and out-groups regularly shift, and are highly vulnerable to external influence, especially for young adults, many of whom form opinions based on trending social media-based topics and beliefs.

15. Robert K. Merton, "Social Structure and Anomie," *American Sociological Review* 3, no. 5 (October 1938): 672–682.

16. Sherif, "Socio-Cultural Influences"; Sherif, "Superordinate Goals."

17. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, "The Spiral of Silence: A Theory of Public Opinion," *Journal of Communication* 24, no. 2 (1974): 43–51.

Second, while social standing has a place in communication access and reach within an in-group, apportioned and assumed roles are of arguably greatest prominence in social media networks, especially for taboo topics such as radicalization, where credibility cannot be assigned. It is for this reason that influential users emerge in online communities almost naturally; they self-identify into a particular role and maximize this role to create a wide reach and influence.

Social Network Analysis

In their research on social network analysis, García, Daly, and Sánchez-Cabezudo¹⁸ sought to explore this very thing. Specifically, what roles are essential to promulgating and sustaining message influence within an in-group social network? Theoretically, this methodology refreshingly avoids the aforementioned traps of being too contextual or trend reliant, and instead focuses on relations, their directions and strength, and finally group and communication structures.

Thus, and perhaps not surprisingly, social network analysis draws its influence from anthropology, notably Durkheim's concept of functionalism, which explains society as a sum of interrelated parts, or functions.¹⁹ From this definition, a stable society is one featuring an array of compatible, cooperative networks. Garcia et al. placed social media influencers within a social network into three categories.²⁰ All three have what they termed "a highly structurally diverse network."

1. Communicative (dissemination): Individuals who prefer to maximize their influence on communication and thus prevent the formation of structural holes.
2. Relational (engagement): Individuals with a tendency to maximize efficiency in relationships with third parties.
3. Leaders: Individuals who occupy top positions in the two previous categories.

From a social media network perspective, these three in-group influencer types respectively ensure communication sustains (e.g., the conversation doesn't die), remains efficient (e.g., remains on topic), and has designated leaders who serve as arbiters of value. This conceptualization places a premium on message flow and resonance rather than on who said what, how many times, and using what words. Thus, reexamining radicalization influence networks from this perspective is apt to yield

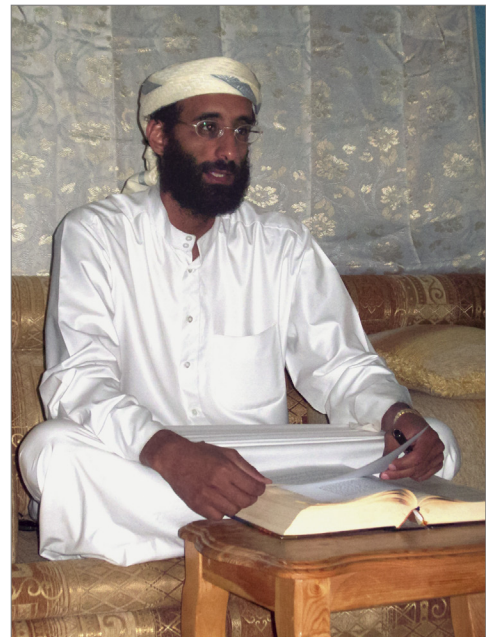


Figure 3. American-born imam Anwar al-Awlaki, an alleged al-Qaeda member and leading social media influencer, in Yemen in 2008. PHOTO BY MUHAMMAD UD-DEEN, LICENSED UNDER CC BY-SA.

18. Fresno García et al., "Identifying the New Influencers in the Internet Era: Social Media and Social Network Analysis," *Revista Española de Investigaciones Sociológicas*, no. 153 (January–March 2016): 23–40.

19. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 2007).

20. Fresno García et al., "Identifying the New Influencers."

invaluable, alternative insight on how information movements organically arise and grow, and how to counter them.

Duffett and Wakeham²¹ seconded the value of an alternative approach to assessing social media network utility in their examination of South African millennial response to social media marketing campaigns. This research employed an adapted hierarchy response model,²² one that examines the impact of message influence on eventual behavioral action.

Notably, and to provide further support for re-conceptualizing messaging from a network versus narrative approach, Duffett and Wakeham discovered declining levels of self-reported impact by persuasive messaging as it progressed to higher stages (from cognitive to affective, and ultimately to behavioral) of their adapted hierarchy response model (see fig. 4).²³ This means, even within an in-group, a social media-based call to action—including political violence—loses its impact as it attempts

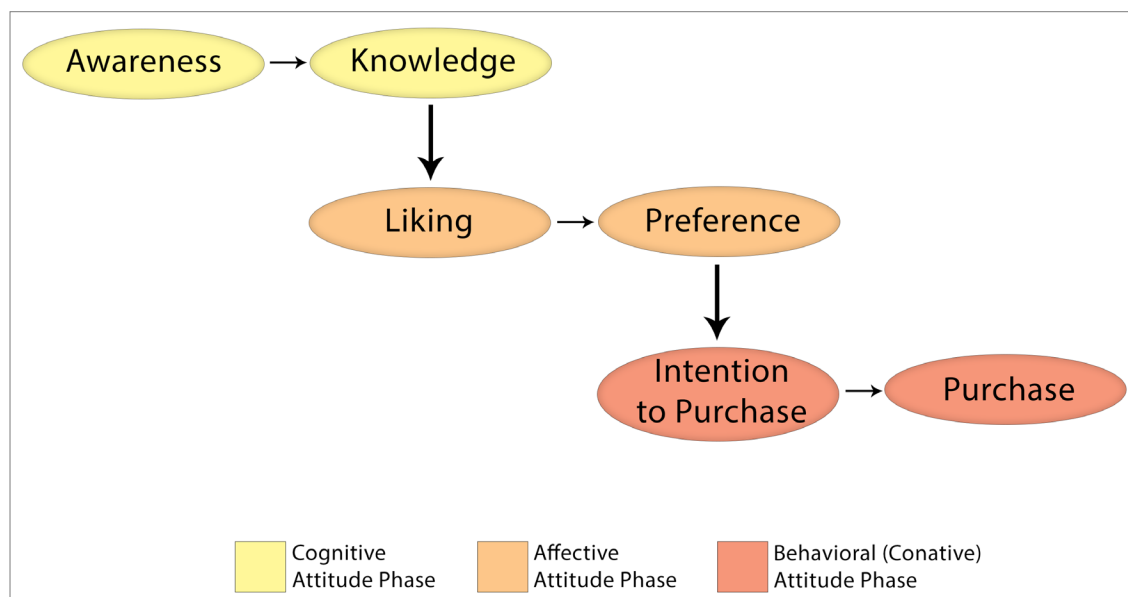


Figure 4. Adapted Hierarchy Response Model. JSOU GRAPHIC BASED ON RODNEY G. DUFFETT AND MYLES WAKEHAM.²⁴

21. Rodney G. Duffett and Myles Wakeham, "Social Media Marketing Communications Effect on Attitudes among Millennials in South Africa," *The African Journal of Information Systems* 8, no. 3 (June 2016): 20–44, <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/ajis/vol8/iss3/2/>.

22. Rajeev Batra and Wilfried R. Vanhonor, *The "Hierarchy of Advertising Effects": An Aggregate Field Test of Temporal Precedence*, Working Paper Series in Marketing 5 (New York: Columbia Business School, 1986); Morris Baldwin Holbrook, "Appendix Two: A Review of Advertising Research," in *Advertising and the Public Interest: A Staff Report to the Federal Trade Commission*, ed. John A. Howard and James Hulbert (Chicago: Crain Communications, 1973), B-1–B-62; John A. Howard and Jagdish N. Sheth, *The Theory of Buyer Behavior* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 1969); Robert J. Lavidge and Gary A. Steiner, "A Model for Predictive Measurements of Advertising Effectiveness," *Journal of Marketing* 25, no. 6 (October 1961): 59–62; Terrence O'Brien, "Stages of Consumer Decision Making," *Journal of Marketing Research* 8 (August 1971): 283–289; Ivan L. Preston, "The Association Model of The Advertising Communication Process," *Journal of Advertising* 11, no. 2 (1982): 3–15.

23. Duffett and Wakeham, "Social Media Effect."

24 Ibid.

to resonate with a target audience beyond awareness and knowledge constructs. This finding also discounts arguments for measures of effectiveness by number of likes, interactions, and/or shares.

Conclusion

Combined and referencing back to Sherif, these theories argue for SOF to rethink how they perceive radicalized groups. In doing so, they should pay particular attention to how these groups are structurally organized, their current standing as an ‘in-’ versus ‘out-’ group, and finally group communication norms (e.g., channels employed when communicating, leadership roles in communication, and the perceived value of external messages). The Robber’s Cave experiment elucidates this well, by highlighting that merit and affiliations will shift via external factors and would-be adversaries/allies. The credibility of a former out-group message in phase 2 is now salient in solving a shared problem in phase 3.

For fluid groups such as ISIS and al-Qaeda, reinvention and allegiances can shift dramatically based on localized and regional threats. It’s often difficult to ascertain where one group and/or ideology begins and ends. The same can be said in countries experiencing rebellions and civil unrest, where in-/out-group divisions are dotted lines, at best. Ergo, recognition that the three phases of the Robber’s Cave scenario are simultaneously at work within a global terror structure is integral to preventing and countering their actions. This can also maximize the utility of seemingly disparate SOF deployments and messaging efforts by forcing a common operating versus a specific effort mindset. The alternative of following messaging trails will produce little gain, especially in the longer term.

Shifting the lens, these concepts can also be applied toward potential de-radicalization. For instance, if meticulously executed (i.e., segmenting a social media network by Garcia et al.’s three category types), a social network approach can stealthily and/or blatantly introduce competing frames and in-/out-group configuration options. Social media, according to Thompson, is an addiction for its users prone to radicalization.²⁵ The same can hopefully be concluded for de-radicalization and political violence prevention, specifically when supplemented by in-theater civil affairs and/or sister key leader SOF engagements.

This opens up a wide range of possibilities for SOF to consider in the future. By augmenting counter-radicalization efforts with proactive and preventative de-radicalization initiatives, longer term gains become possible. More importantly, this marriage can empower SOF to attack regional problem sets versus a group, by name only.

25. Robin L. Thompson, “Radicalization and the Use of Social Media,” *Journal of Strategic Security* 4, no. 4 (2012): 167–190.



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