Online radicalisation: the use of the internet by Islamic State terrorists in the US (2012-2018)

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Chapter 6: The Online Dynamics of Terrorist Pathways

6.1 Introduction

The previous chapter conducted a quantitative analysis using a (mostly) deductive codebook that was created to answer research questions devised from the academic literature. This chapter seeks to turn this approach on its head by using an inductive methodology to determine emergent themes from the data to generate theoretical propositions to better understand the role of the Internet in contemporary radicalisation.

6.1.2 Grounded Theory

To do this, I will draw from a methodology inspired by Grounded Theory (GTM), which seeks to approach data with an open mind rather than testing the hypotheses of previous scholars.) GTM is an inductive method of inquiry, dating back to Glaser and Strauss' *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (1967). At the time of its creation, Glaser and Strauss believed that there was a trend in sociology that the "Great Men" such as Weber, Durkheim, and Marx, had generated enough theories within their work for new scholars to test, problematise and emulate (Glaser and Strauss 1967). They rejected this, believing that there was much more theory that could be generated from data.

I believe that GTM is an appropriate tool for this thesis for two reasons: Firstly, as Lehane (2017) argues, the methodology is particularly useful in areas of limited scholarship; her research was focused on the CVE industry, which she describes as having experienced a significant growth of academic output but with policy based on unfounded assumptions. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, the same can be said of online radicalisation, which is largely under-theorised and relies on untested dynamics which inform policy. Secondly, an inductive and qualitative approach acts as a useful balance to the previous chapter, allowing for exploration into concepts such as gender or the construction of identities that cannot be easily demarcated into 1s and 0s. Two the approaches do not exist independently, however, but inform each other. For example, Chapter 5 finds that terrorists that use the Internet are less likely to be successful than those that do not. Chapter 6 offers a potential explanation for this: the construction of a radical online identity is part of an ongoing socialisation process, which may be more important than security concerns.

GTM has seen a significant growth since its "discovery" by Glaser and Strauss in the late 1960s, in the decade the proceeded it, there was a 70-fold increase in published papers with "Grounded Theory" as a keyword and by the 1990s, it can become a common feature of qualitative analytic methods (Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers 2010). However, the methodology is not a monolith; there are several differences in interpretations. Ralph, Birks, and Chapman (2015) outline how it has changed in the past half-century:

> From the postpositivism of Glaser and Strauss (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), to the symbolic interactionism and pragmatism of Strauss and Corbin (1990), to the constructivism of Charmaz (2000), the field of GT is interesting in the sense that grounded theorists offer markedly new ontological and epistemological perspectives at specific moments in time that have developed ‘‘followings.’ (Ralph, Birks and Chapman 2015; p.1)

The most famous difference in methods is exemplified by the split between Glaser and Strauss in the 1990s, in which the former objected to the latter's use of a coding paradigm and "conditional matrix" which, according to Glaser, forces data down a singular path (Urquhart 2013). In essence, Glaser wanted the process to remain as unencumbered by rules or guidelines as possible, while Strauss and Corbin (1990) wanted to help their students by creating a 'how to' manual (Urquhart, Lehmann and Myers 2010). Similarly, both Glaser and Strauss were criticised for their phenomenalist approach which assumes that theory is merely waiting to be discovered from data which according to Bryant (2002), does not sufficiently account for the subjectivism in coding. This research follows the Glaserian strand as it is the most flexible and reliant on induction (Urquhart 2013), which seems appropriate given the relatively rigid nature of the quantitative element, which is, in part, a replication of previous research.

It should be noted that this chapter cannot be considered "pure" GTM for two reasons related to its mixed method approach. Firstly, traditionally in GTM, the researcher draws from an uncapped dataset which requires an overlap between data collection and analysis; researchers discover new emerging concepts and decide which kind of data to collect next – a process known as "theoretical sampling" (Urquhart 2013). As demonstrated in Chapter 4, this thesis sets out requirements for data collection that are more rigid in nature. However, I use a process similar to this by utilising the theoretical points to further explore related phenomena. For example, my original investigation into the collection of terrorist propaganda led to the finding that actors would "perform" the propaganda as part of an ongoing socialisation process. This led me to sample the low-level content which actors collected, created, and shared to assess whether the same process could be observed. In essence, after the GTM analysis took me to one theoretical proposition, I then took this knowledge and went back to the well of data to expand upon it.

Secondly, in an attempt to rid itself of pre-existing theories of the phenomenon under study, Glaser and Strauss suggest that existing literature should be ignored as far as possible, suggesting:

> An effective strategy is, at first, literally to ignore the literature of theory and fact on the area under study, in order to assure that the emergence of categories will not be contaminated by concepts more suited to different areas. Similarities and convergences with the literature can be established after the analytic core of categories has emerged (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.37).

While it is a commendable strategy to let the data speak for themselves, it does ignore many of the realities of conducting doctoral research – such as having enough knowledge of the field to participate in a competitive application process and the fact that many need to conduct a literature review prior to deciding the specific methodologies that are most effective. While most GTM scholars do agree that researchers ought to keep an open mind, taking this to its extreme has been criticised, including by Dey, who suggests researchers 'keep an open mind, not an empty head. Even ideas drawn from the immediate field can provide a useful guide to analysis, providing that we keep an open mind about their cogency and relevance to the data' (Dey 2011, p.9). Adopting the approach that Glaser and Strauss advise would be impossible in a mixed method approach, such as this, in which the quantitative element is driven by existing research and theory.

Given these two factors, it is more accurate to call this thesis GTM-inspired. The methodology draws from the coding process, memoing, constant comparison, and theoretical development that is typically used with this methodology (Lehane 2017), which are outlined in more detail below.

6.1.3 Coding

GTM takes place over various stages of coding. Lehane (2017) notes that 'coding has two purposes: to capture the substantive content of the area under study; and to articulate relationships that can be observed in the data (Lehane 2017, p.70). In other words, understanding the data and how they relate to each other. Urquhart (2013) suggests that following Glaser's 1978 model of having three rounds of coding is the simplest, most effective way to code using GTM. Firstly, *open coding*, which involves the researcher going through data line by line with an open-mind, looking for any emerging themes that appear. This can be as simple as basic, unconnected observations, trying to ascertain what is happening in the data (Lehane 2017). Secondly, grouping the open codes into larger categories – known as *selective coding* or *substantive coding*, which are the basis for comparison to create larger theory (Urquhart 2013). The final stage is *theoretical coding*, in which the categories are considered in relationship to each other for the purposes of theory-building. As Lehane (2017) puts it, 'theoretical coding involves identifying and conceptualising the relationships between substantive codes' (Lehane 2017, p.85).

Another central aspect of GTM is the constant comparison of data. Glaser and Strauss offer this key rule for coding: 'while coding an incident for a category, compare it with the previous incidents in the same and different groups coded in the same category' (Glaser and Strauss 1967, p.106). While this appears simple, they argue that it is vital for identifying the theoretical properties of the data and the relationship of categories to both themselves and others. Dey argues that a virtue of constant comparison is that it protects against over interpretation of data by finding connections that do not exist (Dey 2011). Accordingly, at each stage of GTM coding in this research, data are compared to other data in the same category. The bringing together of the constant comparison and the coding is aided by the process of memoing. Lehane (2017) describes this as an essential feature of GTM and a valuable way of engaging with the data. Rather than simply acting as notes to

remember thoughts, they are used to organise theoretical categories by comparing core concepts against each other, or as Charmaz (2006) notes, the researcher reflects on what they have seen, heard, sensed, and coded to help to formulate their ideas.

6.1.4 Theory Building

As noted above, Glaser and Strauss (1967) saw GTM as a way to move past the "great men" in sociology and suggested that there was considerably more theory that could be generated from inductive enquiry with data. "Theory" is a relatively broad word from the abstract grand theories such as Marxism or poststructuralism which act as a lens to understand the entirety of social reality, to "middle range" theories which aim to understand limited aspects of social life (Bryman 2015). Within these middle range theories, two subtypes can be identified, "formal" theory which is a conceptual, area of sociological inquiry, such as stigma, deviance, or social mobility or "substantive" theory which is developed for a substantive or empirical area of enquiry like patient care, delinquency, or race-relations (Glaser and Strauss 1967). Within substantive theory, the comparison takes place within the one single area under study rather than at a higher, more abstract level. Although formal grounded theory does exist, and is advocated by Glaser (2007), it is the generation of substantive theory which is typically associated with GTM and will be the purpose of this research. It is generally written to be transferrable rather than generalisable. In other words, this research will create working theories from a specific temporal and spatial population which could be transferred to situations with similar contexts, rather than generating theory which speaks to online radicalisation in all contexts.

At first glance, GTM seems to be under-utilised within terrorism studies. Relevant to this research is Koehler's (2014) GTM approach to interviews with former neo-Nazis to identify common themes and patterns regarding the role of the Internet as part of their trajectories, generating several testable theories for future research. De Bie and De Poot (2016) use the methodology to draw from police files, interviews, and trial observations to better understand jihadist networks in the Netherlands in the 2000s. In a study focused on radicalisation, Bartlett and Miller (2012) create a database of terrorist actors and conducted interviews with non-violent "radicals", and a control group, and use GTM to establish how the first group differ from the second and third. Similarly, Windisch et al. (2018) use GTM to analyse interviews with 89 white supremacists in the US to better understand their micro-situational dynamics. On the "supply side" of online radicalisation research, GTM has been used to analyse extremist media content (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2019; Droogan and Peattie 2016).

Despite the relative scarcity with which GTM appears to be used within this academic field, given further examination, key aspects of the approach are regularly used. For example, one of the most important pieces of research for this thesis, conducted by Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. (2018) consists of data-collection and analysis which categorises travellers to Iraq or Syria into three typologies: Pioneers, Loners, and Networked Travellers. Vidino and Hughes (2015) also do this to some extent, identifying

explanatory categories such as “The Role of Social Media”, “Grooming”, “Travel Agents”, and “Devil on the Shoulder.” Finally, in their database study of jihadist attacks in the West, Vidino et al. (2017) collect and analyse data, before forming a “Tripartite Categorisation of Attacks”, as well as identifying the role of “Radicalisation Hubs” as emergent from the data. While these studies may be described as not pure GTM, they utilise elements of the approach.

Rather than beginning with a specific research question, GTM starts with a general area of interest (Lehane 2017). In this case, it is the use of the Internet by IS actors in the US. The data were then openly coded to identify different aspects of online activity, for example: engaging in propaganda, using social media, and when the actor began to use the Internet to engage with extremist content. However, just as the quantitative analysis does not rely solely on examining Internet usage – i.e. sampling the dependent variable – neither does the GTM analysis. Several related offline activities are coded as well so the importance and role of the Internet can be established. This chapter yields three sections:

1. The socialising role of radical content,
2. Space and gender in the online domain,
3. Online only trajectories and the buyers’ market of the Internet.

The presentation of GTM is typically different to usual academic scholarship and involves the researcher reflectively discussing how and why they chose to collect data, explaining their thought process (Mruck and Mey 2019). With that in mind, the chapter will be set up into the sections laid out above. Each of these sections will begin with an introduction that maps out my thought-process for how the data were discovered, followed by an analysis section in which the data are presented in concurrence with the academic literature, and finally, a synthesis section in which substantive theory is formulated from the analysis.

6.2 The Socialising Role of Radical Content

6.2.1 Introduction

When analysing the 201 case studies line-by-line, it became clear that actors engaged with a range of different types of radical content. This activity was coded descriptively into several different types of categories: e.g. the author (whether it was an “official” piece of IS propaganda, or that of another group, or even just an individual such as the preacher Anwar al-Awlaki); the format (such as whether it was a video, magazine, audio); the contents (executions; religious speeches; infographics); and the name of the content. These descriptive codes paint an interesting picture of the landscape of terrorist propaganda, not least because engaging with radical content is often cited as an important dynamic in the online radicalisation process (For example: Weimann and Von Knop 2008; Torok 2013; Saifudeen 2014; Neo 2016), although existing studies tend to focus on the analysis of the content itself rather than the audience that engages with it (Conway 2016a).

Having established a range of different descriptive codes, these data were compared against each other to better understand how individuals engaged with jihadist propaganda. Below, I discuss two of the selective codes: Firstly, whether this propaganda had an explicit link to the actors' terrorist event. That is to say, whether individuals were directly motivated to act because of content, for example by using the instructional materials that appear in jihadist magazines or using "kill lists" – which were circulated by IS online – to select targets. Secondly, the ways in which radical content is engaged with as part of an ongoing socialisation process between jihadists – for example, looking at where, and with whom, individuals watched it. In essence, these two codes provide two types of (non-mutually exclusive) dynamics for the role of propaganda. The first suggests that it can play a primary role in motivation and providing skills for individuals to conduct acts of terrorism, while the second portrays it as "mood music" for a wider radicalisation process which is reliant on peer-to-peer contact. When comparing the two, the data in this sample provide more support for the latter – there are relatively few plots that can be linked directly to propaganda, but considerably more for whom it was a tool for socialisation.

To explore this further, I decided to theoretically sample beyond "official" content to also analyse how individuals engaged with and created low-level content. While the previous section was important because it considered the audience of terrorist propaganda, this sampling decision takes the decision one step further and considers individuals as potential "prosumers," who simultaneously collect, engage, disseminate, and create radical content online. One example of this activity is actors' social media posts, such as those that are text, image, or video-based. Individuals also created and sent Internet memes, which undercut IS' typical ultra-conservative and serious religious messages with attempts at humour which draw from Western popular culture. Comparison between the engagement of formal and low-level content offers support for the idea that individuals engage with radical content as part of a wider socialisation process – actors construct a radical online identity which mirrors the type of content that can be identified within propaganda – what Macdonald and Lorenzo Dus (2019) call the avatar of the "Good Muslim."

Taken together, this section derives the substantive theory that the propaganda should be seen as a facilitator of an ongoing socialisation process between actors online. Existing online radicalisation theory has posited a unidirectional relationship in which the audience are passive consumers who experience morality salience or sense of moral outrage. This section, while not refuting these claims, points to the wider information environment in which content is not just consumed, but also discussed, replicated, and created. Importantly, this process takes place in a way that blurs the online/offline distinction with activities that cannot easily be demarcated into one domain or the other.

6.2.2 What Kinds of Radical Content do Terrorists Collect?

After coding each of the 201 terrorists' case files line-by-line, each piece of propaganda was noted by name, author (or speaker), group affiliation, and type (i.e. sermon,

execution video etc.) In total, 197 different pieces of content were identified[69] from a total of 60 actors in the sample. Almost every piece of content was either reported to have been watched online or downloaded from an online source or no mention was made of where the actor obtained it. In a small number of instances, physical CDs of sermons and hard-copies of books were found,[70] but it is clear that this is primarily an online activity, which is intuitive given the amount of content which is audio/visual and the inherent advantages the Internet offers in disseminating this type of material.

The most frequently occurring piece of content is the IS execution video of the Jordanian pilot Muath Safi Yousef al-Kasasbeh titled *Healing the Believers' Chests*, which occurred 17 times (9%). Second was *The Flames of War Pt. 1*, an hour-long propaganda video with high production value that was released at the height of IS' strength in September 2014, which was represented 8 times (4%). No other piece of content was present more than 5 times, but there were a total of 45 different pieces of official IS content. This suggests a wide array of content without any single piece – perhaps with the exception of *Healing* – that can be suitably described as fundamental to being an IS actor in the US. Although it is tempting to dispel *Healing the Believers' Chests* and other execution videos as pure grotesque propaganda, it is much more. Ingram notes that the first eighteen minutes of the 22-minute execution video offers a highly methodical justification for their actions, relying on jurisprudential, moral, ideological, and political reasoning. This, he argues, has the effect of increasing the perception of crisis to the in-group (Sunni Muslims) while othering the various out-groups (Ingram 2015). Winter offers a similar analysis, suggesting that this, and many other, videos are an example of IS exploiting a victimhood narrative which justify the gruesome punishment that follows (Winter 2015b).

It is possible that the reason for there being few standout pieces of propaganda – other than *Healing* – was the sheer volume that the group was producing at the height of its power. Both Lakomy (2017) and Conway (2016b) observe that from around the declaration of the caliphate in 2014 until late 2015, the group was able to both produce and distribute large volumes of high-quality content.[71]

[69] Identification is satisfied if either the content was named specifically, or if it was clearly described within the data – for example, many of the court filings mention that actors watched the video of the immolation of the Jordanian pilot Muath Safi Yousef al-Kasasbeh, referring to the execution video "Healing the Believers' Chests". If the description was ambiguous or could have been referring to multiple pieces of content, they were not included. If the content was part of a series, but unnamed, such as reference to *Dabiq* magazine, then it was entered with reference to that (i.e. "*Dabiq* Unnamed").

[70] USA v. Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, Exhibit List, Case 2:15-cr-00707-SRB, United States Court for the District of Arizona, 2016.

[71] However, in 2016 both the loss of propagandists within the caliphate to targeted drone strikes and the degradation of the group's online presence, this significantly reduced. A number of other studies have suggested that, today, the group's ability to disseminate propaganda has been severely limited (Macdonald et al. 2019; Conway et al. 2018), although this has spurred a number of innovations from sympathisers of the group (Fisher et al. 2019). It will remain to be seen whether future IS terrorists have access to such a wide array of content.

Thirty-eight different authors/speakers of content were identified, with Yemini/American Anwar al-Awlaki the most frequently occurring – 11 times (29%) – followed by IS media spokesman Abu Mohammad al-Adnani and radical Jamaican cleric Abdullah el-Faisal (Trevor William Forrest) the next most frequent with five each (13%) – as can be seen in Figure 17. Awlaki's position as most frequent author is particularly interesting for two reasons. Firstly, he was assassinated by a US drone strike in September 2011, prior to IS' prodigious rise in Iraq and around the time Baghdadi sent a cell to Syria (Whiteside 2016), and secondly, Awlaki was a prominent member of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2011), around the time of his death and since, AQ and IS have engaged in a number of tensions, including high level spats between the leaderships of each group (Stern and Berger 2015). Awlaki's enduring presence suggests that the top-down ideology of IS may be less important to actors in the US than other factors, such as a charismatic, English-speaking preacher.

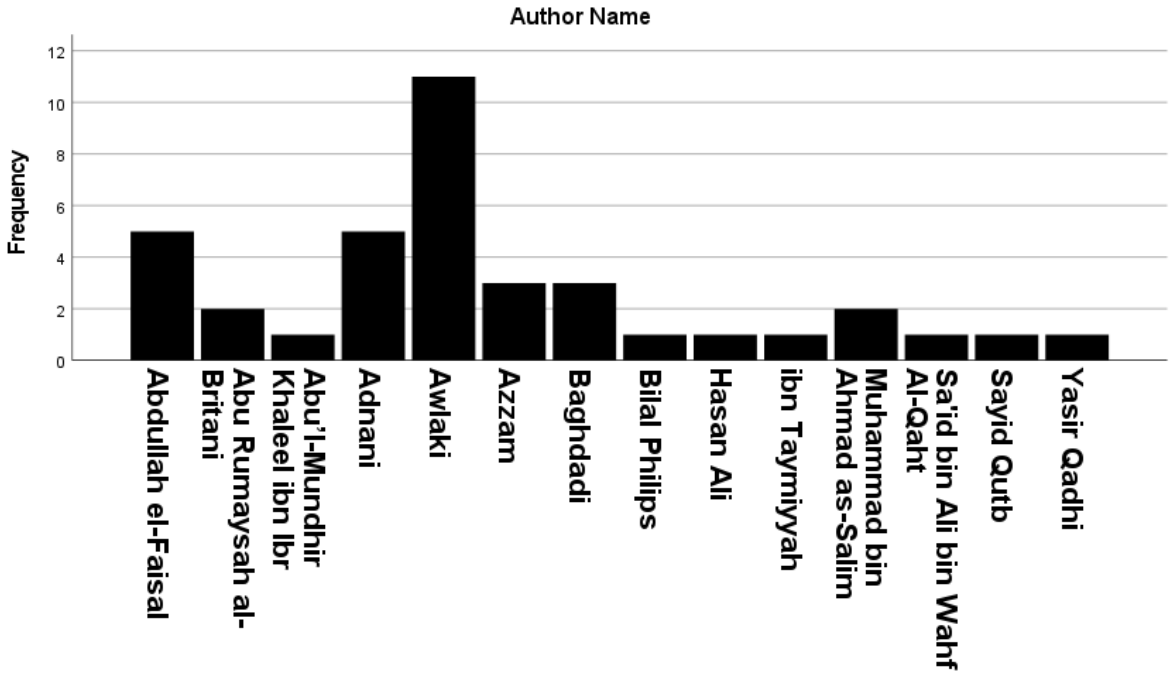

Figure 17 - Author of Radical Content

The presence of Awlaki in contemporary cases of jihadist terrorism in the West – regardless of group – has been noted within the literature. Shane suggests that the aforementioned feud between AQ and IS may have existed on battlefields in the Middle East and North Africa, but did not necessarily carry over to the West (Shane 2016b). In fact, he argues that despite IS' rise to prominence, the group found no English-speaking propagandist of the same appeal, leading to them including an image and his words in the fourth edition of their magazine Dabiq (Shane 2016b). In his study of media content collected from convicted British terrorists, Holbrook also finds Awlaki to be "by far" the most frequently occurring figure with Abdullah el-Faisal in second (Holbrook 2017b), which lends support to the findings of this research, speaking to the importance of charismatic English-speaking preachers for a population that may not have Arabic-

language skills. Gendron (2017) argues that Salafi-jihadist preachers have used the Internet to act as mediators between dense ideological scripture and an audience that needs help digesting it, highlighting Awlaki and Faisal specifically as performing this role.

The presence of Adnani, rather than IS emir Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, as the most frequently occurring "official" IS member can be explained by the relative lack of attributable pieces of content of the latter. Four of the five instances of Adnani content were the famous speech *Indeed Your Lord is Ever Watchful*, in which he advises actors to stay at home and commit acts of terror in the West rather than travel to Iraq or Syria (Al-Adnani 2018). Baghdadi, on the other hand, rarely made speeches in public and usually relied on audio recorded messages; prior to 2019, his only video appearance was his sermon at Friday prayers at the Grand Mosque in Mosul on July 4th 2014 in which he declared the global caliphate of the Islamic State (Al-Baghdadi 2018). This video was only present once within the sample. Similarly, important texts such as Abdullah Azzam's *In Defence of Muslim Lands* and Sayed Qutb's *Milestones* only appear three times and once respectively. It cannot be overstated how important these pieces of content are to the history of IS and the global jihadist movement, and the fact that these influential actors are dwarfed by Awlaki lends weight to the above claims by Shane that IS were unable to find a propagandist for English-speakers that holds the same appeal.

When looking at the group responsible for creating and disseminating the content, the findings offer a similar account to that of the speakers. While 103 pieces of content (65%) were attributable to IS (mostly execution videos, speeches, or e-magazines), 54 were produced by AQ (34%) – shown in Figure 18. It is worth noting that Awlaki's 11 sermons and written works were not coded as belonging to AQ, but solo enterprises. At first glance, this too, suggests a cross-pollination of content which transcends the tensions between the two groups. However, the 54 pieces of content were all copies of *Inspire e*-magazine, more than the 49 total IS magazines – displayed in Figure 19.[72] Actors in the sample seem to be drawn to two specific types of AQ content: Awlaki and *Inspire*, the latter being in part written by the former. There is little evidence of them listening to speeches by AQ emir Ayman al-Zawahiri or older content from Osama bin Laden. This suggests that, rather than actors in the sample engaging in any jihadist content they can find, they are particularly drawn to a specific type of content.

[72] 42 issues of Dabiq, 3 issues of Islamic State News, and 4 issues of Islamic State Report. No copies of IS' second magazine "Rumiyah" were found. This can most likely be explained by the fact that the sample is weighted heavily towards 2015 and the first issue of Rumiyah was released in September 2016.

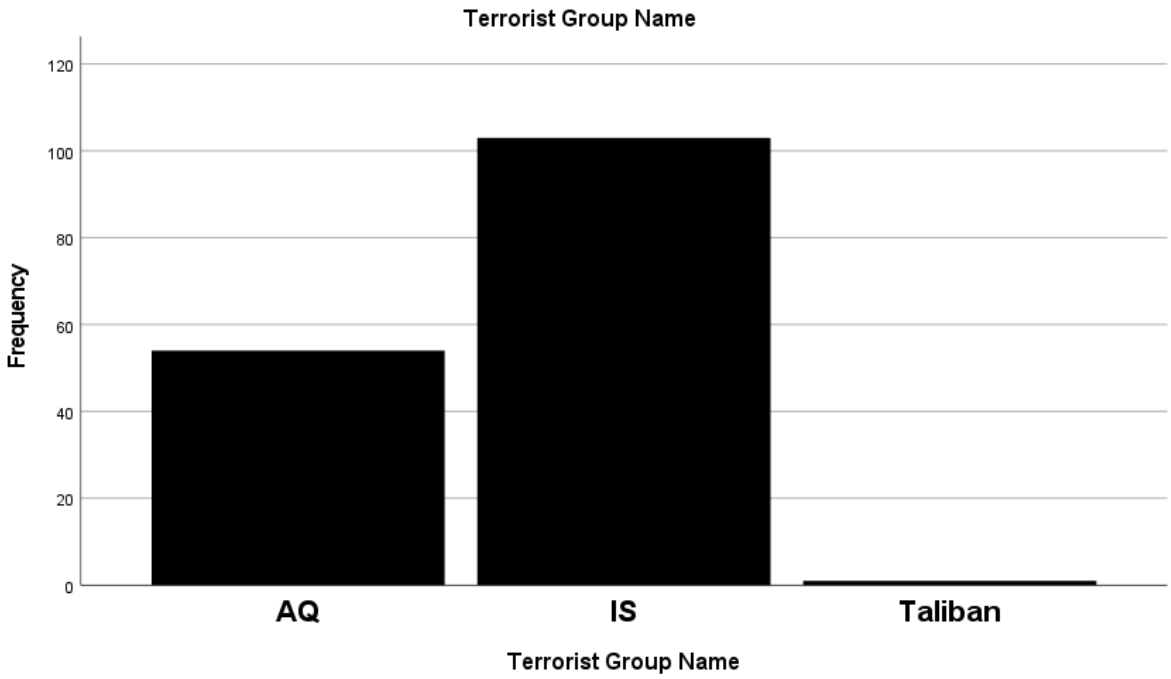

Figure 18 - Radical Content by Terrorist Group

Many scholars have observed that Awlaki's charismatic English-language content – both his sermons and his part in *Inspire* – provided important ideological support to potential recruits. Hughes notes that before actors become violent, there's an amount of "mood music" required, which Awlaki often provides (Hughes, quoted in: Shane 2016). Similarly Meleagrou-Hitchens argues that Awlaki took the global jihadist ideology that had already been created and fostered by bin Laden and al-Zawahiri and simplified it to appeal to the "Facebook generation" of young Western Muslims (Meleagrou-Hitchens 2011). This, too, is present in discussions of *Inspire,* which was clearly written with this generation in mind, employing rap lyrics and superhero narratives (Sivek 2013), with content designed for a less informed and intellectually engaged audience (Lemieux et al. 2014). When compared to IS' magazines – *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* – which rely heavily on religious scriptures (Ingram 2016a) and frames its articles by way of religious obligation (Macdonald 2016), it is easy to understand why it may appeal to a sample which consists of a large number of novices; at least 29% were converts to Islam and a number of those that were born into Muslim families expressed that they did not have a religious upbringing[73] or that they were ignorant of many of the practices and scriptures of Islam.[74]

[73] For example, see: USA v. Munther Saleh, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-00393-MKB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2018; USA v. Abdurahman El Bahnasawy, Handwritten Letter, Case 1:16-cr-00376-RMB, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, 2016.

[74] For example, see: USA v. Islam Natsheh, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 3:16-cr-00166, United States District Court for the Northern District of California, 2016; Temple-Raston, D. He Wanted Jihad. He Got Foucault, *New York Magazine,* Nov 27, 2015. Available at: http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2017/11/abdullahi-yusuf-isis-syria.html?gtm=bottom.

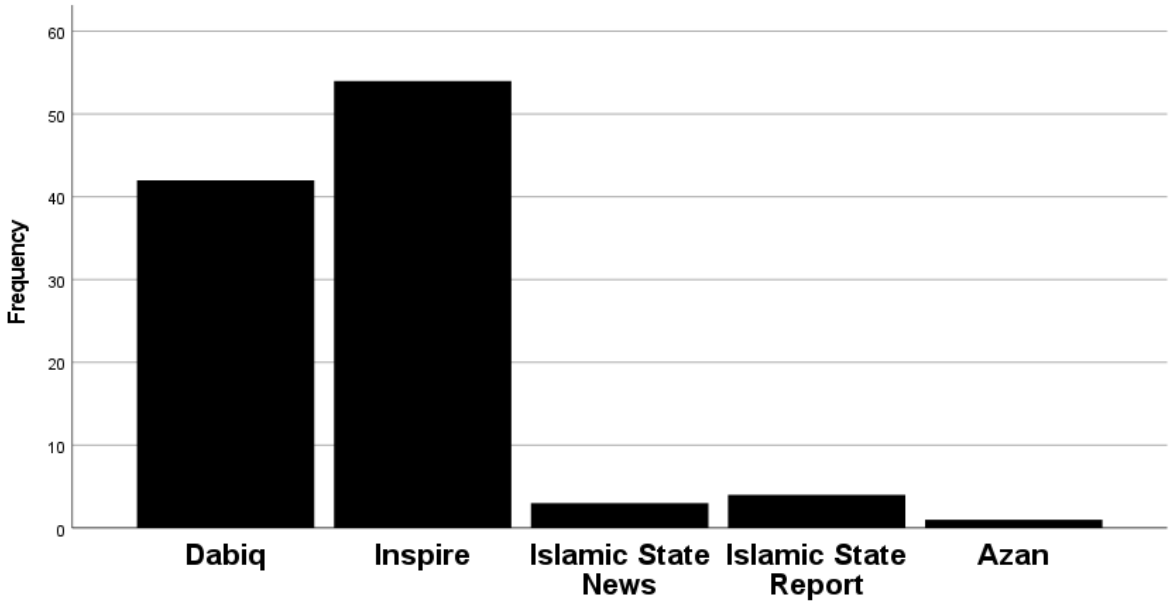

Figure 19 - Magazine Series

6.2.3 Links to Plots

When considering the question of the role propaganda in the radicalisation process, one avenue to explore is whether the content itself has links to plots. This is important because much of academic inquiry into propaganda focuses on the strategic communication of content itself – i.e. why certain speakers or messages *could* be persuasive. However, little has been able to suggest a causal link between consuming radical content and engaging in a terrorist plot. This, again, links back to the "Supply" and "Demand" side of terrorist research online (von Behr et al, 2013) – there is a vast array of research analysing radical content but little data on how it actually influences actors. Therefore, having descriptively coded the different types of propaganda above, this section compares actors' plots to assess whether there are direct connections between propaganda and engaging in acts of terrorism.

One piece of content that there is relatively strong evidence to link to terror plots is *Inspire* e-magazine, which contains instructional material called "open-source jihad"[75] on how individuals can conduct acts of terror within their own countries, foregoing the need for a wider group membership with technological knowhow to execute plots. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, who pleaded guilty to conspiracy to use a weapon of mass destruction, allegedly researched ways to create both a car bomb, as laid out in *Inspire* Issue 12 which they printed out and studied, and a pressure cooker bomb – like the one used in the Boston Marathon Bombing of 2013 – which can be found in *Inspire* Issue 1.[76] However, the two also relied on non-jihadist sources, such as downloading an electronic

[75] In all but four issues (3; 7; 11; and 16)
[76] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint.

copy of *The Anarchist Cookbook,* chemistry textbooks, and YouTube tutorials on soldering.[77] Although the two were able to amass a number of the materials needed for a bomb, the plot was thwarted before it could be constructed.

Similarly unsuccessful was Gregory Lepsky, who pleaded guilty in 2017 to material support for attempting to assemble and detonate a pressure cooker bomb. As with Velentzas and Siddiqui, Lepsky consulted *Inspire* – this time the first issue – for instructions for how to create the bomb, and went as far as purchasing a pressure cooker from an online retailer.[78] Lepsky had downloaded the magazine on his smart phone and backed it up on his computer. As well as consulting *Inspire* for bomb-making instructions, he had also used the Internet to consume other types of radical propaganda, including approximately 3,340 Internet searches on topics such as previous terror attacks, IS' black standard flag, instructions on making anthrax powder, and execution videos.[79]

Other individuals have had more success drawing from *Inspire* magazine's "Open-Source Jihad" section. Ahmad Khan Rahimi, also known as the "Chelsea bomber", was convicted of eight counts including using a weapon of mass destruction and bombing of a public place for setting off pressure cooker bombs in New Jersey and New York. Between 2015 and 2016, Rahimi downloaded every issue of *Inspire*, including the first issue, which includes the aforementioned article on making a pressure cooker bomb titled "How to Make a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom".[80] The court filings note that the article provides detailed instructions on making the types of bombs that Rahimi used for his attacks on 18th September 2016. Like Lepsky, Rahimi also used the Internet to purchase a number of the components of his bombs.[81]

The most well-known plot in this sample that can be directly traced to *Inspire* magazine is the San Bernardino attack, conducted by Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik on 2nd December 2015. Although the attack was an armed assault on the Inland Regional Centre, CA. by the couple, they also constructed at least three pipe bombs that failed to detonate.[82] In the subsequent trial of Farook's friend – Enrique Marquez Jr. – it emerged that Marquez and Farook had used *Inspire's* instructional material to learn how to make an IED using Christmas tree bulbs.[83]

Beyond *Inspire*, other pieces of radical content have been linked to plots, most notably, the IS fatwa against right-wing blogger Pamela Geller. In 2015, Geller organised a competition in which participants drew cartoons of the prophet Muhammad. From

[77] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint.
[78] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint, Case 3:18-cr-00114, United States District Court, District of New Jersey, 2017.
[79] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint.
[80] USA v. Ahmed Khan Rahimi, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:16-cr-00760-RMB, United States District Court, District of New Jersey, 2018.
[81] USA v. Ahmed Khan Rahimi, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:16-cr-00760-RMB, 2016.
[82] Megan Christie et al. Christmas Party May Have Triggered San Bernardino Terror Attack: Police.
[83] USA v. Enrique Marquez Jr., Criminal Complaint, Case: 5:15-mj-498, United States District Court for the Central District of California, 2015.

February of that year, Elton Simpson, Nadir Soofi, and Abdul Kareem plotted an attack on the event, with the online help of British actor Junaid Hussain.[84] Simpson and Soofi opened fire on the competition on the 3rd May 2015, for which IS claimed responsibility. Shortly afterwards, the group uploaded a fatwa[85] to content hosting platform justpaste.it in which they call on supporters to "slaughter" Geller.[86]

In the ensuing days, David Wright, Nicholas Rovinski, and Usaamah Abdullah Rahim plotted to murder Geller – again with online instructional assistance from Hussain – with Rahim purchasing multiple knives from an online retailer.[87] Two days after the call, Rovinski watched a YouTube video of a debate between Geller and convicted UK terrorist Anjem Choudhry, in which the fatwa was discussed, and Rovinski posted in the comments section that Geller was a kufir [unbeliever], implying that she is a legitimate target for violence.[88] The attack never reached fruition because Rahim changed his target to Boston Police Officers and was shot and killed, however, the court filings show that the fatwa and the media coverage that followed it played an important role in the three actors' plot.[89]

A similar type of document to the Pamela Geller fatwa are the "kill lists" that were published by IS and their sympathisers, in which the names, addresses, and other identifying material of US federal employees, including members of the military, were posted online – known as "doxing". The most well-known instance of this was in 2015, when Ardit Ferizi, a Kosovo national, hacked online databases to create a list of 1351 individuals working for the US federal government and sent them to British hacker and IS member Junaid Hussain, who published them on Twitter in August of that year under the name of the "Islamic State Hacking Division".[90] Hussain had previously published the names and addresses of 100 members of the US military in March 2015 as well.[91] It could be argued that having one's personal information displayed on the Internet by a group such as IS is an act of terror in itself; it is an act of incitement with intent to coerce a wider population in pursuit of a religious goal. However, Alexander and Clifford (2019) argue that it is still a relative rarity for US terrorists to use such lists to conduct plots; just Haris Qamar[92] and Nelash Mohamed Das[93] took steps to do so, although neither got to advanced

[84] Seamus Hughes and Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs, *CTC Sentinel*, 10(3), 2017, pp.1-9.
[85] Because the content is anonymous, it is impossible to verify how "official" it is. It is possible it was just IS sympathisers, especially since it was not released via Amaq News Agency.
[86] USA v. David Wright and Nicholas Rovinski, Affidavit, Case 1:15-cr-10153-WGY, United States District Court District of Massachusetts, 2015.
[87] USA v. David Wright and Nicholas Rovinski, First Superseding Indictment.
[88] USA v. David Wright and Nicholas Rovinski, Affidavit.
[89] USA v. David Wright and Nicholas Rovinski, Affidavit.
[90] Audrey Alexander and Bennett Clifford, Doxing and Defacements: Examining the Islamic State's Hacking Capabilities, *CTC Sentinel*, April 2019, pp.22-28.
[91] Audrey Alexander and Bennett Clifford, Doxing and Defacements: Examining the Islamic State's Hacking Capabilities.
[92] USA v. Haris Qamar, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:16-cr-00227-LMB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2017.
[93] USA v. Nelash Mohamed Das, Criminal Complaint, Case: 8:16-cr-00502, United States District Court for the District of Maryland, 2016.

stages of their plot and were infiltrated by undercover sources and arrested. Others, such as Safya Roe Yassin,[94] Terrence McNeil,[95] and Maria Castelli,[96] were prosecuted for disseminating kill lists, while for others, lists were found in the possession of actors that chose other targets, like David Wright[97] and Elton Simpson.[98] Given how well-travelled these lists are and the identifying information they contain, one may expect a greater number of actors to have attempted to utilise them as part of plots, but this does not seem to be the case.

Perhaps the most surprising finding is that there are relatively few cases in which a terrorist event can be directly traced back to a specific piece of radical content. It is possible, however, that the bar for establishing such a link is set too high. For example, Abdul Razak Ali Artan's vehicle and knife-based attack on the campus of Ohio State University took place on the 28th November 2016.[99] Less than three weeks before, the third issue of *Rumiyah* magazine urged actors to undertake vehicle-born attacks, giving the attack in Nice on 14th July 2016 as inspiration. The "Just Terror" section of this issue of *Rumiyah* also suggests that having a secondary weapon, such as a gun or knife. While it is possible that Artan drew inspiration from it,[100] it requires a degree of speculation to even link the two together, let alone answer questions of causation.

More broadly, one could look at the case of Akayed Ullah, who was found guilty of bombing the Port Authority Bus Terminal in Manhattan, NY on December 11, 2017. Although the data do not reveal that Ullah used a specific piece of content to plan his attack, the pipe bomb that he created using Christmas tree lights, a nine-volt battery, wire, screws, are all present in the instructions of "How to Build a Bomb in the Kitchen of Your Mom" from the first issue of *Inspire*. The filings mention that he used the Internet to learn how to build IEDs, but does not mention which sites he visited.[101] Similarly, the filings indicate that Ullah began to watch propaganda videos in, at least, the summer of 2014, including one which suggested that if actors were unable to travel to the caliphate then they should conduct acts of terror in their country of residence, which Ullah did.[102] The court filings do not explicitly lay out that IS content played a role in the event; considering

[94] USA v. Safya Rose Yassin, Criminal Complaint, Case: 16-3024-01-CR-S-RK, United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri, 2016.
[95] USA v. Terrence Joseph McNeil, Affidavit.
[96] USA v. Marie Antoinette Castelli, Plea Agreement, Case: 2:17-cr-00049-DLB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Kentucky, 2017.
[97] USA v. Nicholas Rovinski, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-10153-WGY, United States District Court for the District of Massachusetts, 2017.
[98] USA v. Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, Second Superseding Indictment, Case 2:15-cr-00707-SRB, United States District Court for the District of Arizona, 2015.
[99] Mitch Smith and Adam Goldberg, From Somalia to US: Ohio State Attacker's Path to Violence, *New York Times,* December 1, 2016. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/01/us/from-somalia-to-us-ohio-state-attackers-path-to-violence.html.
[100] Artan died in the attack, which means that no court filings were available, which often provide the most granular and detailed data.
[101] USA v. Akayed Ullah, Criminal Complaint, Case: 1:17-mj-09200-UA, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, 2017.
[102] USA v. Akayed Ullah, Criminal Complaint

that Ullah was charged with one count of material support to a designated foreign terrorist organisation, they would be incentivised to draw out as much of a connection with specific groups as possible. However, it remains possible that Ullah used the bomb-making instructions laid out in *Inspire* or followed the advice to conduct acts in the US, although this also requires a degree of speculation. It is important to make note of cases like that of Artan and Ullah, while a firm link between the content and their respective plots cannot be drawn, they represent cases in which it is possible and missing data clouds the ability to make a firm judgement.

The notion that jihadist radical content may be a motivating factor for actors to engage in acts of terrorism is posited in the wider literature. In discussing *Inspire*, Lemieux et al. (2014) argue that the magazine offers an Information, Motivation, Skills framework which can influence action. That is to say, it informs the audience with "facts" such as the West's war on Islam; it motivates actors by informing the reader of their obligations; and gives them the skills to act within the "open-source jihad" section. Similarly, Holt et al. (2015) observe that jihadist videos offer three important functions – a diagnosis which identifies the specific grievance as well as a perpetrator who is at fault; a prognosis which states what needs to be done; and finally a motivational call to encourage the reader to act. This holds similarities with the framework laid out by Ingram (2016b), who notes jihadist propaganda perpetuates the violent extremist "system of meaning" which identifies a crisis which is caused by the out-group, and the solution which can only be provided by the in-group, which can cause the reader to be motivated to act. It seems plausible, given the data presented above, that jihadist content can play an important role in motivating terrorists to act. On these readings, this kind of instructional material acts an important part of radicalisation as it builds on the persuasive elements and gives would-be terrorists the ability to act.

It is also important not to overstate the importance of radical content; there are still relatively few instances which can be directly traced back to plots as a driving factor of the eventual activity. An important, and unanswered, question is whether radical content motivates actors that would not have otherwise committed acts of terrorism, or whether they merely provide a replaceable outlet. For example, if *Inspire* was not available for bomb-making instructions, would actors merely download the easily obtainable *The Anarchist Cookbook*? A definitive answer to this question is not only beyond the data that are available in this research, but it is also unknowable. At first glance, it may be tempting to observe that a large number of actors collected and consumed radical content and assume that it plays an important role in plots. However, the relative lack of cases linking content to events suggests that often, they do not motivate, or at least, only play a part in motivating actors. It seems plausible, perhaps even probable, that few actors are motivated by radical content that are not already ideologically aligned with the wider movement. Reed and Ingram (2017), for example, argue that the instructional material that can be found in *Inspire* and *Rumiyah* is of little value unless the respective groups can convince actors to adopt the "system of meaning". Similarly, Lemieux et al. (2014) warn

against exaggerating the importance of magazines like *Inspire*, and suggest that more attention needs to be paid to the wider milieu in which they operate.

6.2.4 Socialisation

Rather than framing propaganda use as being directly linked to plots, it may be more fruitful to consider it through the lens of a socialisation process of the wider movement which transcends the online and offline domains. That is to say, rather than a "hypodermic needle" effect in which viewing propaganda causes people to become terrorists (Aly 2017), it is instead the "mood music" by which individuals ingratiate themselves into the radical milieu.

An example of this is the ways in which individuals discussed radical content with each other. Speaking to an unnamed co-ideologue on social media about the most popular piece of propaganda in this sample – *Healing the Believers' Chests* – Arafat Nagi said that the actions were permissible and that 'do to them as they do to you…they drop bombs and burn people.'[103] Similarly, Terrance McNeil posted stills from the video on Facebook and wrote: 'This is what happens when you bomb women and children and get caught. Alhumdullilah I was worried for a while they might let that murderer go.'[104] These justifications are very similar to those given in the seventh issue of *Dabiq*, which covers the incident, stating that it was in retaliation for bombings of Muslims at the hands of Jordan (Ingram 2016b). Many other individuals either shared the video with others online – for example Islam Said Natsheh,[105] David Wright,[106] or Khalil Abu-Rayyan[107] – or expressed explicit support amongst their radical peers, like Alaa Saadeh,[108] Laith Waleed Alebbini,[109] or Samy el Goarany.[110] This activity demonstrates that individuals were not merely watching the video and reading the magazines, but engaging dialectically with each other about the content itself.

Engagement with radical propaganda often protrudes the online and offline domains. A clear example of this is when individuals held "viewing parties" where co-ideologues would visit their houses to watch videos. This is detailed most explicitly in the case of the group of travellers from the Minneapolis/St. Paul region: 'the men would spend hours

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[103] USA v. Arafat M. Nagi, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:15-cr-00148, United States District Court for the Western District of New York, 2015.
[104] USA v. Terrence Joseph McNeil, Affidavit, Case: 5:15-mj-01176-KBB, United States District Court for the Northern District of Ohio, 2015.
[105] USA v. Islam Said Natsheh, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case: 3:16-cr-00166-RS, United States District Court for the Northern District of California, 2016.
[106] Hughes, Meleagrou-Hichens, and Clifford, A New American Leader Rises in ISIS, *The Atlantic*, Jan 13 2018.
[107] USA v. Khalil Abu Rayyan, Criminal Complaint, Case: 2:16-mj-30039-DUTY, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Michigan, 2016.
[108] USA v. Alaa Saadeh, Criminal Complaint, [Unknown case #], United States District Court for the District of New Jersey, 2015. Available at: https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/Saadeh%2C%20A.%20Criminal%20Complaint.pdf.
[109] USA v. Laith Waleed Alebbini, Motion to Revoke Detention Order, United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Case: 317-cr-00071-WHR, 2017.
[110] USA v. Ahmed Mohammed el Gammel, Criminal Complaint, Case: 1:15-cr-00588-ER, United States District Court for the Southern District of New Year, 2015.

watching a YouTube channel called Enter the Truth…all slick Islamic State productions, focused on the suffering of Syrian children and the moral corruption the West.'[111] The group would sit in a circle and exchange devices with each other to share their propaganda.[112] Similarly, the Garland, TX. attackers Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi, along with other co-ideologues including Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, watched ISIS videos and news coverage of terror attacks together. One individual testified that Kareem looked pleased as he watched execution videos and was excited after the Charlie Hebdo attack.[113] Other small cells watched online propaganda together, including Jaelyn Young and Mohammed Daklalla;[114] Munther Omar Saleh and Fareed Mumuni;[115] Mahmoud Elhassan and Joseph Farrokh;[116] and Sixto Ramiro Garcia and Asher Abid Khan.[117]

As well as watching content together, actors would regularly discuss the content that they had watched with others. Haris Qamar, speaking to a confidential witness that he believed was a co-ideologue, repeatedly discussed propaganda he had watched, including *The Flames of War* and an execution in which someone was run over by a tank, which he described as "beautiful."[118] Discussing the execution video *The Procession of Light*, Casey Spain told a fellow prison inmate that he found it funny that the executioners "finished one off" by putting a fish tank on his head and drowning him.[119] Actors discussed and even replicated nashids – Shivam Patel told a confidential source that he had been watching IS videos and that he had learned one of the songs, which he then sang for the source.[120] According to court documents, Aziz Sayyed also 'sang ISIS chants,' as well as

[111] Brendan Koerner, Can You Turn a Terrorist Back into a Citizen? *Wired*, January 24, 2017. Available at: https://www.wired.com/2017/01/can-you-turn-terrorist-back-into-citizen/.
[112] Dina Temple-Raston, He Wanted Jihad, He Got Foucault, *New York Magazine*, November 26, 2017. Available at: http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2017/11/abdullahi-yusuf-isis-syria.html.
[113] USA v. Abdul Malik Abdul Kareem, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 2:15-cr-00707-SRB, United States District Court for the District of Arizona, 2016.
[114] Emma Green, How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group, *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/mississippi-young-dakhlalla/524751/.
[115] USA v. Munther Omar Saleh and Fareed Mumuni, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case: 1:15-cr-00393-MKB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2018.
[116] USA v. Mahmoud Amin Mohamed Elhassan, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:16-cr-0064-AJT, 2017.
[117] Adam Goldman, An American Family Saved their Son from Joining the Islamic State. Now He Might Go to Prison. *Washington Post*, September 6, 2015. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/gdpr-consent/?next_url=https%3a%2f%2fwww.washingtonpost.com%2fworld%2fnational-security%2fan-american-family-saved-their-son-from-joining-the-islamic-state-now-he-might-go-to-prison%2f2015%2f09%2f06%2f2d3d0f48-44ef-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3_story.html%3fnoredirect%3don%26utm_term%3d.153ed638a96a)&noredirect=on&utm_term=.153ed638a96a).
[118] USA v. Haris Qamar, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.
[119] USA v. Casey Charles Spain, Position of The United States with Respect to Sentencing and Motion for an Upward Variant Sentence, Case 3:17-cr-00123-JAG, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2017.
[120] USA v. Shivam Patel, Affidavit in Support of an Application for Criminal Complaint and Arrest Warrant, Case 2:17-cr-00120-MSD-DEM, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2017.

discussing violent propaganda videos and stating that there would be no higher honour than to conduct such acts himself.[121]

These sets of cases demonstrate that propaganda can play a role in the ongoing socialisation process between actors. It is an activity between friends; a topic of conversation; or a justification for violence. Most importantly, it is not the one-way transfer of information from the Internet to a user, but rather part of a larger and more complex information environment which includes several types of radical online content which may reinforce each other (such as magazines and execution videos), offline discussions with co-ideologues, and online postings – the latter is discussed in further detail below. When considering the phenomenon of online radicalisation, this demonstrates that there is often a blurred distinction between the two domains that is not easy to rectify because it is not necessarily clear which activities can be seen as "online" and which as "offline."

This is congruous with the findings of Baugut and Neumann (2019), whose interview-based research with 44 German jihadists found that propaganda consumption was often followed by offline discussions about the content with peers and preachers, or vice versa, in which conversations with peers and preachers aroused interest in further radical content. As with actors in this sample, they found that individuals watched radical YouTube videos in groups and discussed them afterwards. Importantly, participants highlighted that the discussions led them to believe they were actively engaging with the content, rather than passive consumers of it (Baugut and Neumann 2019). It is easy to look at the vast array of "slick" and "Hollywood-esque" IS online propaganda and conclude that it has some kind of radicalising agency. However, this perspective is incorrect; even where actors are engaging online, they are also engaging offline, as demonstrated by Chapter 5 and the findings of Gill et al. (2017) and Reynolds and Hafez (2017). In many instances, separating the two domains is impossible: 'These two modes of communication were strongly intertwined across the complete process of radicalization' (Baugut and Neumann 2019, p.16).

The two explanations – that online content can be motivating under some circumstances and that consuming content is part of a socialisation process – are not mutually exclusive. Rather, they are probably inseparable. Clearly, it is important that IS' preference for gruesome execution videos, which are viewed widely in this sample, may lead to one hypothesising some potentially important psychological affect such as mortality salience, which could be linked to support for terrorism (Pyszczynski et al. 2006) – although this goes beyond the scope of secondary research. Similarly, propaganda which aims to sell a utopia narrative (Winter 2015b) or that an apocalyptic war is approaching (Ingram 2016a), which much of the consumed content in this sample does, may resonate with audiences compared to previous groups' propaganda which focuses on other issues, such

[121] USA v. Aziz Ihab Sayyed, Plea Agreement, Case 5:18-cr-00090-AKK-HNJ, United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, 2018.

as a war of attrition against the West (Novenario 2016). Even if the content is primarily consumed as social currency, the nature of the content can still be important.

6.2.5 Informal Content

Having sampled and analysed the identifiable "formal" content that terrorists in this sample an interesting perspective appeared – individuals were discussing the propaganda they had watched with their peers. In many instances, actors would take to social media to discuss or justify the content. This led me to consider the individuals in this content as potential content creators, rather than as merely an audience. Conway advocates for this in her call to "deepen" their understanding of online content by considering the position of the audience, she specifically notes that 'a particularly salient question would be whether a majority or minority…are so-called prosumers, that is at the same time both producers and consumers of violent extremist online content' (Conway 2016a, p.10). Therefore, I decided to theoretically sample towards the *informal* content – that is to say, content that is not created by a terrorist organisation but instead by individuals.

The findings from this research suggest that there is much that can be learned from researching the creation and dissemination of low-level content. Actors in the sample used social media to profess their support both for IS and the wider jihadist movement using text-based functions of platforms, by posting images, and by recording and uploading videos. A recurring theme within this activity is the construction of the online self as the "Good Muslim"; actors would post content identifying themselves as jihadists even if it is damaging to actors' self-preservation. Many of these constructed personas also conform to the hyper-masculine gender roles that the group propagates. Another important aspect to low-level content is the circulation of memes and gifs by actors in the cohort, which should be seen as communication acts by both their creators and disseminators. These findings lend support to those presented above on formal content – engagement with informal radical content is part of socialisation within the radical milieu in which they inhabit.

As presented in Chapter 5, the majority (56%) of actors chose to express their ideology on an open or semi-open platform such as Twitter or Facebook. In many instances, this was just the basic text function of platforms. For example, Haris Qamar regularly posted statements supportive of IS and its ideology, including asking Allah to "give strength to the mujahideen to slaughter every single US military officer" and after the group conquered Europe that "Auschwitz will be opened again" for non-believers.[122] Or take Safya Roe Yassin, who using Twitter referenced the Garland attack in May 2015, and noted: "They are only getting bolder because no one was killed at their last event, but if it goes the other way…they have courage now, but if a backpack was left at the scene w/nothing in it, you would have a stampede, lol".[123] Finally, Abdullahi Yusuf, who wrote

[122] USA v. Haris Qamar, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, p.2.
[123] USA v. Safya Rose Yassin, Criminal Complaint, pp.6-7.

in a comment section below an image on Facebook that 'Bashaar asad don't deserve to live.'[124] These three actors, and many more in the sample, used violent emotive language to express their ideology, making little attempt to hide it.

Several actors also used social media platforms to create image-based ideologically-aligned radical content. Many actors took photographs of themselves and their co-ideologues with weaponry and uploaded them to social media platforms. Jalil Aziz purchased materials for a military-style rucksack, including ammunition for an AR-15 rifle, a knife, fingerless gloves, and a balaclava, posting multiple images of them to Twitter.[125] Robert Hester allegedly posted a number of photos of automatic weapons and ammunition to an unnamed social media platform, as well as a photo of a Quran next to a handgun and a knife.[126] Gregory Lepsky uploaded several photos of himself to Facebook dressed in military fatigues with a semi-automatic rifle in one hand and a pistol in the other with the accompanying comment: 'look at these sick photos of me yoo'.[127] None of the actors seemed to be concerned that the content would alert unwanted attention from law enforcement, in fact, a Facebook friend admonished Lepsky that he may have his door "kicked in" by police, to which he responded 'fuk the police they are alostolates[128] and disbelievers'.[129]

Many other actors broadcasted their ideological leanings by using imagery other than, and sometimes combined with, weaponry. One popular photograph was of actors posing with their index finger in the air – known as the tawheed gesture (Wignell, Tan, O 'Halloran et al. 2017), representing the oneness of God, which is central to Salafist ideology (Wiktorowicz 2006). A different photo of Lepsky found on his mobile phone showed him in military dress, with a rifle in one hand and making this gesture with the other.[130] Harlem Suarez also posted photos of himself online making this gesture with a ski-mask to conceal his identity.[131] Actors also posed with IS' flag, their version of the black standard with the Islamic declaration of faith (shahada) written on it (Johansson 2017). When UK border authorities searched Sajmir Alimehmeti's mobile phone and computer, they found photos of him both in front of the flag and one of him making the tahweed gesture.[132] Joseph Jones and Edward Schimenti allegedly took a photo of

[124] USA v. Abdullahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur, Criminal Complaint, Case: 14-MJ-0124, United States District Court for the District of Minnesota, 2014, p.22.
[125] USA v. Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-00309-CCC, United States District Court for the Middle District of Pennsylvania, 2017.
[126] USA v. Robert Lorenzo Hester Jr., Criminal Complaint, Case: 4:17-cr-00064, United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri, 2017.
[127] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint.
[128] The court filing suggests that Lepsky meant to post "apostates".
[129] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint, p.8.
[130] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint.
[131] USA v. Harlem Suarez, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 4:15-cr-10009-JEM, United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, 2017.
[132] USA v. Sajmir Alimehmeti, Criminal Complaint, Case: 1:16-cr-00398, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, 2016.

themselves in front of the flag with an undercover FBI source to show the source's alleged brother, a purported IS member; the flag was also Schimenti's Google+ profile image.[133]

Actors from the sample also utilised audio-visual technologies to create and upload video content of themselves and others to the Internet. Zakaryia Abdin allegedly visited a gun range in Summerville, SC and videoed himself firing an AK-47 which he uploaded to an unnamed social media platform.[134] Haris Qamar and a confidential FBI source visited several different tourist sites around Washington D.C. and took videos with a view to sending them back to IS for the purposes of official propaganda videos. When taking a video of the Pentagon, Qamar shouted statements in support of IS that could be heard, such as 'bye bye DC, stupid ass kufar, kill 'em all.'[135] Many actors also planned to make videos as part of their plots that never came to fruition. Munir Abdulkader planned to abduct and behead a US military veteran on camera for the purposes of a propaganda video.[136] John T. Booker, who plotted an attack on a US army base, planned to capture a high-ranking military officer before conducting an IS-style execution on him.[137]

6.2.6 Radical Construction

One might be inclined to put these outward expressions of violent ideology down to stupidity. After all, in terms of both self-preservation and winning IS' perceived war against the West, telegraphing such activities online is detrimental as it can alert law enforcement to them.[138] As discussed in the previous chapter, this is precisely what happened to Heather Coffman. It would be more rational to keep as quiet as possible and not draw attention to themselves. However, to claim it is just foolishness is superficial. The common theme of all of these actors – 56% of the sample – that needlessly telegraphed their ideology in an open platform is that they are projecting an idealised version of themselves. Burkell et al. (2014) find that Facebook users tend to create an online persona that is intended for public consumption rather than a "true" representation of themselves. Gündüz (2017) too, argues that people play "characters" on social media which present themselves in ways in which they wish to be perceived. This is true, too, of posting images in which users engage in a reflexive process of portraying certain aspects of selfhood, while ignoring or concealing others – performing acts of "staged authenticity" (Uimonen 2013). On this reading, the performance of "being" a jihadist is important. This can be done by projecting ideologically relevant information

[133] USA v. Joseph Jones and Edward Schimenti, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:17-cr-00236, United States District Court for the Northern District of Illinois, 2017.
[134] USA v. Zakaryia Abdin, Criminal Complaint, Case: 2:17-mj-00081-MCRI, United States District Court for the District of South Carolina, 2017.
[135] USA v. Haris Qamar, Statement of Facts, Case 1:16-cr-00227-LMB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2016, p.10.
[136] USA v. Munir Abdulkader, Sentencing Proceedings, Case 1:16-CR-019, United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Western Division, 2016.
[137] USA v. John T. Booker Jr. Criminal Complaint, Case 5:15-mj-05039-KGS, United States District Court for the District of Kansas, Topeka Docket, 2015.
[138] For example, Heather Coffman's outward support for IS on Facebook caused a friend to alert the FBI. USA v. Heather Coffman, Criminal Complaint.

on social media, such as violent language towards the "other", posing with weaponry to show strength, or appearing pious by making the tahweed gesture.

Linking together the previous discussion on formal content and this one, the performance of US-based actors may be symbiotically related to what is being projected to them from the official propaganda produced by IS and other groups. Brachman and Levine (2011) argue that the malleable nature of cyberspace allows supporters of jihadist movements to create "avatars" of themselves. These avatars are stylized personas that are crafted to appear as authentically involved in the movement and aim to replicate the behaviours that are considered ideal. In this sense, analysis of jihadist propaganda has been found to visually construct the notion of the "Good Muslim"; a respected non-leader that utilises artefacts such as weaponry and flags that aim to elicit the call for violent jihad (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2019). Similarly, in his analysis of the IS virtual caliphate, Winter finds that propagandists go to great lengths to portray the strength of their military to perpetuate the aura of supremacy and momentum (Winter 2015b). Within this sample, violence, particularly intertwined with religious and ideological piety, is the "language" with which actors communicate and perform their constructed avatars. The Internet provides an outlet that is fundamentally different to the offline domain; offering a more malleable and an idealised version of how actors wish to be seen by their peers. Interestingly, Brachman and Levine (2011) argue that for some that create avatars, they begin to take steps to reconcile the differences between their online and offline personas. Although none of the plots came to fruition, those that sought to video their terrorist activities can be seen as attempting to do this, granted it is not clear they would have been able to follow through given the opportunity.

As well as the image of the "Good Muslim" being portrayed in formal propaganda, many of the actors constructed this identity in the caliphate and used the Internet to transport it back to their peers in the US. Both Abdi Nur[139] and Mohamed Roble,[140] who travelled from the Minnesota/St Paul area to the caliphate in 2014, posted pictures of themselves on social media platforms posing with rifles and the IS flag, which were seen by their friends back at home and played an important part in their attempted mobilisation.[141] As with the consumption of formal propaganda, this blurs the online/offline distinction; Nur and Roble were using the Internet to portray these identities, but were drawing from deep and longstanding social (and in some cases familial) networks with many years of face-to-face communication. Other individuals portrayed their life in the caliphate too, such as Sixto Ramiro Garcia's Facebook account contained a number of pictures of him,

[139] USA v. Mohamed Abdihamid Farah et al., Criminal Complaint.
[140] USA v. Mohamed Amiin Ali Roble, Criminal Complaint, Case 0:16-mj-00584, United States District Court for the District of Minnesota, 2016.
[141] USA v. Mohamed Abdihamid Farah et al., Criminal Complaint.

including posing with an AK-47[142] and IS flag.[143] Abdifatah Ahmed also posted photos on his Facebook page standing underneath the IS flag with a Quran in one hand and an AK-47 in the other.[144] Not only are these actors representing themselves as the "Good Muslim", but they are also providing a reference point to anyone within their online social network that the goal of living within the caliphate is attainable. These pictures from the caliphate are unlikely to be entirely organic. Klausen (2015) notes that the social media accounts of foreign fighters may give the illusion of authenticity but were more tightly managed than one may realise; only trusted actors were given permission to post. IS understood the importance of informal, organic-looking propaganda as well as formal.

The construction of online personas, like that of the "Good Muslim", also has gendered implications. The role of women and the Internet will be discussed in a later section, but it is important to note that the ways in which actors chose to construct their identities also coalesce with typical gender norms within the jihadist community. Pearson and Winterbotham (2017) find that IS propagates "hyper-masculine" norms, in which they appeal to a sense of brotherhood and promote men to a warrior archetype. It is instructive to look at the projections of men that presented themselves as violent such as Aziz,[145] Hester,[146] and particularly the combination of piety and violence, like Lepsky.[147] As Mahmood argues, this is a gendered act: 'masculinity is highly militarised and linked to violence… men are largely engaged as fighters and protectors of women and children' (Mahmood, 2019, p.12). On this understanding, the projection of actors, both in the US and in the caliphate can be seen as conducting "staged authenticity" (Uimonen 2013) of masculinity as guardians of women and children. Interestingly, this does not mean that female actors necessarily use the Internet to project their typical gender roles, as will be discussed in the section on females and gendered personas below.

6.2.7 Popular Culture

As well as content that actors create and share of themselves on social media, another important aspect of informal online content is the flow of low-level material – referred to as "shitposting" – that travels within IS circles. Unlike the pious representations of the "Good Muslim" from official propaganda, these usually take a somewhat lighter and more jovial tone, often imitating Western popular culture. The most common usage of this is the Internet meme, which is usually an image and text together which attempts to

[142] USA v. Asher Abid Khan, Criminal Complaint, Case: 4:15-cr-00263, United States District Court for the Southern District of Texas, 2015.
[143] Adam Goldman, An American Family Saved Their Son from Joining the Islamic State, Now He Might Go to Prison, *Washington Post*, 6 Sept 2016. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/an-american-family-saved-their-son-from-joining-the-islamic-state-now-he-might-go-to-prison/2015/09/06/2d3d0f48-44ef-11e5-8ab4-c73967a143d3_story.html?noredirect=onandutm_term=.153ed638a96a.
[144] Hughes, S., Meleagrou-Hitchens, A., and Clifford, B., The Travelers, *George Washington University Program on Extremism*, 2018.
[145] USA v. Jalil ibn Ameer Aziz, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.
[146] USA v. Robert Lorenzo Hester Jr, Criminal Complaint.
[147] USA v. Gregory Lepsky, Criminal Complaint.

humorously capture a popular cultural symbol. For example, Nicholas Teausant posted a picture to his Instagram account with the text "keep calm and kill kuffar",[148] appropriating the popular "keep calm and carry on" meme – perhaps the irony not lost on Teausant that the cultural symbol originates as a piece of British Second World War propaganda,[149] in which their army occupied a number of Muslim-majority countries; the notion of the West being at war with Islam is central to most jihadist groups' ideology (Glazzard 2017; Ingram 2016b). Similarly, Safya Yassin posted a meme appropriating the poster to Alfred Hitchcock's North by Northwest[150] but with a photo of President Obama imposed as running away from a drone.[151]

While some memes are clearly an attempt at humour, others are more politically overt, such as Muhanad Badawi posting an altered image of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu standing next to a dog, with President Obama's face imposed.[152] Daniel Franey, too, regularly posted memes which were critical of the enemies of IS, such as the US, France, Iran, and Russia,[153] while Mohamed Maleeh Masha posted a meme of the outline of the US dollar with the text "Interest and Tyranny".[154] Others forecasted violence, albeit in a lighter and less realist tone than much of the content above, such as Munther Omar Saleh, whose phone contained an image of a headless Statue of Liberty holding the IS flag with New York City burning in the background with the words "Coming Soon" – as if imitating a movie poster.[155] Around Christmas time, Samy El-Goarany posted a picture to his Tumblr of a masked figure with a knife holding up Santa Claus' severed head with the caption "Merry Christmas".[156] Finally, Everitt Aaron Jameson allegedly posted a gif – an animated image format – of an audience giving a standing ovation to someone posting an article regarding the 31st October 2017 attack in New York, NY allegedly conducted by Sayfullo Saipov.[157] Even in the instances where violence is clearly

[148] USA v. Nicholas Teausant, Criminal Complaint, Case 2:14-mj-0064, United States District Court for the Eastern District of California, 2014.
[149] Know Your Meme: Keep Calm and Carry On. Available at: https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/keep-calm-and-carry-on.
[150] Know Your Meme: North by Northwest. Available at: https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/1452448-bertstrips.
[151] USA v. Safya Rose Yassin, Criminal Complaint.
[152] USA v. Nader Salem Elhuzayel and Muhanad Elfatih M.A. Badawi, Transcript of Proceedings, Case 8:15-cr-0060, United States District Court for the Central District of California, 2016.
[153] Adam Ashton, Suspected ISIS Sympathiser from Montesano was Hospitalized for Mental Health Problems, Records Show, *The News Tribune,* 12 Feb 2016. Available at: https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/local/military/article60143536.html.
[154] Robert Snell, FBI Hunts Doctor from Flint Area Tied to Islamic State, *The Detroit News,* 23 June 2016. Available at: https://eu.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/2016/06/23/fbi-hunts-doctor-flint-area-tied-islamic-state/86270418/.
[155] USA v. Munther Omar Saleh and Fareed Mumuni, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.
[156] Katie Zavadski, His Mom and Dad Hid a Terrible ISIS Secret, *The Daily Beast*, 17 Jan 2017. Available at: https://www.thedailybeast.com/mom-and-dad-hid-a-terrible-isis-secret.
[157] USA v. Everitt Aaron Jameson, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:18-cr-00001, United States District Court for the Eastern District of California, 2017.

supported, it is done in a more light-hearted manner, as if to almost parody the gruesome IS execution videos that were commonplace within these circles at the time.

Although the vast majority of research into radical content focuses on "formal" content, a small number of studies have argued for the importance of understanding low-level peer-to-peer content such as the above. Lakomy (2017a) finds that memes are an important part of IS' visual propaganda, also drawing together the connection with popular culture icons such as films, music, and ideas, suggesting they are directed at unsophisticated, young audiences. Several studies reference a popular IS meme – which does not appear in this sample – that plays on the video game *Call of Duty*, which shows two IS fighters with the text: 'This is our call of Duty, and we respawn in Jannah [Heaven]' (Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran 2017; Lakomy 2017b; Dauber et al. 2019). The two men in the picture are faceless and one of the two is making the tawheed gesture and holding a rifle (Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran 2017), which could be interpreted as representing the "Good Muslim" (Macdonald and Lorenzo-Dus 2019), and while it carries a serious message of a promise of war that is undeterred by the threat of death (Wignell, Tan and O'Halloran 2017), it also plays on the popularity of a popular Western (and worldwide) game, offering an opportunity to recruit from outside a narrow base (Dauber et al. 2019), potentially attracting a generation that grew up with videogames such as *Call of Duty*.

Although memes and other low-level content may serve recruitment functions for groups like IS, this perspective overlooks the agency of the actors that create and repost them. Grundlingh (2018) argues that memes are constructed by their creators as speech acts. Similarly, Nissenbaum and Shifman (2017) note that they can highlight the collective identity of the milieu in which they inhabit and serve significant social functions such as reminding members of their affinity. As with the construction of the "Good Muslim", participation with "shitposting" content should be seen as actors constructing their identity in relation to the social network. In Huey's (2015) study of IS memes, she argues that they are powerful because they offer a transgressive counter-culture appeal, asking their audience to laugh at the dark humour, bonding with their audience while denigrating the butt of the joke, feeding the desire of disaffected youth to be seen as cool and edgy amongst their peers. The literature often does not go into the creators of memes, and it is seemingly assumed that it is done to recruit new members to the movement. However, there is little evidence to suggest they are made by IS; their buoyant and satirical nature is not in keeping with the apocalyptic and religious communications of the group (Ingram 2016a). This is important, as it suggests that groups have little control over this type of content; rather it is the currency of a wider movement, which actors use to socialise with peers.

6.2.8 Synthesis

This section has inductively investigated terrorists' engagement with radical content. It began by descriptively coding each of the identifiable "formal" propaganda and then comparing how actors engaged with it, finding that there were some cases in which the content could be deemed to play an active role, but these were relatively few in number.

The ways in which individuals consumed radical content could better be described as an ongoing socialisation process in which content is consumed, discussed, and shared amongst peers. This led to the decision to theoretically sample informal (i.e. not created by terror groups or renowned speakers) content. An analysis of this shows that many individuals created content to construct a radical persona for their online audience. Moreover, actors also engaged in "shitposting" by creating and sharing memes and gifs, which draw from popular culture in a more light-hearted and jovial manner than the tone of typical IS propaganda.

When considering what these findings present as a theory of online radicalisation, the data suggest that rather than radical content having a direct cause and effect relationship to motivate individuals towards terrorism, as is often explicitly or implicitly assumed as a radicalisation dynamic (For example: Weimann and Von Knop, 2008; Torok, 2013; Saifudeen, 2014; Neo, 2016), the consumption of propaganda should be seen as "mood music" – an important component of socialisation, but not necessarily a direct causative effect. Although this research cannot test the psychological mechanisms at play such as mortality salience (Pyszczynski *et al.* 2006) or creating a sense of moral outrage (2008), it does posit that there are important social dynamics. Regardless of whether propaganda can change attitudes or directly motivated individuals – for which there is little empirical evidence (Rieger, Frischlich and Bente 2013; Frischlich et al. 2015; Reeve, 2019) – it can be conceptualised as "mood music" for individuals to converse and bond with each other, while presenting a cultural artefact for them to construct an idealised persona.

The notion that radicalisation is a social phenomenon has been discussed in the existing literature. Helfstein (2012) creates a model of radicalisation which explicitly highlights the importance of socialisation and states that it cannot easily be separated from ideology. Similarly, McCauley and Moskalenko's (2008) "pyramid" of twelve radicalisation dynamics of radicalisation includes only two personal-level factors and ten group-based ones. Webber and Kruglanski's (2017) "3N" model interlinks the "network" (i.e. social aspect) with psychological "needs" and ideological "narrative." Sageman's (2004) "bunch of guys" theory posits that individual pathways are invariably driven by feelings of kinship and brotherhood with their co-ideologues, while Wikström and Bouhana's (2017) situational action theory seeks to better explain radicalisation via the relationship between individuals and their environments.

Given this theoretical scholarship, it is intuitive that engagement with radical content would also play out in a social manner. Rather than merely absorbing information from online propaganda, individuals met to watch and discussed it with friends, as well as demonstrate that they understood it by replicating key themes via text, video, and audio. Moreover, actors constructed idealised versions of themselves to project to their respective audiences to demonstrate their piety or commitment to the cause. This too, may explain why Awlaki was, by far, the most popular propagandist in the sample; this largely US-based cohort (as demonstrated in Chapter 5) needed easily digestible, English-language content, which could be passed around between actors and discussed online

and watched at offline viewing parties as a social activity. In essence, while previous research has pointed to the importance of radical content as a one-way form of communication, the data presented above demonstrate that each terrorist operates within a holistic and complex information environment.

When considering this information environment, the notion of "online" radicalisation becomes conceptually difficult to defend. While Chapter 5 demonstrated that individual engage in both online and offline antecedent behaviours, a qualitative examination shows that many activities cannot be easily demarcated as "online"; individuals met in offline settings to watch propaganda, or they would meet face-to-face to discuss content they had previously watched and give recommendations. As discussed in Chapter 3, scholars have argued that it makes little sense to consider there as being a distinguishable state of being online and offline in the contemporary world; both domains enmesh to form one single, unified reality (Jurgenson 2012; Rey and Boesel 2014). As Valentini, Lorusso, and Stephan (2020) note, terrorists do not "go online" as a deliberate act, but the two spaces conflate in unprecedented ways to the point of becoming inseparable. This chapter provides further support to this argument.

As per the Onlife thesis, the contemporary information environment – what Floridi (2007) calls an infosphere – has changed dramatically and blurred the distinctions between the two domains. However, these changes may help to explain some of the social behaviours that actors in this sample exhibited when engaging with radical content. Importantly, as Thorseth (2015a) argues, the contemporary information environment has also blurred the distinction between public and private communications. She argues that topics such as sexuality and political affiliations that were previously reserved for private, face-to-face now exist more prominently on public platforms. While, at first glance, it may appear foolish that actors are showcasing their jihadist bona fides on social media because it would be more likely to lead to apprehension. However, on Thorseth's reading, the blurred distinction between public and private means that socialising with peers may take precedence over security concerns on social media.

Grounded Theory

1) *Actors consume, create, and share radical content as part of an ongoing social radicalisation process which often blurs the distinction between online and offline*

6.3 Women and Gendered Online Personas

6.3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter – which quantitatively analysed the online behaviours of actors within this sample – used a binary coding system for several online behaviours as well demographic factors including gender. It found that there were no significant correlates between online antecedent behaviours such as engagement in an online network or learning about or planning their event online with gender – i.e. female and male actors use the Internet at approximately the same rate. However, a binary quantitative coding

system may be ill-equipped to fully explain how gender operates within the online domain. Moreover, the previous section in this chapter, which analysed actors' engagement with radical content, found that individuals used social media to construct radical identities as a means of socialising with their peers. In the context of female jihadists, this is interesting because they are traditionally excluded from offline spaces because of strict gender segregation, therefore it leaves open the possibility that the Internet may offer females a social space in which they are freer to explore their ideological motivations.

Given this, I decided to focus on the female terrorists in the database. When conducting descriptive coding, a range of different data points emerged. These included: online activities such as using social media, including the individuals' reach and influence amongst their peers; offline activities – both as a means of comparison to online and understanding whether they had barriers to entry; how actors interacted with their male counterparts. Each of these cases were then compared to each other, leading to three distinct selective codes based on the ways in which female actors engaged online: "Influencers" – who are important and active members of the radical online milieu and rely heavily on the Internet; "peer-to-peer communicators" who use the Internet, but not as actively as the influencers and do not hold as much sway; and finally, "offliners", who have little-to-no online footprint. The findings show that female terrorist actors should not be treated as a homogenous block and have different motivations which manifest in different online behaviours. Having created these categories and engaged with the academic literature, the analysis then reflects on how the females in the sample align with the online activity "roles" as outlined by Huey and colleagues (2017).

The core category of this section – i.e. 'the prime mover of most of the behaviour seen and talked about in the substantive area' (Lehane 2017, p.80) – is the concept of "space" and how different radicalising women use it. The substantive theory generated from the data shows that for some, the Internet can provide a platform for female actors to construct a less restrictive gender identity than may be possible in offline Salafi jihadist circles. However, women are not a monolith and others seemingly chose to avoid this type of activity. As with the previous section on the role of radical content, it provides a facilitative opportunity which could exacerbate radicalisation for some, but they still had to make an active decision to do so.

6.3.2 Influencers

Seven women within the sample used social media platforms widely and engaged with hundreds or even thousands of other actors, with some becoming important influencers within the online jihadisphere. One example is Keonna Thomas, who operated the Twitter accounts "Fatayat Al Khilafah" and "Young Lioness". Thomas' court filings detail her repeated endorsements of IS; her attempts to raise money for the movement; as well as

extolling the virtues of martyrdom.[158] An example of her output can be seen in this tweet on December 2, 2014:

> If we truly knew the realities ... we all would be rushing to join our brothers in the front lines pray ALLAH accept us as shuhada [martyrs].[159]

Thomas clearly had influence, given that the filings also draw on conversations that she had with a number of important men, including radical preacher Abdullah el-Faisal (Trevor Forrest),[160] virtual entrepreneurs Mujahid Miski (Muhammed Abdullahi Hassan),[161] and Abu Khalid al-Amriki (Shawn Parson), the latter of whom she married online via Skype and intended to join in Raqqa before her arrest.[162] The filings do not state how large her reach was but do suggest that she had a 'large online following'.[163] Given this, and her connection to key figures within the movement, Thomas should be seen as a key influencer. What is more, she seems to have achieved this entirely through the means of the Internet; the filings make no reference to any offline networks or activity and repeatedly iterate her online communications since entering the radical online milieu around 2010.[164]

A similar case is that of Safya Roe Yassin, who posted on several different platforms including Facebook, Telegram, Google+, but was prolific on Twitter. As with Thomas, the court filings lay out Yassin's post history, noting that her Twitter accounts were regularly suspended due to terms of service violations and that the FBI identified 97 different account IDs that she was using to post in support of IS.[165] She also regularly changed her handles throughout the day.[166] Yassin tweeted support for British convicted terrorists Anjem Choudary and Mizanur Rahman when they were charged, as well as posts that were violent in nature, including the post mentioned in the radical content section in which she mocked the "Freedom of Speech Rally Round II" – the "first round" referring to the Garland, TX attack by Elton Simpson and Nadir Soofi – by tweeting:

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[158] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint.
[159] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint, p.3.
[160] Jeremy Roebuck, Facing Sentencing, N. Philly Mom Married to Islamic State Soldier is No Aberration, *The Enquirer*, September 4, 2017. Available at: http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/facing-sentencing-n-philly-mom-married-to-isis-soldier-is-no-aberration-20170905.html.
[161] Hughes and Meleagrou-Hitchens, The Threat to the United States from the Islamic State's Virtual Entrepreneurs.
[162] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 2:15-cr-00171-MMB, United States Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2017.
[163] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, p.1.
[164] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 2:15-cr-00171-MMB, United States Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania, 2017.
[165] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint.
[166] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint.

> They are only getting bolder because no one was killed at their last event, but if it goes the other way…" [and] "they have courage now, but if a backpack was left at the scene w/nothing in it, you would have a stampede, lol"[167]

Yassin was eventually arrested and charged for disseminating an IS "kill list" – in which an actor obtained over 150 names, phone numbers and addresses of US air force personnel in August 2015.[168] Yassin distributed the list by retweeting a link from Justpaste.it by Junaid Hussain.[169] In the following days, she then made a series of posts with the captions "Wanted to Kill" and "hunt him down and kill him" targeting specific federal employees that were mentioned in the list.[170] As with Thomas, the filings do not make mention of how large her reach was, but Alexander notes that while 'it's hard to identify leaders within the [jihadist] Twitter community…she's certainly a prolific voice'.[171] Similarly to Thomas, there is little evidence to suggest that Yassin had any offline connections to the movement and her status is likely due to her online efforts.

Waheba Issa Dais also maintained an active presence across several different social media accounts and played an active role in recruitment. The filings outline that Dais was active on Facebook, where she hacked a number of non-radical users' accounts to circumvent suspensions for terms of service to spread propaganda.[172] She also used Twitter and an unnamed social media platform – presumably Telegram – on which Dais ran a channel named "Shu'a' Al-Khilafah for lone wolves." The channel had 89 members, 4 photos, 10 videos, and 445 files, at least 92 of which 'relate to explosives, guns, attack planning, and target selection.'[173] Dais was also in control or posted links to a number of other social media channels, including those that had *nasheeds* and speeches from IS leaders.[174] The filings lay out that Dias was in contact with a number of actors, discussing both travel to the caliphate as well as methods and techniques for creating bombs for terror attacks.[175] Eventually, when in conversation with an undercover agent who stated that they could no longer live in the land of the infidel, Dais responded by offering operational advice for the undercover agent's would-be attack, including staying secretive, potential targets, and that: 'making bombs is easy, and you can also start with poisons,'[176] linking the undercover agent to Dais' above mentioned channel. As with

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[167] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint, pp. 6-7.
[168] CNN News, Hacker Allegedly Gave ISIS a 'Kill List' of U.S. Troops, October 16, 2015. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/videos/us/2015/10/16/isis-hacker-malaysia-dnt-todd-tsr.cnn.
[169] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint.
[170] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Superseding Indictment, Case No. 16-3024-01-CR-S-MDH, United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri, 2016.
[171] Audrey Alexander, quoted in: Katie Zavadski, The American Anti-Vaccine Mom Turned ISIS Superstar, *The Daily Beast*, March 29, 2016. Available at: https://www.thedailybeast.com/the-american-anti-vaccine-mom-turned-isis-superstar.
[172] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, Case 2:18-cr-00143, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Wisconsin, 2018.
[173] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, p.13.
[174] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint.
[175] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint.
[176] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint, p.12.

Thomas and Yassin, the filings do not reveal how big her network was, but she was again clearly an important part of the milieu; a Facebook friend said that it suited her well to be the press manager of IS,[177] while Hughes notes that Dais had been a key voice online and that 'American women supporters in general, but her in particular, tend to be the glue that hold different online spaces together.'[178]

Heather Coffman also maintained an active presence on social media, although Facebook was her primary platform. The court filings note that Coffman maintained at least 10 different accounts with both male and female pseudonyms which were used 'to establish contacts around the world'.[179] She posted several pictures supportive of IS, its leaders, and the ideology more broadly, including the group's black standard flag with the text: 'Allah has preferred the Mujahideen over those who remain [behind] with a great reward. Degrees [sic] from Him and forgiveness and mercy. And Allah is ever Forgiving and Merciful,'[180] which is clearly meant as an encouragement for actors to travel to the join IS. Coffman was in an online romantic relationship with an unnamed foreign national, and the filings observe that together they planned his travel to the caliphate, including Coffman reaching out to her contacts on Facebook that were already in the caliphate to aid this.[181] Although the filings only show snippets of conversations, they heavily imply that Coffman was driving the situation, particularly as the unnamed man backed out of his travel, which resulted in Coffman complaining to an undercover agent:

> I gave him every opportunity to go there remember? I set him up with the brothers who gave him a contact name and number in Turkey to get him across the border when it was time for training…But I think [he] was just joking about us going.[182]

Coffman then attempted to facilitate the undercover agent's travel to Syria, for which she was charged with material support to a foreign terrorist organisation.[183] The filings paint her as an important influencer too, noting that her social media activities were neither casual nor infrequent, and that 'her online presence was significant'.[184]

Not all influencers were caught in the United States; Hoda Muthana allegedly successfully travelled to Syria after leaving Alabama on the pretence of a college field trip in November 2014. Both prior to and after her travel she was an "active part" of the English speaking Twitter community,[185] which is particularly striking given that Muthana's parents –

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[177] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint.
[178] Seamus Hughes, quoted in: Liam Stack, Wisconsin Woman Used Hacked Facebook Accounts to Recruit for ISIS, Prosecutors Say, *New York Times*, April 22, 2019. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2019/04/22/us/wisconsin-woman-isis.html.
[179] USA v. Heather Coffman, Position of the US on Sentencing, Case: 3:15-cr-00016, United States Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2015.
[180] USA v. Heather Coffman, Statement of Facts, p.3.
[181] USA v. Heather Coffman, Statement of Facts.
[182] USA v. Heather Coffman, Statement of Facts, pp.6-7.
[183] USA v. Heather Coffman, Statement of Facts.
[184] USA v. Heather Coffman, Position of the US on Sentencing, p.3.
[185] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, The Travellers.

whom she lived with – banned her from using social media or to speak to anyone who was not a relative.[186] Prior to leaving, Muthana's account had thousands of followers and interacted with like-minded people around the world,[187] including IS members and supporters, such as Aqsa Mahmood, who left Scotland to join the group in 2013.[188] After her arrival, Muthana remained active, tweeting in support of the Charlie Hebdo attack in January 2015;[189] mourning her husband, who died in a Jordanian air strike 87 days after they married;[190] and uploading a picture of her and three other passports to Twitter with the caption: "Bonfire soon, no need for these anymore".[191]

Other women also kept an active presence on social media, although perhaps slightly below the level of the five actors identified above. One such was Ariel Bradley, a convert to Islam who successfully travelled to Syria in April 2014. Prior to her travel, she used the Internet to forge connections to learn about Islam and find a husband, as well as frequently updating her Tumblr account. However, after her arrival in the caliphate, the content became distinctly more jihadist in nature. Bradley, who was originally from Chattanooga, TN, tweeted the day after the attacks on July 16, 2015:

> Gifted this morning not only with Eid but w/ the news of a brother puttin fear n the heart of *kufar* n the city of my birth. *Alhamdullilah* [thanks be to God].[192]

Furthermore, when she tweeted complaints about the sound of bombs dropping, she responded to prayers for her safety with:

> Not death I should fear but the state I meet it in. May Allah guide us and give us *shaheed* [martyrdom]. Ameen[193]

Similarly, unsuccessful traveller Jaelyn Young also maintained a social media presence prior to her attempted departure in August 2015.[194] Young was married to another actor in the sample, Muhammad Dakhlalla, but it was Young that seemingly drove both actors towards attempting to join IS,[195] and her online presence was an important part of this.

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[186] Jytte Klausen, A Behavioral Study of the Radicalization Trajectories of American "Homegrown" Al Qaeda-Inspired Terrorist Offenders, 2016.
[187] Vidino and Hughes, ISIS in America.
[188] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS, *Buzzfeed News*, April 17, 2015. Available at: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/gone-girl-an-interview-with-an-american-in-isis.
[189] Alexander, Cruel Intentions.
[190] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[191] Alexander, Cruel Intentions, p.18.
[192] Ellie Hall, How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride, *Buzzfeed News*, July 20, 2015. Available at: https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/ellievhall/woman-journey-from-chattanooga-to-isis.
[193] Ellie Hall, How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride.
[194] USA v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Factual Basis, Case: 1:15-cr-00098-SA-DAS, United States District Court for the Northern District of Mississippi, 2016.
[195] Offline, the filings note that Young continually asked Dakhlalla when they were going to join ISIL. In a letter to her family, she claimed that 'It was all my planning—I found the contacts, made arrangements, planned the departure," and "I am guilty of what you soon will find out". While in letter between prisons, she wrote to Dakhlalla, she noted that: I know you felt I ruined your life completely… I did. I ruined yours, mine, our

The filings lay out that it was Young that first began to watch pro-IS content on YouTube and showed them to Dakhlalla, including videos of Anjem Choudary and a video of a man, accused of being a homosexual, being thrown from a roof.[196] The FBI also identified Young's Twitter account, which telegraphed her intention to travel, including tweets such as this:

> "@1_modest_woman $$$ for plane tickets" "the only thing keeping me away is $$$ but working all of this overtime will be worth when I am finally there". "I just want to be there :("[197]

Like Bradley, Young also used the Internet to rejoice in the attack in Chattanooga and attempted to reach out to a facilitator who was, in reality, an undercover agent.[198]

It is clear that there are a number of similarities between the actors described above. The first five – Thomas, Yassin, Dais, Coffman, and Muthana – can all be described as highly prolific and potentially influential actors within the online radical milieu. All seven of them regularly posted idealised visions of the caliphate or celebrated IS acts of terrorism. Importantly, although the literature suggests that online, there is a strict gender separation between jihadist actors (Bloom et al. 2017; Pearson 2017), the data here do not suggest that is necessarily the case. Thomas was in contact with three prominent jihadists via direct message; Dais ran a prominent Telegram group dedicated to inspiring lone-actor attacks (it is very unlikely this was populated just by women given the general prohibition against female violence); and Coffman was in direct conversation with a man and other "brothers" in her attempt to facilitate the former's travel. The data suggest that it is possible for female actors to become important and influential members of the radical online milieu, irrespective of gender, influencing both male and female jihadists.

There is a growing literature which researches the topic of female jihadist actors and their use of the Internet. Many scholars have argued that the Internet may provide a unique space for female actors that are not afforded to them in the offline domain. Writing in 2008, Sageman argued that:

> Gender separation among terrorists is starting to disappear because of the Internet… With the semi-anonymity of the Internet, there is no way of keeping them out. (Sageman 2008a, pp.111–112)

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families'. I single-handedly screwed up everything that could possibly go wrong." The judge accepted this by giving Young and lengthier sentence than Dakhlalla, 12 versus eight years respectively, although Dakhalla did co-operate with authorities more quickly than Young. See: Emma Green, How Two Mississippi College Students Fell in Love and Decided to Join a Terrorist Group, *The Atlantic*, May 1, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/05/mississippi-young-dakhlalla/524751/; USA v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Factual Basis.

[196] USA v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Factual Basis.

[197] USA v. Jaelyn Delshaun Young and Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Criminal Complaint, Case: 3:15-mj-32-SAA, 2015.

[198] USA v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Factual Basis.

At a similar time, Bermingham et al. (2009) conducted a social network analysis on a dataset from YouTube, finding that females (and those that did not disclose their gender) scored higher in terms of network density and average communication speed, indicating a potential leadership role for women. These studies suggest that the anonymity of the Internet may encourage gender impersonation which elevates female actors. However, that does not seem to be the case for actors within this sample. Aside from Coffman, there does not seem to be any case of females impersonating males, or even cases in which females do not disclose their gender.

More recently, a study on pro-IS groups on the platform VKontakte also found that female users had superior network connectivity, despite being outnumbered by men. This connectivity was found to potentially benefit the underlying system's robustness and survival (Manrique et al. 2016). Klausen (2015), too, observes the centrality and importance of female actors in IS social media networks. In her study on foreign fighters' Twitter networks, she argues that the prominence of women is striking and that they were mobilised in tactical support roles to an extent far surpassing their involvement in previous jihadist insurgencies. Certainly the qualitative evidence offered above suggests that a number of actors within this sample – particularly Coffman, Thomas, Yassin and Dias – were important players who may have been at the centre of their respective networks.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that female actors are a monolith; the profiles laid out above suggest that despite showing that they are influential, they exhibit this in different ways and have different motivations. In their study following 93 Twitter accounts of female jihadists for a year, Huey et al. (2017) identify eight overlapping roles: Fan girls;[199] Baqiya members;[200] Propagandists; Recruiters; Muhajirah;[201] Widows; Terrorists;[202] and Leavers.[203] Although there is only a selection of social media posting history, some of these roles can be clearly identified in the women described above. Yassin's posting of memes can be seen as fan girl behaviour, although her re-posting of the kill list is the conduct of a recruiter too.[204] Coffman also exhibits the tendencies of a recruiter in her attempts to arrange the travel of her male partner and the undercover agent,[205] as does Dais' role of providing facilitative information for lone actor attacks.[206] Thomas falls more into the role of propagandist, shown by her history of retweeting the group's and sympathisers' content, such as a picture of a small male child with an AK-47 with the caption:

[199] Fan girls are described as young and enthusiastic about IS because it is cool.
[200] Baqiya translates roughly to "remain". The baqiya family would offer "shoutouts" which help users pick up followers after suspensions.
[201] Females that successfully travelled to the caliphate.
[202] Those charged with terrorism offences.
[203] Those that left the jihadist online milieu.
[204] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint.
[205] USA v. Heather Coffman, Statement of Facts.
[206] USA v. Waheba Issa Dais, Affidavit in Support of Criminal Complaint.

> "And if I were in Shaam [greater Syria], I wouldn't be pleased till I became soldier of the Islamic State."[207]

As successful travellers, Bradley[208] and Muthana[209] were muhajirah, both tweeting about life in the caliphate and their families. Muthana fulfils the role of widow too, shown by her tweet asking Allah to accept her deceased husband as a martyr.[210] Given the relatively limited information, it is possible that these actors fulfilled more roles; the above examples are merely intended to illustrate the breadth of roles that different influencers may utilise within the milieu.

6.3.3 Peer-to-Peer Communicators

While there are several women within the sample who can be described as influential via their online activities, nine maintained a less overt – but still active – presence. The three women involved in the St Louis/Bosnian plot's funding of Abdullah Ramo Pazara can be described this way. Sedina Unkic Hodzic, Jasminka Ramic, and Mediha Medy Salkicevic all contributed to sending Pazara money in the plot laid out in the previous section analysing financial transactions. The court filings note that all of the actors involved in the plot used Facebook and Email to coordinate efforts and rally support for both Pazara and other fighters.[211] As well as this, the members of the conspiracy were active on Bosnian pro-IS fora.[212] Specifically, the filings note that Ramic contacted Pazara to ask if he needed assistance by email, to which he answered by directing her to the Hodzics[213] and that Salkicevic had a social media presence by the handles "Medy Ummuluna" and "Bosna Mexico" in which she commented on photos uploaded by Pazara from the caliphate, although the filings note that the comment was unusual and that other similar content could not be found on her page.[214] Less is known about Sedina Hodzic's online activity, except that she and her husband were ringleaders and in constant online contact with Pazara.

Several other women fit the mould of those that were active online without necessarily being influencers. Shannon Maureen Conley, for example, who attempted to leave for the caliphate in 2014, met and kept in contact with her unnamed fiancé via social media platforms such as Skype.[215] The filings also omit any evidence of offline social networks,

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[207] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint, p.3.
[208] Ellie Hall, How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride.
[209] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[210] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[211] USA v. Ramiz Zijad Hodzic et al., Government's Opposition to Defendants' Motions to Dismiss the Indictment.
[212] Hughes and Clifford, First He Become American – Then He Joined ISIS, *The Atlantic*, May 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/05/first-he-became-an-americanthen-he-joined-isis/527622/
[213] St Louis Post-Dispatch, Rockford Woman Pleads Guilty in St Louis Terrorist Funding Case.
[214] USA v. Mediha Medy Salkicevic, Detention Hearing, Case: 4:15-cr-00049-CDP-DDN, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Missouri, 2015.
[215] USA v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Information, Case: 1:14-mj-01045-KLM, United States District Court for the District of Colorado, 2014.

focusing instead on her online activity, potentially suggesting that the Internet had a prominent role in this case.[216] Marie Castelli was part of a closed, invitation only pro-IS Facebook group in which she reposted the above-mentioned "kill list" with the text:

> "A great sister[217] on twitter published addresses of the kafir men who killed sheikh awlaki and his son with the drone[.] [P]raying the mujahadine will send someone for justice[.]"[218]

Another case of peer-to-peer communicators is that of Asia Siddiqui and Noelle Velentzas, who sought to construct a bomb for an attack between 2013 and 2015.[219] Both had some activity within the online jihadist milieu, although neither could be considered influencers. Years previously Siddiqui had written a poem which she posted to Samir Khan's website, which he later published in the e-magazine *Jihad Recollections*,[220] and Velentzas was Facebook friends with jihadist Tairod Pugh[221] and may have been active in pro-IS chatrooms.[222] However, as will be discussed below, the offline connection between the two women played an important role, potentially greater than that of the Internet.

Zoobia Shahnaz is another case that has a clear digital footprint – it is centred around the use of cryptocurrencies – but there is little evidence of her being a prominent voice online. The filings note that she made payments to shell companies in China, Pakistan, and Turkey,[223] which requires some degree of communication. Furthermore, news coverage suggested that she was "radicalised online", but little information is given.[224] There is similarly mixed evidence regarding the case of San Bernardino attacker Tashfeen Malik. It was alleged that her and her husband Rizwan Farook watched Awlaki videos online;[225] may have communicated in private with other individuals;[226] and even that the two may have met on a website which caters to extremists.[227] However, there is little evidence that she was an active member of the jihadist radical milieu. The FBI argued that the couple

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[216] USA v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Criminal Complaint, Case: 1:14-mj-01045-KLM, United States District Court for the District of Colorado, 2014.
[217] It is possible that this refers to Safya Roe Yassin, although it has not been possible to verify this, not least because of the number of highly connected female actors in this online milieu.
[218] USA v. Marie Antoinette Castelli, Plea Agreement.
[219] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint.
[220] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint.
[221] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint.
[222] Rhonda Schwartz and Randy Kreider, Online Chatter After NYC Terror Arrests: 'Delete Her From Your Phone', *ABC News*, April 6, 2015. Available at: https://abcnews.go.com/International/online-chatter-nyc-terror-arrests-delete-phone/story?id=30124247.
[223] USA v. Zoobia Shahnaz, Indictment.
[224] Harriet Alexander, New York Woman Charged with Sending $85,000 in Bitcoin to Support ISIL.
[225] Maura Conway and Michael Courtney, Violent Extremism and Terrorism Online in 2017: The Year in Review, *Vox Pol*, 2017.
[226] Al Baker and Marc Santora, San Bernardino Attackers Discussed Jihad in Private Messages, FBI Says, *New York Times*, December 16, 2015. Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/17/us/san-bernardino-attackers-discussed-jihad-in-private-messages-fbi-says.html.
[227] Karen Greenberg and Seth Weiner, The American Exception: Terrorism Prosecution In the United States - The ISIS Cases- March 2014 - August 2017, *Centre on National Security at Fordham Law*, 2017.

did not make extreme posts on social media,[228] and she even set up a pseudonymous Facebook account on the day of the attack to pledge allegiance to Baghdadi,[229] suggesting she was not active on the platform previously.

Interrelated to the assertion that the online space may provide a unique platform for female actors is the notion that it may also fundamentally change the dynamics of these actors' trajectories. In her study of the British terrorist Roshonara Choudhry, Pearson (2016) makes the point that the Internet allowed Choudhry to eschew the conventional wisdom within jihadist thought regarding violence conducted by women and shop for a scholar who offered alternative agency. This would have been at best very difficult, or at most impossible, had she been at the centre of a radical offline social network given the prevalence of the idea that women should not engage in offensive jihad. The literature on the case of Colleen LaRose – an American woman arrested as part of a cell that planned to kill Danish Cartoonist Lars Vilks – offers a similar picture. Picart (2015) argues that LaRose was able to construct a "gender-bending" representation of herself online, mostly borne out of her own ignorance of Islam and Salafism, which was at odds with a woman's role within the movement. Halverson and Way (2012) also highlight in relation to LaRose, the Internet's ability to proliferate identity fluctuations in the absence of normative social constraints. Both Picart and Halverson and Way also highlight the importance of several offline factors that played a role in LaRose's trajectory.

The notion of the Internet offering a space for female actors to perform their jihadist identity runs throughout many of the actors in the influencer and peer-to-peer communicator category. Conley, for example, has little known connection to a wider milieu, but met and became engaged to her partner online, conducted "research" into Islam on the Internet, and had a stash of Anwar al-Awlaki CDs and DVDs in her luggage.[230] Interestingly, Conley disobeyed her father, who denied her permission to go and marry her fiancée, telling him that she had thought about it and "disagreed with Islam" on this point.[231] This suggests that Conley, without the checks of a conservative social circle, was able to – aided by the Internet – pick and choose which aspects of ideology to adhere. Castelli, too, was active in the closed pro-IS Facebook group and an online forum, participating in discussions and disseminating propaganda, while at the same time, had no connections to offline cells and a friend of hers, upon hearing about her arrest, remarked: 'I thought, they have got the wrong person, there's no way she can be like that.'[232] Both Conley and Castelli exhibited strange offline behaviours which alerted

[228] Al Baker and Marc Santora, San Bernardino Attackers Discussed Jihad in Private Messages, FBI Says.
[229] USA v. Enrique Marquez Jr, Criminal Complaint.
[230] USA v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Criminal Complaint.
[231] USA v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Criminal Complaint.
[232] Michael Monks, Friend Who Photographed Her Surprised by Maysville Woman's Arrest, *River City News*, September 18, 2016. Available at: https://www.rcnky.com/articles/2016/09/18/friend-who-photographed-her-surprised-maysville-womans-arrest.

others to their presence – at a church[233] and courthouse[234] respectively – but the filings in both cases suggest that they both lived quite distinct lives online and offline.

Many of the filings from actors in the influencer category also draw on the dichotomy of a substantially different constructed identity between their online and offline lives. Coffman's defence counsel notes that she grew up in a protective household and was 'isolated from the real world' and 'the internet became her social outlet.'[235] In Thomas' case, the US Government prosecutors highlighted that she was "living a double life"; one of a quiet and hard-working mother who stayed out of trouble, and one of "Fatayat Al Khilafah", an online persona with a large following, an outspoken personality, spreading violent jihadi propaganda, who was also a close associate of several known jihadi fighters.[236] Yassin too, seemingly lived a double life. When she was arrested one neighbour remarked that it was the first time they had seen her in months, while another had never seen her before; a reporter said that it was difficult to find people that knew her because of her reclusive nature.[237]

Dais' defence counsel also argued that she was a stay-at-home mother who is strapped for cash and whose actions may have been driven by an attempt to seek out friendship and romantic connections.[238] Finally, coverage of Muthana's case dwells on her Twitter alter-ego and how different it was to her offline persona. A friend from Alabama told a journalist that 'you would never have thought that she was anything other than a quiet, shy girl'[239] and that she portrayed herself to be more religious on social media than she actually was, giving the example of Muthana claiming to dress modestly and conservatively when online while wearing Western-style clothes offline.[240] Her friend suggested that this ultra-religious alter-ego was responsible for her influence within jihadist Twitter; 'what she lacked in her personality she would make up for on Twitter.'[241] In an interview with a journalist, Muthana seemed to agree with this, stating that prior to her travel 'I literally isolated myself from all my friends and community members the last

[233] USA v. Shannon Maureen Conley, Criminal Complaint.
[234] Mike Levine, Ahead of 9/11 Anniversary, FBI Arrests Kentucky Woman for Allegedly Promoting ISIS-Inspired Attacks, *ABC News*, September 9, 2016. Available at: https://abcnews.go.com/US/abc-ahead-911-anniversary-fbi-arrests-kentucky-woman/story?id=41975069.
[235] USA v. Heather Coffman, Defendant's Position on Sentencing, Case 3:15-cr-00016-JAG, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2015, p.6.
[236] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.
[237] Thomas Gounley, Neighbors Never Saw Her. But Buffalo Woman Arrested by FBI was "Well Known…in the ISIS Twitter Scene, *Springfield News Leader*, February 25, 2016. Available at: https://eu.news-leader.com/story/news/crime/2016/02/25/safya-roe-yassin-well-known-isis-twitter-scene-fbi-arrested-buffalo-missouri-terrorism-woman/80621154/.
[238] John Diedrich, A Cudahy Woman Charged with Promoting ISIS and Suggesting Attacks on Festivals, Churches Held on Bail, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, June 15, 2018. Available at: https://eu.jsonline.com/story/news/crime/2018/06/15/cudahy-mom-charged-promoting-isis-attacks-held-without-bail/702851002/.
[239] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[240] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[241] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.

year I was in America'.[242] This is particularly striking given, as described above, her parents forbade her from even using social media.

It is important not to sample the dependant variable; there are many male actors that the filings suggest were living a double life, too. The court filings in the case of Ali Shukri Amin, the owner of the influential @AmreekiWitness Twitter account, paint the picture of an immature social recluse whose disability prevented him from leaving the house and was emboldened by the jihadist online milieu.[243] Similarly, Akhror Saidahkmetov's poor English-language skills and lack of friends in New York led to a withdrawal from school and social life, which caused him to turn to the Internet.[244] Interviews with the family and friends of Christopher Lee Cornell portray him as a 'momma's boy who never left the house'[245] who lived a 'fantasy life behind a computer screen.'[246] All three of these actors exhibit a degree of social isolation for reasons other than gender which was overcome by online activity – this theme will be discussed in the next section.

To be clear, none of the female actors described above opted for violence, as in the cases of Choudhry and LaRose. However, the Internet has still offered opportunities for empowerment within the movement. As noted above by Klausen, 'online, women are mobilized as partisans and in tactical support roles to an extent far surpassing their involvement in any previous jihadist insurgency' (Klausen 2015, p.16). Similarly, Melegarou-Hitchens et al. note that of the IS travellers, 'women play an outsized role and are heavily involved in creating and cultivating recruitment networks' (Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. 2018, p.86). Even in cases that do not involve direct violence, the Internet offers a platform which can empower women to – in Pearson's (2016) words – perform a less restricted gender identity.

However, the Internet is neither necessary nor sufficient for female empowerment, as can be seen in the case of Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui. Unlike many of the influencers above, the filings suggest that online communication seemed peripheral to their plot. The two relied on the Internet for planning and downloading multiple copies of *Inspire* magazine as well as *The Anarchist Cookbook* for bomb-making instructions. However, the two women and the undercover agent formed a seemingly tight knit group of three females who were both aware and acted beyond the gender roles that the offline jihadist community would usually allow for them. Velentzas, in particular, expressed a repeated thirst for violence, like when she pulled a concealed knife from her bra and asked the

[242] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[243] USA v. Ali Shukri Amin, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum.
[244] USA v. Akhror Saidahkmetov, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-00095-WFK, United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2017.
[245] Kimball Perry and Patrick Brennan, Father: Terror Plot Suspect Was A 'Momma's Boy', *Cincinnati.com*, January 23, 2015. Available at: https://eu.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/crime-and-courts/2015/01/14/fbi-cincinnati-man-plotting-us-capitol-attack-arrested/21770815/.
[246] Dan Sewel, Attorneys: Tri-State Man Behind Terror Plot Now Rejects "Radical Islam" Wants Lighter Sentence, *WPCO Cincinnati*, November 30, 2016. Available at: https://www.wcpo.com/news/local-news/hamilton-county/cincinnati/defense-urges-lighter-sentence-for-plot-to-attack-us-capitol.

other two: 'Why we can't be some real bad bitches?'[247] or when she described her intended attack as: "This is what it looks like. 'In your face, nigger. Oh, you're dead'.[248] Similarly, when purchasing bomb-making equipment from Home Depot, Velentzas told the undercover agent 'Some women like to look at clothes. I like to look at electric equipment'.[249] Both repeatedly made reference to their gender, but neither saw an inherent contradiction in conducting a terrorist attack. Importantly, unlike the case of Roshonara Choudhry as laid out by Pearson (2016), breaking these gender norms, at best, played out only partially online and the two actors' offline relationship clearly played an important role.

6.3.4 Offliners

In contrast to the influencers and peer-to-peer communicators, several women had little-to-no online communication, with some even taking steps to remove themselves from the online domain. One example of this is Yusra Ismail, who travelled from Minneapolis to Syria in December 2014.[250] Not only is there a very limited trail of online evidence of Ismail's trajectory, but her sister told journalists that she deactivated her Facebook account months ago, conceding that she may be active on other platforms.[251] Relatives suggest that she had been targeted by recruiters,[252] however it is likely that this was offline. Around two years before travel, she switched mosques and began attending the Dar al Farooq Islamic Centre, the same Mosque as several other Minnesotan travellers, including Abdi Nur, Abdullahi Yusuf, and the Farah brothers.[253] It is worth noting that there is no evidence directly linking Ismail to either the first or second wave of Minnesotan travellers, but does suggest that the venue may have hosted individuals with radical ideologies.

Only scant online trails can be found for Zakia Nasrin, too, who successfully travelled to Syria with her husband Jaffrey Khan and brother Rasel Raihan in July of 2014.[254] She met her husband online and she immediately began to show more conservative behaviour after they married.[255] There is also evidence that he was controlling her social media, shown by the fact that in a conversation with Nasrin's high school friend on Facebook, Khan interjected with:

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[247] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint, p.12.
[248] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint, p.20.
[249] USA v. Noelle Velentzas and Asia Siddiqui, Criminal Complaint, p.26.
[250] USA v. Yusra Ismail, Criminal Complaint, Case 0:14-mj-01047-JSM, United States District Court for the District of Minnesota, 2014.
[251] Laura Yuen, Gone to Syria: Family Fears Woman Latest Minnesotan Drawn to War-torn Region, *MPR News*, September 11, 2014. Available at: https://www.mprnews.org/story/2014/09/11/muslim-woman-disappears-syria.
[252] Paul McEnroe, St Paul Woman Charged with Stealing Passport to Travel to Syria, *Star Tribune*, December 3, 2014. Available at: http://www.startribune.com/st-paul-woman-charged-with-stealing-passport-to-travel-to-syria/284520161/.
[253] Sasha Aslanian, Laura Yuen and Mukhtar M. Ibrahim, Called to Fight: Minnesota's ISIS Recruits, *MPR News*, 25 March 2015. Available at: https://www.mprnews.org/story/2015/03/25/minnesota-isis#yismail.
[254] Richard Engel, Ben Plesser, Tracy Connor and Jon Schuppe, The American: 15 Who left the US to Join ISIS.
[255] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, The Travelers.

> Zakia got married. I'm her husband lol… Zakia talks about you a lot and misses you as you were her best friend, so I told her to contact you, but she's too shy/embarrassed. So I convinced her to at least send you a message on facebook, and she agreed on the condition that she doesn't have to look at your reply or anything lol.[256]

Similarly little can be found regarding Tania Georgelas who travelled with her husband and children in August 2013.[257] She sometimes posted pseudo-political content roughly aligned with jihadist thought:

> You guys (meaning Americans) need to stop supporting democracy, and just make Ron Paul your king.[258]

Beyond this, and the statement that she "supported" her husband on social media,[259] there is little to suggest she was an active participant in the online jihadist milieu.

It is important to note the actors who do not seem to be active participants in the online jihadist community for several reasons. Firstly, to reiterate that pathways towards terrorism are heterogeneous, a finding consistent across several studies (Vidino et al. 2017; Klausen 2016a; Gill et al. 2015; Horgan et al. 2016). Just as the findings above show that the women who actively maintain an online presence can play different roles within the jihadist community, there are also a number that barely engage online at all.

Secondly, although the Internet can afford female actors the opportunity to perform a less restricted gender identity, it does not mean that this is a certainty. Much of the literature still suggests that the most important role for females in the Salafi-jihadi movement is to be a wife and stay-at-home mother first and foremost (Saltman and Smith 2015; Europol 2019b). It is important to note that, according to a report by Europol, this too can be seen as empowerment. They suggest that for "jihadi feminism", in contrast to Western feminism and Islamic feminism, it is important that gender roles are not blurred because they are subject to divine reference. On this view, constructing a conservative and traditional gender role of being primarily a wife and mother empowers females to live life as God intends (Europol 2019b). Pearson (2019) also makes this point, noting that IS produces a narrative to sell its own vision of female empowerment and frames it in competition to the immoral and secular understanding that pertains in the West today.

Thirdly, it is worth noting that all three of the actors with a minimal presence were all successful in travelling to the caliphate. The quantitative findings of Chapter 5 found a significant and inverse correlation between online behaviours and the likelihood of

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[256] Richard Engel, Ben Plesser and Tracy Connor, An American ISIS Cell: The Story of 3 U.S. Recruits, *NBC News*, May 19, 2016. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/american-isis-cell-story-3-u-s-recruits-n573831.

[257] Graeme Wood, An American Climbing the Ranks of ISIS, *The Atlantic*, January 25, 2017. Available at: https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/03/the-american-leader-in-the-islamic-state/510872/.

[258] Graeme Wood, An American Climbing the Ranks of ISIS.

[259] Graeme Wood, An American Climbing the Ranks of ISIS.

success. Influencers like Thomas, Yassin, and Dias made themselves easily identifiable by posting on open social media platforms, and the criminal cases against peer-to-peer actors like the three Bosnians was made easier by the online trail left. It is also possible that staying quiet or removing themselves from the online radical milieu was advised by recruiters for this reason. Of course, the success of an event relies on more than simply staying off social media – Muthana was able to maintain an active presence and travel successfully. Factors such as offline social networks and when the actor attempts to travel certainly play an important role too.

6.3.5 Synthesis

The role of gender in violent extremism remains an understudied topic, particularly in the online domain. Conway (2016a) notes that the role and influence of women in violent extremist cyberspace remains largely unknown and when the topic is addressed, women are often discussed only as a motivator for their male counterparts. Similarly, Pearson argues that gender is a key gap for research into violent extremism online and that 'studies on how gender factors in online radicalization are still in their infancy' (Pearson 2017, p.4). It is not difficult to see why this imbalance persists as this and other research identifies that terrorists are primarily men; in fact, it remains one of the only reliable predictors of engagement (Bouhana 2019). However, as this chapter establishes, there is much that can be learned from analysing female participation in online extremist milieus.

This section is fundamentally about space and the ways in which women use it to carve out their emerging radical identity. Constant comparison of the women in this sample shows that, for some, the Internet acted as a space for them to break the socially mandated gender boundaries – like Thomas who was in contact with high ranking and renowned IS members online. For others, it went even further, like both Coffman and Dais who broke gender roles by pretending to be men online. For actors like Muthana, it was an opportunity to disobey her overbearing parents to create status in a community. In essence, it affords a platform to achieve personal agency by communicating with others. This is in line with the previous section on radical content; rather than a cause-and-effect radicalisation dynamic, the Internet provided these women with a venue to be social and explore their ideological development. Much like the use of the Internet to create avatars of the "Good Muslim" or to shitpost, for women, acting online may have offered the opportunity for them to construct a fundamentally different persona.

However, women are not a monolith. Pearson and Winterbotham (2017; p.2) argue, 'the reasons for Western female radicalisation to [IS] are complex', and just as there are differences between female and male actors, they also have different criminogenic factors as well as psychological needs and gratifications to other women. While several females in the sample were able to utilise the Internet to become influential within the jihadist online radical milieu, within this group several different roles are constructed, such as that of fan girl, recruiter, and muharjrah. Furthermore, many women used the Internet in a less prominent way than the influencers, but there is still reason to suggest that it may have provided a platform for them to perform a less restricted gender identity than they

could have offline. However, cases like that of Velentzas and Siddiqui show that this can be done without a heavy reliance on the Internet. Finally, some deliberately eschewed the Internet, possibly because they did not seek a less restricted gender identity, or perhaps out of pragmatism. These cases highlight the heterogeneity of different pathways to terrorism, a finding consistent across several studies (Vidino et al. 2017; Klausen 2016a; Gill et al. 2015; Horgan et al. 2016). While it may be tempting to treat "women" as a homogenous block, the data presented here suggest this is not the case.

Grounded Theory

2. *The Internet can provide a platform for female actors to construct a less restricted female identity than would otherwise be possible within the Salafi-jihadist movement.*

6.4 Online Only Trajectories and the Buyers' Market of the Internet

6.4.1 Introduction

Chapter 5 found that, across the whole sample of 201, actors used the Internet heavily but also tended to act in both domains. However, when coding the previous section on gender, the data showed that several female actors relied heavily on the Internet, which gave them a space to perform a less restricted gender identity. With that in mind, I deemed it instructive to analyse those at the heavy-usage end of the spectrum to assess whether there are instances in which actors engaged exclusively online – from their first involvement within the radical milieu to their eventual activity or arrest. After coding the data descriptively, they were then selectively coded into emergent themes such as entry points, online behaviours, and offline behaviours, which were compared against each other.

Line-by-line analysis suggests that there are only five cases – three of which are females discussed in the previous chapter – which can be ascribed the possibility of an online only trajectory, and these cannot even be confirmed due to the limitations of open-source data. In at least four of these cases, the theme of social isolation emerges from the data; individuals were described by onlookers as being removed from day-to-day society and therefore used the Internet heavily as part of their radicalisation trajectory. Theoretically sampling outwards towards the wider sample, this is a theme that occurs elsewhere too – many terrorists seem to be isolated at the point in which they use the Internet to engage with propaganda or connect with co-ideologues. This suggests that, for a small number at least, social isolation may act as a stressor which facilitates online radicalisation. However, two important caveats should be noted. Firstly, these cases are few in number compared to individuals that do engage face-to-face, or are part of society, suggesting that this is only a potential dynamic for *some*, and secondly, the direction of this relationship is not clear – that is to say, it is not clear whether isolation causes individuals to engage more in the radical online milieu, or whether engaging in it causes actors to remove themselves from their other social groups.

Given that the burden of evidence may be unrealistically high for online only trajectories, I decided to expand on this analysis by theoretically sampling the whole cohort for the entry points into the radical milieu as a means of understanding whether the Internet provided the first steps into the movement. There are more actors that use the Internet as an entry point – 17 in total – and those that do have several different motivations for engaging online. This includes individuals seeking a more fulfilling religious experience; those who moved sideways from conspiracy theory communities; actors seeking to extend their university learning; those with an existing interest in Middle East conflicts; and individuals with predispositions that may have been exacerbated by radical content.

Taken together, this section points to the Internet as a tool for individuals to fulfil a range of needs that they may be unable to fulfil in other parts of their life. In this sense it should be considered a facilitative platform which operates in a less hierarchically structured and regulated manner, which allows individuals the freedom to pick and choose their communities, akin to a buyers' market.

6.4.2 Online Only Trajectories

Keonna Thomas

As highlighted in the previous section, Keonna Thomas was notable for maintaining an active online presence which included online peer-to-peer conversations with a number of notable jihadists: Abdullah el-Faisal, Mujahid Miski, and Shawn Parson.[260] The defence counsel's sentencing memorandum notes that Thomas, who was unemployed and lived with her mother and two small children experienced emotional and physical isolation, which she fulfilled by turning to the Internet, which in turn led to her falling 'prey to the promises made by young ISIL acolytes about a religious utopia in Raqqa.'[261] Her lawyers also suggested that in her loneliness and desperation for social interaction, she spent 13 hours or more per day on jihadist online fora after receiving her first computer in 2010, which led to her becoming an outspoken supporter of Islamic fundamentalism.[262]

The prosecutors also paint the picture of a woman living a double life, on one hand quiet and reserved in the offline sphere and on the other an influential member of the jihadisphere, spreading propaganda and operational advice for those travelling to Syria.[263] In Thomas' case, it appears that her radical behaviour did not leave the confines of her own home – she booked her travel from Philadelphia to Barcelona with the intention of travelling to Istanbul by bus, but the Government executed a search warrant of her house days before her scheduled travel.[264] Her heavy usage of the Internet, taken

[260] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Criminal Complaint.
[261] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, pp.3-4.
[262] Jeremy Roebuck, North Philly Woman Gets 8 Year Term for Plan to Leave Kids, Marry IS Soldier, *The Inquirer*, September 6, 2017. Available at: http://www.philly.com/philly/news/pennsylvania/philadelphia/north-philly-mom-gets-8-year-term-for-plan-to-leave-kids-marry-isis-soldier-20170906.html.
[263] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.
[264] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.

with reports of social isolation, description of leading a double-life, and a lack of evidence to suggest her behaviours spilled over into the offline domain, suggest that she is a strong candidate to be seen as an online only trajectory.

Safya Roe Yassin

There are strong parallels between Thomas' case and that of Safya Roe Yassin. As with Thomas, Yassin's filings describe her as a socially isolated mother living with a parent. In cross-examination in court, her father noted that she had been living with him for around eight years after she became disabled; that she was unemployed; and that she home-schooled her son after she pulled him out of school after facing Islamophobic abuse.[265] Reporting highlights her isolation, too. When she was arrested neighbours commented that they had not seen her in months and the newspaper even suggested that they could not find anyone who knew her to interview because of her reclusive nature.[266] Similarly, when asked by journalists, a spokesman of the local mosque said that he did not know her and that she was unlikely to have been well-known in the community if she was not in contact with members of the congregation.[267] However, within her own home, she maintained an active and influential presence on Twitter using a number of different handles,[268] as laid out in the previous section.

Importantly, her presence as an active voice online pre-dates her involvement with IS; she was a member of a number of communities expounding different conspiracy theories, including the belief that vaccines cause autism, "chemtrails", and anti-genetically modified foods.[269] Given the link drawn between conspiracy theories and involvement in extremism (for example, see: Bartlett and Miller 2012; Berger 2017), it is possible – although not explicitly stated – that the Internet was an entry point for Yassin, or at least primed her for the radical online milieu. As with Thomas, it seems she never exhibited any offline behaviours outside her home. She was arrested for disseminating the "kill list" online and she was apprehended at her residence after a brief standoff in which she claimed to have a knife.[270]

Hoda Muthana

The case for Hoda Muthana having an online only trajectory is even starker than for Yassin and Thomas. As noted in the previous section, Muthana successfully travelled to the caliphate in 2014 after maintaining an active presence on Twitter.[271] In an interview

[265] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Transcript of Hearing on Initial Appearance, Case No. 16-03024-01-CR-S-MDH, United States District Court for the Western District of Missouri Southern Division, 2016.
[266] Thomas Gounley, Neighbors Never Saw Her. But Buffalo Woman Arrested by FBI was "Well Known…in the ISIS Twitter Scene.
[267] Thomas Gounley, Neighbors Never Saw Her. But Buffalo Woman Arrested by FBI was "Well Known…in the ISIS Twitter Scene.
[268] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Criminal Complaint.
[269] Katie Zavadski, The American Anti-Vaccine Mom Turned ISIS Superstar.
[270] USA v. Safya Roe Yassin, Transcript of Hearing on Initial Appearance.
[271] Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, and Clifford, The Travelers.

with her father, he affirmed that she was subject to his conservative "old country" rules in which she and her sister were not permitted to speak to anyone outside of the family or use social media.[272] Both her father and her classmates described Muthana as someone who did not have any friends in real life, which she confirmed by saying that she isolated herself from those she knew, including her local Muslim community.[273]

A key part of her radicalisation was her father's graduation gift of a cellphone, which was explicitly stated by Muthana as her gateway into the radical online milieu. First, she began watching lectures of scholars on YouTube, which she says influenced her much more than the preachers in her local community, then, she set up a secret Twitter account which generated thousands of followers.[274] As noted in the previous section, those that knew her commented on the sharp distinction between her online and offline personas, with one suggesting that she crafted an online identity to appear more religious than she was in reality.[275] This case shows a clear trajectory from social isolation – enforced by her father, to using the Internet and finding radical content, to Muthana's eventual activity, all of which seemingly took place online.

Mohamed Khweis

Mohamed Khweis successfully travelled to the caliphate in 2015, before being captured by Kurdish forces and was eventually charged with, and found guilty of, providing material support to a foreign terrorist organisation.[276] The filings note that Khweis began conducting online research relating to IS in about 2015 and that he frequently watched their propaganda videos,[277] as well as maintaining multiple Facebook and Twitter accounts for communicating with co-ideologues,[278] and even used the TOR browser to use the web anonymously.[279]

Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. note that Khweis 'reportedly told no one of his plans before he left, was largely influenced by his online activities, [and] was not involved in any known physical jihadist networks in the US,'[280] making him an outlier compared to the others that travelled from the US to the caliphate. Khweis travelled alone via London, even attempting to contact a member of al-Muhajiroun, who did not respond to his online message, to Turkey, where he continued to use social media to attempt to find a way into the caliphate, in which he was eventually successful.[281] Although Meleagrou-Hitchens et

[272] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[273] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[274] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[275] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[276] USA v. Mohamed Jamal Khweis, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:16-mj-00213-JFA, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2016.
[277] USA v. Mohamed Jamal Khweis, Criminal Complaint.
[278] USA v. Mohamed Jamal Khweis, Government's Amended Trial Exhibit List (June 1, 2017), Case 1:16-cr-00143-LO, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2017.
[279] USA v. Mohamed Jamal Khweis, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:16-cr-00143-LO, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2017.
[280] Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., The Travelers, p.63.
[281] Meleagrou-Hitchens et al., The Travelers.

al. note that 'there may never be a fully comprehensive account of what drove Khweis to join the group', his online activities and the positive affirmation that there is no evidence linking him to offline recruitment networks suggest there is a good possibility that he had an online only trajectory.

Zulfi Hoxha

Another candidate for an online only trajectory is Zulfi Hoxha, who, like Khweis, successfully travelled to the caliphate in 2015, but unlike Khweis, he rose through the ranks, appeared beheading prisoners in propaganda videos, and is thought, if alive, to be a senior commander in IS.[282] Hughes et al. note that Hoxa's case highlights the importance of jihadist recruitment networks within the United States and that he made these connections via the Internet which was able to help facilitate his travel to Syria.[283] They discuss how he met David Wright via the gaming website Steam between 2010 and 2014, were members of radical PalTalk communities "The Solution for Humanity" and "Road to Jannah," and kept in contact on Skype.[284] Wright and his uncle Usaamah Rahim both helped Hoxha travel with Rahim selling his laptop to raise funds for Hoxha's plane tickets and the two providing all important contacts with facilitators to aid his travel – Rahim was even in conversation with Junaid Hussain about Hoxha, suggesting the he may have helped the process himself.[285]

Hughes and colleagues do not offer evidence that this network activity spilled over into the offline domain before Hoxha's eventual travel and repeatedly reinforce the importance of the Internet.[286] The reporting around the case also highlights his isolation from the social world – those that knew him commented that "he was so shy. He never talked to people"[287] and that he became disillusioned with his mosque several years previously.[288] In contrast, he was vociferous online, getting into arguments on Twitter with the State Department's Think Again, Turn Away strategic communications campaign.[289] Ultimately, as Hughes and colleagues point out, little is known about

[282] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[283] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[284] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[285] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[286] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[287] Rebecca Everett, Before Joining ISIS in Syria, Jersey Shore Man Was a Shy 'Closed Person', *NJ.com*, January 20, 2018. Available at: https://www.nj.com/atlantic/index.ssf/2018/01/nj_man_who_became_isis_commander_was_shy_closed_pe.html.
[288] Ted Greenberg and Brian McCrone, 'I Hate You, Americans': Co-Worker, Friend Recall ISIS 'Senior Command' From Jersey Shore, *NBC News*, January 18, 2018. Available at: https://www.nbcphiladelphia.com/news/local/I-Hate-You-Americans-Co-Worker-Friend-Recalls-ISIS-Senior-Commander-From-Jersey-Shore--470009243.html.
[289] Craig McCoy, Dylan Purcell and Jan Hefler, From Atlantic City High to ISIS: The Path of a Homegrown Terrorist, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, January 19, 2018. Available at: http://www2.philly.com/philly/news/nation_world/american-isis-commander-atlantic-city-margate-zulfi-hoxha-2-20180119.html.

Hoxha's background,[290] but the reliance on the Internet in forging a recruitment network, taken with a lack of evidence of any offline activity prior to his travel and testimony that he was isolated and withdrawn suggest Hoxha may have only acted online.

When comparing these five cases, the theme of social isolation repeatedly emerges from the data. Four of the five individuals were described, either by prosecutors, themselves, or acquaintances as being isolated from wider society. Isolation has often been described as a potential radicalisation dynamic. For example, in their case study based research, both Gartenstein-Ross and Grossman (2009) and Silber and Bhatt (2007) find that individuals who are radicalising isolate themselves from wider society which can push them towards radical ideologies. This is particularly the case for research into lone actor terrorists; Nesser (2012) argues that social isolation is a key vulnerability, while Peddell and colleagues' (2016) interview research with practitioners also finds this to be an important factor. This is relevant to this section because each of the five actors identified above attempted to execute their plots alone, either as lone actor with no direction or a solo actor with direction.

For individuals that are socially isolated, the potential affordances of the Internet are quite clear. Theoretical online radicalisation research has posited it as both an outlet to isolation and a vicious cycle in which individuals become more so. Torok (2013) argues that self-imposed isolation is a key mechanism of online radicalisation, providing insulation from external influences and outside ideas, while normalising extreme behaviours. Neo's (2016) multi-stage model of online radicalisation also points towards this dynamic, suggesting that individuals can become "trapped" within deviant online communities and withdraw from the outside world because their new beliefs are at odds with their friends and families'. Post, McGinnis, and Moody (2014) create a typography of a "lonely romantic" terrorist, who is socially isolated but wishes to eschew this to become part of a wider group or movement. This individual is vulnerable to recruiters' messages on social media who are able to present a romanticised notion of revolution, providing a sense of meaning to their life.

Given this recurring theme, it is instructive to theoretically sample outwards to other individuals that may have experienced social isolation and heavy Internet usage, even if they did eventually have some offline antecedent behaviours. Islam Natsheh is a clear example of this, who according a family friend fell into a depressive state and refused to leave his room and instead engaged with IS propaganda and sympathisers.[291] Several individuals, such as Sayfullo Saipov,[292] Clark Calloway,[293] and Aziz Sayyed,[294] lacked face-

[290] Hughes et al. A New American Leader Rises in ISIS.
[291] USA v. Islam Natsheh, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum.
[292] Mansur Mirovalev and Eric Levenson, NY Terror Suspect Planned to Return to Uzbekistan, Sister Says, *CNN*, November 5, 2017. Available at: https://edition.cnn.com/2017/11/04/us/ny-terror-attack-suspect-sister/index.html.
[293] USA v. Clark Calloway, Criminal Complaint.
[294] Erin Edgemon, Alabama Student Pleads Guilty in ISIS Plot, Obtaining Bomb Making Materials, *AL,* March 8, 2018. Available at: https://www.al.com/news/birmingham/2018/03/alabama_student_pleads_guilty.html.

to-face social connections and engaged with radical content via social media. Others were described by loved ones or acquaintances as either lost,[295] lonely,[296] reserved,[297] or isolated[298] whilst simultaneously acting within the online radical milieu. Therefore, there may be a relationship between some actors experiencing isolation and taking a step further towards an act of terror via the Internet, as theorised by Torok (2013), Neo (2016), and Post, McGinnis, and Moody (2014).

Although this section posits a relationship between social isolation and increased engagement in the radical online milieu, it should be noted that there is little reason to believe the social isolation is the causative factor in individuals' radicalisation; in each of the cases there are a range of factors at play. Moreover, the direction of the relationship is often not clear, which is to say, the data do not elaborate as to whether isolation causes an individual to engage with online radical content, or whether engaging with such content leads to an actor isolating themselves from their peers.

Despite this finding, it should be reiterated that these individuals represent only a small minority of the total number of terrorists in the sample. Compared to the five potential "online only" cases, 167 were deemed to have engaged either in an offline network with co-ideologues or to have learned about or planned their event offline, or both.[299] There are a number of different ways in which this occurred, such as those that trained offline by going to a gun range;[300] hiring out a truck in advance of a vehicle-borne attack to practice;[301] or underwent physical exercise in groups to prepare for travelling to Syria.[302] Actors also went abroad and came into contact with recruitment networks;[303] met up in

[295] Jenny Deam, Colorado Woman's Quest for Jihad Baffles Neighbours, *LA Times*, July 25, 2014. Available at; http://www.latimes.com/nation/la-na-high-school-jihadi-20140726-story.html#page=1.
[296] Patrick Brennan, Father: Terror Plot Suspect Was A 'Momma's Boy', Cincinnati.com, January 14, 2015. Available at: https://www.cincinnati.com/story/news/crime/crime-and-courts/2015/01/14/fbi-cincinnati-man-plotting-us-capitol-attack-arrested/21770815/.
[297] Joe Jackson, Terror Suspect Called a Quiet Loner, Wall Street Journal, February 27, 2015, Available at: https://www.wsj.com/articles/terror-suspect-called-a-quiet-loner-1425089215.
[298] CBC News, Canadian Convicted of Terrorism in US asks for 2nd Chance, March 3, 2018. Available at: http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/canadian-convicted-of-terrorism-in-u-s-asks-for-2nd-chance-1.4561306.
[299] This means that for 29 actors that did not exhibit radical behaviours in the offline domain, not enough evidence could be found to include them as a possible candidate for an online only trajectory (167 that acted offline, 5 potential online only candidates, and 29 with not enough information to make a firm judgement, equalling the 201 actors in this sample.)
[300] For example: Rizwan Farook and Tashfeen Malik - Pete Williams and Halismah Abdullah, FBI: San Bernardino Shooters Radicalized Before They Met, *NBC News*, December 9, 2015. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/san-bernardino-shooting/fbi-san-bernardino-shooters-radicalized-they-met-n476971; Aziz Sayyed, USA v. Aziz Ihab Sayyed, Case 5:18-cr-00090-AKK-HNK, United States District Court for the Northern District of Alabama, 2018; Neleash Mohamed Das, Criminal Complaint.
[301] For example: Sayfullo Saipov – USA v. Sayfullo Saipov, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:17-mj-08177, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, 2017.
[302] For example: Joseph Jones and Edward Schimenti - USA v. Joseph Jones and Edward Schimenti, Criminal Complaint.
[303] For example: Mohamed Jalloh – USA v. Mohamed Bailor Jalloh, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:16-mj-00296-TCB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2016.

order to plan travel to the caliphate;[304] or sought spiritual authority in person.[305] Many cases within this sample have heavy digital footprints, but there are very few that do not spill over in some way into the offline domain.

This is, for the most part, in line with the previous literature on the topic. In their study of "online radicalisation", von Behr et al. (2013) test 15 case studies against five hypotheses, including that the Internet was replacing the need for physical contact. They reject this, noting that 'in all our cases the so called offline world played an important role in the radicalisation process. The subjects had offline contact with family members or friends who shared their beliefs' (von Behr et al. 2013, p. 33). Gill et al. (2015) also note this when discussing Roshonara Choudhry's lack of physical network leading to her decision to attack Stephen Timms, suggesting that her case is an outlier and that the vast majority of terrorists in their sample act in both domains. Reynolds and Hafez's (2017) study on foreign fighters from Germany offers a similar picture, finding that only four actors in their sample of 99 could be confirmed as being driven by social media. To further strengthen the argument of the relationship between females and their constructed online identity, 'all four of these cases involved women who were recruited through undisclosed social media contacts' (Reynolds and Hafez 2017, p.19).

Despite a lack of empirical evidence, research has previously posited a possibility of online only trajectories becoming the new normal. For example, in their *Homegrown Islamic Extremism in 2013* report, the ADL find that: 'Face-to-face interaction with terrorist operatives is no longer a requirement for radicalization. Individual extremists, or lone wolves, are increasingly self-radicalizing online with no physical interactions with established terrorist groups or cells' (Anti-Defamation League 2014, p.1). This is markedly similar to Sageman's claim that 'face-to-face radicalization has been replaced by online radicalization' (Sageman 2008b, p.41). The findings offered above do not support claims that this is happening on a significant scale. Other research has been more cautious, such as a report on foreign fighters for the UN-CTED, which found that direct personal contact was required in most cases, but that 'some Member States have reported instances of Internet-only radicalization or so-called "self-indoctrination" (UN CTED 2015, p.18). Similarly the Institute for Strategic Dialogue find that 'there are few examples of individuals radicalising entirely online, but there are signs that this could increase over time' (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2011, p.1), although they too, stress the importance of offline networks. Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai note that:

> The vast majority of scholars argue that, while the Internet plays a facilitating role, in most cases the individual must still be in contact with real-world

[304] For example: Ali Shukri Amin and Reza Niknejad – USA v. Ali Shukri Amin, Position Of The United States With Respect To Sentencing, Case 1:15-cr-00164-CMH, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2015; Joseph Farrokh and Mahmoud Elhassan – USA v. Mahmoud Amin Mohamed Elhassan, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.

[305] For example: Akhror Saidakhmetov and Abdurasul Juraboev, USA v. Abdurasul Hasanovich Juraboev, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-00095-WFK, United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2017.

> networks...[However] scholars cannot ignore the cases that appear to go against the grain, and may have to re-assess this position if instances of so-called online "self-radicalisation" increase. (Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017, pp.29–32)

These perspectives therefore raise the question of whether these five potential cases of an online only trajectory represent a growing trend or are merely the exceptions that prove the rule. Given they are so few in number compared to those that acted in both domains, it is difficult to make the case that – even in a time of greater cyber-dependence – there is a development towards online only trajectories.

6.4.3 First Steps

While it is important to establish whether actors used the Internet exclusively from their entry point into the radical milieu to their eventual activity, it is admittedly a high evidentiary bar, particularly given the weight of evidence in previous literature that suggests actors tend to use both domains. While coding the case studies line-by-line descriptively to establish whether there were online only trajectories, the data show that the Internet accounted for the first steps into the radical milieu for several actors. The majority then went on to act offline in different ways, but the filings and reporting explicitly state that the Internet was the entry point for them. Interestingly, descriptive coding highlighted several different reasons and methods for actors turning to the Internet to seek radical content. Upon constant comparison, these are selectively coded into themes which relate to how actors came to enter the radical online milieu.

Spiritual Fulfilment

Several actors turned to the Internet for a more radical interpretation of Islam because they felt they were not being fulfilled spiritually. As detailed above, Hoda Muthana, sought a more fundamental religious experience than her family could provide. Although they were deeply conservative, Muthana told a reporter that she sought a more radical interpretation of Islam, and her father's graduation gift of a cellphone provided a gateway to the radical YouTube lectures and jihadist Twitter that gave her that opportunity.[306] Ali Shukri Amin, who operated the influential @AmreekiWitness Twitter account and facilitated the travel of Reza Niknejad, told a forensic psychologist that he, too, sought a more intellectual religious experience than the ceremonial Islam that was practiced by his parents. He then researched Islam online, leading him to IS supporters, who made him feel intellectually valued.[307] For others, it was a frustration that went beyond family.

Similarly, Keonna Thomas' defence counsel claimed that she began to use the Internet when she felt that her local Muslim community was not giving her the religious structure

[306] Ellie Hall, Gone Girl: An Interview with An American in ISIS.
[307] Yasmeen Abutaleb and Kristina Cooke, A teen's turn to radicalism and the US safety net that failed to stop it, *Reuters*, June 6, 2016. Available at: https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/usa-extremists-teen/.

she desired, which led to her receiving spiritual instruction from IS supporters.[308] A college friend of Warren Clark, who successfully travelled to Syria in 2015, noted that he converted to Islam in 2004, but as he became more devout, turned to the Internet, which in turn led him to radical sites and violent anti-American YouTube videos, which he would watch until the early hours of the morning.[309]

One Online Community to Another

Other actors were already in online communities which may have led them towards engaging with the radical online milieu. As described above, Safya Roe Yassin was an active member in several online conspiracy theory communities, including anti-vaccine, "chemtrails", and anti-GMO movements. Given the anti-government parallels between conspiracy theories and extremist movements, it is possible that Yassin transitioned sideways.[310] The same can be said of Christopher Lee Cornell, who sought to conduct an attack on the US Capitol during the State of the Union in 2015, who also regularly posted anti-government conspiracy theories online, for example, suggesting that the Ferguson, MO riots were part of a plot to install a "Jewish world order".[311] Cornell had few friends and recently converted to Islam and it is suggested by Abrams that 'the radical Islam he discovered online might have resonated' with such a personality.[312]

Heather Coffman, too, was someone without a significant social circle, and her defence counsel claimed she developed a strong passion for video games and social media, which became her whole social life. The defendant's sentencing memorandum suggests that through people she met in this domain, she became interested in IS and enjoyed making provocative posts on Facebook.[313] These cases suggest that, rather than the Internet being an entry point to the online radical milieu exclusively from the offline domain, some actors can transition sideways from other communities.

University

Several other actors found their way to radical content via new experiences while at university. Munther Omar Saleh was part of a plot to construct and detonate a pressure cooker bomb in New York, NY and was also part of the network of young men that sought to travel from the New York/New Jersey area. His entry point to radical content came as a college student at which time he became interested in politics. He noted that pictures of injured and orphaned children motivated him to become an activist: 'I saw the civil war

[308] USA v. Keonna Thomas, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum.
[309] Tracy Connor, Texas Convert Warren Clark Sent ISIS His Resume, Report Says, *NBC News*, February 6, 2018. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/texas-convert-warren-clark-sent-isis-his-resume-report-says-n845151.
[310] Katie Zavadski, The American Anti-Vaccine Mom Turned ISIS Superstar.
[311] USA v. Christopher Lee Cornell, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case: 1:15-cr-00012-SSB, United States District Court for the Southern District of Ohio, Western Division, 2016.
[312] Dan Horn, The Terrorist Recruiter in Your Living Room, *Cincinnati*, January 18, 2015. Available at: https://eu.cincinnati.com/story/news/2015/01/17/terrorist-recruiter-living-room/21918469/.
[313] USA v. Heather Coffman. Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum.

in Syria and I was moved… I felt a connection to the people and was bothered by their suffering.'[314] Although his online messages began supporting a peaceful solution, the filings note that after months of researching the conflict online led Saleh to IS propaganda, which credibly made the case of defeating Assad, as well as promising nationhood and citizenship for him.[315] Importantly, the Government prosecutors posit that Saleh was the driving force in recruiting the other members of his network, suggesting that this entry point predates an offline network.[316]

University was also where Mohimanual Bhuiya was motivated to seek further information about Muslim conflicts. Bhuiya, who successfully travelled to and returned from the caliphate, conducted a television interview upon his return to the US. In it he described his emotional turning point at Columbia University in which he took a course called "Muslims in Diaspora", in which he watched the 2004 film "Submission" by Theo van Gough and Ayaan Hirsi Ali which depicts a women in a burqa with passages from the Koran written over her nude body. Bhuiya described the experience as "really humiliating", which led him to turn to the Internet for answers.[317] This then led to him spending "hours a day" online over the subsequent months, which eventually led to him travelling to Syria.[318]

Interest in Middle East Conflicts

As with Saleh, mentioned above, other actors found their way to radical Islamist content online via following conflicts in the Middle East. Donald Ray Morgan travelled to Lebanon in January 2014, before eventually attempting to enter Syria to join IS, but was stopped en route in Turkey and sent back.[319] In a television interview, Morgan gave a detailed explanation of his life and upbringing, saying that he was first exposed to Islam in university, but did not convert until a number of years later after his divorce in 2007.[320] However, his turn towards radical Islamism came in about 2012, a time in which he was spending hours per day following the conflicts in the Middle East and got "sucked in" and

[314] USA v. Munther Omar Saleh, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, p.9.
[315] USA v. Munther Omar Saleh, Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum.
[316] USA v. Munther Omar Saleh, Government's Response to Defendant's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 1:15-cr-00393-MKB, United States District Court for the Eastern District of New York, 2018.
[317] Richard Engel, Ben Plesser and Tracy Connor, American ISIS Defector: 'I've Let My Nation Down', May 22, 2016. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-uncovered/american-isis-defector-i-ve-let-my-nation-down-n578216.
[318] Richard Engel, Ben Plesser and Tracy Connor, American ISIS Defector: 'I've Let My Nation Down'.
[319] USA v. Donald Ray Morgan, Factual Basis, Case 1:14-cr-414-1, United States District Court for the Middle District of North Carolina, 2014.
[320] NBC News, EXCLUSIVE: American Extremist Reveals His Quest to Join ISIS, September 3, 2014. Available at: https://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/isis-terror/exclusive-american-extremist-reveals-his-quest-join-isis-n194796.

began posting statements supportive of IS on social media,[321] including statements quoting and giving homage to figures such as bin Laden and Awlaki.[322]

Samy el-Goarany, who allegedly travelled to Syria in January 2015, straddles the themes of following Middle East conflicts and already being online. El-Goarany – now deceased – had a prolific Tumblr account in which he posted about social justice, from critiques of US interventions to racism to anti-capitalist sentiments, as well as lighter themes such as music and travel.[323] He was of Egyptian heritage and kept up to date with the ongoing civil war in his father's home country. His friends noted that it was around this time that his postings became more radical in nature, and he even tweeted that the Egyptian Government's massacre of Muslim Brotherhood supporters in 2013 was a key motivator for his travel.[324] Importantly, it was via this entry point into the online radical milieu that he met Ahmed Mohammed el Gammal online in October 2014. El Gammal, who resided in Arizona but travelled to New York to meet el-Goarany, would be instrumental in facilitating el-Goarany's travel to Syria, providing him with a contact in IS and a reference.[325]

Fertile Ground

Rather than a location or interest of an entry point, the filings and reporting often suggest that actors' first steps into jihadism were due to factors such as social isolation, trauma, and mental health problems, for which the Internet provided an outlet which could likely not be replicated by offline socialisation. Harlem Suarez, who planned an IED attack in West Keys, FL began searching for radical material online in April 2014.[326] Reporting suggests that Suarez was unstable and childlike and would obsessively adopt new personas such as of a gangster, powerboat racer, and drug dealer, making 'the web… a fertile ground for emotionally immature young men like Suarez to explore all kinds of fanatical ideas.'[327] It was online that Suarez would meet an FBI undercover agent, with whom he planned his plot.[328]

Justin Nojan Sullivan, who plotted attacks in North Carolina and Virginia virtually with Junaid Hussain, told an undercover agent that 'I liked IS from the beginning then I started

[321] Richard Engel, How a North Carolina Native Ended Up on a Quest to Join ISIS, *NBC News*, September 3, 2014. Available at: https://highered.nbclearn.com/portal/site/HigherEd/flatview?cuecard=71348.
[322] USA v. Donald Ray Morgan, Factual Basis.
[323] Katie Zavadski, Mom and Dad Hid a Terrible ISIS Secret.
[324] Katie Zavadski, Mom and Dad Hid a Terrible ISIS Secret.
[325] USA v. Ahmed Mohammed el Gammal, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:15-cr-00588-ER, United States District Court for the Southern District of New York, 2015.
[326] Jessica Lipscomb, How Harlem Suarez Went From Cuban Immigrant to Wannabe ISIS Jihadi, *Miami New Times*, September 3, 2017. Available at: https://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/harlem-suarez-goes-from-cuban-immigrant-to-wannabe-isis-jihadi-9643881.
[327] Jessica Lipscomb, How Harlem Suarez Went From Cuban Immigrant to Wannabe ISIS Jihadi.
[328] USA v. Harlem Suarez, Criminal Complaint, Case 0:15-mj-05016-LSS, United States District Court for the Southern District of Florida, 2015.

thinking about death and stuff so I became Muslim.' [329] Sullivan's neighbours told reporters that he rarely left the house, and he was also unstable, murdering his next door neighbour and soliciting a contract for the killing of his parents.[330] His defence counsel said that he was depressed and suicidal and had been expelled from school, with a doctor diagnosing him with pre-schizophrenia.[331] In the words of Government prosecutors, Shivam Patel, 'began his embrace of ISIS while located in the safety of his parents' home in Virginia,'[332] also focusing on his troubled childhood and mental instability, including suicide attempts, attempting to harm a therapist while in hospital, and having multiple episodes of psychosis.[333]

The core concept which links these factors together is that the Internet can provide a diverse range of affordances which can enable ideological learning. In these cases, individuals were taken up to a certain point but felt that they needed to develop further, for which the Internet provided an outlet. For some it was a frustration with their existing spiritual existence, while for others it was a new conspiracy to help make sense of the world. For many it was an extension of learning within a formalised setting such as university, or an outlet to continue learning about conflict. Finally, it acted as an entry point for individuals that may have predispositions which could be exacerbated by such learning. Important here is the lack of regulation of ideas on social media compared to their offline counterparts – Bouhana (2019) notes that regulation has been outsourced from government to tech companies in recent years, which may promote the emergence of extremism-enabling moral ecologies. Where individuals may have been under the guidance of moderate trained professionals in the offline domain at a mosque, university, or receiving healthcare, the unstructured dialogue of social media and easy access to extreme propaganda could mean that this "jumping off" point created a dynamic which exacerbated these individuals' radicalisation.

Despite sharing the Internet as an entry point into the radical milieu, this section demonstrates the heterogeneity of terrorist pathways. There are a range of diverse factors which lead actors to turn to the Internet. This point is made by Holt et al. (2016), who argue that terrorists' heterogeneous pathways result in a lack of common points of entry to the movement, however:

> The Internet may serve a leveling function that brings all individuals into a similar point of entry. The Internet as a source of ideological messaging is on 24 hours a

[329] USA v. Justin Nojan Sullivan, Factual Basis, Case No. 1:16-cr-05- MR-DLH, United States District Court for the Western District of North Carolina, 2016, p.9.
[330] Michael Gordon, First American ISIS Convert in Custody, Justin Sullivan, to Face the Death Penalty, *Charlotte Observer*, March 18, 2016. Available at: https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/crime/inside-courts-blog/article66952427.html.
[331] Michael Gordon, 'I Am Not a Bad Person,' ISIS Conspirator Says in Admitting he Murdered Elderly Neighbor, *Charlotte Observer*, July 17, 2017 Available at: https://www.charlotteobserver.com/news/local/article161716598.html.
[332] USA v. Shivam Patel, Government's Sentencing Memorandum, Case 2:17-cr-00120-MSD-DEM, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2018, p.15.
[333] USA v. Shivam Patel, Government's Sentencing Memorandum.

> day, providing relatively equal access to radical messages and networks where individuals may gain entrance to a group. (Holt et al. 2016, p.7)

In other words, some actors may turn to the Internet because it is the only place they can seek a radical interpretation of religion, while some may be incapable of forging social connections, but what they can find is the same: a vast amount of ideological content, peer-to-peer communications, and instructional material, among other things.

Other scholars have suggested that the Internet may act as an important entry point, particularly for seeking information. Gendron argues that for individuals that may be experiencing a crisis of identity or a sense of injustice, the 'information gathering process, which is a critical first step along the path to radicalization, is facilitated by the Internet' (Gendron 2017, p.51). Similarly, Silber and Bhatt note that in the first step of their conceptual model, the 'Internet provides the wandering mind of the conflicted young Muslim or potential convert with direct access to unfiltered radical and extremist ideology' (Silber and Bhatt 2007, p.8). These arguments seem to ring true with many of the individuals that took their first steps on the Internet; many were seeking information on different, yet related, topics such as religious doctrine or Middle East conflicts and found IS supporters or propaganda.

However, it cannot be ignored that these cases represent a relatively minor proportion of the sample as a whole. While not every case gives an indication of how the actor first became involved in the movement, many come from offline friendship networks,[334] prison,[335] family members,[336] romantic partners,[337] or via conflict zones.[338] In total, positive evidence was found to suggest that 17 actors made their first steps via the Internet – only around 8% of the sample in total. On the other hand, accurately assessing how many made their first steps offline is far more difficult because positive evidence is often not given. For example, there is little doubt that the recruitment network in

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[334] For example: Samuel Topaz - Benjamin Mueller, New Jersey Man Pleads Guilty to Pledging to Join ISIS, *New York Times*, September 9, 2015 Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2015/09/10/nyregion/new-jersey-man-pleads-guilty-to-pledging-to-join-isis.html. Nicholas Young – USA v. Nicholas Young, Application for Search Warrant. Fareed Mumuni - Mira Wassef, Facing 100-year sentence, Staten Islander Details his 'misguided' Transformation from Kind Child to ISIS Backer, *SI Live*, 25 April 2018. Available at: https://www.silive.com/news/2018/04/staten_island_terrorist_faces.html.

[335] For example: Casey Spain – USA v. Casey Charles Spain, Defendant's Sentencing Position, Case 3:17-cr-00123-JAG, United States District Court for the Eastern District of Virginia, 2018. Clark Calloway – USA v. Clark Calloway, Criminal Complaint, Case 1:17-mj-00287-GMH, United States District Court for the District of Columbia, 2017. Leon Nathan Davis II - Associated Press, 'I am an American': Man who was 'ready for jihad' before attempting to join ISIL sobs as he's given 15 years in prison, *National Post*, July 28, 2015. Available at: http://nationalpost.com/news/world/i-am-an-american-man-who-was-ready-for-jihad-before-attempting-to-join-isil-sobs-as-hes-given-15-years-prison.

[336] For example: Guled Ali Omar – USA v. Mohamed Abdihamid Farah et al, Criminal Complaint. Rasel Raihan - Engel, Plesser and Connor, An American ISIS Cell: The Story of 3 U.S. Recruits.

[337] For example: Muhammad Dakhlalla – USA v. Muhammad Oda Dakhlalla, Factual Basis. Zakia Nasrin – Meleagrou-Hitchens et al. The Travelers. Ariel Bradley – Ellie Hall, How One Young Woman Went From Fundamentalist Christian to ISIS Bride.

[338] For example: Pazara and the Hodzics – Hughes and Clifford, First He Became an American—Then He Joined ISIS.

Minnesota began with offline peer-to-peer relationships, which the filings and reporting discuss at length, but in most cases do not posit a "first contact" instance in the same way as the cases of online "first steps" are outlined above.[339] Despite this, at least 40 cases were deemed to have enough evidence to identify the entry point as offline, although given the skewed reporting; it is far more likely that offline cases are undercounted than online ones.

This prevalence towards an offline entry point as the norm is supported within the literature. Hussain and Saltman (2014) argue that the vast majority of individuals come into contact with extremist ideology through offline socialisation prior to being further indoctrinated online; those that visit 'extremist websites and consume the content enthusiastically are likely to have been heading in that direction, and the websites in question are merely aiding an existing journey' (Hussain and Saltman 2014, p.61). Similarly, in interview-based research with returning foreign fighters, El-Said and Barrett (2017) consider the role of the Internet, finding that there was a range of views in how important it was to their recruitment. However, they found that:

> Would-be [foreign fighters] appeared to turn to the Internet to confirm and strengthen ideas, perceptions and narratives that they had already developed or were beginning to develop. The Internet then played a key role in reinforcing a decision that had in part been taken already. This seemed particularly true when the process was also associated with friendship or network ties. (El-Said and Barrett 2017, p.39)

The findings illustrated above support both Hussain and Saltman and El-Said and Barrett; it only appears to be a minority of actors for which the Internet was the entry point to radical jihadism, particularly when compared to offline connections. As Chapter 5 finds, almost all actors ended up using the Internet either as part of a network of co-ideologues or to learn or plan their event, but there remains little evidence that many used it as an entry point.

6.4.4 Synthesis

While Chapter 5 made inferences about the use of the Internet for the sample as a whole, this section was intended to look specifically at the dynamics for individuals engaged heavily online. The first part sought individuals who were candidates for an "online only" radicalisation, finding that there were only five potential cases in which this is the case. Analysing and comparing these cases, four of the five demonstrated a high degree of social isolation, suggesting that this could be a stressor which pushed them towards the radical online milieu, or alternatively, the converse could be true: engaging online could have caused them to isolate themselves from their existing social circles. When sampling

[339] For example: USA v. Abdullahi Yusuf and Abdi Nur, Criminal Complaint; Mike Eckel and Harun Maruf, "Why He Chose to Leave This Good Land?", *Voice of America*, [No Date]. Available at: https://projects.voanews.com/isis-recruit-somali-americans/; USA v. Mohamed Abdihamid Farah et al, Criminal Complaint.

the wider cohort, this theme appears in several other cases too. The second part analysed those that used the Internet as an entry point to the radical milieu, finding a range of different "jumping off" points, such as a need for spiritual fulfilment, moving sideways from other online communities, continuation of university learning, interests in Middle East conflicts, as well as individuals with predispositions that could be exacerbated by extremist narratives. The core concept which links these factors is the affordances that the Internet offers, providing the individuals with far less regulated or structured learning opportunities, which includes easier access to radical content.

These two dynamics are related; the latter can be seen as a wider explanation for the former. One can consider social isolation as a problem which can be remedied by specific affordances that the Internet provides. If individuals are unwilling or unable to maintain face-to-face social contact, then the Internet affords them an ability to drastically widen their pool of potential co-ideologues that can offer social gratifications. Von Behr et al. (2013) note it is widely available and enabling connection with like-minded individuals from across the world, or as Koehler (2014) observes that it is a cheap and efficient method of communication which is particularly useful for "social purposes." In essence, an online community can be sought out to supplement the lack of an offline community in these instances.

However, there are marked differences between the types of communities that can be found on social media platforms compared to face-to-face communication, which may in turn affect radicalisation dynamics. Saifudeen (2014) notes that online activity is analogous to a buyers' market in which individuals can choose communities and interactions that appeal most to them. In the examples given above, some actors may choose radical communities which offer a more theological or spiritual bent, while others engage with co-ideologues that are interested in Western foreign policy. Engaging in an offline network is unlikely to offer the actor this degree of flexibility to move between groups to find one that suits their needs. Neo (2016) offers a related point, suggesting that having found ideas that intrigue the individual, the Internet offers a greater ability to play with ideas with relatively little consequence. The online environment in which these terrorists operated in the mid-2010s and the protection of the First Amendment, means that the expression of ideology to part of an ongoing socialisation process had little in the way of immediate consequences.[340] Neo argues that this may exacerbate radicalisation because individuals can seek out alternative belief systems in accordance with their specific triggers, needs and vulnerabilities, perceived injustice, or need for adventure. Ultimately, it gives the individual far more choice than they would have had if they operated solely in the offline domain.

A proponent of the Onlife thesis would suggest that this buyers' market is a hallmark of the contemporary information environment. At first glance, it may appear that a move

[340] Of course, in many cases the consequence was the FBI opening an investigation, possibly leading to arrest or imprisonment. However, the crime was not the expression of ideas, but when the individual eventually decided to act upon them.

towards greater access of information would increase heterogenous viewpoints and provide resilience against an echo chamber effect, which is often theorised to play a role in radicalisation (For example, see: Ducol et al. 2016; Neo 2016; Neumann 2013a; Sageman 2008). However, Broadbent and Lobet-Maris (2015) argue that the buyers' market represents a significant change from previous generations in which information was scarce because it was difficult to access and disseminate. In the hyperconnected world there is an abundance of information, but little capacity to digest it. They argue that this has led social media companies designing their platforms to retain attention as long as possible according to their interests which they argue results in volatile identities with little empathy. Similarly, Thorseth (2015b) argues that people lack the capacity to absorb views that diverge from their own narrow interests in spite of the wide information available to them. This point is made by Ducol and colleagues (2016) too, who suggest that platforms are specifically designed to foster homophily by encouraging users to "follow" those with similar views, which may help to foster deviant communities.

Taken together, this section suggests that the affordances that the Internet offer can act as a radicalisation dynamic by fulfilling needs that cannot be met offline, and in doing so, offers an almost limitless possibility of gratifications in a fundamentally different environment. In this sense, von Behr and colleagues put the point well when they summarise their research in this way:

> The internet has to be seen as a mode, rather than a unitary method, of radicalisation (the internet can play an important role in facilitating the radicalisation process; however, it cannot drive it on its own). Instead, the internet appears to enhance the process. (Von Behr et al. p.33)

The Internet can offer new opportunities for would-be terrorists, but it is ultimately just a tool for them to explore and shape their own radicalisation. Even if individuals do act entirely online, or first enter the radical milieu, any online dynamics will intersect with existing dispositions, stressors, and vulnerabilities, or as Durodie and Ng put it: 'No individual approaches the Internet in isolation. They come to it already bearing a vast number of ideas, assumptions and emotions' (Durodie and Ng 2008, p.2).

It is worth reiterating that the individuals identified at the heavy-usage end of the spectrum are relatively uncommon within this sample. Only five cases were identified as possible online-only cases and seventeen instances in which the Internet acted as the entry point to the radical milieu, suggesting that each are still a relatively rare occurrence. It is also instructive to note that the trend of online only radicalisation does not seem to be growing, even in a time of greater cyber-dependence, as has been suggested by some scholars (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2011; Meleagrou-Hitchens and Kaderbhai 2017), and it appears that most individuals are already engaging with radical ideologies prior to turning to the Internet (El-Said and Barrett 2017; Hussain and Saltman 2014). This supports the quantitative findings of Chapter 5, and previous research which found

that the sample tended to act in both domains (Gill et al. 2017; Reynolds and Hafez 2017; Von Behr 2013).

Grounded Theory

3. *The Internet can act as tool for individuals to fulfil their needs that cannot be met offline in a flexible and constraint-free manner.*

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has used a grounded theory-inspired methodology to inductively assess the online behaviours of 201 IS actors in the US, discovering three substantive radicalisation theories from the data. The first section analysed the radical content that they collected, consumed, and created, finding that engagement with propaganda is best seen as an ongoing socialisation process between actors in the online radical milieu in which actors can construct radical identities. The second section looked specifically at female actors' online activity, finding that it is possible to use the Internet as a space to perform a less restrictive gender identity than offline Salafi networks would permit. Finally, the third section examined individuals that used the Internet heavily as part of their trajectory, demonstrating that the Internet can act as a tool for individuals to fulfil their needs in an environment with more flexibility and fewer constraints.

While these radicalisation dynamics should stand alone for exploration in future research, it is worth noting that there are some important commonalities between them which elucidate the contemporary information environment. Firstly, this chapter demonstrates that radicalisation trajectories are invariably social; individuals did not merely turn to the Internet to passively consume information and "self-radicalise". Instead, each of the sections shows that terrorists engaged in social processes by seeking a wider network to continue their ideological learning and, importantly, perform it to their new audience. Secondly, and relatedly, each of the sections shows that the online radical milieu is a malleable space. By using online platforms, actors can pick and choose the type of propaganda or social contacts that suits their specific needs. This can be seen in the high prevalence of AQ content – a rival to IS – to the use of memes to the various online entry points. It allowed the women in the second section to create the personality that suited their needs rather than being bound to traditional gender roles.

Finally, the findings of this chapter support much of the Onlife thesis. Many of the ways in which individuals acted blurred the distinction between the online and offline domains, such as consuming online propaganda in offline groups; having face-to-face discussions about the content they had previously watched online; or taking risky photos or videos to upload to social media. This type of activity suggests that within the contemporary information environment, it makes little sense to have a hard dichotomy between the two domains. At first glance, this may seem at odds with the latter two sections of this chapter, which suggest that there *is* a meaningful difference between acting online and offline. However, as will be elucidated in the following chapter, the most

ontologically sound position is to consider an individual's full information environment, consisting of a range of online *and* offline interactions, which may include platforms or dialogues that offer different affordances, but can be assessed within a holistic theory of radicalisation.