counter-speech on Facebook UK and France

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INTRODUCTION

In October 2015 we published a [report](), supported by Facebook, which examined the activity of counter-speech and populist right-wing groups on Facebook and made recommendations for how counter-speech groups could more effectively diffuse their messages. This short report sets out the summary findings of phase II of this project, examining how speech which challenges extreme Islamist narratives in the UK and France is produced and shared. Future reports in this series will cover counter-speech in other countries, including India and Indonesia.

Facebook serves almost 1.5 billion people globally. Although the majority of people use the site for positive purposes, there are some who use the platform in negative ways. With that in mind, Facebook has created a set of policies - its [Community Standards]() - detailing what type of content people can and cannot post. For instance, Facebook prohibits and removes hate speech and does not allow dangerous organizations (defined as groups that engage in terrorist or organized criminal activity) to have a presence on Facebook. In addition, content that supports or promotes those groups is removed. Sometimes people post disturbing content which other users consider extreme, but does not violate Facebook's policies.

To counter that type of disagreeable or extremist content, Facebook has publicly stated that it believes counter-speech is not only a potentially more effective way to tackle this problem, but is also more likely to succeed in the long run. Counter-speech is a common, crowd-sourced response to extremism or hateful content. Extreme posts are often met with disagreement, derision, and counter-campaigns. Combating extremism in this way has some advantages: it is faster, more flexible and responsive, capable of dealing with extremism from anywhere and in any language and retains the principle of free and open public spaces for debate. However, the forms counter-speech takes are as varied as the extremism they argue against. It is also likely that it is not always as effective as it could be; and some types of counter-speech could potentially even be counter-productive.

Because of its belief in the power of counter-speech and the growing interest in a more rigorous and evidence-led approach to understand it better, Facebook commissioned Demos to undertake this series of research reports, examining the extent to which different types of counter-speech are produced and shared on Facebook.

IS propaganda

In recent months there has been increased concern about how various extremist groups (in particular the so-called Islamic State or IS) are using social media to share propaganda and recruit. How to best respond to this remains a pressing policy question: particularly content which, while extreme, might not technically break any laws or Facebook's policies.

There is a growing consensus that alongside efforts at removing certain types of content, counter-speech and counter-messaging must be part of any response. For example, David Fidler's work at the Council for Foreign Relations argues that any online response should be based on counter-speech and challenging extreme content in a 'marketplace of ideas'.[1] Similarly, the White Paper by the Quilliam Foundation describes "censorship and filtering initiatives" as "ineffective", and emphasizes the critical role of counter-speech in "challenging the sources of extremism and terrorist-material online". At the 2015 White House Summit on Countering Violent Extremism, challenging extremist narratives online was one of the three key programmes in defeating IS.

At Demos we believe it is important that the principle of internet freedom should be maintained; and that it should be a place where people feel they can speak their mind openly and freely. We therefore believe that debate, disagreement, and challenge is nearly always preferable to censorship and removal of content, including when dealing with extreme or radical content, whatever its origin. However, we also believe that this can and should be put on an empirical basis to help us better understand the phenomena and how to respond. This research series is an attempt to do that.

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[1] Fidler, D 'Countering Islamic State Exploitation of the Internet'. See also: http://www.quilliamfoundation.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/publications/free/white-paper-the-role-of-prevent-in-countering-online-extremism.pdf; and Scott Beatie (2009) Community, Space and Online Censorship: Regulating Pornotopia

METHOD

For both the UK and France we collected data from public Facebook pages using a four step iterative process of identifying pages liked by individuals who had reported extremist content, and manually marked up those pages where *prima facie* counter-speech (as understood to be content which criticised, confronted, or disagreed with, or presented an alternative to IS) was taking place. We then identified other similar pages, and again manually marked up pages that appeared to include counter-speech.

Using this method, we identified 229 pages in France; and 355 pages in the UK. Using Facebook's public 'API' (Application Programming Interface), we collected public posts and interaction data from these pages. In France this was from 1 April to 12 April 2015. In the UK we collected data between 24 June and 24 July 2015. We used 'R', an open source software that allows researchers to access publicly available data from the public API. 'Posts' in this sense refer to updates that were made on the page by the administrator(s) of that page. In addition to posts, we collected all the interactions that were associated with the posts. Interactions refers to 'likes', 'shares' and 'comments' on those posts. Interaction data can be useful in estimating the reach of content, because each time a user interacts with a piece of content, it will appear in their friends' timeline (depending on the privacy settings applied).

Following the Paris attacks of 13th November 2015, we collected the data again from the same pages between 13 and 21 November, in order to calculate any changes in activity.

We did not attempt to collect or use any personal information about individuals; nor did we attempt to identify any individuals. Where a user's name or ID was collected inadvertently, it was deleted. We did not collect any data from groups or from individual's pages; and we did not collect any data from closed or secret pages. Throughout, only data from pages that were public and viewable by everyone were used. In order to further protect individual privacy, we have not quoted or republished any specific posts that might identify individuals.

We conducted a series of analyses. This included: calculating average interactions per page and per post using automated API results; calculating the format of the most popular types of data using automated API results; calculating the type and style of the most popular types of content through human manual analysis; calculating the types of speech occurring on different pages using human manual analysis; calculating the way different types of content was shared on pages vis-à-vis users' own newsfeeds using automated analysis. The purpose of these modes of analysis was to better understand the scale and nature of counter-speech content on Facebook; and to identify what types of content were most likely to be engaged with

by users. However, it is important to stress that these are in many cases quite novel methodologies. There are no firmly established 'best practice' methods to collect and analyse data of this nature – social media research is an emerging academic discipline. Further, this is designed as a scoping study rather than a comprehensive analysis of counter-speech. Therefore findings need to be read with caution.

Part 1 summarises the French results; part 2 summarises the UK results; and part 3 summarises the post-Paris attacks data. We finish with a short number of conclusions.

STUDY 1: FRANCE

Overall data

Using the process above gave us a total of 931 public pages, from which we used the API to collect all public posts, interactions, and some other pieces of demographic data as available. On further analysis we found that there were 229 pages that a) we were able to access and b) had posts on them from the last six months. Following a manual coding exercise, Demos researchers divided these pages into the following broad groups, which best reflected the types of pages we identified:

1.   Pages which were generally about Islam

2.   Pages which were anti-Islamic

3.   Pages which were potentially counter-speech (for example, pages about progressive Islam, anti-IS humour, interfaith pages, French Muslim identity)

We found that, while general pages about Islam were more voluminous, counter-speech pages were more active in terms of average page likes, average posts per page, and average interactions (see Table 1).

Table 1 Broad groups of pages in France

	Pages (total)	Page likes (average)	Posts (average)	Interactions on these pages (average)
General Islam	191	669,178 (3,504)	6,112 (32)	92,991 (15)
Counter-speech pages	36	398,737 (11,076)	2,039 (57)	370,473 (182)
Anti-Islamic pages	2	16,209 (8,105)	2,372 (1,186)	162,742 (69)
Total	229	1,084,124	10,523	626,206

Post content

In order to better understand the nature of posts on these pages, Demos researchers manually read and 'marked up' the most popular 624 posts made in our 'counter-speech' category. From this we found 246 posts, or 39 per cent of the total, which were marked up as a form of counter-speech.

Using a system of manual coding, we determined these 246 posts could be broken into 6 broad categories of counter-speech, as per Table 2 below.

Table 2: Types of counter-speech posts

	Description	No of posts (/624)	% across whole data set	Extrapolated across the total data set
National solidarity/ Charlie Hebdo	Expression about not letting extremists divide France	70	11%	1,157
Differentiation	Stressing the importance of not confusing Islam with extremism (often quoting the Qu'ran, on tolerance)	13	2%	210
How to respond	Discussion about how to respond to terrorism around the world, including France	31	5%	523
Humour/parody	Mocking or exposing the absurdity of extremism	36	6%	631
Risks of over-reaction	Raising awareness about the danger of over-reaction and Islamophobia	59	9%	947
Exposing IS	Active content showing the true character of IS	37	6%	631

Note: Charlie Hebdo was selected as a category because, following the attack on the Charlie Hebdo's office, there was a significant amount of posts and pages which referenced or used the magazine.

If extrapolated, this would give a total of 4,099 counter-speech posts across the 229 pages we identified, over the last six months. (Of course, we assume there are many more on Facebook as a whole).

Interactions with posts

In order to better understand popularity, we looked at which type of content was the most popular. Charlie Hebdo posts were the most shared and liked in terms of volume. However, when calculated as an average, we found that posts about how the French government should respond were more shared and liked.

We examined who interacted with these counter-speech posts. We found that the overwhelming majority of users interacting with this content are French users; and with a relatively equal gender split. Similarly, the age categories of users suggests a relatively broad cross section of age groups – overall 44 per cent are under 34; and around one in four are under 24.

Table 3: Interactions with counter-speech posts (averages in brackets)

Content Type	Posts	Likes	Comments	Shares
National solidarity/ Charlie Hebdo	70	22,094 (315)	1,061 (15)	19,226 (275)
Differentiation	59	21,419 (363)	502 (9)	18,289 (310)
How to respond	37	21,111 (571)	2,359 (64)	11,795 (319)
Humour/parody	36	14,257 (396)	777 (22)	4,820 (134)
Risks of over-reaction	31	12,911 (416)	1,369 (44)	3,101 (100)
Exposing IS	13	5,457 (420)	1,178 (91)	3,748 (288)

Popular posts

We took the top 20 posts in each category of counter-speech and, in order to better illustrate the specific types of posts, defined for each the type of content, the tone of the post, and the origin of the post. The categories created by the researcher are as follow (all were designed by the research team):

1) The Type of Content category was broken down into: Argument, News, Denouncing violence, Hadith, News from Muslim News Network, Exposing IS' arguments and the Aftermath of the Charlie Hebdo attacks.

2) The Tone of Content category was broken down into: Constructive, Tolerant/solidarity, Aggressive, Humour, Outrage and Celebratory.

These categories were determined by a French analyst based on a review of the available data. We used a coding system based on 'grounded theory', whereby an analyst would mark up data into categories of meaning which were created based on what data was found. The categories were revised iteratively, until further data no longer resulted in any further categories being created.

On this analysis, we found that:

- Posts on Charlie Hebdo pages against extremism (1,236) and anti-Islamophobic pages (956) had the highest number of average interactions per post.

- In terms of the tone of posts, tolerance/solidarity (1,833) posts had the highest number of average interactions per post.

- In terms of the content of posts, exposing IS arguments (1,514) and argument (1,501) had the highest number of average interactions per post.

Reach

We were also able to determine whether or not an interaction was made by a user who had liked the page where the original post was posted. This shows how far content can travel beyond the people who like pages. This suggests that content relating to how to respond to extreme Islamism, humour/parody and exposing IS is the most likely type of content to go 'beyond' page followers.

Table 4: Who interacted with content?

	Follower	Not a Follower
National solidarity/ Charlie Hebdo	72%	28%
Differentiation	67%	33%
How to respond	54%	46%
Humour/parody	58%	42%
Risks of over-reaction	66%	34%
Exposing IS	60%	40%
Total	62%	38%

We also examined the average interactions from people who were not followers of a page, in order to see what type of content 'travelled well'.

- Posts from Muslim News groups and Islamophobic groups are the most likely to have interactions (likes and comments, since the API does not include shares in this measure) from people who do not like the original page. (For the latter, we think this reflects the fact that they are often very good at producing content which appeals to a wide audience).[2]

- In terms of the tone, celebratory/pride and tolerant/solidarity are the most likely to have interactions from people who do not like the original page.

- In terms of content, argument and exposing IS arguments are the most likely to have interactions from people who do not like the original page.

[2] The Origin of Content category was broken down into: Muslim Faith Group, Muslim News Network, Anti-islamophobia Group, Islamophobic Group, Charlie Against Fundamentalism Group, and Multi Faith Group. These categories were determined by a French analyst based on a review of the available data.

STUDY 2: UK

Overall

We ran the same data collection effort as in the French study above, which gave a total of 355 pages, from which we scraped all public posts, interactions, and some other pieces of demographic data as available between 24 June – 24 July 2015. These pages were manually marked up into ten groups, based on categories chosen by the research following a coding exercise: using the same method as for the France data, above. The difference from the French pages demonstrates that each country has its own pattern of counter-speech.

Table 5: UK pages and interactions

	Pages (total)	Posts (average)	Interactions on these pages (average)	Average interactions per post, per page
Charity	1	2 [2]	2 [1]	1
Individual/public figure	35		28,546 [31]	31
Local community group	14	185 [13]	1,540 [8]	8
Mosque/Islamic Centre	7	89 [13]	837 [9]	9
Muslim educational organisation	15	115 [8]	1,033 [9]	9
News network	12	4 [0.3]	31,903 [7,976]	48
Non-religious political or social (based abroad)	47	1,246 [27]	148,022 [119]	119
Non-religious political or social (based in the UK)	60	1,474 [25]	378,195 [257]	257
Positive religious campaign	154	3,171 [21]	187,126 [59]	59
Religious group with no explicit/clear agenda	10	196 [20]	2,496 [13]	13

We found that there were 677 thousand unique interactions on the pages in our data and around 1.78 million page likes overall.

We found that 'positive religious campaign pages' were the most numerous, with 43 per cent of the total. By examining how many posts had been posted on each page, we found that positive religious campaign pages were also the most active. These pages posted 13.1 thousand posts during the period (35 each, or just over one a day).

In terms of average interactions per page, we found that non-religious political or social group pages were by some margin the most popular, followed by individual/public figure pages and positive religious campaign pages.

Audience reach

We examined what type of person interacted with these pages. Users currently in work (but 'late' in their careers) were overwhelmingly the most active when it came to interacting with the content across all the pages. Non-religious political or social group pages (based abroad) were disproportionately highly interacted with by high-school aged people. By contrast, Mosques and Muslim educational organisations are failing to reach young people, although they have some reach into college-age Facebook users. Overall, male users were more active on these pages. Only in Muslim educational organisations and charities were women more active. The reasons for this requires more research.

Post content

In order to do some more detailed analysis of posts, we manually marked up the 500 posts most interacted with in the data set, from any category. In total, we found that 127, or 25 per cent of the total were examples of counter-speech. Following a manual coding exercise, these were broken down into the following categories, set out in Table 6.

This found that exposés of IS were the most commonly shared type of post, followed by moderate media content and specific campaigns relating to countering extremism. This analysis shows that, if extrapolated across our data set of posts, there would be approximately 2,123 posts 'exposing IS' on our pages during the time period for which data were collected (June 24 – July 24 2015).

Interactions with posts

In terms of the interactions on this content, exposés of IS were by some margin both the most interacted type of posts in volume and in average interactions per post. Interestingly, counter-extremism campaigns and moderate religious voices were the next most popular types of content. If this were extrapolated up across the entire data set, we would speculate there would be potentially millions of

interactions with content exposing IS each year. It is not, however, possible to calculate this precisely with the data we have.

Table 6: Type of counter-speech posts

	Description	No of posts (/500)	% across whole data set	Extrapolated up across the total data set
Exposé of IS	Specific efforts to expose IS narrative or behaviour	44	8.8%	2,123
Community Event	Advertising or sharing stories about positive Muslim events in the UK	17	3.4%	820
Counter-Extremism campaign	Specific campaigns relating to countering extremism	21	4.2%	1,013
Moderate media	Muslim media outlets posting content	22	4.4%	1,061
Moderate religious voice	Scholars or other discussing why Islam rejects extremism/violence	13	2.6%	627
News article	Sharing stories about moderate Muslim leaders	10	1.2%	289

Table 7: Interactions on posts

Content Type	Posts	Total Interactions	Average interactions
Exposé of IS	44	574,702	13,061.4
Community Event	17	11,998	749.9
Counter-Extremism campaign	21	99,968	4,760.4
Moderate media	22	13,076	653.8
Moderate religious voice	13	30,794	2,368.8
News article	10	5,104	510.4

STUDY 3: POST PARIS DATA

On 13th November 2015, a series of co-ordinated terrorist attacks took place in Paris, killing 130 people. Following the attacks, we collected the data again from the same pages in both France and the UK in order to calculate any changes in activity. We collected this data from 13th November (the date of the attacks) to 21st November 2015. This allowed us to calculate the change in the averages across the two periods for both the number of posts circulated and the number of interactions those posts received.

France

The France data shows that during the eight days that followed the Paris attacks there was a surge in activity on some counter-speech pages, with a ten-fold increase in the number of posts being shared and a five-fold increase in the number of interactions with that content. Interestingly, there was not an increase in activity on general Islam pages which suggests that there was a specific spike in counter-speech activity, as opposed to a general increase in activity across all pages.[3] In order to gauge relative activity, the figures were averaged to activity per day.

Table 8: Pre- and post-Paris data

	Pre Attack		Post Attack			
	Ave daily posts	Ave daily Interactions	Ave daily posts	Ave daily interactions	% Change posts	% change interactions
General Islam	34	516.6	26.5	259	-22	-50
Counter-speech pages	11.3	2,058.2	128.8	14,122.8	+1010	+586
Total	45.3	2,574.8	152.3	14,450.5		

As might be expected, across our pages the top ten most popular posts post-Paris were all about the attacks. They were all posted by the Je Suis Charlie account (a Community Page). The posts were an assortment of images and statements that France should not be fearful or cowed. The most popular post, with 15,000 interactions, is below. It says 'They have guns. Screw them. We have champagne!' **In total, these top ten posts received 66,768 interactions.** It is not possible to calculate how many people will have seen these posts as a result, but it would certainly have been hundreds of thousands of users.

Images: most popular post following the Paris attacks
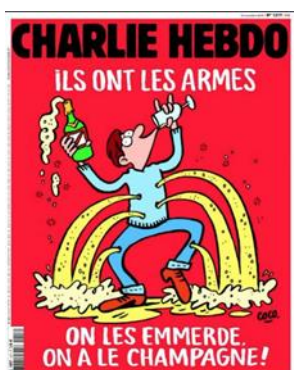
UK

We conducted the same analysis as for the French pages, above.

Table 9: Pre-Paris and post-Paris activity on counter-speech pages

	Pre attack		Post attack			
	Ave daily posts	Ave daily interactions	Ave daily posts	Ave daily interactions	% Change (Posts)	% Change (Interactions)
Charity	0.6	1.8	4.0	5.3	640%	292%
Individual / public figure	9.0	20.9	4.8	100.6	54%	481%
Local community group	13.0	4.1	6.7	11.5	52%	284%
Mosque/Islamic centre.	13.4	5.3	2.3	6.1	17%	116%
Muslim educational organisation	10.3	18.2	6.7	209.6	65%	1152%
News Network	60.7	21.9	25.0	584.3	41%	2672%
Non-religious political or social (based abroad)	19.1	116.3	9.4	2607.8	49%	2242%
Non-religious political or social (UK-based)	26.4	102.5	10.1	6464.5	38%	6309%
Positive religious campaign.	34.7	9.8	11.1	2565.7	32%	26080%
Religious group with no explicit/unclear agenda	20.2	5.0	5.4	31.8	27%	635%

Despite a relatively smaller number of posts being circulated over the period (with the exception being the Charity category), the interactions were much higher. Positive religious campaigns in particular saw a 260-fold increase in interactions with their content in the week after the Paris attacks, compared to three months earlier. The majority of the top ten posts in the UK in the week after the Paris attacks were in Arabic or Urdu. However, a key use of Facebook was to circulate the hashtag #AMessagetoISIS. Three of the top ten most interacted with pieces of content referred to the hashtag.

The most interacted with piece of content in English (3,222 interactions) was the following:

"Around the world, people are showing their solidarity with a #MessageToISIS through words, art, film and more. What's your message?"

It linked to an article on mic.com showing artists paying tribute to the victims of the attack.

OVERALL CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the analysis undertaken suggests a number of things relating to the volume and nature of counter-speech content on Facebook.

First, it is clear that different countries have different types of counter-speech, and each is country specific and indeed (as illustrated by Charlie Hebdo) event specific. Users for each country will have very different ways of creating and producing content that could be categorised as counter-speech and it could vary significantly country to country.

Second, events in Paris highlight that counter-speech surges at specific times, and typically in response to certain events: it springs into action following an offline action, and volume increases dramatically. Following the attacks in Paris there was a 260 fold increase in posts on pages relating to positive religious messages in the UK; in France there was a five-fold increase in posts on pages that were explicitly counter-speech over the same period. This also suggests that following major events there is a good opportunity for groups and individuals to produce content that can connect to large numbers of users.

Third, analysis shows that certain types of post do secure more engagement with users than others. For example, in both France and the UK, posts which expose IS are both the most numerous and the most interacted with.

Fourth, there are certain areas where more could be done. Most pressingly, 'Mosques' and 'Muslim educational organisations' are failing to reach young people. These groups might consider using some of the more popular content types to reach a wider audience.

Finally, this analysis can tell us something about how and why content is shared online, and the sort of reach that it has. However, it cannot say much about if and how that content is understood and acted upon in the real world. This remains an area for further research.

NOTES

[1] None of the original five Islamophobic pages posted during the period, so comparison is not possible in that category. This is due to pages being either inactive or suspended by Facebook

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Counter-speech - which argues, disagrees or presents an opposing view - is a potentially important way to deal with extreme or offensive content online. It is fast, flexible and responsive, capable of dealing with extremism from anywhere, in any language and retains the principle of free and open public spaces for debate. However, it is also likely that it is not always as effective as it could be; and some types of counter-speech could potentially even be counter-productive.

This second report sets out the summary findings of phase II of this project, examining how speech which challenges extreme Islamist narratives in the UK and France is produced and shared. Future reports in this series will cover counter-speech in other countries, including India and Indonesia.

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