

An Institutional Analysis of British CVE Propaganda Policy, 2006-2019

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0. Preface

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This is the place in the North West of England

It's ace, it's the best and the songs that we sing

From the stands, from our bands set the whole planet shaking

Our inventions are legends! There's nowt we can't make and

So we make brilliant music. We make brilliant bands

We make goals that make souls leap from seats in the stands

And we make things from steel and we make things from cotton

And we make people laugh, take the mick summat rotten

And we make you at home and we make you feel welcome

And we make summat happen, we can't seem to help it

And if you're looking for history then yes, we've a wealth

But the Manchester way is to make it yourself

And make us a record, a new number one

And make us a brew while you're up, love. Go on!

And make us feel proud that you're winning the league

And make us sing louder and make us believe it

that this is the place that has helped shape the world

And that this the place where a Manchester girl

Name of Emmeline Pankhurst from the streets of Moss Side

Led a Suffragette City with sisterhood pride

And this is the place with appliance of science

We're on it, atomic, we strut with defiance

In the face of a challenge we always stand tall

Mancunians in union delivered it all

Such as housing and libraries, and health, education

And unions and co-ops, the first railway station

So we're sorry! Bear with us! We invented commuters!

But we hope you forgive us – we invented computers!

And this is the place Henry Royce strolled with Rolls

And we've rocked and we've rolled with our own Northern Soul

And so this is the place to do business, then dance

Where go-getters and goal setters know they've a chance

And this is the place where we first played as kids

And me Mam lived and died here, she loved it she did

And this is the place where our folks came to work

Where they struggled in puddles, they hurt in the dirt

And they built us a city. They built us these towns

And they coughed on the cobbles to the deafening sound

Of the steaming machines and the screaming of slaves

They were scheming for greatness, they dreamed to their graves

And they left us a spirit, they left us a vibe

The Mancunian Way to survive and to thrive

And to work and to build, to connect and create and

Greater Manchester's greatness is keeping it great

And so this is the place now we've kids of our own

Some are born here, some drawn here but we all call it home

And they've covered the cobbles, but they'll never defeat

All the dreamers and schemers who still teem through these streets

Because this is a place that has been through some hard times

Oppressions, recessions, depressions and dark times

But we keep fighting back with Greater Manchester spirit

Northern grit, northern wit in Greater Manchester's lyrics

And there's hard times again in these streets of our city

But we won't take defeat and we don't want your pity

Because this a place where we stand strong together

With a smile on our face, Mancunians Forever

Because this is the place in our hearts, in our homes

Because this is the place that's a part of our bones

'Cos Greater Manchester gives us such strength from the fact

That this is the place. We should give something back.

Always remember. Never forget. Forever Manchester

Tony Walsh (aka Longfella)

Don't Look Back in Anger



**This thesis is dedicated to the memory of the victims
of the Manchester Arena Attack**

22/05/2017

Executive Summary

This thesis is an institutionalist examination of the development of British CVE propaganda policy from 2006 to 2019. The central focus of examination is the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU), established under Gordon Brown in 2007. However, it also investigates the development of associated policy for censorship of extremist material. The driving aim of this analysis is to ascertain how the British state has adapted itself to the newly dominant modes of political and social communication, undergirded by technological advance in terms of hardware, software, platforms and ever-widening participation. Through careful institutionalist observation, the thesis seeks to disentangle this policy evolution to extract and separate intra-governmental and intra-organizational factors from the inescapable demands of a rapidly shifting information economy. Such an operation allows us to make contributions in two complimentary fields. First, it reveals the processes that guide policy evolution in British security matters. Secondly, such a separation allows us to identify the degree to which such changes have been technologically determined – either by facilitating gentle experimentation, or through reversing underlying policy assumptions. In simpler terms, we are not only interested in how the British state has reshaped itself to face the challenges of the internet, but how the internet itself has implacably bent the British state to its own force and logics. Doing so can illuminate many threads relevant to scholarly attention. We can appreciate more fully the process of how new technological realities are negotiated by the British state, the internal policy-making process, and by extension how this process has impacted the political culture of the United Kingdom.

To achieve this goal, this thesis adopts a blended institutionalist approach, wedded to an innovative conceptualisation of propaganda. The thesis conceptualises propaganda as an ongoing imperative in modern society, and

as such directs its focus to the organisational basis that brings political communication into the real world, rather than viewing propaganda as solely the final products themselves. The investigation of this policy area is carried out through utilising the historical institutionalist frameworks of path dependency and critical junctures, and from this point employing neo-institutionalist conceptualisations of coercive, mimetic and normative isomorphism to explain the processes and influences that guide and constitute the end points of change. A thorough investigation of this kind reveals both how the institutional mores and patterns of the British state collided with new technological (and by extension, geopolitical and cultural) dynamics that surrounded it.

In the first instance, we can observe established patterns to the British government's approach to managing policy evolution in propaganda policy. Following a change in governmental leadership, or terrorist success, coercive pressure emanates from senior cabinet leaders, spurring mimetic isomorphic alterations in policy. In these junctures, CVE propaganda policy has reached for working practices from other areas of the British government (in particular from attempts to eradicate child sexual abuse) and other state propaganda organisations. At the same time, we can identify normative isomorphic changes, as RICU strengthened its connections to the private sector, and imported leadership with greater public relations experience. This process continued until 2017, when RICU's growing international prestige among other similar organisations, and its resulting position as a source for mimetic isomorphism, shielded it from restructuring. RICU's protection from reform lends great support to institutionalist assertions as to the competition for legitimacy among competing organisations in similar fields.

The position and authority of RICU itself also followed a continuous trajectory in terms of its mission, responsibilities and authority. From its inception, RICU has indeed only been a sub-unit or piece of the wider propaganda policy picture. However, during each successive stage of strategic reformulation,

RICU has found itself an evermore central cog in the wider propaganda bureaucracy, taking over greater powers to commission and editorialise propaganda output. In 2007, RICU was founded as a consultative body that sought to harmonise government communications on security and terrorism with researched best practice. As time went on, the agency took on greater responsibility for commissioning new material, until it became an effective command and control centre that oversaw the entire propaganda cycle. As part of this process, connections to the private sector were increased (through the awarding of contracts, or the establishment of formal mechanisms for consultation) while civil society actors were increasingly excluded from policy formation. These civil society groups were originally provided seed funding by government for projects considered to be worthwhile. As time went on, these groups were offered 'technical support' to professionalise their offering; by 2014, they were increasingly demanded to support prefabricated government campaigns. By 2016, RICU held a firm grasp of editorial control over propaganda output, even when this output was disseminated through accounts outwardly run by these campaign groups. The consistent movement down these trajectories – combined with the recurring isomorphic patterns outlined above – indicate a form of path dependency evident within critical junctures themselves. This path-dependent approach to executing strategic reformulation may provide a new perspective on analysing government policy shifts in the security arena.

Having identified the institutional and intragovernmental forces at play that governed RICU's juddering evolution as an organisation within the state, we can begin to disentangle these internal determinants of policy change from those enabled or enforced from outside. In the first instance, we must acknowledge that these technological factors could only come into play once the requisite conditions for internal reformulation of policy had been met. Institutional factors preceded technological influence into the state, though at times the shifting balance of communication power would spur policy change.

However, RICU's engagement with this new balance of communicative power was consistently mediated and guided by its position within the British state. Its relationship with the new surveillance capacities afforded by WWW protocol – on which the government's messaging, targeting and censorship strategies are based - was determined by its ability to either gain backdoor access to the records of Internet Service Providers (ISPs) or through building on capacities developed by the security services; even both. The approach to censorship which emerged in early 2019 itself was shaped by the prosecutorial decision-making of the Crown Prosecution Service.

In our analysis, we have identified technological determinants within each of the three propaganda functions – the crafting of persuasive messaging; the targeting of individuals or groups to receive this messaging; and state approaches to censoring undesirable extremist material.

In terms of its propaganda output, RICU's messaging has been relatively stable, with a focus on unifying traditional 'British' and Islamic values. Emphasis concerning the predominance of British or liberal values has undulated over time, in accordance with shifts in government leadership. However, the growing centrality of social media platforms to political and cultural dialogue has allowed far greater flexibility in terms of persuasive strategy, pursuing differing strategies in accordance with any perceived 'vulnerability' to extremism, rather than a homogenous one-size approach characteristic of the legacy mass media. Further, the use of social media accounts to pull together an ideal narrative and subjectivity for British Muslims has accelerated and embedded a mission to instil national unity through the simulation of an idealised liberal British Muslim identity which others are encouraged to emulate.

Technological factors have played a strong determining role in the process of crafting and disseminating RICU's messages. The packet-switching structure of the world-wide-web protocol, alongside the physical infrastructure that

supports it, has facilitated the use of personal browsing histories to determine who is targeted with RICU propaganda. The granular nature of this data, and the government's right to hold it, is the main determining factor in the establishment of RICU's multi-tier targeting paradigm, and their corresponding propaganda products.

Finally, the practice of censorship has been fundamentally altered by the arrival and predominance of internet-based political discourse. The British government's approach to this aspect of propaganda policy has been uneven and reticent. Faced with the seemingly insoluble problems of crossing jurisdictions, and identification of users, government has tended to back away from censorship issues, informed by the criticism levelled at New Labour over civil liberties concerns. This combination of technological rebalancing and institutional sheepishness has produced a new situation, where claims to free speech are *de facto* no longer treated as political rights, but as economic privileges extended by private companies. As prosecution tactics have shifted, aligned with extension of existing statutes that arrived late in this timeframe, the stance of political rights to speech and freedom of conscience have been upended. To solve the jurisdictional issues and identification problems it faced, the Government has reversed the locus of censorship criminality from the disseminator to the consumer; criminalising the possession – or even viewing – of extremist material without concern for any desire to publish it.

How RICU and its partners have brought to bear the authority, power and responsibilities of the state to new technological realities reveals a good deal about the current state and development of British political culture. The most obvious is in terms of surveillance. As widely acknowledged, the power of surveillance has been put to use heavily in advertising, with the data generated on then sold by social media platforms. RICU largely copied this formula. Yet its position within the British state has transformed its significance. In its quest to micro-target messages to 'vulnerable' young adults, the agency has initiated a new ongoing political practice – that of the democratic British government

consistently monitoring its population to ensure that their ideological and political beliefs do not venture from approved territory. When combined with later developments in censorship policy, this monitoring now extends into direct criminal investigation for consuming information that the government deems undesirable.

Secondly, the government's approach to engaging with its Muslim population and civil society groups continues to drive forward the murky waters of online discourse. While the tactical reasoning behind such an approach is sound, it risks further muddying the political waters. Hostile state actors such as the Russian Federation operate along these lines as a matter of course, in a deliberate attempt to undermine the legitimacy and trustworthiness of official sources. To engage in broadly similar activities, therefore, runs the risk of further pushing society away from an online arena that can be genuinely informative and healthy.

Research Questions

Central Research Question

What does the development of RICU and its connected bureaucracy reveal about the evolution of British CVE in the modern communications environment?

Subsidiary Questions

How and why has RICU and its connected bureaucracy reformed itself since 2006?

How has RICU's discursive strategy to combat Salafist extremism developed, and what outside influences have influenced this development?

How has the new communications environment reshaped the British state's approach to censorship?

List of Abbreviations

ACPO	Association of Chief Police Officers
AFMA	Armed Forces Muslim Association
AI	Artificial intelligence
ARK	Audience, Research & Knowledge, RICU
ATM	Anti-Tribalism Movement
AQ	Al Qaida
BBC	British Broadcasting Corporation
CA	Cambridge Analytica
CCP	Chinese Communist Party
CES	Counter Extremism Strategy
CNN	Cable News Network
COI	Central Office of Information
CPS	Crown Prosecution Service
CT	Counter Terrorism
CTIRU	Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit
CVE	Countering Violent Extremism
EAU	Extremism Analysis Unit
EU	European Union
FAST	Families Against Stress and Trauma
FCO	Foreign and Commonwealth Office
FMO	Federation of Muslim Organisations
FOI	Freedom of Information
GCHQ	Government Communications Headquarters
HMG	Her Majesty's Government
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
IP	Intellectual Property
IPD	Information Policy Department
IRA	Irish Republican Army
IRD	Information Research Department
ISIL	Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant
ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria

JSCHR	Joint Select Committee on Human Rights
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
MEND	Muslim Engagement and Development
MOD	Ministry of Defence
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGO	Non governmental organisations
NPCC	National Police Chief's Council
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education
OSCE	Organisation for Security Cooperation in Europe
OSCT	Office for Security and Counter Terrorism
OSINT	Open Source Intelligence
OYE	Open Your Eyes
PM	Prime Minister
PR	Public Relations
PVE	Prevention of Violent Extremism
RAN	Radical Awareness Network, European Commission
RICU	Research Information and Communications Unit
RICU-I	Research Information and Communications Unit - international
RIO	Regional Information Office
SOCMINT	Social Media Intelligence
TDI	Target Detection Identifier
TUC	Trade Union Congress
URL	Uniform resource locator (web address)
USIO	United States Information Office
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
VNSA	Violent non-state actor
WWW	Worldwide web

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1. Introduction & Methods

On 20th July 2015, Prime Minister David Cameron delivered a speech on countering 'Islamist extremism'. The venue – Ninestiles School in Birmingham – had been chosen to highlight the school's "commitment to British values" (Cameron 2015: Online). The previous year, the 'Trojan Horse' scandal had erupted and garnered significant and alarmed attention in the national press. The conspiracy to seize control of local schools in Birmingham by Salafist extremists had resulted in an inquiry into the failings of local government and the Department for Education. The speech, which laid out the key proposals of the new Conservative-majority government in counter-extremism, ended with Cameron issuing a call to arms against the forces of Salafism in Britain and beyond, something Cameron described as the "struggle of our generation":

"Britain has never been cowed by fear or hatred or terror. Our Great British resolve faced down Hitler; it defeated Communism; it saw off the IRA's assaults on our way of life. Time and again we have stood up to aggression and tyranny. We have refused to compromise on our values or to give up our way of life. And we shall do so again. Together we will defeat the extremists and build a stronger and more cohesive country, for our children, our grandchildren and for every generation to come."

(Cameron 2015: Online)

While many academic studies and sensationalist journalism has highlighted various aspects of this struggle, little to no serious long-term analysis has been carried out on the application of these lofty goals into concrete policy. This thesis seeks to fill this vital gap in knowledge, and evaluate how this fight has been carried out within the institutions of the British government. Doing so is a vital academic task, for several reasons. First, it will provide greater clarity

into the practice of counter terrorism in the United Kingdom. Second, it will allow scholarship to appreciate how security policy develops within the machinery of Whitehall, and how policy reformulation is triggered, designed, and executed. Thirdly, it will correct the serious disproportionality of academic work on terrorism and the media, which to this day is heavily weighted towards the output and workings of non-state actors and authoritarian regimes. Lastly, by analysing how the British government has adapted to the ever-quickenning pace of innovation in media technologies, we can gain penetrating insight into what the new media environment has meant for our security, the development of political consciousness, and the feasibility of liberal democratic ideals and principles in the information era.

This thesis examines the trajectory of British government counter-extremism propaganda policy since 2006. As discussed below, and in later chapters, such a decision reflects the use of censorship to aid and abet outward-facing communications to shape the minds of the public, and thus our analysis starts with the efforts of the Blair government to suppress speech and ideas sympathetic to al-Qaida. However, the central focus of this analysis is the work and development of the Research Information and Communications Unit (RICU). This agency, set up during the premiership of Gordon Brown, has found itself at the centre of the ideological struggle that Cameron laid out in 2015. It has grown both in size and importance within the Home Office, has shifted from a consultant to active participant, overseen the redirection of policy to online media, and straddled the transition between al-Qaida and the emergent ISIL-Daesh as the chief flag-bearers for international Salafism.

Examining the institutional evolution of RICU and its conjoined apparatus is an important and necessary undertaking for contemporary scholarship, both in terms of the target of inquiry and its methodology. It is now widely accepted that the emergence of a political culture primarily situated within the internet arena has had transformative effects (both positive and negative) on the course of liberal democracies. Cultural expectations, organisational realities,

and regulatory frameworks have been seriously challenged or upended entirely, threatening the security of civil society with new forms of violent political action, and the erosion of liberal norms and values. Understanding the case of RICU – and its mission to counter these trends in the context of international violent Salafism – can therefore produce vital insights into the trajectories of the British state in its attempts to adjust and adapt to these new realities. Through a rigorous analysis of this organisation – committed to waging what Cameron labelled our generational struggle – we can access new perspectives on the impact of internet communication on our society at large.

To do so properly, however, we must take a firmly institutionalist stance in terms of methodology. Such an approach is well suited to examining the development of an organisation situated within the wider state bureaucracy, pressurised by edicts from above and seeking to justify its relevance to horizontal partners. More importantly, however, is the ability of such a framework to prise apart the multitudinous array of forces and tendencies that have guided policy outcomes in this area. To satisfactorily answer the question of how the internet has shaped the British state's approach to counter-extremism, we must contend with the numerous and cross-cutting influences on how counter-extremism policy has been reformulated and re-oriented in the period under discussion. An institutionalist approach allows us to trace how change is instigated, how adaptation is managed, from where new strategies are drawn, and how these are re-applied into the security sphere. Establishing an accurate picture of these internal machinations is of central importance to the question at hand. When such an examination is complete, we can separate out which policy outcomes are the result of particular inside factors peculiar to the British state, and which have been enforced from the outside as technological advancement fundamentally alters the ground of political and social reality. More simply, adopting such a framework allows us to explore these questions by examining not only how government has reshaped itself for this generational struggle, but how the battleground has in turn reshaped it.

As such, this research project analyses the evolution of British state propaganda policy in the realm of countering violent extremism (CVE). Through an institutionalist framework, and building upon the work of scholars interested in intelligence and propaganda policy in the twentieth century, the following thesis seeks to expand public and academic understanding of government intervention against the radicalisation of British youth into violent Salafist terrorist organisations. Threatened by the appeal of Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda, the New Labour government began to introduce new censorship laws in the 2006 Terrorism Act, followed in June 2007 by the founding of a new entity within the (itself-newly established) Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT), a sub-unit of the Home Office. RICU was handed responsibility for ensuring best practice and consistency in government communications related to terrorism.

In the twelve years since its inception, however, RICU's remit, responsibilities and purpose have shifted markedly. At time of writing, it has moved from a coordinating role, advising other government agencies on the use of appropriate language, to a command and control centre that commissions and disseminates its own propaganda products to the public, though in concert with various civil society groups. This function-shift has coincided with its re-orientation from print, television and radio to the still-evolving social media ecosystem. As part of this move, it has expanded its formal and informal influence, both within Whitehall, but also outside of government - with civil society groups and leaders, internet service providers, and web platforms. More recently, the scope of its operations has expanded beyond the domestic sphere, with the launch of RICU-International (RICU-I). While RICU has sought to influence foreign publics since its beginnings, this was targeted at Britain's former colonial territories, particularly Pakistan. However, this new move has seen RICU's working practices and strategy welcomed in by its European partners, empowering RICU to counter violent extremism in continental Europe as well as in the UK.

In more recent years, RICU has come under increased media scrutiny. Piecemeal reports on aspects of its CVE campaign have appeared in *The Times*, following a deep-dive exposé in *The Guardian* in 2016. However, despite solid and valuable journalistic efforts such as this, RICU's evolution from minor government consulting agency to transcontinental propaganda behemoth has not been properly scrutinised. The course of RICU's development has not run as smoothly as may outwardly appear, with several episodes of enforced reorganisation in the face of senior scepticism surrounding its effectiveness. A thorough examination of RICU's growth, and its adaptation to our current media system, is beneficial not only to academic knowledge and study, but also to public understanding of the influence of state intervention into political communication and deliberation.

Terminology, Definitions & Scope

The thesis defines its object of study as the evolution of British state counter violent extremism propaganda policy. Given the controversial nature of these terms – and the shifting focus of RICU's mission in the decade since its establishment – it is worth taking time to contextualise and justify this chosen terminology, the scope of RICU's work that falls under investigation, and the description of its works as 'propaganda.'

At the outset, however, it is important to clarify the target of this campaign, and the sphere of communications that will be under investigation. This thesis will focus on RICU's efforts to counter the spread and appeal of Salafist political ideology. Despite the widening of CVE policy to counter right-wing extremism from 2015 (HMG 2015: 10), and reports of growing interest in left-wing extremism in recent months (Quinn 2019: Online), the thesis squares its focus on Salafism. This is done for the sake of clarity and a more consistent evidence base. To the first point, it would be undoubtedly interesting to consider the

reasoning behind the policy shift to focus on new ideological challenges other than Salafism. However, to introduce new elements into analysis from 2015 only would be a recipe for confusion, and analysis of these efforts would be undercooked in comparison to the consideration of RICU's anti-Salafist campaign. To extend this point, given RICU was established to explicitly counter the threat of Salafist violence in the UK, observing the development of RICU's efforts against this ideology will provide the richest and most consistent evidence base from which to draw – allowing us a more complete picture of policy shift and entrenchment within Britain's counter-extremist efforts.

The ideology under consideration in this thesis will be referred to throughout as Salafism. This contrasts with government and media terminology on this issue, which generally refer to this ideology as 'Islamic fundamentalism' or 'Islamic extremism', or even 'jihadism'.¹ This is done for the sake of accuracy. Salafism is a political and social ideology that is identifiable in the Arabic world since the mid-19th century, espousing hard-line implementation of sharia law as the pathway to Arab and Islamic resurgence in the face of non-Muslim domination. While it is not inaccurate to describe these groups as Islamic, or Islamist, doing so would obscure the vast and often-irreconcilable ideological differences between differing currents of Islamism. Further, the current prevailing orthodoxy in referring to these groups as 'Islamic fundamentalists', or similar, feeds in to these groups own narratives, attempting to portray themselves as Islam's true representatives. Lastly, though the use of 'Salafism'

¹ Other sources refer to this ideology as 'Wahhabism'. This term, though sometimes used interchangeably by commentators, obscures the differing emergence and worldviews of these two strains of Islamism. Wahhabism and Salafism bear similar traits in their rejection of Western influence and ideas, and have, according to Stanley (2005) "cross-pollinated" under the influence of King Faisal of Saudi Arabia (1964-1975). However, Wahhabi sects – particularly in Saudi Arabia – have denounced al-Qaeda and ISIL/Daesh as unrepresentative of true Wahhabism. In this (admittedly confused) context, and given British alignment with the Wahhabi Saudi state, Salafism is considered the most accurate moniker for these groups' political ideology.

or 'Salafist' as a catch-all term for these groups may be slightly problematic (given the differences in respect to violent tactics between groups operating under this ideological framework), characterising British policy as countering Salafism as an ideology encapsulates the re-focusing of RICU energy to fighting 'extremist' beliefs, even those that do not openly call for violence (HMG 2015: 23). In this context, Salafist rejection of the liberal institutions and values that the government characterise as lying at the heart of their 'ideological struggle' places all groups and individuals who hold Salafist beliefs within the category of 'extremist'.

The propaganda campaign waged by (and with the aid of) RICU since 2007 is referred to throughout as part of the British government's counter-violent extremism (CVE) policy. While this may seem uncontroversial, the shifting language, aims and terminology espoused by the government in this timeframe have been somewhat inconsistent. Under New Labour, RICU's focus was explicitly on rejecting the ideology of *terrorists*, seeking to discursively isolate those who espoused terrorism from the rest of 'moderate' society (RICU 2007). Under the coalition, agencies responsible for *Prevent* were reminded that preventing terrorism could only be achieved by challenging those who explicitly supported, sanctioned or condoned the use of violence (HMG 2011A: 5-6). In 2015, following the surprise Conservative outright election victory that same year, *Prevent's* focus was widened to combat both violent and non-violent extremism, which the government defined as "the vocal or active opposition to our fundamental values, including democracy, the rule of law, individual liberty and the mutual respect and tolerance of different faiths and beliefs." (HMG 2015: 9) Given these floating – and rather loose – definitions and objectives, it can be argued that one could not define it as a single, consistent project. However it is clear that, despite these movements and shifts, a common thread weaves through these successive strategic realignments. If one makes the reasonable connection that terrorism is a form of violent extremism, one need only follow the government's own reasoning, which argues that their focus has widened to incorporate those who stop just

short of glorifying violence openly, and those who encourage others to isolate themselves from society, easing the transition to violent worldviews and actions (HMG 2015:10-12). In these circumstances, and fully cognisant of the important shifts in the scope of propaganda policy, this thesis considers it justified to describe RICU's propaganda campaign as a Counter Violent Extremism project. An added advantage of using this terminology is that it can link this project more explicitly to the growing academic and professional CVE sector, encouraging a greater scope of research and best practice in this field.

This thesis unapologetically considers the work of RICU and its associate network as a propaganda campaign. As shall be argued in Chapters 2 and 3, in contrast to the pejorative connotations attached to the word since the early twentieth century, this thesis considers propaganda a value-neutral term. It follows the definition of Jowett & O'Donnell (2012), who define propaganda as "the deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour to achieve a response that furthers the desired intent of the propagandist." (p.7) In adopting this position (and furthering its institutional character) this thesis looks to sidestep misleading debates as to which forms of communication fall into the category of 'propaganda', as opposed to say 'spin', 'public relations', or even 'education'. Further, despite 'strategic communication' being the term preferred outwardly within Whitehall (see for example MOD 2019), government insiders admit that this term is a euphemism for propaganda.² In this case, the deliberate, sustained, and systematic attempt by government through the use of persuasive communication (and strategic censorship) to counter violent extremism (in this case, Salafism) is confidently asserted as fitting the moniker of propaganda. This allies the thesis with the private admissions of government staff, and attempts to demystify the subject of persuasive intervention into the public sphere, particularly by government.

² Private information

Lastly, it is important to demarcate the boundaries of this propaganda campaign that will come under scrutiny. Having developed and accelerated over its twelve-year lifespan, the accumulative output of the propaganda policy spearheaded by RICU is too wide-ranging for any single thesis to properly analyse and represent. This is further complicated by the arenas in which RICU has sought to operate – not only through media channels, but also in the sponsorship of community events, and even seeking to influence students in British schools and universities (HMG 2015: 14-16). Given this swathe of outward-facing work, and inescapable practical limitations, it was decided that this thesis would focus exclusively on RICU's attempts to propagandize through public media channels including the print and television press, and later via social media platforms. This avenue was selected partly to avoid falling into the mire of separating propaganda from typical education, which would prove a distraction from one of the secondary aims of the thesis, which is to interrogate how RICU's propaganda apparatus has adapted to new media logics and structures. Moreover, by keeping the field of inquiry within the framework of the mass and internet-enabled media, the thesis will track far closer to the current academic conceptions of propaganda, increasing its usefulness to scholarly and public understanding.

Methodology

This research project is an inductive qualitative case study of British state CVE propaganda policy since 2006. It will primarily rely upon documentary analysis of primary sources, informed by insider accounts through semi-structured interviews. From this evidence base, the thesis will utilise two complimentary inductive methods to analyse and interpret policy. The first is a form of process tracing, informed and guided by a blended institutionalist approach. This approach finds its basis and footing within the historical institutionalist literature concerning state intelligence and propaganda. However, to help bridge interpretive gaps in an inevitably restricted evidence base, it takes

inspiration and explanatory concepts from the neo-institutionalist strand of organisation studies. This approach, alongside close and careful documentary research and analysis, will allow us to trace and mark the triggers for policy and strategy reformulation, as well as the influences and constrictions that guide this reformulation into new working practices and procedures. This approach is applied to the organisational aspects of the government's CVE propaganda campaign, exploring the evolution of RICU as a department itself, as well as its rising prominence within Whitehall, and its changing relationships to the private sector and civil society groups. In the same vein, this institutionalist perspective is applied to the adaptation of the government's approach to censorship strategy, and targeting methodology respectively. The second is a discourse analysis of the stable and evolving discursive trends in RICU's propaganda products, seeking to establish the grand narratives and positive examples being put forward to diminish the appeal of Salafist ideas. These narratives – with appropriate connection to their organisational basis – are then interpreted through the ideas of prominent media and social theorists Marshall McLuhan,³ Guy Debord, and Jean Baudrillard.

The applicability and usage of institutionalist frameworks, and the ideas of these media theorists, are explored and justified in Chapters 2 and 3. What is important here is to emphasise the suitability and benefits of a qualitative case study approach to the question of modern state propaganda. As noted in Chapter 2, this thesis sits within a growing academic interest in modern state propaganda policy, and how this relates to the internet-mediated public sphere. However, many of these studies approach this question from a strictly quantitative perspective, utilising statistical approaches to investigate large datasets that capture state intervention through examining the timing and homogeneity of messaging, and the operating procedures of censorship (King,

³ McLuhan's ideas are also applied to the development of RICU's targeting and dissemination strategy, and its intertwined nature with the discursive appeals these products make, as well as more broadly to the impact of new technologies on censorship practices.

Pan & Roberts 2017; 2014; 2013). The decision to adopt a qualitative research for this study is due to its tremendous advantages for the examination of its research questions. The unattributable nature of RICU's propaganda efforts muddy the waters for researchers, as a complete picture of its total propaganda output cannot be hoped to found without access to restricted information.⁴ It is possible for us to make reasonable connections between certain propaganda outlets and RICU, and to draw on journalistic investigation on the relationships between RICU and private sector or civil society partners. However, in these conditions it is impossible to create a reliable or all-encompassing dataset that could deliver reliable observations or conclusions. Further, statistical quantitative analysis on such datasets would only be able to reveal the timing, speed, or textual similarity of various messages. Such an approach would also be unreliable in comparing discursive and dissemination strategy between different stages of RICU's evolution, with inconsistent bases of evidence from which to draw comparison.

In contrast, a qualitative approach is far more suited to the investigation of the evolution of British CVE propaganda policy. A qualitative approach, utilising documentary and discourse analysis, is more than able to track the flows and patterns within discursive and dissemination strategy, even if in a more general way. However, the analytical breadth that the approach allows more than compensates for this slight loss. For our purposes, a small loss in the investigation of minutiae within trackable and quantifiable messages is balanced by the ability to comment on the overarching discursive approach evident in these messages, and the technologically-structured approaches to targeting and dissemination that underpin these persuasion attempts. Moreover, a qualitative approach allows us to explore in detail and with appropriate subtlety the shifting language emerging from official government sources justifying and directing policy change. From this point, we can also

⁴ King, Pan & Roberts (2017) relied on a leak of metadata on government-sponsored internet commenters from within a local organ of the CCP's Propaganda Department (p.498-499)

investigate and piece together disparate and incomplete evidence to establish an institutionalist model that maps the process of policy evolution within the state, and how this is related to developing political events and the inculcation of new media technology. Taking a single case study approach, rather than a study that encompasses many similarly-constituted states, or a range of liberal-democratic and authoritarian governments, allows such an investigation to take shape and explore these questions in a depth that other approaches could not allow. Beyond this, the institutional analysis of modern state propaganda is, as of yet, an underdeveloped field, making even a small-*n* study of this kind impractical, given the depth of investigation required to establish a clear picture of policy evolution in a single state. As such, a single case qualitative study allows us to establish a workable, sufficiently detailed, and analytically useful approach to propaganda study than can serve as a model that can be emulated elsewhere.

Therefore, while quantitative approaches could deliver a highly detailed analysis of a highly constricted sphere of inquiry, a single case qualitative study allows the analytical flexibility and wide scope to create a full and compelling account of modern state propaganda. Applying such an approach to the study of British CVE propaganda policy can reveal – in strong detail and with re-applicable conceptual tools – the separate though interconnected elements of propaganda policy. Beyond that, we can observe carefully the interplay of the many agents of social change that together constitute technological and social evolution; in this case, the state, civil society, the private sector, and the technical capabilities of new media technologies.

It is important at this point to justify that a qualitative approach such as this can be effective for the study of contemporary security policy. It is undeniable that a study into modern policy in such a secretive area is at a disadvantage in terms of raw source material compared to studies that focus on historical periods. Scholars studying 20th century topics will generally be able to access meticulous archive material in order to understand policy junctures. From

these documents, they are able to construct blow-by-blow narratives complete with recorded statements from the parties involved, and definitive accountings of relevant intra-departmental bodies. While certain documentation may be reserved due to their sensitivity into the present day, historical study of security policy has access to a mass of raw material to work from that cannot be realistically hoped for by those focussed on the contemporary context.

However, research into modern developments in security policy remains capable of fruitful and insightful analysis, when it combines a careful and searching approach to collecting and interpreting evidence. For while the type of evidence available to modern security researchers is of a different form, there is still a great deal available. The salience of security policy matters – particularly in the case of terrorism – means that much journalistic data exists concerning the development of government policy. Government leaders, keen to show competence and alertness to national security matters, seek to champion and justify new policy and its reasoning to the public through the news media. Further, journalists in recent years have proven adept at securing classified leaks, or developing compelling accounts of secretive government actions. This thesis, where appropriate, draws on these kinds of journalistic evidence and public statements.

At other points, this thesis utilises government and public documents that, while not widely circulated, offer illuminating information. Examples of this kind of evidence include Freedom of Information releases, parliamentary committee documents, Hansard, job advertisements, curricula vitae, and commercial filings. While disparately scattered, through careful reading such documentary evidence can provide vital clues that help us mark the development of policy. To name a few, they can plot increases in funding for an organisation, mark periods when external expertise was desired, demonstrate co-operation between different public and private bodies, and the timing of policy moves. When cross-referenced and contextualised by

insider information through elite interviews, such documents can paint a robust portrait of how policy has developed over time.

Scholars of propaganda are at a particular advantage in the study of modern security matters. Given the purpose of propaganda policy is persuasion of the public, propaganda scholars enjoy being able to catalogue and interpret these persuasion attempts, drawing them from the public domain. In the case of a 'grey' propaganda campaign, such as RICU's, one must take care in identifying and attributing propaganda products to a particular agency. However, with a thorough examination of other types of evidence as listed above, attribution of authorship can be done with reasonable confidence – especially if one can draw linkages between organisations through multiple sources and channels. In our digital age, propaganda via social media channels also provides an advantage for assessing the timing of policy development. Social media sites provide excellent logging of the dates and times (in some cases to the minute) of photos, text and videos shared by accounts. This, in turn, lets us track the genesis and/or shuttering of different initiatives. However, the availability of propaganda through social media can prove a double-edged sword, as publicly available accounts can be removed without warning. In our case, an unfortunate development occurred when Breakthrough Media – a key partner of RICU – deleted its YouTube account, which hosted several documentary films examined in this thesis. Happily, this did not impact the evidence-gathering process, but does disqualify further analysis by others. Attempts made to locate alternative sources for these propaganda products were largely unsuccessful. Yet this sad incident, rather than discouraging study of modern propaganda, makes such scholarship ever more urgent. If propaganda material may be deleted unceremoniously, it is vital that such material is studied for insight before it vanishes from our view.

Despite this solid base of evidence from which to work, modern security scholarship must adopt a mature and considered stance towards its limitations, and utilise a conceptual framework best suited to its particular

qualities. We have already discussed the qualities of the evidence available to scholars of historical security policy, and their meticulous recounting of internal policy formation. Such evidence allows scholars to pry open the 'black box' of policymaking, and reveal its internal machinations. While modern scholars have a good deal of internal evidence on which to build analysis, we must appreciate that developing a cogent account of such internal dynamics cannot be reasonably expected. To overcome these limitations, this thesis draws upon neo-institutionalist approaches that provide a flexible frame for interpreting organisational and policy change, without relying upon blow-by-blow accounting of policy formation within these organisations themselves. Doing so allows us to sketch out a clear picture of the forces that operate among different levels and areas of government, as well as between government, civil society and the private sector. Metaphorically, it does not attempt to pry open the black box; rather, it aims to reveal the changing contours of that box over time. Further, it seeks to illuminate its connections and similarities to other boxes, and how these features also develop over time.

In short, through close and detailed attention to developing a cogent timeline, and a committed search for clues that can illuminate developments in differing spheres, scholarship can produce compelling narratives of change in modern security policy. This must be combined with a measured view of the qualitative limitations of the available evidence – and a conceptual approach that accentuates its advantages while compensating for inevitable gaps with powerful explanatory models. In these ways, modern study of propaganda and security policy can overcome the differing quality of its evidence base to produce robust analysis.

An Organisational Approach to Propaganda

This thesis utilises a framework that seeks to build on the materialist tradition of propaganda study. While this materialism is not objectively stated, a focus on the conditions and systems that support the material production of propaganda unites disparate scholars in their focus on propagandising institutions. Some, such as Herman & Chomsky (2002) re-orient focus onto how communication systems and news media in the West are shaped by the influence of its owners. They argue that this influence did not have to involve blanket censorship – though this is too present – but instead more implicit tactics, such as selective hiring, alongside self-selection factors. In contrast, thinkers such as Cunningham (2002) emphasise that propaganda should not be considered as a category of objects, but instead as a social process, “an organisational event”. In this view, the objects of propaganda (such as posters, films, or websites) can still be embedded into proper propaganda study – as is certainly useful and necessary – as the final outcome of a total and material process of applied organisation.

Cunningham draws attention to the example of the Catholic Church. Faced with the rise of Protestantism, the church embarked upon an organised, and systematic, policy to re-convert those lost to Protestantism, and to gain new followers outside of Europe. The *Sacra Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* was, aside from this general proselytisation, “dedicated to doctrinal uniformity within the Roman Catholic Church’s worldwide religious community” (p.15), presiding in judgment over theological and organisational disputes in these new outposts (Dowd 2008: 45; Guilday 1921: 481). It is important to keep in mind that we can glean much from the form and character of the propaganda products that the *Congregatio* ultimately produced. However, an approach solely investigating these products would miss out the ways in which the Church brought these products out, into the world. This involved the founding of the Collegium Urbanum, seminaries for the training of priests, the establishment of printing presses, or the erection of Catholic colleges and

schools (Kingsley 2014: 6; Dowd 2008: 45; Guilday: 479-80). Further, laying upon the propaganda products as the sole point of study in this example would miss the wealth of information available to us that would explain the history of this propaganda campaign. It would ignore the potential to observe the inner workings that produced the messages themselves, giving them greater contextualisation, and a more thorough picture of the choices made, and how these issues were decided. For example, we could view documentary evidence (written or printed material) from the vast bureaucratic system that supported this organisation, such as requests for doctrinal or practical guidance being received and acted upon by the senior echelons of the Congregatio, and the pressures perhaps felt emanating downwards from the Pope. Given the subject of inquiry within this thesis, a hope for access to such a trove of potential documentary analysis would be misguided. However, the point remains that through adopting this organisational lens, we can gain a much deeper insight into the both the wider political context that informed these choices, and the intentions behind these final products.

A greater discussion on the benefits of such an approach are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. In particular, the concept of an 'agricultural' approach to propaganda study is borne out. This is a metaphor founded in an appreciation of the linguistic construction of propaganda in the original Latin. Here, we must fully explain the significance of such an appreciation. To begin, however, we must (counter-intuitively) first think about the significance of the word 'propaganda' in English. Propaganda is a *noun*. One disseminates propaganda. We can quite naturally say that 'This newspaper is full of propaganda.' We can add various euphemisms for propaganda, and we can notice that these are also nouns: 'This newspaper is full of lies/public relations/education/facts.' This treatment of propaganda as a noun may help explain the consistent focus on propaganda products in academic research. If one studies 'propaganda', one is naturally looking to observe an assortment of material objects that constitute a set or assortment of 'propaganda'. One compares them to each other, observes crucial similarities and differences, interprets their semiotic

meaning, notes aspects of style and tone and so on. It bears repeating that such a view on propaganda is not only valuable, yet indeed necessary to a full appreciation of the phenomenon.

However, in the original Latin, *propaganda* is not a noun – it is a *gerundive*.⁵ Precisely, it is a verbal adjective. This case is clumsy in its translation to English, but it is used to express a form of ongoing demand. The best translation into English would be along the lines of '[that] which must be ____'. Fortunately, there are some uses of these words in Latin that have been imported into English. Gerundives in Latin can generally be signified by the presence of a '-*nda*' ending, and these borrowed forms have found their way into everyday English. For example, *Amanda* has the meaning 'She who must be loved.'; *Miranda*, 'she who must be admired.' Away from names, we find the word *agenda*, which means 'That which must be done.'⁶ *Propaganda* stems from the Latin verb *propagare*, meaning 'to sew/plant.' Therefore, the gerundive form *propaganda* can be translated as 'that which must be sewn.' This is from where our previously mentioned agricultural metaphor stems. It is important to point out that those responsible for naming the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* would have been aware of this agricultural metaphor when choosing its name.⁷ We are therefore describing the phenomena of propaganda more closely in line with those who carefully chose their name for its metaphorical significance, rather than from among a myriad of thinkers who have conflated propaganda with pejorative connotations, or interpolated its meaning across cases from a verbal form to a noun form, a collection of objects. Instead, it is upon us to regard propaganda as closer in reality to a verb, as a process.

⁵ Although the significance of the Latin translation is considered in respected introductions to the subject (for example, see Auerbach & Castronovo 2013: 1-3) no scholars seem to bear out the implications of this verb form.

⁶ Notice how all these words have slipped into the realm of nouns in English - proper nouns in the examples of *Amanda* and *Miranda*, and in the case of 'agenda'. One quite naturally talks of 'crossing that item off the agenda.'

⁷ The verb 'propagare' refers more exactly to a process of planting cuttings from other plants to create new ones.

Viewing propaganda as akin to agriculture is useful in explaining the full significance of what is meant by this process. Agriculture is an organisational process that must be repeated, deliberately and systematically, with no particular 'end'. Of course we can talk of agriculture having 'ends', such as the feeding of people, but this form of 'end' is not meant in a temporal sense. Agriculture is not taken on in order so it may be overcome, or deliberately abandoned when the requisite amount of abstract 'agriculture' has been produced. It is an ongoing imperative. This ongoing imperative demands both the necessary resources for its successful completion, but also a system of organisation that regulates and guarantees this completion. This system of organisation necessarily relies on human input. This is true in the physical sense, as we must apply labour to transform seeds into produce, and then transport this produce to a market. Yet we also apply problem-solving, decision-making and other administrative labour, so that we may reform the process to achieve new or improved outputs - perhaps in this agricultural example, greater efficiency at producing food for the market. This attempt for greater efficiency could be approached in various ways. For example, one could seek to extract more plants per square footage of available land. Likewise, one could attempt to harvest the same number of plants more often. The choice of one strategy over another – or the attempt to achieve both simultaneously – will depend upon a decision-making process, which will shape this new demand for greater efficiency into a clear strategy of action. This decision-making process would not only be influenced by the decision-makers' own beliefs, but by the material limitations and abilities set in front of them. For example, we would gain certain abilities if we were to buy a tractor, as opposed to a combine harvester. Then again let's suppose that, after one of these pieces of technology is bought, and following the passage of a few years, there is a new need to increase efficiency once more. Technological change has made gene-edited crops readily available, and cheaper than alternatives. This would, in theory, incentivise a take-up of gene-edited crops into the agricultural system.

The above is a crude example, yet it demonstrates well the type of questions that are opened by viewing propaganda as a form of this mandatory organisational process. Initially, when analysing propaganda, we saw an assortment of products, of objects, that had to be interpreted as belonging to the group of 'propaganda' per a hazardously subjective definitional scheme. From this new processional standpoint, propaganda can be removed of its pejorative element, as a process akin to agriculture, that which remains as an ongoing background imperative. It is difficult to imagine 'agriculture' in of itself being considered as something possessing a pejorative quality – unless perhaps it was feeding an opposing army. The 'ends' of the propaganda may be considered as manipulative, dishonest, or even 'evil', but the process of propaganda can remain in and of itself, ethically neutral. Next, it opens up a space for exploring the necessary conditions for the existence, and thus more fully explaining the significance, of the propaganda products themselves. To continue our agricultural example, we are no longer focusing solely on excavating and cataloguing preserved examples of the meat, dairy, or plants that any agricultural process may happen to produce. Again, this approach would not be incomplete; carrying out our research in this manner would still let us observe the arrival of gene-edited crops, for example.

Yet these crops would appear in our record *ex nihilo*. We could notice change. We could observe the difference between the products, but we would not appreciate the full extent of the growth of technology in this process, or why some farms could produce this product, while others could not. In the same breath, we could not look upon the emergence of the gene-edited crop into our database as a proper explanation of that technological progress. We could easily infer the existence of a new technology; however, we would be no closer to explaining the myriad of other social processes that informed the arrival of this technology into this place, or at this time. So, while we could deduce that the gene-editing technology had been invented, we could not say anything about the changing price of this technology which made its use possible in this

instance. This price is itself attached to things such as exchange rates, access to transport infrastructure, or more efficient production of this said gene-editing technology. In sum, the propaganda process is itself tied into these other social processes, technological advancement being only one. We may also consider the question of why the demand for greater farming efficiency came about in the first instance; for it is this demand which was the catalyst for the adoption of the new technology, not the mere existence of the technology in and of itself. In the terms of this thesis, the propaganda process intersects with and reveals the technological process, but it is also shaped by the demands placed upon those intent on organising it. Therefore, adopting this organisational view of propaganda can reveal far more about the differing pressures felt by the liberal democratic state in its responses to terrorism. We can observe catalysts for change, and then contextualise the action (or, often, inaction) of the propaganda organisation through the lens of a decision-making process, something which will reveal the internal pressures, assumptions, and demands felt by those decision-makers.

With this in mind, let us focus finally upon the exact naming of the Catholic Church's evangelising institution: *Sacra Congregatio De Propaganda Fide*. This is often translated as 'The Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith'. This is not an inaccurate translation. However, it loses some of the active quality of the gerundive form. As noted, the gerundive case takes the form of '[that] which must be ____'. Inserting *propagare* lets us arrive at '[that] which must be sewn', or '[that] which must be spread.' However, while the gerundive has a verbal quality, we must remember that is in fact a form of *adjective*, and thus needs attachment to a noun. *Fide* takes this position. *Fide* has several potential translations, the most common of which is 'faith'. However, given the religious leanings of those in the upper echelons of the Church, and the unscientific connotations of the word 'faith' generally in the Western World, a better translation would perhaps in this case be closer to the related word *fidelity*, or truthfulness, or simply 'the Truth'. Therefore, a title

closer to its original usage could be 'The Holy Society for the Truth which must be Spread.'

From this standpoint, we can study propaganda in a new light, separating out clearly this 'Truth', from its 'Spreading'. In other words, this Truth becomes a sort of empty container, which can be filled with any form of Truth – why one should convert to Catholicism, why one should buy this car, why one should vote for this person, why one shouldn't join ISIS, etc. This truth exists separately from how it is spread. This Truth, in order to be spread, must travel through the organisational process responsible for doing so, including its decision-making structures, its technological capabilities, and its relationship to other similar and necessary organisations, such as a private publisher or a radio broadcaster. Therefore, to understand this precious truth that the propaganda organisation wants to spread, we cannot solely observe the propaganda products, the outputs of this organisational system. In order to fully understand this truth, we must how it was understood by those involved in its dissemination, and how they sought to grapple with both the machinery at its disposal and the pressures of a changing political or wider social context. A fuller and more complete account of propaganda takes this whole system into account. In doing so, it allows greater space for the study of propaganda to reflect broader social processes and events, how the spreading of the 'Truth' is channelled into particular forms and directions, and from this point observe the drivers of change from within the propaganda organisation itself. Such an approach will not only create a fuller account for those interested in an academic sense – it will allow research to speak more directly to the concerns and experiences of propaganda policymakers themselves, creating more room for better outcomes.

Chapter 2 will explain how this theoretical separation can be systematised into a workable research output. At length, the thesis demonstrates how the neo-institutionalist framework is of great use for identifying the trends and patterns of change that affected the inner workings and set-up of the

propaganda organisation itself, but also the various domains of this organisation's work – Persuasive Messaging, Targeting and Censorship. Each of these chapters contribute in their own way to establishing a clear picture of the information, ideas, and especially identities that RICU sought to foster in and outside of the British Muslim community. The latter two of these elements, Targeting and Censorship, also reveal how RICU has risen to the task of spreading these ideas, both by facilitating communicative relationships with their various target audiences, but also how the government, and later the unit themselves, have sought to strip out undesirable voices from the public conversation regarding Salafism. With this conceptual framework in hand, it is the task to demonstrate the effectiveness of such an approach in explaining the forces and pressures that have shaped the British government's attempts to fight the appeal of Salafist extremist groups, from al-Qaeda to ISIL-Daesh, and how these attempts have been constricted by the United Kingdom's position as a liberal democracy, coming to terms with the disruptive emergence of a new communications environment, which has created fertile ground for extremist ideas to take root.

Key Findings

After completing this institutional analysis, we can establish a clear overarching view of how RICU's development illuminates the struggles of the British state – with substantial generalisability to other liberal democracies – in adapting its counter-extremism propaganda policies to the new communications environment.

Of course, the first focus must be on the intra-governmental factors that shaped RICU's development. In this regard, three broad themes have emerged. The first theme is the consistent manner in which changes have been triggered. Overall, in the thirteen-year period under study, changes in the structure and activity of the propaganda bureaucracy are linked to either

terrorist success (at home and abroad), and/or changes in government leadership. The successful July 7th attacks in 2005 spurred the strengthened censorship laws passed under the Blair government. The accession of Gordon Brown bore the creation of RICU, responsible for implementing his ideas on the proper framing of the domestic terrorist threat. The incoming 2010 Coalition government gave rise to RICU's increased links to the private sector, while the rise of ISIL-Daesh in the Syrian Civil War led to an increased interest in the online sphere, and the more strident approach to extremism pushed forward by the now-majority Conservative government in 2015. Lastly, the spate of attacks preceding the 2017 General Election (that saw that Conservative majority overturned) inspired an internal review, and while RICU was left unscathed, a major pivot in censorship policy quickly followed.

As suggested by this latter case, institutional factors – namely, response to perceived failures – that has primarily sparked policy reformulation, not a general or anecdotal appreciation of the changing nature of political communication. Failures experienced in the CVE policy area are closely linked to the shifting balance of power in the wider communication sphere. However, these external shifts in of themselves did not constitute the starting point for RICU's adaptation. Instead, technological adaptation followed the initiation of change from higher levels of government, in response to failure or crisis. Institutional concerns were the prime determinant of bringing change, after which point new technological concerns and capabilities made their impact felt.

Yet even after these periods of change were initiated, significant institutional pressures and influences had a major input into RICU's development. , it is important to note how these policy reformulations played out in similar ways. During each juncture period, RICU's central and coordinating position within the propaganda bureaucracy was strengthened. Beginning life as a small team dedicated to researching and spreading best practice in counter-terror and counter-extremism messaging, each stage of reformulation saw more power

and editorial control handed to the agency, leading it to become a well-staffed, and well-funded, central node commissioning and spearheading outward facing communications. Concurrently, with each period of change brought greater connections with the private sector, with civil society voices increasingly squeezed. From hiring in outside expertise, to creating and then deepening ties with private sector content and public relations companies, RICU repeatedly sought to increase its access to the resources and influence of outside professionals, and the senior figures of international companies. At the same time, RICU moved from providing seed-funding for counter-extremist projects, to providing technical support to professionalise the output of civil society and increase their visibility, to then finally firmly taking the reins of content creation and distribution with civil society groups placed in a thoroughly subordinate position to government ideas and planning. These movements have not been consistent, and reflect the lurching nature of policy change and adaptation. However, they reveal how policy change became characterised by an acceleration of previously established routes for change – a ‘more of the same change again’ approach – that reveals path dependency within critical junctures themselves, a pattern that may provide fruitful comparisons in other areas moving forward.

These centralisations cannot be attributed as a direct form of technological influence. Instead, they reveal how the British state sought to reshape its own workings to produce a more efficient response to the increased pace and scope the agency would now have to work. These inward reorientations would in fact delay the uptake of British CVE propaganda policy to the new communications environment. Despite receiving commissioned research in 2008 and 2009 that specifically highlighted the growing centrality of social media to the political and social consciousness of young British Muslims, it would take two periods of policy reformulation for RICU to pivot decidedly into the social media space. From 2011 RICU favoured expanding its operations into international broadcast media, an environment in which its new leadership and private sector contacts felt most comfortable. As ISIL-Daesh gained

greater notoriety and effectiveness in the online space, RICU products moved with it – yet early attempts to compete on internet platforms still favoured the traditional news media, with participation via hashtags being encouraged through press conferences geared towards print and television journalists. From 2015 – a full six years after RICU’s research highlighted the growing importance and credence given to new media – the government placed the internet firmly at the centre of its approach. From this evidence, technological influences must be considered to play a subordinate role in CVE propaganda policy reform.

Instead, the main determinant of new policy direction appears to have been the battle for legitimacy – theorised by neo-institutionalist scholars – that RICU has waged throughout its lifespan within the Government. Leaked documents and insider information have revealed that RICU struggled to convince Whitehall of its utility or the effectiveness of its methods in its early years. When such concerns were echoed in the 2011 *Prevent* review, RICU sought to bring in experienced professional staff and leverage private sector contracts. After 2015, private sector connections were deepened, as RICU sought to overcome the effectiveness of ISIL-Daesh recruitment. Meanwhile, RICU also sought to absorb new ideas for conceptualising its audience from other state propaganda organisations through the EU’s Radicalisation Action Network (RAN). However, after the events of 2017, RICU was spared from criticism during the government’s internal review. This protected status reflected RICU’s growing prestige among other state propaganda organisations, with the agency invited to directly undertake propaganda work in Europe and beyond, with their methods seen (according to agency insiders) as a model for other states to follow. The attempts to import talent and ideas, and the lack of action to reform after its leading role among similar organisations had been – at least to internal audiences – established, lend great credence to the neo-institutional maxim that organisations constantly strive for recognition in a competition for legitimacy. In this context, we are forced to conclude that institutional factors – firstly the response to clear crisis, and secondly the hunt

for legitimacy – were the prime guiders of policy change. Only after these processes played out, and the need for updated procedures were internally established, could technological influences begin to play their part.

As a result, RICU's technological adaptation to this new environment has been slow. At the time of RICU's founding, it was tasked with promoting effective message discipline on stakeholders in delivering counter-terror priorities, from cabinet level to local police forces. This approach was well-honed by the final years of the Blair government, an administration with which the word 'spin' has become synonymous. Such an approach – in line with other government departments – was well adapted to a media environment dominated by print and television news. As previously discussed, it took several years for RICU's work to change focus onto the online space, primarily the result of the search for legitimacy through outside expertise. Once these institutional machinations had played out, and the Government grasped the nettle of the internet battleground, its distinct balance of technological capabilities began to be felt quickly.

In terms of Messaging, social media allowed for the proliferation of diverse messaging strategies that spoke to different segments of RICU's target audience. As this smorgasbord of approaches was whittled down, RICU utilised the shared space and connectivity aspects of social media to create simulated online communities supportive of liberal values. A similar trend – a coercive form of isomorphism – encouraged RICU to adopt established templates for targeting its messages, connecting IP addresses to personal email accounts that could be used in existing procedures for targeting individuals on social media platforms. Indeed, David Cameron went as far as to encourage expanding the surveillance of individuals used to sell products, applying the same practices into countering extremism. This economic surveillance was built upon the architecture of the WWW protocol, which required the meticulous and continuous tracking of user activity. The new capabilities afforded by the internet also impacted the development of censorship policy.

The censorship provisions of the 2006 Terrorism Act were built upon the assumption that apportioning blame for publication of extremist content would be realistically achievable. However, as social media platforms came to dominate news and information consumption, apportioning this blame became far more problematic. Further, the international character of this media made claiming jurisdiction over differing kinds of undesirable speech highly difficult, regardless whether one sought to prosecute an individual who used the internet as a platform, or the company that indirectly published that undesirable speech. This 'platform v. publisher' dichotomy, alongside the uncertainty of jurisdiction, was perhaps the key determinant of government reticence to implement censorship via law on social media platforms. By 2019, this reticence to regulate the international media environment has led to an acceleration down the path of censorship that targets consumers of information rather than producers. Provisions criminalising the publication or dissemination of extremist content (or that which glorified violence) remain on the statute books. However, provisions used (somewhat questionably) to prosecute ownership or storage of extremist material by consumers have been pushed further to criminalise the simple act of viewing extremist material.

2. Literature Review

Overview

This thesis lies at the connecting point between propaganda, intelligence, and media studies. As such, it sits within a wide and contentious area of inquiry, filled with competing interpretations and foundational assumptions. The branches of academic study that have approached the question of state propaganda and counter-extremism have done so from starkly diverging propositions, concerning the objects or phenomena under consideration, their stance towards the state and its practices, and the theoretical or analytic debates their work seeks to enhance or challenge. Given the contested and rather fragmented state of the discourse surrounding these questions, it is necessary to lay out succinctly the posture that this thesis holds in relationship to current study. Chiefly, this research project speaks to: theoretical interpretations of propaganda and its normative character; existing scholarship on counter-extremism and *Prevent*; accounts of modern state propaganda (especially censorship policies); accounts of institutional adaptation in British intelligence and the British state more broadly; and the implications of ICTs on political discourse and organisation, as well as the liberal democratic state's position within this new paradigm. The features of these discourses, and their treatment for the purposes of this project, will be laid out more thoroughly in the remainder of this chapter. However, it will likely prove helpful to outline more briefly the key elements of adherence and differentiation between the analysis provided in these pages and wider academic and public debates.

In terms of assessing 'propaganda' as a form of social or political action, this thesis largely rejects the Critical associations and interpretations that became attached to the term through the 20th Century. Instead, it takes an ethically-neutral view on the practice of propaganda in-and-of-itself, to better

interrogate the organisational and discursive processes that state propaganda organisations use to achieve their goals. This is more in keeping with the historical institutionalist analysis of state propaganda institutions. However, this thesis seeks to expand this institutionalist analysis to include the role and pressures facing the modern liberal democratic state – a largely-missed opportunity within the current literature, that disproportionately dissects the practices of modern autocratic states, or contains strong institutionalist accounts of British propaganda policy, but several decades removed from the present.⁸

It would be incorrect to suggest that modern British state propaganda, or state propaganda in democracies, has not been studied. In the British case, the *Prevent* programme truly takes centre stage. Given this thesis' attention on *Prevent*, one may expect that the existing scholarship may serve as a rich basis for study. However, it is important to appreciate the theoretical foundations that undergird these accounts, and the target of their enquiries. This scholarship, once again, sits comfortably in the Critical tradition, which seeks to critique and problematize the assumptions of state power, particularly its power to promote its own narratives and interpretations of events. Furthermore, existing scholarship is heavily skewed toward understanding the impact of *Prevent* policy on the lives of Muslims in Britain, rather than dissecting how this policy has shifted, and in what context. Some of this scholarship admonishes the British government along the lines of turning UK Muslims into a "suspect community" (Pantazis & Pemberton 2009) that must go above and beyond to prove its loyalty to Britain, whilst being subjected to intrusive and heavy-handed police tactics. Such insight is useful for our purposes, but not at the level of formal analysis – such pronouncements may help us shed light on the effectiveness of state policy, but only as secondary material. The object of investigation – the response of Muslims to *Prevent* –

⁸ This gap may be explained by the lack of appropriate documentary evidence, due to the secretive and ongoing nature of these projects.

precludes useful theoretical or conceptual crossover between these studies and our current project. Other Critical approaches to modern state propaganda bear similar problems, for while they may illuminate interesting trends that are identifiable in RICU's work, they lack the conceptual apparatus to offer accounts of policy evolution and its triggers. Such accounts also tend away from discussion of extremism or online communities, and highlight the use of marketing methodologies to advertise a nation as an opportunity for investment or tourism.

Given these setbacks, the thesis will situate itself more closely within the historical and institutionalist framework of intelligence studies. This field of inquiry possesses many qualities that speak to the aims and pursuits of this research. First, it drives at the organisational and institutional factors of propaganda policy, and secondly, it provides a deep well of historical comparison – aiding us to draw valuable connections between trends both past and present. Chiefly, we shall seek to clarify the triggers and developments of transformation in national security policy, especially the area of propaganda. However, this thesis must set itself apart from this area of the literature. For despite excellent and in-depth examinations of the Information Research Department (IRD – RICU's spiritual predecessor in Whitehall), its modes of practice, its shifting position within national security strategy, and its attempts to come to terms with new media technologies, the modern focus of this research project necessitates a shift in conceptual perspective. This realm of study is explicitly historical in its aims and practice, informed by deep and relatively unfettered access to primary sources and internal archives. By contrast, given RICU's secretive nature, and the contemporary timing of our project, the evidence base available has not matured to the extent necessary to attempt a truly comparative analysis. Therefore, while this thesis' findings and comparisons are indebted to this historical approach, it shall also utilise neo-institutionalist concepts and frameworks to help guide analysis, and bridge potential gaps in evidence (See Chapter 2). Further, this approach will illuminate the transformation of propaganda and intelligence policy with

contemporary advances in social and organisational science, allowing greater crossover between the two domains.

This is not to say that there is lack of modern scholarship on state propaganda. This field of scholarship is diverse, ranging from more traditional institutionalist accounts to those utilising advanced data analysis methods. In terms of this thesis, aside from the superficial similarities in terms of focus on the state, the main takeaway from this segment of the literature is its innovative approach to the issue of censorship, which is seen as tightly bound to the issue of propaganda, reinforcing one another (King, Pan & Roberts 2013). This censorship, much like the outward attempts at persuasion which accompany it, is shown to be variegated and subtle, and shifts according to political sensitivities. The key difference between this thesis and the modern state propaganda literature is its focus. For while these pieces of work do an excellent job of analysing propaganda/censorship practices at the state level, their focus is overwhelmingly on autocratic states, such as Singapore, Russia and particularly China. The application of censorship in the British context is similarly complex and subtle, but must (at least, theoretically) come to terms with liberal democratic traditions such as freedom of speech and conscience in its desire to be effective. Any institutional analysis of propaganda –and, therefore, censorship – policy, must be receptive to the ideological differences of states that seek to shape the online political and social environment.

Lastly, and as an extension from the institutional analysis of propaganda policy, the thesis shall seek to contribute to the raging and often-contradictory debates surrounding the impact of our current media environment on political discourse, organisation, and action. Digital media has, by turns, been heralded as a bastion for the promotion of democracy and citizenship; labelled a subversive influence on democratic institutions; or credited for inspiring mass uprisings across the Middle East (and by contrast for the radicalisation and recruitment of European Muslims to fight for Salafist networks in the ensuing conflicts). In terms of concrete trends, the current field is hit-and-miss. The

discourse surrounding echo chambers, filter bubbles and micro-targeted advertising identifies certain key features of political communication in the online sphere, but remains mostly descriptive in nature, with little remaining to spur further academic inquiry. Where relevant, the impact of new challenges and capabilities such as these is highlighted – but this must be combined with an appreciation of how RICU has sought to capitalise on, or seek to overcome, these new realities. Instead, this thesis will speak more directly to the literature concerning the effects of communications modernisation on political organising and action.

It is in this sphere that Critical Theory can provide real value, in conjunction with more mainstream interpretations of the internet's social impact. These range from the strict technological determinism of Marshall McLuhan, to Bruce Bimber, who describes his foundation as “in-between technological determinism and social constructivism” (Bimber 2011: 778), to the overtly Critical ideas of Jurgen Habermas, which much early internet research held up as the aspirational standard for online political communication. However, even this rich area bears serious gaps. Firstly, despite their wide-reaching and solid predictions for the future, these sections of the discourse do not deal at any true length regarding the power or position of the state, and its unique role in creating and maintaining the environment for political debate, protest and organisation. Secondly, the rather utopian assertions of the internet's Habermasian potential for freeing public discourse run up against the facts of an increasingly closed-off and partisan nature of our current political climate. This is even without reference to the wide disparity of access and influence to social media between the state, political parties and business interests on the one hand, and ordinary citizens on the other (Fuchs 2015).

The hegemonic position of the state, while eroding in the liberalised and internationalised sphere of modern media, is thus still a vital consideration when seeking to explain the development of political discourse. The theorist best positioned, in this case, to interpret the discursive and participatory

elements of RICU's propaganda strategy is Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard's ideas form the theoretical basis of several accounts of state propaganda – though, as previously noted, these accounts tend towards the analysis of public advertisements of states themselves. However, a thorough examination of RICU's propaganda output demonstrate that Baudrillard's concepts of the *simulacra* and *simulation* of political identity and action through the media are highly relevant to British CVE propaganda policy, at least its discursive element. RICU's output, especially since its re-orientation toward social media channels in 2015, is comparable to the "simulated nation" identified by Kaneva (2018), insofar that RICU's work seeks to construct – and then solidify support around – a *simulated* British Muslim identity that, though devoted to Islam, is supportive of liberal political and social ideals such as feminism and constitutional democracy, while also (at least, implicitly) amenable to British foreign policy objectives.

In sum, this thesis seeks to draw on many strands observable in the current literature, whilst pushing academic inquiry into new territory. It seeks to eschew the overly pejorative connotations of propaganda that have emerged in academia and in general society, seeking to observe and interpret propaganda policy within an institutional and organisational framework that captures the triggers for, and final destination of, policy change. By doing so – and particularly in the context of the modern liberal democratic state – this thesis will speak to unfortunate blindspots within the current academic debate, although this situation is slowly improving. Despite these small shortcomings, the contribution of scholars interested in the development and execution of state propaganda policy are keenly appreciated, including the institutional accounts that provide excellent context for modern study, and innovative approaches to the question of censorship. This being said, due to the constraints on documentary evidence, and the lack of an encouraging formal framework for studying propaganda in an organisational manner, this thesis looks to expand and build on these accounts to better illuminate shifts

in practice and policy.⁹ As such, in terms of analysing the evolution of British CVE propaganda policy, the thesis is situated most closely to the institutionalist perspective of intelligence and security studies, with necessary adjustments in conceptualisation, given the difficulties presented by the study of contemporary national security matters. However, in terms of connecting our findings to debates surrounding the impact of ICTs and social media on the modern political arena, the thesis orients itself and speaks toward critical perspectives. This is not done out of devotion to critique for critique's sake. Instead, it is due to the applicability of the concepts generated from this tradition to our current situation, and how they can illuminate succinctly the trends observable in the outward-facing and discursive elements of RICU's propaganda output.

Propaganda: a dirty word?

The question surrounding the legitimacy of propaganda - or more accurately, the perception of its legitimacy as a political tool - has loaded the study of propaganda with serious normative concerns. This is particularly true of scholars belonging to the critical tradition. Noam Chomsky & Edward Herman (2002) describe propaganda as a tool that deliberately obfuscates truth in order to "inculcate and defend the economic, social and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the society and the state." (p. 298)

Jacques Ellul, himself of the 'libertarian-anarchist' critical tradition (Chastenet 1994: Online) similarly characterises the term propaganda as an authoritarian and deceptive tool. For him, propaganda is a "weapon... for the purpose of effectively arming policy and giving irresistible power to its decisions." (Ellul 1973:x) He asserts that a full understanding of 'propaganda' must be synonymous with psychological warfare, re-education and brainwashing (Ibid:

⁹ This question is addressed in Chapter 4, but to its greatest extent in Chapter 5.

xiii), and further argues that “The force of propaganda is a direct attack against man” to the extent that “If I am in favour of democracy, I can only regret that propaganda renders the true exercise of it almost impossible.” (Ibid: xvi)

Pejorative definitions and discussions of this kind abound in the academic literature. For Albig (1956) propaganda is political communication which presents ‘correct’ interpretations of social phenomena, but of a kind that are designed to “discourage the subject from examining the reasons for the positions they are asked to accept.” (p.293) Others assert that propaganda can be identified by political communication that disguises its true purpose or motivation (Lumley 1933: 44), or is deliberately misleading (Elliott & Summerskill 1957 in Welch 2013: 203).

This nexus of ways that propaganda is defined and separated from other forms of communication creates a highly confusing picture, which discourages propaganda study. The normative connotations of these debates places severe strain on scholarly work, as it creates a confusing theoretical environment loaded with ethical considerations of what constitutes legitimate forms of political communication. However, this problem becomes easier to handle when one appreciates the source of these debates.

What cannot be subtracted from this evidence is the social and political context of these remarks and definitions. These definitions all stem from those in liberal democratic political cultures, and either during or with fresh memories of the use of propaganda in authoritarian states such as the USSR, China, Mussolini’s Italy and Nazi Germany to justify and instigate human atrocities (Ellul: xii). David Shambaugh (2007) points out that in other political cultures, such as China, ‘propaganda’ is not a word with pernicious consequences, but is rather seen as a legitimate tool “for the shaping and educating of society.” (p.29)

Bernays (1923) with a good deal of prescience, helps us push this point further. He argues that the term 'propaganda' is used as a label with which to delegitimize the communications and arguments of political opponents, and as a corollary the word 'propaganda' is avoided when discussing the creation of one's own political communication. However, he points out, this remains an arbitrary distinction:

"The only difference between 'propaganda' and 'education', really, is in the point of view. The advocacy of what we believe in is education. The advocacy of what we don't believe in is propaganda."

(p.212)

The battle over propaganda's legitimacy is based upon subjective considerations of truth, and conceptions of 'positive' social progress. Information which presents an alternative, and perhaps extreme, interpretation of social reality may be considered false or manipulative, in contrast to the 'true' and 'positive' interpretation that one has internalised. Reflexively, a person or group involved in propaganda activity may wish to avoid the negative connotations that have attached itself to the word 'propaganda' in certain environments and cultures.

This remains a consideration for modern British propaganda work. Though terms such as 'public relations', 'strategic communications', and even 'counter-propaganda' are routinely used, senior government officials acknowledge privately that these terms are simply euphemisms for propaganda work.¹⁰

Thus, any attempt to delineate 'propaganda' from other forms of political communication - and even social institutions and pressures - in terms of legitimacy (truthfulness, openness etc.) is extremely problematic. One cannot

¹⁰ Private information

easily or usefully divide ‘truthful’ information from that which is deliberately misleading, or tells ‘lies’. Such distinctions are often made due to subjective political beliefs and opinions. Further, propaganda has become a pejorative label often used to discredit the interpretations and opinions of political opponents.

As a result, this thesis considers that arguments over the legitimacy of contrasting attempts at persuasive political communication are unhelpful. Essentially, such arguments are reducible to disagreements over the intentions of a propagandist: namely, their intentions regarding the use of evidence, and the political project which said propaganda is intended to promote. The first intention is virtually unknowable from an outside observer’s perspective; the second intention is, unfortunately, bound up in subjective political beliefs and attitudes, which leads to a great deal of conceptual confusion. Given these extreme difficulties, the term propaganda is used within this thesis as a neutral term, which should not be assigned normative values. Once this is appreciated, one can investigate - with a more neutral lens - as to how propaganda should be defined and identified.

Critical Perspectives on Prevent

Perhaps due to its situation within this critical framework, the wealth of scholarship already conducted on *Prevent* seems to adopt a pejorative position and normative stance on the programme. These studies, though worthy in and of themselves, are conceptually and objectively divorced from the aims and perspective of this thesis.

In terms of their objectives, these pieces of work focus most on the effect of *Prevent* policy on the lived experiences of British Muslims. Tahir Abbas, writing from a “left-realist critical criminology” perspective, asserts that “the outward-facing component of the UK’s counter-extremism strategy... conflates

legitimate political resistance among young British Muslims as indications of violent extremism”, adding that Prevent “is a form of social engineering¹¹, ultimately mollifying resistance by re-affirming the status quo” (Abbas 2018: 296). Fahid Qurashi admonishes *Prevent* as “a surveillance infrastructure, embedded into Muslim communities, which has securitised relations with local authorities.” The foundation of this policy, Qurashi asserts, “uncovers the practice of Islamophobia at the heart of the *Prevent* strategy.” (Qurashi 2018: Online) Katy Sian attempts to dig down into and challenge the foundations of government thinking on radicalisation, which operates, in her view, on a model of ‘criminal/extremist types’. Sian argues that “By developing a rich critique of these positivist approaches” academia can “go on to question how we might think beyond the essentialism, reductivism and racism/Islamophobia inherent within such frameworks.” (Sian 2017: Online) In a more solid line of attack, Rizwaan Sabir – himself arrested on terror charges connected to academic research (Townsend 2012: Online) – argues that *Prevent* represents the transference of counter-insurgency strategy into the domestic arena, and as a result

“blurs the distinction between Pursue and Prevent, coercion and consent, and, ultimately, civilian and combatant. This challenges the liberal claim that counter-terrorism policies, especially Prevent, are about social inclusivity or ‘safeguarding’ and that the UK government is accountable to the people.”

(Sabir 2017: 202)

Such critiques in recent years build on the foundations of earlier critical scholars in response to the *Prevent* programme. In 2012, Imran Awan built upon the criticism of Githens-Mazer (2011) and Hickman et al. (2011), which argued that *Prevent* had turned British Muslims into a “suspect community”, similar to the Irish community during The Troubles. He echoes Githens-Mazer’s

¹¹ The LSE e-prints version of the article uses the word “control”

criticism of government policy, insofar that it was “merely government rhetoric and sound bites kindling fear and risk, causing confusion, disengagement, and confrontation in diverse communities.” (Awan 2012: 1160) Awan concludes with a more tempered approach, insisting that “the UK government needs to develop a better understanding of how to prevent people from following a path of extremism” (p.1177) if it is not to “further marginaliz[e] and stigmatiz[e] Muslim communities.” (p.1158) This consistent thread in the criticism of *Prevent* can be found in studies from O’Toole et al. (2012), Choudhury & Fenwick (2011), and Thomas (2014). The direct notion of the ‘suspect community’ in the Muslim community can be traced back to Pantazis and Pemberton (2009), who adopted Hillyard’s (1993) notion of the Irish suspect community and transplanted it into the modern Muslim context. This article’s influence has only grown, despite contemporary criticism of its argument – and its foundation in Hillyard’s work. Steven Greer (2010) points to numerous “analytical, methodological, conceptual, logical, empirical, evidential and interpretive errors” within Pantazis and Pemberton’s argument, including its central hinge concerning the discourse of the ‘War on Terror’, and its underlying foundation (Hillyard’s work *Suspect Community*), stating that “no scientifically reliable conclusions can be drawn” from its small sample size. Further, he points out that Pantazis & Pemberton’s thesis is undermined by its loose attention to the timing and evolution of government policy and legislation, including its reference to laws enshrined in the Terrorism Act, which had been passed before 9/11. Pushing this point further, Greer also points out the discomfort of the War on Terror rhetoric within the British government, later expressed by then-Deputy Director (later Director General) of MI5 Eliza Manningham-Buller (Manningham-Buller 2011: Online; Greer 2010: Online).

This is not to say that problematising and exposing the flaws in *Prevent* engagement with Muslim communities is unhelpful. Many scholars outside of the expressly critical tradition have made observations as to the potentially counterproductive relationship that had emerged between authorities and

local communities. David Stevens (2009) points out that, due to an uncertain policy base, “Consequently this arm of PVE is, at best, barking up the wrong tree; at worst, fuelling extremism.” (Stevens 2009: Online) In terms of policy and social outcomes, such criticism is important.

Yet the key takeaway from a review of this strand of the literature is the lack of any true forward momentum or development in this approach. Analytical or theoretical dispositions may vary, yet the conclusions are unerringly and depressingly similar – that *Prevent* is a toxic, Orwellian and/or inherently racist endeavour. Little attention is paid to policy implications (Greer 2010), or even the substantial and real shifts in CVE policy in the last decade. If *Prevent* is Islamophobic, one would assume it may be useful to examine and demonstrate how this Islamophobia has manifested in concrete ways during these policy shifts. This thesis, attempting to ascertain the drivers of policy and its relationship to evolving technology, has little to gain from embedding itself in a discourse that assumes an unshifting position on policy outcome, and pays scant attention to the litany of adjustments that have characterised British CVE propaganda policy since 2007.

[Intelligence & Security Studies on Propaganda](#)

The adaptation or evolution of state policy is the central concern of this thesis. As a result, it eschews the normative and rather fixed stance of the Critical analysis of *Prevent*. Instead, it seeks inspiration and a highly useful comparative evidence base from the historical and institutionalist literature concerning British national security policy, and especially its analysis of state propaganda policy; with relevant additions to its conceptual framework to account for unfortunate but inevitable shortfalls in available evidence in the contemporary context.

The pieces of work most relevant to this thesis concern the founding, operation, and eventual dismantling of the Information Research Department (IRD), a sub-unit of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office that existed from 1948 to 1977. The scholarship concerning IRD ranges across its original anti-communist focus, to its expanding remit in countering Arab nationalism and later Irish republicanism. Through these phases, we can identify parallel situations that faced both the IRD and RICU – namely, the recognition of the need for an applied and centralised coordinating force for state propaganda policy; bureaucratic competition and contestation over its aims, goals, and strategy; the construction and maintenance of private-public partnerships to disseminate its messages; and pressures exerted from the top of government that trigger new working modes and practices. These studies, therefore do not only offer a viable and proven route for the exploration of modern propaganda policy, but also a wealth of analysis from which to draw comparisons. From this position, we can most accurately discern the existence of a ‘British way’ in propaganda, in the same way it is asserted of British counter-insurgency (Mumford 2012). Similarly, we can identify whether there are identifiable consistencies in the ways in which British propaganda policy has developed or evolved, and for what reasons.

Andrew Defty (2004) situates propaganda policy in the IRD era in the context of the 20th century up to and including the two world wars. He identifies that the IRD sat comfortably within this established approach, remarking that

“In marked contrast to totalitarian governments... British governments have found the selective presentation of facts a far more effective, and more palatable, employment of propaganda. Despite this, British governments have also been keen to hide their propaganda activities. British governments, it was claimed, did not engage in ‘propaganda’, they told the truth. Consequently, agencies responsible for directing propaganda overseas have usually operated in secret.”

Defty's analysis trains itself towards the remarkably close nature of Anglo-American cooperation in their shared endeavours in responding to the spread of communism, remarking that "Even before the end of the war, Britain and the USA were exchanging plans for the post-War organisation of their respective information apparatus." (p. 250) While there is evidence of some planned coordination between the US and British governments in our timeframe, these attempts appear to have been limited in number and scope. As such, the applicability of Defty's analysis is limited for our purposes. One may argue that the coordination and sharing of methodology between RICU and its European counterparts represents a continuation of a general tendency. However, this ignores the very real differences in approach between RICU and the IRD in this regard. For whereas RICU imported working strategies and ideas from its European partners, and later took the lead in delivering CVE propaganda in Europe, UK and US cooperation in the IRD era took the form of a division of responsibilities for anti-communist propaganda in different parts of the globe (Defty: 250-1).

Moreover, if we are to come to a firm understanding of how RICU's approach has shifted in our timeframe, we must also establish a clear picture of its internal dynamics. This includes both how new policy approaches are shaped within Whitehall, as well as the practical structures and relationships RICU has created to carry out its work. Fortunately, many studies in this field of inquiry have interpreted the IRD's evolution along these lines.

These pieces reflect a view of propaganda from an intelligence and foreign policy perspective, and highlight the importance of intra-mural contestation and compromise in the production of propaganda from the state. Cormac (2016) highlights that propaganda policy both extends far wider than the remit of a single department or agency, even to the top levels of government (p.1076) and that the work these departments undertake is both controversial

to other stakeholders (p.1088), and subject to complex bureaucratic structures that define its role and impact (p.1085, 1089). Vaughan (2005) identifies that the experiences, worldviews, and political leanings of both senior politicians and their civil servants played a key role in guiding the direction of policy. He observes that, in its early years, and “Largely to appease Labour Party sensitivities, IRD was charged with the task of providing a vigorous defence of British social democracy (a role increasingly neglected as IRD fell under the control of conservative elements in the diplomatic and intelligence services).” (p.18) Aldrich (1992) highlights how the formation of the IRD – as part of the new centralised Cold War intelligence apparatus – came about due to a delicate balance and compromise between the fears of the military Chiefs of Staff and the scepticism of the Foreign Secretary Ernest Bevin (p.19-20). In the same edited volume, Lucas and Morris (1992) expand on this contestation, observing that Bevin’s desire “to maintain Cabinet and Labour Party unity on foreign affairs” both delayed the implementation of new anti-communist propaganda policy, and shaped its final form. The authors assert that it was this desire for unity – and to maintain FCO authority over the project – that Bevin declined to allow the creation of an interdepartmental body to oversee IRD’s work. As a result, “the IRD became a ‘service department’, on call to support the intrigues and anti-Soviet projects of other agencies.” (both Lucas & Morris 1992: 86)

Cormac (2016) also identifies how this intra-mural process affected minds and plans within the IRD itself. As the department faced the challenge of shifting its focus to the domestic counter-insurgency effort in Northern Ireland, and came to terms with a loss of prestige and allocated resources, Cormac highlights how IRD was under pressure to justify its existence and continued relevance against the scepticism of senior stakeholders (p.1082). These pressures are echoed in the contemporary experience of RICU. For example, the *Prevent* strategy review of 2011, and to a less critical extent, the *Counter Extremism Strategy* of 2015, demonstrate that RICU was under similar pains to justify its outlay and position to a changing cast of political masters. In this way,

this area of the literature is useful for comparison purposes, but can also be built upon to observe differences in how these pressures have been managed or responded to.

This deep examination of the bureaucratic tensions that guide and constrain policy change is not the only factor that makes this historical institutionalist literature such an effective base. These studies also provide a detailed accounting of the IRD's working practices, professional connections, and its logistical arrangements for the creation and dissemination of its propaganda output. Maguire (2015) elucidates the wide-reaching and prominent contacts the department established within the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and the Labour Party proper, whose socialist and social democrat credentials were utilised as an effective bulwark against a slide into communist or Soviet sympathies. Lucas and Morris (1992) explain how these secretive and informal links between the IRD and the Labour Party were mirrored in the department's relationships with the media, in particular the BBC (p.91, 97). Shaw (2001) comments how the department established and utilised informal links with the film and literary communities. Contacts and friendships that were forged during the wartime Ministry of Information were leveraged to unofficially press for anti-communist themes and subjects in new projects, and as cover for IRD funding to be funnelled into anti-communist magazines (p.66-67, 70). Multiple sources attest to IRD's commitment to this 'grey' propaganda approach, noting insiders' attachment to this method on account of the perceived ineffectiveness of overt or officially sanctioned products (Cormac 2016: 20; Shaw 2001: 66; Lucas & Morris 1992: 91). Instead, IRD activity centred around the drafting of briefing documents to journalists, diplomats and foreign leaders. The factual analyses that the IRD circulated then formed the basis of stories and opinion pieces (Lucas & Morris 1992: 85, 95), as did material unattributably disclosed to the press (Cormac 2016: 8). However, as Collyer (2013) points out, by 1954 the department regularly disseminated its own self-authored content through the London Press Service (Collyer 2013: 134). The IRD was also keen to influence the wider cultural context regarding

communism and the Soviet Union, yet also sought to do so on an unattributable basis. The department would go on to set up its own publishing imprint to encourage the publication of books critical of the USSR and communism in general (Lucas & Morris 1992: 97). This print-dominated approach reflects how IRD output was focused on winning over elite 'opinion-formers' in various territories, rather than appeals to the masses; this focus on reaching out to the educated and elite in foreign countries to enhance British influence was one that the FCO under David Miliband sought to change.¹²

Moreover, there are close examinations of how these working structures adapted to circumstance, and sought to incorporate and adapt itself to emerging technologies, primarily in the Arabic World. These changes to the IRD's remit – and those of its partner organisations, the Information Policy Department (IPD), the Regional Information Office (RIO) and the Central Office of Information (COI) – were reactive measures. While the beginning of the Troubles presaged IRD's move into the explicitly domestic area of operations (though the distinction had been blurred far previously), the grander changes in the aspect of the IRD's propaganda machinery was triggered by geopolitical events abroad. Defty (2004) analyses the triggers for shifts in the approach, tone, and focus of propaganda work. Focusing on the period from the IRD's inception (1948) until the end of the Korean War (1953), he identifies that sudden changes in the geopolitical landscape was the key catalyst for the re-arrangement of resources and priorities. In particular, he highlights the death of Josef Stalin, the Czech coup of 1947, the Berlin blockade, the creation of the Cominform, the breakdown of imperial control in Asia, and the beginning of the Korean War (Defty 2004: 247-8). Focusing on the subsequent period of 1954 to 1963, Collier (2013) draws attention to "the organisational changes that took part [sic] throughout the British information services following Suez" (p.135), which led to the re-arrangement of these departments in to closer

¹² US State Department Cable, 'EUR SENIOR ADVISOR PANDITH AND S/P ADVISOR COHEN'S VISIT TO THE UK, OCTOBER 9-14, 2007'

proximity in Whitehall, and strengthening region-specific output (Ibid). This observation chimes nicely with RICU's response to the rise of ISIL/Daesh, and even propaganda products created in the context of Britain's impending withdrawal from Afghanistan.

Observing these changes in policy also provides us with a useful point of comparison in terms of how the British state adapted its propaganda apparatus to new media technologies, and what new challenges arose. In order to keep pace with the scope and popularity of the anti-British propaganda emanating from Cairo, the IRD and its partners placed great emphasis on strengthening its presence in non-print media, mainly radio. While this move indicated a shift into influencing the population at large, these attempts to counter Arab nationalist propaganda met with little initial success, mainly due to financial and planning issues (Mawby 2014: 182-8; Collier 2013: 69-70). The limited range of radio broadcast outposts added another complication, in that the raw briefing documents arriving from London had to be digested and reformed to the tastes and ideas of propagandists 'on the ground'. Colonial Office propagandists, for example, remained unconvinced of their applicability or usefulness for many years, even after the ministry dropped its official institutional resistance to IRD leadership in propaganda matters (Collier 2013: 137-8). The speed required to fill the airwaves with British content also often overwhelmed department staff, some of whom advised a slower turnaround so that arguments could be more thoughtfully considered and presented (Ibid: 141).

However, despite the wealth of detail and analysis that these works provide, this thesis must depart from this area of the literature in conceptual terms. This is done partly due to the constraints placed upon this project because of its contemporary focus. These studies, as previously noted, are overtly historical in their focus. In the case of the IRD, the timespan for analysis ends at 1977; and while the archival record on the department's activities was not fully unsealed until 1995, scholars even before this time enjoyed access to

unedited and internally-disseminated memoranda and minutes that showcase the intimate details of policy negotiation and execution within Whitehall. For our purposes, given the contemporary and naturally secretive nature of the policy under investigation, we cannot hope to enjoy the same kind of full and detailed picture of the internal dynamics of RICU and its partner organisations. Such a situation requires us to go beyond the historical institutionalist approach within these studies, as this approach is tied to the ability to carefully pick apart exact moments of change within official bureaucracy – the re-ordering of priorities, the re-shuffle of personnel, and reappraisal of resources can be accounted for in minutiae, leading to a full account. This project, by contrast, must piece together a narrative of internal reorganisation and adaptation through the lens of official publications, Freedom of Information (Fol) releases, and identifiable examples of RICU output available in the public sphere. This limitation leads us to reach for the aid of alternative conceptual frameworks that can help us parse gaps in the available evidence, and thus construct a viable and compelling narrative regarding the triggers, internal dynamics, and guiding influences within the evolution of modern propaganda policy. This is done through a ‘blended institutionalist’ approach, which conjoins the premises of historical institutionalism with the more flexible and dynamic viewpoint of neo-institutionalist ideas.¹³

At the same time, despite being necessitated by gaps in the ideal evidence base, it is believed that adopting conceptual frameworks from the wider social sciences will help to strengthen and enrich the potential of intelligence and security studies. Good examples of this include Thomas Maguire (2015), who analysed the IRD from a state-private networks perspective, or Louise Kettle (2018) who has analysed the evolution of national security policy from the ‘connectivist’ approach to education and learning (p.14-21). By widening the scope of inquiry in a similar way, this thesis hopes to connect the field of

¹³ For a more detailed examination and explanation of this approach, see Chapter 3: Conceptual Framework

intelligence studies to wider debates in the social sciences, and provide new directions for the study of national security policy. In this case, it hopes to open up opportunities for comparison between the state and other institutions, and for more piercing examinations of how organisations inspire and lead each other in different directions.

Modern State Propaganda Study

In this regard, this thesis also takes inspiration from the innovative analyses emerging from the modern study of state propaganda. In contrast to the institutionalist literature focusing on Britain, this area of scholarship demonstrates a more thorough reappraisal of the meaning of ‘propaganda’ and the analytical approaches that can be utilised to study it. In the main, these advancements centre around the treatment of censorship, and how different states have sought to respond to the emergence of information technologies as a dominant feature of the media environment.

The work of King, Pan & Roberts is exemplary of both these tendencies. Gary King, along with contributors Jennifer Pan and Margaret Roberts (2017; 2014) highlight through automated text analysis, manual or automated named entry recognition, and quantitative analysis, the patterns displayed by the Chinese Communist Party’s censorship campaigns. They discovered that the application of Chinese censorship was sophisticated in terms of its targets – allowing criticism of the regime to proliferate, but clamping down on attempts at citizen-organising or collective action (2014: 1). Further, their analysis maps out the process by which censorship is applied, including examples of standard operating procedures, and the separation of automated and human-enacted removal of social media posts (2014: 3-4). Later, the team analysed the “astroturfing” programme exerted by the CCP across internet platforms, directed by state propaganda institutions through a paid workforce of internet commentators. They argued that this initiative gravitated around a tactic of

“cheerleading about (essentially) irrelevant topics” in order to distract from or bury news that might inspire public anger. Again, they highlight how this type of activity spiked around “events with ‘collective action potential’” (2017: 496). The team conceptualise this activity as a form of *reverse censorship*, which in tandem with content removal policies, effectively buries criticism and opposition without the open deletion (2017: 484). These points contain important implications for modern propaganda study; reflecting both the central relevance of censorship to the execution of a propaganda campaign, as well as the numerous and intricate avenues that censorship can exploit in the modern context.

It is perhaps this newfound area of growth that has brought new focus onto the subject of censorship. Literature concerning IRD and British propaganda efforts in the 20th century pays little, if any, attention to the question of censorship. Comparative programmes, such as the insistence that television programming in Aden would dampen anti-British sentiment through distraction (Mawby 2014: 185), are noted, but these addendums remain piecemeal and not conceptually connected to propaganda techniques in any true sense. Contrast this blindspot with the treatment of censorship within the propaganda equation in the modern equation. Those focussed in the contemporary era and very recent past go to great lengths to reveal the methods and procedures involved in the restriction of unsavoury material from public view. Shambaugh (2007) reflects on the numerous layers of apparatus that exist in China to prevent undesirable news and opinion to spread into the body politic, including CCP officials’ attachment to newspaper staff, the approvals procedures subjected to even basic academic texts, and the culture of self-censorship that has emerged as a result (p.44-6).

Peng Hwa Ang and Berlinda Nadarajan (1996) consider the Singaporean government’s censorial approach to the internet in terms of its conceptualisation by the authorities. After restating that the sheer amount of raw information now available created problems of scale, they explain that the

government had several censorial frameworks that could be applied from earlier media, all of which had 'legitimate' grounds – the question being whether to treat the Internet as a mail service, a computer service, or a broadcasting service (p.3). They explain that the decision to treat the internet as a broadcasting service led to guidelines being enforced by the Ministry of information and Arts, leading to an entrenchment of this ministry's heavier hand in private homes, in comparison to universities (p.6-7). Chaabane et al. (2014) measure and assess the censorship tactics of the Syrian government, discovering that heavy censorship focus is placed on instant messaging services, while employing some rather basic deletion techniques based on IP addresses and key word searches (p.285).

The variation in style and approach to censorship reveals to us the need to take the practice of censorship into account with the same alacrity we must use for 'positive' or outward-facing propaganda. Further, the institutional basis for the execution of this censorship must also be carefully considered. As Barney Warf (2011) argues:

"Because the state is not a monolithic entity but composed of diverse agencies, sometimes working at cross-purposes, rather than view censorship as the simple repression of oppositional discourses it is more instructive to think of it in terms of multiple, sometimes contradictory authorities that invoke diverse strategies of suppression of various groups and individuals for a broad array of reasons and motivations."

(Warf 2011: 4)

This is a pertinent observation for our analysis. For while entities such as the CTIRU are involved in censorship efforts against extremist content, many other parts of the British state are involved in censorship campaigns in other areas. This institutional separation allows us to observe the transfer of strategies from one part of the state to another – as in the case of extremism, CVE strategy has imported the principles successfully implemented in the fight

against child sexual abuse. Further, it reminds us how control over strategy can change in the contestation over policy process – such as the OSCT (that contains RICU) being handed oversight of CTIRU (a division of the Metropolitan Police), and its implications for propaganda strategy.

At the same time, Warf's analysis reveals a gap which this thesis aims to fill in this literature on modern state propaganda strategy. While he excoriates what he considers as a lack of attention on global censorship strategies – a fair complaint – he demonstrates the literature's focus on the conduct of autocratic states. He identifies three strategic trends of censorship, ranging from 'crude' approaches in low-Internet penetration countries, which rely on internet licensing and real-world surveillance of cybercafés (Cuba, Vietnam and Myanmar), replaced by firewalls, IP-address blocks and keyword filtering as internet usage grows (China, Kazakhstan and Saudi Arabia), and "soft" censorship tactics that encourage Internet service providers (ISPs) to restrict content in their commercial offerings (Russia and Singapore) (Warf 2011: 7). The position of liberal democracies, such as the USA, Canada and others in Europe is mentioned, but only in the sense that these states have been overwhelmed by internet usage, and effective censorship is therefore practically impossible (Ibid). However, and as shall be explained in Chapter 7, in response to technological pressures the British government has pushed the boundaries for prosecuting the consumption of undesirable material. To dismiss out of hand the efforts of liberal democratic states in such a way reduces the utility of political internet studies scholarship; leaving a blind spot in explanation of the effect of the internet on public and civil society in these countries.

The studies listed above are only a sample of the current literature; yet they reflect this tendency to zero in on autocratic regimes. This thesis, while indebted to and inspired by the innovative conceptions of propaganda strategy, and its variations in censorship, seeks to redress this balance by

shining a light on the challenges that internet-based extremism poses to liberal democracies, and the institutional approaches to combatting them.

It is worth noting that, although the normative implications of censorship (within the framework of liberal ideals such as free speech) certainly have impacted the British state's response, this thesis does not intend to impose normative judgements on this aspect of policy. However, examining the execution of this censorship will allow us to more accurately and holistically interpret the implications of British CVE propaganda policy on the character of public discourse online, and how it is shaped by institutional adaptation and decision-making.

[Analysing Propaganda Strategy](#)

We have already in this chapter examined the difficulties surrounding the definition of propaganda. However, such a discussion concerning the ethical considerations or connotations of 'propaganda' get us no further along the trail towards a compelling framework for analysing propaganda tactics. Bakir et al (2018) highlight this point effectively. They point out that a conceptual schism has developed within the field of political communication - between those studying manipulative propaganda in non-democratic regimes and those focused on the salesmanship within liberal democracy – that has severely weakened the theoretical advancement of propaganda study. In its place, they propose a spectrum of communication attempts that range from the most consensual to the most manipulative, which allow us to appreciate the use of coercive, incentivising, or deceptive forms of communication that still penetrate liberal democracies (Online). Gonzalez (2017) reminds us of the pressing need for scholarship to address this current "blind spot" within the literature (Bakir et al 2018: 311), as new technology opens up greater and new avenues for the manipulation of information (Gonzalez 2017).

This blind-spot, concerning both the ongoing evolution of organised political communication and the position of political discourse within liberal democracy, is one this thesis explicitly seeks to address. However, Bakir et al. once again run into the recurring problem of value-based judgement on what consists of manipulation, as well as the severe deficiencies in the Habermasian conceptual basis which undergirds their analysis, resting as it does on an intersubjective basis where truth or success is only established through the agreement of the other participants (Camargo Brito 2010: 2). To do so is to insist on a limited criterion for free speech acts, assuming that freedom to speak and question creates in and of itself a basis of rationality (Ibid: 6). Slavoj Zizek (1989) instead asserts that such free association and collective discourse, and the social activity which presupposes it, “supports the fantasy which regulates social activity.” (p.36) Auerbach and Castronovo (2013) support Zizek in this dispute, commenting on how his conception of propaganda (as vital to support the ‘comforting illusions’ which are necessary for the functioning of technological society) is supported both by their scholarly work and the ideas of influential thinkers such as Jacques Ellul and Walter Lippmann (pp. 10-11).

This underlying difficulty with delineating and interpreting propaganda practice is reflected in the dearth of strong conceptual tools utilised in modern propaganda study. Without a secure basis on which to make judgements concerning the validity of certain activities or ideas, propaganda study has instead become a field filled with painstaking accounts of differing propaganda campaigns or battles, with little unifying theory between them. For example, we can take Khamis, Gold and Vaughn’s (2010) analysis of the dynamics of ‘grassroots propaganda’ from the Egyptian Revolution and the Syrian Civil War. While exhaustive in detail, and an excellent source for a blow-by-blow accounting, little in terms of concrete conceptualisation of propaganda is evident in its exploration or its conclusions. Their analysis is composed of three basic elements, in this case actors, tools, and tactics (p.419-420), and their conclusions make little headway in discerning new avenues for study, beyond reflections on the breakdown of traditional media hierarchies, which “will

provide average citizens with [more] choices of information sources” and elevate them from the role of ‘passive consumer’ to ‘active producer’ (p.432). Such statements have been widespread since at least the early to mid-2000s; as such, they seem to fall far short of the authors call for “Re-envisioning Propaganda in the Internet Age.” (p.431) This is not to take away from the tightly-focussed and compelling insights concerning effective organisation and discursive tactics that have resulted from their analysis (p.433-5). However, such conclusions must be considered as general reflections for a specific case, not examples that point to a compelling new framework for propaganda study.

Khamis et al. are hardly alone in this regard. Frischlich et al. (2018), researching the effectiveness of CVE propaganda products, merely point out the increased effectiveness of products with a narrative element, as opposed to those without. Jowett & O’Donnell (2012), in their excellent summary of the field, provide a process for the taxonomy of pieces of propaganda or a campaign, but aside from listing a number of differing factors that may be considered by an analyst (p.289-306), offer little for a compelling research agenda besides a meticulous model for taxonomy (p.361).

Piers Robinson (2019) indicates his belief that “the academic field of political communication... is in need of a rethink, to the extent that its horizons must be broadened it is to succeed” (p.2). He posits that the academic literature to date has been far too concerned with the public-facing media institutions, even those coming from the most critical of perspectives, such as Herman and Chomsky (1988). Instead, due to ubiquity of propaganda within modern society, research must be flexible enough to account for the myriad and multiple sources and contributors to persuasion attempts. This is in contrast to approaches that seek to improve the quality of communication (an instrumentalist approach), or to provide detailed but analytically-sparse accounts of propaganda in the modern world, particularly in the inculcation of ideology (all Robinson 2019: Online).

As previously stated, this thesis aims to achieve a framework that Robinson sees as necessary for the field to move forward. The first task – to illuminate the web of activity that shapes the final propaganda products – is achieved through the institutional analysis of RICU’s ties to the private sector and civil society, as well as the isomorphic patterns that shape change in policy. The second – to explore how propaganda inculcates its desired beliefs into society – requires a toolkit that can reflect the complex and evolving interplay between media and audience, and how the rise of the internet age has changed this dynamic. To do so requires a nuanced and compelling conception of the modern media landscape and the internet’s effect upon this landscape, which is addressed below. Yet this still requires us to possess a framework for analysing the discursive attempts of British CVE propaganda policy. To achieve this, and to move scholarship forward, it is most prudent to revisit the work of the famous propaganda scholar Jacques Ellul, in particular his eightfold typography for analysing propaganda campaigns.

Ellul’s perspective fits neatly with the ubiquity of propaganda in the modern media that Robinson describes. His work attests to the inseparability of education from the propaganda process; indicates that propaganda is necessary for the regulation of society and the individuals within it; and attests to the inseparability of modern modes of communication with the content and character of the persuasion attempts made to those who exist within them (Kellen 1965: v-viii). Ellul outlines an eightfold categorisation that help us organise and understand persuasion attempts, aligned in four contrasting pairs. These are 1) Political v Sociological Propaganda; 2) Agitation v Integration Propaganda; 3) Vertical v Horizontal Propaganda; and 4) Irrational v Rational Propaganda.¹⁴ The first divides attitudes that are spread through deliberate purposes by an organisation, as opposed to the gentle shaping of

¹⁴ Taken from Marlin (2013) pp.351-7

cultural products according to pre-existing ideological beliefs.¹⁵ The second delineates an overarching purpose of the propaganda – agitational propaganda seeks to inspire action along certain lines, while an integrationist looks to promote stability and harmony within a given social group. The third pairing speaks to the fashion in which the propaganda is constructed, whether it be handed down and disseminated from higher powers or authorities, or is completed through the actions of the masses.¹⁶ The last pair indicates the tactics within the messages themselves, depending on whether they appeal to emotion, or utilise figures and/or other data. This last category is problematic, in that both appeals to reason and emotion can easily appear within a single propaganda product. However, this framework provides us with a categorisation that helps to illuminate both the structural elements that created RICU's propaganda campaigns, and how their purpose has changed over time. Further, it allows us the elasticity to show how RICU's discursive strategies have altered over time, and how these categories can become increasingly blurred in the social media age.

Information and Communication in the evolution of the public sphere

The final area in which this thesis seeks to make a contribution is to the fluid and rather erratic discourse surrounding the evolution of the internet and its impact on political organisation and action. Given the political turbulence ignited by the election of Donald Trump as President of the United States, and the referendum vote for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union, it is unsurprising that academic and public debate regarding this issue have proliferated wildly. However, this discourse has generally suffered from an overly-utopian view of the internet's potential for opening up a new pluralist

¹⁵ An example of this division could be the Nazi Party's famous *The Triumph of the Will*, as opposed to the casting of racial supremacists as the villains of the Harry Potter series.

¹⁶ It is important to note that Ellul was sceptical about the veracity of persuasion attempts that seemed to harbour horizontal ambitions.

vision of politics, stemming from its serious lack of attention toward the state. This is not simply a disadvantage due to the nature of this thesis and its research aims. The entrenched advantages of the state in terms of resources, access, and authority, make it a key part of any discussion of how the internet alters the course of politics in any given polity.

Cyber-utopianism's early fruits – and its distinctly anti-state agenda – began to emerge in the mid-1980s. In 1985, Secretary of State George Schultz (1985) argued that new information and communication technologies presented totalitarian states with an impossible dilemma: either reject the imposition of these new technologies, and suffer a competitive penalty, or open themselves up to them and have their control over society eroded. "In fact, they do not have a choice, because they will never be able to entirely block the tide of technological advance." (p.881) In 1996, John Perry Barlow, a pro-cyber activist and founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation, published a tract entitled "A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace". In this piece, Barlow situates the new zone of internet-based communications as

"a world that all may enter without privilege or prejudice accorded by race, economic power, military force, or station of birth... where anyone, anywhere may express his or her beliefs, no matter how singular, without fear of being coerced into silence or conformity."

(Barlow 1996: 1)

Barlow insists that the arrival of the internet was an unstoppable wave for 'liberty', warning governments that "erecting guardposts at the frontiers of Cyberspace... may keep out the contagion for a small time, but they will not work in a world that will soon be blanketed in bit-bearing media." (Ibid) The fetishising of the internet as an inescapable force that would inevitably topple coercive or restrictive public spheres was, it seems, absorbed wholesale by most thinkers, politicians and researchers. Even David Shambaugh (2007), in

his in-depth study of the Chinese Communist Party's propaganda apparatus, called into question the CCP's ability to maintain its control over public debate as the internet penetrated deeper into Chinese society (p.55-8). However, given the country's continued rise, and its wide assimilation of ICTs into its economy and society, we must be at once sceptical of this view, and studies that implicitly accept its premises. For while the more grandiose proclamations of the internet as a bastion of democracy may have subsided, in academia its influence is still keenly felt, such as in the growing power of the masses against the top-down power of the state.

Bruce Bimber's (2003) Information Regime Theory argues that the advent of the internet represents a new information regime: a set of dominant technologies and their properties that favour new types of political organisations (p.18-20). In the case of the internet, the associated speed of communication and the low costs of coordination and message-creation, Bimber argued, would lead to a period of 'post-bureaucratic pluralism' in politics, where political activism is ad-hoc, issue-based, and exists without formal structures and hierarchies (p.18, p.25). This is a point echoed by Clay Shirky (2008), who highlights the ability of citizens to use the internet in order to affect social change outside of traditional political or institutional structures (p.143-145). Howard & Hussain (2013) emphasise how the initial phases of the Arab Spring were dominated by groups that existed outside of traditional hierarchies, such as parties, trade unions, or religious organisations (p.3), as internet platforms allowed new groups to organise, recruit, and spread their messages outside of the gaze of the state (p. 8-10). Terrorist groups, such as al-Qaeda, ISIL/Daesh and al-Shabaab have used this absence of control to amplify their messaging, recruit members and inflate their significance in the public gaze (HMG 2015: 13).

However, the key issue with this line of argument is the role of the state. While the internet – and social media platforms such as Facebook, in particular – has allowed citizens and violent groups to circumvent traditional methods of

organisation and recruitment at lower cost, Bimber's formulation does not consider the role or impact of the state at any length, other than in response to citizen-led campaigning (2003: 129-133).

Evgeny Morozov (2011, 2009) is a notable exponent of this important consideration. In response to the enthusiasm that surrounded the initial phases of the Arab Spring, Morozov pointed to the example of Iran, and its crackdown on dissidents that utilised the internet as a tool of investigation and intimidation (2011: 10-13). He goes as far as to argue that such revolutionary change as seen elsewhere in the region could only happen "where the state apparatus is completely ignorant of the internet and has no virtual presence of its own." (Ibid)

It is clear, then, that addressing the impact of state intervention in the online environment – here, in a CVE context – in the terms of a cyber-utopian or citizen-focused paradigm is unlikely to bear fruit. This is partly due to this thesis' direct attention toward state action. In any case, assessing the quality of *Prevent* discourse, or the parameters allowed for online debate by government, against some imagined normative standard is beside the point.¹⁷ If we are to arrive at a firm understanding of what effect British propaganda policy's move into the online arena has had on public awareness and debate – we need to operate from a basis that captures the realities of technology and state influence on the public consciousness.

Due to the deficiencies and inconsistencies of the directly internet-concerned literature, it is beneficial to draw from analyses that offer definitive and agile accounts of how technological advancement has shifted the ground of political engagement. In this endeavour, the work of media theorists interested in the

¹⁷ For good examples of this tendency, one can look at the comparison between Jurgen Habermas' ideals of deliberative democracy and the potential of the internet to help society reach them (see Knapp 2013; Dahlgren 2005; Boeder 2005).

pre-internet mass media culture (including some Critical voices) is very useful. In this discourse, the impacts of technology on society – mediated through the auspices of the state and existing economic conditions – are far more lucidly accounted for and interpreted.

Elizabeth Eisenstein (1979), in her work on a similarly transformative technology, the printing press, demonstrates that these considerations must be part and parcel of considering the outcomes of technological change, arguing that new technology “is *an* agent, not *the* agent, let alone *the only* agent of change... it is not [sufficient] to substitute a single variable for many but to explain why many variables, long present, beg[i]n to interact in new ways.” (p.xv-xvi) Such a view is supported by influential policymakers. Jean-Claude Paye (1988), former Secretary General of the OECD expresses this point well:

“technological change is often equated either with certain hardware, or with specific production processes. This is a mistake. Technological change is, in its development and application, a social process not an event, and should be viewed not in static but in dynamic terms.”

(quoted in Mansell 2012: 11)

At base, the study of political transformation through technology requires an appreciation of the interconnection of technological, social, legal, political, and economic factors, and the interplay between new modes of communication and established social and political institutions. The power of these institutions remains considerable in the online sphere, utilising its embedded prestige, exposure and economic might to gain advantage in this new realm, despite outward impressions of equal access to new media by individual users or citizen-led groups (Fuchs 2015: 15-18). Chadwick (2013) argues persuasively that the regime we currently inhabit is a ‘hybrid’ media system, where older and newer media logics coexist and inform each other, “emphasiz[ing] how

older media logics are renewed and ultimately evolve as they interact with newer media logics.” (Chadwick et al. 2016: 4; see also Chadwick 2013) As shall be shown at length in later chapters, the informal connections between government, media companies, and third-sector organisations are of vital importance to the organisation and implementation of government CVE propaganda policy. Understanding technological disruption in this way also extends the efficacy and applicability of an institutionalist approach to the study of propaganda outlined above.

The work of media theorist Marshall McLuhan is also instructive in this regard. Although he takes an uncompromising technological determinist stance, observing the shifting character of RICU’s propaganda output through his theoretical framework can help illuminate the changes brought about in the character of messaging over differing platforms. This applies to the discursive elements of RICU’s offering, but is also intimately tied to its targeting methodologies as well. He explains:

“[I]t is sometimes a bit of a shock to be reminded that, in operational and practical fact, *the medium is the message*.¹⁸ This is merely to say that the personal and social consequences of any medium – that is, of any extension to ourselves – result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs... by any new technology.

Our conventional response to all media, namely that it is how it is used that counts, is the numb stance of the technological idiot... The content of a movie is a novel or a play or an opera. The effect of the movie form is not related to its program content.”

(McLuhan 1964: 7, 19)

¹⁸ Emphasis added.

In sum, McLuhan argues that content is preceded by the practical capabilities and limitations of a given medium. The Shakespeare play *Hamlet* can either be performed through the medium of live performance or of televised drama. In the latter case, the ability to edit and cut camera angles allows a director to hone in closely to an actor's face, or to signify the meaning of outdated vocabulary. The 'content', in each case, is for all intents and purposes, the same; but the change in medium opens new ways for this content to be communicated to an audience. For our purposes, we must consider in a similar way how the character of RICU's chosen media – print, television news, and later social media – offer distinct opportunities and restrictions in each case. The "personal and social consequences" of new media technologies, particularly in the case of their interactivity and community-building aspects, are an important consideration for this thesis, as the British government have continually attempted to 'build the capacity' and appeal of moderate Islam.

Yet it is one thing to explain how the practical capabilities of the new media environment have mutated the character of RICU's output, but quite another to diagnose its wider impact and implications for online-mediated political discourse. In contrast to the analysis of RICU's working model, which eschews a critical interpretive stance in favour of a more relevant and powerful institutionalist framework, these implications are best interpreted through the lens of critical media theorists Guy f, and Jean Baudrillard. Attempting to analyse the impacts of government intervention on social media platforms through the ideas of theorists writing in the early 1960s to the late 1980s/early 1990s may initially seem problematic. This is a fair critique, given the radically altered set of capabilities that new media affords in comparison to the age of top-down mass media. However, this ignores two important points. Firstly, as argued by Chadwick (2013), the 'logics' of mass media institutions still remain a part of this new environment, and thus remain an important component in understanding this new developmental phase. Secondly, despite their age,

these works have been noted for their remarkable applicability to the age of the internet and social media (Briziarelli & Armano 2017; Harris 2012).

In *Society of the Spectacle*, Debord (1967) argues that, due to the proliferation of mass media, society had now entered a stage in which social values are realised and spread as a form of performance in cultural products, in which “*Fragmented* views of reality regroup themselves into a new unity as a *separate pseudo-world* that can only be looked at.” (p.7) This analysis appears only strengthened in the new age of the internet, chiming with Barlow’s (1996) declaration that the new cyberspace “consists of transactions, relationships, and Thought itself... it is not where bodies live... There is no matter here.” (p.1) Debord continues: “The spectacle presents itself simultaneously as society itself, as a part of society, and as *means of unification*.” (p.7) The resemblance of this account to our current social media platforms is striking – social media presents itself as an alternative social space that facilitates the forming and maintenance of human relationships, the expression of inclusive political debate, and a public forum for the open discussion of social events from elections to sporting events to daily life. In this context, it is reasonable consider internet-based communication as the ultimate extension of the mass media culture. This position, in Debord’s framework, is of central importance to the character of public debate and action in the sphere of politics:

“[The spectacle] offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries. The bureaucratic regimes of certain industrial countries have their own particular type of spectacle, but it is in an integral part of the total spectacle, serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support.”

(Debord 1967: 28)

This co-option of anti-establishment forces is encapsulated within RICU’s ongoing work. One example is the social media channel ‘Woke’ – an account that decries Islamophobia in Western countries, challenges traditional gender

stereotypes, and allies Muslim experiences of discrimination with that of African-Americans. Despite this anti-establishment and disruptive stance, the channel is financially supported as part of the UK government's counter-extremism strategy (Bridge 2019). One does not need to believe that this type of action is inherently deceitful (as Debord does). However, we can't ignore how the rebellious posture of this account – and others like it – sits uncomfortably with its state-backed status, and the tacitly pro-Western model RICU products advance for global Muslim society.¹⁹

Again, however, we are faced with a problem of explanation – if potentially transformative social movements from British Muslim society are, to use Debord's phrase 'recuperated' by the state, the question remains as to the methods by which this is achieved. Here, we can turn to the work of Jean Baudrillard, in particular his concept of *simulation*. Emerging from the same culture, and building on many of Debord's key concepts, Baudrillard takes a notably acerbic and polemic stance on the topic of mass media culture. However, despite some of his more theatrical and bleak tendencies, Baudrillard's ideas retain a solid theoretical foundation and highly relevant observations that provide us with a strong conceptual toolkit.

In a series of essays, published under the title *The Iraq War Did Not Take Place* (1995), Baudrillard observes, accurately, that the mass media's reach and scope meant that, practically, the First Gulf War's cultural and political significance lay primarily in the way it was represented and interpreted through television news and cultural products such as film and television dramas. In contrast to, say, the Second World War, the Gulf War did not result in any direct changes to the majority of Americans' lives. Although WWII is also a conflict saturated in war and political propaganda through mass media, its social impact was felt directly in the form of ordinary Americans being drafted into the military, the resultant loss of friends and family felt by millions across

¹⁹ See Chapter 5

the country, and those who stayed at home having their labour power being redirected to military production. The social impact of the First Gulf War was comparatively miniscule. For Baudrillard, due to the continuing advance of this media, war was now primarily performed on and for television, rather than on an actual battlefield (Baudrillard 1995: 51-3):

“Any more than the direct transmission by CNN of real time information is sufficient to authenticate a war. One is reminded of *Capricorn One* in which the flight of a manned rocket to Mars, which only took place in a desert studio, was relayed live to all the television stations in the world.”

(Baudrillard: 53/4)

Histrionics aside, Baudrillard’s central diagnosis is a firm one. The detachment of the media landscape from social reality is an idea widely and often accepted in broader society, and implicitly condoned within the British government’s own CVE strategy, which insists on rebalancing the outsized influence extremist voices enjoyed in online media (HMG 2015: 23).

The reference to *Capricorn One* is a clear example of what Baudrillard coined ‘simulation.’ In *Simulacra and Simulation*, (1981) Baudrillard argues that the mass media (and its second order effects on living people) meant that the modern world was governed through “the generation by models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal.” He likens this process to “the map that engenders the territory” (Baudrillard 1981: 1). Given Baudrillard’s opaque style, it is perhaps best to understand this concept of simulation through the explanations of others interested in his work. Chen (1987) expands that “What is real is no longer our direct contact with the world, but what we are given on TV is the world.” (p.71) When the representation of real-world events through the media presents us with (inevitably) truncated, inaccurate, or downright false ideas given the real-world, these misunderstandings produce their own real-world effects, which are then covered by the media once again, and so on.

As this process becomes embedded in our social structures, “We enter into a new age of simulation: images and codes, the subject (the masses) and the (TV) event flow into each other” in a continuous feedback loop (Ibid: 71-2). Voicu (2012) explains how this results in an inversion of what we would traditionally consider as the relationship between events and their media coverage: “society is based on models other than objective reality... It is reality which tries to mimic the copy, it is the real which attempts to reproduce the dimensions of imitation.” (p.98) The application of this concept of simulation to the question of state propaganda is taken up by Nadia Kaneva (2018) in her analysis of the Kosovan state’s Young Europeans ‘nation-branding’ campaign. She notes how, having been “precluded [from] the use of symbols of ethnic affiliation (i.e. Albanian, Serbian or others) in Kosovo’s official markers of identity, such as its flag, hymn, emblem and colors”, the government (in coordination with outside public relations partners) attempted to re-construct Kosovan nationality, to both internal and external audiences, around its status as newborn, youthful, forward-looking and optimistic country re-asserting its ‘true’ identity on the world stage. This new identity, having been constructed by advertising executives, is held up as a model to which Kosovans can orient their national identities towards (Kaneva 2018: Online).

This Kosovan example parallels with RICU’s rhetorical strategy toward the British (and later, European) Muslim community. Since the unit’s conception in 2007, the British government has, by various means, through third sector partnerships, seed funding, and direct media intervention, sought to promote and exemplify what it referred to as ‘moderate’ voices within the Muslim community, which were being drowned out by a slick and professional extremist offering. In response, RICU has repeatedly put forward through diverse media positive examples of British Muslim activism, and opportunities for collective political engagement that reject Salafist claims and ideas. In this way, through “generation by models”, the British government has sought to assemble from disparate parts - and then inculcate - a new social collective of liberal British Muslims who, though emotionally connected to their heritage,

and sincerely devoted to Islam, are loyal to British nationhood and seek to advance liberal social ideals. Later combined with the simulated social spaces afforded by new media, which offer a forum for sympathetic Britons to congregate and coalesce, RICU's rhetorical strategy can be considered as an attempt to construct a *simulated liberal British Muslim identity* that can be emulated in the real world.

3. Conceptual Frameworks for Analysis

To effectively engage with the question of how the British state has adapted to the rigours of communication via new media, researchers need an effective conceptual framework within which to order proper analysis. In this regard, what is needed is a scaffold which encapsulates the intricacies of institutional memory and the historical context which shapes organisational adaptation. At the same time, such a framework must also systematise these changes, so that the ways in which they are instigated, and what pressures guide their final form, can be effectively applied to the complex policy realm that is British counter-extremism.

To achieve this, this thesis proposes utilising a blend of historical and neo-institutionalisms. Doing so should enable researchers to remain true to the highly specific factors that constrain institutional adaptation within particular governments, while also rendering such work useful in comparing or contrasting these findings with other states or supra-national organisations. This framework, it is proposed, creates a toolkit for analysis that is sufficiently broad and deep to engage with the small-scale issues that can illuminate the cases under direct scrutiny, while also easing the application of any lessons drawn to the wider issues within which the research questions are embedded.

After this discussion, this institutionalist toolkit is integrated into the overarching framework this thesis utilises to interrogate British CVE propaganda policy. Taking instruction and inspiration from the Latin roots of the term propaganda, and the institution that made this term synonymous with persuasive communication, this thesis proposes an 'agricultural' lens for the analysis of policy. This lens divides analysis into three broad categories. Firstly, the organisation responsible for propaganda policy; second, the 'Truth' or attitudes that the organisation wishes to spread; and third, the methods used to spread or disseminate these desired attitudes. The lens of

institutionalism is to be applied in study of the first category. The second category, as discussed further below, is approached from the perspective of Ellul's eightfold categorisation of propaganda styles and Baudrillard's concepts of simulacra and simulation. The third category, which covers both the aspects of targeting and censorship, also utilises the proposed institutionalist frame, along with an eye towards McLuhan's work concerning the social consequences of emerging media.

Propaganda as Organisation

As argued in the previous chapter, the study of propaganda is, at present, too narrowly focused on interpreting particular pieces of propaganda output. Increasingly, propaganda study is opening its conceptual repertoire to study where such persuasive messaging strategies sit amongst a complex set of levers that are designed to constrain and guide public opinion.²⁰ Still fewer focus upon the adaptation of state propaganda organisations to new technological innovations.²¹ As such, a proper way as to study these kinds of phenomena has yet to be clearly defined.

This chapter seeks to address the choices taken by the author in framing the study of this topic. This thesis primarily draws from the literature on historical institutionalism – emphasising the particular influences that shape policy choices in individual social or historical contexts. The thesis also utilises literature from the related field of bureaucratic institutionalism, for a tighter discussion of competing decision-makers within a stratified organisational structure. The thesis also draws upon the conceptual developments of so-called neo-institutionalism, with its emphasis on categorising differing types of *isomorphism*. Conceptually, it is set forward that the broad types of organisational change described in the neo-institutionalist literature provide

²⁰ King, Pan & Roberts 2013

the basic assemblage for describing the driving impetus or general destination of change, while the historical context extant in an organisation provides set limits, or 'guardrails', that guide this impetus into a final form.

Such a framework encapsulates the intricacies of institutional memory and the historical context which shapes organisational adaptation. At the same time, such a framework also systematises these changes, so that the ways in which they are instigated, and what pressures guide their final form, can be applied successfully to other specific examples or larger-*n* analyses.

The vision of 'propaganda' set forth in this thesis has had a profound impact upon the choice of these conceptual frames. Propaganda studies – in its traditional sense - has primarily been carried out as a form of political art criticism, deconstructing imagery and messages and interpreting their desired effects upon the target audience or population. As a counterweight to this narrow view, this thesis seeks to reground propaganda as a consistent institution of modern human life, and as such primarily an organisational feat.

A useful metaphor for this distinction comes from the etymology of the word 'propaganda' itself. *Propagare* – the root of the word – is an agricultural metaphor, referring to a form of sewing / replanting from cuttings. The concept of agriculture presupposes two interlinked but disparate elements – the produce of farming (food, clothing) and the methods by which that produce is made (tools/technology, division of labour, social hierarchies etc). If we were to extend this agricultural metaphor, we can see that propaganda studies in the recent past have been too heavily focused on analysing *what was planted*, rather than on *how it was planted*. To demonstrate the problem of taking such a view, we may consider another agricultural example. If we compared the form of output that two farms in different historical periods, we may find that both produced the same foodstuff: wheat, though perhaps later in elevated quantities. Yet to describe the evolution of farming in such a way would fail to illuminate the complex social, political, environmental and

technological factors that had allowed that increase to take place, and leave out the rather more compelling aspects of the story, such as the invention of pesticides or automotive engines.

Neo-institutionalism: Isomorphism and Legitimacy

To better understand this side of propaganda, and in particular, how such 'planting' practices change in response to new, disruptive technology, it is fruitful to turn to the ideas of organisational science. Neo-institutionalism, as a conceptual approach, focuses upon the interplay between organisations and their 'organisational field': "those organisations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognised area of institutional life." (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 148). Moreover, it is primarily concerned with the "endogenous and exogenous forces shaping organisational dynamics and responses to changes." (Li & Du 2016: 4) Emerging out of 'traditional' institutional ideas, neo – or 'new' – institutionalism seeks to establish the interplay between distinct organisations within a shared professional field, in contrast with older accounts that tended to focus on "analysing internal factors [that] influence organisational processes" (Ibid: 5). Such alacrity allows us to examine RICU as an organisation engaged within – and thus shaped by – the wider realm of private public relations and advertising, but also as a state propaganda organisation among many others. (As previously discussed, the lack of attention to such organisations in liberal democracies is a surprising gap within the modern propaganda literature, and such comparisons are highly useful for future scholarly work.)

To neo-institutionalists, "organisations compete not just for resources and customers, but for political power and institutional legitimacy." (Aldrich 1979: 265) It is this competition for legitimacy that is the key driver of organisational change that can be observed within various fields of human endeavour: "Copying organisational structures is not a process driven by efficiency considerations, but a way of securing legitimacy in political life." (Radaelli

1997: 8) In neo-institutional terms, legitimacy is not a result of working via proper legal channels, or ones which are based on public support. Instead, legitimacy exists within an organisational field of activity, with each organisation within said field observing, imitating, and responding to each other – in particular, conforming to a set of shared assumptions, norms and practices that increase access to talent, funding, and general stability (Ball & Craig 2010: 283). As such, accruing and maintaining legitimacy is of the utmost importance to organisations. The collective process through which new modes of operation are accepted as effective, and then become imitated by other organisations within the same field, drives the process of conformity – or institutionalisation – that encourages uniformity between organisations in that field, to the point where “in neo-institutional theory, legitimacy and institutionalisation are virtually synonymous” (Suchman 1995: 576).

Organisations are under constant pressure to conform to shared industry terminology, standards, and structure to remain operational. In an area of high imprecision and uncertain effects, such as propaganda, the ability to rely on accepted standards of ‘appropriate’ or ‘correct’ practice should of great importance to organisational longevity and success. Intriguingly, Cormac (2016) highlights how, after the receding of international communism as the overwhelming and imminent threat to UK security, the Information Research Department (IRD – RICU’s predecessor as the UK’s state propaganda organisation) was eager to shake off its perception as a relic of the early Cold War and to “safeguard their future prospects” after severe cutbacks (p.1082). This clear concern with retaining professional respect from within the Civil Service can be seen to be at work within IRD’s modern counterpart. As shall be explored in greater detail, RICU officials are keen to highlight themselves as a source of legitimacy for other democratic countries, and proudly relate how the RICU model is being studied and absorbed by other state propaganda organisations.²² Existing not only within this organisational field, but as a

²² Private information

constituent part of the wider Civil Service, RICU's search for legitimacy should be intensified, as it seeks both to recruit talent that it requires, but also to secure funding and licence to operate from senior government officials within a wide range of policy options.

The imitation of RICU's model by similarly positioned agencies is an excellent example of the other core concept of neo-institutionalist thinking – isomorphism. In a highly influential article, DiMaggio & Powell (1983) laid out three distinct forms of isomorphism: coercive, mimetic, and normative. Though these are distinct, the authors stress that these forces will likely intermingle in practice (p.150). *Coercive* isomorphism takes two primary forms – “pressures from other organisations on which a focal organisation is dependent and an organisation's pressure to conform to the cultural expectations of the larger society.” (Mizruchi & Fein 1999: 657). These dominant organisations may take the form of a regulatory agency enforcing legislative mandates, larger customer organisations, or even “the informal rules of the game” by which an organisation is forced to operate (Martinez-Ferrero & Sanchez 2017: 103). *Mimetic* isomorphism – involving “standard reactions to uncertainty” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 150) – represents the tendency for organisations to directly imitate the practices and structure of similar “model” units when faced with new or changing realities (Martinez-Ferrero & Sanchez 2017: 105). This may indeed be seeking to adjust to directly similar structures, or to undertake ‘strategic’ isomorphism, following the lead of others in seeking change, though perhaps arriving at differing end-points (Deephouse 1996: 1025). Finally, *normative* isomorphism relates to the accumulative processes that result in the steady ‘professionalisation’ of a field, involving “the collective struggle of members of an occupation to define the conditions and methods of their work... and to establish a cognitive base and legitimation for their occupational autonomy.” (DiMaggio & Powell 1983: 152) This may involve events such as conferences, where ‘best practice’ ideas are shared amongst a professional group, or vocational training that is designed to induct new members into the organisational field, resulting in entrants

applying a standard set of behaviours and principles to organisational tasks (Ibid).

Though discussed at greater lengths elsewhere, it is worthwhile to note here that each of these pressures can be identified in relation to RICU, though operating at different levels and in differing directions. In 2011, RICU was placed under substantial *coercive* pressure from the incoming Coalition government to ‘professionalise’ its product (HMG 2011A: 52). This pressure resulted in developing deep connections with organisations in the same field outside the Civil Service, such as Breakthrough Media and Saatchi PR (Cobain et al 2016: Online), and the recruitment of professionals with experience not available within the Civil Service.²³ Such a move for experience from the private sector reflects *normative* isomorphic pressure flowing into RICU, as wider industry standards and ideas were implemented. RICU’s move into the social media space reflects a *mimetic* inward pressure, as it was forced to reshape itself in order to compete with an enemy organisation. While little tangible evidence exists, the self-reported pride of RICU officials in becoming a model for mimicry by others is an example of *mimetic pressure* flowing outward from RICU. Such pride also lends further credibility to the application of these neo-institutional ideas to the agency’s study. RICU’s newfound model position among other state propaganda organisations seemed to enhance its standing (which had started at a low ebb) within Whitehall, shielding the agency from restructuring amongst conditions that had generally triggered evolution in its structures or working habits. Further, the launch of an international arm for the agency – alongside bullish language concerning the adoption of British priorities in CVE – reflect the outward *coercive* isomorphic pressure that its newfound prestige allowed it to wield on other state propaganda organisations.

²³ See Chapter 4

Despite these strengths, neo-institutionalism has faced a number of criticisms. Hasselbladh and Kallinikos (2000) highlight that the approach lacks focus on or appropriate explanations for “the means linking situated forms of organising with wider instrumental beliefs and practices” other than in loose allusions to adaptation or diffusion (p.697). In particular, they draw attention to neo-institutionalist failure to “consider the various ways by which ideas are objectified, i.e. developed and embedded into social and durable artefacts” (p.699), and as such argues that

“the empirical programme of neo-institutionalism fails to account for important facets of institutionalisation... offers no account of the means through which a domain of action is conceived, rules of conduct, performance principles and devices of control are developed and forms of actorhood constituted. It instead concentrates, by and large, on patterns of diffusion.”

(Hasselbladh & Kallinikos 2000: 701)

Similar critiques have been levelled by Goldmann (2005), who maintains that attempts to account for human agency and action within neo-institutionalism struggle to be clear about how such concepts are to be utilised in analysis (Goldmann 2005: 38). Colomy (1998) asserts that this blind spot is a result of the approach’s “macro bias”, and argues that interest should be targeted more closely at internal specifics (p.265-6). In short, while neo-institutional concepts are useful for describing the overarching types of change across organisations, they lack the precision to provide compelling accounts for the character of that change, its final end results, or how this state of affairs has come about.

As a corrective to this problem, this thesis utilises the perspective of historical (or ‘old’) institutionalism. Other researchers have already achieved success through blending these sociological and historical lenses, such as Leblebici et

al. (1991) on the evolution of radio broadcasting, and Hargadon & Douglas' (2001) analysis of the role of legitimation in the design and invention of the electric lightbulb. The latter authors indeed argued that a historical institutionalist approach

“offer[s] ways to examine social processes in ways that both cross-sectional and even current longitudinal research cannot [...] cognition, whether they be individual or organisational”

and that:

“Careful analysis of moments in history when innovations rapidly change the landscape of existing institutions offers the opportunity to observe these larger systems of meaning.”

(both Hargadon & Douglas 2001: 480)

These “larger systems of meaning”, however, must be appropriately constrained as to avoid losing all meaning. We must be careful to properly appreciate the underlying social structures within which such choices are embedded, and how to appropriately account for the impacts of decisions made within these wider structures on the case in question. Consider the following thought experiment, laid out by Richard Lewontin (1990):

“If I slip on the ice on my way to class in winter, and I break my leg, I will say that the cause of my broken leg was my fall. But one of my students will say that the *real* cause of my broken leg was my hurrying to class at eight in the morning, when a more reasonable teacher would have set the class for ten. A lawyer friend who hears about my fall will tell me that the cause of my fracture was the negligence of the City of Cambridge, which failed to sand the streets when they were icy. And my more political friends will say that the cause of

my broken leg was the unequal tax structure in Massachusetts, which starves cities of the money they need to provide basic services.”

(Lewontin 1990: Online [Audio])

Notice how in each new explanation, the causation of the broken leg is dependent upon decisions reached in ever-wider social structures. The decision to hurry to class is predicated upon the setting of the class timetable, assumedly both in the past and demanded by the structure of the university. The decision whether to sand the roads was made within the wider social structure of the city council – which itself was under a *fact*-based pressure of low funding, predicated upon decisions made in the even wider social structure of the government and voters of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

Lewontin explains that “We all think we know what we mean by ‘cause and effect’... Generally, one looks for *the* cause of an effect. Or – even if there are a number of causes allowed – one supposes that there is a major cause, and the others are only subsidiary,” yet causes in fact interweave within wider social contexts, such as considering the cause of tuberculosis as both the specific bacterium which infects the body, and the poor labouring conditions common in the 19th Century, when the disease was most prevalent (Ibid).

To alleviate this problem – and to succinctly characterise the nature of adaptation within RICU itself – we must properly account for the decision-making structures within RICU operates, and apply direct and consistent effects to its own decision-making. As an addendum, we may also characterise the types of events or facts that provoke decisions within this wider structure. For example, and as shall be discussed at much greater length elsewhere, changes to RICU’s strategy may be imposed as broad directives from ministerial-level decision-makers, themselves placed under pressure from the announcement of an election or a change of government. Maintaining

flexibility in accounting for wider structural issues, but insisting on clear and consistent institutional lines of connection, should allow analysis to incorporate all relevant processes of decision-making, whilst ensuring such questions do not fall into a cycle of infinite regression.

The framework of historical institutionalism offers the most fertile ground to account for these various demands. It implies the space for sequential analysis, illuminating paths and choices playing out over time, with previous choices affecting subsequent ones (Sanders 2008: 39). Further, such a perspective invites careful consideration of how inter-connected decision-making hierarchies impact the construction and interpretation of problems, and therefore proposed solutions (Thelen 1999: 375). More usefully, placing the study of propaganda adaptation in an historical institutionalist framework can help scholars understand how and why path dependency is broken within British policy circles.

Path dependency is the central tenet of historical institutionalist scholarship. In outline, path dependency is the observable intransigence of large organisations – and in particular governments – when faced with outside pressures. This may be attributable to the desire to preserve gains already made, or the entrenchment of certain institutional arrangements that are resistant to or seek to obstruct a reversal (Levi 1997: 28). Farrall et al (2014) note that such a perspective “has tended to make historical institutionalism rather conservative, in that it focuses how paths are maintained, rather than changed” (p.6). Within the historical institutionalist literature, such continuity is treated as a punctuated equilibrium, with rapid bursts of change cutting through the steady entrenchment of practices and processes over time. These rapid bursts are known as critical junctures. However, as Pierson (2004) notes, such junctures may well be caused by entrenchment itself, or result in the consolidation of previous decisions (p.64-5).

So to challenge this conservatism is to rather miss the point – even in times of adaptation and change, previous decisions clearly affect the potential avenues of change available. At other points, revolutionising overhaul in one area is counter-balanced by a hardening of existing principles in another. For example, while RICU’s Online Strategy division seeks to create new spaces for interaction between government and private partners on the issue of censorship, the legislative attitude of New Labour to this aspect of propaganda policy can be observed in the responsibility for internet censorship being invested in the CTIRU, a division of the Metropolitan Police. Institutional change, as we can see, rarely involves wholesale reorganisation, but instead a targeting of changes to avenues which are considered most fruitful, while accepting large degrees of continuity and entrenchment. This reflection of competing voices and interests within the formulation of new strategies allows the thesis to weave a compelling narrative that helps explain the full scope of emerging policy. This adds much-needed depth and connective tissue to the broad impulses outlined in the neo-institutionalist literature.

Interrogating Critical Junctures: Structuring and Analysing Choice

To this point, the chapter has outlined the nature of the inquiry that the thesis takes on, and how the complimentary viewpoints of historical and neo-institutionalism provide the proper conceptual space for fruitful analysis. At this point, it is necessary to lay out a clearer ‘roadmap’ of how these ideas come together to produce a viable framework.

This thesis interrogates how the British state propaganda apparatus has navigated the critical juncture of modernising and professionalising its output and procedures to the pressures associated with the online communication environment. Yet to answer such a question involves approaching the problem from several levels of analysis.

When considering how state organisations – in this case, a state propaganda organisation – adapt to changing social pressures, one is at first confronted with the problem of the causes of such adaptation, and how to understand them. It is obviously not enough to say that the changes we see in the structure of an organisation (such as RICU) was due to the rise in popularity of internet-based communication platforms such as Twitter. While clearly an initiating cause, such an explanation falls far short of a compelling analysis for RICU's adaptation.

As Jon Elster (2007) explains, most explanations of causation in the social sciences can be divided into four categories: *event-event* explanations (such as the Treaty of Versailles causing the second world war), *fact-event* explanations (a slippery road causing a car accident), *event-fact* explanations (the 9/11 attacks causing a heightened rate of anxiety-related illnesses in the US), or, most commonly, *fact-fact* explanations (levels of education for women and GDP per capita in developing countries). (p.7-10) Elster goes on to explain that, if followed through consistently, one can find themselves in an infinite regression, whereby several explanations would emerge, all helpful, but insufficient in of themselves: "At some point in the explanatory regress, we must [] come to a positive event, such as a conscious decision" by the parties involved in the phenomena in question (p.12).

Placing the focus of analysis upon decisions taken by related or effected parties is a useful step, one that squares us with the main determinant of social phenomena: people themselves. Decisions/choices, whether rational or otherwise, are "fundamental" to explaining social behaviour, at both the individual and group levels (p.6), and as such should be the basis of analysis. Therefore, accurately describing the pressures that surround particular decisions, and the types of decisions taken amongst the options available, is the most promising route to reaching satisfactory accounts.

For the purposes of this analysis, we can identify clear moments of choice taken by government leaders that have shaped propaganda policy development. An excellent example is the choice taken in 2018 to strengthen consumer-centred censorship laws. British censorship law already contained provisions to prosecute on two bases – for the dissemination or promulgation of terrorist-supporting attitudes, or for the ownership of such material. While noises were made concerning the potential for new legislation and regulation for internet companies and social media platforms by many government leaders, the true legislative drive went down the avenue of strengthening consumer-centred provisions, amending previous legislation to criminalise the streaming of extremist material, instead of storing a digital copy.²⁴ Faced with two clear policy avenues, surrounded by a milieu of competing considerations, and seeking to come to grips with the capabilities of modern media, Cabinet-level policymakers made an explicit choice to move down the consumer-centred path.

i. Time-series of relevant critical junctures

Utilising an institutionalist approach to technological adaptation opens up the space to explore responses during critical junctures, such as the one listed above. This allows us to achieve two things: first, to understand how decisions reached in previous critical junctures may become entrenched during subsequent ones; and second, to compare how adaptation to technological pressure may be differentiated to adaptation triggered by other factors.

Yet to do so properly, the need still remains to identify how a critical juncture is sparked. This includes under what ambient conditions critical junctures are triggered, and which are the most important players in triggering the overarching institutional change. Once sparked, it is necessary to understand how the smaller units of the institution navigate this period. These choices are all

²⁴ See Chapter 7

made under consistent pressures, including institutional norms, values, existing structures, and concerns regarding hierarchy and input.

ii. *Vertical, Horizontal, Societal and Comparative Institutional Connections*

The proposed blend of institutionalisms provides a more adept framework through which to observe and understand the complex web of organisational and institutional connections that influence the choices made during these critical junctures. Historical institutionalism would stress the direct organisational connections that constrain decision-making and change. The implications for cascading policy choices – involving the interpretation and implementation of broad directives by decision-makers at descending levels of the hierarchy, and their importance for structuring conflict in these policy areas – are central to such analysis (Thelen 1999: 375). Neo-institutionalism adds further analytical breadth to this conception, by allowing analysis to wander outside of the defined boundaries of a self-contained organisation. This approach widens the focus from a particular structure, into viewing the smaller units of the British propaganda apparatus as part of a sustained area of social life (such as the advertising and public relations industry), but also as a state propaganda organisations embedded within a network of similarly-purposed agencies.

iii. *Applying Isomorphism*

The truly illuminative aspect of neo-institutionalist analysis as applied in this thesis is an ability to express in common frames of reference the overall form of pressures that are inspiring change in certain directions. Further, it can differentiate how these change-presures are experienced at varying levels, and how different pressures are applied through differing structures. These can include direct authority relationships, the norms of inter-departmental/inter-agency cooperation and competition, and the more indistinct social and professional pressures that exist within the wider media

communications profession. Being able to identify these contrasting directions of isomorphism within the prism of complex organisational relationships both assuages the difficulties of prying isomorphism and its results apart successfully – a noted criticism of neo-institutionalist theory (Beckert 2010: 152). At the same time, by being able to apply a common language of reference describing the impetus of change, one can more clearly observe the forms of change most likely to result in choices becoming embedded or discarded. Sager et al (2014) assert that due to its emphasis on “country-specific pressures”, historical institutionalism leans away from comparative impact, drawing somewhat limited inferences between certain large collections of governments in contrast to others (p.462). Applying the isomorphic framework offers the potential to provide comparison among similar groupings of states, as well as between contrasting groups. Because the impetus behind and the final results of changes can be more effectively separated, it allows researchers to identify similar patterns of change-behaviour prevalent in different governments, even if historical precedent guides these patterns in different policy directions.

The framework proposed above can be laid out in terms more directly applicable to the matter in question. Under downward (coercive) pressure to professionalise from cabinet level, smaller units (such as RICU) seek to broadly imitate the practices of other organisations in their field (mimetic pressure), or import expertise from outside government (normative pressure). Whatever broad strategy is chosen, the smaller units are limited by decisions made both in the past and within the current hierarchy. For example, RICU’s move toward addressing the challenge of online extremism in the language of child abuse was predicated on the success of child abuse prevention strategies elsewhere in government, allowing RICU to mimetically find legitimacy for its ongoing work. An initial coercive spark, therefore, has achieved a mimetic result, guided and constrained by previous government experience. This new strategy becomes ‘locked-in’ until a new critical juncture is triggered, and

organisational change is once again deemed necessary by those in higher positions of authority.'

In this case, intersecting types of isomorphism can be detected within the same hierarchy, with decisions made at one level resulting in new forms of decisions to be made elsewhere (Pierson 2004: 109). Further, the broadly identifiable isomorphic impulse can be traced into a concrete final form, via imitating set paths already present in other areas of government. Here, the fluid dimensions of neo-institutionalism combine with the conservative impulses of historical institutionalism, illuminating the complex process of adaptation during critical junctures more clearly than if used separately.

Operationalising the Model

Having laid out the lens through which RICU's adaptation will be perceived, it follows that we should spell out clearly the forms of evidence that will be brought to bear in analysis. As stated previously, this thesis relies primarily on documentary and interview methods to collect its evidence. For example, we may identify changes in strategic direction through awaiting and analysing government documents related to counter-extremism or CONTEST more generally. Less prosaically, we may turn to social media activity as a signal of changing plans. Tracking government-sponsored accounts on popular social media accounts would allow us to observe: when the accounts were founded; changes in emphasis or argument over time; and when such avenues of communication may have been abandoned.

Once such a change in strategy has been identified – the end-result of a critical juncture – we can then begin to locate when and why such a juncture came about. This can be realised by retroactively examining statements by government officials in connection with counterterrorism/counter-extremism policy, or investigating for significant political or terror-related events in the timeframe preceding the observed course-change. As shall be discussed in

greater detail within the empirical chapters, it is possible for such pronouncements to be misleading. Instead of revealing the reasoning behind strategic alterations, they can obfuscate an unwillingness to steer policy in new directions. However, such a drawback does not limit such an approach as an analytic tool when attached to evidence of real change. Even in such a situation outlined above, this form of analysis still provides revealing insights into the management of British propaganda policy.

After identifying a change in course – and the spark for the critical juncture that preceded it – we must still identify the pressures and influences that have guided the formulation of the new course of action. Initial clues may be observed within documents or statements that outline or argue in favour of the course-shift itself. These may be explicitly-stated goals, or the use of coded language (such as the vocabulary of child abuse). Such clues can guide investigation to the appropriate areas that have inspired such change - we may use this coded language to observe and draw comparisons with government policy in the alluded to area, that may provide a ‘copy-paste’ model for other departments to follow. Alternatively, we may look at the types of new skills and expertise that the government wishes to bring in to the fold. For example, when the 2015 Counter Extremism Strategy called for RICU to ‘professionalise’ its output, we can query what kind of professional expertise that RICU sought to add to its capabilities. Here, we can turn to either journalistic revelations of RICU’s connections with private contractors; comparison between RICU’s changed structure and that of other advertising/public relations organisations; contracts and tenders serviced by RICU to the private sector; or the skills and competencies listed as desired in candidates for RICU positions to be filled from outside government.

When we have identified the existence of a critical juncture, its jumping-off point, and the influences that have shaped replacement policy, we can then organise these changes according to their isomorphic origin. Further, we can see in what circumstances different forms of isomorphism apply – whether at

times of crisis coercive measures are more evident, or if normative or mimetic pressures are more prevalent during the time period under investigation. In this way, we can bring solid evidence to bear within a conceptual framework that allows us to identify, organise and categorise changes within the British counter-extremist propaganda machinery, and draw insights into propaganda policy in democratic states more generally.

Structuring Analysis

It is, of course, one thing to advocate for a more organisational or processional approach to propaganda study, quite another to carry one out in practice. As noted at length, there are crucial distinctions to be made as to which facts or trends garner attention in analysis. We can reduce the propaganda products themselves into certain features that may appear, just as we might say that we are interested in certain topics spoken to or those emanating from a particular time period. However, in the case of the advocated organisational approach, we must also spell out which organisations are under review, and the conceptual lens through which they will be analysed. To return to our argument concerning the Catholic Church, we must consider the Truth, the Spreading, and the Society. From this point, we will focus on each of these elements in turn, and explain how empirical analysis will seek to capture the workings and nature of each component moving forward.

The Propaganda Organisation ('The Holy Society')

As laid out in Chapter 1, this thesis will train its focus on the work of the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU). In this analysis RICU and its affiliates take the place of the organisation, as would the Congregatio within the Holy See's ideological battle with Protestantism. It should be noted that RICU, formed in 2007, does not mark the beginning of British attempts in this field. As such, analysis extends back before the unit's creation in certain

areas of its operations.²⁵ This reaching back, however, is used as a means of contextualising RICU's actions, and indeed the creation of the unit itself under Gordon Brown's ministry.

However, as is explained more fully forthwith, RICU is not a standalone organisation that incorporates all parts of the propaganda production process. In fact, it sits within a complex web of organisational hierarchy, both within the government and outside of it. This includes government stakeholders such as the Foreign, Cabinet and Home Offices, community organisations and charities (particularly coming from the Muslim community), and select private sector organisations that aid in the production process. At the same time, we must appreciate RICU's place within intergovernmental structures, including its relationship with the EU's Radicalisation Action Network (RAN), and other government partners who have sought to import the RICU model into their own countries. More than this, RICU's role and direction has changed a great deal since its inception, moving from a consultative body into more of a command-and-control position within the British CVE policy circle. As these priorities have shifted, so have its output and responsibilities.

As such, our empirical analysis will begin with a thorough examination of RICU itself, and its relationship to other private and public sector organisations. Chapter 4: RICU's Structure, Purpose and Mission, is focused especially on RICU's changing relationships to its various partner organisations, and how the agency's remit has expanded and solidified over time. To understand this change, this chapter will utilise a blended institutionalist framework, outlined in Chapter 2. This institutionalist lens trains our focus onto the forces which impacted RICU on its road of development; for example, the recruitment of talent and leadership from the wider public relations and communications vocational community, or the wholesale importation of ideas from other areas of government. Moreover, this framework aids our understanding of the

²⁵ See Chapters 4 and 5

pressures and demands placed on the unit itself, and thus can demarcate wider social events which presage change in output and overall strategy. In this research effort, we will be guided with the aid of the theoretical tenets of neo-institutionalism, and its investigation into the sources of organisational change, or *isomorphism*. The following analysis discovers multiple sources of *mimetic*, *coercive* and *normative* forms of isomorphism influencing RICU's developmental trajectory, in identifiable patterns. Through this framework we can establish three distinct phases of RICU's evolution - the *Light Touch Model* phase of 2007 to 2011; the *Commissioning and Organising Model* of the middle period, between 2011 and 2015; and finally the *Command and Control Model* that has been its dominant mode of operation since 2015.

This a vital first step, as it helps us to organise RICU's other developments and activities in the CVE space. This is due to two interlocking factors. First, there are the pressures faced by RICU itself as the unit sought to meet the demands of its superiors, while justifying its position within the government's counter-terror apparatus. In response to criticism, the unit molded its working practices internally, and its relationships to outside partners. As RICU slowly embedded itself and expanded its purview over CVE propaganda operations, it took on new positions of influence, responsibilities, and decision-making powers that shifted its strategic outlook. At the same time, and in accordance with these shifts in influence, RICU also moved into new and growing media spaces, which shifted the background environment of capabilities and limitations within which the unit was working. Having a clear picture of how the Unit itself changed in terms of its personnel, its relationships to other government departments, and its growing connections to the private sector, provides a strong backbone from which we can organise and flesh out a coherent explanation of RICU's development, and thus the approach of the British government in its ongoing struggle with Salafist extremism and terrorism.

Once we have completed a thorough institutional examination of RICU's structure and goals, we will turn to the evolution of its tactics and strategy for communicating its messages. Or, in other words, once we have established a firm grounding in the history of the Holy Society, we must seek to establish what forms of 'Truth' it sought to spread. Chapter 5: The Evolution of RICU's Persuasive Messaging Tactics, fulfils the bulk of this role, and is the analysis that most readers would commonly associate with traditional propaganda studies. However, there is a growing consensus among many propaganda scholars that the field needs new conceptual tools to remain relevant and up to the task at hand. In these circumstances, a serious effort must be taken to ensure that future study can rest on a toolkit that can capture the shifts identifiable in messaging strategy. Paradoxical though it may seem, this thesis argues that to a certain extent that propaganda scholarship must move backwards in time so to move forward on surer footing. To analyse and interpret the evolution in RICU's discursive strategy ('The Truth' it seeks to spread), this therefore seeks to utilise a careful combination of frameworks for studying the inculcation of attitudes in modern society. In this case, it seeks to combine Ellul's eightfold categorisation of propaganda techniques and approaches, embedded within an overarching framework guided by the thinking of Jean Baudrillard, in particular his concept of the simulacrum.

For Baudrillard, simulacra are the key element in fashioning the simulation of reality that media feeds back into society. A good example for visualising the connection between simulacra and simulation is the sport of Quidditch. Quidditch is a fictional sport found within the fictional wizarding world of author JK Rowling, played on flying broomsticks with various magically-animated balls. This sport – a completely fictitious one relayed in print and visual media – has however been adapted by fans of the series into a game akin to netball, with the players holding plastic 'broomsticks' between their legs. The sport has gained a small but dedicated following, with world championships contested between the students of world-leading universities. In this way, Quidditch demonstrates neatly how simulacra relate to simulation.

The fictional game played by the characters of books and film – the *simulacrum* – has been taken on by its dedicated fanbase, who produce a *simulation* of the game in the real world. Unwittingly, Rowling has generated a model of behaviour in the fictional realm of the media that is copied in the real world. For our purposes, the statements of leading government figures, and the propaganda products that RICU has disseminated to its audiences, can be considered simulacra, in that they seek to provide models for appropriate and rightful action by members of our society, in particular the British Muslim population.

Within this overarching frame, we can utilise the eight categories of Jacques Ellul. Within these four pairs of opposed categories, this thesis will focus on the division between agitation and integration propaganda, as well as the split between vertical and horizontal forms of communication. The other two dichotomies are relevant, but either remain stable (as RICU's work must be considered as political, though it seeks to push others into sociological propaganda activity), or are combined with such regularity as to add little clarity to our understanding (in the case of separating irrational from rational cues).

Such a combination is of great use to this project, as it allows us to trace both the movements made in government policy across these discursive and constructive lines. Further, it allows us a tighter analytical frame that can transcend the boundaries of traditional and emerging media technologies. Briefly, such an approach help us to see with greater clarity the shift between the integrationist approach characterised by RICU's language briefs under the New Labour government, and the more agitational language offered under the Coalition and Conservative governments. Further, the division between the vertical propaganda set out through the traditional media, and the horizontal image of propaganda in RICU's social media offering is made more apparent. This vertical/horizontal delineation, in addition, allows a more nuanced interpretation of how emerging media has affected the creation of simulacra

within British CVE propaganda policy. To summarise, whereas in earlier years, the formation of simulacra was held within the propaganda organisation alone, modern communications and its prevailing trends have resulted in the promotion of participatory forms of simulacra, where British Muslims are invited to demonstrate their allegiance to British values and their opposition to Salafism through the use of hashtags and the sharing of desirable content. In this way, the combination of Ellul's and Baudrillard's ideas allows us to mark both the evolution of government discursive strategy, as well as the changing social dynamics of simulacra due to the advancement of technology, per the ideas of Marshall McLuhan. Joining this framework with a thorough examination of the institutions behind these simulacra also allows us to draw reflections on the relationship between government and its Muslim population, comparing its notions and claims to horizontality with the reality that is put before British Muslims.

Targeting and Censorship ('The Spreading')

To complete our 'Holy Trinity', after laying out our examination of the 'Holy Society' and their 'Truth', we must explain our framework for investigating their approach to 'Spreading'. This element is considered through Chapters 6 and 7, focused on the spheres of Targeting and Censorship. Our study of these components once again calls upon the institutionalist framework, and finds influences manifesting themselves through the mimetic form of isomorphism especially.

The sphere of Targeting is one which most would consider most naturally aligned with this imperative of Spreading. Targeting, at its base, involves not only the vital requirement to have your products reach those whom you intend to influence, but to do so in the most effective way possible. This area, however, has powerful implications for the crafting of the messages themselves. Because of this, Chapter 6 will be highly cognisant of the implications of how RICU sought to delineate and conceptualise its target

audiences. Decisions such to primarily target British Muslims by national heritage, or through their perceived likelihood to turn to extremist ideas or groups, have had profound impacts on the way in which RICU has sought to construct their products in order to best resonate with these groups. Therefore, where appropriate, we shall draw linkages between changes in RICU's targeting regime and any concordant shifts we observe in RICU's messaging output.

However, perhaps the most interesting observations concerning RICU's targeting activities concern its relationship to the emerging new media environment. In a similar way to the impact of audience delineation, the medium through which RICU sought to communicate its messages has had a key determining effect in creating the character of specific propaganda products. What is more, RICU has consistently demonstrated a desire (or requirement) to communicate on CVE issues with the wider British population, outside of those considered 'at risk'. The choice of media, and its relationship to the messages and products under analysis, is explored in Chapter 4 as well as Chapter 5. However, Chapter 5 pays closer attention to how the technological capabilities and limitations of particular media have influenced the usage of more targeted, focused communications aimed at a tightly defined core of individuals, as opposed to more openly-addressed persuasion attempts through the print and television media. This analysis will allow us to not only address in general terms how media choice is related to messaging, but how RICU's targeting regime is directly influenced by its position as a state propaganda organisation, allowing it access to techniques not widely available in the private or public sectors. Further, the chapter will explore how technological capability to plant messages in the desired place is married to RICU's conception of its audiences – and how these factors come together to produce the particular propaganda products we can identify as having RICU origins.

Lastly, this thesis will examine the position of censorship within the British CVE propaganda apparatus, and RICU's slowly growing influence over this aspect of policy. Chapter 7 is slightly unusual in comparison to the greater whole of this research, in that its focus on RICU only emerges towards the end of our chosen period, in and around 2015. Instead, our attention extends back to 2006 to encompass the efforts of the Blair ministry to tighten censorship laws, and the foundation of the Met Police's CTIRU. Such an approach is important for two reasons. First, as demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 3, censorship plays a vital role in the effective conduct of any propaganda campaign. It is an essential counterpoint to the activity of targeting. For where targeting seeks to influence an audience by presenting them with new, informative, or positive information, censorship is the process by which competition is removed from the arena, and desirable messages allowed to take hold with less challenge. Second, close attention is warranted to the tactics and strategy of a censorship campaign. Chapter 2 demonstrates that, quite apart from a simple act of legal intervention, the ways in which censorship power is exercised can be incredibly intricate. Scholarship concerning the People's Republic of China has demonstrated how censorship criteria operate in different ways at the level of national, regional and local media (Roberts & Stewart 2014: 18), and even allowing criticism of the CCP to circulate, while clamping down on attempts to organise protests or other forms of civil action (King, Pan & Roberts 2013). Both aspects then – targeting and censorship – seek to influence behaviour, one by the addition of information and ideas, the other by their subtraction from the public consciousness. In this light, we can see how the issue of censorship must be considered as a natural extension of propaganda, lying “on one connected continuum.” (Roberts & Stewart 2014: 2) Yet there is also a further reason why studying British censorship practice is useful in our analysis. As outlined in Chapter 1, and touched upon briefly above, little scholarship to this point has effectively sought to account for the position of the liberal democratic state and its political response to the political implications of the emergence of new communication technologies and platforms. Given liberal commitments to freedom of speech, closely observing

the application of censorship (either through legal or extra-legal channels) can tell us much about how liberal democracies have sought to tackle the easy availability of extremist material online, and thus shaped RICU's ongoing campaign against Salafism. Through appreciating the institutional linkages utilised by government in its censorship policy, and the evolving use of legislative tools for censorship purposes, we can come to appreciate the effects of new media on liberal democratic rights in the United Kingdom. To use McLuhan's language, doing so allows us to reflect on the social consequences of these new media and their capabilities on the public sphere, particularly the retreat of government from the application of free speech rights, and the shifting of criminal focus away from disseminators to consumers of undesirable information.

4. RICU's Structure, Purpose & Mission

To properly ascertain the impact of the new communications environment on the working propaganda practices of the British State, it is vital that we begin with a thorough examination of RICU's organisational development. This development has not been a smooth process. Faced with edicts from above, and important constraints both in terms of its position within government and wider society, RICU has experienced a wide array of competing pressures, influences and limitations in chasing its goals, and repeated attempts at reform.

Disentangling this myriad of factors that have guided these reformations and reformulations must be our first concern. From an institutional perspective, such an investigation is of distinct academic utility in its own right. Such evidence can be a valuable resource in improving better understanding of, and further inquiry into, the machinations of British security policy generally, and CVE in particular, that can be utilised in future comparative work on British or wider policy evolution.

Moreover, establishing a firm grasp of RICU as an organisation can ground our own inquiry in important ways. Firstly, doing so provides a footing to contextualise shifts and reinventions of the distinct strands of propaganda policy. When new tactics or strategies can be identified, such a footing can explain how the timing or nature of these shifts can be traced to wider organisational reformations – or alternatively shed light on why shifts did not occur even when they may be reasonably expected.

Secondly, and consequentially, this context can be used to separate organisational and institutional factors from technological hurdles that must be vaulted. Armed with a thorough and clear overview of RICU's development over time, we are able to sift through intra-governmental influences on the direction of policy, and from this position subtract these factors from

consideration where appropriate. Where intra-governmental explanations reach their limit, we can identify far more precisely at which junctures policymaking has hit the unavoidable technological realities that have shaped policy from the outside.

To arrive at this position, however, we must first engage in a rigorous analysis of RICU's changing nature and mission. Using our blended institutionalist toolkit, we can appreciate the successive twists and turns of RICU's development, as well as the consistent institutional directions of influence and pressure that have guided its development. Once this analysis is done, we can then turn our attention proper to disentangling institutional and technological influences on varying aspects of British CVE propaganda policy.

From Consultancy to Command

Observing RICU's evolution in the twelve years since its founding is a difficult, if illuminating task. The secretive nature of the agency, and thus the policy discussions around it, make analysis a time-consuming process, requiring researchers to seek information in a wide variety of open source, public and FoI-released material. As such, there are long gaps during which little material can be found to inform researchers on RICU's activity, let alone any hints on their inner machinations or motivations. However, it is possible to piece together a robust timeline of RICU's journey. Through careful observation of repeated trends, comparison between public pronouncement and private action, and connection to political events in the wider world, we can produce (with a good deal of confidence) solid conclusions on how RICU changed, why it changed when it did, and what types of isomorphic pressures influenced the final form of these changes.

This chapter explicitly focuses on RICU's structure, purpose, and mission. This cannot be only in terms of its internal structure, nor only its place within

government, though these indeed are important considerations. Instead, RICU's place at the heart of government outreach and support for Muslim civil society organisations means we must also interrogate its changing relationship with these groups, and the new relationships it struck up with the private sector to support this vital work.

Overall, we can identify three distinct phases in RICU's development in these regards, divided into roughly equal four year periods: 2007-2011, 2011-2015, and 2015-present. Each new period was informed by a change of government, or a successful Salafist terror attack either at home or mainland Europe (and at points, both). RICU responded to these critical junctures in similar ways; in both 2011 and 2015, the agency strengthened its access to the expertise of the private sector, while taking firmer control of messaging policy, slowly relegating its civil society partners to firmly junior partner status. It is possible to argue that such professionalisation and centralisation trends began with RICU's very founding in 2007, and these changes reflect a trend that had begun even earlier. In any case, it was such trends that later opened RICU to accusations of 'manipulating' these civil organisations, rather than working in genuine partnership (Cobain et al 2016: Online).

Such pronouncements are somewhat hyperbolic. Yet they do reflect RICU's evolution from a Light Touch Model (2007-2011), providing support and guidance, but eschewing direct intervention; to a Commissioning and Organising Model (2011-2015) that, through greater private sector connections, sought to be an avenue for civil society to access high-end professional products to support their (and RICU's) wider goals; to finally a Command and Control Model (2015-present) that hardened these professional connections, and used civil partners to advance its own goals through certain quid pro quo arrangements. Such approach to change, it is argued, represents a 'double-down' approach to organisational evolution, as in 2015 RICU accelerated along the paths set down in 2011. After RICU began to gain prestige as a source of practice and ideas for other state propaganda

organisations, it seems to have become shielded from reproach during a reset of counter-terror strategy after the wave of terrorist attacks in 2017.

Changes in RICU's structure and mission were initiated by downwards coercive pressure exerted on RICU from the very top of government, reflecting the power of the Cabinet on national security issues. Yet more interestingly we can see how this coercive influence not only affected RICU, but due to the downward flow of commands, RICU itself began taking on these coercive characteristics in its relationships with civil society (something that David Cameron would seem to tacitly accept as unavoidable). This ever-tightening hold on the reins of strategy enhanced the influence of normative pressures, as RICU (and its senior management) sought known quantities with whom to establish public-private partnerships, augmenting RICU's skill base, and delivering on demands issued above for greater professionalism. Finally, an interesting mimetic pressure can also be identified, as RICU was forced to mimic the tactics and focus of another organisation, ordered to match ISIL/Daesh on the online battleground.

2007-2011: Light-Touch Model

RICU was formed in June 2007, under the auspices of the Office for Security and Counter Terrorism (OSCT), also formed that year. Tony McNulty – then Minister with responsibilities for counter terrorism and policing – explained:

“RICU is a cross-Government resource, based in the Home Office, reporting to my right hon. Friends the Home Secretary, the Foreign Secretary and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government...

The decision to create this Unit was taken to address the need for coherent and effective communications across Government in countering terrorism—in particular to support the strategy of tackling violent extremism locally, nationally and internationally.”

McNulty also revealed that in this infant stage, RICU was staffed by 13 civil servants, though this was going to be strengthened (*Ibid*), in the year hence the agency quickly grew, rising to a total of 33 total staff by December 2008.²⁶ The decision to form RICU – by necessity, the first critical juncture of nascent CVE propaganda policy – was catalysed by the successful 7/7 bombings in 2005, which prompted New Labour to seek new pathways to deal with the hitherto underappreciated threat of home-grown extremists.²⁷

The agency's cross-cutting, co-ordinating role reflects the 'media management' habits of the New Labour era, with a strong faith in the power of appropriate wording (or 'soundbites'/'spin') to positively influence public opinion, along with strong central coordination of that messaging (Fairclough 2002: 121). RICU's recommendations were supported by the results of the unit's most innovative function during this early period, chiefly as a commissioning house for audience, impact and focus-group research by third parties, whether they be traditional media research firms to prestigious universities. This research particularly focused on the impact of RICU-approved messaging on Muslim audiences within the UK, and how far government campaigns had penetrated the mainstream media.²⁸ RICU then processed these findings into recommendations for its wide range of consumers, in order to coordinate government messaging on terror issues.

This coordination took on the form of briefing sessions and the circulation of assistance documents. These documents did lay out four key themes for CT messaging (the substance of which we will later return), but importantly RICU

²⁶ The Home Office (2009) Freedom of Information Response. (email correspondence from J. Fanshaw to D. Miller) 20, April 2009. Received 20, April 2009. 09:30

²⁷ Yvette Cooper, Shadow Home Sec, HC Deb 07/06/2011 Col 55

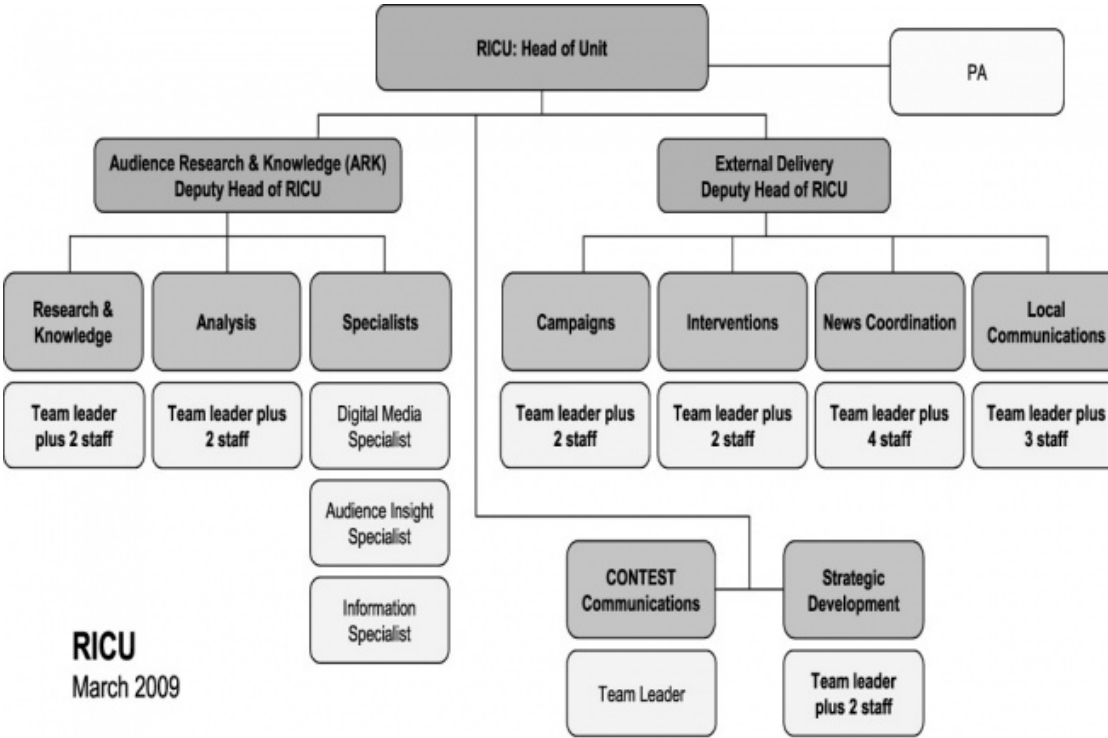
²⁸ Private information

did not lay down concrete messages and lines of argument for others to follow. Instead, these documents laid out key principles to keep in mind, and helpful suggestions about kinds of language to avoid, while the agency's customers crafted their own specific CT strategies (RICU 2007: 3-7).

The reach of this new consultative body is demonstrated by the access it enjoyed within and beyond Whitehall. This reach was broad, including senior ministers, as well as FCO, DCLG and Home Office officials. RICU analysis in this period repeatedly insists on the necessity of "top-down" language change for counter-extremism messaging to be effective, and for these changes to emanate from the ministerial level (Armstrong, Chin & Leventer 2008: 1). This top-down mantra was taken to heart, with disclosed documents revealing RICU's guiding hand in local police operations and government, delivering training courses to officers in how to plan appropriate messaging strategies to accompany CT operations and local government outreach (RICU 2008). Once again, these courses emphasised that "For local partnerships to work... national coherence (OSCT/CLG especially) is essential" (Ibid: 6). Despite the circulation of language assistance documents and training courses to local police perhaps lending the impression that RICU were jealously guarding control of CT messaging, their own guidance asserts that the guide "is not a definitive list of 'what not to say', but rather to highlight terms which risk being misunderstood and therefore prevent the effective reception of the message." (Ibid: 7)

While these assurances may be treated as a disguise for more rigorous intervention below the surface, observing the structure and staffing of RICU itself within this time period is instructive in establishing the unit's overall priorities, and its limitations. In March 2009, RICU numbered a total of 32 staff. Roughly a third of this compliment was placed within the division of Audience, Research & Knowledge (ARK). Half of the unit, on the other hand, was given over to External Delivery, with the largest of these teams being those responsible for 'News Coordination' and 'Local Campaigns' – teams of 5 and 4

respectively. So while RICU placed a strong emphasis on coordination and local outreach, this remained on a rough par with its responsibility for research and insight. Further, it is not reasonable to argue that a team of nine civil servants could exercise any form of tight control over CT messaging down to the local level.



[Figure 1: RICU Structure March 2009 – FoI Release (Home Office 2009b)]

At this early stage in its development, RICU remained a consultative body – informed by commissioned research – that had inhaled the New Labour approach of the importance of remaining ‘on-message’ and sought to apply it to counter-terror communications. In 2009, RICU’s remit was widened to coordinate all PREVENT-related communications throughout Whitehall (Intelligence & Security Committee 2009: 29). This impetus behind increasing coordination of messaging down to the local level, however, somewhat obscures the fact that, in this period, RICU (and the fight against terrorism in general) became principally considered a tool of foreign policy.

FoI releases from this period outline this balance neatly. In 2008/9 the FCO was the largest single contributor to RICU's budget, providing just over £800,000, roughly 37% of the agency's total. One document from this period includes differing strategies and arguments that could be utilised in the event of an incoming Republican or Democratic administration following the 2008 US election (Armstrong, Chin & Leventer 2008: 21-22), indicating RICU's desired role to shape foreign policy was already envisioned from its founding. For the year 2009/2010, however, not only was RICU's proposed budget increased to £5.7 million, but the FCO commitment rose to £3million; over half of RICU's available resources.²⁹ The increase in funding for RICU can be partly explained by the widening of its remit, noted above. However, this does not fully explain such an upturn in funding as RICU enjoyed, nor the reason for the dramatic upshift in FCO backing.

Yet while they are not publicly or clearly stated, a couple of key factors may be reasonably pointed out. The first was Britain's impending withdrawal from Iraq in July of 2009. This withdrawal left the United States as the only foreign power with ground troops in the country, as Britain's contribution to combating violent Salafism abroad pivoted away from military intervention. This pivot would have required a shift of energy towards the use of international public diplomacy as the government's key policy tool for combatting terrorism in the region, where terrorist activity and support remained stubbornly persistent. In Iraq during April 2009, for example, when this proposed budget was released to the public, terrorist attacks resulted in over 300 killed and over 700 casualties (Global Terrorism Database 2019: Online). With public opinion in the UK long-since turned concerning Britain's presence in the Middle East – and the War on Terror as a whole – RICU may have appeared as an appropriate and sensible option to counter the Salafist threat while pulling away from direct

²⁹ The Home Office (2009) Freedom of Information Response. (email correspondence from J. Fanshaw to D. Miller) 20, April 2009. Received 20, April 2009. 09:30

intervention. RICU's research was also intended to be useful for the conduct of diplomacy in the context of the War on Terror, with documents drafted specifically for the usage of the FCO in convincing the United States to adopt similar language measures recommended by RICU.

In August 2009, the FCO reached out to the US government, seeking greater co-ordination in its counter-extremism efforts.³⁰ That such a meeting was held lends further support for the conjecture that increased RICU funding signals a key shift in the UK's stance toward international Salafist terrorism, and that the government sought to strengthen this tool with US support. RICU's presence and input at this meeting attests to its importance as a foreign policy tool, highlighting several RICU-backed foreign initiatives, especially in Pakistan. (Including a speaking tour by the founder of the Quilliam Foundation, Maajid Nawaz.) Here, RICU seems to have performed a similar function as in Whitehall, with RICU officials spending "extended periods" in the country, improving Pakistan's own strategic messaging. Again, RICU did not seek to establish and control the messages of British Muslim interlocutors: "UK Muslim delegates are briefed on UK policy but have latitude to freely converse... and develop their own initiatives."³¹ At the same time, however, RICU and FCO policy does appear to have been more directly interventionist abroad than at home. Certain foreign initiatives were extensions of successful domestic programs, and RICU provided comparable research on message impact and media consumption habits for Pakistan as in the UK.

However, RICU and its FCO partners appear markedly more strident in its approach to foreign intervention than in the domestic sphere. Government funding for counter-extremism projects such as these was considered potentially problematic by both the British and the Americans, but crucially overt UK government support was seen as far less problematic in the foreign

³⁰ US State Department (2009) CABLE: 'UK Government Seeks Deeper Counter-Radicalisation Coordination', 09LONDON1933_a

³¹ Ibid.

arena. Moreover, RICU and FCO officials signalled great concerns over whether grassroots initiatives could self-fund counter-extremism initiatives such as those proposed. This funding gap would only have been more acute when applied to the international scale. This concern over the ability to self-fund – combined with British confidence in displaying overt support for such programs – indicates a far greater deal of self-confidence in approach from RICU regarding the international sphere. US officials also noted that establishing links between Pakistani and domestic civil society organisations was a high priority for Prevent; and at the same time indicated a strategic communications plan was being prepared primarily through RICU to target eight key audiences within that country. Overall, British counter-extremism strategy (and RICU’s function within it) was at this time outward facing. RICU was at the very least as confident in drawing up messaging strategy in the foreign arena as at home, and felt more confident in propping up new initiatives openly with government funding (another potential explanation for the uptick in FCO support for the agency). Partly this focus on the foreign sphere was hoped to rebound into the domestic, given the media consumption habits and family diaspora connections of Muslims in the UK (RICU 2010a: 2, 17-20). Though in time, this comfort with the supply of funds in the foreign arena would become more closely mirrored in RICU’s domestic operations, as senior government leaders demanded greater fight from RICU for the hearts and minds of British Muslims falling under the influence of ISIL/Daesh.

In general, RICU’s engagement with community organisations in the UK remained ‘light touch’. The 2011 Prevent review – a more thorough examination of which follows below – highlighted that “Although RICU was right to work with local and national organisations to develop and disseminate counter-narratives, some of those organisations have struggled to make themselves heard” (HMG 2011A: 51), implying that RICU had not sought out or vetted partners effectively, or that support had not been sufficient. Further, the review chastised the agency for its lack of impact through its practice of

guidance documents and training courses, and its lack of engagement with Charity Commission, Ofcom and Ofsted (Ibid: 50).

The 2011 review also slammed RICU's evaluation and research procedures, claiming projects had been assessed "on the basis of number of individuals who have received a message" rather than behaviour change, that its projects "were difficult to evaluate", and that its evidence base was rarely 'mature' (HMG 2011A: 51). Yet even earlier RICU was already drawing criticism from government partners on these issues. In 2008, FCO staff pointedly remarked to US counterparts that they were unconvinced by RICU's working methods, worried as they were that RICU would rush its plans for Pakistan into action too quickly, and "do more harm than good."³² US officials criticised the assessment of RICU's impact, labelling reports of effectiveness as merely "anecdotal".³³ Here, we can begin to assemble true comparative evidence of an election becoming a critical juncture for RICU. These internal, private criticisms of RICU's evaluation procedures were also a matter of public criticism from parliament before the entry of the coalition government. As early as 2009, the Intelligence and Security Committee noted that they had "Given [their] concerns about the difficulty of measuring the success of work" by RICU and PREVENT as a whole, stating that "We hope that the results will be visible in the future" (ISC 2009: 29). Despite these widespread criticisms, it took a change of government for effective admonishment to arrive from within the executive. Criticisms could be levelled, but a change in direction brought about by larger political concerns would be required for the agency to be forced to adapt.

Overall, RICU succeeded in its overarching goal of ensuring increased coordination between the various branches and levels of government (HMG 2011A: 51). However, beyond this limited objective, the agency drifted without

³² US State Department (2009) 'UK Government Seeks Deeper Counter-Radicalisation Coordination', 09LONDON1933_a

³³ Ibid.

a clear sense of drive or purpose (Carlile 2011: 9). It engaged with civil society partners at the local, national and international levels, but aside from the provision of funds did not provide a strong guiding hand. Even in its cross-governmental role, the agency displayed reach, but deliberately stepped away from enforcing standard conduct (and, as discussed, most likely lacked the capability to do so). In short, lofty and ambitious rhetoric was not matched by much in the form of concrete strategy.

The same is true for RICU's engagement with internet media in this initial phase of its development. The challenges faced by RICU in implementing an effective propaganda campaign were not unknown to key decision-makers before 2015, when social media was given far higher priority. In fact, these issues were identified and handed to RICU since the agency's inception. FCO officials – and then-Foreign Minister David Miliband – were indicating in 2007 that they accepted the importance of engaging Muslim youth “through web-based technology and communications”³⁴ and how these new technologies were outstripping the effectiveness of traditional outreach methods such as exchange programs.³⁵ In 2008, Jacqui Smith (then Home Secretary) highlighted the need for innovative solutions from RICU in order to compete “in today's crowded mobile world.” (Smith in Mahmood 2008: Online) Yet despite these marching orders, RICU seemed to lack any true imagination for engaging in this new web domain. It is true that RICU commissioned research into analysing the influence of popular online blogs, and discussions on terrorism online. However, direct intervention into the online sphere appears completely absent from RICU's thinking. Quite on the contrary, the agency appears to have deviated little from traditional engagement through more high-minded and academic channels such as workshops, discussion forums, and speaking tours to carry its desired messages, with traditional press coverage sought for

³⁴ United States State Department (2007) CABLE: 'EUR SENIOR ADVISOR PANDITH AND S/P ADVISOR COHEN'S VISIT TO THE UK, OCTOBER 9-14, 2007', 25 Oct 2007, 07LONDON4045A

³⁵ Ibid

increased awareness.³⁶ This lack of engagement with the internet was a key point of criticism of RICU in both the official and independent Prevent reviews of 2011 (HMG 2011A: 50-2; Carlile 2011: 9).

2011-2015: Commissioning and Organising Model

In sum, RICU's early and formative years were considered underwhelming. But this is perhaps unsurprising, given its comparatively small size and the scope of the lofty (and rather ambiguous) ambitions set for it. Teething problems are not uncommon when new agencies are created, and RICU was regarded through the same lens.³⁷ A top-level civil servant commented privately that while RICU had suffered from a "slow start", most sympathised with these teething problems due to the inherent difficulties of their mission, and the lack of accumulated experience to deal with such challenges.³⁸ Such insider considerations and diagnoses likely influenced the decision to recruit outside expertise to lead RICU moving forward. In this light, it seems harsh to lay these shortcomings at RICU's door, especially concerning criticisms of online strategy.

The issues surrounding the increasing prevalence of mobile-internet devices, and the popularity of online news in general, were identified by the New Labour government (see above), but senior figures did not explicitly state what any new strategy may look like. The same is true of the 2011 Prevent review which marks the next stage of RICU's life. The review critiqued RICU's lack of headway in this domain rather sharply (HMG 2011A: 51), but precious little in the way concrete strategy is suggested. Instead, we find vague wishes to "develop powerful and specific narratives across a range of communications channels, especially the internet" or "making best use of emerging information and communications technology." The most specific recommendations that

³⁶ Ibid

³⁷ Private information

³⁸ Private information

the review lays out are themselves hardly revolutionary – suggesting that the agency engage with companies such as Facebook, who themselves would “help civil society organisations plan and manage their digital communications more effectively” (all HMG 2011A: 51-2). In short, fitting internet communications within the light-tough approach to civil society that was already part of RICU’s modus operandi.

What this review does reveal, however, is the first instance of the primary force that has driven change throughout RICU’s lifespan; namely, coercive isomorphism flowing downward from the ministerial level. The 2011 review itself was launched by Home Secretary Theresa May – and many of its conclusions aligned closely with a speech made by PM David Cameron in February, even though the review was submitted to parliament in June. Such alignment indicates that the desires of the Prime Minister (or at least, those of senior ministers) played a strong part in shaping new strategy, which was then handed down in the form of a wish list for civil servants to enact.

With this coercive power in hand, it is unsurprising that the 2011 review and its recommendations for RICU fit in lock-step with the political positioning of the Conservative Party, and eschew transformative change to RICU’s work or structure. The review, despite its many criticisms, stated that RICU would not face any great deal of structural change (HMG 2011A: 52) and though May announced that “Above all, [the strategy] will counter the threat of homegrown terrorism” (Hansard Deb 07/06/2011 Col 54), no mention is made in the review of pivoting RICU’s funding towards the domestic sphere. Sources indicate that the FCO – and presumably a decent contingent elsewhere – believed earnestly that its foreign work needs must have a rebound effect for domestic Muslim audiences, perhaps making this gap between speech and recommendation more understandable.³⁹

³⁹ United States State Department (2007) CABLE: ‘EUR SENIOR ADVISOR PANDITH AND S/P ADVISOR COHEN’S VISIT TO THE UK, OCTOBER 9-14, 2007’, 25 Oct 2007, 07LONDON4045A

What the review did make clear, however, were the far greater financial imperatives RICU would now face, highlighting the need for “more cost-effective programmes” and that “There [would] be much greater scrutiny of RICU projects, costs and value-for-money.” (HMG 2011A: 52) Under this scrutiny, RICU was expected to deliver “much sharper and more professional counter-narrative products.” (Ibid) Greater effort was also expected in developing processes for evaluating campaigns (Ibid), a criticism which echoed that of the Intelligence and Security Committee (Ibid; ISC 2011: 45; ISC 2009: 29).

When observing the revised *Prevent* strategy, the influence of the 2008 financial crisis is keenly felt. The Conservative Party Manifesto and campaign for the following 2010 election played heavily on the theme of Labour’s mismanagement of the economy and public spending. The Manifesto highlights the need to “cut wasteful spending” five times, and mentions Labour’s ‘debt’ 23 times. ‘Terrorism’ on the other hand, only receives four mentions (Conservative and Unionist Party 2010). The great purpose of this 2011 review, when viewed in this context, was to ensure that Prevent fit within the wider spending priorities of the new Conservative-led coalition government, and to ‘cut waste’, not to redraw the lines of counter-extremism policy wholesale. Labour’s Yvette Cooper laid out similar criticism, accusing May of using the review for “political point-scoring” rather than for laying out concrete policy (HC Deb 07/06/2011 Col 55). Support for partner organisations, such as Quilliam, was also withdrawn. In 2011, having won around £1.5 million in funding from the Home Office in previous years, Quilliam found itself teetering on the brink of collapse. In response, several prominent members of the New Labour government, including Hazel Blears, stood in the Commons to support £150,000 in stop-gap support. Liberal Democrat and Conservative members, on the other hand, insisted that while admirable Quilliam should not be dependent on government support (HC Deb 15 Mar 2011 Col 1WH-24WH). The desire to reshape CVE communications

policy according to a push to cut public spending, and across such partisan lines, further indicates the impact of electoral pledges and changes in government in producing critical junctures for propaganda policy.

Whatever controversy exists around the political purpose of the review can be laid to one side for now. But it is worth highlighting once again how RICU was buffeted by the winds of political change in Westminster. RICU was forced to adapt by the arrival of a new governing party, one with its own governing agenda and principles, enforcing change from above. Political crisis – normally in the form of successful terror attacks, but in this case a financial crisis – has routinely driven change to RICU’s hierarchy and working practices, as political elites seek to demonstrate effective response. Regardless of the intentions behind the 2011 review, RICU had been put on notice. As mentioned, RICU’s internal structure was not seen as a target for reform, so we can leave such concerns to one side during this middle period. The most important change in this period is the relationship that RICU quickly struck with an outside private partner, one that has remained a key organ for RICU material ever since: Breakthrough Media.

Given the sensitive nature of RICU operations, it is difficult to discern exactly the point at which Breakthrough and RICU first came into contact. The best indication is that Breakthrough was working with RICU as early as the year between 2012-13 (Cobain et al 2016), but there are tantalising hints that this relationship began earlier, though more informally, between RICU and Robert Elliott. Elliott would go on to found and direct Breakthrough Media (later Zinc Network), a firm with close ties to RICU. As a filmmaker, Elliott had already demonstrated experience at producing professional content within the geographical region of MENA, and in the context of the international community’s ongoing struggle with international Salafism. In 2011, Elliott produced a documentary for Al Jazeera news network, titled ‘The Mayor of Mogadishu’, released in November of that year (Al Jazeera 2011). While this release date could plausibly place a documentary such as this being

commissioned after the release of the Prevent review, the events portrayed within the film occurred in the first half of the year, at least before the 15th of May (Freeman 2011: Online). Neither the documentary itself or other materials on Mohamed Nur – the titular Mayor – name a precise date. But since four civilians were reported killed in several sources, we can tentatively point towards a known attack in Mogadishu by al-Shabaab on the 21st of April that killed 4 and wounded 45 (Global Terrorism Database 2019: Online). Given the timeframe to organise filming, we are looking at the documentary being commissioned and planned in the early stages of 2011 at the latest. This timeframe is significant, as it could indicate a link between this documentary and the praise RICU received in the 2011 review for “the new, more cost-effective” efforts (HMG 2011A: 52). This link is strengthened by the nature and content of the documentary. The wider themes explored by RICU in this period will be examined further below, but certain notable identifiers are worth mentioning here. First, though produced for Al-Jazeera, the documentary was produced in English. Second, Mohamed Nur is a British citizen, who openly asserts the need to bring European-style governance to the city (Al Jazeera 2011). Thirdly, and most significantly, the film creates a stark contrast between the sympathetic Nur (a Londoner and community activist) and al-Shabaab, who launch an attack on a music festival Nur has organised. Thus, the film bears the hallmarks of RICU involvement: highlighting the international community’s struggles against murderous Salafist fighters; targeting English-speaking audiences through foreign/international channels (See Chapter 5); and, in the words of the 2011 review, seeking to draw ties between home and diaspora Muslim communities in the UK (HMG 2011A: 52). There are other hints that ‘The Mayor of Mogadishu’ may have just been the precursor to a formal RICU-Breakthrough partnership. For example, the film was re-published by Breakthrough under their name four years later, and is accompanied by other films made during the company’s RICU partnership that focus on diaspora connections with Somalia (Breakthrough Media on YouTube: Online).

Whether this first film was commissioned in partnership with RICU remains a matter of speculation. However, if we follow the number of clues that indicate that it indeed was, it can offer an intriguing perspective on RICU's response to the 2011 review. Namely, they provide the first concrete appearance of its trademark form of path-dependency. Strategically, we can already see the outlines of institutional drift emanating from senior government positions – for despite some withering criticism, RICU was left structurally untouched. But internally, we can see the outlines of a 'double-down' approach within RICU itself. If RICU remained largely in its current form, this left RICU in an unenviable position of having to create "sharper, more professional" products without any ability to do so in-house, and under much greater scrutiny for return on investment. Yet 'The Mayor of Mogadishu' presented a workable formula to resolve this problem – commissioning experienced film-makers (who would have been required to submit plans of action, and importantly, budgets) to supplement the skills at RICU's disposal. In 2012, Breakthrough Media was formally founded, with Robert Elliott its CEO (Zinc Network 2019: Online). In that same year, Breakthrough was awarded just shy of £500,000 in contracts from RICU (Cobain et al 2016: Online). RICU had initiated a partnership with a filmmaker, most likely feeling the winds of change approaching from a new government committed to slashing public spending. Once these winds hit, and finding a formula that was easier to cost and provided more direct control of messaging to a wider audience, it doubled down on a partnership already in place. In 2013-14, RICU would push even harder on this arrangement, awarding Breakthrough just shy of £6 million in public contracts (Ibid).

The year 2012 was also significant for RICU internally, as it brought a new figure into the agency responsible for guiding this new phase – Richard Chalk. This appointment helps us to understand how *normative* isomorphism was shaping RICU's development. Before joining as Head of the agency, Chalk was a seasoned PR professional, working for the Conservative Party on its media strategy (Davis 2012: Online; Telegraph Online 2003) before moving onto

international firm Bell Pottinger, where he spearheaded coalition PR strategy in Iraq (Cobain et al 2016: Online). It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that Breakthrough's other co-founder, Scott Brown, worked in communications for the Conservative Party and under Chalk in Baghdad (Ibid). Normative isomorphism is apparent in both cases. Firstly, there is the appointment by a Conservative-led coalition government of a Conservative Party stalwart.⁴⁰ Next, there is the formalisation of a public-private partnership between two ex-colleagues, both with experience in public relations concerning British security and the Muslim world. Such a professional connection also helps explain why such large sums of public money were handed to a company that had not existed 18 months previously, and increases the likelihood of a pre-Breakthrough connection between RICU and Robert Elliott. These moves, through normative isomorphism, would have entrenched an over-arching set of principles, based on shared experiences and assumptions, at the heart of RICU's messaging strategy. No doubt to further strengthen this overarching vision, Chalk is reported to have made frequent personal visits to Breakthrough to oversee the editing process before products were green-lit (Cobain et al 2016: Online). The consequences this move had on RICU's persuasive messaging will be explored in the next section. For now, they demonstrate the first signs of how the private and public sector became intertwined in British CVE propaganda policy. Greater professionalism was demanded; greater impact was required to be shown. As a result, RICU strengthened its connections with the skills and knowledge of the private sector, first by importing experience, then by establishing public-private partnerships to strengthen its hand when guiding civil society organisations. The hiring of Chalk, a seasoned private sector practitioner, bucked a trend for experienced civil servants to head and direct the agency. The agency's first head was Jonathan Allen, a 10-year FCO veteran whose previous role had been Assistant Director within the Home Office's International Directorate (HMG

⁴⁰ This may also be considered another form of coercive isomorphism being enforced on RICU, but the normative effects are more significant in terms of RICU's overall direction.

2019a: Online). During his tenure, the Directorship of the OSCT had also been in the hands of public sector stalwarts. Stephen Rimmer, a long-serving prisons officer, joined the Home Office in 1984 (HMG 2019b: Online) and as of 2014 Home Office Director General for Crime and Policing (Elkes 2014: Online), headed the unit from at least February 2008⁴¹ until at latest October 2009, being replaced by Debbie Gupta, herself a 7-year veteran of the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.⁴² The predominance of internal civil service hires for these roles was perhaps an indication to the new government that fresh eyes were needed, particularly someone with extensive relevant public relations experience, such as Chalk. This move to import expertise and strengthen relations with the private sector would continue after the rise of ISIL/Daesh, and the resultant release of the new Counter-Extremism Strategy in 2015.

Breakthrough's influence in strengthening RICU's output through NGOs is apparent. The partnership allowed RICU to provide professional propaganda films that fit with the overall mission of the NGOs the agency had partnered with. For example, Breakthrough returned to Somalia in 2013 and produced films for the Anti-Tribalism Movement (ATM)⁴³, one of which featured the founders of the organisation returning to Somalia on a campaign to eradicate inter-tribal discrimination in the country (Anti Tribalism Movement 2016: Youtube).⁴⁴ In 2014, the company produced a film entitled 'Families Matter' for Families Against Stress and Trauma (FAST) campaign, focusing on the aftermath of a young person's journey to Syria on their loved ones. In Mid-2015, Breakthrough also produced a documentary for the Armed Forces Muslim Association (AFMA), following an imam attached to the British Armed

⁴¹ RICU (2008) p.1

⁴² Debbie Gupta, LinkedIn profile; Home Office (2009) FOI Release – Letter from Debbie Gupta to Ed Hussain, dated 22 October 2009

⁴³ Another of these films focused on the journey of a young Somali-American woman, suggesting that Breakthrough offered a conduit for the increased US-UK coordination the British government had lobbied for in 2009.

⁴⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gNDkYVFTTWY&t=222s>

Forces travelling around Afghanistan.⁴⁵ RICU's hand in enabling the professionalisation of propaganda products was strengthened through its workings with Breakthrough, though crucially RICU's primary focus was creating products to sit alongside existing civil society efforts, integrated within the goals and mission of its NGO partners.

However, in this period we see the first signs of RICU's increasing assertiveness in establishing its own campaigns, and as a conduit for British public diplomacy in general. Breakthrough produced a documentary following the preparation of Pakistani and Afghan athletes from the 2012 Olympic Games in London, which would have formed part of wider promotion for the Games and the UK's worldwide prestige. But more importantly, RICU showed the first signs of seeking to bend its civil society partners to its propaganda vision – and crucially, this was in direct response to the deteriorating situation in Syria. Since the Arab Spring spread to Syria in 2011, the situation had consistently deteriorated, and many European Muslims had made the journey to Syria. Some made the trip to engage in humanitarian efforts, while others travelled to take up arms as part of the many armed factions springing up throughout the region. To tackle this issue, RICU formed the Help for Syria campaign. In liaison with the Charities Commission, RICU approached three existing charities [Hand in Hand for Syria, Syria Relief, and Human Care Syria]. Help for Syria itself was not a charity, and thus could not accept direct donations, but claimed its purpose was to “offer advice on how to organise fundraising efforts in the UK to help the displaced Syrian people.” (Help for Syria Online: No Date)⁴⁶ At this stage, RICU remained focus on developing campaigns in accordance with the goals of existing NGOs. What had changed, however, was the level of direct control RICU exercised over the project. RICU/Breakthrough initially approached these three groups with offers of media support, and a

⁴⁵ Breakthrough Media (2015) Youtube. Unfortunately, the full video has been deleted, but a trailer is still available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cY54c2_1Ttw&t=13s

⁴⁶ Website now deleted [12/12/19]

platform to advertise their own humanitarian efforts, reaching out for information and content that could be published on the Help for Syria website and used in promotional materials. However, it soon became clear the Breakthrough saw themselves as the arbiters of the messages being disseminated. The company did not aid others in professionalising their web offering, but created a platform under its auspices that their partners were merely invited to use. The company would produce its own materials using the charity's branding, and would continue to push the line of 'Don't go to Syria' over and above the protests of the charities in question, explaining that their anonymous backers (RICU) need also be placated (CAGE 2016: 22-23).

Two key points should be drawn out here. First is that RICU's output was first and foremost in support of FCO policy. Throughout that year, the Foreign Office advised against all travel to Syria, citing both the threats from government forces and terrorist groups – warning that hostage deals only served to strengthen the terrorist cause (Gardner 2013: Online). The FCO went on to advise Britons to not only avoid Syria, but also neighbouring countries such as Lebanon (RICU's remit was to ensure adherence of that advice, above the goals of the charities it was supporting. Most important to note, however, is the changing relationship between RICU and its partner civil society organisations. The situation in Syria, and the need for an emphatic government response, had spurred RICU into even greater centralisation of messaging strategy. The agency had already migrated from a light-touch approach (of providing some technical support but largely giving its partners free reign), to commissioning professional products that would support of the activist goals of new partners. In the Help for Syria campaign, RICU had centralised power once more, becoming the hub of publication and decision-making powers, while relegating the aims and concerns of its NGO partners to a very much secondary concern. This initiative would provide the working framework on which the agency would double down once more, as control of messaging strategy became even more firmly entrenched within the RICU-Breakthrough

axis. And once again, the instigator of this entrenchment would be a political crisis, and once again, driven by events in Syria.

This increasing centralisation of editorial control through RICU was married with its organisational streamlining to focus on outward-facing propaganda concerns. In 2014, operating and making decisions under the same pressures as that which began RICU's realignment to outside partners, David Cameron created the new Extremism Analysis Unit (EAU) – a body that would research and monitor extremist activity in the UK and deliver recommendations to the public sector (HL Ans 28 Jan 2019 HL12796; Cameron 2019: 425)

2015-Present: Command and Control Model

October 2015 brought a new urgency and scope to RICU's counter-extremism work. David Cameron declares that his government, in response to the successes of ISIL-Deash, sought to "supercharge" the agency (Cameron 2019: 426) This is reflected in the resources diverted to RICU. By 2018, the agency (not including its private-public partnerships) had swelled to 75 active civil servants, while commanding a propaganda budget of around £40 million (HMG 2018a: 5).⁴⁷ The agency's focus also pivoted squarely back to communicating directly to British Muslims.⁴⁸ Until this point, RICU had slowly laid down the connections and apparatus that would form the basis of the new energetic push that was to come, and during which the agency would face true public scrutiny for the first time. RICU had begun as a small consultative body which tried to coordinate counter-terrorism and counter-extremism communications from the government, attempting to get all its representatives – from senior ministers, to the local police – 'singing from the

⁴⁷ It is not possible to track the rate at which extra money was diverted to RICU. However, this 2018 figure represents a near eightfold increase in its funding since 2010.

⁴⁸ See Chapter 6

same hymn sheet', whilst commissioning research from private partners to inform best practice.

But this had not been enough to placate critics from across Whitehall, nor the incoming coalition. In response to this change of government, and then due to the deteriorating situation in Syria, RICU sought to professionalise its output by constructing a network of private partners, and by claiming greater authority over the messages which were presented to the public. This marked an important shift from its position of merely offering advice to its government and non-government partners in its early years, to controlling the platforms of distribution and batting away concerns about messaging from the campaigns and parties it ostensibly sought to work alongside.

In 2015, provoked by the continuing chaos in Syria and Iraq, and the recruitment success enjoyed by the ISIL/Daesh terrorist organisation, RICU was handed new orders from above. To this new pressure, the agency would demonstrate a curious form of path-dependency – not 'more of the same', but more precisely 'more of the same change again'. RICU's strategy was to repeat the steps made after the criticism of the 2011 Prevent review, accelerating along the paths it had previously established. When faced with the requirements of the new Conservative government's Counter Extremism Strategy (CES), it took the interesting, but limited, innovations it had previously made, and once more strengthened its connections to the private sector, while taking even firmer control of message output and design. RICU's private partners were brought closer into the fold; NGO partners were pushed further to the margins of strategy and implementation. In neo-institutionalist terms, normative isomorphic pressures from the private sector strengthened, while RICU simultaneously began to exert greater coercive pressure on its civil society partners.

The need for a more strident approach in CVE propaganda policy – particularly across the internet – was the driving force behind the CES, as then-Home Secretary Theresa May explained in her foreword to the strategy:

“in recent times, we have seen extremists operating at an unprecedented pace and scale, seeking to divide our communities and cause great harm. [...] Where this leads to violence is all too apparent, from the 38 people murdered in Tunisia in June to the 17 people murdered in Paris in the attacks in January this year.^[49] The rise of ISIL is particularly alarming, driven in part by their sophisticated use of the internet and social media. More than 750 UK-linked individuals have travelled to take part in the Syrian conflict.”

(HMG 2015: 7)

The phenomenal success that ISIL/Daesh had achieved in Syria and Iraq (and the group’s successful recruitment and terror attacks in mainland Europe) is ostensibly the catalyst for this new strategy. Yet it is important to interrogate the timing of this new CVE direction. As noted, UK citizens travelling to Syria had been a running concern for the government since 2013 at the latest. Further, ISIL/Daesh had orchestrated successful attacks in Europe as early as May 2014. And while the attack in Tunisia in June had killed British citizens, a change in CVE strategy was unlikely to reach any further potential extremists in North Africa, notwithstanding a remarkable pivot away from RICU’s familiar territory of Pakistan or Somalia. With these complicating factors in mind, we are invited to consider what pressed the government into action at this point in mid-October. While complete certainty is inadvisable, it would be foolish in such circumstances to overlook the surprise election victory that the Conservatives enjoyed in May, that allowed the party to shake off the constraints of coalition government.

⁴⁹ Referring to the Charlie Hebdo attack, and the ensuing violence. The far more destructive and infamous attack on Paris would occur in November.

The Liberal Democrats, whilst in the coalition, had locked horns with their Conservative counterparts multiple times regarding the issues of national security and counter-extremism. The party had opposed a strengthening of data collection and retention powers for the security services in 2012, and blocked a second attempt in February 2015 (BBC News Online 2015). In 2013, the Liberal Democrats thwarted the Conservative agenda again, blocking a withdrawal from the European Convention on Human Rights, designed to allow for the deportation of extremist cleric, Abu Qatada (Travis 2013: Online). Then-Deputy PM Nick Clegg and Theresa May attacked one another directly over the consequences of his party's rejection of these measures; May claimed that Clegg's decisions had 'put children's lives at risk', a claim that Clegg labelled "false and outrageous" (Mason 2014: Online). In this context, we can understand why the new CES may have been drawn up and released after the Conservatives (and May in particular) were free and clear of the various obstructions that the Liberal Democrats posed. The fact that May had been the focal point of this controversy is made more interesting by the fact that May had traditionally been the voice of restraint within the Cabinet regarding the curtailing of civil liberties and free speech, often battling with Michael Gove over these issues (Cameron 2019: 261). If May had been the cautious voice in these Cabinet-level debates, the conflict with the Liberal Democrats within the coalition is brought into sharper relief. The ridding of their coalition partners after 2015 would serve to narrow the spectrum of opinion within government (one that was already vigorous within the ruling party), reducing impediments to actions that may be considered controversial to other parties.

It is important, however, to separate out the new propaganda strategy set out in the CES from the new legal powers that the government sought to disrupt extremists through legal means elsewhere in the document (HMG 2015: 33-34). Given Liberal Democrat previous opposition to legislation that threatened to curtail civil liberties, it is unlikely that a restored coalition would have supported the creation of these new powers. The freedom gained to legislate

for these policy goals helps us explain the timing of the strategy's release, which is a vital consideration, since the architecture and preparatory work needed for RICU's new push was already well underway by the time of the 2015 election.

Two RICU-linked campaigns that help us define this new stage in propaganda policy – 'Open Your Eyes' and 'Ummahsonic' – were activating accounts and preparing content from as early as May 2015 (CAGE 2016: 35).⁵⁰ Horizon PR, a firm set up as a co-venture between Breakthrough and M&CSaatchi to work on counter-extremism projects, was incorporated even earlier in March, with its formal ownership and directorial structure formalised in June, including Breakthrough co-founders Scott Brown and Robert Elliott.⁵¹ Moves such as this being made so early in the year indicate that these projects enjoyed sufficient support to be greenlit by the coalition, allowing the groundwork to be laid for these changes in CVE propaganda policy. As such, it seems that the attack in January on Paris had indeed spurred discussions of new directions, indicating that successful terror attacks (not only at home, but on the continent) help form significant critical junctures in British counterterror and counter-extremism strategy.

The delay in the launch of government messaging efforts until May, however, does raise questions about how to treat the influence of elections on policy in this area. To do so, it is important to consider the essential difference of outcome in the 2010 and 2015 elections. The first resulted in a change of government, with the ruling party being ushered out of office. As such, the election formed a critical juncture as it installed a senior executive driven by an alternative mandate and governing principles. The second did technically result in a change of government, but the overall ruling party remained the

⁵⁰ *Open Your Eyes* Twitter and Youtube Accounts:

https://twitter.com/o_y_eyes?lang=en;
https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCgehS3Xu4jfYpJDizLJ_i5g

⁵¹ Companies House (2015a; 2015b; 2015c)

same. In this case, the election seems to have dampened (at least temporarily) the true fruition of a juncture, rather than heralded one. The Civil Service's traditional furlough during campaign season – and the very real possibility of a Labour victory – paused new innovations that may have been reversed within weeks. Elections, then, remain essential to understanding the changing flows of policy in this area; but it is vital to reflect on how differing outcomes will change their influence if policy evolution is to be properly comprehended.

The timing of RICU and Breakthrough's new moves into the online space – influenced by ISIL/Daesh's attack in Paris – places even greater emphasis on the source of pressures shaping policy, strategy, and even the inner workings of RICU itself. For it is at this point we can see the first signs of a *mimetic* pressure influencing RICU's adaptation to the internet. Although many commentators drew comparisons between RICU and the Cold War-era Information Research Department (IRD), it is notable that RICU had not been modelled on any existent body when it was formed. Indeed, the agency's 'innovative' approach was considered one of its strongest selling-points in the face of ongoing scrutiny (May in ISC 2012: 31).

It is striking, therefore, that the first organisation to influence RICU in such a way was not another government, but a terrorist organisation. Adaptation was firmly driven by the need to match a disruptive force, coming from outside the traditional bounds of political communication in the UK. The CES is explicit on this point. In terms of RICU's mission, the CES was adamant on the need for the agency to 'contest the online space'. The strategy warned that "a fundamental shift in the nature and scope of our response is required to match the huge increase in extremists' use of the internet." (HMG 2015: 24). As such, RICU's focus was redirected squarely onto establishing a compelling and effective presence through online media, especially on social platforms such as YouTube, Twitter, Facebook and Instagram.

The importance of mimetic pressures is underlined by the fact that RICU had already uncovered much evidence of the influence that social media was already gaining within its Muslim population. As early as 2009, audience research had revealed that content and information received through sites such as Facebook and YouTube had made deep impressions on young Muslims concerning events in the Middle East, and saw it as providing a way to cut through the stage-managed interpretations of the British mainstream media (RICU 2010b: 11).

RICU had received its marching orders once more. As noted above, the agency turned to similar changes as it had attempted in the past, doubling down once more on strengthening its links with the private sector, and taking a notably 'Command and Control' position within its network of partner NGOs. Senior government officials had called for change; RICU's strategy was to attempt more of the same changes again. The first way in which this was done was to set up a new public-private partnership. The agency's partnership with Breakthrough was highly useful in creating more professional products (as demanded by the 2011 review) and providing a stronger position for RICU to control message output. After the transfer of power to the single party Cameron ministry, RICU's work leaned even more heavily on the nous and expertise of the private sector. In collaboration with the PR firm MC&Saatchi, Breakthrough established a new firm Horizon PR (Cobain et al 2016). Changes to RICU's internal structure also reflected this increased connection and adherence to the private sector, with a new Online Policy division being created to liaise with internet providers, social media platforms and search engines.⁵² Here we can see evidence of a tight-knit policy community forming between government and powerful private sector operators. To illustrate this,

⁵² Private information

it is intriguing again to note that Scott Brown, one of the founders of Breakthrough, once worked at MC&Saatchi as an Account Director.⁵³⁵⁴

Public reporting on this partnership left Horizon's position within this new structure largely unclear. The Guardian's exposé on RICU, when discussing Horizon, merely quoted an M&C Saatchi spokesperson, who only spoke in the most general of terms (Cobain et al 2016). Horizon's own website is particularly oblique, stating that the firm "specialises in applying best-in-class strategic communications to promote, celebrate and strengthen the positive voices and stories of ethnic minorities" (Horizon PR Online) and declines to provide any details or examples of its previous work (Ibid). Conversations with RICU insiders have provided a far clearer picture. Horizon's role appears to be a promotional one, helping to create a more authentic 'grassroots' feel to positive news about Muslim integration and rejection of Salafist extremism. The overall strategy, per one source, is to support the activities of local groups, which gain coverage in local news outlets. Once this initial coverage is secured, it is pitched for coverage into regional and national media.⁵⁵ Although the source did not mention Horizon by name, it is highly unlikely that Horizon was not tasked with this assignment.

This strengthening of ties to the private sector coincided with RICU's second strategic decision: assuming greater control of message output. RICU was still ostensibly working in partnership with civil society,⁵⁶ though from this stage it is far more accurate to consider RICU as working *through* these organisations.

⁵³ Scott Brown, LinkedIn profile: <https://uk.linkedin.com/in/scott-brown-642264a5>

⁵⁴ While this was not explicitly stated, the formation of such a policy community may explain why CVE professionals considered RICU susceptible to 'groupthink', as charged by other operators in the field. Prior professional connections seemed to have an enormous influence not only in the formation of strategy but the reception of government contracts.

⁵⁵ Private information

⁵⁶ The CES uses the term 'partners' or 'partnership' 35 times. (HMG 2015)

First, we should consider how the campaigns RICU ran (or continue to run) from this point in time only represented tangential connection to the organisations which were supposedly running them. ‘Open Your Eyes’, perhaps RICU’s most striking, and certainly most directly anti-ISIL propaganda campaign, was fronted by Upstanding Neighbourhoods, a civil society organisation in Birmingham. The organisation did work in the field of counter-extremism, though crucially this was exclusively within the Birmingham area, acting as community organisers. Upstanding Neighbourhoods’ efforts were directed to training adults in the practice of safeguarding, including how to identify at-risk youths, and how best to engage with them, not targeting these youths directly or via online propaganda; though it had used Facebook to organise a demonstration against the preacher Anjem Choudhary (Upstanding Neighbourhoods 2015: Facebook;⁵⁷ Safe Space Group 2019: Online; Elkes 2015: Online). In addition, there is the Ummahsonic campaign, supposedly administered by the Federation of Muslim Organisations (FMO). The FMO does work on a large range of projects concerning Muslims in Britain. However, the campaign’s goal of becoming “the champs of young Muslim life in the UK” (Ummahsonic 2019: Online) is one that only fits loosely within the FMO’s vision, working “on a whole range of projects covering areas such as education, housing, youth and social welfare” (FMO 2019: Online).

Another way to demonstrate this central command is to look at the underlying technical and professional infrastructure that supported this work. Despite the assertions of partnership, and giving the role of these NGOs high prominence, Breakthrough (and, by extension, RICU) was taking full responsibility for the upkeep and content of these platforms. For example, both of these campaigns (and the Help for Syria website) were hosted from Breakthrough’s in-house server (CAGE 2016: 13). The wide array of content presented through the ‘Open Your Eyes’ channels included secret filming from inside ISIL-controlled territory, something which a local campaign group in Birmingham would have

⁵⁷ available at <https://www.facebook.com/UpstandingNeighbourhoods/>

been unlikely to attempt or procure (OYE 2017: Facebook).⁵⁸ With regards to Ummahsonic, multiple instances can be found of Breakthrough employees and freelancers listing work for the campaign as professional experience (CAGE 2016: 35-7). As the evidence suggests, RICU had moved to sponsorship model, with NGOs providing a public face to obscure government involvement. One counter-extremism professional, who had knowledge of RICU's work and operating habits, asserted that the government had established quid-pro-quo arrangements to establish these relationships:

"These organisations take it [financial support] gladly, because they need the funds for their day-to-day operations, like youth clubs etc. If they can keep the lights on, they're happy for their names to be used."⁵⁹

In short, RICU began to stand behind groups with some relevant connections to the campaigns they wanted to run, and using the names of these groups to shield government involvement, seen as vital to the campaigns' success in the UK.⁶⁰

However, outwardly this quid-pro-quo would appear to mean civil society groups being given increased access to senior government officials, including the Prime Minister. In July 2015, in the same speech in which he presaged the arrival of the CES in the autumn, PM David Cameron vowed to set up a new 'Community Engagement Forum'. This forum would allow the prime minister to "hear directly from those out there who are challenging extremism." (Cameron 2015: Online) Symbolically, Cameron chaired the first meeting of this forum days before the release of his government's new Counter Extremism Strategy (Allegretti 2015: Online). As Home Secretary, Theresa May

⁵⁸ available at <https://www.facebook.com/OpenYourEyesToISIS/videos/1410752908983077/>

⁵⁹ CVE professional, speaking under condition of anonymity.

⁶⁰ Ibid

attended events designed to draw attention to the campaigns and work of civil society partners, such as the ‘#MakingAStand’ and ‘Fightback Starts Here’ campaigns, and even visited and was briefed by Upstanding Neighbourhoods on their work in the local area. (Elkes 2015: Online)

However, the actual balance of representation and access to these officials was skewed away from the ‘partners’ that worked with RICU. The make-up of Cameron’s new Community Engagement Forum was largely formed of local government officials from areas with large Muslim populations, and faith leaders (including a former Bishop). Some civil society organisations were represented, namely Inspire (of ‘#MakingAStand’ and ‘Fightback Starts Here’ and the Quilliam Foundation).⁶¹ Inspire required little help from RICU in spreading its messages. Its director, Sara Khan, had already enjoyed links to government since 2008, and was a well-known media commentator in her own right.⁶² In contrast, none of RICU’s other identifiable partners, such as the FMO, Upstanding Neighbourhoods or FAST were invited to attend. From this evidence, it is clear that the pledge to “stand with and build the capacity of mainstream individuals [and] community organisations” did not mean allowing such organisations with low profiles to gain access or influence over policy in any meaningful way. An anonymous source in the Guardian’s exposé piece claimed: “It’s not a genuine partnership... it’s a manipulative arrangement.” (Cobain et al 2016: Online) While this may be overstretch, it is certainly fair to say that RICU’s partners had been relegated far below the status afforded during the agency’s formative years. During each new round of pressure from above, RICU had pushed its own agenda far more forcefully, while denying the NGOs it worked with any practical input or influence either over messaging strategy or government thinking.

⁶¹ HC Ans 12 Jan 2016 WA20784; HC Ans 02 Nov 2015 WA13090

⁶² Sara Khan personal website, available at <http://sarakhan.co.uk/>

The creation of Cameron's forum further lays out the strong downwards coercive pressures that have consistently guided counter-extremism policy in general. Outside ideas and voices had always been considered essential to the success of government efforts, whether in propaganda policy or more widely. Yet the light-touch and support partnership model had been considered ineffective, un-costed and not fit for purpose. Commissioning films and other content to support existing campaign efforts had also been discarded due to lack of impact. As discussed, RICU moved to greater command and control over policy. Each of these moves was instigated by demands from above.⁶³ Yet this coercive pressure was also beginning to be demonstrated by RICU itself. The exact internal motivations behind this are unclear, but squaring the circle of repeated demands for more professional output with the lack of professional and later digital skills in civil society would have required a strong hand to achieve. In short, coercive demands came from the Cabinet to RICU, who rationalised these demands into new ones for their civil society partners. In this context, the propaganda policy stream flowed strongly downward. Outside voices, as the partners of Help for Syria discovered, were trying to swim against a torrent. Cameron's forum seemed to recognise this issue, but seemed to accept it as necessary, and that outside input needed to be inserted at the very top of government to find any true benefit. RICU's new role had become cemented; its journey from consultancy to command-and-control was complete.

2017 and the Critical Juncture that Wasn't

The wave of terrorist attacks that hit the UK in the weeks preceding the 2017 general election in London but most notably Manchester produced a fascinating complicating event in RICU's developmental trajectory. Paradoxically, this is because it produced no discernible disruption to RICU's

⁶³ Current RICU personnel admitted they have little input into the long-awaited CONTEST review expected to arrive in 2019, indicating an unchanged pattern in this regard.

form and working practices. Initially, this evidence of CT/CVE policy failure followed a predictable pattern, with the need for change and instigated at Cabinet level. After the London Bridge attack that swiftly followed a suicide bombing in Manchester, then-PM Theresa May announced she would launch a sweeping review of British counter-terror strategy (Syal & Walker 2017: Online). RICU officials noted that, many months later, they were awaiting the outcome of that review, indicating that they had had little contact with or input into this process. This could be interpreted as a further reflection of the downward coercive pressure that has been a hallmark of change in propaganda policy.

Alternatively, this may merely reflect that RICU was left largely untouched by this review. During the review announcement, May was adamantly focused on the role of internet companies and the pressing need for effective media regulation.⁶⁴ When this review was published in 2018, it mentioned RICU only twice; one being a generic overview of RICU's functions, the other asserting that RICU's work – in tandem with FCO anti-ISIL/Daesh initiatives – “ha[d] positioned the UK at the forefront of the battle against terrorist propaganda, including specifically online terrorist content.” (HMG 2018b: 72) Here there appears something of a paradox. Following the very visible and destructive failures of CVE propaganda policy – with multiple attacks launched by ‘home-grown’ terrorists – it seems very unusual to conclude that RICU's propaganda strategy had been fully effective. This judgement may have been based on an assumption of maximal effectiveness in the free-flowing internet environment, and thus attention being redirected to reshaping that environment.

However, a neo-institutional analysis provides a more compelling account for this lack of reorganisation. As Aldrich (1979), Radaelli (1997) and Suchman

⁶⁴ The impacts of 2017 are more clearly observed in the realm of censorship strategy, and thus are more fully explored in Chapter 7.

(1995) relate, organisations are constantly attempting to gain or absorb institutional legitimacy to maintain their existence or growth. In previous critical junctures, as we have observed, RICU was anxious to absorb the knowledge, skills and practices of the private sector so to assuage criticism from above. In short, RICU lacked institutional legitimacy in its various stages. However, by 2017 this position had been reversed. Interviews with RICU officials in this period revealed a consistent desire to express how their CVE models were being imitated by partner organisations across Europe and beyond.

This internal pride – which falls into the category of anecdotal evidence – is strengthened when one considers its organisational realisation in the creation of RICU-International (RICU-I). A foundation date for RICU-I is as yet not ascertainable. However, RICU-I has been identified as operating in Tunisia, Lebanon and Morocco, with funds provided by the EU. The sub-organisation has reportedly held teaching events in Finland and the Netherlands, with French authorities approached in the belief that they will too adopt RICU practices. Leaked documents stated that RICU “expect[ed] to see increased political will to tackle terrorism, and a recognition and willingness to act on UK priorities” (All Cobain & Mechaï 2019: Online). No official or fully-confirmable documents or links exist to demonstrate RICU’s move into the European zone. The timing of *Open your Eyes* releases, and the timing of a forum RICU hosted on counter-radicalisation, indicate that this outward flow of mimetic isomorphism began early in RICU’s third structure phase.⁶⁵ However, the British government clearly holds its methods and strategy in high regard in comparison to its European partners. Leaked documents, drawn up by civil servants, stridently argued that “No other country currently has capabilities as well developed as RICU.” (Ibid) Further, the bullish language showcased in RICU-I documents suggests that the agency’s growing prestige made RICU

⁶⁵ See Chapter 5: p.196 (footnote 95)

confident enough to at least attempt to exert coercive isomorphic pressure on other state propaganda organisations.⁶⁶

On this evidence, it appears that the belief in RICU's 'market-leading' position in the CVE propaganda space have been the determinate factor in maintaining its current form, despite the terrorist success that would normally have triggered a new round of policy reformulation. RICU has demonstrated some small internal changes. The more direct and micro-targeted strand of its social media offering, *Open Your Eyes*, which was aimed at those assumed to be most at risk of falling into extremist attitudes, was quietly wound down after the 2017 election. Similarly, while there was no root-and-branch change within RICU or the wider CVE propaganda apparatus, RICU did experience a change in management. Public recruitment information indicates that the Home Office were seeking a replacement for a new head of RICU from early 2018 at the latest, with a final deadline for applications in March, with final interviews in late April (HMG 2018: 9). This indicative timetable would have put the new Head in position (or at least, being offered the position) by the release of the CONTEST review in June (HMG 2018b). It is unclear whether this change was a result of a voluntary resignation, or from change demanded from above. In this manner, we can more accurately accommodate this complicating example of 2017. RICU saw some minor changes in management and tactics, but was insulated from reorganisation due to it becoming the source of mimetic isomorphism to other nations.

Conclusion

⁶⁶ If RICU has, as is suggested, begun to exert coercive pressure onto other state propaganda organisations, clear comparison could be drawn between its international and domestic organisational trajectories: moving from offering support to improve messaging, to ensuring that RICU's priorities were dominant in these partnerships. However, on current available evidence, this remains but a tantalising glimpse, and a promising avenue for future study.

It is apparent that a decisive change has occurred in the way RICU imagined its relationship with civil society since it was formed in 2007. In the initial phase of its development, the agency had merely sought to be a helpful resource to other areas of government and to civil organisations that wished to ‘fight the good fight’. The agency provided briefing on policy, and seed funding, but explicitly chose not to intervene with the arguments or ideas its partners sought to communicate. In response to criticism over its lack of polished final product, in its secondary phase, RICU struck up a convenient alliance with industry that augmented its own expertise and delivered on demands from above. RICU commissioned professionally produced content from Breakthrough Media to achieve this. In so doing it began to centralise control over the messages produced; but crucially this content was designed to promote and augment the existing campaigns and efforts of civil organisations; and when it did seek to centralise control, this was at least done with a group of organisations that had a direct link and shared goals to the campaign RICU wanted to run.

After the CES, the agency dropped all effective pretence of building the capacity of others to run their own campaigns. The strategy opined that the government would “train a wide range of civil society groups to help them build and maintain a compelling online presence, uploading mainstream content”. In reality, this content was strategized and produced to RICU’s own specifications, created, hosted and maintained by Breakthrough. Civil society received some promotional support from government ministers attending events and press launches, and even invitations to brief the Prime Minister on policy options. Realistically, however, organisations without considerable pre-existing connections to the government or the media found little traction or influence.

At the same time, RICU responded to criticism by strengthening links with the private sector. This began with Breakthrough after the mauling the agency received in 2011. In 2015, after more was demanded by superiors in the online

sphere, RICU set up a new partnership (symbiotically linked to its previous one) and changed its internal structure to engage with the internet industry in a more focused way. Such partnerships were what allowed RICU to take ever-greater control of messaging policy from its civil society associates, control it required in order to respond from demands from above for greater professionalism and reach in its output.

These demands were the integral driving force behind RICU's adaptation, and are themselves exemplary of the downward flow of policy in this area. Policy choices flowed downward to RICU from senior Cabinet level, placing coercive pressure on RICU to justify the levels of investment it received from multiple departments. In order to meet these new requirements, RICU took greater control of messaging strategy, and over time began to exercise coercive power over the civil society organisations it worked with. Coercive pressure above RICU eventually translated into RICU delivering coercive pressure below it. Yet we can also identify examples of mimetic and normative pressures. In normative terms, the connections forged between RICU and Breakthrough rested on collegial experience; a factor that seems to have had more than a passing influence in the foundation of Horizon PR. These public-private partnerships resulted in the professionalisation of CVE propaganda policy, with the implied shared codes of conduct, and assumptions of best practice, which it brings. But when coupled to RICU's increasingly strengthening policy hand, such normative pressures could spread down the policy chain with great effect. Finally, and most intriguingly, we can see how mimetic pressure prompted RICU's pivot to the internet as its primary battleground. Yet this did not come from matching the best practice of other governments, but matching the effectiveness of a terrorist organisation in turning British and European Muslims against their own governments.

It is true that the 2015 CES also cites the success of right-wing and neo-nazi extremists in their use of the internet to win converts. However, an observation of the events that triggered junctures in policy undercut the

relevance of these organisations. Instead, it has been successful attacks by Salafists on British or European soil that have been the primary driver of policy change. RICU was founded in response to the successful 7/7 bombings in London in 2005. The CES explicitly refers to both the January 2015 Charlie Hebdo attack and Tunisia attack in June that same year as its catalysts; the timing of production and release of RICU's new propaganda products attest to the former being the most influential. Success of these organisations outside of Europe was also relevant, with the success of Salafists in Syria prompting RICU to take a steadily firmer grip on the messages it and its partner initiatives spread to the public. Elections also played a part in RICU's development, but alternatively played a juncture-inspiring role (in the case of a change in government) or a delaying role (before the largest party were returned with a sole majority).

Appreciating the intra-governmental dynamics that have shaped RICU's development is a vital step in disentangling the interwoven influences that have guided the reformulation of British CVE propaganda policy to new and growing demands. From this position, we can now contextualise strategic or tonal shifts in the diverse strands of propaganda policy in which RICU and its associates were engaged. With a thorough understanding of how RICU has been reformed, and how its position within government has shifted – and for what reasons it has done so – it is possible to more precisely determine the impact of institutional factors on the one hand, and technological factors on the other. Throughout the remaining empirical chapters (Messaging, Targeting and Censorship) we can lay out how CVE propaganda work has been determined by these distinct but interlocking considerations. Through matching changes in output alongside its changing organisational remit, we can map out which changes in policy can be attributed to changes in personnel, pressure from above, and inspiration from other departments, as opposed to those explained by the influence of new technological capacity or limitation.

5. The Evolution of RICU's Persuasive Messaging Tactics

Introduction

This chapter analyses the persuasive messaging tactics employed within the British government's CVE propaganda policy. Other chapters have observed and commented upon the organisational aspects of this policy – namely, the structures through which policy is set and delivered; attempts to censor undesirable material, seen as detrimental to the government's aims; and the logistical arrangements used to target and reach desired audiences. This chapter, by contrast, is closer in its goals and focus to traditional propaganda studies. As such, it shall be concerned with the rhetoric and persuasive language used by RICU and its governmental partners in pursuit of their CVE goals. This includes analysis of selected communicators for said messages; the structure and content of the individual messages themselves; and the political or social conceptualisations (and assumptions) that form the ideological basis for these communicative acts generally. Properly understanding these acts requires us to be cognisant of how RICU understood and delineated its desired audience. Thus, findings within Chapter 5: Targeting will be referenced, insofar as they impact the qualitative nature of the messages RICU has produced at particular moments.

Shifts in this strategy are related to several factors. Changes in RICU's persuasion strategy largely align with the shifts identified in Chapter 4: Structure. This is unsurprising. RICU's role within CVE propaganda policy has shifted considerably since 2007, as have the media through which RICU has been directed to operate. As outlined in Chapter 4, these shifts have been primarily instigated through changes in government, or by terrorist successes at home and abroad. The final character of the persuasion attempts has been influenced by instruction from above, and by the abilities and limitations of the media utilised for these communications.

To demonstrate how these influences resulted in final propaganda products, this chapter will progress sequentially through the periods outlined in Chapter 4. In each Model, RICU's role within the execution of CVE policy, and the primary media by which its messages were disseminated have both influenced the final character of their persuasive messaging products. Underneath these, however, lies another determining factor. Chiefly, RICU persuasion attempts orbit around the thorny issues of values and identity. The language, phrases, and terms in which RICU's CVE propaganda campaign have barely changed; the focus on Islam vs. ideology, separating extremists from mainstream society, and creating a shared sense of identity have consistently been driven as paramount to fighting terrorism / extremism. Instead, the relationship between these concepts, how they are presented in opposition to one another, the potential for crossover between Western and Islamic values, and the blueprint for reconciling British and Muslim identities through action, mutate in subtle yet instructive ways throughout the period in question.

In Ellulian terms, the integrationist attempts of New Labour shifted steadily further into a more agitational mode through the Coalition and Conservative governments. This later approach involved the invocation of a simulacra model for British Muslims to follow – devoted to their heritage and faith, and active within their communities, though striving for the spread of liberal ideals, and standing in opposition to international Salafism; and by extension, implicitly supportive of overarching British goals for the MENA region. As RICU moved tentatively, and then stridently, into the online and social media spaces, this simulacrum was endowed a participatory form. Through the encouragement of hashtag use, and the use of testimonials from British Muslims, government sought to stir up its Muslim population into action against the influence of Salafists, and to create the appearance of a horizontal propaganda campaign. This campaign, however, remained organised and designed centrally from within government, with Muslim individuals and NGOs pressured to participate along lines set down by RICU and its partners.

Overall, it must be concluded that institutional factors were the prime movers of messaging strategy and tactics in this period. When placed in comparison with RICU's ongoing organisational development discussed in Chapter 4, shifts in the character and tone of messages is primarily determined by the preferences of senior government and the expertise of personnel brought into work in and alongside RICU to produce these messages. Only after these institutional pressures have resolved themselves do technological factors come into play. As suggested above, due to the technological capabilities at play, these changes are tightly bound with those discussed in Chapter 5. In short, the micro-targeting and community-themed aspects of social media allowed RICU to experiment with more closely tailored offerings to a spectrum of potential audiences, while pulling together the appearance of a self-sustaining liberal British Muslim community as Government intervened in the background.

‘The Struggle of Our Generation’

Addressing and rebutting the ideological challenge of Salafist extremism has proven a continuously thankless and difficult task for successive British governments, especially RICU and its CVE partners. For despite repeated assertions and proclamations of the need to counter and battle extremist ideology, and the dressage of such statements in grandiose terms, the continued requirement to make such statements indicates that this battle has not been won in any real sense. Such failure is evident within the statements of successive prime ministers, or indeed individual prime ministers at differing points in their tenure. For example, in August 2006 – just as New Labour were seriously approaching legislation to censor extremist material for the first time⁶⁷ – PM Tony Blair insisted that:

“we will not win the battle against this [Salafist] extremism unless we win it at the level of values as much as force... Rightly, in my view, we realised that you can’t defeat a fanatical ideology just by imprisoning or killing its leaders; you have to defeat its ideas.”

(Blair 2006: Online)

Here, Blair is commenting on the decisions during the occupations of Iraq and Afghanistan – and he further remarks that the invasions of those countries could not be blamed for the terrorism then being experienced throughout Europe, as the September 11th attacks preceded either (Ibid). Further, he espoused that the regime changes attempted in both countries did not equate to a ‘regime change’, but a ‘values change’:

“The moment we decided not to change regime but to change the value system, we made both Iraq and Afghanistan into existential battles for

⁶⁷ See Chapter 7: Censorship

reactionary Islam. We posed a threat not to their activities simply, but to their values, to the roots of their existence.”

(Ibid)

Blair’s intervention on this matter, at this time, is revealing in a number of ways. First of all, and in a slightly depressing fashion, it reveals how little true progress has been made against Salafist extremism in this ideological arena. During his premiership, David Cameron asserted that “any strategy to defeat extremism must confront, head on, the extreme ideology that underpins it... In doing so, let us not forget our strongest weapon: our own liberal values.” (Cameron 2015: Online). Likewise, during her subsequent premiership, Theresa May commented that Salafist extremism “proclaims our Western values of freedom, democracy and human rights are incompatible with Islam... Defeating this ideology is one of the greatest challenges of our time.” (May 2017: Online)

In a similar way, this focus on the concept of values is a mainstay of the persuasive rhetoric emanating from RICU and senior government in the years since 2006. As noted above, both Cameron and May’s ministries placed ‘values’ as the key element through which the fight against Salafism must be won. Gordon Brown’s ministry, as we shall see forthwith, also centralised this concept. However, the ways in which these values, and especially, their relationship to Islamic culture, are conceived, represent subtle yet highly important shifts in propaganda policy, which at times have proved problematic in their contradictory nature. Further, there have been significant changes in how the ‘battle’ against Salafist extremism has been conceptualised and presented to the public in British CVE policy. Gordon Brown, having succeeded Blair into Downing Street, spearheaded a push to recast CVE communications outside of the framework of the War on Terror, and to quickly establish his position as a responsible and alert caretaker for security policy in general, though recentring the need to “win hearts and minds” (Summers et al. 2007:

Online; see also Brown 2007: Online; Reiff 2007: Online[paywall]). The later coalition government sought to reverse this trend (HMG 2011A). Yet the mainstay of 'values' at the heart of British CVE communications has been remarkably consistent, and it is interesting to note how the Brown-era conception of terrorists as criminals has been re-forged in the pursuit of wider censorship goals (Chapter 7).

Blair's speech also highlights how persistently the shadow of British foreign policy has hung over British CVE efforts. Iraq and Afghanistan have loomed large throughout this period, as well as the instability in Syria and the wider MENA region. The justification of Western intervention in the region has, despite Blair's protestations to the contrary, remained a focal point of contention that British CVE propaganda has sought to address. The shadow of the British Empire is also prevalent, as RICU sought to reach out to diaspora communities from, and the current populations of, former colonial possessions or interests such as Somalia and Pakistan.

Blair's speech is also revealing due to its rejection of ideas that he himself acted upon previously. At this moment in 2006, Blair rejects the notion of military victory as sufficient for the defeat of terrorism – a position rather at odds with his decision to support the US-led invasion of Iraq three years previously. It seems that his realisation of the need to win over hearts and minds occurred rather later, after the successful 7/7 bombings in July 2005. Arguing in the Commons for the invasion of Iraq, Blair claimed that the removal of the Taliban in Afghanistan 'dealt a blow' to the Islamist cause, and that striking at Iraq could produce a similar protective effect (HC Deb 18 Mar 2003 Vol 401 Col 768). Shortly after this event, Blair stated that "What we are confronting is an evil ideology... it is a global struggle, and it is a battle of hearts and minds both within Islam and outside of it. This is the battle that must be won." (Blair 2005b: Online)

At time of writing, this battle has clearly not been won. But we can identify how the British government have attempted to win it, and the forces that have shaped and guided the formation of a strategy to do so. Having analysed this change, we can then focus on the surprising stability that can be found in this strategy. Lastly, by combining a knowledge of these two trends, and the reasoning behind them, we can provide a roadmap that may aid in bringing this battle to a victorious end.

2007 - 2011: Criminals and Murderers against the Rest of Us

The focus of this thesis, in the main, has been on the activity of the Research, Information and Communications Unit (RICU). This chapter retains this focus, as it is the most effective in recounting the evolution of British CVE communications. It remains important at the outset to reiterate that RICU arrived on the scene at a point when government communications surrounding the impact of terrorism were already in full swing. RICU is a product of a desire to reform this extant strategy to become more effective. Its inception date in July 2007, quickly following Blair's resignation from office, once again reminds us of the impact that changes of leadership in the higher echelons of government has had on the formation of British CVE propaganda policy.

It is unsurprising therefore that RICU's early work is rather out of step in terms of content and tone than British CVE communications through the rest of the period. As Brown entered office, it is reasonable to surmise that a desire to stamp his own authority prompted the creation of a new formal entity to manage CVE communications, which had been previously led in an ad-hoc fashion under the Permanent Secretary for Government Communications (Payne 2009: 118). Later circumstantial evidence points to Brown reading a book concerning the IRD's work in the Cold War in his early days as Prime Minister (Cobain 2018: Online), indicating that the formation of RICU itself went alongside his desire to bring his new authority to bear on CVE issues. It is

also reasonable to propose that Brown sought a ‘clean break’ from the security rhetoric and record of the Blair era, as the new leadership sought to soften the bellicose language emanating from government on the issue (Payne 2009: 120).

It is unclear from an outside perspective as to what drove Brown to draw back from the rhetoric of the War on Terror, but even before his arrival into No 10 we can see important shifts in style to Blair when speaking on security issues of this kind. In October 2006 – just a few months from Blair’s speech – Brown laid out a map of British responses to terrorism from a treasury standpoint. This speech echoed strong support for the policy framework laid out by Blair, including revitalising the Israel-Palestine peace process, or repeating how Western intervention and ideals in Iraq could drive down support for Al-Qaida in the country (Brown 2006: Online; Blair 2006: Online). However, there are already noticeable divergences in style between the two men. Blair stridently called upon world leaders to ‘confront an evil ideology’ and fight ‘existential battles’ for hearts and minds between two mutually exclusive worldviews. By contrast, Brown addresses how Britain and the West may begin “overcoming this challenge of global terrorism” by “isolat[ing] terrorist extremists from the moderate mainstream” through “cultural effort” (Brown 2006: Online).

It was into this political context that RICU was born in July 2007. By September, the unit was publishing guidance notes for ministers and government departments regarding helpful and unhelpful language regarding the subjects of terrorism and extremism (RICU 2007). These guidance notes bear striking similarities to the language and ideas espoused by Brown before he became PM (See RICU 2007). Especially, the briefing document lays out in its ‘Topline’ and subsidiary messages that “Terrorists and murderers are criminals” (RICU 2007: 4) and that “As with other criminal activity, we will pursue terrorists through our criminal justice system.” (RICU 2007: 3). The document goes on to explain why such a message – largely stripping out the ideological component of Salafist extremism, and placing British policy on a squarely criminal justice

model – is effective. It lays out two strands of reasoning. Firstly, such a narrative “distinguishes and defines terrorists by their actions (e.g. criminals) and not their motivations (e.g. ideological) and therefore avoids implying that any one religion is to blame.”⁶⁸ Secondly, it defends the move away from the martial imagery of Blair, instead arguing that the new language “avoids militaristic metaphors, which can be negatively received and can reinforce terrorists’ claims to be soldiers fighting a legitimate battle, rather than mere criminals.” (RICU 2007: 5)

While the internal logic of these statements is sound enough, it is uncertain how such conclusions were reached. It is certainly possible that focus group or other research may have informed this decision, even if it were under the informal CVE arrangements that had existed previously. The earliest identifiable research testing these messages was completed in April 2008 (RICU 2010b), which refers to earlier message-testing work carried out in 2007 and 2006 (p.8). These earlier pieces of research have proven elusive. Yet the 2008 research suggests a good degree of common results to these earlier pieces, including “a suspicion of government communications, a desire to blame the media for misrepresenting Muslims and Islam, and a belief that UK and US foreign policy were an important driver of terrorist activity.” (Ibid) If Brown had been influenced by these earlier pieces of research is not known, but their existence also implies that Blair would most likely also have been aware of their findings. Whatever the circumstance, Brown had become convinced that a new course was needed in CVE communications, one that he employed before his own accession as Prime Minister, and was translated into direct guidance for other ministers through RICU.

The 2008 research, as a point of interest, highlights that the messages set out in the 2007 guidance were having some positive impact, as compared to the overwrought and alarmist tone emanating from government previously (RICU

⁶⁸ Emphasis in original

2010b: 8). Yet within this research one can detect a desire to justify this new approach, and the new leadership of Gordon Brown especially. The executive summary of the research takes four quotations from the various focus groups conducted. All the quotations highlight a perceived improvement in the situation for British Muslims – but three of these quotations directly relate this improvement with Brown’s new form of leadership, in contrast to that of Blair:

“I feel a bit of relief now as things are a lot calmer. I think it is to do with the change in leadership.”

“Gordon Brown is better... The policy has not changed, but the tone has changed.”

“Brown is slightly separating, not like when Tony Blair was attached to Bush... I think Gordon Brown is trying to concentrate on government now and improve local communities.”

(RICU 2010b: 8)

To a certain degree, there appears to have been a wish to justify the direction that Brown’s ministry had travelled in terms of CVE propaganda policy. This interpretation is strengthened by the fact that, even though the research informing the publication was undertaken in 2008, the findings were not officially released until March of 2010, only weeks away from the general election of that year. The findings offered up in the 2010(b) document, and the timing of their release, add further evidence to support the strength of prime ministerial influence of CVE communications. Not only does policy follow the preferences of the installed leaders, but the success of messaging strategy is directly tied to the performance and legacy of the leader themselves. It is perhaps due to the emotive nature of terrorism, and the sensitivity of the public to it, that has driven successive prime ministers to take such a firm grasp of CVE policy.

In any case, RICU's early work in the persuasive arena can be characterised as a softening of tone, spearheaded by the prime minister. It remains important, however, to disentangle and summarise the thinking espoused by RICU's messaging in this period, and the conceptualisations of radicalisation which supported it. Furthermore, it is necessary to lay down the communicators that RICU used to spread its messages – those it considered necessary, and those it found desirable.

We have already remarked at some length as to how RICU's early messaging saw to downplay the overtly 'ideological' elements from CVE communications, and how the unit were explicit in the need to do so. It is perhaps flippant to point out that this does not mean that the British government did not apply an ideological lens of their own to these communications. To explore this lens, let us first analyse the 'Topline' messages that RICU disseminated to government stakeholders in September 2007:

- “1. Terrorism is a real and serious threat to us all.
2. Terrorists are criminals and murderers and they attack the values we all share.
3. We all need to work together to tackle the terrorist challenge.”

(RICU 2007: 2)

In many ways, it is useful to be able to see an official map to RICU's CVE communications in this era. Moving forward, no such exact or formal documents have been traced, leaving us the task of assembling the tenets of RICU's persuasive strategy from individual propaganda products. In this clear formalisation, we can notice immediately how these messages reflect the preferred style and tone that Gordon Brown brought to this policy arena, in particular the reference to a terrorist 'challenge', as opposed to a battle or struggle. It also brings into sharp relief the lasting focus on the invocation of

‘values’ as a basis of establishing an oppositional stance to Salafism. RICU’s justification for this message describes this basis as “inclusivity through the concept of shared values” and by doing so both “avoids implicitly branding whole communities as being responsible for terrorism” and “makes reference to our opposition to all forms of extremism (e.g. right wing extremism).” (RICU 2007: 5)

This invocation of values, as we have already touched upon, has been a continuous trend in British CVE communications, and marks the key holdover from Blair’s interventions on the issue. However, there is an important shift in how this concept of values is framed to the public. Blair unapologetically uses these values as a rallying cry and justification for British action in Iraq and Afghanistan, Brown’s ministry domesticated this concept. In the Brown-era conception, ‘our shared values’ forms a moderate core, under assault from extremists on the fringes of public debate and belief. CVE communications in this period attempt to draw the clear majority of Brits of all heritages and creeds inside of this moderate core, and from this common ground, turn enmity outwards to the terrorists outside of it.⁶⁹

There are some concerning gaps remaining. The most obvious issue with this conceptualisation is that, despite the insistence on moderate values as a rallying point, RICU declines to offer even token examples of what these values are. The furthest this document reaches is to define terrorists as “far removed... from *normal* societal or religious values.”⁷⁰ The 2008 research referenced above listed these shared values as “the rule of law, equality, religious diversity, tolerance and respect for others.” (RICU 2010b: 2) However, describing these as ‘British values’ was considered troublesome, as this phrase “brought to mind images of going to the pub, football matches, eating fish and chips, and the monarchy.” (Ibid) Further, the report indicated that participants

⁶⁹ Given the centrist/moderate leanings of Brown and New Labour generally, this was likely to have been comfortable territory for the government.

⁷⁰ Emphasis added

rarely described themselves as ‘British Muslims’, even if they felt the two were compatible (Ibid). In this light, the ambiguity of the 2007 document appears to have been a deliberate choice, and not an oversight. Through defining the notion of ‘shared values’ in the widest possible terms, RICU sought to appeal to Muslims in Britain without creating an unnecessary distinction between ‘Britishness’ and Islamic social values. In addition, the ‘hands-off’ approach that RICU was currently exercising in this timeframe⁷¹ also helps explain why firm ideas of shared values may have been missing from the document. It is still noteworthy, however, that RICU did not see itself as having to bridge or reconcile this divide between the British and Muslim identities, but instead of finding ways around the tensions it noticed within the community of British Muslims.

Instead, the key point of differentiation was that of criminality, as highlighted above. This creates something of a tension – those who hold extremist beliefs, but who refrain from breaking the law, are considered in this imagining as existing in opposition to the terrorists the government is seeking to isolate. Under Blair’s leadership, the government sought to step around this problem through criminalising certain types of speech, widening the distinction of criminality.⁷² However, such a move would prove insufficient to the minds of the incoming coalition government as it sought to grapple with this problem of distinction.

Lastly, it is appropriate to consider in some detail the *communicators* whom the government and RICU considered to be helpful to their CVE goals. RICU’s focus in this area appears to subtly shift in this early period. Analysis commissioned by the unit and compiled in 2008 demonstrates that senior government figures were tasked with delivering the brunt of CVE messaging for the government, at least in the domestic sphere. Research conducted for

⁷¹ See Chapter 4: Structure

⁷² See Chapter 7: Censorship

RICU places a heavy emphasis on the messages and statements emanating from Prime Minister Brown (who delivered the largest number of messages) and other key cabinet figures, including Foreign Secretary David Miliband, and Home Secretary Jacqui Smith (TNS Media 2008: 50). The analysis also cast close attention to the language coming from official department communications not delivered by any particular individual, including press releases (pp.42-3).

By 2009, the situation appears to have shifted. Research conducted in that year – and also released in 2010 – develops RICU’s thinking on which individuals or groups may be better placed to deliver the unit’s desired messages than senior politicians. The published findings of this work constructed a shortlist of attributes, experience and traits that would distinguish credible voices within the Muslim community. Many of these notable characteristics were drawn from a milieu of general positive personal qualities, such as strength of conviction, displaying empathy or sympathy, or passion and charisma (RICU 2010: 3). Aside from these, the report asserted that these communicators should most importantly present themselves as true to the Islamic community and its value structure:

“someone who is well presented, interested in the Muslim community... of similar background... knowledgeable of Islam, holds Islamic values... [and] is visible and active within the community.”

(RICU 2010a: 3)

Lastly, the report indicated that these communicators should be “independent” (Ibid) – particularly “independent of Western agendas” (RICU 2010a: 2, 19-20). In this context, we can begin to better understand the choices RICU made in seed funding projects by former Muslim extremists such as Maajid Nawaz (See Chapter 4). The report highlighted several Muslim scholars and religious figures, including Dr Zakir Naik (p.38-41). However, there was considerable support for non-religious political figures, particularly from

diaspora communities that had been long-settled in the UK. These political figures were noted for their opposition to British intervention in the Middle East, such as George Galloway, Clare Short or Tony Benn (Ibid: 9, 25, 36, 40).

The selectivity that RICU and the government showed in developing their messaging campaigns – that is, to favour moderate Muslim figures over trusted anti-war activists – highlights the troubling situation the British government faced due to its involvement in the Middle East. The desire to downplay the effects of this invasion on domestic and international extremism and terrorism is apparent in both government statements and actions.

A key example of this can be found in the defence of the government's counter-terrorism record. When then-Home Secretary Jacqui Smith presented the revised CONTEST strategy to the House of Commons, she signalled agreement concerning the need to point out that "the biggest killer of Muslims in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan is al-Qaeda and the Taleban" (HC Deb 24 03 2009 Col 179). When challenged with the position that al-Qaeda had only taken root in Iraq after the invasion, Smith argued that "the threat from al-Qaeda in the world predated the action taken in Iraq and Afghanistan" (Ibid: Col 182). Such a position, despite the evolution of government language on the issue of terrorism since the formation of RICU – and Brown's ascension – is starkly reminiscent of Blair's justifications in 2006:

"Still now, I am amazed at how many people will say, in effect, there is increased terrorism today because we invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. They seem to forget entirely that September 11 predated either."

(Blair 2006: Online)

A lasting determination to downplay the effects of British intervention appears to have been a defining factor in the constriction of the lens and terms in which the British government addressed the problem of violent extremism in these

early years. Rather than highlight and support those in the political establishment who had opposed invasion (and gained credibility amongst the British Muslim community), resources and effort were directed to ‘moderate’ Muslim figures. The ideological component of the conflict between Western liberal democracy and Salafist extremism – the elusive ‘values’ over which Blair claimed the conflict was fought – was stripped out of RICU’s persuasive messaging strategy, as this was perceived as fertile ground for Salafist propaganda (RICU 2010b: 2; RICU 2007: 5, 7). This resulted in a persuasive messaging strategy that sought to set a boundary of criminality between terrorists and the rest of the society, despite the problematic nature of such an attempt.

This notion of ‘values’, even in the space of four years, – and with the same political party in power – proves to be a challenging one for British CVE propaganda policy. It also reveals the beginning of a lasting, and somewhat uncomfortable, trend. That is to say, the terms in which extremism and terrorism are addressed (i.e. values, moderate, mainstream, etc) remain very consistent from 2007 to the present day. How these terms are conceptualised, addressed, and operationalised in government communication change regularly. These changes are often subtle from an outside perspective; but they are highly important, as they often push RICU and its partners into outwardly contradictory positions over the course of its lifespan. Such contradictions are only exacerbated by the reversions in rhetoric that are present in the differing products that RICU would go on to produce in the years since its foundation.

2011-2015: A ‘Muscular Liberalism’

Several important shifts occurred in the evolution of RICU’s persuasive messaging under the coalition government, including the choice of communicators, the media through which its messages were disseminated, and the greater focus on the experience of the British Muslim diaspora. These

changes would imprint themselves on the character, rhetoric, and arguments displayed in RICU's propaganda products. In terms of differentiation from the New Labour government, however, the impetus and framing of RICU's CVE products differed most greatly in terms of this notion of 'values'. Most interestingly, this new framing did not truly break a great deal of new ground, but instead manifested a reversion towards the conception of the Blair era.

At the same time, it is important to note that there is real and significant crossover in terms of the rhetoric and statements emerging from senior government figures from the Brown into the Cameron era. In his first major speech on counter-extremism, delivered at the Munich Security Conference, Cameron sticks closely to the forms of speech outlined in RICU's 2007 guidance. Early in the speech, on the position of Islam in the extremism picture, he declares that "It's important to stress that terrorism is not linked exclusively to any one religion or ethnic group." (Cameron 2011: Online) This line could almost have been directly lifted from the 2007 guidance, which offers the following version in its sub-headings: "Terrorism is not the product of any one religion or community." (RICU 2007: 2). Cameron repeatedly insists on this separation of terrorist or extremist sympathy with the religion of Islam throughout his speech, reminding his audience that the bedrock of Islamist terrorism was

"the existence of an ideology [Salafism]... and we must distinguish it from Islam. Islam is a religion observed peacefully and devoutly by over a billion people. Islamist extremism is a political ideology supported by a minority."

(Cameron 2011: Online)

He goes on to drive this point home even further, asserting "The point is this: the ideology of extremism is the problem; Islam emphatically is not." (Ibid) This close similarity reveals both how resilient these talking points had been in the

intervening years, as well as the strong crossover from the Labour to Coalition governments.

However, despite these similarities, this speech also showcases how the new government sought to strike away parts of the RICU legacy he found troubling, or, what he himself coins as the “muddled thinking around this whole issue.” (Ibid) In this vein, Cameron points his crosshairs on the failings of the previous government, and how they have played a part in spurring radicalisation, such as the “doctrine of state multiculturalism”, which created “segregated communities” that formed fertile ground for extremism. In Cameron’s eyes, the Labour-led focus on ‘shared values’, which sought to downplay the tensions between British and Islamic identity, was in fact a driver of the problem, not a solution: “This hands-off tolerance has only served to reinforce the sense that not enough is shared. And this all leaves young Muslims feeling rootless.” This rootlessness stems from the government’s “fail[ure] to provide a vision of society to which they feel they want to belong.” (Ibid) In place of this ‘state multiculturalism’, Cameron advocates that the UK must “turn the page on the failed policies of the past” and instead profess “a much more active, muscular liberalism.”

This ‘muscular liberalism’ manifests itself in three ways. Firstly, it signals a rejection of the criminality distinction that gained traction under the previous government. “A passively tolerant society says to its citizens, as long as you obey the law, we will just leave you alone... I believe a genuinely liberal country does much more.” Instead, being drawn within the bounds of acceptable society – and thus in opposition to the Salafist threat – one had to show a positive and unwavering commitment to these liberal values, which Cameron describes as “Freedom of speech, freedom of worship, democracy, the rule of law, equal rights regardless of race, sex, sexuality.” (Ibid) It is from this basis that we see the first signs of the move in government terminology on the subject of radicalisation moving from a focus on ‘terrorists’ to ‘extremists’, which Cameron characterises as a move that allows government to take action

across the spectrum of Salafist adherents, and thus shoring up the government's response (Ibid).⁷³

Secondly, and as a consequence of the first principle, it reverts once more to the Blair conception in which conservative Islamic and Western Liberal practices and values are set into diametric opposition. Cameron refers to practices such as forced marriage, and beliefs that do not align with the notions of universal human rights, of women's' rights especially, and those members of society who "accept various parts of the extremist worldview, including real hostility towards Western democracy and [said] liberal values." In the face of such practices, and their adherents, the Western world faces a risk "not just lives, [but] our way of life." Despite this attack on traditional Islamic cultural practices, Cameron assures us that "the vast, often unheard majority" of European Muslims fall inside the boundary set by these two 'muscular' principles (all Ibid).

Thirdly, Cameron's conception seeks to overhaul this divide that he has drawn by seeking to separate Islam itself from these exclusionary practices. One path Cameron outlines is the creation of the National Citizen Service, a youth programme designed to encourage cross-cultural exchange between young Britons of different backgrounds.⁷⁴ (This is in the hope that this will build pride in "local identity", so Muslim and British identities can coexist side-by-side). More importantly – and as is carried over into RICU's propaganda work – Cameron insists that Western attitudes to government and society are not only compatible within majority-Muslim countries, but overtly desirable results. In

⁷³ The Prevent Strategy of 2011, which we touched upon in some detail in Chapter 4, reiterates this criticism of previous strategy, asserting that referring to terrorists as criminals "has risked removing the ideological component which it should be the purpose of RICU to address." (HMG 2011A: 50)

⁷⁴ Interviews with NCS organisers report that beliefs which Cameron labels as related to extremism, particularly homophobia, are still engrained within participants from Islamic backgrounds, and remain difficult to challenge.

this regard, the yet-nascent Arab Spring forms an illustrative backdrop to proceedings. Cameron implies that the pro-democracy protests in Tunisia and Egypt at this time reflect that “Western values and Islam are entirely compatible” (Ibid). Further, Cameron asserts that the draw of terrorism internationally can be countered through Western powers being “on the side of openness and political reform in the Middle East.” It is this line of argument – the superiority of Western Liberal values, and how they are encouraging, even necessary, for the revival of the MENA region – that is taken up most fervently by RICU in this period.

Before discussing this work, it is necessary to make an important distinction between the types of messaging that form British CVE propaganda policy moving forward. To this point, we have largely concentrated on the interventions and statements of senior government figures. This is for two reasons. Firstly, it is only following the accession of the coalition government, and under explicit direction of the 2011 Prevent strategy – released four months after Cameron’s speech – that RICU takes on responsibility for the production of “more professional counter-narrative products.” (HMG 2011A: 52) To this point, RICU’s focus had been on coordinating language and messaging emanating from government spokespeople, and seed-funding anti-extremist projects carried out by other non-government groups. As a result, the messages in the public sphere that are identifiably influenced by RICU are those coming from senior government positions.

Secondly, we must remember that while RICU were re-focused toward reaching out to British citizens who were “vulnerable to recruitment to terrorist organisations” in the 2011 review, CVE communications remained directed toward both the Muslim and non-Muslim populations in the UK. As such, it remains of vital importance to parse out how senior government figures – who spoke mainly to this wider audience – addressed the issues of religion and extremism, as government also had to stand firm against interpretations of the Salafist threat emerging from non-Muslim sections of

the population. In the 2011 Munich speech for example, Cameron sets aside time to rebut hard- and far-right interpretations of the Salafist threat, and reject their proposed solutions, including forced repatriation and a moratorium on the construction of mosques (Cameron 2011: Online).⁷⁵ Such stances are necessary to make it clear that the government seeks to stand alongside Muslim communities, and not against them. This problem of a 'split audience' (Muslims, non-Muslims, and those 'vulnerable' to extremist indoctrination and recruitment) means it remains important to prise apart not only propaganda products directed at those considered at-risk, but also how the problem of extremism is addressed by senior government to the public at large.

Now that we have addressed the need for such a distinction, it is timely for us to turn our attention to the propaganda products aimed by RICU at the 'vulnerable' young Muslim community. As covered in Chapter 6: Targeting, RICU's products in this period zeroed in towards the experience of the Muslim diaspora within Britain, with international media outlets – particularly Al Jazeera News Network – utilised to deliver these messages; although these initiatives are mirrored to a certain degree in domestic coverage, for example through the BBC's Asian Network. For our purposes, we shall focus on three long-form documentaries that RICU funded in this period: *Return to Somalia*, *Mayor of Mogadishu*, and *Faith on the Frontline*.⁷⁶ All of these films reflect the themes to which Cameron spoke in early 2011 – the role of 'modernisation' in bettering the Muslim world, the importance of liberal values, and the cohesion between the practice of Islam and whole-hearted association with Britain.

⁷⁵ The inter-connectedness of right-wing and Salafist extremism becomes hardened during the course of RICU's life, as we shall see later.

⁷⁶ Unfortunately, the Youtube account for Breakthrough Media (now Zinc Network) that hosted the full versions of these documentaries has been recently deleted. *Return to Somalia: Adam and Abdi* remains available via the Anti-Tribalism Movement Youtube account.

Faith on the Frontline encapsulates this final point extremely well. Produced by Breakthrough Media (ostensibly for the Armed Forces Muslim Association), the film follows Imam Asim Hafiz, the first Muslim chaplain to the British Armed forces, as he joins the NATO mission to Afghanistan during the UK's final deployment in the country. Immediately, we can see how Hafiz would fit well into the mould of credible communicators that RICU spelled out in 2010 – knowledgeable of Islam, showing a genuine interest in the public good and the Muslim community, and belonging to a trusted vocation (RICU 2010: 3). Further, Imam Hafiz makes clear statements in alignment with broader government messaging. For example, as is highlighted in the documentary's preamble, Hafiz tells his audience that "Unfortunately there are individuals out there who want to show this to be a war of religion, but it is nowhere near that."⁷⁷ The documentary repeatedly seeks to undermine the 'Islam v West' narrative, with the Imam insisting that

"Islam is not at war with the world. Actually, Islam is very comfortable with a relationship with people of other faiths. Islam seeks peaceful relationships with people, and I think we need to educate people about challenging some of the misrepresentations that are taking place about Islam and the Quran."

(Ibid)

More uniquely, the documentary seeks to present involvement within the British Armed Forces – a significant indicator of association with Britishness – and its mission, as perfectly in keeping with a devout following of Islam. This includes an interview with a local Imam who denounces the Taliban-led insurgency in the country, demonstrating once more that Islamic values are being misappropriated by Salafists; but mostly this line of argument is expressed by Hafiz and his fellow Muslims in the army. Hafiz asserts "I really

⁷⁷ *Faith on the Frontline*

feel that what I am doing is part of my faith, and what my faith expects me to do... I really feel that I am doing God's work." A Muslim soldier comments that

"People misunderstand what people are doing here, and what people are trying to sort out in the world. It's not that people are fighting for Islam. What's happening now, is not about the Muslim[s] only, and it's not about the Christian[s]. It is about everybody."⁷⁸

Beyond this, being Muslim is shown to be a factor that strengthens a soldier's connection to the fight to rid Afghanistan of its Salafist insurgency, and gives the soldier a unique ability to connect with the local people. Hafiz explains that a Muslim soldier killed in action in Helmand province "felt that he was in a unique position, as a Muslim, as someone who understood their culture, who could bring communities together." The soldier's family added that "he wanted to utilise his linguistic and cultural intelligence... to build relations and to help reduce conflict in Afghanistan."⁷⁹ Through these perspectives, *Faith on the Frontline* takes up the mantle to build, as Cameron describes it, "a shared national identity that is open to everyone." (Cameron 2011: Online)

It is of great interest to note that a wider push on this theme is identifiable through the BBC. Information as to the nature of the release of *Faith on the Frontline* is scarce, but we can confirm its filming occurring in 2014. Yet we can also see evidence of a similar propaganda product published by the state broadcaster, released in October of the same year. This shorter documentary also features Imam Hafiz, and the story of the same Muslim soldier who was killed in Helmand, Jabron Hashmi. *Inside Out: Afghanistan Special* is no longer publicly available, but was advertised as a platform to give voice to Muslims in

⁷⁸ Ibid

⁷⁹ Ibid

the British Army, who are “rarely heard from or seen, largely due to hostility from extremists in their own community.” (BBC News 2014: Online) While RICU involvement cannot be confirmed, the separation of moderate or integrated Muslims from extremists, the invocation of Hashmi, the involvement of Imam Hafiz, and even the use of images from *Faith on the Frontline* in a short BBC News companion piece indicate that RICU was seeking to utilise its connections with the BBC to spread its message. The focus on diaspora communities also reveals itself from the fact that *Inside Out: Afghanistan Special* was aired on two regional stations (*Inside Out* is typically editorialised in separate regions). The programme was instead aired in the East and West Midlands, two areas of the country with large Muslim diaspora communities (Ibid). Such tactics are also visible even earlier in this period, very close to Cameron’s intervention on extremism in the February of 2011. In a similar fashion, this BBC radio segment, *Muslims on the Frontline*, “was given exclusive access to follow Muslim military men and women.” In a similarly targeted move, this programme was aired via the BBC’s Asian Network radio station (MEND Online 2011).

However, what is also apparent in *Faith on the Frontline* – largely through its absence – is the looming shadow of Britain’s decision to intervene militarily in Afghanistan. The film is at pains to demonstrate the success of the Afghan National Army, highlighting its ability to take care of its own security without the help of the British after a sudden Taliban night raid – and also the British influence in creating this readiness, such as the modelling of the Afghan officer training programme on the Royal Military Academy, Sandhurst. A British Army soldier – the only non-Muslim soldier shown to speak in the film – asks pointedly of the Imam whether the local community had “respond[ed] well to the difference between us being here for stability and not being here against Islam?” The reaffirmation of the legitimacy and success of the NATO mission is also hinted at in Cameron’s speech, when he insists that battling extremism required Britain’s continued support for NATO operations in the country (Cameron 2011: Online). With this in mind, it is fascinating to review how the

history of conflict in Afghanistan is treated in the film. While the British Army is the focus of the piece, frequent mentions are made to the fact that NATO is in the process of leaving the country; in contrast, the actual invasion is never mentioned. Instead, it is subsumed into the history of a country that “has been at war for 35 years, as various groups have vied for political control, while trying to exploit tribal, ethnic, and religious differences.” This framing is entirely in keeping with the sustained government position of Salafist terrorism being “thrust upon us.” (Cameron 2011: Online) However, such inclusions and omissions remind us that, despite government protestations, British CVE propaganda policy is still required to retroactively justify the benefits of Western intervention in the region, in an attempt to undercut the ‘West v Islam’ argument.⁸⁰

This justification extends outwards across the MENA region, and away from countries that have experienced intervention during the War on Terror. *Mayor of Mogadishu* is an excellent example of this. Once again, the subject of this documentary, Mohamoud Nur, fits well with the criteria laid out by RICU regarding credible communicators, being of a similar background (an immigrant who moved to Britain), and involved in the bettering of his community, as well as showing empathy and sympathy with the less fortunate in his home country (RICU 2010a: 2). Nur is also demonstrated as a trailblazer, seeking to reform the governance of the Somali capital by importing Western ideas and practices:

“I was an activist, and member of [the] Labour Party in Great Britain. So I was thinking ‘What can I apply... what was the best thing I can take away from Europe and apply to Africa, Somalia in particularly [sic]?’”⁸¹

⁸⁰ It is perhaps telling that the film focuses on the NATO mission to Afghanistan, rather than the Coalition-led mission to Iraq.

⁸¹ *Mayor of Mogadishu*

The Western ideas Nur seeks to import are mostly in the domain of effective city planning and maintenance. His initiatives to improve the city's electrical infrastructure – especially street lighting to extend market and business hours – and basic sanitation are highlighted against a backdrop of deep poverty, a lack of proper housing, and a failed municipal government; Nur meaningfully asserts that the people of Mogadishu “accepted to live in the dark... they thought ‘This is the life. This is the normal life.’” (Ibid) The centrepiece of the documentary follows Nur's attempts to launch a city-wide festival of Somali arts and culture, which is sadly a target for al-Shabaab militants that controlled half of the city.

The framing of the security situation in the city is what makes *Mayor of Mogadishu* such an instructive case in how RICU sought to conceptualise the battle against Salafist extremism in the Islamic world. Through placing Nur's westernising and modernising project in contradiction with the goals of al-Shabaab, the film encapsulates RICU's reversion to the view of the counter-terrorism battle espoused by Blair, in which the values system being implemented (in the hope of improving the everyday lives of Somalis) is shown as an existential battle to the Salafi insurgency. Al-Shabaab leaders are shown to decry the loss of Islamic symbols and culture to the ‘Christian’ values imposed from outside. Unsurprisingly – though rightfully – al-Shabaab are reported as self-interested collective, recruiting child soldiers, displacing thousands from their homes, and killing indiscriminately:

“One time, I say, ‘why do you kill... ladies that were collecting garbage?’ They wanted to get only fifty-thousand shillings for that day to feed their children. They were not involved in politics; they were not armed. Why did you do that? What was your aim? ... If you kill me, I can understand. Because I am against you. But why did you kill these ladies?”⁸²

⁸² Ibid

in this manner, RICU/Breakthrough set the stage to reveal how a devout Muslim, seeking to improve the lot of his fellow citizens through importing basic ideas of city management (shown as welcomed by the local inhabitant), faces an indiscriminate foe, who through their actions betray their warped interpretation of the same faith. Moreover, Nur is shown to be in a running battle with the internal divisions within the society, including disputes over money and land between rival factions. In the face of this, Nur shows admirable faith to liberal ideals of justice and the rule of law:

“I asked one of them, ‘What will happen if you do not get your fifty-nine thousand⁸³ shillings?’ He said, ‘The conflict will continue.’ Then I ask the other guy, I say, ‘What will happen if you cannot get your ammunition?’ He said, ‘The conflict will continue.’... Then I say, ‘You two are responsible for the death of three people, and I will put you in prison. You will be taken to a court, and you may be sentenced to death, because you killed three people. This is the environment we are dealing with.’”⁸⁴

In these ways, Mogadishu is framed in two different perspectives. On the one hand, there is the battle between moderate, progressive and reformist politics and the violence of Salafist extremists. On the other, there is a reminder of the value of a peaceful, civilised society, underpinned by recognisably Western notions discussed by Cameron, such as the rule of law, and the empowerment of women. Nur later argues that “women should lead this uprising [against al-Shabaab], that women are not involved with the conflict, but men are... if they start [an] uprising, I believe that we can march through Shabaab [sic] wherever they are.”⁸⁵

This emphasis on the benefits and peacefulness of Western society, underpinned by its liberal ideas and values, is carried over into the *Return to*

⁸³ Nur earlier reports this number as fifty-five million shillings.

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid

Somalia series also published by RICU in this timeframe. The most overtly political of these films follows the travels of two activists, born in Somalia but immigrants to the UK, returning to their mother country. This trip forms part of their activism through their NGO, The Anti-Tribalism Movement. This fight against tribalism represents a further example of members of the Muslim diaspora seeking political reform in their home countries, on the grounds of political and social pluralism in the place of traditional secular divisions in Islamic societies. As the protagonists argue early in the film:

“Tribalism means discrimination. In Somalia, there [are] smaller tribes compared to the bigger ones and those smaller tribes [have] no rights whatsoever. They don’t get nothing in the political power-sharing, and we are trying to be the voice of those voiceless people.”

(Breakthrough 2012)

The stark difference in social reality between the MENA region and the UK is highlighted in an exchange between the protagonists and another (ethnic Syrian) Londoner, who challenges them on their reasoning for seeking a return to Somalia –

“Look at me, look at my country, Syria - have you seen what’s going on Syria? – I can’t go back. They take teens, I should be in the army this year. If you’re gonna leave here, you’re missing out on lots of stuff. One, like in London, there’s a democracy, the UK, freedom... In Somalia, you lot don’t have justice, no human rights, nothing.”

(Breakthrough 2012)

As if to drive home this point, on arrival in Somalia, the protagonists are subjected to near-immediate harassment from the security services, an experience that only comes to be repeated. Not only this, but the documentary

highlights that, due to their political goals, the activists are at risk from attack by Salafist militants. These political goals, interestingly enough, are overtly supported (logistically and rhetorically) by the Mayor of Mogadishu, one Mahomoud Nur:⁸⁶

“We welcome your ideas. This is what the nation needs, and this is the right time for it. Tribalism is associated with underdevelopment. It’s associated with hatred, its associated with envy.”

(Breakthrough 2012)

This crossover between the subjects of these two documentaries highlights two things. First, it reiterates how traditional cultural and social practices hold back the Islamic world from its full economic potential. Second, through this linking of both youthful and experienced perspectives, RICU is seeking to highlight how devotion to Islam and concern for the well-being of one’s homeland need not lead toward sympathy with Salafist ideas and principles. Instead, the unit and its partners highlight how activism based on Western, liberal principles can be a conduit for healthy and productive engagement with one’s faith and heritage.

Return to Somalia joins up with *Mayor of Mogadishu* in terms of pairing these more experienced perspectives with the concerns and worldviews of young British Muslims. The protagonists from the film are themselves only in their early 20s. Further, the documentary chooses to give voice to the subjects’ contemporaries, who profess lines of thought closely aligned with government thinking about young British Muslims. One describes her situation as a Muslim Londoner very closely to the idea of ‘rootlessness’ that Cameron earlier described:

⁸⁶ As an aside, it is worth pointing out that the protagonists here associate the presence of large makeshift camps in the city – a point of criticism of Nur in *Mayor of Mogadishu* – with the tradition of tribalism in the country.

“I’ve been brought up here, In London. But I don’t fully... fit in in every aspect of life here in London. I think there’s like a generation of us that’s quite ‘lost’ in a way. So, I know the London side of me, I know the England, UK side of me, but I feel like the African and Somali side of me, I haven’t explored yet.”

(Breakthrough 2012)

In this film, and the other instalment of the *Return to Somalia* series, RICU and its partners appear to be attempting to provide a framework for this exploration by young British Muslims – one not defined by a reversion to traditional and hard-line interpretations of their faith, but by a marriage of their heritage and day-to-day Western lives. This companion film follows a young Somali-American woman⁸⁷, who seeks to reconnect with her culture. This piece is far less overtly politically-minded than that following the Anti-Tribalism Movement, but still hits upon similar themes. For example, it expresses the desire for young American Muslims to seek validation and wisdom from their historic culture and its values:

“Unfortunately, the American culture is go-go-go. And you become a little bit selfish, you become a little self-contained, you’re in your own world, and the only time you see your family is during the holidays. So, I want to break out of that. And I want to become more family-oriented, and more about my people.”

(Breakthrough 2012b)

The subject’s interpretation and concern with life and society in Somalia is remarkably similar also to the points raised in the film following the Anti-Tribalism Movement. This ranges from small-scale cultural approaches to

⁸⁷ As discussed in Chapter 5, this is perhaps a signal of greater coordination between the British and American governments on the issue of countering violent extremism.

women's freedom, particularly over their clothing choices, to problems with the education system, to the failures of the government to deliver effective services or infrastructure, again largely attributable to tribal associations:

"Everybody here is clan associated, *we* are clan associated. You have to call a cousin that knows a cousin that knows *somebody*... There's no order here. There's no law here. There's no *phonebook*..."⁸⁸

That such systems of social organisation stand in the way of the subject's attempts to open a school in the capital only further highlight the benefits of Western styles of governance for underdeveloped majority-Muslim countries. The subject's usage of her clan connections (as a member of one of Somalia's most influential tribes) is problematized by the editors of the documentary, as voiced by its narrator:

"using her name to get what she needs is a contentious issue. Today, many people associate 'clanism' with the discrimination, suffering, and violence that was part of Somalia's long civil war."⁸⁹

In this way, these three projects represent the broad swathe of new territory that RICU sought to take on and conquer in this middle period. Challenged by the new government to create a new, more focused, and more professional CVE propaganda offering, RICU set about creating a framework for the reconciliation of Western and Muslim identity. Cascading downward from the Prime Minister, the government's new approach of 'muscular liberalism' sought to set out a roadmap for young Muslims in Britain (and elsewhere) to channel their desire for greater connection to their homeland into an embracing of liberal values, and how these values – in contrast to traditional cultural attitudes – could help improve the lot of their respective nations. As

⁸⁸ *Return to Somalia 2*

⁸⁹ *Ibid*

discussed in Chapter 4, this shift coincides with the importing of experienced leadership and expertise from the private sector, with this incoming tranche of personnel experienced in selling this concept of liberal, Western-style reform into the Middle East in Iraq. Such hiring reflects the reversion to a more stringent model for understanding the political and cultural situation of the MENA region, placing the advancement of more rational, successful and equitable models of political engagement and governance in opposition to hard-line, ultra-conservative interpretations of Islam and Middle East history.⁹⁰

These documentaries reveal an important evolution in RICU's discursive strategy. When formed under New Labour, the unit pushed a firmly integrationist approach to be taken up by senior government leaders. As noted, Cameron certainly retained these integrationist arguments in his public pronouncements. But in RICU's offering, an agitational simulacrum began to emerge – one that sought to direct British Muslims into action that would preserve their proud links to their heritage or faith, but in forms that were supportive or sought to instantiate liberal social ideals. The roots of this new agitational form can be seen within the research commissioned by RICU into its audiences in the New Labour years. The two key groups that RICU identified as needing to be reached by government messages were both highlighted as lacking proper direction for positive social action. 'The Angry and Alienated' "were often upset and angry about the suffering endured by Muslims around the world, but felt there was little they could do to change the situation", while 'The Frustrated but Open to Dialogue' "wanted to get involved but didn't know how to do so" (RICU 2010b: 1).

In addition to these focused, long-form documentary formats, RICU and its government partners also attempted to foster a rallying point around which moderate Muslims in Britain could publicly reject the ideology of Salafism in

⁹⁰ For more information as to why Somalia was a key focus for RICU work, see Chapter 6.

Britain. One such campaign, *#MakingAStand*, is an excellent example of this. The campaign is notable in two important ways. As the title of the campaign suggests, the campaign is the first time we see a concerted focus toward utilising social media as a communicative tool in the battle against Salafist extremism. In addition, it helps to form a bridge between RICU's mid-period work and its activities from 2015 onwards, displaying a new aim to empower ordinary people to form a bulwark against the influence of extremists. This campaign was supported by high-profile government figures, such as then-Home Secretary, Theresa May, and spearheaded by Sara Khan, who would go on to work within the Home Office on CVE issues. Speaking at the campaign launch, which was covered in several mainstream press outlets, Khan urged Muslims - women in particular - to demonstrate their proud, British Muslim identity:

"We are British Muslim women – proud of who we are – British and Muslim. We cherish the values of peace, democracy, citizenship, and human rights. As women we know our role in challenging extremism is essential.

So today, as part of our communities and within our own families we call on everyone to join us in making a stand and challenging extremists in our communities, on television, in our societies and online.

We call on all women to join us and say that we will not tolerate this barbaric ideology. We will not tolerate our children being groomed by these terrorists.

That's why we're all here today to launch our own 'jihad against violence'."

(Khan in Inspire 2014: Online)

This campaign, aside from following the main lines of RICU-backed talking points regarding extremism, is of note in how it characterises CVE efforts as protecting the 'vulnerable' from the advances of predatory or 'grooming'

extremist recruiters, a line of argument most notably used in the advocacy for tighter censorship practices by major internet and social media companies (See Chapter 6: Censorship). Yet it is also instructive in the way it urges ordinary Muslims to take up the mantle of challenging extremism, defining their role as “essential.” This tightening of the role of British Muslims in the wider social struggle against Salafism comprises the growing solidification and directorial stance RICU’s campaigns begin to take on moving forward, providing clear guidelines for the embodiment and personification of a definitive British Muslim identity. This propaganda campaign did not use only words to make its point – in a rather heavy-handed piece of imagery, Khan and May launch the project in front of an image depicting a minority-ethnic woman dressed in a headscarf emblazoned with the Union Jack.



[Figure 2: May and Khan attend the Inspire campaign launch. Middle: Campaign centrepiece image, that also appeared on the front page of *The Sun* (Inspire 2014: Online)]

RICU's movement into social media propagandising, though still in its embryonic stages, already begins to reveal the effect of social media in the 'generation of models' for action that Baudrillard often pointed to in his work. Whereas under conditions of top-down mass media, simulacra were crafted by a privileged group with behind-the-scenes access and influence, the emerging role of peer-to-peer platforms has created the conditions for more participatory forms of simulacra. In the case of *#MakingAStand*, British Muslims are invited to help craft and disseminate the liberal British Muslim simulacrum. Such a move would also indicate that the government was moving from a markedly vertical approach to propaganda to a more horizontal form. However, it is important to outline the form that this participation took in reality. Rather than a spontaneous action taken to indicate opposition to Salafism and solidarity with its victims (such as in the case of the Tricolore profile picture trend after the Bataclan attacks in Paris), what is offered is a template provided by government sources through the mainstream media. In this way, RICU set forth a simulacrum for participation in a further simulacrum in a different form of media. Such a two-step process reveals the tensions experienced by government as it sought to adjust itself to the new media environment in which it found itself. It was determined to lay claim to the horizontal social media environment; but could as yet only do so by vertical means. And while integrationist in overall tone, it laid down a challenge to British Muslims to take up the fight against the influence of ISIL-Daesh – somewhat conditioning Muslim access to shared British national identity.

2015-present: ISIL-Daesh, Young British Muslims, and 'Grassroots Movements'

From 2015, and the arrival of a majority Conservative government, we see RICU's focus on and conception of this thorny issue of identity begin to crystallise further. Whereas earlier we can trace how RICU's work sought to massage and create a pathway through which the separate forms of British and Muslim identity could be realised, in this late period we can identify a more energetic approach aimed at forming a synthesis between these two

identities, fusing them into a coherent single worldview, presaged in the *#MakingAStand* campaign.

However, what is most interesting about this period is how a shift in primary medium (onto social media channels) prompted RICU to favour new forms of address and attempts at persuasion, in line with the differing capabilities that this new medium presented.⁹¹ A useful metaphor to help understand this dynamic can be seen in the world of music. It is perfectly possible, for example, to play a piece of classical music on a piano or a guitar. As such, it is easy for the 'message' (i.e. the notes and speed which make up the melody) to be transferred and be recognisable from one instrument (i.e. medium) to another. Yet the character of these mediums – certainly the timbre of the sound, but especially the physical arrangement available to produce the needed notes – encourages differing flourishes and amendments to an original piece. In this way, a shift in medium can produce contrasting final products, even though each communicator begins from the same basic outline. As such, the new capabilities eschewed on communicators (or social agents generally) by these new media help to construct new patterns of interaction and association between people. It is in this sense that media theorist Marshall McLuhan insists that "the medium is the message." (McLuhan 2003/1964: 18-20) The deep implications for RICU's work that these changes brought about will be discussed further below.

To appreciate these changes properly, though, we must first track back and establish the conceptual basis and outward political realities that shaped RICU's persuasive challenge. The rise and success of ISIL-Daesh in Iraq and Syria dominates the attention and concern of RICU in this later period. As noted in Chapter 4, while ISIL-Daesh had already begun to achieve global renown before 2015, it was the transfer of power to a majority Conservative

⁹¹*#MakingAStand* was discontinued a mere eight days after the Conservative election victory (Inspire 2015: Online).

administration, freed from its constrictive arrangement with the Liberal Democrats, that formed the springboard for the reform and restructure of RICU's propaganda efforts. This of course involved the pivot towards social media. Yet it also included the hardening and advancing of government rhetoric on the root causes of radicalisation, and thus how best to address its target audience of 'vulnerable' young people.

This more focused vision was laid out by Cameron in July 2015, shortly after his surprise victory in the May General Election, as he introduced the government's new *Counter Extremism Strategy*. Once again, it is worth noting that the familiar tenets of CVE communication are still present – framing the Salafist threat as one from an extreme ideology, not Islam itself; the focus on promoting and defending British values; and the rejection of a “grievance justification” for violence, due to the existence of the Salafist threat before the interventions of the mid-2000s (Cameron 2015: Online). Cameron also repeats his denunciation of the far-right, though draws them far more closely into connection with Salafist extremism, in that they “privilege one identity to the detriment of the rights and freedoms of others.” This tight-knit connection in government language reflects the mutually-reinforcing trend of far-right and Salafist rhetoric underscored by the government in the new strategy (HMG 2015: 22, 37).

Yet the most notable shift in government language is in the way that the issue of radicalisation is handled. Far more emphasis is placed on the process of radicalisation (“no one becomes a terrorist from a standing start”); the energising portrayal of life in extremist/terrorist groups; and the outsize influence of moderate Muslim voices. As is further explained in Chapters 4 and 6, these statements lay out the broad framework through which RICU sought to engage with non-government partners and deliver its messages to its

desired recipients.⁹² (Cameron 2015: Online) It is the last factor which Cameron describes that presents the most noticeable advancement of government thinking in this area, the subject of British Muslim identity. Initially, the foundation of this identity ‘weak point’ that provides the space for Salafist recruiters remains the same, with Cameron repeating that “we have to confront the tragic truth that there are people born and raised in this country who don’t really identify with Britain – and feel little or no attachment to other people here.” (Cameron 2015 Online) However, it is the approach to solving this problem which represents a marked shift in government thinking and policy. The main thrust of Cameron’s plan is to focus on highlighting the potential for social mobility in Britain for those of minority-ethnic communities, including Muslims. He proposes economic and social solutions for bettering the lot of minority communities, with Cameron setting key targets for increasing minority-ethnic employment, education, training and representation within Britain’s public institutions (Cameron 2015: Online). The key plank of this strategy, in a communicative sense, is a focus on greater representation and visibility of ethnic minorities in positions of respect, power, and success, as Cameron highlights specifically. To drive home this potential for social mobility, Cameron highlights the make-up of his own Cabinet:

“When we discussed childcare last week, the item was introduced by a Black British son of a single parent – Sam Gyimah, who was backed up by the daughter of Gujarati immigrants from East Africa – Priti Patel – and the first speaker was the son of Pakistani immigrants – Sajid Javid – whose father came to Britain to drive the buses.”

(Cameron 2015: Online)

⁹² The impact of the ‘process’ delineation, further outlined in Chapter 6, is a subject to which we will shortly return in relation to RICU’s persuasive output.

It is through these shining – Conservative Party – examples, and the impact of wider social policy, that Cameron desires to “lift the horizons” of minority communities, so that they “feel they have a real stake in our society”, creating more Muslim young people that are “proud to be both British and Muslim, without conflict or contradiction.” (Ibid)

Twinned with this more positive vision for fostering a shared British identity, is a more negative and direct counter-attack against the vision and appeal of ISIL-Daesh. These persuasion attempts form two lines of attack. One attempts to undercut the group’s self-professed image, with striking examples of heinous acts, particularly against the vulnerable. Cameron asserts that “This is a group that throws people off buildings, that burns them alive... its men rape underage girls, and stone innocent women to death.” Alongside these brutal images, Cameron issues a direct appeal to those vulnerable or at-risk of radicalisation in the following terms:

“here’s my message to any young person here in Britain thinking of going out [to Syria]: You won’t be some valued member of a movement. You are cannon fodder for them. They will use you. If you are a boy, they will brainwash you, strap bombs to your body and blow you up. If you are a girl, they will enslave and abuse you. That is the sick and brutal reality of ISIL.”

(Cameron 2015: Online)

With these main strands of argumentation laid out in Cameron’s speech and the new strategy it was designed to promote, we may now turn to how RICU and its partners sought to translate these arguments into new propaganda products.

To do so, we shall focus on three broad recurring themes that are present in RICU’s propaganda offering from 2015 onwards – the invocation of several ‘popular grassroots movements’; the rejection and warnings these movements

provide regarding the lure and promises of ISIL-Daesh; and the manner in which these projects convey and frame Muslim identity, in terms of both its relationship to Britishness and the embodiment of Islamic principles in everyday life. To examine the manifestation of these themes, we shall study the output of three separate, identifiably RICU-supported projects that launch in the days and weeks following the launch of the new government's *Counter Extremism Strategy* in 2015: the *Open Your Eyes* social media channel; the *Ummahsonic* social media community page; and a traditional press successor to *#MakingaStand*, *The Fightback Starts Here*. These three are chosen as they help to demonstrate not only the evolution of RICU's overall persuasive strategy, but also how the new media channels that RICU sought to contest shaped how this strategy was translated into concrete propaganda products.

At the beginning of this section, we noted how the transfer into the online (especially social media) space produced deep and significant changes in the messages that RICU released to the public. RICU's move into the online space instigates, first of all, an end to the long-form documentary formats utilised in the previous period, and into much shorter and compact products. Given the limitations of the medium (character limits, video-length limits, etc) and the competition for attention on these platforms, this is unsurprising. What is more surprising is the wealth of experimentation present, as the unit seemed anxious to find a winning formula.

As foreshadowed by the 2014 *#MakingAStand* campaign, from 2015 RICU doubled down on the need to bolster the image and influence of a united British Muslim majority rejecting the Salafist worldview. The Open Your Eyes campaign, a project aimed at those considered most at-risk of joining ISIL-Daesh or similar groups, and a prominent example of RICU propaganda across different social media, is a particular exponent of this. The campaign's website declares as its headline statement: "Our movement is exposing the truth. We're exposing the reality of ISIS." Below, the campaign evokes the NGO Upstanding Neighbourhoods, and that it is "working with young people,

activists, bloggers and filmmakers to raise our voices against ISIS.” (OYE Website 2019) Yet this sense of a growing popular movement is not achieved through words or statements alone. Open Your Eyes operates on a steady diet of short interviews with British Muslims (typically in the late teens to mid-20s) delivering heartfelt pleas to those considering joining a terrorist group, denunciations of ISIL-Daesh, stories of friends who travelled to Syria, and moderate, inclusive interpretations of Islamic doctrine (OYE Twitter/Facebook 2019: Online). In this example, the drive to create the impression of a wider social movement is moulded by the capacities of the social media channels through which *Open Your Eyes* operated. The capacity for targeted, multimedia products directed into a single audience member’s feed, allowed RICU to make personal, emotional appeals and warnings (“Don’t go to ISIS”/ “ISIS are lying to you.”) to members of a desired audience, who are assumed as having been exposed to extremist propaganda, and perhaps tempted by it.⁹³ Further, RICU can use testimony from those of a similar background and social identity, making personal appeals direct to camera, along with graphics designed to catch the eye and draw attention. In this way, the capacities (and challenges) of working in the social media environment shape the way in which RICU sought to invoke this wider British Muslim social movement.

Of course, this is not the only way social media can be utilised to produce such an effect. As its name would suggest, social media is capable of strengthening weak ties between individuals with similar worldviews who may not meet or organise together in normal life (Gil de Zuniga & Valenzuela 2011: 411-412). This ability to foster a sense of community, representation, and mutual recognition is what is capitalised upon by the *Ummahsonic* social media community. This project is ostensibly targeted at young British Muslims considered less at risk of imminent flight to Syria or elsewhere. However, due to the gap in British Muslim identity repeatedly highlighted in the government’s wider conceptualisation of radicalisation, RICU was determined

⁹³ For a closer examination of this targeting regime, see Chapter 6.

to help foster a sense of shared identity through its propaganda offering. The *Ummahsonic* project, through its various guises, has sought to embody a space for the transmission and sharing of the British Muslim experience. *Ummahsonic* began life as a podcast, but over the years of its operation the project expanded into producing audio-visual content for social media. Throughout its lifespan, however, the project's aims were to be part of a "range of nationwide projects that bring people together so they can be a positive force and voice for the Muslim community." (Ummahsonic Online 2019) As the project moved into popular social media channels, RICU modelled their efforts within the broad and general interest market of social media, using both positive example and humour to provide a positive and light-hearted take on British Muslim life:

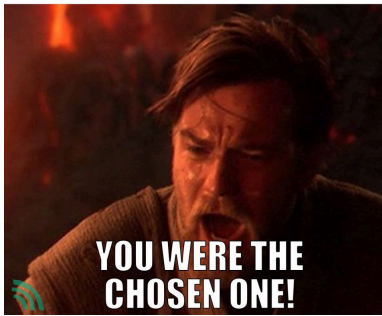
"At Ummahsonic, we showcase young Muslims making waves in the world and love to shout about the success that they attain. We also enjoy looking at the funny relatable moments that many of us young British Muslims go through, so like our page today to join in on the fun!"

(Ummahsonic Facebook 2019: Online)

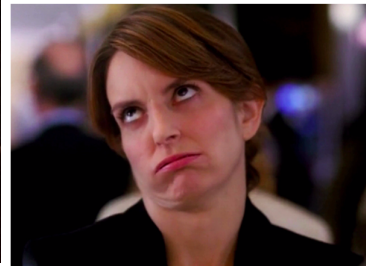
Ummahsonic regularly showcases content that may appear rather unconnected to the issue of extremism or radicalisation. Examples of its content include shared stories about being asked strange questions about being Muslim, dating advice for devout Muslims, recommendations for Halal-friendly eateries and recipes, or 'humorous' takes on Muslim family life, practicing their faith, or not fitting in with typical British society.⁹⁴

⁹⁴ Ummahsonic Facebook: Posts
<https://www.facebook.com/pg/ummahsonic/posts/>

When your parents find out that you haven't done your prayers yet



When someone feels like they have to talk to you about Islam because you wear a hijab



Me: Looks good I wonder if there's gelatine in it.

Me to me: There's no gelatine if you never read the ingredients.



(Figure 3: Humorous images shared via Ummahsonic's Facebook Page)

Such tactics, even though seemingly divorced from the issues of terrorism or extremism, demonstrate how RICU's messaging strategy has moved beyond mere persuasion attempts through force of argument or rhetoric. In such a way, Ummah sonic presents a simulacra of Muslim youth by seeking to demonstrate comfort within 'meme culture'. By engaging in such behaviour, the account seeks to win trust and credibility for its wider social-issues messaging. The example of Ummah sonic shows us that the 'democratisation' represented by social media – the evening out of the ability to produce and disseminate content, as well as passively consume it – in fact represents the ability to obfuscate the difference between state-backed propaganda attempts and genuine citizen-to-citizen bonding via social media.

The *#FightbackStartsHere* campaign, modelled along similar lines to the 2014 project, on the other hand, shows how RICU also attempted to use social media as a forum for outwardly ad-hoc public demonstrations of support, akin to a one-off rally in a public square. Fronted by the Federation of Muslim Organisations (FMO) – similar to *Ummahsonic* – the campaign was aided by a public relations campaign operating through the traditional and mainstream press, such as *BBC News*, *The Daily Express*, *International Business Times*, and *The Guardian*. This public demonstration against the rise of Salafist extremism seeks to create the basis of a nationwide reaffirming of wills to battle radicalisation, which despite good local efforts, had never 'gelled' into a

cohesive countrywide platform, according to the FMO's Suleman Nagdi (Middleton 2015: Online). Social media is leveraged in this campaign to signal a cross-cultural rejection of ISIL-Daesh, a space in which "today – with one voice – we launch a collective fightback against those who do us harm." (BBC News 2015a: Online) Crucially, the media campaign surrounding the launch took pains to highlight the support emanating from the non-Muslim population, as families of aid workers executed by ISIL-Daesh voiced their allegiance to the 'Muslim-led' campaign (Winchester 2015: Online; Walker 2015: Online).

These social movements which RICU and its partners attempt to invoke, therefore, vary in terms of both the media architecture utilised, and the form of social movement or community which they are trying to solidify. The eye-catching and highly-targeted multimedia campaign is aimed at showing a concerted attempt by the wider Muslim community to reach out to at-risk individuals, forming a direct counter to ISIL-Daesh's slick messaging tactics. The community-building or 'social' aspect of new media is used to create a light-hearted and welcoming environment for British Muslims to recognise themselves as positively belonging to an established identity group; and the traditional print media (accentuated by the potential for public involvement via these platforms) is brought to bear to forge a deeper and broader anti-ISIL coalition that crosses ethnic and cultural boundaries.

However, it is in the attempt to recast the young British Muslim identity that RICU appears to place the most time and energy. It is the relationship of young British Muslims to their faith, and how this faith should be expressed in action, that lies at the heart of Open Your Eyes' persuasive strategy. The interviews presented through the campaign's various social media channels are explicit in this regard, with different videos variously insisting that "ISIS isn't Islam - it's insanity", "ISIS are completely and totally un-Islamic", "They do not represent Islam", that the group are "hijacking" the Muslim faith, and "ISIS are perverting the religion [Abdul] loves." Beyond simply rejecting the ISIL-Daesh vision of

Islam, the OYE videos offer broad and inclusive new paths for its devout practice:

“The Prophet [pbuh] was sent as the mercy of mankind. He was the mercy - he wasn’t just sent for the Arabs, he wasn’t just sent for the Muslims...So one day when these people ask you, ‘Who are you? Where are you from? What’s your background? What are your beliefs?’ You tell them: ‘I am a Muslim and I promote peace, I promote love, and I promote unity.’”

(Kashif from Bradford, Open Your Eyes Facebook 2015x: Online)

“Islam is a really, really, beautiful religion... Islam, it’s about love. It is about loving your God, Allah, it is about loving your fellow Muslims, it is about loving... all of humanity... and there is no other way of living than that.”

(Matthieu from Martinique, Open Your Eyes Facebook 2015w: Online)

Further still, the communicators shown in these products bring these ideas back squarely into the attempt to foster an active and positive young British Muslim identity. Kashif adds to his above sentiments, arguing forcefully that “we need to portray that, we need to send that message back out as young Muslims. And I believe that we need to seek knowledge... and above all, self reflection.” (Open Your Eyes 2015c). Other participants in the project continue on this theme, one asserting that “The solution to the difficulties of living in the UK are not to go and join ISIS. It’s not to go killing people. That will solve nothing.” (Fateme from London, Open Your Eyes 2015a) In fact, the project advocates the position that joining such a group will only worsen the stereotyping that British Muslims face:

“We are constantly seeing a negative image of Islam in society. By going to ISIS, and joining them in their fight, or by joining any other radical group, we are only fuelling the negative image.”

(Sufaraz from Bradford, Open Your Eyes YouTube 2015b)

In this light, *Open Your Eyes* represents one half of the counter-narrative that Cameron echoed in his launch speech – that ISIL-Daesh warp and pervert Islam for their own ends. On top of this, the campaign seeks to build a schema for young British Muslims to follow, that sets out a map for the proper realisation of Islamic principles in keeping with their experience as Britons. Here, we can see another form of participatory simulacra creation, though one with more direct involvement with RICU programming. Bringing in the voices of regular British Muslims endows the campaign with the horizontal propaganda characteristics that RICU strived to generate, and lent deeper authenticity to the desired message.⁹⁵

Ummahsonic provides such a roadmap, in its own, more inspirational, tone. The project also takes on the other half of Cameron’s vision of British Muslimhood. Much like how Cameron highlighted the success of minority-ethnic leaders in his own cabinet, *Ummahsonic* places a spotlight on British and Western Muslims who have risen to prominence and success in Western society. This includes high echelon celebrities; of particular note are political campaigners, such as Malala Yousafzai, and US Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib; successful artists are also highlighted, such as actors Mahershala Ali, comedian

⁹⁵ Such an approach was explicitly recommended by the Institute for Strategic Dialogue in briefing documents for a forum on counter-radicalisation communications in October 2015 (Netherlands Government Release (2015) p.4. The timing of the release of these videos in relation to this forum (dated 27th October 2015) indicate that RICU had already taken action on such recommendations and was subsequently sharing them with European partner organisations.

Hasan Minhaj, British actor Riz Ahmed, and British Muslim film director Asif Kapadia, who is reiterated to be “inspired by his British Muslim culture.”⁹⁶

Interestingly, sports are invoked in a way that only showcases the opportunity for acceptance as Muslims, but as a means by which Muslims can actualise both their Muslim identity as well as their true ‘Britishness’. Examples of note include such as UFC champion Khabib Nurmagomed, footballer Paul Pogba, and boxer Muhammad Ali. Examples of Muslim practice in sport are shown, such as a world cup footballer feigning injury so his teammates could break their fasts during Ramadan. The football world cup is also raised up as a means to assert allegiance to British identity and culture, with the account posting in support of the English team, captioned with the ubiquitous “It’s coming home.” British Muslim athletes are also given high prominence, including Mo Farah, congratulated by the account for his knighthood; Paralympian Ali Jawad, celebrated for his Rio silver medal; or former champion boxer ‘Prince’ Naseem Ahmed, for his success and personable style. This last example is worth exploring, as the athlete is quoted as saying “Power is more than the punch”, contextualised by the account as meaning “You don’t need to fight to be powerful.”⁹⁷ In this way, sport is presented as a means by which Muslims can both assert their group and individual identities, and also by implication reject violence.⁹⁸

Apart from these high profile and international examples, *Ummahsonic* also takes pains to showcase British Muslims using their work to bring about positive social change, particularly women. Sport is again invoked, such as by Muslim women asserting their independence through cricket in Bradford, or the celebration of hijab-wearing sportswomen in horse-racing, boxing, and

⁹⁶ All Ummahsonic Instagram [Phone Application Access]

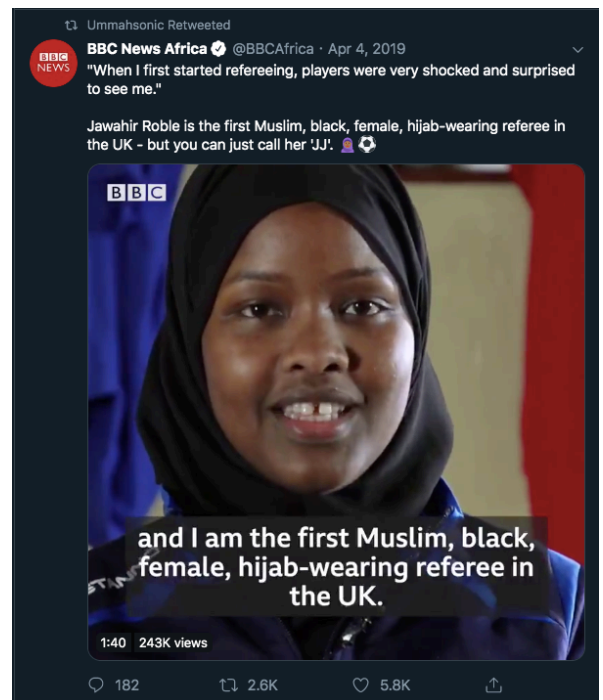
⁹⁷ Ibid

⁹⁸ Ibid

athletics. Further examples of this include Sabina England, a deaf Muslim playwright committed to “destroy[ing] stereotypes”, showing “little deaf girls that they can be anything they want to be”, and “us[ing] her art to encourage others to create change.” To drive home the inspirational message, the account captions the video: “Who says you can’t achieve? Sabina certainly doesn’t.”⁹⁹ The account also celebrates those who express their faith through liberal values, including Parvin Paidar who sought to “unite Islam and feminism”, even though “some people think Islam and feminism don’t mix.” The account further features the success of Muslim women in diverse fields, such as finance, the media, and astrophysics.¹⁰⁰ Clearly, *Ummahsonic* seeks to empower Muslim women and girls through showing examples of how they can succeed in Western society, in contrast to the more limited horizons of the Islamic world, and how Western ideals can exist easily alongside the Islamic faith. This empowerment of women stands alongside feting of charity work, and giving back to community. Paidar’s lifetime of charity work is highlighted, alongside other examples of Muslims giving to others through their enterprise and drive.

⁹⁹ Ibid

¹⁰⁰ Ibid



[Figure 4: Examples of content shared via Ummahsonic Facebook and Twitter Accounts]

In these ways, we can see how *Open Your Eyes*, *Ummahsonic*, and, to a lesser extent, *#FightbackStartsHere* advance the framing of the all-important issue of values in RICU's propaganda products. In the early periods, these values were conceptualised in terms of how Muslim and British liberal values related to one another, and to what extent both may be embodied at once. This later period

is focussed more directly on how these values can be applied or effect British Muslims (chiefly young Muslims) in everyday life, ranging from their spiritual practice, their personal ambitions, their social consciousness, and their relationship to the non-Muslim community. Through this wide-ranging approach, RICU sought to help establish a comprehensive blueprint or simulacrum for the fusion of a cohesive British Muslim identity, as Cameron set out in 2015.

Having detailed the various aspects of RICU's renewed social media push, it is important to reflect what the post-2015 RICU offering signifies for how British CVE propaganda policy evolved in the face of technological forces. As evidenced by the *Fightback Starts Here* campaign, RICU's work sought to highlight the integrationist and horizontal aspects of its working model to the public. The inclusion of and greater role for Britons outside of the Muslim community in this campaign perhaps reflect recognition of the troublesome appearance of extra burdens and responsibility being placed on the Muslim community alone in similar earlier attempts. The inclusion of testimonials from members of the Muslim community addressing those feared to be swayed by Salafist ideas is further evidence of the desire to make RICU's campaign more horizontal, and to be part of a wider societal rejection of those ideas. Such a move, in the categories of Ellul, demonstrate a desire to move from a political mode of propaganda to a more sociological one, where RICU's output was actually indicative of the 'mainstream' beliefs of most Muslim Britons – at least in an outward-facing sense. Accounts such as *Ummahsonic*, and the more-recently identified *Woke* social media accounts, demonstrate that this attempt to create a more sociological mode in RICU work was given extra room to expand within the online social space. As noted above, a significant portion of output from these accounts had little in connection with the issues of Salafism or terrorism, focussing instead on the day-to-day experiences of young Muslims. In this way, RICU's messages would appear to emanate from a position of familiarity and shared experience, lending greater weight to these arguments.

What is more interesting, however, are the implications for these persuasion tactics for the ways in which simulacra – the models offered for replication in the real world – are substantiated within modern modes of communication. We noted previously how new media had brought about new participatory forms of simulacra, and how RICU had sought to provide clear templates for others to follow. RICU's attempts post-2015 reflect the differing ways in which these new forms of participatory simulacra can manifest themselves. *#FightbackStartsHere* evidenced a continuation of the imposed template for others to follow, with tweaks to neutralise potential criticism of its earlier incarnation. The *Woke* and *Ummahsonic* campaigns, however, created a simulacrum of British Muslim identity in line with liberal ideals and the rejection of violence. These accounts invited users to "join in on the fun" (Ummahsonic Facebook 2019a), and presented articles that were designed to resonate with their day-to-day annoyances and family lives. In contrast to the encouragement of hashtags, which implied that audience members should come shape the desired simulacrum through their participation, the audience for these accounts were invited to engage emotionally and participate with the simulacrum itself. The likes and shares garnered by individual posts would lend the appearance of social acceptance and a wider community who connected with each other through their participation with the presented simulacrum. Rather than merely presenting models for behaviour and action through non-interactive media, the emergence of social platforms has allowed RICU wider and more intimate array of options to instantiate a liberal British streak within its Muslim population, in an attempt to inoculate them from extremist ideas.

Lastly, however, it is important to evaluate how the focus of this messaging strategy shifted in response to important political events. In this case, we are referring to the terrorist successes experienced by Salafists in the UK just prior to the General Election in 2017. We should first square away other potential factors that may have impacted this evolution. Firstly, the accession of Theresa May to the premiership does not seem to have affected RICU's propaganda

output. This is understandable, partly due to the dominance of Brexit, but also the fact that as Home Secretary she herself had been responsible for RICU's work as Home Secretary. Given this position of close influence, it is highly unlikely that RICU's messaging strategy cut against May's close-felt preferences on the issue of counter-extremism. Secondly, although *Ummahsonic* moved away from its original podcast format and onto social media channels, the timing of this move (and the rebranding of the account's image) do not seem to be related to any external, trigger event, and seem to be based upon internal calculations of success.¹⁰¹

However, we do see a refocusing of effort from RICU after the sustained terror campaign of 2017. The success of these attacks cast doubt on the effectiveness of the *Open Your Eyes* campaign. First operational from early July 2015, the channel continued to operate for a little under two years, with some experimentation with its form and content, moving from testimonials by British Muslims to also including hidden camera footage from inside ISIL-held territory, and testimony from those who had escaped the group's clutches. However, after the terror campaign that included successful attacks in London and Manchester, and a promised review of the CONTEST strategy signalled by May, *Open Your Eyes* was wound down. The last video uploaded to its YouTube channel appeared on the 8th of June 2017, with the last posts made on its Facebook and Twitter accounts appearing on the 6th of June. That such moves occurred in the days preceding and the day of the General Election of that year is a slight departure from what we have previously observed in RICU's evolution, which normally followed the installation of a new government after an election. The winding down of *Open Your Eyes*, therefore, reflects a more instinctive and internal process for responding to a failure to prevent

¹⁰¹ *Ummahsonic's* social media presence across platforms as of October 2019 appears dormant. Similarly, little outward trigger is easily identifiable; though the accession of Boris Johnson to the role of Prime Minister, and the instalment of Priti Patel as Home Secretary could perhaps be significant. This change in leadership could have prompted action amid the channel's disappointingly low engagement (Ummahsonic Twitter 2019).

radicalisation. The more targeted approach had not dissuaded British Muslims from identifying with ISIL-Daesh; further, the channel's emphasis on preventing travel to Syria was wide of the mark from dissuading extremists from carrying out violence in the UK itself.

Ummahsonic, on the other hand, survived this purge. This is partly explained by the fact that the channel's new approach (and move into new channels, such as Instagram and Snapchat, had only occurred in January of 2017). As such, it is likely that the channel was afforded more time for its new approach to be judged. *Ummahsonic* is still active across social media to this day. In addition, its approach to creating a space for the reflection of Western Muslim life appears to have been mimetically transferred across Europe. At least one similar propaganda channel, *Muslim*, another English-language offering operated from Belgium,¹⁰² is an indication that RICU's attempt to leverage social media for its community-building architecture is an approach keenly taken up by other European governments. *Muslim* paints itself in very similar terms to *Ummahsonic*, describing itself as "an online community that creativity, self-development, and entrepreneurship" that "unites people from different backgrounds and cultures, not only to create a strong community of Muslims, but to make the world of Muslims more accessible to others." The channel espouses that it is a platform for the sharing of "views, concerns and lifestyle topics" as well as inspiring Muslims to achieve personal goals for success, and forming a bridge between a positive, strong Muslim community and non-Muslims (Muslim Online 2019). The channel also highlights the contributions of historic Islamic society to the development of science and culture, no doubt as a bulwark against Salafist rejection of such non-Islamic ways of thinking (Ibid). In this context, we can see the strong linkage between this channel and *Ummahsonic*, who have publicly spread and supported *Muslim's* content (Ummahsonic Twitter 2019).¹⁰³ With these facts in mind,

¹⁰² (A country which saw a high level of terrorist success in the preceding years)

¹⁰³ <https://twitter.com/ummahsonic/status/1160888086353592325>

Muslim can be considered an excellent candidate for consideration as a product of RICU's new international arm, RICU-International, or RICU-I; reflecting as it does "a willingness to act on UK priorities" in the CVE propaganda arena (Cobain & Mechai 2019: Online). That RICU had become a clear source for mimetic isomorphism for its European partners, at least in terms of its persuasive messaging strategy, may help explain how – after being taken to task repeatedly in past updates of *Prevent* strategy – RICU escapes criticism in May's promised CONTEST review of 2018, and is in fact lauded as having "positioned the UK at the forefront of the battle against terrorist propaganda" (HMG 2018b: 72). This is in despite of the continued radicalisation of young British Muslims, notwithstanding the resources committed by RICU into its new array of targeted, professional, and updated propaganda products.

Conclusion

Observing the direction in which RICU's messaging strategy has proceeded since 2007, three main points stand out. The first is how institutional factors have taken the lead in determining the tone and character of persuasion attempts. Across a time period which saw RICU take on increasingly complex and demanding position within the CVE propaganda bureaucracy, reactions to perceived failures, through crisis or change of political leadership. It is clear that, despite stability in terms of language used to diminish the appeal of Salafist ideas, the conceptual frameworks undergirding this language was determined from the highest echelons of government. Changes in leadership at the prime ministerial and cabinet level have preceded shifts in the way that both Salafist ideology and the British public have been construed. The accession of Gordon Brown to the premiership brought RICU into existence, alongside its mirroring of his desire for a more consensual approach than his predecessor. Cameron's coalition – then majority Conservative administration

– brought about subtle but important changes to the way in which British values and ideals were presented.

In both strands of CVE messaging – statements from senior government officials, and products aimed at ‘vulnerable’ audience – the concept of ‘values’ has morphed from a battle between Western ideals and ‘backward’ cultural and political norms in the Islamic world, into an emphasis on ‘shared’ values between British and Muslim communities, and then reverted to a ‘muscular liberalism’ that sought to demonstrate how these values could benefit the Islamic world in its efforts to develop and modernise. After the fall of the Liberal Democrats from government, the new focus of CVE communications was to discard the “misguided liberalism” of the past (Cameron 2015: Online), and to energetically attempt to forge a coherent British Muslim identity. In Ellul’s parlance, RICU’s overtly integrationist stance under New Labour shifted to one that was more consistently agitational, seeking to inspire and shape action by providing simulacrum-templates for British Muslims to shape British society and their diaspora-homelands – along overtly liberal and implicitly pro-British lines. This agitational approach within RICU’s grey propaganda products, delivered through international and online media, was tempered by integrationist appeals from senior government, which were disseminated through the mainstream British press.

It would not be until 2015 that RICU’s offering diversified, owing to the new technological capabilities for dissecting and reaching its desired audiences afforded by new media. These changes in medium, like the translation of musical pieces across instruments, allowed RICU to explore new methods of packaging its message, and of achieving the goal of reconciling the problematic gap between Western and Muslim identity. Throughout RICU’s lifespan, the traditional press retained its utility as a conduit for expressing the common goals and concerns of the British Muslim and non-Muslim populations, with support voiced by senior government, Muslim civil campaigners, and non-Muslims affected by terrorism. From 2011, the longer-form documentary

formats allowed the unit to dive deeper into its arguments for the reconciliation of Muslim identity with support for UK foreign policy, and how Islam was compatible with a desire to actively spread liberal ideas of justice and pluralism for the sake of improving the lot of fellow Muslims. From 2015, the unit experimented with different forms of establishing communication with its audience, in accordance with the abilities of these new media through which it was now working. One approach was to craft eye-catching, highly-targeted videos to those it considered most at risk, enshrining communicators of the requisite background denouncing ISIL-Daesh's interpretation of Islam, and providing fresh avenues through which to explore the devout practice of Islam. On the other hand, RICU sought to bring the community-building element of social media to bear in the hopes of forging a focal point for the recognition and solidification of a welcoming, light-hearted and inclusive British Muslim identity that spanned across cultural and national lines.

While it is useful to identify how technology has altered the character of government CVE communications, it is important to recognise how these technological changes were largely subordinate to intragovernmental factors. Social media was already an emerging battleground for political ideas by 2010. However, seeking expertise from the private sector, RICU pivoted instead towards an internationalised approach to legacy media, and the production of long-form video content. It would not be until the advances of ISIL-Daesh in 2014-5 that the new affordances of social media would come into play, with legacy media still initially regarded as the key area of battle. Later, after the spate of attacks prior to the 2017 election, a key pillar of messaging aimed at those deemed 'most at risk' of radicalisation was wound down. From this evidence, technological factors allowed new approaches and forms of messaging to briefly flourish, before institutional pressures restricted them once more.

Yet the technological capabilities now employed by government have had a clear effect on the new stable character of government messaging in the CVE

space. In the new media environment, RICU has shown itself to be adept at constructing participatory forms of simulacra that provide opportunities for direct engagement with the attitudes and models for action that the agency wishes to spread. Though still utilising these traditional media to initiate some of these campaigns, the invitation to participate in the shaping of media simulacra (through the use of hashtags and personal stories) creates a platform for 'mainstream' British Muslims to coalesce into something like a cohesive and identifiable force. In other areas, the community rhetoric and engagement tactics of ever-present social media accounts show us how RICU have utilised social media to construct simulacra with which young Muslims can directly interact and engage with, and serve as a focal point around which young Muslims can congregate and feel connection to a liberal British Muslim community. Here we can identify Debord's argument that the spectacles offered by modern communication present themselves as a means of unification around groups and shared identity can coalesce (Debord 1967: 7), and particularly how this unifying centre offers itself up as a voice for youthful progressivism and anti-establishment social attitudes, whilst in reality forming part of hidden and centralised command structure that has repeatedly sought to realign youthful exuberance for social reform alongside established British foreign policy goals.

RICU's messaging strategy can offer us lessons for our new political communications environment more broadly. This discursive activity reinforces Debord's insight that 'spectacular' political discourse offers pseudo-revolutionary models for emulation (p.28). In the modern age, these pseudo-revolutionary voices are given the same tools to communicate as its audience; many have taken this to be a sign of greater democratisation of the media. Yet when we view these voices as simulacra, with the same interactive capabilities as individual audience members, another interpretation of this 'democratisation' is the breakdown of the differentiation between media constructions and human beings, giving pseudo-revolutionary, liberal Muslim

simulacra greater power to mischaracterise their purpose and the control structures which support them.

6. Critical Junctures and Adaptation in RICU's Targeting Practices

In Chapter 5, we have already touched upon how the character and tone of persuasion attempts is heavily influenced by the technological capabilities of the media employed to deliver propaganda products. The new targeting capabilities of new media perhaps represent the most significant change for state propaganda organisations in comparison to legacy media. As already discussed, the micro-targeting methodologies utilised by RICU later in its life created the space for a multi-channel persuasion campaign that sought to appeal to disparate audiences in the pursuit of a unified goal.

This chapter will dive deeper into the path of RICU's targeting development, and the varying influence of technological and institutional factors. Again, we see institutional factors predominate over the technological. As outlined elsewhere, institutional factors are the prime mover in sparking policy reformulation and guiding its trajectory. It is only through the interplay of various forms of isomorphism, and cooperation between government and non-government partners, that technological capacities come together and impact concrete policy.

Again, we see targeting policy change linked to institutional reorganisation linked to crisis or perceived failure. In particular, RICU's working methods demonstrate long periods of path dependency, punctuated by large, top-down reorganisations of policy that are instigated from the highest levels of government. In the historical institutionalist framework, these critical junctures punctuate the general path dependency of British counter-extremism policy. These critical-juncture re-organisations are carried out in response to evidence of failure or sub-optimal performance in Counter-Extremism policy, such as lack of attention on emerging media trends that allow VNSAs to gain the upper hand (HMG 2015: 7).

As failures are appreciated within government, changes are prescribed, which generally reflect the interests and beliefs of senior cabinet-level officials. is because RICU's work and role is embedded within an over-arching cross-government counter-terrorism strategy, which requires amendments of responsibilities not only across departments but across ministries. As a consequence, changes can only be effectively marshalled from cabinet level.

Once these human factors have played out, there seems to remain a period of plasticity in which RICU may innovate or explore new working practices. It is at this point that technological factors are felt most strongly in RICU's adaptation process. The varying opportunities and constraints afforded by differing media technologies guide and constrain both how RICU conceptualises its audience and how it seeks to identify the best avenues of reaching its audience. Over time, the emergence of internet-based communication platforms has therefore pushed RICU from a targeting methodology built around demographic indicators (ethnicity, age, gender, etc.) to a methodology built around attitudinal factors, such as ambivalence to British identity, or sympathy with extremists/violent extremists.

However, RICU's particular brand of this targeting is determined by its institutional position within the British state. This position allowed RICU to access capacities generated in other areas for the tracking of internet usage, using internet browsing history to place individual users into an 'upstream/downstream' delineation determining their vulnerability to extremism. In this case again, while technological factors coincided to shape the possibilities of targeting practice, the institutional relationships established within and outside the British state determined which capacities could be brought to bear into the new environment. Once again, while technological factors determine and set new limits on what is possible, these factors are mediated through the mores and capacities of RICU's wider institutional arrangements.

Changing Technologies, Changing Frameworks

RICU finds itself operating within a rapidly-shifting modern communications environment, the internal dynamics – and more importantly, the net effects – of which are still poorly investigated and theorised. The recent wave of shock democratic results across the transatlantic world, particularly in the United States and the recent British referendum and general elections, has spurred intense debate within the public and academic spheres.

The important point for now is that, since the mid-2000s, the emergence of social media platforms, and the increasing prevalence of personal internet-connected devices throughout society has dramatically shifted the landscape of information consumption by ordinary citizens. The shift has simultaneously lowered barriers of access, so that smaller fringe political groups have greater opportunity to connect with potential supporters. Political organisations – as well as states - have been forced to update their communications strategies as to better convey their messages to their various audiences. However, it is not only political organisations have felt pressure from the escalating dominance of social media platforms. News media organisations, both print- and television-based, have found themselves squeezed by the new patterns of media consumption that have accelerated since the mid-2000s.

New opportunities for audience interactivity, and the personal recording of audio and video, have undermined the traditional media as the focal point for the creation, transmission and reception for political or social news (Bakhurst 2011: Online). The rise of information sources that primarily exist on social media platforms has also weakened the traditional media's grip on the political debate, as partisan outlets create content that is highly-specialised to the

platforms in question and is easily shared by and between individual users (Waterson 2017: Online).

This decentralisation of the media has opened up new opportunities and challenges for conceptualising and reaching intended audiences. The challenges facing RICU – and the UK government more generally – are the declining influence of the traditional or ‘mainstream’ media in this new environment, and what is commonly known as the ‘echo chamber’ or ‘filter bubble’ effect. Conversely, new opportunities are also opening. These opportunities are centred around the ability to conceptualise audiences into smaller and more-refined subgroups. The plethora of information that is stored and analysed concerning users’ online habits, and the cheapening cost of establishing and maintaining multiple communication channels, has allowed much greater imagination and latitude in online political campaigns. However, in these opportunities are nested further challenges, concerning how best to take advantage of these new capabilities. As we shall see, the ways in which audiences can be segmented is virtually limitless – it requires human decision-making to be implemented, in accordance with an organisation’s goals, understandings, and ethical limitations. As mentioned, RICU’s response to this new environment has been almost exclusively reactive. However, understanding how RICU has sought to react, and how it has re-organised its audience segmentation, is instructive for appreciating the impact of technological change on political communication, and the unique difficulties faced by liberal democracies seeking to leverage this new environment to its advantage.

Declining importance of 'traditional' media and the new dynamics

In this new environment, the established working patterns of the media have been disturbed – organisations that have adapted to the mass-media few-to-many flow of political communication must quickly discover effective practices for gaining traction in the new social media 'many-to-many' era. The struggles of the traditional press and television in recent years have been well documented. However, the declining revenues and reader/viewership for these outlets is not only problematic for these news outlets themselves, it also presents distinct problems for the British government. This is due to the ways in which the government's approach to communications strategy has been tightly focussed on working with the traditional mass media. From 1997, the New Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown emphasised the need for closer relationships between the Civil Service and the mass media, either to suppress the impact of negative coverage or to sway public opinion in favour of new policy initiatives (Franklin 2: 91-96). The declining importance of these outlets in the modern media environment has necessitated a re-tooling of government media apparatus to more effectively communicate with its citizens on terrorism issues, although these relationships continue to be leveraged by RICU to serve its purposes.

The falling importance of traditional conduits for political persuasion is further complicated by the personalised nature of social media, and the wider internet. Much commentary and speculation has been heaped upon this topic in recent years, though it is important that warnings concerning the potentially negative effects of these trends have been present for over a decade (Pariser 2011; Sunstein 2001). Terms such as 'echo chamber' and 'filter bubble' have permeated the public consciousness, although these terms remain loosely defined and poorly conceptualised. Broadly, these terms refer to the tendency of the new communications environment to shield individual users from alternative points of view. However, upon observation we can identify that two concurrent elements of this personalisation contribute to this net effect:

the user element, driven by human psychology, and a system element, determined by economic or business choices – which exacerbates these psychological tendencies.

Since the advent of the internet, users have been easily able to manually select the information sources they choose. This could be done either manually (simply choosing which website to visit) or through an amalgamating service such as an RSS feed or sign-up newsletter. This is what Sunstein (2001) labelled the 'Daily Me' (p.3-12), the ability to precisely tailor the types of information the internet presents them, or from which particular sources. In the political realm, this self-selection normally leads to individuals - through largely subconscious choice - refraining from selecting (or actively rejecting) to receive information from sources that tend to oppose their personal beliefs.

However, this is only half of the story: namely, the user side of the interaction. From the system side, there are the wide and widening use of algorithms that seek to display preferential content without involving user choice. These sorts of filtering are prevalent not only on social media platforms, but on search engines (most prominently Google). Making judgements from electronic signals such as internet history and clicks, these algorithms tailor the type of search results that are presented, or the content displayed in social media feeds. This is in order to ensure that the platform provides results that are most likely to be of interest or use to the user. However, user preference for self-selecting political information that is in alignment with their pre-existing beliefs means that these attempts at personalisation from the system side exacerbate the effect of these subconscious choices by the user.

In sum, these two elements interlink to shelter internet users from points of view that are contrary to their own. This presents RICU with a sticky problem. With the relevance of the mass traditional media declining, the established working model of public relations management that had risen to prominence during the preceding decades was no longer sufficient. Having been first

created in this public relations management mould, RICU has been tasked with striking out into new methods of government communication, and transforming its own structure and working practices to effectively communicate with its target audience.

New Pathways: Audience Segmentation and Multi-Channel Persuasion

Conversely, this new communications environment provides opportunity, as well as obstacles. The interactive nature of internet-based media has created a wealth of accessible personal data that can be exploited for the purposes of targeting propaganda. Either by utilising personal information freely provided by users, or through collecting data on users' internet use, modern propagandists have the potential to glean penetrating insights into internet users.

Youyou, Kosinski & Stillwell (2015) demonstrated that the broad and deep well of personal data available through internet platforms such as Facebook could generate working models to translate these outward signals into reliable indicators of identity and inner beliefs. Not only this, but these models outperform human attempts to do the same, even if the person in question is a close friend or family member (p.1037). This may be attributable to the counter-intuitive connections that such models can reveal. For example, for predicting the sexual orientation of male users, the most accurately predicting signal for male heterosexuality was not showing interest in male-oriented publications or motorsport, but in a hip-hop group, The Wu Tang Clan (Kosinski, Stillwell & Graepel 2013: 5804).

Such discoveries have been springboards to further refinement and deepening insight for use in political communication. One particularly prominent example is the work of Cambridge Analytica (CA), a political communications firm,

connected to both the Vote Leave and Trump presidential campaigns. Moving beyond the pattern set down by Youyou et al., CA developed a model for translating a combination of electronic signals into psychographic assessments of individual internet users. These models were applied in order to decide on the use of – among others – fear- or consensus-based persuasion attempts, as described publicly by CA CEO Alexander Nix (Nix 2016: Online).

By leveraging the swathes of personal data now available, propagandists can segment their target audiences with greater depth and specificity. Moreover, the personal devices that generate this data can be used to deliver messages to tightly-specified groups of users. However, such opportunities have themselves opened new questions as to how best use this data to identify members of the target group, decisions reached through human decision, not by technological necessity.

The extremely lowered costs of establishing communication channels through social media platforms has offered the ability to create diverse information sources in service of a single campaign, or overarching set of goals. As will be discussed in greater detail, these abilities have prompted governments to forgo traditional broad appeals to the population at large, and instead put into practice diverse messaging strategies which are specifically targeted at various subgroups. Governments – both democratic and autocratic – have showed keen interest in such tactics. The Russian Federation, for example, have organised their outward propaganda streams in just this way. According to Giles (2016):

“By 2014, the media element of Russian information campaigns displayed... an impressive range of alternative outlets to address all sectors of the target audience. RT (formerly Russia Today), Sputnik, Russia Direct and others [have] each tailored their level of sophistication of argument – and the extent to which they concealed their propaganda function through subtle imitations of objectivity – to the expectations of their intended readers and viewers”

While Russia's outward information campaigns exist both online and in traditional broadcast form, such a case is instructive in its implications for modern targeting practice. The ability to maintain a diverse range of channels for persuasion facilitates the breaking down of the target audience into ever more refined subgroups, which can be exposed to differing persuasion strategies in pursuit of wider political goals. Social media platforms have afforded the opportunity for diverse outlets to be maintained far more easily, making such refined segmentation tactics more widely available. As shall be discussed in greater depth later in this chapter, the British government has initiated such tactics to target different segments of the British population to these refined persuasion attempts, both to deter those deemed at immediate risk of radicalisation, or to prevent extremist arguments taking a foothold in the mind of young British Muslims.

In sum, the question of how the British government is remoulding itself in order to communicate more effectively in this new media environment is an intriguing one, which has so far gone unanswered. To do so, we must first appreciate the three identifiable periods of development that RICU's audience segmentation practices have undergone since its creation in 2007. These periods can be identified as the traditional media phase; the international media phase; and the social media phase. Evidence of failure or sub-par performance (internal or public) have been the drivers of these changes – forming critical junctures that allow periods of policy innovation that are in opposition to the general path dependency of the British civil service.

The policy changes allowed by these critical junctures are initiated from cabinet level, and seem to largely reflect the personal tastes and initiatives of these policy players, particularly prime ministers. However, the final forms of these policy changes are above all shaped by the opportunities and constraints

presented by the evolving media environment. During these critical junctures, RICU has integrated its understandings of this evolving environment into its targeting segmentation. Presented with the opportunities of access to increasingly deep wells of personal information, RICU has developed audience segmentations on increasingly ideational terms, in order to target and cater more effectively to smaller target subgroups. Meanwhile, the constraints presented by ever greater user choice have moved RICU away from working predominantly through the domestic traditional mass media, to segmenting audience via media consumption habits – and inserting content into these channels and outlets, mostly through the use of paid advertising.

These developments have not been linear, nor have they been completely smooth in implementation. However, the reactive nature of these changes, their top-down implementation, and the creation of strategy based on evolving opportunities and constraints provides a fascinating picture of the trajectory of government propaganda targeting into the next decade or more.

Conceptualising RICU's audience

'A common sense of purpose' – The Traditional Media Phase

Reporting upon the creation of RICU in 2007, the Sunday Times reported that the new agency's "task [was] to analyse the way in which key audiences at home and abroad (in other words, Muslims) react to messages from the government and to try to give more coherence to those messages to undermine the ideology of Al-Qaeda." (Corera 2007: Online) RICU, in other words, was a clearing-house of sorts for the messaging of government departments on the issue of terrorism and radicalisation – it was not an active purveyor of the messages themselves. This places the early design of the agency firmly within the established working practices of government

communications, tasked with optimising the government's use of and relationship with traditional mass media channels.

This mode of government communications had risen to prominence under the New Labour government, in particular during the premiership of Tony Blair, although, Garland (2017) argues, this process had been covertly under way since the 1980s (p.172). Alastair Campbell – Blair's Director of Communications – was disdainful of the government's existing press management practices (ibid: 173). Diamond (2011) observes that the intense focus that the New Labour government placed on reforming and revitalising the Civil Service's connections was in response to "the pressures imposed by the 24/7 news media", and placed the government in a form of 'permanent campaign' in order to garner support for new policy initiatives and to rebut negative or damaging coverage as effectively as possible (p.155). This involved often directly feeding stories and information to the press that fit the government's narrative (Garland: 177; Gabor 2000: 508). Gabor highlights that this mode of government communications was built around the traditional print and broadcast media, with messages and personnel prepared to respond to the rhythms of such media coverage: seeking exposure during weekend print editions, or placing government narratives front-and-centre during broadcast media analysis that follows major events (Gabor 2000: 510-1).

Co-ordinating cross-government communications in this way, and operating within the mass-media framework, RICU's conceptualisation of its target audience was characteristically broad. In a briefing document created by RICU and released to other government departments on 4th September 2007, the agency outlined three broad audiences: violent extremists, 'mainstream' Muslims, and the British public at large (RICU 2007: 7-8). Sitting atop these three subgroup delineations was a 'topline' set of messages that seek to thematically "separate terrorists from the rest of society", and "provide[] the 'inclusive' basis from which to start a conversation" about terrorism (ibid: 2). The aim of producing as 'inclusive' a message as possible is reiterated

throughout the document, asserting the need for “a common sense of purpose” (p.4), and for citizens to recognise that “It is everyone’s responsibility to do what they can to tackle the terrorist challenge.” (p.5) The guidance which RICU issued in this document is built upon supporting this over-arching narrative. Though RICU outline three main messages¹⁰⁴, subordinate clauses and language are attached to each message, as well as the advantages of these arguments. Further, a crib sheet for drafting official statements is included, including words to avoid, preferred language, and reasoning for how this language supported the broad goal of fostering a whole population response to the issues of terrorism and radicalisation (Ibid: 7-8).

Deepening RICU’s Understanding – The International Media Phase

This having been said, it should not be thought that RICU’s ideas of its audience remained static, or that change came reluctantly. In fact, in accordance with its primary mission, RICU actively sought new ways of understanding and relating to its audience. This should not be confused, however, with a sea-change in targeting practice. Such changes would come, but only gained momentum in or around 2015, according to available evidence. What did occur of significance in this period were the first roots of conceptualising and dividing target groups by attitudinal measures; however, these would remain firmly grounded within the over-arching demographic Muslims/non-Muslims delineation that was already in place.

Instead, in the intervening period from 2008, RICU deployed resources deepening and refining the broad conceptualisation of its target audience that had been established in 2007. This movement was concentrated on increasing RICU’s understanding of the British Muslim subgroup. This move manifested in two important directions: enriching understanding of how British Muslims

¹⁰⁴ Later documents reveal that this number was increased to four by elevating one of the subordinate messages (TNS Media 2008: 4).

access or are exposed to political information,¹⁰⁵ and particularly about terrorism; and the second, into further dividing this subgroup according to their attitudes towards the issue of terrorism, their position in British society, and towards the government itself.

This second change is an important one, as it is a clear shift from RICU's conceptualising of its audience via binary demographic strokes (Muslim/Non-Muslim) to conceptualising the audience according to their existing beliefs. This was a welcome change inasmuch as it reflects a more mature understanding of the British Muslim population, and is a precursor to the much fuller shift towards attitude-based targeting that occurs in and after 2015. However, at this point – although the ways in which RICU conceptualised its audience were beginning to deepen – the ways in which RICU established connections and exposure to their audience were still largely carried out through the global mass media. This meant that these nascent attitudinal considerations were being understood via or had to be translated into actionable demographic categories.

This attitude-via-demographic form of conceptualising RICU's audience is best exemplified in a piece of focus group research conducted by the agency in April 2008. This document divides RICU's target audiences into three camps: 'The Angry and Alienated', 'The Frustrated but Open to Dialogue', and 'The Engaged and Concerned' (RICU 2010b: 1). The first was defined as "often hostile to the government and unwilling to listen to government messages" (RICU 2010: 13) and "shared a perception that they were not listened to"; the second by their more balanced reaction, though indicating sympathy for the views of the first camp; and the third by their preparedness "to acknowledge the reality of extremism within Muslim communities", as well as concern about anti-Western attitudes that appeared to be rising (all Ibid: 14-5).

¹⁰⁵ A fuller discussion of the importance of this mapping is discussed later in this chapter.

These definitive – while broad – attitudinal distinctions of the target audience can be viewed as a welcome change in RICU's approach, one that evolved from viewing British Muslims as a homogenous block rather than a huge collection of individuals all operating within their own frameworks of attitudes, beliefs and external pressures. However, for RICU's purposes, these attitudinal groups are described as largely common traits of particular demographic groups. These demographic groupings became more granular and sophisticated, but the overarching method in which these target subgroups were described is by relation to demographic indicators, such as gender, age, and particularly ethnicity.

For example, the three attitudinal groupings which RICU laid out above, were immediately translated into demographic groupings. 'The Angry and Alienated', the document points out, "were mainly Pakistani and Bangladeshi young men... with Pakistani men in Bradford falling most squarely into this segment." (Ibid: 13) 'The Frustrated but Open to Dialogue' "were mainly Somali young men, some Pakistani and Bangladeshi men, and women across the whole sample" (Ibid: 14), and 'The Engaged and Concerned' – the smallest group – "were often mothers, younger women, and some men aged over 25." (Ibid: 15) It is also interesting to note that the sample for these interviews was assembled primarily of Bangladeshi and Pakistani males aged 18-30 (p.5). This reveals that though this attitudinal framework is established through these surveys, the research into these attitudes itself was undertaken within a framework that young Muslim males were RICU's primary target audience, rather than seeking to understand 'The Angry and Alienated' independent of concerns over ethnicity. RICU still primarily constructed its audience in demographic terms, with elements concerning attitudes sitting squarely within the goal of persuading British Muslim males between the ages 18-30 from becoming radicalised. This fruits of this demographic mode of targeting is evident in the propaganda products that RICU would commission and seek to disseminate through the international media. Three documentaries, of four

identifiable RICU-sponsored films, focus on the conditions of Somalia, *Mayor of Mogadishu* (broadcast on the Al Jazeera news network) and two editions of *Return to Somalia*. RICU's research identified young Somalis – particularly young men – within their 'Frustrated but Open to Dialogue' category, highlighting that this group were "prepared to listen to government messages" and often "wanted to get involved but did not know how to do so." (RICU 2010b: 1)¹⁰⁶ This same document can also account for the placement of *Mayor of Mogadishu* through international news media rather than through domestic channels. For example, the document highlights that the events or news coverage emanating from the home country is most important to "older generations of Pakistani, Bangladeshi or Indian communities, or more recent North African or Somali participants" and these communities most heavily relied on networks such as *Al Jazeera* (RICU 2010b: 11, 15). Similarly, RICU identifies that "participants of all ages and genders from Bangladeshi or Pakistani communities were highly concerned by the way in which Muslims were portrayed by the media at a national level" (Ibid) and that younger Muslims were those generally more concerned with global issues, "particularly those of college and university age" (Ibid: 16).

Overall, these documents capture RICU's primary ways of conceptualising its audience in the years after its inception. Though initially working with a broad and largely undifferentiated conceptualisation between Muslims and non-Muslims, RICU moved into a model fleshed out by seeking to understand the attitudes of specific subgroups within this over-arching architecture. However, while considerations of attitude and psychology became part of RICU's lexicon and thinking, these were merely tools in service of a targeting model that was conceptualised and strategized in terms of demographics. The reasons for the

¹⁰⁶ For a deeper analysis of what models RICU set down for this group to follow, see Chapter 5. It remains interesting that this middling group, The Frustrated but Open to Dialogue, would seem to be more heavily targeted than The Angry and Alienated. This group would appear to be most in need of persuasion. At present, we may only speculate that RICU considered The Frustrated to be more easily persuaded in the short term.

continuation of this overarching model is related very much to how RICU understood its information environment, an issue that will be addressed fully in the second section of this chapter. For now, it is only necessary to appreciate the sea-change in thinking that was instigated in 2015, as RICU's role and mission were re-organised by a majority-Conservative administration – and the concurrent shift to building a new conceptualisation of RICU's audience founded on attitudinal, rather than demographic, lines.

The Counter Extremism Strategy, Alignment to Attitudes & The Social Media Phase

To understand this shift, we need to understand, at least in general terms, the reasons underlying its necessity. In 2015, and with the rates at which young British Muslims were becoming radicalised by groups such as ISIL/Daesh rising at an alarming rate, the Government unveiled the Counter Extremism Strategy (CES), which significantly redrew the parameters of counter-radicalisation policy, and RICU's own role within it.

This redrawing involved a number of changes, which are too numerous to discuss in sufficient depth at present, but included improving oversight mechanisms in public institutions such as schools and universities, and reviewing citizenship requirements (HMG 2015: 22, 25-6, 33).

The important changes for RICU - and thus this discussion - were threefold. The first two were a direct result of this new overarching strategy; and the third, the adaptation that RICU thus made to its conceptualisation of its audience in accordance with its new powers and objectives. The most obvious change was RICU's function within the Prevent strategy – RICU was no longer an agency dedicated to creating guidelines for government language about terrorism, or researching the Muslim population in order to gain actionable insights for that purpose. From this point, RICU was to be the central command and control hub for the UK's domestic counter-extremism propaganda

campaign. This was part-and-parcel of the Government's stated desire to 'contest the online space' by "supporting a network of credible commentators who want to challenge the extremists" and "help them build and maintain a compelling online presence, uploading mainstream content so that the extremist voice is not the only one heard" (HMG 2015: 25). RICU was to be the beating heart of the "fundamental shift in the scale and nature of our response" that was required (Ibid: 24).

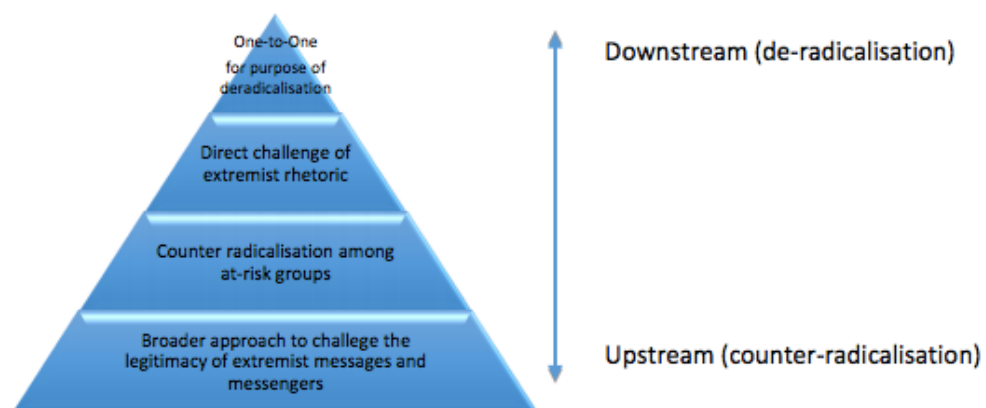
At the same time, the CES imposed a new element into RICU's working mission – a policy of also abating the rise of rightwing extremism, rather than simply Salafist extremism. As we have seen, RICU had previously been focused squarely on the challenges of communicating with Muslim audiences, further divided into age, gender, and ethnic categories. It was now also given responsibility of communication with disaffected ethnic-British audiences also. On top of that, RICU was also charged to explicitly broaden its mission beyond deterring violent extremism to deterring extremism in general (Cameron in HMG 2015: 5).

The tightening of RICU's responsibility from advising cross-government communications on terrorism to the central point of a counter-extremism propaganda policy altered drastically the way RICU conceptualised its audience. To meet the new goals, RICU was focused on understanding how to prevent those at risk of radicalisation from becoming radicalised.¹⁰⁷ With the addition of placing right-wing extremism on parity with the problem of Salafist extremism, RICU's new audience was now categorised as those at risk of turning to extremist attitudes.

Now under pressure to stem the tide of British citizens flying to the Middle East to fight for violent non-state actors in Iraq and Syria, RICU sought new

¹⁰⁷ De-radicalisation was handled through the counselling-based Channel strategy.

ways of conceptualising this audience in a way that was actionable. In the same month as the publication of the CES, the EU's Radicalisation Awareness Network (RAN) published its *Issue Paper: Counternarratives and Alternative Narratives* that stemmed from a transnational workshop entitled "Countering Violent Extremism: Online Communications". This document laid out an attitudinal delineation based upon an 'upstream-downstream' structure, based on assessments of the likelihood of an individual turning to or joining extremist groups:



[Figure 5: Upstream / Downstream Delineation for CVE communications (RAN 2015: 5)]

E-mails released by the Office of the EU Permanent Representative of the Netherlands reveals that RICU seem to have organised and hosted this forum.¹⁰⁸ The diagram presented above is a clear representation of the new predominance of attitudinal factors in constructing RICU's targeting segmentation. The design of counter-extremist communication is built in accordance with the 'risk' of extremist beliefs having been accepted and internalised by the audience. This extends into the area of one-to-one interventions (as the British government seeks through the Channel

¹⁰⁸ Netherlands Government (2015) email chain, 'FW: EU industry and forum dinner', 4 Nov 2015. Available at <https://bigwobber.nl/wp-content/uploads/osd/20171221/3979.pdf> [A briefing document containing Figure 5 is also included in this release (p.4).]

programme) for identified and already radicalised extremists; to “direct challenge of extremist rhetoric” for those believed to be on the verge of radicalisation. The British government’s focus on the third segment focuses on the need to ‘build resilience’ within “at-risk groups” – and according to Cameron, to “show the boy in East London or the girl in Birmingham how proud you can feel to be both British and Muslim, without conflict or contradiction.” (Cameron in Whitehead 2015: Online)¹⁰⁹

Further, through close analysis it is possible to identify at least two government-backed accounts that fit this broad structuring. *Open Your Eyes* squarely rests within the remit laid out in the “Direct challenges” segmentation provided by the EU RAN. Nominally curated by a Muslim community organisation based in Birmingham, press releases on the organisation’s website reveal RICU support for this social media offering (Upstanding Neighbourhoods 2017: Online). This campaign predominantly features direct testimonials of young British (and Western Muslims) direct to camera, imploring viewers to not turn to extremism, and to question the ‘true’ Islam espoused by groups such as ISIL-Daesh (‘ISIS’). The account also features undercover filming inside ISIL-held territory, testimonials of those who suffered imprisonment and torture at the hands of the group, and a prominent tagline asserting how the campaign is “exposing the reality of ISIS” (Open Your Eyes 2017: Online). This evidence leads us to conclude that this account is involved in the ‘Downstream’ interventions aimed at those deemed most vulnerable to radicalisation to extremism.

Another social media campaign active on the same platforms - *Ummahsonic* represents the third lowest segment on the RAN diagram – a counter-radicalisation campaign aimed at reconciling British and Muslim identity. The

¹⁰⁹ The “broader approach to challenge the legitimacy of extremist messages and messengers” is too broad a topic for full discussion, but has included moves such as to refer to ISIL/Daesh, not as ISIS or Islamic State but ‘so-called Islamic state’ by the BBC and other media outlets.

account includes ‘humorous’ takes on Muslim life in Britain, biographies of successful British Muslim artists and business owners, articles about refreshing your wardrobe in a way that still conforms to Islamic tenets, and highlighting feminist Islamic scholars and figures throughout history. Although the FMO has not claimed any connection with the Home Office in the running of this account, evidence taken from LinkedIn profiles indicates that content for the Ummahsonic account is at least in part created and curated by Breakthrough Media, a private media company with known links to RICU’s online campaigns (CAGE 2016: 37; Cobain et al. 2016: Online).

While at present the exact number of RICU-backed accounts is still unknown, as well as their respective positions within this targeting delineation, these accounts provide compelling evidence as to the centrality of an upstream/downstream structure (as presented above) to RICU’s conceptualisation of its audience. Not only do we see government-backed accounts aimed at opposing ends of this spectrum, but the tailoring of these messages to their specific audiences also reflects arguments and recommendations made in key public documents, such as the 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy.

Although the exact details of RICU’s targeting model are understandably not public knowledge, this move in an attitudinal direction is supported by triangulation of available evidence, as well as by private admission from RICU officials.¹¹⁰ Although demographic indicators still play a role, it is evident that demographic factors no longer form the basis of how RICU conceptualises its audience. Instead, they play a support role that aids RICU to identify and establish communicative routes to members of RICU’s attitudinal subgroups.

Explaining Policy Shifts in RICU’s Targeting Approach

¹¹⁰ Private Information

So far, we have undertaken an overview of the ways in which RICU has updated or revised its conceptualisation of its audience, and what final forms these shifts have taken. In reality, this is merely setting the groundwork from which to answer the key questions that this thesis poses. Answering the puzzle of RICU's adaptation to the online communication environment requires answering two questions: 1) what factors/events drive shifts in government propaganda policy, and 2) what factors guide or constrain the final form of these policy changes. In the course of our discussion, we have already touched upon some of these outside influences; now, we must address these issues more explicitly. First, we will discuss what events and factors have driven the desire for policy change inside RICU, before following with a discussion about how the opportunities and constraints of mass-media- or internet-based communication have shaped the final manifestations of these policy changes.

Internal Review

The first question to answer is what has caused shifts in RICU's targeting policy. Despite RICU's privileged and deliberately-sheltered status, it is quite possible to determine the common factor responsible for driving change in the agency's working practices: namely evident or perceived failure of current policy approaches. This change is, at turns, propelled either by internal evidence of sub-par performance, imposed from above, or demanded by outward circumstances. As such, changes in RICU's goals and functions – which, as we have seen, have altered its targeting practices substantially – do seem to broadly align themselves with changes of government (2010, 2015, 2017). While elections and changes in government do correspond temporally to these changes in targeting concepts, it is more accurate to say that newly-formed governments merely hold the 'political capital' required for making changes: it is the perceived shortcomings of RICU or counter-extremism policy in general that identify the need for change, which new governments tend to act on.

The first change that we have identified was driven by internal evidence of less-than-desired effectiveness of RICU's working practices. In a research document commissioned by RICU to analyse its penetration of the media, it was noted that RICU was "keeping pace" with the national media conversation surrounding terrorism, but was not making much active impact, with little change in the uptake of specific messages or the government's messages overall (TNS Media 2008: 41). When viewed in this light, we can infer the logic that led to the deepening and refining of RICU's targeting conceptualisation between 2009 and 2010, rather than wholesale changes. Although sub-optimal at the time in question, RICU's working practices had been relatively effective at keeping in touch with the national conversation, though not actively shaping it. This evidence lent some support for the agency's modes of working, and thus encourages refinement on top of existing concepts, rather than implying the need for complete revisions.

It is this refinement which seems to have largely sheltered RICU from wholesale changes during the Prevent Strategy Review undertaken by the Coalition government, and published in June 2011 (HMG 2011a). In this review, RICU does receive a deal of censure for its targeting practices, in that its focus had been somewhat too tightly trained on the Muslim community (2011a: 48), but the greatest criticism levelled at RICU in the review fell on perceived failures of its messaging choices, as well as the professionalism of its output. Further, the conduits through which RICU sought to relay its messages after this review – as discussed below – remain consistent with the audience-model that RICU had been developing through 2009 and 2010, indicating that these ideas at least remained the basis of RICU's thinking in the post-2011 period.

Exposed Realities

However, in 2015 new policy directives, in the shape of the Counter-Extremism Strategy, did cause a severe pivot in RICU's thinking about the make-up of their

audience – a Counter-Extremism Strategy that itself directly refers to the need to overcome and correct shortcomings in existing government policy. However, in marked contrast to acting on internal evidence to refine working practices, and deepening knowledge incrementally, in 2015 RICU's lack of effectiveness was exposed by outside forces. In the area of targeting, changes to RICU's targeting methodology were guided by a form of normative isomorphism, reaching for approaches and ideas offered from the world of public relations, absorbing the knowledge and insight of the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, a governmental public relations think-tank, that drew up a report for RAN on counter and alternative counter-extremism narratives (RAN 2015).

The success of violent groups – primarily ISIL/Daesh – in using the internet and social media platforms to convert new members to their cause in the preceding months was of particular concern (May in HMG 2015: 7). It is perhaps unsurprising therefore to find RICU's domain of operations come in for significant overhaul, given its dedication to countering the threat of extremism. Due to the emergence of social media as a fertile ground for extremist recruitment, RICU's efforts were refocused towards this new battleground (Ibid: 24-5). But a mere redirecting of current approaches was clearly not considered efficient; the same section of the strategy concluding that "a fundamental shift in the nature and scale of our response" was needed in order to face "the huge increase in extremists' use of the internet." (Ibid: 24)

Furthermore, the release of the CES provides evidence that this fundamental shift was guided by top-level government actors. Prosaically, the link between the election of a Conservative majority government in May 2015, and the release of an overhaul in counter extremism policy indicates a causal link between the political strengthening of top-level players and top-down restructuring of policy. Moreover, the policy concerns of David Cameron himself become ingrained within RICU's working practice following the launch

of this new strategy. As touched upon above, RICU's conceptualisation of its audience seems to reflect concerns that Cameron repeatedly raised concerning the social identity of British Muslims – chiefly, that many young British Muslims could not reconcile the British and Muslim parts of their identities “without conflict or contradiction.” (Cameron 2015: Online) Cameron's repeated and public declarations of this problem force us to assume that he felt personal stake in this idea, and its translation into policy outcomes was seemingly fast-acting and direct. This is important, as it demonstrates that ideas concerning the internal struggles of the target audience – ideas that govern communicative messaging strategy – were being directed and implemented on RICU largely from above, and by top-level cabinet members.

When observed from an historical institutionalist perspective, these subsequent policy recalibrations indicate that British counter-extremist propaganda policy displays clear characteristics of both path dependency and critical junctures. In its initial form, RICU adhered to the rough guidelines of previous government communications policy through the mass media; after its audience-conceptualisation was settled in this infancy period, RICU mostly developed and refined these targeting approaches, rather than ever fundamentally questioning these presuppositions. After the success achieved by ISIL-Daesh in the social media space, RICU sought to absorb new ways of thinking from outside government, in this case a think-tank, the Institute for Strategic Dialogue. Instead, it was the clear, obvious and public displays of shortcomings in current policy that loosened these binds, and allowed high-level players to reset propaganda policy in new directions.

What is more, it seems that these high-level resets have a ‘hangover’ period, where lower-level decision makers can also seize initiative to drive policy in new directions. It is of great interest to note that, it was after the release of the CES that RICU began to incorporate ideas and approaches from the EU Radicalisation Awareness Network, as discussed above. This suggests that

while ideas could be and were being implemented from above, RICU officials were able to seek new approaches and incorporate them into their conceptualisations of the target audience. Whether this is due to government officials sensing opportunity or leeway to bring new ideas to the table, or due to a pressing need for fresh approaches from outside sources, is currently unclear. However, it does appear that this period of plasticity is limited, and critical junctures in counter-extremist propaganda policy are demanded by evident policy ineffectiveness, then driven through from top-level positions.

Such an interpretation is supported by the current and ongoing reorganisation of British counter-extremism policy. The wave of terrorist attacks committed by home-grown extremists in the spring of 2017 has triggered a similar realignment of policy to that implemented by the CES. After a series of attacks by Salafist extremists across Britain, Theresa May broadened the scope of a strategic review into CONTEST, as well as announcing an intention to pursue new agreements and powers to regulate internet platforms (Syal & Walker 2017: Online). When asked about how this strategic review – and its broadening – may impact RICU’s work, an official in the agency remarked that RICU had little input in formulating new policy approaches in the review, and would have to wait for the review to be completed and enacted.¹¹¹ Again, in this current overhaul, we can see that the policy desires of top-level players in government are having a significant effect on these strategic changes – though Prime Minister May’s efforts have been more closely directed on the censorship element of propaganda policy.¹¹²

Overall, it is possible to establish a clear picture of how policy change has been and continues to be initiated within RICU. The general path dependency of RICU’s targeting concepts is revealed through the gradual and incremental refining of its ideas from 2007, through 2011 and beyond, and the reactive

¹¹¹ Private information

¹¹² See Chapter 7

approach the agency takes to changes in policy and strategy, awaiting changes from above. These changes appear, for the most part, to be driven by evidence of sub-optimal performance of British counter-extremism policy in general, or in the communications field in particular.

Furthermore, the changes RICU has undergone have all been a subset of much wider policy realignments of the CONTEST strategy as a whole. This may explain why policy change is directed from above – the highly collaborative culture of the British government and civil service is very apparent in the terms of CONTEST, a strategy that cuts across many ministries and sub-departments, including the security services, the Department of Education, the police, and local government, among many others. The wide net cast by the CONTEST strategy, with its cross-cutting responsibilities and joint ventures, leaves very little room for manoeuvre for the agencies under its auspices. As such, with such a wide array of responsibilities to fulfil, it is reasonable to argue that proper change must be driven by top-down re-drawings of strategy and policy. This is to ensure that these responsibilities are divided so that no important functions are left unattended, but also to achieve maximum effectiveness. However, this does little to promote flexibility in approach, apart from when clear failures instigate these broad top-down structural revisions.

Reaching the Audience – Identification and Communication

So far, we have discussed the drivers of policy change within British counter-extremism, and in particular propaganda policy. However, to appreciate the adaptation of British propaganda targeting in this period, we need to analyse how the opportunities and constraints of the relevant technologies have shaped the final form of these policy shifts. A helpful way of exploring this question is taking into account how RICU sought to make contact with their target audiences, and how they identified these conduits. In general, we can establish that RICU's attempts at identifying and communicating with potential targets has become far more granular in the last three years or more, in

accordance with its pivot towards internet technologies. In sum, the interactive nature of the internet, and the increasing prevalence of personal devices has allowed RICU to gather far more data about their potential targets, which in turn has allowed a transition to a targeting model based in attitudes, rather than broad demographics.

To understand this change a little more clearly, it is useful to consider the arguments of John L. Martin, an American scholar who possessed considerable practical experience of a propaganda practice, thanks to his years with the United States Information Office (USIO). Writing in 1971, during the ascendancy of the traditional mass media, L. John Martin laments the lack of scientific rigour in the planning of propaganda targeting (p.70), and highlights the paucity of information with which to make these decisions (Ibid). He argues that, if individuals could be more effectively categorised in terms of their age, sex, race and education during a period of 'precommunication [sic] analysis' then propaganda would be measurably more effective – though he concedes that the limitations of the mass media environment precluded such analysis from taking place. Further, he admits that even if this kind of analysis could be achieved, the wide audience bases of contemporary media organisations prevented any confidence that these messages would be received by these individuals (ibid).

Therefore, tightly-prescribed targeting of subgroups was likely to be ineffective. Precise analysis of these subgroups was severely hampered by the lack of available data, and communications designed on such a basis had no guarantees of reaching their intended targets. Further, such attempts would most likely be counter-productive – these sorts of tightly-targeted appeals would most likely waste the limited available opportunities to communicate effectively with the public at large. From this perspective, it is easy to understand the logic of defining the audience to be as wide as feasibly possible, in order to maximise the potential resonance of these limited communication opportunities.

We have already touched upon how, in its early years, RICU relied on very broad demographic categories to conceptualise its different audiences (Violent Extremists, 'Mainstream' Muslims, and the public at large), and put in place a communicative strategy that sought to establish a sense of unity among British society. This focus on creating a common sense of purpose and responsibility for countering terrorism supports the argument that RICU's message targeting was shaped by the limitations of political communication through the traditional mass media.

RICU's focus was predominantly upon gaining positive attention for its messages in broadcast and print media (TNS Media 2008). As previously discussed, the realities of communicating through these media dis-incentivised making focused appeals to small subgroups. Instead, RICU was channelled into designing an inclusive messaging strategy designed to communicate with each of its target subgroups at the same time – to warn or discourage violent extremists, reassure the majority of the British Muslim population that it was not being targeted, and to dissuade the public at large from blaming the Muslim community as a whole for the actions of extremists. Three distinct subgroups did exist in RICU's conception of its audience; however, they remained very much constituent parts of a cohesive homogenous audience that was the primary target of communication. Thus, the media environment in which RICU were operating – in which reaching tightly defined subgroups was impractical - actively encouraged this wide conceptualisation of their audience.

After 2011, the relationship between RICU's attempts to reach its target audiences and their conceptualisation of audience takes an intriguing turn. We have already discussed how RICU sought to deepen its knowledge concerning the subgroups of its British Muslim audience, and how its nascent divisions concerning attitudes were translated into a demographic context. A potential explanation for this translation is the way in which RICU perceived the

communications environment in which it was now working. As well as developing more detail concerning the attitudes of British Muslims, RICU's research in this period spent a great deal of effort establishing the media consumption habits of their target subgroups. This research indicated that with an increasingly internationalised information environment, British Muslims – particularly older generations of sub-continental Asians, or more recent North African or Somali counterparts – often looked for alternative perspectives from their home countries, or other regional/international news sources (RICU 2010b: 15).

This presented RICU with the reality that focus on British outlets alone would not be enough. As a result, RICU broadened its horizons to create content for international news channels, in order to establish a more effective communicative channel with its target audience, who were as a rule more distrusting of the British media (RICU 2010b: 8-12). Seeking to reach the audience in this way helps to explain RICU's reliance on demographic indicators to delineate their audience in this period. Although the media environment in which RICU found itself had become increasingly internationalised, this media environment was still dominated by single-direction, one-to-many types of communication channel. Thus, RICU sought to understand which communication channels were best suited to reaching their target subgroups – and, through use of demographic indicators, could seek to place their messages through channels that were most trusted by the subgroups with whom they wished to communicate. In this case, RICU understood that recent Somali migrants were interested in the political situation at home, but distrusted perspectives presented through the British media. As such, RICU used an international channel to disseminate information about politics in Somalia, which presented the 'West' as a force for positive social change.

In both above examples, RICU identified the best way to establish conduits to their target audience was through the traditional mass media. Lacking the

ability to establish links directly, or to subject potential targets to pre-communication analysis, demographic indicators were used in order to select the optimum channels for persuasion. However, RICU's increased focus on social media platforms largely reversed the nature of the problem laid out by Martin. The rise of the internet-dominated communications environment – and social media platforms in particular – has opened up the exact conditions for Martin's wish-list to be implemented. The highly interactive nature of internet technology, as well as the tracking capabilities created by the use of packet-switching data transfer, has allowed RICU to receive a plethora of data about individual internet users before having to disseminate their messages. Further, the prevalence of personal internet-connected devices allows RICU to establish communication links directed at individual users. These messages may not be tailored down to the individual level, but the ability to insert messages directly into individuals' information channels is truly significant, and a reversal of the conditions Martin outlined for working through the mass media. This ability for extensive pre-communication analysis has shaped how RICU conceptualises its audience, and to directly establish conduits to individual users has allowed RICU to develop a conceptualisation based upon attitudes rather than demographics – the information received about users allows RICU to sort them into these attitudinal categories, without relying on demographic categories to do so.

However, these abilities present two new and intriguing problems – deciding which pieces of digital information should be used to sort users into these attitudinal categories, and which conduits are best suited to delivering messages to these now-sorted users. Information about how RICU tackles these two problems is patchy, with no mention of RICU's working practices appearing in official documents. Further, RICU officials remain mostly tight-lipped about their access to digital information about internet users.¹¹³ Fortunately, through analysing information available about the British

¹¹³ Private information

government's access to digital information flows, public information as to how users are targeted with advertising, and some personal experience, we can make informed observations as to how these problems are being tackled.

Observing the internet history of individual users, and translating this information into attitudinal categories, appears to be RICU's answer to the problem of identifying their target audiences. Classified documents made available through the Snowden leaks demonstrate that not only is the British government (due to its access to key transatlantic information cables) particularly well-situated to access this information, but GCHQ has further developed software that picks apart online signals into actionable intelligence about the behaviours and interests of internet users (See Figures 6, 7). These slides reveal some of the tools that the British government has its disposal to store, monitor and analyse online browsing habits. These include – but are certainly not limited to – users' presence and activity on social media platforms, internet fora, and other online resources to develop a picture of individual interests and beliefs, in context of wider group trends. With such tools, identifying members of target subgroups via media consumption habits can be achieved at deeply granular levels – a clear example of how the singular advantages presented to the British government in the internet-dominated media environment has direct significance to how audiences are segmented, and chosen to be presented with desired messages.

TDI Applications

- Bulk store of all TDIs seen in last 6 months [MUTANT BROTH]
- Bulk store TDI correlations (6 months) [AUTO ASSOC]
- Bulk store TDI <-> website correlations (6 months) [KARMA POLICE]
- Bulk store TDI vBulletin activity [INFINITE MONKEYS]
- Bulk store TDI Social Networking Site activity [SOCIAL ANIMAL]
- Bulk store web search requests [MEMORY HOLE]
- Bulk store Google Earth requests [MARBLED GECKO]
- Bulk store of Host Referrer references [HRMAP]

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Slide 14

UK SECRET STRAP2 COMINT ORCON

Save as CSV

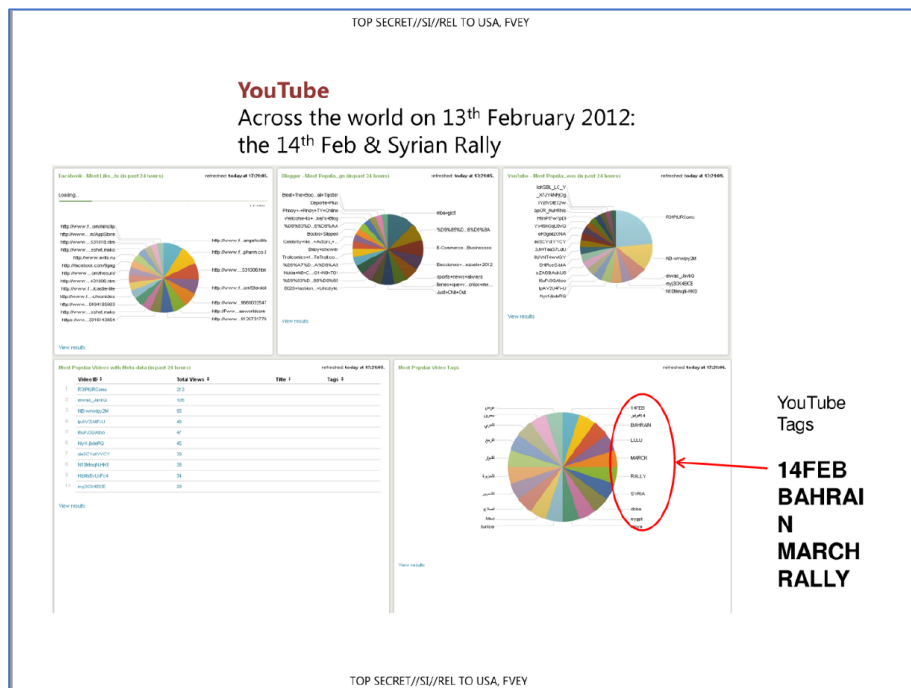
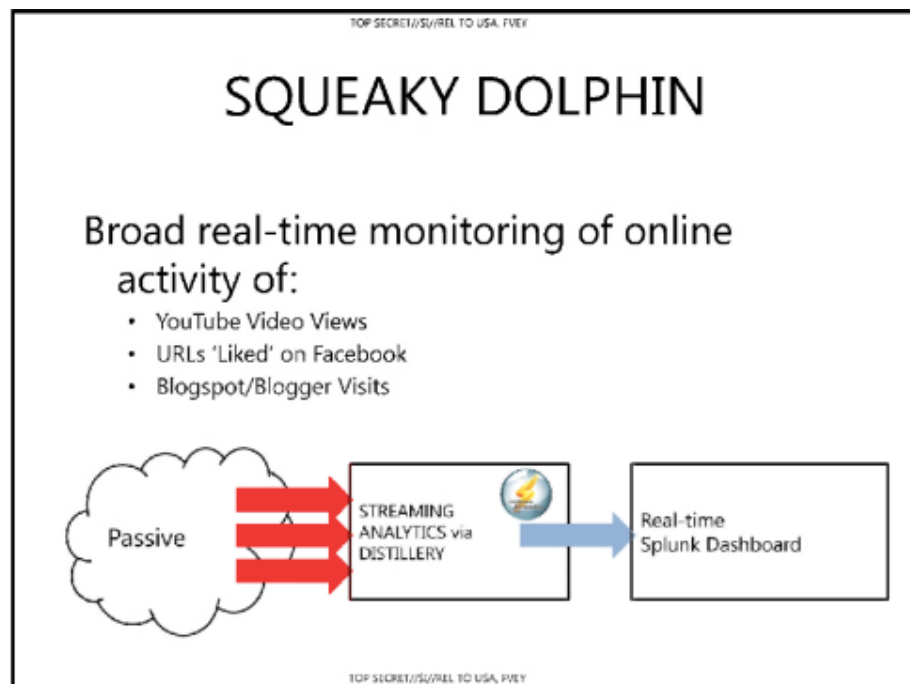
SECRET

Date	Time	Source IP	HHFP	Source IP Geo	Identifier Type	Identifier Value	Passw
17/06/2008	17:08:44	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	41.02;28.96;ISTANBUL;TR;5MMM	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
17/06/2008	17:08:44	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	41.02;28.96;ISTANBUL;TR;5MMM	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
17/06/2008	16:55:21	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	41.9022;-87.6726;CHICAGO;US;5	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
17/06/2008	16:55:16	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	41.02;28.96;ISTANBUL;TR;5MMM	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
17/06/2008	16:54:47	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	41.9022;-87.6726;CHICAGO;US;5MMM	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
17/06/2008	16:52:13	[REDACTED]	6de32bb0	39.94;32.86;ANKARA;TR;5MMM	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	
15/06/2008	19:20:33	[REDACTED]	de8bdc48	33.5;36.3;DIMASHQ;SY;5MLV	Hi5-Email-Cookie	[REDACTED]@hotmail.com	

Annotations on the table:

- WHEN** points to the Date and Time columns.
- WHERE** points to the Source IP Geo column.
- WHAT** points to the Identifier Type column.
- WHO** points to the Identifier Value column.

[Figure 6: An overview of GCHQ's clients for harvesting and analysing browsing habits. First slide indicates programs for storing Target Detection Identifiers (TDIs). Second slide demonstrates UK government ability to tie location and internet history to email addresses, similar to the capability RICU officials claim to enjoy (GCHQ 2009:14,17)]



[[Figure 7: GCHQ explanatory document concerning the monitoring and analysis capabilities of the Squeaky Dolphin program (GCHQ c.2012: 27, 31)]

This examination of browsing habits showcased above – particularly the visiting of certain webpages – seems to play a large part of identifying members of RICU’s target audiences, and deciding which conduits to use to reach them. RICU officials, whilst remaining tight-lipped concerning the

manner in which individuals were targeted for communicative intervention, conceded that internet use was a metric through which targets were chosen.¹¹⁴ The visitation of certain material seems to facilitate identification into RICU's subgroups, and targeting for intervention. RICU officials have repeatedly denied connections with the Security Services.¹¹⁵ However, certain evidence indicates that RICU at least independently has access to similar tools. The micro-targeted advertising suites on sights such as Facebook and Twitter rely on either a check-list of likes and interests on a given platform, or the supply of email addresses with corresponding accounts on said platforms. Access to tools such as those developed by GCHQ would be able to link the tracking of IP addresses to email accounts for such a purpose. Further, RICU officials have previously revealed that the agency possesses the capability to access information about the browsing habits and even locations of individual users.¹¹⁶ Especially in this second instance, it is more than likely that RICU has access to tools that are at least similar to those discussed in Figures 7 and 8.

This use of advertising is likely influenced by the tendency for the modern internet-based communications environment to shield users from alternative points of view. Garnering positive media coverage through media outlets is not a promising approach in this environment, as those inclined to more extremist attitudes are unlikely to read or trust these sources of information, instead favouring outlets that would not be receptive to government messages or overtures. As a consequence, RICU has emphasised the use of paid advertising to insert their messages into the information streams of chosen users. Though the effectiveness of this approach is uncertain, it demonstrates a choice in establishing communication conduits to targets that seeks to overcome limitations present in the environment. In turn, this shows us how targeting practice is tightly linked to the demands and capabilities of the information environment. In the frame of Marshall McLuhan, it is not the deep and rich

¹¹⁴ Private information

¹¹⁵ Private information

¹¹⁶ Private correspondence

forms of content freely available over the internet that is its main effect for propagandists. Instead, the demand for specific markers to tightly target the desired audience (pre-selected within the architecture of major websites) incentivises state propaganda organisations to leverage the surveillance powers for the purposes of disseminating their messages.

As we can see, the ability for tightly targeting messages to individual users, and to subject these users to pre-communication analysis – as Martin had hoped – presents new challenges as well as opportunities. What is most significant for this discussion is that these abilities have allowed RICU to move to a targeting model that is built primarily on assessing attitude and belief. This model is informed by human choices as to which signals are relevant to assessing this attitude, and as seen, these choices may be flawed. However, it is possible to establish a direct link between the medium of communication – the internet – and the type of targeting strategies that RICU has undertaken. The highly interactive nature of the medium – and the tracking ability built into its very foundations – allow the reception of large swathes of personal data that can be distilled for insights about individual users. In turn, these insights (alongside the personal devices which generate them) allow RICU to make direct observations about the likelihood of certain users' vulnerability to radicalisation. Further, these personal devices allow RICU to make direct connection with these users. As a result, the structure and capabilities of internet-based communication strip away the need to make targeting decisions based on generalised observations about the attitudes and media habits of broad demographic subgroups; instead, they have guided policy actors to focus on granular analysis of electronic signals for insight into the attitudes and beliefs of individual users.

Conclusions

The development of RICU's targeting practice illuminates much concerning about the adaptation of the state to new technological realities, and how these realities come to shape it. It is in this strand of propaganda policy that technological influences have had the most impact. Not only have the new opportunities for establishing conduits with audiences presaged a far more multilateral conception of target audiences than could be conceived through the legacy media, but these capabilities have, as discussed in Chapter 5, had fundamental ramifications for the content and style of propaganda products.

However, this is only one part of the story. Alongside these broader changes ushered in by new technological capabilities, we have also considered the numerous institutional influences that have guided these possibilities into concrete policy. In this regard, we conclude similarly to Chapter 5 that institutional factors were responsible for mediating and translating new capacity into practice. Once again, it is only in the aftermath of downward coercive pressure from above that we can observe RICU coming to terms and grasping at new targeting opportunities.

Yet even when RICU turned to this new battleground, these technical considerations were heavily mediated by RICU's position within the British state. It is undeniable that technological influence has been primarily responsible for shifting targeting practice from the utilisation of certain outlets according to general statistics concerning age and ethnicity, to one delineated by their perceived attitudes or beliefs. However, the way in which this has been put into practice has been translated through RICU's unique institutional position. The agency was in close contact with similarly-tasked organisations through the EU RAN, where the 'upstream/downstream' concept was shared

and honed. More importantly, we must consider the British state's ability to track the internet browsing habits of its citizens. As discussed, RICU appears to enjoy access to tools remarkably similar to those detailed in the leaks of NSA & GCHQ documents by Edward Snowden. While non-state organisations may be able to gain certain information regarding browsing habits through third parties, the British state has the capacity to directly track and flag individual browsing in real time. It is not precisely clear exactly how RICU has obtained the sorts of tracking capability that its officials have repeatedly boasted. Government has denied that the outfit has links to the intelligence services, and it is possible that capacity is borrowed from internet service providers. In either case, it is undeniable that RICU would not be able to carry out such a targeting regimen if it were not a British state organisation.

The development of RICU's targeting practice, therefore, can tell us much about British state adaptation to new technological realities. What is more, such an analysis provides illuminating insights into the overarching effects of the internet on the culture of political discourse. The primary conclusion to draw is that once again institutional factors presage and mediate the technological. Whether it is in terms of setting in motion policy reformulation triggered from above, adopting practices from other areas of government, cooperation with similar organisations internationally, or through placing coercive pressure on internet service providers or platforms, RICU's position as a state organisation has had enormous consequences for how it has come to terms with and exploited the new communications environment. It is only after and through the resolution of institutional influences that technological capacities can come to fruition.

While the unique ways in which RICU and its allies have come to terms with this new environment have been determined by its government position, it must be stated that they also are in close step with the wider development of political discourse. This can be explained by RICU's need to interact with standard platform advertising rules, requiring the input of email addresses to

reach certain users (in RICU's case, garnered by relation to an IP address). Regardless of how RICU specifically resolves its targeting methodology, its practices mirror those used by non-state actors and advertisers. David Cameron made specific comparison to these advertising practices, using their existence to justify adoption of these capacities by the state for counter-extremist purposes. In this case, we can again see institutional normative isomorphism setting the direction of policy, reinterpreted through the capabilities of a state actor. In any case, the similarity of approach between state and non-state organisations reveal that the technological structure of the internet has ushered in forms of propaganda cultivated and defined by constant granular surveillance, and the British government has itself become a major player in this trend (Zuboff 2019).

7. The Shifting Stance of British Censorship Practice

These surveillance capacities would in turn have a strong determining effect on the practice of British state censorship. But again, the possibilities of these technological capacities were stymied by institutional brakes. After the legislative activism of the Blair administration, successive governments of all stripes have shown repeated reticence to further legislate or regulate political speech circulating on the internet. Whereas RICU's targeting and messaging strategies have been routinely updated in response to crisis or failure, censorship strategy has proven 'sticky'. As shall be discussed, government 'action' taken in this area generally amounted to no more than measured admonishments from senior ministers, and stern warnings mixed with veiled threats at regulation if social media companies and ISPs did not improve their performance in this area. While no official or explicit reasoning for this 'more light than heat' approach does not exist, it is with some confidence identified as stemming from the poor optics that followed the New Labour government's record on civil liberties, and a caginess from future governments to avoid such criticisms.

However, the string of attacks that rocked Britain in the spring of 2017 brought new censorship powers onto the statute books through legislation once more – though with a considerable delay of over a year. In this case, once again, institutional factors predominate over the technological, and determine the shape and character of adaptation. In the area of censorship, these institutional factors – aside from the usual reformulations emanating downwards from senior government – have been set through the legal system. In short, provisions within the 2006 Terrorism Act have been extended via prosecutions of alleged terrorists through the courts. A full and proper examination of this process is not possible here, and is best left to trained legal scholars. This being said, the applicability of the legal prohibition of ownership

of material deemed 'useful to a terrorist' to extremist propaganda remains questionable. Regardless, the clear failure of government CVE strategy evidenced by the carnage of 2017 demanded action. The action chosen by senior ministers was to extend these earlier prohibitions as to include material not owned or downloaded but merely viewed or read.

In this move we can see an interesting departure from the adaptations to technology we have seen elsewhere. Elsewhere, ideas and capabilities have been imported from the private sector or borrowed from other government policy areas. This influence remains, particularly in the comparison of terrorist recruiters to the fight against child sexual abuse. Yet in the case of censorship policy, we can see a clear acceleration of tactics down pre-established lines, updating them slightly in their wording to account for the new balance of power and capability in the new communications environment.

The change in wording of this statute is subtle. However, the outward appearance produced – that of a slight course correction – actually glosses over a stark pivot in the locus of censorship criminality. In contrast to an earlier arrangement by which the speaker or disseminator of extremist messages was liable for prosecution, statute now criminalises the very act of consuming such information (akin to the penalties for accessing images of child sexual abuse). Once more, the reasoning behind this move is not fully stated, though 'updating the law' to keep technological pace is referred to. Analysis indicates that such a move stems from the difficulty of applying jurisdiction to speech posted outside of UK borders. Consumers of information in Britain, however, (whose internet browsing histories can be tracked and flagged) are a far easier target for prosecution.

In such a way, we can see how institutional factors set the stage for how technological factors will be incorporated into government policy, and its concomitant effect on political culture. For while senior government was consistently shy to legislate and grasp the nettle of censorship questions,

Britain's legal institutions set down the tracks down which technological adaptation would run. Married with the state's unique capacities in such an environment, the development of censorship strategy raises troubling questions as to the state of current and future of political speech rights in the United Kingdom.

Framing the Question of Censorship

Censorship, as an instrument of government, has a long and well-established tradition. However, its exact workings have been subject to change and development, in accordance with capability, possibility and need. Typically understood, censorship is the redaction, prevention or deletion of 'undesirable' content for the 'good' of society. However, this type of definition is a severely restricted manner to think about the practice of censorship within the real world. As discussed in the earlier part of this thesis, the inclusion of censorship as an avenue of wider propaganda efforts is a necessity, given how both nominally distinct instruments coalesce towards similar goals. Given its place as a part of propaganda, the practice of censorship needs to be approached within its proper context. When this is done, the study of censorship becomes far richer – revealing the challenges faced by a propaganda bureaucracy as they seek to restrict the flow of undesirable information, which differ per economic, technological, social, and legal factors.

The case of censorship within this study is complicated by the fact that the Terrorism Act of 2006 predated RICU's formation, and the Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit (CTIRU) was only folded within the overview of RICU in 2015, comparatively late in its lifespan. That the Terrorism Act 2006, CTIRU and RICU's objectives closely coincided makes their study of direct importance to our overall project. Further, the desire for closer coordination between the two agencies is a tacit admission of their extant interconnected nature. However, viewed within its proper context, this fact is, in reality, revelatory of

the unique pressures faced by liberal democracies as they seek to weed out extremism and terrorism within their borders. Such separations of outward-facing propaganda and censorship capacity is not seen in other, autocratic governments, such as the People's Republic of China. Understanding the reasons for this divergence of approaches – and their implications – is an exciting avenue through which to observe how the British government (and all liberal democracies) adjust to the twin realities of home-grown extremism and modern communications technology.

Civil Liberties and Path Dependency

The greatest determinant for the path of British counter-extremist censorship in this period has been the issue of civil liberties, and the balancing of these concerns with the need for action to prevent radicalisation. As the internet has become increasingly the crux of political discourse and communication, this question has only become more central. While factors such as successful terrorist attacks in allied nations, successful attacks at home, looming elections, and the installation of new governments have given censorship policy routine shots in the arm, the controversy surrounding the legislation of new powers has limited government responses. As a consequence innovation has been slow, piecemeal and path dependant, as successive governments have sought courses of action that do not require legislation. At the same time, the controversial nature of these policies has required that these governments employ sophisticated persuasion techniques in order to justify and advocate for such policies. In particular, these messaging strategies have sought to reframe these policies as necessary for public safety, and the expression of uncontroversial common values. The equation of extremist content to child pornography, and extremist recruiters to child groomers has been a consistent hallmark of these messages.

What is most interesting is that the period in which these push factors have been most prevalent (from early to 2015 to mid 2017) did not create a

significant critical juncture in censorship practice. While there were subtle yet significant shifts in government approach in this period, governmental unwillingness to legislate has limited government options in such a way that these approaches represent hardening and entrenchment of previous policy. The reasons for such a state of affairs – prime among them, the passage of the Terrorism Act 2006 – will be discussed in greater detail below. Yet what emerges is a clear pattern of path dependency in government counter-extremism censorship policy, influenced heavily by the deep questions faced by liberal democracies when seeking powers to censor free political speech.

The Liberal Tradition v. Public Safety

The UK – along with the other Western democracies – faces, for a number of reasons, a set of contradictory governing principles when seeking to manage security affairs. It is of course the responsibility of government to provide to its citizenry safety and security from terrorism and other political violence. However, the liberal democracies' needs to guarantee such safety often runs directly counter to "their codes of law [which] have evolved from a long political consensus of the liberal democratic tradition to guard the individual from unwarranted state interference." (Haubrich 2003: 5) It is unsurprising, therefore, that for over a decade British anti-terror legislation and policy has been roundly criticised from across the political spectrum for precisely this incursion on civil liberties (Bartley in Woodcock 2017: Online; Nabulsi 2015: Online; Major in Prince 2008: Online; Jones 2005a: Online). The importance of the civil liberties question in the sphere of counter-terror policy has meant that stringent criticism has emanated from leaders and key figures within the security apparatus itself, including former officials and leaders from the Metropolitan Police the Security Service (Babu in Halliday and Dodd 2015; Rimington in Whitehead 2009: Online).

The presence of entrenched ideals of individual autonomy in opposition to government or state power – as well as a free press that serves as a conduit to such criticisms – places liberal democratic governments in a far more limited position than autocratic governments. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP), for example, is afforded considerably more scope for the exercise of censorship in the pursuit of its propaganda goals. Its broad exercise of power over national and regional media outlets affords the CCP the ability to utilise selective censorship to stifle dissenting opinion and prevent the coverage of collective action (King Pan & Roberts 2013). Further, the CCP wields censorship far more overtly as a political tool, with broad censorship powers granted to various ministries according to the genre or content of material up for publication (Shambaugh 2007: 53). It is relatively easy to draw conclusions as to how the lack of a free press simplifies the application of censorship in an autocratic state such as China. Yet also, as Shambaugh points out, the orientation of the prevailing political culture in China is far less averse to government interference in the spread of information, knowledge and values (Shambaugh 2007: 29). In 2013, an illuminating example of how such conditions strengthen the CCP's hand in relation to terrorist threats can be found. After a terrorist attack in Tiananmen Square, the CCP were able to mute and stifle coverage of the incident, reducing its psychological impact and prevent the perpetrators from obtaining the 'oxygen of publicity' (Al Jazeera News 2013: Online).

The example of the CCP's position – and in particular its advantages in responding to security threats – provides a clear foil for the comparative challenges faced by liberal democracies such as the United Kingdom. Entrenched values of personal autonomy in opposition to government power and interference in political speech has placed policy makers and legislators in an uncomfortable political position when trying to justify the need for new measures that incur upon those principles. As a result, politicians from the Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments have turned to differing communicative strategies, seeking to frame the need for censorship powers in such a way as to make these incursions legitimate. At the same time, the

legislative and bureaucratic agendas of these governments have sought to pre-empt and deflect criticism by placing censorship powers in an explicit criminal justice framework – though the exact methods through which censorship is pursued are themselves significantly varied. However, throughout this period, the ‘liberal dilemma’ has remained central to how censorship is framed, legislated and administrated within British counter-extremism policy.

Labour, 7/7, and The Terrorism Act 2006

The New Labour government placed a legislative approach to counter-terrorism and counter-extremism at the heart of its strategy, particularly during the premiership of Tony Blair. Terrorism legislation was passed under a Labour majority in 1998, 2000 (in relation to Northern Ireland) and in 2001 (in response to the attacks of September 11th that year), 2003, and 2005. However, in terms of the question of censorship, the Terrorism Act 2006 stands in prominence.

This act of parliament demonstrates the key feature of bureaucratic adaptation and change that we have already witnessed in counter-extremism policy: a critical juncture for policy sparked by a public demonstration of policy failure: the London attacks on 7th July 2005. Within a week of the bombings, then-Home Secretary Charles Clarke had written to his Conservative and Liberal Democrat counterparts, indicating the impending arrival of new legislation (BBC News 2005a: Online).

The British constitution presents no special barriers to imposing security measures that infringe on civil liberties, apart from achieving a majority in parliament (Haubrich 2003: 24). This helps us to understand the advantages of the legislative route in the eyes of the Blair government. However, it would be unwise to suggest that this makes passing such legislation easy or uncontroversial. Rather, the deeply engrained political culture that stresses

individual freedom (including freedom of speech) is keenly felt by government leaders.

On August 5th, Blair announced publicly the broad sweep of the 2006 act, outlining that the new legislation would “include an offence of condoning or glorifying terrorism.” (Blair 2005a: Online) In the same speech, Blair referred indirectly to contemporary incidents of extremists publicly proclaiming their support of the bombers and their cause, and subsequent public frustration that such speech was protected under current legislation (Ibid). The final bill which was passed in March 2006 proscribed the making of public statements that serve “as a direct or indirect encouragement or other inducement... to the commission of acts of terrorism”, or the distribution and circulation of terrorist publications (Terrorism Act 2006: 2-3). This Act represented the first significant steps for improving censorship capability in response to Salafist extremism. The implications of new technologies, and the creation of distinct apparatus for prosecuting online extremism, seem to have been largely ignored, although the bill did also ensure to proscribe dissemination of terrorist material electronically (Ibid: 3).

Despite this lack of engagement with the need for technological adaptation in 2006, this case is a useful one for investigating the trajectory of censorship practice in counter-extremism, and the various forces that have continually shaped it. As touched upon, the 2006 bill showcased the highly reactive and somewhat scrambling nature of counter-extremism policy in general. Path dependency and bureaucratic inertia are the norm. Yet these critical junctures are themselves largely shaped by past responses, including the culture of counter-terrorism policy that has been entrenched within Whitehall and in legislation for decades. Further, this case demonstrates a useful example of government seeking to frame the issue of censorship advantageously, in order to legitimise infringements on civil liberties and by extension the challenges of legitimising anti-terror laws within the culture of liberal democracy.

The decision to legislate extremist speech as a criminal offence shows that the Labour government was keen to frame censorship policy within a definitively criminal justice context. As Rees and Aldrich (2005) point out, Labour had inherited a counter-terror apparatus that favoured “regulatory or judicial-legal responses that seek to enhance the criminal penalties for terrorist activities and improve civil-police cooperation” (p.907) which itself was a legacy of the British counter-terror policy in Northern Ireland (p.910). When it comes to policy that intersects with civil liberty concerns, ‘the path of least resistance’ already begins to emerge as a guiding principle in British counter-extremism.

Counter-Extremism by Public Relations

Repeatedly, governments have sought to reframe the parameters of the debate surrounding censorship so to avoid accusations of excessive government power over civil liberties. While the portrayal of the Blair government as overly-image conscious may well be a well-worn trope, the significance of how Labour sought to publicly justify the need for new censorial powers should not be understated. Nor should it be considered a true turning point – attempting to reframe the ethical context of counter-terror policy was not unique to Labour under Blair. Margaret Thatcher, during the Republican hunger strikes of the 1980s, used the media to reframe the narrative of ‘political’ prisoners to legitimise the focus on criminal justice approaches: “there is no such thing as political murder, political bombing or political violence. There is only criminal murder, criminal bombing and criminal violence.” (Thatcher 1981: Online) The Labour government’s endeavours to build legitimacy are in fact the opening salvo in seeking to legitimise greater censorship in the face of Salafist extremism.

It is important to remember that the ‘talking points’ that surrounded the 2006 act were also pushed in order to win public support for more controversial action, including the 90-day detention amendment that was defeated in November 2005. Yet the similarity of the two cases – with government seeking

to impose limitations on civil liberties – means that the arguments for one reinforce arguments for the other, and thus deserve to be understood also within the prism of censorship. Using major speeches, and public action, Labour pursued a number of communicative strategies in order to deflect accusations of over-encroachment, and to legitimise incursions upon civil liberties.

The first to appear was then-Home Secretary Charles Clarke's letter to his Conservative and Liberal Democrat counterparts – David Davis and Mark Oaten respectively – Clarke underscoring a desire for compromise and inter-party unity on the new anti-terror laws (Clarke in Riddell 2005: Online). Blair also insisted that the government "will consult widely on these measures, including with the other political parties of course." (Blair 2005a: Online) The ability to present new civil liberties-restrictions on the basis of cross-party support would certainly have allowed Clarke and Labour to deflect and share any criticism resulting from its passing.¹¹⁷ While this strategy was discarded in the face of the other parties' opposition to the contents of the bill, it demonstrates that the tricky issue of civil liberties was one of which senior ministers were keenly aware, even if their strategies were unsuccessful.

More famously, Blair sought to justify the new legal powers that his government were seeking by redrawing the boundaries of 'acceptable' policy approaches. In a series of high-profile speeches, and Commons debates, the government sought to redraw the boundaries of acceptable levels of governmental encroachment on civil liberties in light of the new jihadist threat, insisting that "the rules of the game" and "the circumstances of our national security have self-evidently changed" (Ibid). In doing so, Blair himself suggested that high-profile terror attacks form the basis for critical junctures in counter-terror and counter-extremism policy, though he insisted that this

¹¹⁷ Blair claimed that the proposal for 90 days' detention without trial for terror suspects was the result of pleading from the police, in effect distancing himself and his government from the proposals (HC Deb 9 Nov 2005 Col. 297)

was in response to changing attitudes within the population that these attacks brought about:

“I think you have a different situation now... when I talk to the French Prime Minister or the Spanish Prime Minister, it was actions of terrorism in their countries, the Paris Metro bombing, the Madrid terrorist attacks which then created the climate, if you like, in which people were prepared to take these measures.”

(Ibid)

We have already argued that terrorist attacks – as open examples of counter-terrorism and counter-extremism failure – spur policy change in these policy areas. However, to follow Blair’s reasoning that these policy changes are simply newly accepted by citizens would be incomplete.

New licence to act, or electoral ruin?

Instead, we must appreciate the public pressure that spurs government into action in such situations. Charles Clarke, during the promotion of the bill, admitted that inaction in the face of human or civil rights justifications would not be gazed on kindly by the electorate (Clarke in Riddell 2005). Blair’s reasoning in this regard is further undercut by the fact that the censorship capabilities enshrined in the 2006 act remained virtually unimplemented during his remaining premiership (Parker 2007: 756-7). If these new measures had been already desirable or necessary – the key difference being that their need was only now publicly accepted – it is suspicious that these needed powers were so underused.

Thus, it is far more reasonable to interpret the timing of these changes as rising from party-political concern, and fear of being punished electorally for perceived inaction on the issue of terrorism. With this in mind, it is possible to parse out a more precise relationship between the beginnings of critical

junctures that lead to greater censorship powers, and the public advocacy by government for such measures.¹¹⁸

The success of terrorist plots betrays failures in the current policy framework, where public pressure demands action – most especially in the form of policy change or legislation. Fear of electoral punishment for inaction creates the conditions for critical junctures in policy, that allow alteration of course. However, the public pressure that faces governments in these situations encourages policymakers to seek to reframe the specific alterations chosen as expressions of values held by the majority.

Blair and Clarke very deliberately sought to challenge the notion of direct conflict between civil liberties and national security. This approach was used to make the case for the desired extra policing powers, as well as particularly the censorship aspects of the bill. Especially in the case of censorship, the government made repeated appeals that their proposals merely reflected a broad consensus – or ‘common sense’ – that already existed. Blair remarked in the Commons that

“Members talk about civil liberties, and of course it is important that we protect the civil liberties of terrorist suspects. It is also important that we protect the civil liberties of this country, and the right to life and protection from terrorism. That is why we have brought the proposals forward. We do that in a reasonable way”

(HC Deb 9 Nov 2005 Vol 439 Col 299)

This ambiguous referral to ‘reasonable’ measures is also found in Blair’s defence of the new censorship powers the bill proposed:

¹¹⁸ This reasoning could be expanded to shifts in counter-terrorism and counter-extremism policy more generally.

“there’s a great British characteristic which is common sense, and I think people understand that the common sense difference between people who have political views that I don’t agree with that you don’t agree with, and people who are actively engaged in trying to incite people to kill others or justifying it.”

(Blair 2005a: Online)

Given that the flagship proposal of the 2006 act was defeated indicate that the success of this framing attempt is debatable, at best. However, it reflects the pressures faced by liberal democratic governments to argue for increased censorship powers – and thus how public relations and media engagement is necessarily a key tool for seeking support in increasing censorship effectiveness and capability.

[More Light than Heat: Action-Signalling masking Path Dependency](#)

The Terrorism Act 2006, and the debate surrounding its passage, is a highly useful case for studying the development of censorship in British counter-extremism policy. The offences created by the act are those still used today, and thus help us establish continuity and innovation in policy more clearly. For certain, the Act bears almost no reference to emerging communications technology. However, such a gap increases its usefulness to our analysis. Being able to subtract concerns with technological development in this way allows us to observe the forces that shape government approaches to censorship in isolation, before observing how the disruptive factor of technology itself has shaped their interplay and outcomes.

In particular, observing the context of the 2006 Act reveals how path dependency carried itself out in practice, and what actions or events trigger ‘critical junctures’ in policy. What is most striking is the way in which counter-

terror legislation was seemingly influenced by the desire to appear active, rather than to build usable legislative or administrative apparatus. However, it also reveals that significant and undeniable public failure of policy triggers policymakers to portray reform to a degree commensurate with the severity of the issue. As hinted at by Clarke, failure in the public mind to take sufficient necessary action “would place impossible pressure” on any government (Clarke in Riddell 2005: Online). In the case of the 2006 Act, the ‘rules-changing’ event that apparently necessitated it resulted in mostly hollow reforms that “remained virtually unutilised” under Labour (Parker 2007: 753).

As previously discussed, Blair’s Labour government had passed anti-terror legislation in 1998, 2000, 2001, 2003 and 2005. Such a consistent rate of legislation in this area – before a major attack on UK soil – certainly arouses suspicion. More interestingly, the terrorism legislation passed by Blair’s government in this period represented only incremental reforms. Although anti-terror legislation was passed multiple times, and new powers were granted to law enforcement in each, these changes should not be confused with transformative approaches to policy. Rather, they represent ‘doubling-down’ on pre-existing solutions in the hope of increasing their effectiveness.

The Terrorism Act 2000 extended terror-related detention to 7 days;¹¹⁹ the Criminal Justice Act 2003 extended it to 14.¹²⁰ The 2001 Anti-terrorism, Crime and Security Act was billed by then-Home secretary David Blunkett as being necessary to deal with the extraordinary nature of the threat of Al-Qaeda.¹²¹ However, this transformative threat did not lead to transformations in policy direction. Instead, this ‘transformative’ approach necessitated by the new threat of Salafist terrorism simply extended the reach of an already “extremely extensive range of coercive and regulatory powers” that Labour had sought and secured in previous legislation (Fenwick 2002: 725).

¹¹⁹ HMG (2000) *Terrorism Act 2000*

¹²⁰ HMG (2003) *Criminal Justice Act 2003*

¹²¹ David Blunkett in HC Deb 19 Nov 2001 Vol 375 Col 30

One may be inclined to forgive Labour for not reinventing the counter-terror wheel in 2001. After all, while the events of 9/11 were indeed shocking, they did not represent an overt failure on the behalf of British counter-terror measures *per se*. This interpretation, however, does not mesh well with the evidence of the 2006 Act – the next realistic critical juncture since 2001, and one that demonstrated failure in the UK’s own policy.

Once again, as with the 2003 Act, detention was to be lengthened, this time to 90 days. Here we can clearly see Blair’s government doubling down on the already-established detention powers. In the face of failure, Labour remained steadfast in their belief in the efficacy of these legal powers, but merely believed they possessed inadequate reach. The length of the extension was deemed appropriate both to make these tools more effective, and commensurate with changes in the way the public viewed the balance between security and civil liberty.

In 2006, Tony Blair sought out criminal censorship powers through legislation that proscribed the ‘glorification’ of terrorism. This was supposedly to give the state and the police the powers to silence and punish extremists whom had been previously sacrosanct. However, in so doing the government ignored the fact that many laws already existed that would be sufficient for prosecutions under the government’s examples (JSCHR 2005: 16-7). In its first year on the statute book, no convictions were made under the glorification provision (Parker: 753). As of September 2009, no cases were decided in the appeal courts based on the glorification provision (Ekaratne 2010: 209). Sections 2 & 3 of the Act, arguably the now more important sections, were not given an administrative apparatus for enforcement until early 2010.¹²²

¹²² Even today, in public prosecutions of accused terrorists, earlier provisions provided in the Terrorism Act 2000 remain preferred. Section 58 of the Act, which prohibits the storage of “Information likely to be useful to a terrorist” has been extended to include the ownership of extremist material such as

The gap between the public presentation of the Act and the efficacy of the new tools the new act put in place belies the prioritisation of public appearance over measured and effective counter-extremism policy. As such, it reflects the first marked sign of a recurring pattern of 'energetic inaction' in British counter-extremism.

Though doubtfully the first, the Labour government were certainly not the last to signal active and sweeping changes in approach, which in fact delivered little in practice. As we shall see, the coincidence of various reviews and policy launches with looming elections, and new governments, demonstrate further this electoral signalling behaviour in censorship policy. This electoral signalling plays out even during critical junctures for policy. Politicians, aware that they will be punished for taking insufficient action, turn to high-profile initiatives that in practice deliver little in transformative change. The criticism that Blair's government experienced may likely be a cautionary experience for future governments, who have since favoured to forgo legislative approaches to censorship.

However, successive governments have still consistently sought to use traditional public relations methods to reframe the censorship question in terms of common or shared social values. Blair and Clarke sought to directly address and overcome the security/liberty clash, by appealing to a rather ambiguous notion that the 'common sense' present within the social attitudes of ordinary Britons was being translated into legislation. Future governments would appeal overtly to these 'common values', while often leaving them ill-defined. As we shall see in greater detail, the May government's

"ideological essays or sermons" (Casciani in BBC News 2017: Online). As explained further below, senior government figures sought to extend the act to 'keep pace with technological developments' so that streaming such content would also become a criminal offence (Bond 2018: Online; Travis 2017: Online).

communicative strategy would seek to reframe the debate in terms of child exploitation and abuse.

Despite these changes in emphasis, using common social values to reframe the need for greater censorship appears to be a running theme in British counter-extremism. The introduction of emergent communications platforms has made this type of public campaigning even more necessary.

The CTIRU Model – Reasoning, Justification, & Effectiveness

Elections as Critical Junctures

Through the example and context of the Terrorism Act 2006, we have so far laid out the evidence that the practice of censorship within British counter-extremism policy is influenced heavily by party-political/electoral pressures. Further, these changes in policy are often cosmetic. These facts make it hard to discern where truly critical junctures actually occur, and for what reasons.

For the application of censorship, the period of transfer from the Labour government to the Coalition bears out these difficulties. In 2009, Gordon Brown opted to make public the Contest Strategy for the first time. The proximity of a general election within the next year should not be underestimated as a factor in the timing of the release, and as a factor for the launch of new initiatives. Labour's record on successfully combining security with concern for civil liberties, and the further development of the Prevent strategy in particular were highlighted in Labour's 2010 manifesto (Labour Party 2010: 5:5).

Critics of this point of view may argue that Labour remained distant from the policy, and that the agency itself was brought into existence by the now-

disbanded ACPO.¹²³ However, to do so would be to overlook the practicalities of bringing such a new agency into existence. First, there is the question of finance. As agreed by police chiefs, funding for such specialist counter-terror police units such as the CTIRU is granted by the Home Office, under the auspices of the Home Secretary and Security Minister (NPCC 2015: 23).¹²⁴ Further, the 2009 CONTEST strategy places deliberate agency and mandate to the OSCT¹²⁵ to spearhead initiatives corresponding to the mission of the CTIRU (Home Office 2009a: 89) and the legal basis of the 2006 Terrorism Act was already laid out as a means to enforce compliance (Ibid: 94). With all of this evidence, it is reasonable to conclude that the drive to CTIRU's creation came from within the Cabinet, and the upper echelons of the domestic counter-terrorism bureaucracy. It is difficult to imagine therefore, whether through worries of loss of power, or to present a strong front on extremism, that electoral pressure for action did not play some part in the formation of the CTIRU in early 2010.

CTIRU: Position, Powers, and Strategy

Though ostensibly committed to bolstering the administrative force and effectiveness of the Prevent strategy, the presence of an election to spur the government into action alone cannot explain the ways in which the new censorship apparatus would be constructed. Yet the position of the CTIRU within the security machinery, and its tactics, are revealing. The choices made by the Brown government over the formation of the CTIRU demonstrate how

¹²³ Association of Chief Police Officers. In July 2014, ACPO was disbanded in favour of the current National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) (NPCC 2014: Online).

¹²⁴ If the later provenance of the agreement here cited is considered insufficient evidence in isolation, attention should be drawn to the fact the National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC) in its current guise had only existed for less than a year before this agreement was drafted. On balance, the agreement likely reflects the *status quo ante* the dissolution of Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO).

¹²⁵ Office for Security and Counter Terrorism, Home Office

concerns regarding civil liberties, the transformative effect of technology, and the government's position within the global internet infrastructure were incorporated into policy outcomes. CTIRU's continuing existence (despite minor bureaucratic reorganisation) underlines the importance of these decisions. The maintenance of the CTIRU and its capabilities by successive non-Labour governments highlights that the underlying framework of reference for these decisions remains in place – to the point that these initiatives are supported (or at least accepted) by Labour's political opponents. Thus, understanding the pressures that resulted in the CTIRU will illuminate the decision-making environment for British governments of all stripes, and spanning to the present day.

The first feature to consider is the CTIRU's position within the British government. Though spearheaded by the OSCT, the CTIRU was formed within the organisational umbrella of ACPO, before in 2011 being transferred into the Metropolitan Police's Counter Terrorism Command (NPCC 2017: Online). However, and as previously noted, funding is provided separately from the Home Office, and the OSCT was placed in initial charge of the policy initiative. In 2011, a revised Prevent strategy reaffirmed OSCT's links with the CTIRU, "to foster an environment of mutual assistance" between the police, government and industry (HMG 2011a: 76). OSCT leadership, and continued involvement under opposed governments, in the online censorship program forces us to examine the decision to place the primary apparatus of the program outside of the OSCT.

The most obvious answer would be that seeking to prosecute through legal means is reflective of the criminal justice model of British counter-terrorism in general. It cannot be denied that the CTIRU operates within a criminal framework, seeking censorship of material proscribed as criminal in the Terrorism Act 2006, and utilising the powers outlined in the same (HMG 2011b: 75). The CTIRU also works in co-ordination with the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), which plays an advisory role to determine whether content

equates to a breach of statute (CPS 2013: 2). On this evidence, it would be reasonable to argue that the CTIRU's position boils down to the formation of a criminal justice agency to prosecute criminal justice cases.

However, the methods through which CTIRU wields its powers – and thus seeks its intended censorship goals – must give us pause before describing the agency strictly as a police organisation. The close links with the OSCT notwithstanding, the *modus operandi* of the agency is not focused on pursuit or prosecution. Instead, CTIRU's model relies on monitoring internet channels, either independently or by referral by private citizens, before forwarding requests to private companies and partners. (Jarrett in MPS 2016: Online; Taylor, HL Ans 23 Sep 2013 Vol 747 Col WA421-2; HMG 2011b: 75). Revealingly, these private sector partners are encouraged to remove the material under the pretext of breaching a platform's own terms and conditions, rather than a breach of the Terrorism Act.¹²⁶

This incongruence between the CTIRU's status as a policing body and its strategy force us to realise that the agency is a piece of a wider political propaganda campaign, instead of being a stand-alone enforcer of the law. With this realisation in hand, we can begin to prise apart the reasoning behind both the CTIRU's position and strategy. As mentioned previously, the survival of the CTIRU under successive ideologically-diverse administrations implies that this reasoning has remained roughly constant since 2010. To fully understand these reasons, we must look deeply into the question of outward presentation, but especially into the shifting technological foundations of modern communications, and the implications of these shifts for government access and regulation.

Outward Appearances – Not Civil Liberties, but Child Protection

¹²⁶ Private information. See also McNamee (2011) p.28

Although the issue of civil liberties has, to a degree, been already repeated within this discussion, it bears further repetition when considering the choices made in the creation of the CTIRU. It is easy to appreciate that the precise role of the CTIRU in the flagging and take-down of extremist material need not have been placed within the police. CPS personnel may also have easily assisted a more clandestine agency, such as RICU, within the OSCT proper. Therefore, we must look at other political considerations to explain why the CTIRU's functions landed within the police service.

The culture of a criminal justice model to counter-terrorism in general should not be overstated. While it is true that path dependency alone may account for the endowment of the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) with responsibility for propagandistic censorship, a much more compelling explanation comes from examining the framing of the CTIRU's work as an essential part of community cohesion, and as an expression of common values within British society. Even before the official foundation of CTIRU, this rhetorical framework was already being laid. The 2009 Contest strategy, which laid out the responsibility of the OSCT, highlighted the basis on which future censorship would be approached and justified.

This basis, specifically, was centred around the precedents set in tackling child sexual abuse. The strategy specifically sought to equate the banning and removal of extremist material from the internet with laws and procedures that were designed to fight the ownership or dissemination of "indecent photographs of children under 18", while simultaneously acknowledging the incompatibility of the underlying legal frameworks (Home Office 2009a: 95)¹²⁷. Such a move is, in fairness, a smart way of negotiating the civil liberties questions that had dogged the passage of the 2006 Terrorism Act which provided the legal powers that CTIRU uses to enforce its censorship program.

¹²⁷ Perhaps unsurprisingly, such admissions have been wholly absent from government statements from this time forward.

Reframing the issue in this way bypasses the tensions between security measures and civil liberty, and presents extremist censorship as vital to the protection of children, and by extension, the common values and decency of society.

This rhetorical tactic has been maintained and further developed in different ways by successive governments, although the language and tactics for relaying this message have shifted somewhat over time. Nevertheless, the equation of the fight against extremism and radicalisation to child exploitation and abuse has remained a common theme since the CTIRU's inception. Although specific references to child sexual abuse are omitted from the 2011 Contest strategy, the work of Prevent was closely linked with the desire to "safeguard children" (HMG 2011b: 61). The standalone revised *Prevent* strategy, however, demonstrated the first deliberate linkage by government between sexual abuse and radicalisation, describing young extremists as "being groomed to terrorism" (HMG 2011a: 80). By 2013, the relationship and similarities between the CTIRU's role and the removal of internet child pornography were put in sharp focus by the government,¹²⁸ while the application of counter-extremist censorship through "family-friendly filters" was openly encouraged (Cabinet Office 2013: 3). This trend of likening radicalisation to grooming has continued largely unabated. Radicalisation was frequently and deliberately associated with "other forms of grooming", and recruiters were referred to as "groomers" in official training documents (Sutton County Council 2015: 2; University of Kent 2013).

The advantages of such a rhetorical approach have clearly been felt and understood across the ideological spectrum and across time, allowing to justify censorship tactics by tapping in to deeply-held common values relating to the prevention of child abuse. Critics may view such an interpretation as cynical, and argue that such equations between radicalisation and abuse are justified

¹²⁸ HL Ans 23 Sep 2013, Col WA421-2

and appropriate. It is certainly true that the British model of censorship has been inspired by and built along the same lines as civil society initiatives to crack down on indecent images of children circulating online (HMG 2015: 25; HMG 2011a: 79), and that the problems of removing content from a widely-distributed (and often well-hidden) network remain largely the same. In this light, the similarities between the two issues are clear and straightforward.

However, it is supremely difficult to argue that this comparison is not more than a little expedient. While there are distinct matches between how these types of content are uploaded and transmitted, basing an argument for fair comparison on such grounds is tenuous at best – for the simple reason that all online content is constructed, packeted, and distributed in the same manner. The actual content of communication over the internet is irrelevant for how the technological underpinnings of the internet transfer this information. So while this argument can be made, it ignores that all types of political content are uploaded, distributed and accessed in the exact same way as child pornography – at least in technological terms. The application of such a rhetorical strategy begins to unravel when we separate the means of censorship enforcement from what is actually being censored.

Another way in which the comparison could be justified is that young Britons are routinely targeted by terrorist organisations for recruitment. Indeed, young British Muslims have been specifically targeted for recruitment by extremist Salafist organisations, instances of which have received great attention in the British press. However, this argument does not address the true total audience of these political communications. For while children may need protection from radicalising influencers before they are adjudged to be sufficiently responsible to vote, the removal of such content also prevents such communication reaching adults. No distinction is made between censoring material intended for children and that intended for adults – the questions around these adults' civil liberties cannot be explained away by reference to child exploitation.

In order to successfully frame censorship powers in such a way – the protection of vulnerable people from criminal predators – requires a body with criminal justice authority to undertake them. As representatives of the police (and by extension, the rule of law) the CTIRU’s position serves to legitimise both the censorship powers themselves, and the arguments made in their favour. As under Blair, censorship powers are thus framed as serving common social values, and extensions of ‘common sense’ limitations on free expression. The inclusion of a public referral system from the CTIRU’s outset only further strengthens the argument that the government sought to position the agency as a public servant, that received and acted directly upon the concerns and worries of average citizens (HMG 2011a: 78). Then-Security Minister Lord West described that this inclusion was “about empowering individuals to... make a civic challenge against material that they find offensive, even if it is not illegal.” (West in Harris 2010: Online) This final addition is telling, coming from no less than a minister directly responsible for the policy. If not based upon legality, and aiding the police to prosecute suspects, then this referral system has been designed to incorporate civil society and citizens into the application of censorship, lending the project needed legitimacy in the face of civil liberties questions.

Challenges of Online Censorship

While one can admit that the tricky political questions thrown up by the application of censorship powers have been well handled – at least in the public eye – the same cannot be said for the actual effectiveness of the CTIRU model. The new challenge faced by the emergence of the internet as a dominant forum for political communication has seriously hindered British efforts at counter-extremist censorship. Many factors have coalesced to create the exact challenges that the British government now faces. However, they can primarily be divided into: the internet’s international and decentralised

character; and the prevalence and cheapening of content-creating devices and software. These factors are bound up within the free-market system within which (as other liberal democracies) is embedded. Negotiating the difficulties related with a free enterprise system is not new to the British government, particularly throughout the 20th century. However, the character of online communications has complicated this process severely, as the media infrastructure with which the government must engage has decentralised and internationalised on a massive scale. The ways in which the government sought to navigate this new environment reveal these difficulties clearly.

However, attempts to overcome such difficulties – between 2010 and 2015 – were thin on the ground, if they existed at all. Throughout, an emphasis on collaboration with industry emerges as predominant, with legislation taking a subordinate position. Controversy surrounding civil liberties once again emerges as a factor that stayed the government's hand. Yet the new environment as a whole presented government with limited effective options, and from 2015 a new approach emerged, seeking to place public pressure on private companies to act in the name of society to stamp out extremism on their platforms, and to develop of automated tools for identification and removal of terrorist content.

Challenges of International Media

To begin, however, we must first appreciate that the British government has long been working in concordance with independent media outlets for many decades. The DMAS-Notice system, established with the voluntary acquiescence and involvement of the British media, is a testament to the government's established behind-the-scenes modes of censorship in the name of national security (Sadler 2018: 1-2; Miller 2004: 11). Wilkinson (2009) describes this system as “non-statutory, voluntary, independent, adversarial, pragmatic, semi-formal, yet accepted almost invariably, if not invariably happily, as representative of both the Media [sic] and of officials.” (p.xx)

Immediately, we can draw out the similarities between the (still active) D-Notice system and the informal approach that has been taken by successive British governments to online censorship of extremist material. That such path dependency should materialise in this new domain is not highly surprising. But nor should it be outright condemned – the pressures of seeking to prevent the circulation of material that is damaging to national security within a free media environment have remained constant, and these informal links have produced very positive results in the past (Miller 2004: 11). However, the vastly altered media landscape has seriously hampered the effectiveness of such an approach.

The D-Notice system was first conceived and enacted during World War I. This system of establishing informal understandings with the media was embedded within a media system characterised by low numbers of established outlets, centralised editorial control of publication, and that was strictly domestic in scope. This made establishing and managing these links a simple task, and such links would translate directly into media output, which itself was of a relatively narrow variety. Further – apart from certain cases during times of war – there was very little in terms of international input into the British media diet. As such, the D-Notice system was able to restrict access to undesirable information with great effectiveness.

The emergence of internet-mediated news and political communication has thrown this state of affairs on its head. This new environment is characterised by an exponential increase in available news sources, little to any controls over publication, a decentralised infrastructure, and the availability of news sources that operate across borders with ease. In this environment, the assimilation of the D-Notice framework has met with limited success when applied to online censorship attempts.

The international scope of accessible information through the internet has made enforcement and removal of content an ineffective tool. The example of Nominet – the private enterprise responsible for the management of all .uk domain names – is instructive to the difficulties found here. For three years, between 2014 and 2017, Nominet has suspended domain names after requests from the CTIRU only once, which may be increased as far as 9 if we treat the CTIRU as the source of all requests from the Metropolitan Police.¹²⁹ Such low request numbers – in contrast with the far higher government estimates of content removal – push us to conclude that the territorial jurisdiction of the government is an underpowered tool when it comes to online censorship, being unable to enforce the removal of content at source. Government sources inform us as much. Where legal enforcement is not a viable option, the government has formed partnerships with other governments (who may themselves be able to enforce removal) and with Internet Service Providers that apply filters that prevent access to certain web addresses (Dick in Home Affairs Committee 2014: 6). The sprawling architecture and cooperation needed to operate such a system – and the difficulties associated with such – are simple to imagine. Representatives of major internet and technology providers such as Google, Microsoft, Twitter, Facebook and Yahoo for example, indicate the inconsistency of process for removal requests across territories as a key area for improvement by the Home Office (Ascroft et al. in Home Affairs Committee 2014: 108-9).

Democratisation & Decentralisation of Publication

Given these potential pitfalls and entanglements, the favouring of informal ties becomes much easier to understand. However, this approach possesses severe limitations. The most pressing issue that is facing governments as they seek effective censorship of this new environment is they democratisation – and therefore decentralisation – of publishing ability. This involves cheap

¹²⁹ Nominet (2015; 2016; 2017)

access to web hosting services, cheap access to content creation tools. These include hand-held devices that are capable of video and audio capture, as well as free or cheap editing software¹³⁰ - as well as popular and open social media platforms that allow easy upload and search, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, among others.

Perhaps the most direct evidence of these problems can be found in the limitations of the web address removal and filtering policies discussed above. While the closing down of individual outlets may have been effective when these were difficult and expensive to maintain, the rise of internet communications has rendered such an approach worryingly underpowered. As McNamee (2010) notes:

“There are unending numbers of free or cheap web hosting services available. The deletion [or blocking] of a website is therefore an inconvenience and not a punishment... with penalties imposed by the criminal justice system replaced by nothing more than the inconvenience of having to upload the content elsewhere.”

(McNamee 2010: Online)

Whereas in the past government agencies would be able to locate and seize the means of production and publication of undesirable content, the low-cost, high-speed means of content production and distribution afforded by the internet significantly undermines the labour intensive, site-specific methods of censorship used by the CTIRU.

Another serious impediment to the effectiveness of URL removal and blocking is the pre-eminence of social media platforms in the current communications

¹³⁰ The prevalence of such technology is the key factor in the professional and sleek propaganda products put out by groups such as ISIL/Daesh (e.g Rose 2014: Online)

environment. The fact that these platforms – primarily YouTube and Twitter – have been leveraged heavily by terrorist and extremist organisations make this a particularly glaring hole in the censorship regime. That these platforms are hosted overseas makes the application of the Terrorism Act 2006 a non-starter. Further, the filtering out of such platforms on a unilateral national basis would most likely be extremely politically – and potentially economically – damaging. Indeed, the unilateral censorship of such platforms has been used as evidence to de-legitimise governments across the world who have taken similar action (Raoof in Abutaleb & Menn 2016: Online; Clinton in Bradshaw 2011: Online).

The position of the social media giants within the extremist/terrorist propaganda campaigns, however, must be understood as a product not only of the publication service and audience that they provide, but also the wider technological context in which these platforms reside. The publisher/platform dichotomy of these companies is a subject of intense debate, to which we shall soon return due to its centrality to later responses, particularly under the May government. Yet this publisher/platform dichotomy is only made possible by the increase in personal devices and means to create and upload compelling political communication. The sheer weight of information that can be uploaded to these platforms places online censorship strategies on a permanent back foot (Henry Jackson Society in Home Affairs Committee 2014: 70). This overwhelming tide of information has been cited by police officers as a key determinant of the CTIRU's reliance on public referrals (Ibid). The effectiveness of such a state of affairs is questionable at best; and these shortcomings have since been brought into sharp relief, pushing government to seek automated solutions for identifying terrorist and extremist content online.

[The 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy & Beyond](#)

Responding to these censorship limitations, as well as those in other areas, was the main thrust behind the launch of the 2015 Counter-Extremism Strategy. This new strategy, which, according to then-PM David Cameron, represented “a complete overhaul” of government thinking in this policy area (Cameron in HMG 2015: 5) laid out little in terms of plugging these gaps in the censorship element of Prevent. However, through insider testimony and analysing public statements, clear breaks with the past can be discerned in the period from 2015 until the time of writing.

A Critical Juncture?: Radicalisation, Elections & the PM

Before reviewing these changes in more detail, it is important to return to the question of critical junctures. As put forth in the previous chapter, the Counter-Extremism Strategy (CES) represented a clear break with the past in terms of the targeting practices of British propaganda policy. On the surface, the reasoning for this change appears straight-forward – the alarming success achieved by terrorist organisations such as ISIL/Daesh in radicalising and recruiting adherents through a sophisticated online propaganda machine. In the previous chapter, such an explanation was requisite for a discussion surrounding targeting. Concerning the question of censorship, however, it is useful to explore the complexities of this question in sharper definition. In this area of propaganda policy, it is far easier to discern more fully what events help to constitute critical junctures; in this case, the atmosphere of elections, and the personal prerogative of the prime minister in counter-extremism.

This having been said, it is wise not to understate the impact of the success of ISIL/Daesh in carrying out successful attacks across mainland Europe, and the flow of British recruits to swell the ranks of groups fighting across Iraq and Syria. Much deserved public attention was focused in these developments. However, it was not until July 2015 that David Cameron announced the Counter-Extremism Strategy, which was released in the autumn (Cameron 2015: Online). The timing of this ‘strategic redirection’ can be attributed to two

reasons: the lack of serious attacks on British soil, and the newly-installed majority Conservative administration ushered in by the 2015 General Election.

The absence of successful attacks on British soil – as opposed to the turmoil across the continent (particularly in France) – helps to explain the lack of real overhaul in counter-extremism policy in 2015. In contrast to their European counterparts, the only successful attack in the 2010-15 period was the small-scale, single victim murder of Drummer Lee Rigby in 2013. Instead, it was the pace and scale of recruitment from Britain to ISIL/Daesh and others that was the driving force behind the new strategy, as attested to by then-Home Secretary Theresa May (May in HMG 2015: 7).

Eliminating successful terror attacks on UK soil as a motivator for this ‘critical’ juncture in policy forces us to examine the timing of this strategy more closely. As demonstrated by the 2013 killing of Lee Rigby, the role of online material to the radicalisation of British Muslims had been a growing problem for a number of years (Burke 2015: 175). Throughout the years 2013 and 2014, the use of social media as an extremist propaganda and recruiting tool had been well documented in the media and throughout the public sphere (Berger & Morgan 2015: 9; Irshaid 2014; Telegraph 2014). Given the sensitivity and widespread nature of this problem, the delay until the latter half of 2015 for government action is difficult to understand.

This is unless we pay proper attention the General Election of that same year, which delivered a single-party government for the Conservatives. Since 2010, the Conservatives had been saddled in a coalition with the Liberal Democrats. Now free from having to negotiate a bipartisan approach, the government was in a far more powerful position to initiate changes to counter-extremism policy, and by extension the application of censorship. It is not difficult to reason that the opportunity to stamp Conservative authority onto counter-extremism in such a way would be attractive, and would signal a government now free to deal with these problems effectively. The CES released in October

included policy announcements that had already been laid out in the Conservative Manifesto of the same year, including the roll-out of Extremism Disruption Orders that would “prevent those seeking to radicalise young British people online from using the internet or communicating via social media.” (Conservative & Unionist Party 2015: 63)

The Juncture that Wasn't: the Conservative Promise-Action Gap

In the final released strategy, this language was considerably softened; no direct mention of Extremism Disruption Orders was made, though the strategy declared that the government would

“create targeted new powers, flexible enough to cover the full range of extremist behaviour, including where extremists sow divisions in our communities and seek to undermine the rule of law.”

(HMG 2015: 17)

There is no mention of any censorship powers attached to these new powers in the CES, in contrast with the forthrightness of the party's manifesto. Potential controversy over sweeping gagging powers may have played a role in the softening of language in this document. Cameron's speech announcing the strategy's impending autumn release also softened the manifesto language, declaring that the government would “introduce new narrowly targeted powers” that would stop radicalisers “peddling their hatred.” (Cameron 2015: Online).

Yet this softening of language was also reflected in a lack of action to bring these proposals forward. By mid-July 2016, a lack of government action on these policies pressed the Joint Select Committee on Human Rights (JSCHR) to comment that the government “are now only able to talk in general terms of... some form of consultation short of a draft Bill. It is not clear whether the

original proposals are still on the table or whether they have been superseded.” (JSCHR 2016: Online)

While some may suggest that the ascension of Theresa May to the office of Prime Minister may have played a role in this shift of priorities – and May’s influence is a subject to which we shall soon return – this is not a compelling explanation for this gap between promise and action. Simply put, by the time of the JSCHR’s opinion was released, May had been Prime Minister for a sum total of nine days (JSCHR 2016: Online; BBC News 2016: Online), and the Queen’s Speech the committee referred to had taken place in May (HMG 2016: Online). As such, the softening or lack of action on these policy commitments must be considered as a reflection upon the priorities of the Cameron administration.

On the balance of this evidence, we can see clearly a large gap between publicised initiatives and concrete action. Once again, a pattern of energetic inaction begins to emerge, seemingly predicated on a desire to signal a tough and competent approach on terrorism to the electorate. The inclusion of statistics from the CTIRU campaign – that “Over 75,000 pieces of unlawful material have been taken down from the internet” – alongside the Conservatives’ manifesto pledge on Extremism Disruption Orders lends further weight to this interpretation (Conservative & Unionist Party 2015: 63).

Such a gap forces us to question the extent to which the Counter-Extremism Strategy represented a critical juncture in censorship policy. If the main censorship powers sought during the election campaign were not pursued, then any claim that such pronouncements may accurately be labelled as a critical juncture would be thin. If we also take into account the rather minor shifts in the CTIRU’s position within the counter-terrorism bureaucracy instigated in 2015, this realisation is borne out more clearly. In this year, RICU was re-organised, with an Online Policy segment founded to help manage relationships with industry partners more effectively. More importantly for

our purposes, this segment was given shared oversight of the CTIRU¹³¹, jointly with the Metropolitan Police, most likely in a similar effort to streamline cooperation efforts between the OSCT and internet service providers. In one way, solidifying the connections between the OSCT and the censorship agency that the Home Office funded was a step away from treating censorship as a squarely criminal justice issue. However, maintaining CTIRU's position within the Metropolitan police demonstrates that this was hardly a sweeping change in policy direction.

In addition, the creation of evermore complex connections between various agencies and departments has been a consistent trait of British counter-terror and counter-extremism for many years (Dick in Home Affairs Committee 2014: 9). The government's relationship with service providers would remain largely unchanged. The Counter-Extremism Strategy asserted that the government would "work with social media and communication providers to ensure extremists do not have open access to their platforms." (HMG 2015: 25) That this statement reflected previous policy exactly is unsurprisingly not mentioned; similarly, the promotion of filtering as a solution to extremist online content, as we have seen, was a goal of government policy in this area since at least 2013 (HMG 2015: 25; Cabinet Office 2013: 3).

On the issue of censorship, the Counter-Extremism Strategy represents little in terms of actual innovation. Incremental revision to bureaucratic structure (in line with long established practice) and a seeming unwillingness to forcefully pursue promised powers forces us to conclude that while 2015 outwardly represented a potential critical juncture in censorship policy, in fact little in terms of true change was achieved.

Explaining the Gap

¹³¹ Private information

The reasons for a lack of action on the issue of censorship in 2015 requires explanation. First of all, it is important to note that the 2011 review of policy initiated by the newly-elected government also resulted merely in the shifting of the CTIRU's position, from ACPO into the Metropolitan Police proper (NPCC 2014: Online). It seems that, in terms of censorship, elections primarily lead to the signalling of intentions to voters, rather than spurring much action in of themselves, especially post-election. Yet, as we have seen, the 2015 strategy did result in significant changes to the targeting regime for the government's own propaganda (even if these new practices were extensions of pre-existing thought). Therefore, we must also look for other explanatory factors that can account for the comparative lack of action in the realm of censorship.

The answer for this lies in the controversial nature of increasing censorship powers, particularly those requiring new legislation. It is important to remember that, even though the Labour government successfully passed the 2006 Terrorism Act, the censorship provisions of this Act were not provided administrative counterparts until February 2010. This indicates that the controversy and scrutiny generated by the bill's passage may have stayed government willingness to implement these new powers fully, at least in the short term. We may also consider the Conservatives' – and Theresa May's – experience during the attempted passage of the Draft Communications Bill in the previous parliament, that drew harsh criticism from both the public and within the coalition government (Press Association 2014: Online). Though these powers were directed towards surveillance, the ensuing controversy in regards to the encroachment on civil liberties may help explain the Conservatives' reluctance to chase legislative remedies.

Public Relations in aid of Censorship Enforcement

To this point, we have established that the 2015 strategy did not equate to a critical juncture in censorship policy. This is partly explained by the political need to signal action on terrorism, and partly by the sensitivity of seeking

greater powers through legislation. Hemmed in due to these difficulties, it is accurate to say that 2015 did not represent a critical juncture in its own policy. Yet 2015 did signal a clear break with the past in how the problems of censorship were framed. The rhetorical linkage of radicalisation with child abuse has continued unabated (Shields 2016: Online; HMG 2015: 25; Cameron 2015: Online), but the ways in which rhetoric and public relations strategy are used by the government in aid of censorship policy were significantly increased.

From this point, a clear pivot in the communicative strategy often used by government in aid of censorship can be spotted. Instead of, as previously, rhetorical strategies being used to justify the need for censorship powers, government statements began to be used in order to place pressure on private companies who were adjudged as needing to do more in combatting online extremism. David Cameron asserted no less when announcing the CES in July 2015:

“we need our internet companies to go further in helping us identify potential terrorists online... when it comes to doing what’s right for their business, they are happy to engineer technologies to track our likes and dislikes. But when it comes to doing what’s right in the fight against terrorism, we often hear that it’s all too difficult. Well I’m sorry – but I just don’t buy that.”

(Cameron 2015: Online)

To varying degrees of severity, government officials have pressed these companies to participate more actively in preventing extremist content proliferating on their platforms in public statements (Shields 2016: Online).

This shift in communicative strategy can largely be explained by the problems of international enforcement, selective URL blocking or filtering, and media democratisation discussed above. However, these public statements have also

deliberately sought to shift the onus of blame away from government for holes in the censorship regime, particularly after the run of terror attacks experienced by the UK in the spring and early summer of 2017. The narrow timeframe within which these attacks took place, and their severity, reflect a hardening of this stance.

After the Westminster attack on 22nd March, both the Foreign and Home Secretaries used major media outlets to chastise major social media and technology companies for their lack of progress. Foreign Secretary Boris Johnson, in an interview with the Sunday Times, labelled Google “disgusting”, insisting he was “furious” at the company’s “making money out of prurient violent material.” (Johnson in Revesz 2017: Online). Home Secretary Amber Rudd used an article in The Telegraph to pressure these companies “to take a more proactive and leading role in tackling terrorist abuse of their platforms”, insisting: “we can’t do it by ourselves.” (Rudd in Riley-Smith et al. 2017: Online)

After the Manchester attack on 22nd May of the same year, this rhetoric was ratcheted up further. Security Minister Ben Wallace indicated that the Conservatives would continue to up pressure on these companies, and that the government was deliberately encouraging automation and AI tools as the best way forward (Wallace in Asthana 2017a: Online). May herself re-iterated these calls for automated solutions, while also pushing for better industry standards and rules regarding extremist material, and improved lines of co-ordination with the government (Asthana 2017b: Online).

Finally, after the London Bridge attack on 3rd June, May backed off on the social media companies in a televised address to the nation, instead announcing “we need to review Britain’s counter-terror strategy” in order to adapt “as the nature of the threat we face becomes more complex, more fragmented, more hidden, especially online” before simply declaring: “enough is enough.” (May 2017: Online) The repeated success that Salafist terrorists had achieved in such

a short space of time seems to have forced the government into greater self-reflection, and turn away from blaming the missteps of outside forces.

A Carrot and Stick Approach

As noted towards the start of this chapter, and during the previous, open examples of policy failure are most closely associated with critical junctures in counter-extremism policy. This announcement of a review in June 2017 would fit nicely within this argument. However, in terms of censorship this reasoning does not seem to hold. While the Westminster and Manchester attacks were followed by stringent criticism from Cabinet ministers, these statements certainly would not constitute a critical break in policy; as we have seen, the pressuring social media companies through public statements had been a feature of censorship policy since 2015. What is different about these statements is a newly-trained focus on automation and AI as a means of streamlining and improving the effectiveness of censorship, which did not come about until the government's response to the Manchester attacks on 22nd May. Yet again it is difficult to frame this move as a critical juncture in policy, and instead it is more accurate to characterise this move as a hardening of approach rather than a significant pivot of any kind. The review promised by May after the London Bridge attacks in June, however, could be pointed to more realistically as reflecting a potential critical juncture. The repeated and tragic failures of policy had been laid bare, with three high-profile and damaging attacks hitting within a two-and-a-half month period. At the time of writing, the results of such a review are yet to be made public, and as of at least October 2017, this review was still not complete.¹³²

During the autumn and winter of 2017-2018 though, some clues as to a new approach from government have come to light. We have already discussed the reticence on the part of the government for seeking legislative remedies in this

¹³² Private information

area, and potential reasons that explain this reticence. Yet since the summer, what has clearly emerged is a kind of ‘carrot and stick’ approach to encourage greater compliance from these companies. One RICU official responsible for managing the agency’s relationships with tech firms indicated that while the government sought voluntary co-operation, “legislation is always on the table” if these companies are seen to be shirking their responsibilities.¹³³ Over the winter, though, the government has appeared to move away from enforcement legislation; instead favouring the threat of punitive tax measures to encourage more action:

“We should stop pretending that because they sit on beanbags in T-shirts they are not ruthless profiteers... If they continue to be less than cooperative, we should look at things like tax as a way of incentivising them or compensating for their inaction.”

(Wallace in Lomas 2018: Online)

As of April, however, no concrete action has been taken to legislate new responsibilities for or impose new tax measures on social media companies.

As such, it is still hard to characterise these developments – under both Cameron and May - as constituting a critical juncture or junctures. Instead, it is more accurate to say that these moves represent a subtle yet significant shift in the relationship between government and industry. The structures and processes that connect both sides remain firmly in place; but the tone and public debate concerning this relationship has slid slowly into an ever-increasingly antagonistic context.

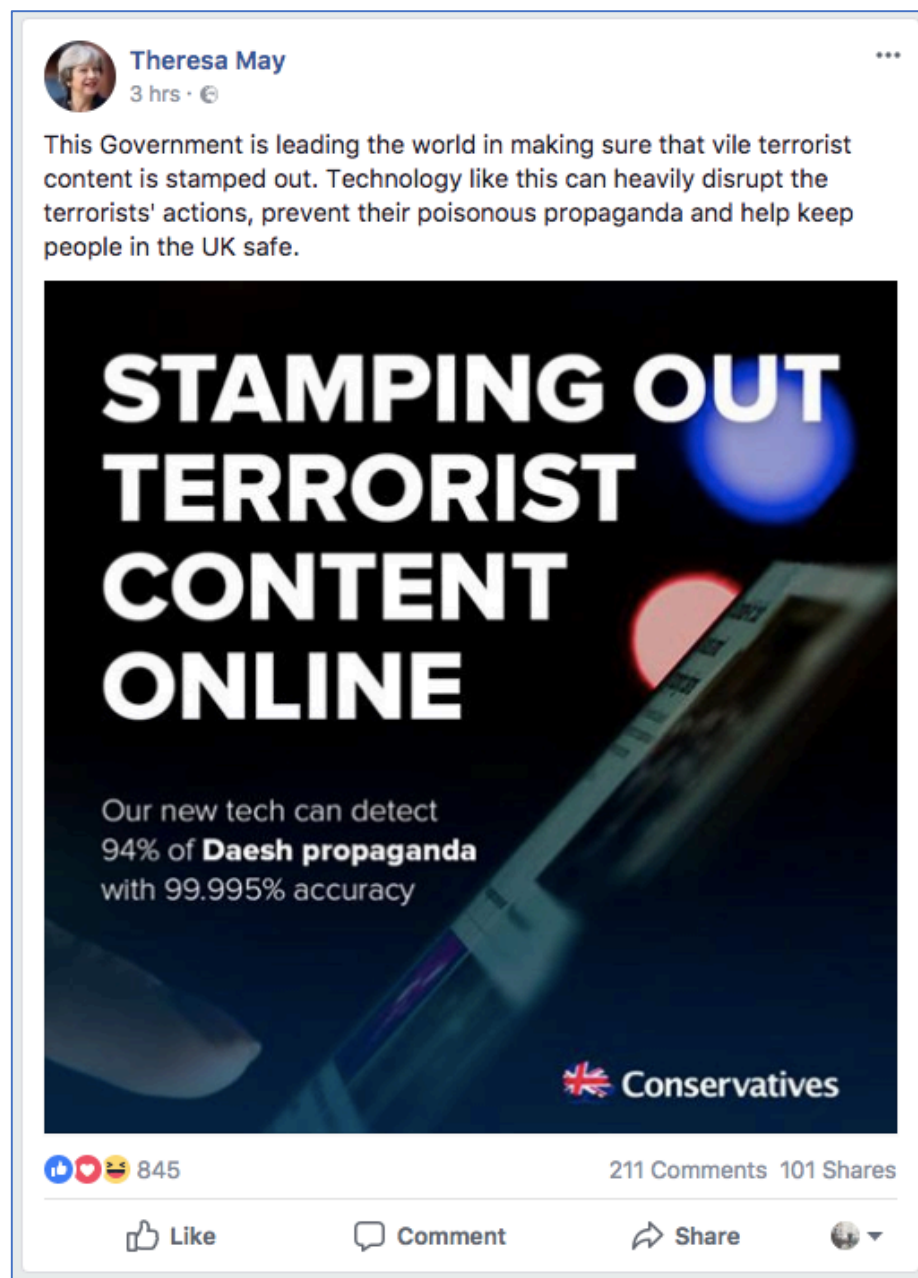
Constraints negating Critical Junctures: Symbolic Change in Stance

¹³³ Ibid.

In this chapter and elsewhere, we have outlined that shifts in counter-extremism policy – critical or otherwise – have flowed from two main sources. Firstly, successful terrorist attacks in allied nations, and particularly on UK soil; and second, the pressures of party politics, either pressing for action in the face of an election, or the elevation of a new government. In the case of 2015-2017, all of these factors are in play. The significance of each of these interwoven factors is difficult to prise apart – especially for the year 2017, where clear failings of counter-terror policy were coupled with an ongoing General Election campaign.

In this instance, the escalation from Cameron-style criticisms by Johnson and Rudd in March to specific calls for the use of AI and a policy review announced in May and June respectively cannot be persuasively explained as the result of one factor over another. The celebration of these automated systems in Conservative party communications underlines that effective censorship policy is seen as a useful means of garnering electoral support (at least within

the party hierarchy), but separating public opinion on this issue from the shared experiences of March to June 2017 is an impossible task.



[Figure 8: Conservative Social Media Advert (Theresa May Facebook 2018)]

But in many ways, such a question is beside the point. For instead of sweeping change in censorship policy (or in counter-terror/extremism in general) what we have seen is a subtle change in public posturing on the part of the government, from chastisement, to antagonism, to lingering threats. Without

evidence of any – let alone significant – change in bureaucracy, administration, or legislation, we must treat such changes as largely symbolic changes. When we appreciate this, the important question to ask is not which particular factor may have superseded another in driving this shifting stance, but rather why such a confluence of push factors did not lead to more sweeping changes.

The answer appears to be that the government, on the issue of censorship, has run out of road. Without the political will – or the parliamentary majority – to back new legislative powers that will almost undoubtedly draw severe criticism, there remain limited options for the government to proceed, beyond these changes in public posture towards industry. The legal regime already in place, as discussed, is not an effective tool in an internationalised media environment. As a result, the doubling-down on cross-border cooperation makes sense as an attractive option (HMG 2015: 25); but represent nothing more than attempts to improve current approaches, rather than serious changes.

The reported success of automated, AI-based censorship tools may point to the wisdom of refining existing practice and the subtle change of posture to a more antagonistic footing (see Figure 8). But, as mentioned, this cannot be considered as a critical juncture in the true sense. Rather, the reliance on (or ultimatums to) social media and technology companies reflects the lack of other options considered viable or advantageous to the government at this time. These political and technological constraints have funnelled the impetus for potentially significant changes into actions that must be treated largely as presentational, though the effectiveness of such changes is still up for debate.

The ‘Double Down’ on Consumer-focused Censorship

It has taken until 2019 for the final fruits of the 2017 attacks to appear in CVE propaganda policy. As noted in above and elsewhere in Chapter 5, the lack of significant restructuring of the British CVE propaganda policy is a curious

omission, especially given the tendencies displayed in previous critical junctures.¹³⁴ However, the impact of 2017 has most clearly come to bear in censorship strategy. The 2018 CONTEST review, following May's announcement speech in June 2017, explicitly laid out that more effectively preventing the dissemination of extremist material on the internet was to be the primary focus of policy improvement (HMG 2018: 10; May 2017: Online)

However, in subsequent years the focus of government has been to strengthen legislative provisions targeted at consumers of propaganda, not its exponents or the platforms that host them. Again, the noted acceleration of policy change along pre-established rails comes into focus. Further, this acceleration produces a neat conceptual way to observe policy decision-making. It is important to clarify that prior to the passage of the Counter-Terror and Border Security Act, the British government possessed and utilised legal provisions that targeted both disseminators and consumers of extremist material.¹³⁵ What is instructive to students of policy is that, in this context, government sought to strengthen legislation targeted toward consumers.

Granted Royal Assent on February 12th 2019, the changes brought into law by this act included the extension of prohibited activities offline (such as the display of terrorist insignia) into the online sphere; the widening of the prohibition on "inviting support for a proscribed organisation" to include 'supportive' or 'reckless' opinions; and increasing the maximum penalties for disseminating terrorist propaganda to 15 years. Chief among these changes, however, was the extension of Section 58 of the 2000 Terrorism Act, which prohibited "collect[ing] or mak[ing] a record of information of a kind likely to be useful to a person committing or preparing an act of terrorism".¹³⁶ In the 2019 Act, this prohibition was amended so to add that "A person commits an

¹³⁴ RICU's increased standing amongst international partners is a partial explanation for this phenomenon, see Chapter 5.

¹³⁵

¹³⁶ *Terrorism Act 2000*

offence if - ... the person views, or otherwise accesses, by means of the internet a document or record containing information of that kind.”¹³⁷ The Home Office explanatory note to the 2019 bill explains that this measure is targeted at the viewing of terrorist propaganda, by “updating the offence of obtaining information likely to be useful to a terrorist to cover material that is only viewed or streamed, rather than downloaded” (HMG 2019b: Online).¹³⁸

It would seem that, given the previously-discussed difficulties of applying censorship to producers and disseminators in an internationalised media environment, government has decided that consumer-focused censorship is the route most likely to be effective – at least for the purposes of securing prosecutions (Bond 2018: Online; Travis 2017: Online). The comparatively simple means to establish criminality on a geographically locatable individual (more importantly, where their jurisdiction is unquestioned) has incentivised government to accelerate down this path.¹³⁹ This example demonstrates how a blended institutionalist approach can illuminate the process of policy choice. By examining which pre-established paths policy-makers choose to travel, we can critically examine the reasoning for such choices. In combination with the lens provided by McLuhan, we can demonstrate how technological advancement is approached by government through competing policy avenues, and thus discover its wider social impacts.

¹³⁷ *Terrorism Act 2000* – amended via *Counter Terror and Border Security Act 2019*

¹³⁸ This reading of the 2000 provision, and its extension into the mere act of viewing or streaming extremist content, raises uncomfortable questions concerning civil liberties in Britain. The UN Special Rapporteur on privacy described such moves as moving the UK “towards thought crime” (Cannatacci in Dearden 2018: Online).

¹³⁹ It is also worth noting that government rhetoric concerning internet companies has simultaneously thawed.

Conclusions on British Online Censorship Policy

The censorship strand of British CVE propaganda policy has been largely out of step with the rest. Although New Labour responded to the attacks of 7/7 with new legislated censorship powers, it would take another 13 years for another leap forward. During other periods of reorganisation, triggered by changes in government or policy emergencies, censorship has remained mostly static while the other two strands experienced significant reform. As discussed, even when New Labour legislated their new powers in 2006, such powers remained underutilised. When faced with other signs of failure, future governments would change tack, but fail to go beyond issuing some remonstrance to social media companies for failing to enforce their terms of service, or to seek to streamline ties between ISPs, social media companies and government (May 2017: Online). Without the will or ability to pass new legislation to change or increase the government's censorship powers, the ability to affect corporate censorship – and to apply pressure for such corporate censorship internationally – has allowed the government to extend the reach of censorship powers beyond what could reasonably be expected to be gained through legislation alone. The scope of social media platforms' terms of service are often more stringent than can be reasonably afforded by the criminal justice system, a key reason for the government seeking content removal in the guise of terms of service breaches.¹⁴⁰ That the OSCE¹⁴¹ identified this practice as commonplace demonstrates that such an approach is advantageous across liberal democracies, where civil liberties form a key part of civic culture (OSCE in McNamee 2011: 28; Haubrich 2003: 5), further indicating that problems regarding legislation are a key motivator of the path dependency we can witness in British censorship policy across this time period. The institutional position of a liberal democracy – and arguably the sharp

¹⁴⁰ Private information

¹⁴¹ Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe.

criticism aimed at the New Labour government over these issues – appears to be the key limiting force in this middle period.

It would require the quite monumental series of events that occurred in 2017 to spur the pursuit of new powers in the aid of censorship policy. Here, the impact of new technology is most keenly felt. The ability to enact constant surveillance of citizen's browsing habits provides the necessary basis for the extension of the 2006 Section 58 provision. However, we must still understand this technological leap within its proper institutional context. It should not be forgotten that examination of browsing habits was neither new to the British government (as evidenced by the Snowden releases) nor to British CVE propaganda policy. For at least three years, RICU's multi-tiered 'upstream-downstream' concept had been predicated on the ability to access browsing habits, in order to select which stream (if any) a particular internet user would be categorised into, a categorisation which determined what persuasion attempts would be delivered to them. In this regard, the 2019 censorship pivot can be understood via the same isomorphic formula as in other strands. Policy failure spurred senior government into response, which generated pressure to identify blindspots formulate new policy proposals. At this point, practices were sought from other areas of government; in this case, the utilisation of internet-use-surveillance to identify extremists was *mimetically* transferred into new policy. This case only seems to differ from others in that strategy seems to have been transferred from within the area of CVE propaganda policy, rather than tangentially related government policy areas. It appears that the applicability of surveillance capacity used for targeting purposes was simply too obvious to ignore – although the legal powers to use such an approach would have to be work their way through parliament, explaining the significant gap we can observe between 2017 and the implementation of these new powers.

At the same time, we must remember that government censorship policy, in this regard, accelerated down lines already set by other areas of government. The application of the Section 58 provision to extremist propaganda was an innovation led by the Crown Prosecution Service, as they wrestled with the question of how to prosecute alleged terrorists. The process that led to this tactic is out of the realms of inquiry in this thesis, and is best left to trained legal scholars. The growing gap between being able to prosecute downloaded (but not streamed) material would likely have struck the CPS as a nonsensical distinction, particularly as 'streaming' internet content does imply its downloading – though not storage – from the internet. Nevertheless, it was the CPS' innovation in the usage of Section 58 that laid the groundwork for the next iteration of censorship strategy, combining the capacities and ideas of two separate units to produce a new approach hoped to meet new technological realities.

In this way, we can gain a deeper insight into how the adaptation to a new technological playing field has been dealt with in CVE propaganda policy. Once change is deemed necessary at the top of government, agencies responsible for particular strands enter a period of receptivity, in which new ideas, solutions and capacities are sought from other areas of government. These capacities and strategies are then combined to form the basis of new policy.

Civil Liberties & Public Relations

This being said, the special position of the UK as a liberal democracy committed to the protection of civil liberties has created unique approaches to the censorship issue which are worth exploring. The use of public relations and statements by the government and its ministers can be traced back to the civil liberties question. The controversy surrounding these issues has pressured successive governments into employing active messaging strategies to win public support for (or acquiescence to) the application of censorship powers, framing them as instruments of shared common values. While the partnership

of Blair and Clarke sought to openly advocate the primacy of security over individual freedoms, and insist that the government was enacting ‘common sense’ of the British people, the public ire drawn by this strategy seems to have discouraged future governments from taking such an overt stance. From the Brown government onwards, the linkage of extremist censorship with censorship of images of child abuse has only gathered steam.

The only significant changes in public relations strategy in this period has been the pivot into openly criticising social media and other tech firms over their perceived lack of cooperation and initiative. Interestingly, we can also link such a media-focused strategy back to the government’s reluctance to enforce these responsibilities via legislation. Unable – or, more accurately, unwilling – to do so, the government’s decision to place public pressure on the tech giants becomes easy to understand, hoping that public ire would be able to encourage cooperation more effectively. Once again, the controversy over creating civil liberties powers has narrowed the government’s scope for action, enforcing innovation in policy that does not require the passage of legislation to increase effectiveness.

Ethics & Efficacy

To this point, we have so far considered the ethics and efficacy of British counter-extremism censorship practice in a highly practical manner. That is to say, we have tried to parse out these issues from a policymaker perspective, viewing such issues insofar as they encourage or constrain particular types of government action. However, as a final point it is worth engaging with these questions more seriously.

There is no shortage of literature that is critical of the ethics of British counter-extremism policy, justified on many diverse grounds. The point that has largely been missed in these criticisms is the fact that the unsure ethical territory of the government’s censorship campaign unfortunately prevents open scrutiny

of this campaign's true effectiveness. As McNamee notes, the 'slide to corporate censorship' presents serious questions regarding the position of private companies in our political system (McNamee 2011: 4-6). In the face of such questions, it is perhaps unsurprising that the exact nature of these relationships remains concealed from public eyes.

However, the desire to maintain tight control on information concerning causes great confusion, and prevents proper debate. For example, while government and political party sources proclaim high numbers of content removals through the CTIRU every year, no accompanying information is given regarding what percentage of online extremist material such a number represents (e.g. Metropolitan Police Service 2016: Online; Conservative & Unionist Party 2015: 68; Dick in Home Affairs Committee 2014: 6). The numbers of these removals that are instigated via public referral, or police discovery, or action by private companies is also not revealed.

This is a serious problem, as it obscures from the public view which parts of this system are most effective, if it is effective at all. It is perfectly reasonable that a censorship campaign carried out by the British government in the name of protecting the public and protecting its shared values ought to be open to scrutiny by the same public. The fact that such information remains closely guarded seems to indicate that the government's record in this area may not be as impressive as it has been made to sound. This lack of transparency hampers forward progress even in instances of success. In 2018, the Conservative Party celebrated that 'their' new automated systems could automatically identify and remove over 90% of extremist material (See Figure 8). This is undoubtedly good news for the effectiveness of policy. However, a few weeks later Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg made the exact claim to the US Senate, and that this was in fact Facebook's technology (Zuckerberg in US Congress 2018: 116). Contrary claims such as this spell out clearly the possibility of friction down the road. If the partners in this system cannot between themselves decide where credit should lay for success – and with no

transparency or accountability systems in place to help settle the matter – then it is easy to picture that future cooperation could become strained, if credit is not reliably shared or given where its due. While these may seem minor concerns, they bear the seeds of potential disarray down the road, a situation that may severely hamper future attempts to censor dangerous extremist material in the future, whatever successes may have been gained through the current partnership model.

Lastly, it is worth considering in broad terms what the advance of new media technologies and social media platforms has had on the legal status of civil liberties in the United Kingdom. During the New Labour years, while online media remained in their infancy in terms of their impact, legislation was set down that betrayed internal assumptions about the possibility to locate and prosecute publishers of terrorist material. In a media environment characterised by the dominance of top-down publication models, relying upon highly expensive and technical industrial infrastructure, identifying the publishers of broadcast or print media (even locating individuals giving talks or speeches) was clearly considered to be accomplishable. However, the saturation of the new media environment, which cuts across national jurisdictions for publication law, and raises previously unnecessary debates concerning the responsibility for publication and dissemination of undesirable material, undercuts these assumptions severely. In response, the government have resorted to a two-fold strategy.

The first is pressuring and cajoling the major social platforms to take on greater responsibility for policing extremist content on their sites. As McNamee (2011) argues, such questions are troubling for the status of citizen's rights. In this case, the retreat of government from this issue (constrained as it is by new technological capabilities) has presaged a shift in the undergirding structures upholding liberal commitments to freedom of speech. Of course, debates about the limits that should be placed on such speech are highly fraught and complex. Yet the pressure placed on social media platforms has led to a new

situation - where individuals in British society no longer have their rights to speech set down and guaranteed as political rights enjoyed as citizens by their government, but rather economic privileges conferred on consumers by multinational companies. While this is not a complete destruction of civil rights and freedoms to speech, such a move certainly represents a decay in the ground on which such rights stand.

The second has been a shift in the locus of criminality in government censorship policy. As noted above, the Terrorism Act 2006 was focused on criminalising publishers and speakers of speech that glorified terrorism. As also noted above, the provisions within this Act were not taken up as useful tools for prosecution. This is most likely due to the vague wording of the Act, and the rise of new forms of communications technology that quickly outpaced the relevance of such restrictions on publication and dissemination.

With relatively little outcry or publicity, the British government has quietly switched the focus of censorship away from the disseminators to the consumers of information. Using provisions within the Terrorism Act 2000, particularly Sections 57 and 58, the CPS has prosecuted individuals for the mere possession of extremist material, under the pretext that such behaviour involves storing 'information likely to be useful to a terrorist'. Given royal assent in February 2019, the Counter Terror and Border Security Act strengthened this provision further, making the online viewing of material, not simply its download and storage, a criminal offence. The criminalisation of even viewing extremist material would appear an unusual stance for a liberal democracy to take. Leaving aside the questionable application of the Section 58 provision to extremist propaganda, the fervour for provisions to criminalise even the passive viewing of extremist content demonstrate the sea-change in the legal structures concerning freedom of speech in a liberal democracy buffeted by a changing technological landscape. To borrow Marshall McLuhan's phrase, the cultural and social consequences of the internet on free speech has appears to have been a shift of the locus of criminal responsibility

away from speakers and writers onto readers, listeners and viewers. Such a development is a troubling one for liberal democratic ideals, as they more closely resemble the proscribed-texts tactics of authoritarian Communist states of the Cold War era, rather than a country confidently espousing and embodying liberal ideals as Cameron had envisioned.

8. Conclusions and Reflections

This thesis is the result of a detailed blended institutionalist analysis of British state propaganda policy for the purposes of countering violent extremism (CVE). The story of RICU, and its associated partners, as they sought to develop new methods of working so to gain traction in the emerging communications environment. RICU's stature has undoubtedly grown in the years since its foundation, and while its mission to help diminish the attractiveness and power of Salafi ideology has remained constant, the unit's position, role, and working practices in pursuit of this goal has shifted remarkably in this time. RICU – and the counter-extremism project it spearheads – have not been immune to academic criticism or journalistic scrutiny. Since 2016, greater amounts of information have become public through the news media, particularly regarding its secretive nature, along with examination of its relationships to partner organisations in the private and civil society sectors. However, little formal attention has been paid to the evolution of RICU (and its attendant propaganda apparatus) over the course of its lifespan.

This is a serious and unfortunate oversight. Accurately recording and interpreting this evolution can illuminate pressing issues and debates both inside and outside academia, can assist in answering the key and supplementary questions addressed in this thesis. The key question was to identify how the development of RICU and its partners can reveal how British CVE adapted to the new communications environment. Doing so required to observe RICU's changing organisational structure and wider position, and how this development had led to new approaches and ideas in the distinct strands of propaganda policy – Messaging, Targeting, and Censorship. Through answering these questions, we can then begin to observe what the story of RICU can tell us about the effects of the internet on our political culture; and

how the state has itself affected that culture through its adaptation to new technological realities.

To answer these questions, the thesis utilises two distinct but interconnected forms of inquiry. In the main, this thesis employs a form of process tracing, guided by the analytical frameworks of historical and neo-institutionalism. This method is applied to the examination of RICU's structural changes, both internally and in respect to its relationships with partner and outside organisations. Further, this approach is applied to the interrogation of changes in its working practices. This is split into two broad areas. The first is the methods of dissemination used by RICU, and its impact on how RICU material is targeted and delivered to its target audience. The second is the shifting legal and organisational approaches that the government (and RICU) has taken to a censorship strategy designed to suppress material supportive of Salafist groups and ideology. This institutionalist approach is complimented by careful discourse analysis. This discourse analysis is principally concerned with the discursive elements of RICU's propaganda output – in other words, the arguments, examples, and worldviews proffered in rejection of (and in contrast to) the ideas of Salafist preachers and commentators. However, this discourse analysis is not only applied to RICU output, but also senior government officials in their defence of CVE policy. This is most important in respect to government defence of and advocacy for increasingly-tightened censorship laws.

Through carefully examining the trajectory of RICU's development, we can arrive at solid conclusions regarding the work of the British state to update its 'ideological warfare' into the modern environment. Such an approach delivers insight into several stages of technological adaptation. The first is how institutional and technological factors interact when determining the outcome of technological revolutions in wider society. Second, which institutional factors were most influential in this process, and the predictable lines that have characterised them. Finally, through appreciating the final arrival points

of each distinct element of British CVE propaganda policy, we can identify more clearly the outcomes of new technological capabilities on political discourse and culture.

In the first instance, a thorough overview of RICU policy direction in this period forces us to conclude that, in the process of British state adaptation to new technical capacities, institutional factors predominate over the technological. The foundation of RICU itself can be confidently linked to the desire of Gordon Brown to 'put his stamp' on the role of Prime Minister, and his own policy preference (circumstantially evidenced further by claims he was intimately familiar with the history of the IRD, RICU's spiritual Whitehall predecessor). Changes in government leadership would remain a key trigger for policy change. These included among parties (Blair to Brown; Cameron to May) and across parties (New Labour to Coalition to Conservative). Upcoming elections also influenced this process, pushing the brakes on planned reforms in case of leadership change.

Despite being in possession of clear evidence for the increased importance and faith placed in the information they received through social media, RICU maintained its focus on the legacy media, if opening its view to the international broadcasters, a decision most likely influenced by the arrival of expertise from the private sector. In any case, this particular instance reveals how shifts in the balance of technological capabilities does not enforce change in and of itself. Instead, we are presented with an example of institutional drift, punctuated by clear examples of policy failure. The 2005 attacks on London transport users, the success of ISIL-Daesh recruiting techniques, and the spate of attacks in the run up to the 2017 General Election forged the desire for significant change in CVE propaganda policy. However even these outside factors - certainly facilitated by the new online ideological battlefield - were also determined through institutional lenses and mediation. After the failures of 2017, the most visible for more than a decade, RICU was shielded from the restructuring occurring around them. The only satisfactory explanation

available is that RICU had now become to be regarded as a leader in terms of its output and innovation in comparison to similarly positioned state propaganda organisations, lending great credence to the utility of neo-institutionalist concepts in the study of security.

Institutional factors continue to play the key role in RICU's adaptation, even when at last techno-adaptation is demanded. To illustrate this more clearly turn to the consistent intra-governmental patterns that characterized the process of CVE propaganda policy reformulation. Responding to change in government leadership or a clear policy failure, *coercive* pressure emanated from the top of government, setting priorities and outlines for the desired change. From this point, RICU would centralise and increase its control over propaganda output. It would also strengthen its outward links to the private sector, drawing in expertise, habits and assumptions in a *normative* fashion from the public relations and technology industries. Meanwhile, the agency would engage with government partners whose capabilities or policy strategies may be workable or justifiable to their own task. These *mimetic* changes – mirroring or importing ideas from other areas of government – have had a profound effect on British propaganda policy, both in terms of targeting but particularly censorship.

The real-time surveillance required to make RICU's targeting regime workable was undergirded by the hardware and software infrastructure of the WWW protocol. This strategy was largely inspired, according to David Cameron, by the norms of the modern advertising industry. However, RICU's ability to harness this ability in such a fashion was dependent either on the transfer of capabilities from elsewhere in the government (such as GCHQ) or through behind-the-scenes arrangements with ISPs. In either case, RICU's position as a state organisation determined its ability to access such capability. This surveillance capacity extends into the realm of censorship. The difficulties of establishing jurisdiction created by a deeply internationalised media space were met through switching the locus of criminality onto the consumer of

undesirable information online; a step made possible through the maintenance of real-time surveillance. Further, the extension of the Section 58 provisions was a policy option set in motion by another state organization – the Crown Prosecution Service – which had begun to utilise the provision to prosecute the digital ownership of extremist propaganda, on the somewhat-questionable basis that it constituted ‘information likely to be useful to a terrorist.’ In the vast majority of cases, therefore, institutional arrangements had the greatest impact on the end-point of propaganda policy reformulation. Whether limited by the preferences or directions of senior officials, borrowing capabilities supplied to it as part of the state, or picking up and running with the innovations of officials in quite separate areas of the government, RICU’s continued adaptation was determined by its integration within the British state. Technology had rapidly and seriously altered the shape of the media landscape, which provided new threats, as well as new opportunities. Yet RICU’s position within that landscape was consistently defined by its position within the government, whose institutional arrangements mediated these new technological developments into concrete policy choices.

It is a similar case in terms of messaging strategy, even though it is in this strand that we find the greatest level of direct technological influence. The ability to utilise targeted, full multimedia platforms to distribute propaganda products allowed its messaging both to diversify and experiment with new themes and motifs. In McLuhian terms, the medium came more and more to define the character of the message. However, technology also seems to have had little effect on how this strategy was organised. Long before RICU was founded, its predecessor also resorted to clandestinely supporting other actors who would push British government sponsored messages to the press, without it being potentially tainted by association with its true source. As previously discussed, the ‘Truth’ that RICU was tasked to spread remained remarkably consistent, and changes only appeared to emerge directly from the preferences of senior government. Further, the increased centralisation of editorial control within RICU runs counter to the wider picture scholars have identified of an increasingly decentralised ad-hoc form of organising political movements and

discourse (Shirky 2008; Bimber 2003). Therefore while we can find the most direct influence of technology on messaging, the evidence reveals that institutional guardrails remained strong.

The question of what these policy choices can tell us about the modern communications environment, and its immanent political culture, is more complex. While the development of British CVE propaganda policy at many points reflects continuations of trends emerging elsewhere, the position of the state means that RICU and its partners are responsible for solidifying and accelerating these trends according to its own policy preferences.

The most pervasive aspect of the new communications environment is that of surveillance. The opportunities for the surveillance of everyday online browsing habits (necessarily built in to the internet's very architecture) has created huge markets for the exploitation of user data for profit. British CVE propaganda policy has sought to bend the structure of these marketplaces to its own social agenda. However, through accepting the norms of current advertising industry strategies and transferring them to the state level, RICU and its partners have solidified this trend from the economic sphere into the workings of government, and thus into the relationship between government and governed. As a result of RICU's adaptation, and its application of state capacity and authority, the British government maintains checks on the ideological dispositions of its citizens through continuous surveillance. Initially this capacity was used to deliver targeted messaging to 'the vulnerable'.

Later, this capacity would be transferred to the penal system. Responding to new technical capabilities that undercut the reasonable assumptions that had upheld censorship laws, the government transferred its approach to Targeting to Censorship. If this capacity could be used to identify those accessing extremist material, it was therefore legitimate to use this capacity to enforce censorship laws and remove *potentially dangerous extremists* from society. To do so, however, required flipping the previous logic of censorship on its head,

centring criminality on the consumer of information, not its producer. This is a very recent development, and its consequences are yet to be fully realised or understood. Still, this marks an important shift in British political culture on speech rights issues.

RICU's work has also solidified into British government policy a mode of political discourse predicated on using digital technology to obscure the source or intent of an information campaign. This is a fashion of operation that RICU took on slowly to a greater and greater degree throughout its lifespan. From humble beginnings as a centre point to help coordinate message-discipline from government ministers, RICU began to fund the activities of civil society actors to undertake counter-extremist messaging and outreach. Under pressure, the agency began to bend civil society actors into its own preset templates, before finally taking almost complete editorial control of the messages put out through newly-created campaign accounts ostensibly operated by willing civil society partners. This occurred while deliberately shrouding government involvement, even to the point that employees of this organisation were unaware of its influence on their work. At the same time, government messaging strategy has increasingly centred around exploiting the community-building aspects of social media, and the obfuscation that internet political discourse allows, to create the impression of a unified and spontaneous community of liberal British Muslims. As a result, RICU's program has solidified into the practice of government trends identified by earlier situationist and postmodern thinkers. RICU's offering portrays itself as a community-led project seeking to spread its interpretation of Islamic faith and culture, challenge ingrained Islamophobic attitudes, and improve the lot of fellow Muslims in the MENA region through the implantation of liberal values and practices. When comparing to their government-sponsored status and the solutions they propose to the disruptive and activist tone of these messaging strategies, we are reminded nonesomuch as Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle*, which "offers false models of revolution to local revolutionaries... serving as its pseudo-opposition and actual support." (Debord 1967: 28)

This approach can be justified on the grounds that direct government outreach would less likely prove effective in reaching these audiences. This justification is a fair one. However, its overall effect is to further muddy the waters of the current information environment, where hostile state actors use this capability to spread conspiracy theories as well as uncomfortable or embarrassing true information into the public sphere. As a result, RICU's adaptation to the modern communications environment has only furthered the issues of identifying the source of trustworthy information, by drawing such trends into the realms of public policy. This decision, while justifiable from the perspective of RICU's goals, has more thoroughly integrated this state of affairs between government and the governed, only heightening the sense of 'vertigo' created by the proliferation of media spectacles lamented by thinkers such as Jean Baudrillard (Roderick 1993: Online).

Inconsistencies and Blind Spots

At this point, it is appropriate to make some limited comments concerning the effectiveness and the glaring inconsistencies within the British government's approach to *Prevent* and the threat of Salafism more generally. When taken in isolation, the approach that RICU has taken to the task of counter-radicalisation and counter-extremism has been reasonable – deny links between Islam as a faith and Salafist doctrine; enshrine Britain's mixed cultural, religious, and ethnic differences as one of its greatest strengths; and offer alternative visions and pathways for British Muslims to be socially conscious and active away from extremist attitudes. Further, government analysis highlights the aggravating factors that draw people into extremist attitudes in a broad and clear-headed way, showcasing the effects that social isolation, poor community integration, and social deprivation have on casting perspectives on spirituality and international politics.

However, this good work is consistently undermined by government myopia on these issues. Instead of seeing radicalisation occurring within its wider social context, government policy has seemingly viewed terrorism as a distinct policy area that can be easily separated from activity on the international stage, attitudes towards Muslims in the traditional media, and party-political concerns. A particularly glaring contradiction can be observed in the example set by David Cameron, the longest-serving Prime Minister of this period. Cameron repeatedly stressed how “Over generations, we have built something extraordinary in Britain – a successful multi-racial, multi-faith democracy... open, diverse, welcoming” (Cameron 2015: Online). It is quite correct and proper for a Prime Minister to speak in such terms, especially when approaching the thorny issue of cross-cultural tension in Britain. Yet this stance is undermined by Cameron’s own pronouncements in other areas. Repeatedly, Cameron sought to place faith back at the heart of British social life and national identity (Allen 2018). In his Easter message, recorded soon after a deadly Salafist attack on Brussels airport, he sought to plant Christianity at the heart of social discourse. After commending the selfless work of charities and community projects, and the values that underpin them, Cameron asserted that “They are Christian values and they should give us the confidence to say yes, we are a Christian country and we are proud of it.” (Cameron 2016: Online) Earlier, in his Christmas address in 2015, Cameron went so far as to claim that “it is because of these important religious roots and Christian values that Britain has been such a successful home to people of all faiths and none.” (Cameron 2015b: Online) While not directly contradictory, great tension exists between these two positions, especially when considering Cameron’s desire to struggle against the appeal of Salafist doctrine. If Cameron wishes to demonstrate, to his desired audience of young Muslims, that Britain is an open, multi-faith and pluralistic democracy, it is surely counter-productive to indulge in sermonising that excludes young Muslims away from the national identity that he wishes they would embrace. At best, it implicitly asserts the superiority of Christian values, which must be ‘protected’ from malign outward influence. Concocting such a narrative, however well intentioned, stands at

odds with government attempts to engender a broad, pluralistic form of national identity. When placed in this context, the attempt to generate a liberal British Muslim identity may also be considered as an example of a divided nationalism – one that places differing burdens on different areas of British society, defining how each one may perform their Britishness, either through social media hashtags or through pro-Western activism. Furthermore, asserting that the rights of ethnic minorities to freely practice their religion is based upon the magnanimity of ‘Judeo-Christian values’ implies that these rights are conditional and may be legitimately withdrawn in the name of protecting those values, as is often argued by far-right extremists. Doing so can only create a fractured image of society, with extra burdens placed on the Muslim population to prove their allegiance to the British state. This subtle form of exclusion only empowers Salafist arguments that Muslims will never truly be accepted by Western society, and the only place they shall find acceptance is within the worldwide community ‘*ummah*’ of Muslims.

However, this problem runs deeper than mere incongruence between prime ministerial statements. A far more pervasive and troubling factor is the influence of the British tabloid press, long criticised for its repeatedly xenophobic and islamophobic stances (European Commission Against Racism and Intolerance 2016). In April 2015, during the European Migrant Crisis, *The Sun* – Britain’s most popular daily newspaper – published an article by ‘political commentator’ Katie Hopkins, that described migrants desperately fleeing North Africa as “cockroaches”, with British towns “plagued by swarms”, and “aggressive young men at Calais, spreading like norovirus” (Hopkins 2015: Online). *The Daily Mail*, later that year, published a cartoon depicting figures in traditional Muslim dress crossing the borders of the European Union accompanied by a swarm of rats (See Figure).



[Figure 9: MAC cartoon from *The Daily Mail* 17 Nov 2015]

RICU's own research demonstrated that already in 2009 the British Muslim community felt ostracised, demonised and alienated by their treatment in the mainstream British press (RICU 2010: 2; 15). Despite this ongoing problem, the government has not sought to curtail the tabloid press in any meaningful way. RICU insiders admit that, despite their own analysis that right-wing racist rhetoric and Salafist extremism fuel each other in a vicious cycle, they are unable to take any form of action in the realm of the British print media, and this represented a profound difficulty at the heart of their project.¹⁴² The support for the Conservative and Unionist Party (in power for nine of the twelve years of RICU's life) is of course well known, and may play a part in government reticence to chide these media outlets. In any case, the inability to link the xenophobic attitudes of the dominant British print media outlets to

¹⁴² Private information

the issue of Salafist radicalisation demonstrates a policy myopia or tunnel vision in regards to *Prevent*. In policy terms, the sphere of counter-terrorism is divorced from the pervasive issues of Islamophobia in Britain, abetted by the tabloid press. Regardless of motivation, such a gap represents a lack of imagination or bravery on the behalf of successive British governments in their search to combat the cycle of radicalisation.¹⁴³

Misguided Focus on Youth and Missed Opportunities

As noted above and elsewhere in this thesis, 2015 saw RICU's definitive turn towards social media as a battleground against Salafist extremists and recruiters. Tentative moves to incorporate the use of hashtags had begun in 2014. However, RICU's own research had already flagged the growing importance of social media platforms to Muslim communities in their connection to domestic and international political issues:

"Facebook is really good like that, it tells you everything that's going on... I saw images of Gaza on Facebook and people with limbs chopped off and I was really shocked. You've got to see it to believe it, it opens your eyes."

(RICU 2010: 17)

¹⁴³ The close embrace of US President Donald Trump – who centred his candidacy on a pledge for a "complete and total of shutdown of Muslims entering the United States" – further widens the divide between government and its rhetoric of inclusivity towards its Muslim citizens. RICU products have heralded and promoted examples of grassroots action against Islamophobia in the United States (Ummahsonic Instagram 2011). While this is commendable, little concern has been shown how the far more significant welcoming of the man himself into formal state functions undercuts government messaging that racism is unwelcome in British society, handing further propaganda fuel to Salafist radicalisers.

The research also highlighted that “a high level of Internet literacy among participants led to a substantial use of video-sharing websites, in particular YouTube”, which was “perceived to be independent of Western agendas.” (RICU 2010: 20; 2) However, RICU’s strategy in the years after the completion of this research instead pivoted towards international broadcast media such as Al Jazeera. It would only be after the dramatic and alarming wave of young British Muslims travelling to join extremist groups, or committing atrocities at home, that strategy would shift decisively into the online social media space.

However, this redirection into the online sphere was somewhat wide of the mark, as its focus was to counter the flow of young people into the arms of Salafist extremists. While young Muslims have indeed committed acts of barbarism in the UK, a policy focus on the safeguarding of young people has ignored the high proportion of adults that have been the chief perpetrators of Salafist violence in the UK and Europe. For example, the murder of Lee Rigby was committed by two adult males, aged 22 and 29 respectively (Dodd & Halliday 2013: Online). The 2017 attack on the Manchester Arena was also committed by a 22 year-old. However, the following attacks on London Bridge and Borough Market the same year were perpetrated by men aged 52, 31, 27, and 22. In 2018, a 52 year-old man attempted a similar style of attack on the Palace of Westminster. By contrast, the bombings of July 7th 2005 – which preceded the 2006 Terrorism Act that served as the starting point for our analysis – were committed by four men aged 30, 22, 19 and 18 respectively. On this evidence, it would appear that the average age of British Salafist terrorists has been rising. As a result, we must question the reasoning behind selecting the ‘safeguarding’ of children as the key rhetorical device for justifying increased counter-terrorism measures. Every perpetrator of Salafist violence in the UK has been a legal adult, although some may be not unfairly categorised as youths. Instead, the focus of such safeguarding measures was aimed towards preventing the shocking exodus (though very small in numerical terms) of legal minors travelling to Syria to join groups such as ISIL-Daesh. This is not to say that such an approach was fruitless or unnecessary,

but rather that this concern came to dominate over others, which meant that those truly at risk of perpetrating attacks were overlooked. Furthermore, this over-attentiveness to the rhetoric of grooming and child protection suggests that government policy was more greatly affected by the focus of the British press on these worrying but outlier cases.

The Questionable State of Liberal Values

Lastly, it is important to reflect on how the British government's attempts to come to terms with the threat of Salafist extremism – and the role of the internet and later social media in its flourishing – have impacted on the state of liberal ideals and civil liberties. The viability of democratic institutions in the face of the internet, particularly since the seismic year of 2016, has been called into question from many quarters. However, this broad area of critique is scattergun in its approach as to why democracy is under threat, ranging from the polarising effect of algorithmic recommendation and the self-selection of information sources (Benkler, Faris & Roberts 2018: 289-91); the internationalism of the global information environment and the advantages afforded to hostile interventionism in democratic elections (Rosenbach & Mansted 2018: Online); or the market dominance of a tiny number of companies who regulate the online information system, such as Google or Facebook (Vaidhyanathan 2018; Persily 2017; Cadwalladr 2016: Online). These schools of thought, however, generally observe noticeable trends in the development of the modern information environment and provide some warnings as to their potential implications. Those that delve in to the more specific areas, such as the application of law and the setting of precedent in legal proceedings concerning these new technologies, also tend to reflect on the complexities around the topic, rather than observing or tracking the development of policy (Porambage et al. 2016: Online).

This thesis' commitment to tracking government triangulation of these issues goes some way to providing a more solid basis for assessing the impact of the information age on liberal democratic values and institutions. The Snowden revelations of mass surveillance by the Five Eyes countries are of course a key element to our understanding of this process. The mass collection of internet metadata, as pointed out by Binder (2017), is particularly ironic in the trajectory of liberal democracy, given that such interception of communication was a hallmark of statesmen such as Austrian Chancellor Metternich, who led authoritarian states seeking to halt the spread of liberalism in their societies. However, whilst Metternich led a concerted campaign to proactively seize communications for inspection, the architecture of the internet (and its need to constantly track the source and destination of information packets) has simplified this process to the point that the sheer volume of information collected, and the difficulties this poses for insightful analysis, is the main concern for security services (GCHQ 2011: 4). This example suggests that, in the very fabric of the World Wide Web protocol, the internet encourages the regression of privacy from undue state or economic surveillance.

The 2019 Counter Terror and Border Security Act – to include accessing information via a device rather than only storing a digital copy – has profound implications for the freedom of inquiry into political ideas. Whereas the 2000 Terrorism Act originally framed “information likely to be useful to a terrorist” as transferable or actionable knowledge, such as guides to manufacturing explosives, over time the usage of this provision expanded to cover a number of other sorts of information, including propaganda (Casciani 2017). The 2019 Act expands this word to mean the ‘bits’ that together construct undesirable content, in particular extremist propaganda. This represents a deliberate misreading of original statute, and expansion of provisions per this misreading. This decision reflects a concerted effort from government to utilise and strengthen provisions on consumer-based censorship, rather than to attempt tighter regulation and responsibility for the technology giants who support this material via their platforms. Such a concentration of focus, and the

criminalisation of the passive consumption of information, rather than its active dissemination (which in itself stands somewhat uncomfortably with liberal political ideals) is a troubling development for all those concerned with safeguarding basic civil liberties. As UN Special Rapporteur Catanucci observed, such a move presents Orwellian potentialities for the prosecution of ‘thought-crimes’.

This problem is exacerbated by the economic and political status quo of the online information environment. The sheer domination and scale of companies such as Google and Facebook – and their truly multinational character – makes their position near unassailable. This position helps explain the timid approach of successive governments in terms of regulation or taxation levied on these tech behemoths. For our purposes, this market power has had two important consequences. The poor optics and complexity of formulating new and effective regulation for speech on the internet, combined with the unilateral power of these companies to deny access to undesirable ideas, has led to civil liberties (freedom of speech and privacy etc) collapsing from the template of political rights enjoyed by citizens into one of commercial privileges enjoyed by consumers. For the time being, general principles may be shared. However, the transfer of these rights into the economic sphere bears huge potential for sweeping changes to the bounds of civil discourse without effective redress.

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In this way, the confluence of the internet’s architecture, its transnational capability, and its economic domination by a tiny number of leviathans, has eroded the traditional compact of political rights enjoyed by citizens of a liberal democracy. In its place has arisen an unaccountable and byzantine structure of ad-hoc arrangements – as well as downright Orwellian surveillance tactics – that claim to defend and properly implement the general principles of liberal

democracy, without the need to seriously legislate or challenge entrenched economic power.

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