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'YOU'RE AGAINST DAWLA, BUT YOU'RE LISTENING TO THEIR NASHEEDS?' APPROPRIATING JIHADI AUDIOVISUALITIES IN THE ONLINE STREETWORK PROJECT *JAMAL AL-KHATIB – MY PATH!*

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The Issue: Contesting Jihadi (Online) Recruitment

'I want to write a book, in order to prevent other young people from repeating the same mistakes I made.' These were the words of a young man in prison who is mentored by a social worker from our project team. Once part of the jihadi subculture in Vienna, Austria, he had since cut all ties to the group he was once part of and distanced himself from the worldview he had shared. He had turned his back on a scene that had been the starting point for the more than 320 Austrians who travelled or attempted to travel to Syria and Iraq to join the so-called Islamic State (IS) or other groups in the ongoing conflict (Bundesministerium für Inneres 2019). He had reflected his own fanaticisation process and had reached a point where he wanted to share his experiences with young people like himself, who for various reasons are susceptible targets for the recruitment efforts that had once convinced him. An initial project team, consisting of social workers and experts in Islamic sciences formed around his idea to disseminate his conclusions in order to prevent other young people following a similar path. The question facing our newly-formed project team was how such young people could be reached. Against this background, three main guiding principles were formulated in

the conceptualisation of the project: to use social media as means to communicate our message (1), to deconstruct the us vs them narratives, prevalent both in jihadi propaganda but also in mainstream discourse, in our message (2) and to use videos in which we appropriate audiovisual aesthetics of jihadi propaganda, as vehicle for our message. These principles were informed by the experiences made by the young man within the jihadi scene, the insights our social workers had gained in their day-to-day work, and the expertise of Islamic scholars, who were consulted from the very beginning of the project.[1]

It quite quickly became clear that the best way to reach our target audience, namely adolescents who are at risk of coming into contact with extremist content, as well as adolescents who already sympathise with jihadi groups and their narratives, would be to use social media as means of communication instead of a book. Accordingly, the first guiding principle was formulated: In order to prevent young people being convinced by jihadi recruitment efforts, we decided to employ the same means of communication as that used by extremists. Groups such as the so-called IS make extensive use of social media platforms in order to spread their propaganda, knowing that such media have the capacity to shape perceptions, manipulate cognition and divert behaviour to achieve a response that furthers their desired intent (Jowett and O'Donnel 2012: 7). Long before the so-called IS, Al-Qaeda was already using online forums to spread its ideology and most importantly to recruit sympathisers. Such actors are well aware of the impact of their online propaganda, in fact they consider it to be crucial to the whole movement, as Osama Bin Laden, founder of Al-Qaeda, and his successor Az-Zawahiri, have stressed (as cited in Al-Rawi 2018: 6). The American jihadi Omar Hammami who led the al-Shabab terrorist group once declared: 'The war of narratives has become even more important than the war of navies, napalm and knives' (Cottee 2015). Abu Bakr Naji, author of the book *Idārat at-Tawaḥḥush* (The Administration of Savagery) published in 2004, which aims to provide a solid strategy for establishing the caliphate, stresses the importance of media, describing jihadist struggles as 'media battles' (Najii 2006: 73). He identifies several crucial functions of media. Firstly, media can convince potential recruits to '[offer]

[1] Parts of this chapter have previously been published in e-beratungsjournal.net – Fachzeitschrift für Online Beratung und computervermittelte Kommunikation 15(1).

positive support and [adopt] a negative attitude toward those who do not join the ranks' (ibid. 55). Secondly, media should call upon people living outside the groups' territories 'to fly to the regions which we manage, particularly the youth after news of our transparency and truthfulness reached them' (ibid. 51). As part of the strategy, jihadis and their sympathisers exploit every media outlet possible, creating a complex network of content that is spread across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Telegram (Conway 2017: 77–98), employing a wide variety of multimedia including videos, memes, comics, video games, magazines, literature and a cappella-style songs with religious themes called *anāshīd* (plural of *nashīd*) (Piper 2008: 28–38). The decentralised nature of jihadi online content and its interlinked distribution across different platforms are considered key to maximising the number of people reached. However, it is neo-Salafist content that appears to come closest to dominating the search results on topics like Islam as such, or international conflicts involving the oppression of Muslims. Neo-Salafists mostly operate within the limits of the law and try to attract the attention of adolescents by addressing issues relevant to them and tapping into mainstream discourses. Not only in legitimising violence do their narratives overlap to a large extent with those of actors from the jihadi end of the spectrum, however (Said 2015). The experience of some of the young people who later became part of our project team confirms that these jihadi and neo-Salafist online recruitment efforts can be effective. In a conversation with his social worker, the young man who sparked the idea of the project recalled: 'The first time I heard about *Takfir* [the concept jihadi and neo-Salafist actors mainly refer to when distinguishing between "true Muslims" and "non-believers"] was in a propaganda video. When I heard it more often in videos featuring imams, I wanted to know more.' These kinds of remarks inspired our decision to use the same kinds of media to promote a very different message and to distribute our content across several social media platforms, mainly in the form of videos.

A second guiding principle that was formulated at the start of the project was to focus on particular aspects of the political socialisation of the young man, whose biography we wanted to share with our target audience. More precisely, we wanted to concentrate on the jihadi narratives that had been central in his fanaticisation processes. This principle was created in response

to the observation that groups such as the so-called IS produce content ranging 'from gruesome images of beheadings and calls of violence against *kafir* (infidels) to Instagram posts depicting jihadists who are cuddling with cats or are gleeful about access to Snickers and Funyuns' (Farag 2017: 848). Presenting such a diverse range of material is a strategy intended to speak to the needs and interests of different target groups, to appeal to anyone, from a young Muslim student to a thirty-year-old who feels alienated by the state or discriminated against. The success of the so-called IS derives to a large extent from its ability to address the grievances of different people at different stages of their lives (Farag 2017: 848). In 2010, Al Qaeda published the first issue of *Inspire* in English, one of many jihadi online magazines that are freely available on the internet (Ghambir 2014). Political myths play an important role in *Inspire*, especially when it constructs in-group and out-group identities (Kirke 2015: 284). One of Al-Qaeda's main narratives is the foretelling of an epic clash between the *Umma* and the evil Western 'Crusader' who is supported by treacherous 'puppet' regimes in the Middle East. The intention behind these kinds of narratives is clear: you either support your oppressed brothers and sisters by joining the fight (in self-defence) against the *Umma* or you become a traitor without morality who passively accepts the systemic persecution of Muslims. So-called IS's *Dabiq* magazine, first published in English in 2014, uses similar 'us versus them' argumentative structures to construct the good 'we' and bad 'they' (Berger 2017).

Othering, identity politics, polarising in- and out-group constructions are thus crucial to jihadi online propaganda and have been seen as key to the fanaticisation processes of adolescents in the West who decided to follow the call to jihad. That is because the 'us versus them' constructed in jihadi online propaganda is especially effective when it resonates with the everyday experiences of the receiver. 'Discrimination and abuse can give rise to anger that could be transformed into rage, hatred and a desire to take revenge' (Karagiannis 2012: 106), and so 'feelings of Islamic repression and massacre affect radicalization' (Githens-Mazer 2008: 550). The adolescents who joined our project later confirmed this interrelation when they talked to the social workers in our team. These observations made it clear that for the *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* project it would not suffice to try to counter the narratives of jihadis by simply spreading opposing content, but that it was also

necessary to fight or at least publicly denounce the roots of Muslim suffering as well as discrimination and racism in all its forms – especially in the wake of rising Islamophobia and right-wing nationalism in Europe. This 'unexpected solidarity' proved crucial in tackling the 'us versus them' narrative of jihadis that aims to convince vulnerable individuals that they are isolated in a hostile society and can count on no one except themselves or their 'Muslim brothers and sisters' (i.e. the construed in-group) in the fight against discrimination (by the out-group).

The third principle that guided our approach in reaching out to the target group was appropriation of the audiovisual aesthetics of the online propaganda of groups such as the so-called IS. Content created in order to offer alternatives to jihadi narratives and to reach out to their target audience needs to be as aesthetically appealing as the propaganda itself, while challenging the simplified world-view that the latter propagates. Appropriation must therefore be undertaken in terms of both content and (audiovisual) form. Propaganda videos produced by the so-called IS, for example, often draw on Western pop culture by incorporating certain stylistic features of Western movies, video games and so on, combined with quintessentially Islamic elements, such as *anāshīd* in the soundtrack. The videos showcase high-quality graphically violent footage, fast cuts between scenes and a generally 'dark' atmosphere. Even just the way the pick-up trucks were presented was enough to spark interest in these videos, according to the adolescents who later became part of the project team themselves. This made it clear that in order to contest these kinds of videos, high production standards would have to be achieved to produce videos with similar kinds of footage, general atmosphere and sounds to those disseminated by extremists, but with a completely different message. It was thus clear from the outset that a professional filmmaker would have to be consulted for the project.

Building on these three principles, *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*[2] has been developed: a project in which the internet is understood as an informal learning environment within which political education can be offered in

[2] The second season of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*, which was launched in the course of an online campaign between May and July 2019, was funded by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung and the Erasmus+ Role Model Initiative.

a manner that is geared towards young people's circumstances and experiences. The project is conceptualised as media-mediated youth work, whereby our specific approach to online preventative work combines aspects of both information dissemination (political education online) and online interaction (communication and discussion online).[3] The young man quoted at the beginning of this contribution, who initiated the project, was joined by other young participants including both young people who had dropped out of the jihadi scene and young people who, during the heyday of the so-called IS, had resisted jihadi narratives. In accordance with the project's peer-to-peer approach, the experiences of these young people have come to form the basis for the content of the campaigns. Based upon narrative biography work, videos featuring alternatives to jihadist and neo-Salafist propaganda are produced. The videos are posted on different social media platforms, communicated to the target audience via the fictional character Jamal al-Khatib, and discussed in the course of online streetwork.[4] The adolescent members of the project team are involved in every step, from text production to online streetwork. This participatory approach is central to our work. It guarantees a level of authenticity without which it would not be possible to reach the target group. Most importantly, however, working in the project offers participants the opportunity to reflect upon their own biographies, compare their experiences to those of other adolescents, and share their reflections with their peers and participate in a public discourse that is relevant to them. Reflecting on their political socialisation strengthens their sense of autonomy; combined with being afforded a chance to become self-efficient in a supportive social environment, those who are in the process of distancing themselves from the jihadi scene are supported sustainably (see also al-Mafaalani 2017; Deci and Ryan 1993). The adolescents were joined by professionals including

[3] Digital youth work can be subdivided into media-related and media-mediated youth work (Mayrhofer and Neuburg 2019: 8). Media-related youth work in turn can be subdivided into media pedagogical work, which aims to teach young people specific skills in the use of digital media, and creative-transformative media work, which seeks to develop competencies that enable young people to actively design digital spaces.

[4] Streetwork is a method in the field of social work, which is designed to establish contact with hard-to-reach target groups in public space. Online streetwork describes the transfer of this approach to the online sphere.

experts from fields such as Islamic studies, political science, sociology, psychology, psychotherapy, social work, educational science, filmmaking, digital content management and more, to create a richly diverse team. This multidisciplinary approach is essential to realising the goals that the project *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* sets out to reach: to deliver alternative narratives to those propagated by extremist groups to adolescents who are vulnerable to, or have already been influenced by, extremist propaganda; to initiate discussions and processes of self-reflection; and ultimately, to increase young adults' resources to cope with conflict, compromise and contradictions, and to foster their tolerance towards ambiguity.

The Project: *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*

Narrative Biography Work

The fundamental core of the project lies in the experiences and thoughts of the participating young adults. Throughout the text production phase, the young men are supported by social workers and experts in Islamic studies and other fields, who first conduct narrative biographical interviews and then moderate group discussions. In order to get to know the stories of these young people, narrative biography work has proved to be a very productive method. Generally speaking, it is a way of dealing with topics separately from the individual. Working with narratives serves to distance the person concerned from the events that they have lived through, helping them to take a more objective view. Thus, the sense of personal involvement is reduced to a certain degree, relieving the narrating person and facilitating a better environment for discussions. The method is empowering for narrators because it puts them, and especially their stories, at the centre of the discussion. Narrative biography work can be used to address different processes in life. In our case, the focus was on the political socialisation, the access to and exit from jihadi groups and, in particular, key moments in participants' pathways within these groups.[5]

[5] It is crucial to recognise the processual character of fanaticisation and the multiplicity of its causes. Neither a single event nor a single isolated aspect of life can be identified as exclusively responsible. Experiencing discrimination, although in itself very harsh, is much more likely to lead to the adoption of extremist views if it is linked to feelings of powerlessness. If

The first step is to offer narrators a safe space in which to share the narratives that have shaped their beliefs and their personal development. This gathering of experiences is undertaken with the accompaniment of other team members – social workers, experts on Islamic studies, psychologists or psychotherapists. At this stage, the team provide general psychological support to help narrators to discuss difficult circumstances, while also helping them to express themselves and to re-view and reframe certain aspects of the narratives they encountered in the course of their involvement in the jihadi scene. This involves the deconstruction of jihadi narratives and the effort to abstract specific needs that had motivated their interest in extremist narratives and the joining of groups. The next step is to work together to come up with alternative perspectives and different ways of framing certain aspects that were talked about.

As mentioned in the introduction, one factor in fanaticisation processes is the experience of recurrent discrimination and exclusion. Continually being subjected to racism in different contexts, such as in school or in police controls based upon racial profiling, can result in an overwhelming sense of powerlessness and humiliation: feelings that can lead an individual to experience disaffection from society (El-Mafaalani 2017: 91). In the course of narrative biography work, the young adults of the project team reported such incidents all too often in connection with police and teaching staff. They had almost always been singled out for such harassment on the basis of their cultural and religious identity, which led to feelings of frustration and anger towards the perpetrators, relative to whom they were in a socially subordinate position. They had rarely had opportunities to reflect on such incidents afterwards, and even when they had, the outcomes were often frustrating, with the victim all too often being blamed for the racism and actions of people in power. Institutionalised racism in Austria receives a great deal less critical attention from the country's popular media, however, than do narratives claiming Islam is a violent, misogynistic or anti-democratic religion. These narratives contradict the experiences of young people for whom

young people discover ways of expressing their frustration about racist narratives and other negative experiences productively, the likelihood of their being convinced by extremist rhetoric is diminished.

faith is an important part of their identity, and something they perceive as positive – seeing it constantly coming under attack from representatives of the *Dominanzgesellschaft* (dominant society) intensifies a sense of being excluded and isolated by the society they live in. A widespread response to these racist experiences is anger and disappointment, which makes the 'us versus them' narratives of extremist groups make sense. But even this anger can be channelled in ways that benefit not only the persons experiencing it, but society as a whole, by holding it accountable for negative developments within it. Anger is a powerful force that can open up a great window of opportunity if young adults are included in public debates that all too often take place without their being offered a chance to take part. Being left out creates a sense of powerlessness that is a further factor in increasing the propensity to fanaticisation. By embracing young people's strong feelings about society and their position within it, a great many different opportunities and ideas can be created. Jihadi groups recognise this potential and harness it, calling upon young people, who are already motivated to do so, to oppose the injustices they have experienced (Reicher and Lippe 2019: 60). The sense of powerlessness felt by such youth can also be countered by offering them opportunities to create narratives of their own and by involving them in wider discussions, which increases their perceived self-efficacy (Freires 1973). Hence, it is not enough to simply criticise the 'us versus them' narratives spread by extremist groups; those of the so-called *Dominanzgesellschaft* need to be subjected to similar scrutiny. This approach is central to our method, and is most visible in the narrative of the video *Takfir* from the second season of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*.

The diversity of the team is key to the way our project works. All team members recognise and highly value the multiplicity of skills and expertise contributed by other members. Input from different professional experts is a prerequisite for high-quality, nuanced and differentiated results. The method necessarily involves instigating situations in which young people may experience flashbacks or other psychological stress as they recall highly charged emotional moments from their own lives. These difficult situations demand a highly sensitive approach and support from very considerate, dedicated, experienced and well-qualified personnel. Talking about turbulent experiences can (re-)trigger feelings like fear, isolation or anger. Irrespective of

Table 9.1 Narrative Framework of *Takfir*, Indicating the Deconstruction and Reframing of Extremist Narratives

Takfir Extremist narrative	Discriminating narrative	Alternative narrative
Dualistic world-view '*Kuffar*' (disbelievers) vs 'Muslims' as a central concept '*Kuffar*' oppose you because of your Muslim identity Divisive theology Undifferentiated judgement of people based upon identity	'*Kuffar*' is a derogatory term used to refer to non-Muslims '*Takfir*' is a (political) method to separate people Undifferentiated judgement of people based upon identity Muslims oppose non-Muslims because of their beliefs	Only God can know whether someone is a believer or not My opinion towards people is based on the way they treat others, not their religion or identity God does not want the division of humankind

the objectives of the process in relation to the project, there must always be time and willingness to respond to the narrators' needs and, if necessary, immediately take a pause to guide the narrator to a position in which they can somewhat distance themselves from their story, in order to prevent re-traumatisation. The social workers in our team are indispensable. They see it as their role to work towards the empowerment and inclusion of excluded groups within society and to fulfil the duty of political education. One key objective to this end is to debunk extremist narratives and to show young people that serious issues and societal problems can be addressed in ways that do not have to be based on violence and discrimination.

Appropriating Jihadi Aesthetics – A Means to an End

In order to adapt the texts created in the course of narrative biography work into videos, the team's filmmaker guides the adolescents to develop a shooting script together. A lot of thought is put into this process in order to guarantee the right look and feel of the videos. This is essential if our videos are to compete with the highly professional material produced by terrorist groups such as the so-called IS. The group uses film language to develop the arguments they want to convey, discovering audiovisual techniques that can add meaning and enable them to deliver their message to the target audience. Since this target audience includes young people who have already come into contact with jihadi propaganda, we have made it our mission to appropriate some of the audiovisual codes and strategies used in such videos. These

Figure 9.1 Point-of-view in IS-produced video (first image) and over-shoulder shot in *Jamal al-Khatib*; both are commonly seen in computer games. Note the different focus: IS – the fight lies ahead; Jamal – confusion in the middle of a fight. © IS Propaganda; © turn.

include the use of exaggerated aesthetics, graphical elements, sound design, *anāshīd*,[6] character building, episodic structure, presentation of religious content in sound and graphics, and varying cinematographic styles from handheld documentary-style camera to complex effect shots to first-person shooter sequences like those in video games (Figure 9.1).

We wanted to appropriate such codes in order to attract the attention of the kinds of young people who find jihadi content appealing and are likely to spend hours watching it. To that end, the filmmaker reviewed selected

[6] For a detailed examination of other appropriations of IS *anāshīd* by different actors see Dick and Fuhrmann (Chapter 12).

propaganda material in order to identify the audiovisual devices employed and was advised further in terms of content by academics and social workers. The audiovisual codes presented in the first season were largely religious, and featured elements commonly found in productions by the so-called IS (e.g. quotations from the Quran, *anāshīd*). In the case of the Quran quotations, the young participants proposed certain rules of presentation that we adhered to strictly, such as no accompanying music, intricate graphic borders and an impressive visual design (Figure 9.2). The key shot that we developed for presenting the protagonist Jamal, in which he approaches the camera head on, is the same as that used in many recruitment videos produced by the so-called IS as well as numerous other military recruitment videos (Figure 9.3). We decided that Jamal should walk steadily and consistently maintain a camera height of almost eye level to match that of the viewer. This shot is used recurrently in every episode. The audiovisual atmosphere that accompanies Jamal is created by techniques including fast-paced editing, hard and stylised contrasts and associative sequences that support the voiceover on an emotional level. In the second season, we adapted a few of these approaches and added others that are frequently used in the audiovisual material consumed by young people (e.g. first- and third-person camera angles). We hoped that these techniques would enable us to present young people with alternative ways of dealing with the problems in their lives to those put forward by extremist groups.

Yet the most important aspect of the filmmaker's work was not addressing style, dramatic structure, series branding or audiovisual codes. One of our priorities was to effectively establish the central character and the world he inhabits, to define his goals and his needs. The thematic content of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*, as well as the stagings, were proposed by those directly affected by the themes addressed. In order to catch the initial attention of the target audience, the videos' aesthetic elements had to be appealing, but if the videos had then failed to address relevant issues, to speak with an authentic voice, with character development and the establishment of a plausible world in which it all plays out, they would have only catered to the eye and probably failed to hold viewers' interest, let alone stimulate conversation. After various texts had been created by the young people, they were developed collaboratively into screenplays. The process involved

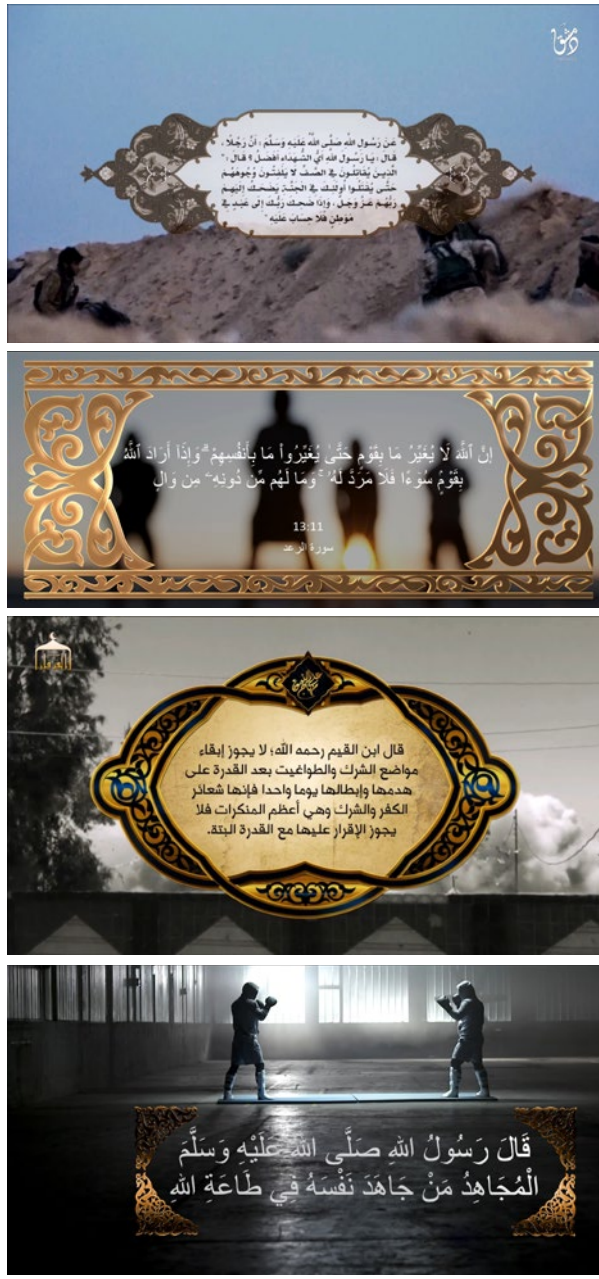

Figure 9.2 Quran quotations included in IS propaganda (images 1 and 3) and Quran quotations featured in *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* videos (images 2 and 4). Images 1 and 3: © IS Propaganda; images 2 and 4 © turn.

Figure 9.3 Protagonists approach the camera in IS propaganda videos (images 1 and 3) and in *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* videos (images 2 and 4). Images 1 and 3: © IS Propaganda; images 2 and 4 © Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

singling out a specific theme for each video, combining different storylines and reducing redundancies. In a series of meetings, the screenplays were reviewed together with the young participants. Then each scene was broken down to identify requirements in terms of location, props and costumes, and content. The young participants discussed what they would consider authentic locations, appropriate attire and further accessories. During the shoot, the participants who were not acting in a particular scene were given a monitor so that they could give feedback on what was being filmed. Their insights, based upon their own viewing habits and preferences, as well as the social workers' knowledge, helped those filming to produce videos which are authentic down to the tiniest detail.

The result of this process is Jamal al-Khatib, who appears visually as a black shadow; a silhouette without a face. There is no way of knowing who he is, but viewers recognise the world he moves through, the way he talks, the problems he faces, the desires he has and what drives him to walk confrontationally towards the camera. Since the project is driven by the thoughts and experiences of young people, issues were addressed from their perspective, which allowed us to reach other young people with a similar background and prevented us from replicating the discourse from the perspective of the *Dominanzgesellschaft*. The production process includes, among other tasks: defining a negotiation level (personal/with society/religious and secular); the creation of a visual world in look and feel, with an identifiable location and social context; building a sustainable episodic structure with recurrent key visuals (live action, graphics and sound); incorporating audiovisual codes familiar to the target audience (e.g. *anāshīd*, certain graphic arrangements, spoken voice, authentic costumes) to establish an emotional landscape; and including dramatic structure and character development underscored by visual features. All these elements, and the choices made in order to achieve them, transform the themes, messages and content into a story.

The everyday experiences of discrimination described by adolescents in the course of narrative biography work are taken up visually in the video *Takfir* from the second season of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* (Figure 9.4), for example. The 'us versus them' mindset that is established by propaganda produced by so-called IS is cinematically expressed by staging Jamal in sharp focus with a narrow depth-of-field so that his surroundings dissolve into

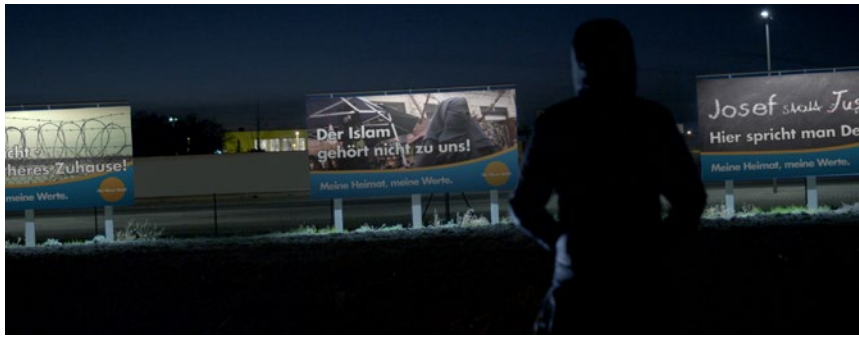

Figure 9.4 Visual representation of the everyday discrimination experienced by young Muslims in Austria shown as fictional (but plausible) election campaign posters. In English, the slogans would read: 'Closed Border = Safe Home'; 'Islam does not belong to us/There's no place for Islam here'; 'Josef not Yusuf –We speak German here!'. The fictional party slogan means 'My homeland, my values'. © Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung.

blurriness. His in-group, by contrast, appears homogeneous, bound by a common cause (Figure 9.5).

It is necessary to use cinematic techniques in order to produce videos that tell stories that people will want to watch, to package the content in ways that will engage those receiving it, but the main and most important part of the project is working together with young people. Letting them find their own themes and motives and keeping the process within a framework that enables them to express their thoughts in a way that is participatory and results in a product they can be proud of – dark and hopeful, threatening and compromising, angry and forgiving, always conflicting and never simple – is the essence of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*.

Online streetwork

The text and script production, as well as the shooting of the videos, is followed by an online campaign, in the course of which the videos are released. However, in contrast to other, alternative-narrative or counter-narrative campaigns, our online campaign does not end with the release of the videos. Our aim is not simply to deliver content that the target audience accepts and adopts. We want the adolescents to whom we reach out to critically challenge the themes and ideas addressed in our material, so that they form their own opinions rather than just unquestioningly taking on ours. To achieve this,

Figure 9.5 The visual rendition of the 'us versus them' narrative. © Bundeszentrale für politsche Bildung.

we strive to initiate discussion and debate in the comment sections under our videos. This is where our online streetwork method comes into play. Just as some social workers take to the streets, and spend time in parks and public places in order to reach their target groups, online streetworkers dive into digital spaces to get in contact with young people. Instead of shopping precincts, social media platforms are visited; instead of hanging around offline meeting points, they are present in groups in messenger services. In contrast to approaches in which youth workers use their own profiles to enter different online groups and forums in order to communicate with their target groups, the project *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* does content-based online streetwork. Like an offline youth club, the *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* campaign platforms, with their own commenting and messenger functions, serve as a primary meeting and communication space for the targeted young

audiences. The outreach aspect of this approach is realised firstly by working in the digital realm, which transcends geographical borders,[7] and secondly by the target-oriented distribution of our contents on the internet, whereby we take measures to get in contact with hard-to-reach dialogue groups by reaching out to their online bubbles and echo chambers.

The *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* videos address young people in general, but in particular, young people who already have an affinity for extremist or fanatical groups and who are highly likely to reject projects sponsored by the state out of principle. For this reason, we refrain from clearly marking the videos as the work of a preventative project when we present them on distribution channels (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube). At a second glance, however, the project can be recognised as such, and online streetworkers respond transparently and openly when questions are raised.

During the online phase of the project, our team of online streetworkers seeks to instigate discussion of the videos' content in a one-to-many, many-to-many approach. They also create opportunities for individuals to move into a safer discussion space, that is, to communicate via private message (one to one), which enables direct relationships to be established and personalised counselling to be offered. The goal is to establish a common ground and a respectful trustworthy relationship, which are prerequisites for changing behaviour patterns in the young adults from our target group (Weilnböck and Uhlmann 2018). In our project, interventions are undertaken not only by social workers but also by scholars of Islamic studies, religious educators, sociologists, political scientists, social educators and peers. In peer-to-peer interventions, young project team members take part in some of the online discussions on the various channels. Which particular mode of discursive intervention is chosen, and which member of the team takes on the main responsibility for communicating with a particular individual or group, varies according to the person or group addressed and the kinds of questions or issues discussed.

Our work is project-based and temporary, which means that we are only able to maintain contacts established with young social media users during

[7] Geography does not become irrelevant, however, as some national legislations limit access to certain digital spaces and the exchange of certain information and opinions via the internet.

the so-called online phase, which runs for a limited period. Therefore, one regrettable characteristic of our work is that we are unable to offer permanent supportive relationships via the net. Nonetheless, a large number of young people have used our channels to contact us expressing their need for advice and support. This shows that it is possible to reach young members of our target audience via content-based online streetwork, and that youth workers can successfully establish online relations that are trusted by the respective young people. We have set up a network of offline and online institutions that enable us, if necessary, to mediate contacts with specialised counselling services.

The Campaign: Can Target Groups be Reached by Appropriating Jihadi Audiovisualities?

Having described the project, its background, methods and implementation, we will now evaluate whether appropriating jihadi audiovisualities in our videos resulted in a successful online campaign and, most importantly, whether we successfully reached the desired target groups.[8] The four videos of the first season received 200,000 views during the online phase. During the campaign for the second season, we reached around 450,000 views. It has to be noted, however, that we encountered certain obstacles: during the first campaign, our Facebook account was blocked for a week, and in both seasons, the option to advertise our videos was restricted on all platforms. This might suggest that we did so well in appropriating jihadi audiovisualities that platform staff felt it prudent to impose restrictions. All in all, we achieved a satisfying number of views and interactions. However, while great awareness indicates a certain degree of success, the principal question for us was whether we could win the sustained attention and critical engagement of our specific target groups.

In order to obtain more in-depth information on that question, we analysed the 'likes' of Facebook accounts that had 'liked' the *Jamal al-Khatib*

[8] Since this contribution focuses on the appropriation of jihadi audiovisualities in an online campaign, it will assess the degree to which we achieved our aims in terms of reaching the specific online target group. The results of the evaluation of the offline phase were published in April 2020. The report can be downloaded on www.turnprevention.com.

Facebook account.[9] The analysis of a sample of 500 such accounts revealed that about one fifth also had 'Pierre Vogel.de' and 'Ansaar International e.V.' among their 'likes'.[10] These are the Facebook accounts of a German-speaking preacher and an organisation, both of which can be related to the neo-Salafist spectrum.[11] Other popular Facebook accounts were 'Generation Islam' (approximately 15%) and 'Realität Islam' (Islam Reality) (approximately 8%). Together with demographic data about our viewers provided by the social media platforms, these numbers indicated that we had reached at least one part of the online target group, namely adolescents who are at risk of getting into contact with extremist content via search requests concerning topics that are relevant to them because they relate to their circumstances and experiences. That is to say, Facebook accounts such as 'Generation Islam' and 'Realität Islam' are quite successful online initiatives that have been classified as Islamist and are associated with Hizb ut-Tahir, which has been declared illegal by the German government and several others (Schölermann 2018). The group uses the internet intensively for its activism. Part of its online strategy is the organisation of online campaigns such as #NichtohnemeinKopftuch (notwithoutmyheadscarf) in order to bring its narratives to the attention of young Muslims. It takes up issues that are relevant to its target audience, typically incidents of anti-Muslim racism, to initiate discussion. The next stage, however, reveals its true agenda: part of the messages it typically puts forward are 'us versus them' narratives, referred to throughout this contribution, which it harnesses to exacerbate the polarisation of society. Its target group are young Muslims who are interested in questions concerning their faith, for which they seek answers online, and who may be susceptible to manipulation (Institute for Strategic Dialogue 2018).

[9] This relates to the first season of *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!*. We have been undertaking a similar analysis for the second season, the results of which were made available in April 2020 and can be downloaded on www.turnprevention.com

[10] A 'like' does not indicate that the user who 'likes' has been fully convinced by the narratives we present. However, it is an indication that our contents were well-received, or at least that the respective user wished to receive updates relating to our online campaign.

[11] Interestingly, we mainly found that accounts from the neo-Salafist spectrum were 'liked', and not ones that were associated with the jihadi subculture. This is probably because the latter mainly operate on more clandestine social network platforms such as Telegram, while the former tend to prioritise public visibility in order to reach a wider audience.

In order to find out more about the extent to which we had been able to reach our target group, we also conducted an exploratory social network analysis of the 'likes' displayed on the public profiles of the followers of the *Jamal al-Khatib – My Path!* campaign account (de Nooy et al. 2018). The results suggest that we had successfully reached an important part of our online target group – that which was already frequenting online spaces associated with the jihadi or neo-Salafist subculture and thus was familiar with online settings characterised by extremist content. This was indicated by clusters of 'likes' identified by the social network analysis of the sample. One cluster comprised Facebook accounts associated with neo-Salafist circles, such as that of the Salafist preacher mentioned above. More precisely, the analysis revealed that half of the 20 per cent of the *Jamal al-Khatib* followers who had also 'liked' 'Pierre Vogel.de' had also 'liked' the 'Ansaar International e.V.' Facebook page. Also, 'Generation Islam' (31) was among the 25 most popular Facebook pages of the *Jamal al-Khatib* followers who had 'liked' 'Pierre Vogel.de'. When the most popular Facebook pages of *Jamal al-Khatib* followers who had 'liked' the account 'Realität Islam' are examined, this trend becomes even more evident. Of those 40 followers, 27 had also 'liked' 'Ansaar International eV.' and 24 'Pierre Vogel.de', which represent the two most popular Facebook pages of those accounts. Assuming what cannot be taken for granted, that there were actual persons behind these accounts, this finding means that while scrolling through their news feeds, these people would have been regularly confronted with content posted to a large extent by accounts that disseminate Islamist and neo-Salafist material. From the moment that they clicked 'like' on the *Jamal al-Khatib* campaign account, our content, including the alternative narratives produced by the project team, also became part of their Facebook timelines.[12]

Taken together, the three guiding principles that we formulated at the beginning of our project have proved vital to the success of our online alternative narrative campaigns. Harnessing social media in order to communicate

[12] When drawing conclusions on the basis of the exploratory social network analysis, it must be remembered that a 'like' on Facebook does not necessarily mean that the 'liker' is actually a sympathiser with the respective preacher or organisation. However, at the very least, the accounts mentioned above are ones that people interested in, if not convinced by, jihadi or neo-Salafist narratives could be expected to 'like'.

alternative narratives to those disseminated by extremist groups has not only allowed us to reach our target audience (defined above), but has also enabled us to establish contact and initiate discussions of the issues raised in the videos. The decentralised online setting and the limited time period available for building relationships imposed upon us by the campaign structure make it hard to be certain how many viewers and commentators were inspired to engage in processes of self-reflection as a result of our work. Nonetheless, it can be assumed that many more people than the number who actively responded by commenting or contacting us were reached in some way and followed the discussions without getting directly involved in them. Furthermore, basing the content of our videos on material developed in narrative biography work proved a highly effective strategy. In order for the narrative of our main character to engage adolescents from our target groups, they needed to identify with him; the issues and experiences addressed in the videos had to be similar to the issues and experiences of the viewers. Key to achieving this in the course of our project was our collaboration with young people who had themselves made such experiences: young people who had encountered propaganda material disseminated by so-called IS but resisted it, as well as some who had formerly been active in the jihadi scene. These young participants themselves expressed their strong motivation to take action against extremist online propaganda and to participate in public debates about it, while also expressing their frustration that they rarely found opportunities to do so. Two shitstorms during the second season, that is, co-ordinated efforts to spam our channels with propaganda disguised as harmless arguments, suggest that addressing the narratives the young adults had come across on the jihadi scene and combining them with the right keywords and hashtags was an important factor in reaching the target audience. These shitstorms were the answers of extremist actors to our reframing of certain aspects of their ideology. Our appropriation of audiovisual codes employed in material produced by extremist organisations such as so-called IS was also a significant factor in ensuring that our material caught and sustained the attention of our target audience. Examples of similar campaigns in this field suggest that regardless of how well-researched the content of an alternative narrative or political education online campaign is, or how convincing the arguments it formulates, if the material is not presented in a way that (audiovisually) appeals to the target group, the

campaign is unlikely to be effective. For our videos to engage adolescents who are at risk of being influenced by the narratives of extremists, the right images had to be selected, the right music had to play in the background and the narrator had to speak the right kind of language. Many of the comments posted in response referred to the look and feel conveyed by the videos. One viewer was particularly confused by the combination of extremist audiovisual codes and unexpected narratives. He asked: 'You're against Dawla, but you're listening to their nasheeds?' His question indicates that our strategy achieved what we had set out to do: to instil a sense of ambiguity by combining familiar elements with new ideas, an ambiguity that opens space for self-reflection and the critical reconsideration of concepts and beliefs.

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