

Institution: University of Sussex		
Unit of Assessment: 21 – Sociology		
Title of case study: Disrupting the online activity of extremist and terrorist organisations		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: Oct 2016 – Dec 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s): Dr Suraj Lakhani	Role(s) (e.g. job title): Lecturer in Criminology and Sociology	Period employed by submitting HEI: Sept 2014 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: Oct 2016 – Dec 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact The internet has become a tool for violent extremist networks such as Islamic State (IS), contributing to their propaganda dissemination, recruitment, organisation and funding activities. Lakhani's research, carried out with an international academic team, has made a substantial contribution to measures disrupting this online activity. It has facilitated a better-informed, more targeted approach by the UK Home Office (HO). It has also contributed to a new European regulation and has informed the work of international bodies including Europol, the United Nations and Tech Against Terrorism, as well as social media companies.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research Over the past decade, social media platforms and online spaces have been exploited by terrorist networks. Governments globally, including in the UK, have entreated social media companies to engage in active disruption (to remove content and accounts) of extremist organisations and individuals. The need for greater transparency about disruption has also become a priority, as larger social media companies tend to evaluate their own approaches. Responding to this need, Suraj Lakhani's collaborative research has sought to understand: (1) the use of (both large and smaller) social media platforms by a range of jihadist organisations; and (2) the levels (or lack) of disruption of these groups.</p> <p>The research that underpins this case study consists of two projects [R1&2], with Lakhani as Principal Investigator for both. The work built on his expertise on jihadist networks and especially Al Qaeda and the Afghan jihadist scene, the Syrian conflict and IS, and the dynamics of radicalisation [R3]. He also directed the day-to-day operation of the projects and supervised researcher Khawaja Moinuddin. The team was completed by Jeremy Reffin and David Weir from Sussex Informatics, who developed innovative machine-learning software (Method 52) used by the research, and Maura Conway from Dublin City University, who contributed leading expertise in online terrorism and provided a link with her EU-funded VoxPol project (Violent Online Political Extremism).</p> <p>The first project [R1], commissioned by the UK HO (October 2016–April 2017), made use of a large dataset comprising 722 pro-IS Twitter accounts and 451 other jihadist accounts. It collected 119,730 total tweets using a semi-automated methodology consisting of Method 52 combined with researcher analysis. This research, the first to involve a systematic and empirical analysis of disruption measures on Twitter, tracked the status and age of accounts and any suspensions. There were three key findings. Firstly, that contrary to public and government perceptions, Twitter was successfully disrupting pro-IS content and accounts to a high level (predicted at above 90%). Secondly, that differential disruption was occurring, with pro-IS accounts disrupted at a much greater rate than other pro-jihadist groups, including Hayat Tahrir</p>		

al-Sham (HTS, widely seen as a franchise of al-Qaeda), Ahrar al-Sham (AAS), the Taliban and al-Shabaab. Over 25% of pro-IS groups were suspended within five days of their creation, compared to under 1% of these other groups. Thirdly, the research looked at the outlinking patterns (external URLs included within tweets) of jihadist groups, finding that these groups were linking, as expected, to numerous smaller platforms including justpaste.it, IS's own server, archive.org, sendvid.com, YouTube and Google Drive. This suggested a need for disruption activities to target smaller platforms to a greater extent than before.

The second project [R2], also funded by the HO (September 2017–February 2018), was commissioned in response to the first. It used the same methodology and covered four groups' Twitter activity: IS; HTS; AAS; and the Taliban. It further investigated the disruption of these groups and quantified their outlinking practices using a larger dataset consisting of 1,236 pro-IS, 1,179 pro-HTS, 3,782 pro-Ahrar, and 1,201 pro-Taliban Twitter accounts posting a total of 432,817 tweets. The team also analysed 'follower' and 'following' networks in order to map the online community. The research confirmed that differential disruption was continuing to take place, with 94% of pro-IS accounts suspended during the study compared to 23% of pro-HTS, 10% of Taliban and 7% of AAS accounts. The research also demonstrated pro-IS accounts were still outlinking to large social media platforms such as Facebook and YouTube, as well as mainstream media platforms such as Al Jazeera, CNN, the BBC, and RT, but were being pushed towards smaller platforms due to disruption of their presence.

3. References to the research

R1a Conway, M., Khawaja, M., Lakhani, S., Reffin, J., Robertson, A. and Weir, D. (2018) 'Disrupting Daesh, Measuring the Takedown of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts', in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, 42:1-2, 141-160. (Authors 1-3 (listed alphabetically) co-leads, contributing 75% between them). In REF2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1513984>

Paper originally a confidential report for the HO (2017), available from HEI on request [R1b]; longer version published by the EU-funded network VoxPol [R1c]:

<https://www.voxpol.eu/download/report/DCUJ5528-Disrupting-DAESH-1706-WEB-v2.pdf>

R2a Conway, M., Khawaja, M., Lakhani, S., Reffin, J., and Robertson, A. (2017) 'Mapping the Contemporary Jihadi Online Ecology: Differential Disruption, Community Strength, Outlinking Practices, and Preferred Online Platforms'. Confidential report for the HO, available from HEI on request. (Authors 1-3 (listed alphabetically) co-leads, contributing 75% between them).

Since published in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* (OnlineFirst), 4 Jan 2021 (accepted 10 Nov 2020) [R2b]: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2020.1866736>

R3 Lakhani, S. (2020) 'Extreme criminals: reconstructing ideas of criminality through extremist narratives', in *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 43:3, 208-223. In REF2. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1057610X.2018.1450613>

4. Details of the impact

Suraj Lakhani's collaborative research has impacted the work of the UK government, and European and global counter-terrorism measures at governmental and non-governmental levels. It has confirmed that IS content is being effectively disrupted on large social media platforms, and has influenced policymakers, NGOs and social media companies to focus more on smaller platforms and other extremist groups.

Influencing HO strategy and budgets

The HO commissioned Lakhani's research to inform its counter-terrorism policy. While stakeholders in sensitive areas such as this (particularly government departments) are often unwilling to confirm the specific ways they use research findings, the changing focus of government policy that was discernible shortly following delivery of R1 and ongoing after delivery of R2 indicates that these reports were instrumental in convincing government that terrorist content on Twitter was being disrupted and to focus more on smaller platforms.

Before the first project report [R1b] was submitted in 2017, correspondence between Lakhani and his colleagues and officials at the HO involved a request [text removed for publication]. On

26 March, then Home Secretary Amber Rudd wrote in the *Sunday Telegraph* that she was attending a meeting the following week with various social media platforms (including Twitter and the smaller platforms highlighted in Lakhani's research), to discuss disruption of terrorist activity [S1f] – an indication that Rudd was likely the cabinet minister briefed with this research. The findings from R1 were formally presented to the HO and other key policymakers across Whitehall in April 2017, followed by the full report. Emails between Lakhani and a senior HO employee [text removed for publication].

In August 2017, Amber Rudd met again with technology firms in Silicon Valley to discuss the terrorist threat [S2]. On 30 November 2017, she stated in Parliament: 'Twitter now takes down 95% of illegal material with artificial intelligence' [S3]. This figure echoed Lakhani's findings that the loss of pro-IS accounts from the platform was probably greater than 90% [text removed for publication]. Rudd's statement represented a significant shift in the government's understanding of disruption to online extremism. Two months earlier, the Prime Minister had told the UN General Assembly that technology companies needed to go 'further and faster' in removing extremist content, and a Downing Street source had said: 'These companies... should really be focusing on what matters, which is stopping the spread of terrorism and violence' [S4]. In December 2017, [text removed for publication].

R1 also had an impact on HO budgets, [text removed for publication]. It was in this context that the HO supported the second piece of collaborative research [R2], which Lakhani and colleagues briefed HO staff on before submitting the report in April 2018 [R2a]. In July 2018, [text removed for publication]. A year later, the government launched a technology-based initiative targeting online terrorism on all platforms, recognising that '[s]maller platforms, however, are increasingly targeted by Daesh (IS) and its supporters and they often do not have the same level of resources to develop technology' [S1g]. This was consistent with the findings of both R1 and R2.

In October 2019, the Deputy Director of the Online Policy Unit at the HO confirmed that '[t]he research conducted by Dr Lakhani and his colleagues has bolstered the HO's understanding of the online terrorist threat and the impact of companies' disruptive measures on Daesh's online networks and dissemination of content. This in turn has contributed to a series of ministerial and working-level briefings as well as our engagement with companies' [S1e].

Improving European and global policy and understanding

Findings from R1 and R2 are also being used in wider security contexts in Europe and other parts of the world, informing policy and raising awareness amongst stakeholders about rates of terrorist disruption and the importance of focusing on smaller platforms and other jihadist groups as well as IS. [text removed for publication]

Inter-institutional negotiations on this new regulation began on 9 October 2019 and it is part of the European Parliament's Legislative Train on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs [S5b]. The research has also made an impact on other European policy units: in 2017, the European Parliament report 'Countering Terrorist Narratives' cited one of the key findings of R1, that pro-IS accounts on Twitter linked to various different platforms or content hosting websites, and one of its key recommendations was that '[d]isruption of violent extremist networks should be comprehensive and multi-platform to avoid displacement' [S5c, p39].

Lakhani's research has also informed the work of the UN, specifically its Counter-Terrorism Executive Directorate (UNCTED). [text removed for publication]

In November 2018, the UN Security Council Counter Terrorism Committee cited R1c, especially its findings on the evolving methods used by terrorists including cloud-based and file-sharing services, to underpin its recommendation that there is '[m]ore support needed for smaller technology platforms to counter terrorist content' [S6b, title page, p2].

Tech Against Terrorism (TAT), launched and supported by UN CTED to work with the global tech industry, has also used Lakhani's research. [text removed for publication]

Team members have been invited to disseminate key findings and recommendations to global security agencies including Europol (10 April 2017), Interpol (8 Aug 2017) and the Singapore Ministry of Defence (8 Aug 2017) [S8]. [text removed for publication]

The need to disrupt other jihadist groups is particularly pertinent to Facebook and Twitter, and they have both seen the research. In a 2017 interview with the Combating Terrorism Center, Brian Fishman (Facebook Counterterrorism Policy Manager) said: 'a recent VOX-Pol study [R1c]...found Facebook was not in the top 10 platforms ISIS-supporting Twitter accounts were out-linking to'. This was in the context of a discussion about Facebook's relative success at taking down photos and videos through automated matching. He continued: 'Facebook is not a good repository for that kind of material for these guys anymore, and they know it' [S10]. Project Co-Investigator Maura Conway presented R1 and R2 to Twitter and Facebook at both companies' headquarters in San Francisco on 3rd April 2018. Although the research confirms that these companies are disrupting IS material relatively effectively, it will also hopefully encourage them to refine and diversify their counterterrorism activity.

Overall, Lakhani's collaborative research has contributed to a better-informed and more targeted approach to tackling online extremism since 2017, both in the UK and overseas. Lakhani's research is particularly important due to the shifting fortunes of both IS and HTS on the ground in Iraq and Syria. In the face of increasing loss of physical territory, the continued – and increasing – importance of online 'territory' should not be underestimated.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

- S1** Home Office materials: [text removed for publication] **f)** Home Office announcement, 'We need the help of social media companies', 26 Mar 2017 <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2017/03/26/home-secretary-we-need-the-help-of-social-media-companies/>; **g)** Home Office announcement, 'New technology revealed to help fight terrorist content online', 13 Feb 2018 <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-technology-revealed-to-help-fight-terrorist-content-online>
- S2** Sky News, 'Amber Rudd to meet tech firms in California over extremist content', 1 Aug 2017 <https://news.sky.com/story/amber-rudd-only-has-google-meetings-planned-as-she-urges-web-extremism-crackdown-10969423>
- S3** Parliamentary debate on 'Online Hate Speech', 30 Nov 2017 <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2017-11-30/debates/9ED5779E-DAA6-4DF6-A558-8C7E533A469E/OnlineHateSpeech>
- S4** BBC News, 'Theresa May warns tech firms over terror content', 20 Sept 2017 <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-41327816>
- S5** European Commission materials: [text removed for publication] **b)** European Parliament, 'Preventing the dissemination of terrorist content online – Legislative train schedule', 20 Nov 2020; **c)** Reed, A., Ingram, H. J. and Whittaker, J. (2017), 'Countering Terrorist Narratives'. Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs. Policy Department for Citizens' Rights and Constitutional Affairs. European Parliament.
- S6** UNCTED materials: [text removed for publication] **b)** UNCTED (2018), 'More support needed for smaller technology platforms to counter terrorist content', CTED Trends Alert, Nov 2018.
- S7** [text removed for publication]
- S8** Presentations and dissemination, Apr 2017 – 31 Dec 2020.
- S9** [text removed for publication]
- S10** Cruickshank, P. (2017) 'A View from the CT Foxhole', The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, September 2017, Vol 10, Issue 8.