

SUMMARY OF COUNTER-SPEECH ON FACEBOOK: UK AND FRANCE

Jamie Bartlett
Alex Krasodonski-Jones

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BACKGROUND

Counter-speech is a common, crowd-sourced response to extremism or hateful content. Extreme posts are often met with disagreement, derision, and counter-campaigns. Compared with simply deleting controversial content, 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.

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 a series of research reports, examining the extent to which different types of counter-speech are produced and shared on Facebook.

In October 2015 Demos 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 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.

Method: For both the UK and France, Demos collected data from public Facebook pages. Demos identified 229 pages in France; and 355 pages in the UK where prima facie counter speech – as understood to be content which criticised, confronted, disagreed with, or presented an alternative to, Islamic State’s (IS) narrative - was taking place, although this is by no means a comprehensive account. Using Facebook’s public ‘API’ (Application Programming Interface),

Demos collected public posts and interaction data from these pages, and analysed them using both automated and manual techniques. Following the terrorist attacks in Paris on 13 November 2015, we conducted the same analysis on the same pages.

FRANCE KEY FINDINGS

Popular posts

- Posts on Charlie Hebdo pages against extremism and anti-Islamophobic pages had the highest number of average interactions per post.
- In terms of the tone of posts, tolerance/solidarity posts had the highest number of average interactions per post.
- In terms of the content of posts, ‘exposing’ gaps in IS’ arguments had the highest number of average interactions per post.

We also analysed 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.

UK KEY FINDINGS

We found that there were 677 thousand unique interactions on the pages from where we collected data and around 1.78 million page likes overall.

Pages

- ‘Positive religious campaign pages’ were the most numerous and active.
- In terms of average interactions per page, 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.

Popular posts

- Exposés of IS were by some margin both the most interacted type of posts in volume and in average interactions per post.

- Counter-extremism campaigns and moderate religious voices were the next most popular types of content.

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.

POST PARIS ATTACKS FINDINGS

- In France, during the eight days that followed the Paris attacks there was a ten-fold increase in the number of posts being shared and a five-fold increase in the number of interactions with counter-speech 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).
- In the UK, during the eight days that followed the Paris attacks there was a slight decrease in the number of posts being circulated, but 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.

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. *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.