

ISD

Powering new
generations
against extremism

BETWEEN TWO EXTREMES

Responding to Islamist and
tribalist messaging online
in Kenya during the 2017
elections

Zahed Amanullah
Anisa Harrasy

NO POS
NO GRAFF
KEEP
PEACE
ALIVE
By solo7

About this paper

This study took place in Kenya with trusted indigenous community service organisations (CSOs) and other partners within the country at a time of great political uncertainty. Any online messaging work online, particularly dealing with extremism, contains elements of risk to individuals involved in campaigns, their wider communities, or the campaign target audiences. As a result, we have withheld the names of individual CSOs in this report along with identifying aspects of the campaigns they produced. Although this limits the data that can be presented, the applicable lessons learned during the study, along with our recommendations, remain unchanged.

For consistency with similar research on violent extremist movements, this report identifies ideologies underpinning groups such as Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen (al-Shabaab) and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and supporters who draw on the narratives they produce as “Islamist.” There is no other intention to conflate such groups with the population of Muslims in Kenya or Islam in general.

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Executive Summary

In this report, we review the state of extremist discourse and propaganda techniques used across the Kenyan social media landscape and share the results of a 16-month long study conducted to understand the capacity of Kenyan community service organisations (CSOs) to adapt to this changing landscape.

With the assistance of Google/YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, ISD helped train over twenty peacebuilding CSOs in online counter-narrative creation, in both Swahili and English. The aim of this training was to equip CSOs with the tools and skills to compete effectively with those trying to promote extremism and division online. We shared techniques for targeting, distributing, and evaluating the content, looking at ways to maximise reach, engagement, and impact.

The majority of the 18 campaigns developed by partner CSOs were disseminated during the Presidential elections of 2017, extended by the annulment of an initial vote in August, and followed by a second vote in late October boycotted by the opposition.

Data from the campaigns, including responses by Kenyan social media users, incorporated themes and narratives from Islamists, promoters of tribal division and holders of political grievances. Despite many challenges, results from the study show that increasing digital literacy and a better understanding of the promotion – and countering – of extremist narratives online can have a positive influence on the next generation of Kenyans grappling with these interconnected threats to stability and prosperity.

Key Findings

- Counter-narrative campaigns were collectively able to reach 4.4 million users, over 10% of Kenyans online, during a 1-2 weeks of paid promotion with high engagement and minimal resources during the election season.
- Islamist extremists and promoters of tribal division are equally dangerous and their messaging techniques remarkably similar. While many global resources are being mobilised for the former, relatively fewer are being made available for the latter.
- The extremist online ecosystem in Kenya is very interactive with extremists reaching out to individuals whom might have a slight interest in their cause.
- Extremists of all types increase their activity during election periods, exploiting and sometimes co-opting the political process. This has parallels to extremist online activity during recent elections in Western countries.
- This research displayed that engagement on online counter-narratives in Kenya may differ due to factors such as platform placement, video title, and the campaign's narrative arc.
- Kenya's peacebuilding CSOs have rapidly developed their capacity and expertise for the promotion of peace through online messaging over the past few years and are well placed to improve their influence.

Recommendations

ISD recommends building on these efforts with other CSO partners to ensure that Kenya's citizens are more resilient to those promoting violence. To this end, the quality and quantity of influential and credible counter-narrative content needs to increase and the bars to creating them lowered. This can be achieved with the support of social media companies like Google/YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, the Kenyan government, and Kenya's increasingly active digital citizens.

Introduction

The 1998 al-Qaeda bombing of the US Embassy in Nairobi, Kenya, which killed 224 people, marked the beginning of a new phase of extremist violence that has touched all corners of Kenyan society. While this attack was Islamist in nature, it compounded waves of tribally-motivated violence that have often been sanctioned by a number of politicians, peaking during contentious election cycles. Though the two may seem unrelated, the widespread adoption of social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter has mirrored a marked increase in violent Islamist and tribal content, using the same strategies and tactics.

Today in Kenya, the risk from al-Qaeda has been replaced by that of Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen, commonly referred to as al-Shabaab, which has drastically increased its recruitment efforts towards Swahili-speaking Kenyans from Somalia's southern border in recent years.¹ This recruitment has been amplified by the influence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), whose propaganda techniques have proven extremely effective in luring foreign fighters from countries around the world, including Kenya, to join its pro-Caliphate struggle. Add to this the disruption from Kenya's rapid development, which has left many of its citizens feeling disenfranchised and exploited, and there is a real danger that a segment of Kenyan society could be lured in by the narratives promoted by extremists of all stripes.

In this report, we review the state of extremist discourse and the propaganda techniques used across the Kenyan social media landscape and share the results of a 16-month long study conducted to understand the capacity of Kenyan community service organisations (CSOs) to adapt to this changing landscape, and to help them compete effectively with those trying to promote

“ There is a danger that a segment of Kenyan society could be lured in by the narratives promoted by extremists of all stripes. ”

extremism online. With the assistance of Google/YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter, ISD helped train over twenty CSOs in online counter-narrative campaign creation, in both Swahili and English, on the issues of concern based on their stories and experiences. We shared techniques for targeting, distributing, and evaluating the content, looking at ways to maximise reach, engagement, and impact.

The majority of these campaigns were disseminated during the presidential elections of 2017, extended by the annulment of an initial vote in August, and followed by a second vote in October that was boycotted by the opposition. Data from the campaigns, including responses from Kenyan social media users, incorporated themes and narratives from Islamists, promoters of tribal division, and holders of political grievances. Despite this, the results from the study show that increasing digital literacy and having a better understanding of the promotion – and countering – of extremist narratives online can have a positive influence on the next generation of Kenyans grappling with these interconnected threats to stability and prosperity.

Understanding Kenya's online extremist ecosystem

From January to March 2017, and then later in the run up to the 2017 election, ISD undertook research in order to understand the online extremist ecosystem in Kenya. Utilising a range of social media analysis tools, researchers examined the relevant websites as well as the three major social media platforms – Facebook, Twitter and YouTube – in order to understand if and how these online platforms are being used to recruit or promote extreme ideologies and/or violence.

Keywords relevant to extremist groups, determined in coordination with local partners in both Swahili and English, were utilised to identify extremist influencers and supporters across these platforms.² Other forms of secondary research, namely established reports and news articles, were also used to identify key offline extremist influencers such as Aboud Rogo, who was believed to be an al-Shabaab recruiter in Mombasa. The names of such individuals, along with other relevant tags, were used as keywords. The results were narrowed down to Kenya where possible using geo-tags and geo-location. For pages that failed to display geo-tags, their followers and content were further examined for relevance. If the pages focused on Kenyan grievances, particularly on YouTube, where geo-location is not as applicable, they were included in the data set.³

Our research found an interactive and assertive extremist ecosphere online in Kenya on all of the major social media platforms. This presence was most prominent on Facebook, which has grown rapidly to become the most widely used platform in the country. ISD researchers identified Islamist extremists and promoters of tribal division, the two predominant forms of extremism found online in the region, operating over 30 combined Facebook pages and groups on the social network with over 35,000 followers in total. Moreover, we also identified a conspicuous absence in terms of effective counter-narrative campaigns and discourse to mitigate the impact of these extremist narratives.

Islamist extremism online

Islamist extremism has been a significant and well documented problem in Kenya, with the government listing internationally known groups such as al-Shabaab, ISIS, al-Qaeda and the regional Mombasa Republic Council as terrorist organisations.⁴ Amongst Swahili-speaking individuals who join al-Shabaab, Kenyans tend to be the majority.⁵ In addition, al-Shabaab has also been

responsible for significant massacres in Kenya, such as the Garissa University attack in 2015 and the massacre in Nairobi's Westgate Shopping Mall in 2013, the first terrorist attack in the world to be live-tweeted by the perpetrators.⁶ The Islamist extremist content we studied included output from these groups and their affiliates and sympathisers, as well as non-violent Islamist groups such as Hizb ut-Tahrir.

Platform use

Our research suggests that Facebook is the most commonly used platform amongst extremist related and violent Islamist groups, followed by YouTube, and then Twitter. This aligns generally with social media platform distribution within the country. According to StatCounter, over 72% of internet users in Kenya between December 2016 and December 2017 (toward the end of our study) used Facebook, whilst less than 10% used Twitter and less than 5% used YouTube.⁷

During the research timeframe, we identified over 20 extremist related/sympathiser pages and groups on Facebook, with a combined following of over 28,000 individuals. On YouTube, five Islamist related/sympathiser channels were identified, with over 1,000 subscribers and over 300 videos in total. On Twitter, a mere eight accounts were found, with a significantly smaller follower base. Although Twitter's penetration in Kenya is far lower than Facebook, this may also reflect the additional scrutiny made on the part of Twitter to close al-Shabaab-related accounts in the wake of the Westgate Mall incident.

The online environment surrounding the extremist pages on Facebook was highly interactive, with aggressive recruitment demonstrated throughout the study. For example, after having liked a few Kenya-specific Islamist pages with a Kenyan Facebook profile during the research, the profile quickly received ten invitations to join other radical pages/groups, over 150 friend requests, and seven private messages from extremist group sympathisers, in addition to being tagged and mentioned in three comment threads and being tagged in the family photos of various individuals.⁸ One of the invitations was to a secret pro-al-Shabaab group that praised the organisation and encouraged individuals to join the group.⁹

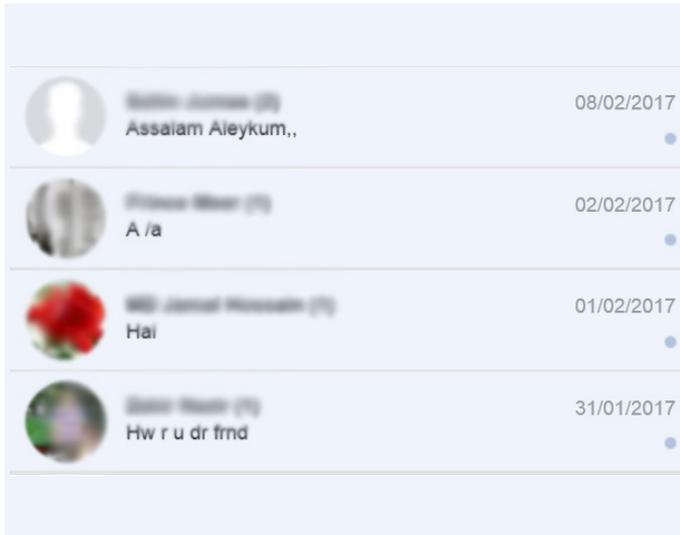


Figure 1. Private messages that the ISD research accounts received after liking extremist pages and groups during the research

Language choice

The languages used amongst the observed extremist content online aimed at Kenyan audiences included Swahili, English, and Arabic. Within the 20 groups and pages on Facebook, Swahili tended to be the most commonly used language, with religious quotes in Arabic and a few posts in English.

The use of a particular language appeared to suit particular purposes. Within the groups, Swahili tended to be used more often when individuals expressed anger or promote violence, with occasionally graphic descriptions. In the view of one local partner with experience working with university students, English posts within the groups tended to take a calm and philosophical approach to the same topic while posts in Arabic usually depicted religious scripts and imagery in opposition to the West, such as describing non-Muslims as “كفار” (kuffar or infidels).

Interestingly, a few Indonesian posts, also expressing religious sentiments, appeared randomly on the pages promoting extremist content. This seems to be due to the fact that Swahili and Indonesian languages are frequently interchanged by Facebook’s translation feature, illustrating a reliance on translated Arabic religious content in Swahili messaging rather than indigenously produced Swahili content.

One sample English language post reads as follows:



Figure 2. Example of an Islamist supportive post in English

Another individual posted the following message in Swahili (translated):

“Listen my brothers and sisters of Islam, and kill them. Be heroes like our prophets – Omar (bless his soul) and Ally (bless his soul). Omar came out headstrong for Islam, how could we compare ourselves. #Infidels aren’t our friends.”

Commonly used narratives

Over the past few years, ISD researchers have developed a framework to identify extremists’ propaganda narrative streams and sub-streams. This framework consists of over 14 distinct strands (see Appendix B). In our research on the Kenyan extremist ecosystem, the most prevalent narrative strand used was Us vs. Them, which is further split into two sub-streams – the West vs. Muslims and Government vs. Muslims.

The West vs. Muslims

Across all three platforms, the most common narrative used by Islamists denotes the West as the enemy of Islam. Every page and group analysed in this category called for individuals to join the “Caliphate” and fight against the West, which causes torment to Muslims worldwide. The situation in Burma (the persecution and expulsion of the Rohingya Muslims) and the lingering conflict in Palestine tended to be the most common examples cited to show how the West mistreats Muslims and to paint an image of victimhood. One Kenya-based page with over 3,000 followers highlighted graphic images similar to the one shown on the following page.

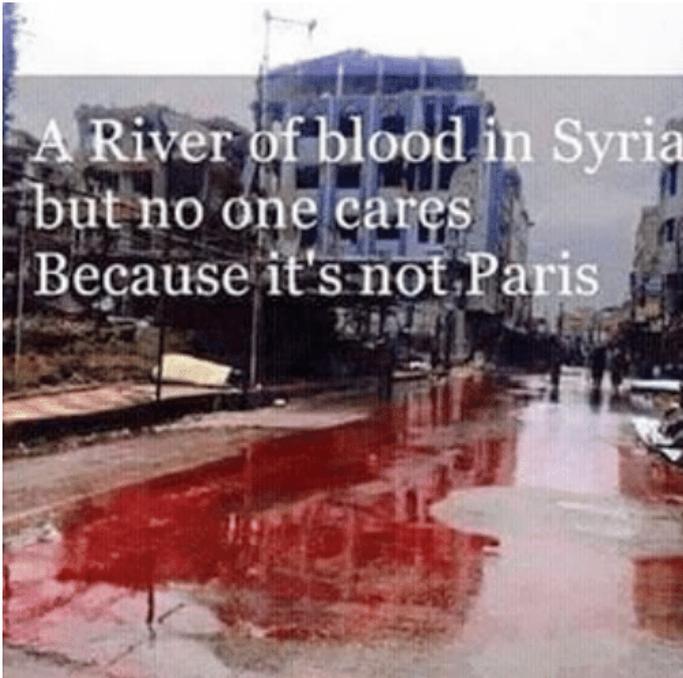


Figure 3. Example of a post used to justify "The West v Muslims" narrative.

Negative propaganda regarding the West's treatment of Muslims also tended to be linked to negative narratives about democracy as a form of government. On 30 October 2017, one group admin's post, "Democracy, the evil system of idolatry and infidelity," received 38 reactions (37 likes and one love), two shares and two comments which stated "No wonder we can't find peace in the 21st century" and "It is infidel because it opposes the law legislated by Allah."

These accounts, which cite the West's control of land and resources, again proposed the establishment of a "Caliphate" as the solution and ultimate goal. A post uploaded on Facebook in March on an Islamist page stated:

"The actions and violence the Jews (Israel) inflict on the Palestinians are drastic enough to be called Terrorism but the world remains quiet. Whereas terrorism in the diplomatic sense, only implies for Islam. #Muslims are dying #Democracy eliminates rights"

The Government vs. Muslims

Unlike the narrative above, this narrative stream promotes sympathy and anger on a more local level. We have found that these extremists tend to have regional pages on Facebook highlighting local grievances and illustrating that the "Caliphate" would be their safe haven. Such pages label the Kenyan government as the enemy of Muslims or claim the government disregards, in particular, the Mombasa region due to its majority Muslim status.

The government's alliances with the West and its adoption of democracy link this narrative to that of the West vs. Muslims, allowing proponents to directly correlate the grievances with a global campaign of Islamophobia or anti-Muslim disenfranchisement. One example of this is al-Shabaab's statement just before the August 2017 elections, describing Kenya's military activities in Somalia as an "occupation" in support of an "apostate government."¹⁰

On one public page with over 5,000 followers, one individual shared several posts blaming the death of several individuals in Kenya, circumstantially or not, on the government. Other pages and groups go further, stating that the government actively discriminates against Muslims by limiting jobs, food, and basic necessities to Muslim-populated areas. These narratives combine with other narrative streams in the framework such as isolation, social grievances, abuse, victimhood and the narrative of Us vs. Them, followed by an explanation of how the "Caliphate" would aid these grievances.

Tribalism online

Although our research primarily focused on Islamist extremists and sympathisers, we came across 12 Facebook pages and groups focusing exclusively on the 2017 Kenyan elections that were inundated with tribal hate and the legitimisation of violence, using the political process as a proxy and catalyst. We found that, in the same way as Islamists, promoters of violent tribalism were more prevalent on Facebook than on Twitter and YouTube, probably due to Facebook's greater volume of use for sharing content under which comments can be posted.

Tribal division has been an issue dividing Kenya since its pre-colonial days, but it was amplified by political activity after independence through Kenya's two dominant tribes, the Kikuyu and Luo.¹¹ From late 1991 to December 1992, over 1,000 people were killed as a result of violence between the two tribes, primarily over land rights. In response to the landmark annulment of the August 2017 presidential election by Kenya's Supreme Court, we again saw political supporters calling for the two tribal groups to mobilise against each other for political gain.

The two principal presidential candidates for the past three elections have represented each of these opposing tribes. During the 2007/08 election, candidates Raila Odinga, a Luo, and Mwai Kibaki, a Kikuyu, had supporters who used tribal identity as a means of garnering support whilst slandering other tribes to strengthen their candidate's position. The 2017 elections again pitted Raila Odinga, a Luo, and Uhuru Kenyatta, a Kikuyu, against each other.

The violence that took place after the August 2017 election annulment had a distinct tribal undertone, with many comments distinctly promoting the division of the country along tribal lines; is a similar tactic to that used by Islamist extremists. One unique distinction between Islamist extremists and tribalists was that comments promoting tribal divisions were found on election-related posts and pages rather than on pages exclusively set up to promote tribalism.

Below are samples of the comments found across two different politically orientated pages:

"#luolivesmatter"

"Why are they killing Luos or don't we have blood, we have water" (Translated from Swahili)

"Kikuyus are the ones who bring about tribalism in Kenya" (Translated from Swahili)

"The rest are fine (Reference to other Tribes)... but Luo's never"

"We want justice in Kenya, not a Kenya for Kikuyus alone, or it has to be divided into two"

Political groups and their supporters exploiting tribalism use the same methods as Islamist groups to 'recruit' others to their cause. They state grievances in relation to the status quo and then refer back to their political aims. One explicit example of this found in our research was when an individual stated in a comment that "if our tribe doesn't win, we'd be at war." This was in addition to some pages stating, for example, that their lack of clean water is due to the current tribe of the government, and suggesting that under another tribe their grievances would be solved. In a heated political climate, there are many such issues that can be addressed in this manner, as we have seen elsewhere in the world with the rise of political polarisation.

On Twitter, although we identified a few accounts that made sporadic one-off comments on tribalism and tribal division, our research did not identify any accounts that were in themselves dedicated to promoting tribal division.

Existing counter-narrative content

During our research, we discovered that although Kenya has a high level and complex mix of extremist content online, there have been very few visible counter-narrative or alternative narrative efforts created in response to this to date. Counter-narratives explicitly and directly deconstruct extremist narratives, while alternative narratives provide a positive vision of society that creates resilience among at-risk individuals. Among the few counter-narrative campaigns that exist – primarily on Facebook – the quality, reach, and engagement of the campaigns we found were all low.

“ Supporters exploiting tribalism use the same methods as Islamist groups to recruit. ”

Before new campaigns were created with the partner CSOs following our research, we found seven groups and six pages on Facebook dedicated to countering extremist narratives, and one channel each on Twitter and YouTube. Many of these pages were unaffiliated to any group or organisation and would only rarely post content; only two of the pages belonged to Kenyan CSOs. These two pages rarely posted counter-narratives and the online platform was mainly used to promote the organisation and its offline work.

When analysing existing counter-narrative campaigns on Facebook, we found that seven focused on countering terrorism, four focused on religious intolerance and two focused on more generic Kenyan unity. While we were unable to conduct a detailed assessment of the impact of these campaigns, we nevertheless observed two key faults that suggested why they may not have been effective: their narrative arc and their relatability.

With regard to narrative arc, many campaigns took the form of videos featuring an individual lecturing into a camera telling the viewer that, for example, peace is good and violence is bad. In past studies, we have found that simply lecturing to an audience, especially by someone who is not a peer of that audience, rarely leads to any suggestion of a positive impact. People tend to relate to a story with emotional resonance and a meaningful narrative arc rather than simply being told what is right or wrong.

This format is commonly seen in religious counter-extremist messaging, often featuring a sheikh or religious leader denouncing extremism in a lecture format.

Secondly, the majority of the counter-narrative campaigns found were in English rather than Swahili which, although a national language, is primarily spoken among the coastal region. To maximise their impact, counter-narrative campaigns should be relatable to and understandable by their target audience. Having content in English but not Swahili (even if only subtitled) can be unproductive, as the majority of content spread within Kenya by Islamist extremists tends to be in Swahili.

This absence of high quality counter and alternative narrative content, along with concerns about the capacity and capabilities of Kenyan CSOs to produce this content, was one of the drivers of this project. Similar work conducted elsewhere in the world through our YouthCAN network and the Online Civil Courage Initiative (a European capacity-building partnership between ISD and Facebook) has demonstrated that the right mix of strategy, resources, research, and training can increase the abilities of CSOs and other individuals to compete with extremist messaging online.

ISD's YouthCAN programme conducts two-day innovation labs worldwide, combining representatives from the tech and marketing sectors with activists and creatives. Our subject matter experts train up to 30 individuals to understand and create counter-narrative campaigns. In sub-Saharan Africa, these workshops have been conducted in Djibouti and Rwanda with good results in both activism and output. Using feedback from these activities, ISD endeavoured to replicate their success in Kenya within the context of this study.

Building a response to extremist messaging

Informed by the research described in the previous section, between February and October 2017, ISD trained 54 Kenyan CSOs on how to create counter-narrative campaigns. Many of the CSOs were trained at an event co-hosted with YouTube in February 2017 called the Africa Summit for Social Change.

ISD also worked directly with 29 Kenyan CSOs to develop 18 counter-narrative video campaigns to combat extremist recruitment and propaganda using social media platforms in Kenya. Twelve of these campaigns were created by individual CSOs, utilising their own pre-existing social media presence, while the remaining six were created by CSOs working together to create unaffiliated content.

The strategies used to create the campaigns were based on methodologies developed in earlier work conducted by ISD with CSOs elsewhere, to produce counter-narrative messaging that demonstrates a positive impact on targeted at-risk individuals online.¹²

Risk mitigation

Although Kenya is relatively safe and stable, it is still a developing country in a region that poses significant risks for any work that challenges extremist organisations or individuals and the messaging they produce. The systems in place in Europe and North America that allow for interventions and referrals for extremist individuals, among other things, are less developed in Kenya, and concerns remain about potential human rights abuses (e.g. extrajudicial killings). Because of this, we have conducted this work with the legal, ethical, and security risks in mind in order to limit the exposure of ourselves, our partners, or any other individuals to potential harm.

Also, because of the nature of these campaigns, which target extremist narratives in a number of direct and indirect ways, there are legal, ethical, and security risks that preclude the disclosure of the campaigns – and the organisations that produced them – in this report. Many of the campaigns created feature a number of individuals who could be put at risk from overexposure and the credibility of the CSOs could be harmed by an overt association with our work. This remains the case despite the efforts we have taken to support rather than direct the work done by courageous individuals within Kenya’s indigenous CSOs, who have themselves taken great risks to combat extremist influence and recruitment on and offline.

Content production

The campaign creation process consisted of an overview of campaign development, including the use of storyboards and scripts to create short videos between 1-3 minutes in length. This was followed by a discussion of the risks described above and the risk appetite of CSOs given their own experiences, their digital literacy and capabilities, and their understanding of the online environment. Video production ranged from using mobile phone cameras and freely available video editing software to employing the use of professional videographers and filmmakers. ISD reviewed each process in the role of consultant and offered suggestions for campaign development. However, CSOs were left to make the ultimate decisions on their campaigns.

Campaign themes chosen by the CSOs ranged from addressing hate speech to targeting Islamist extremism, tribal hate, and electoral violence during Kenya’s 2017 presidential elections. Although we shared our campaign creation methodologies (The Counter-Narrative Handbook)¹³, research, and best practices with the CSOs, we were careful not to influence the campaign themes and subject matter that they eventually chose. Instead, we guided the organisations to build on their own expertise and experience to address the challenges they felt they were best placed to take up. A full breakdown of the video themes chosen is provided in the table below.

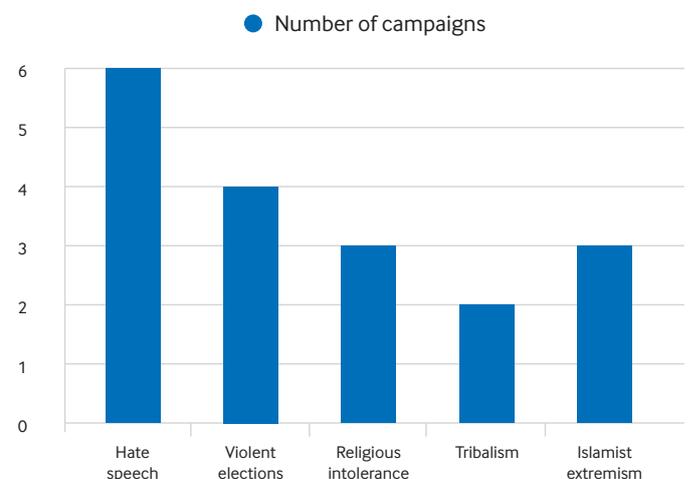


Figure 4. Campaigns the Kenyan CSOs produced, with support from ISD, broken down by theme

Based on the themes chosen, ISD assisted CSOs with disseminating the campaigns effectively on Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. The targeting of the campaigns was based on the advertising tools of each platform, which utilise demographic information (age, gender, location) and keywords. Advertising credit for the campaigns was generously donated by all three platforms.

For CSOs with existing Facebook pages, counter-narrative campaigns were hosted on the pages and identified as a product of the CSO. Campaigns from a subset of CSOs were deployed on a non-affiliated umbrella page. The campaigns were boosted using a minimum of US\$100 of advertising credit each in order to reach social media users across Kenya.

Islamism vs. tribalism

The campaigns were created during the summer of 2017, shortly before the August 2017 elections. As such, a significant amount of the campaign messaging addressed electoral violence. Across all of the campaign videos, tribalism was a prominent issue raised and repeatedly addressed. Six of the eighteen campaigns referenced the dangers inherent in tribalism, compared to only three which focused on Islamist extremism – even though our research has indicated that Islamism has a bigger presence online.

An explanation for this discrepancy, according to one local partner, is that tribalism is an everyday occurrence of “us versus them” thinking, while Islamist extremism and related terrorism occurs more sporadically, even if particular incidents (such as the Westgate Mall and Garissa University attacks) attract disproportionate attention.

Campaign dissemination

Our research has shown that video counter-narrative content should be created in a story format to maximise engagement and retention. Campaigns created in this manner should promote critical thinking through questions and answers, provide a call to action, or have characters in a story who resonates with viewers. Although most of the CSOs had no prior experience in video production, they were trained and encouraged to create storyboards to translate their own ideas and experiences into a format suitable for campaign production.

ISD was responsible for disseminating these campaigns across the three major social media platforms – Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. Each single counter-narrative video was disseminated simultaneously on each platform and monitored in parallel. Each campaign was boosted for a period of one week, to Kenyan social media users in general. These videos were mainly posted and boosted at week intervals to ensure the videos did not compete against each other; a few campaigns overlapped momentarily, and this might have impacted these campaigns’ statistics.

“According to one local partner, tribalism is an everyday occurrence of “us versus them” thinking, while Islamist terrorism occurs more sporadically.”

Campaign results and analysis

As the campaign sprints were completed, we measured the key metrics for each campaign, including reach (the number of Kenyan individuals in total exposed to the campaigns) and engagement (the number of likes, shares, views, video retention rates and comments, depending on the platform). The ratios between these metrics and further qualitative analysis allows for a better understanding of relatability and possible impact. Ultimately, the goal is to get some indication of behavioural or attitudinal change in viewers in response to the campaign, particularly if there was evidence of sympathy or support for extremist narratives.

Although ISD deployed the counter-narrative campaigns across Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, the most consistent volume of engagement and reach was achieved on Facebook through videos posted on the pages of individual CSOs. Therefore, the majority of the findings that follow apply to our findings and analysis of Kenyan-orientated counter-narrative campaigns on Facebook. This allows us to better compare the effectiveness of the campaigns in relation to each other.

Reach

Using Facebook’s advertising tools, we were able to determine that during the course of the four-month campaign deployment, the 18 campaigns collectively reached over 4.4 million Kenyans. Six campaigns were deployed on YouTube, reaching 42,000 people, and just one campaign on Twitter earned 66,000 views. The majority of the CSOs used their Facebook pages to disseminate their campaigns. During the course of the campaigns, an umbrella Twitter account used for anonymous campaign dissemination was unexpectedly blocked by Twitter, limiting our ability to collect data for some of the campaigns.

Considering the reach across each platform and using Facebook analytics alone, for consistency, we find that amongst the 18 campaigns deployed, 15 of the top audiences (those who viewed the campaign the most) were men aged 25–34, followed by two campaigns that had men aged 18–24 as their top audience, and one campaign that attracted primarily women aged 18-24.

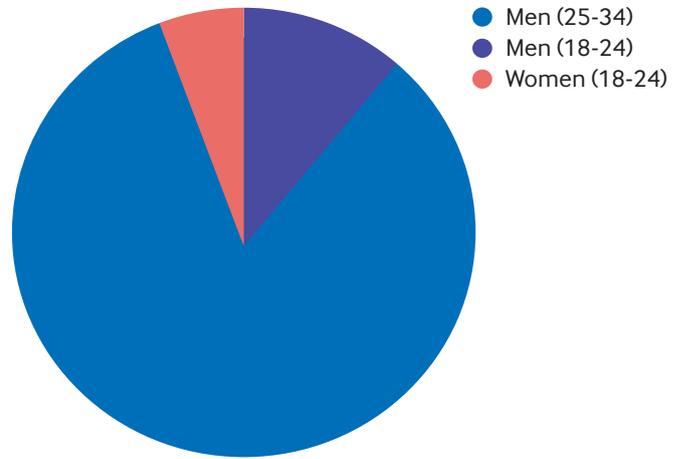


Figure 5. Age and gender breakdown of the 'top audiences' of the campaigns

Video views vs. reach

The reach of a campaign, which indicates the numbers of people exposed to the content, is less significant than the number of people who actively view the content and, more specifically, who view the content to completion. In total, on Facebook all the campaigns reached over 4.4 million people and were viewed by over 1.6 million individuals, with an approximate average of 87,000 unique viewers each. The ratio between reach and views can vary widely, with more effective and engaging content achieving a higher ratio. For those who view content, the average view time for a particular video, or the retention rate, provides a more significant indication of whether the video content is being absorbed by the viewers.

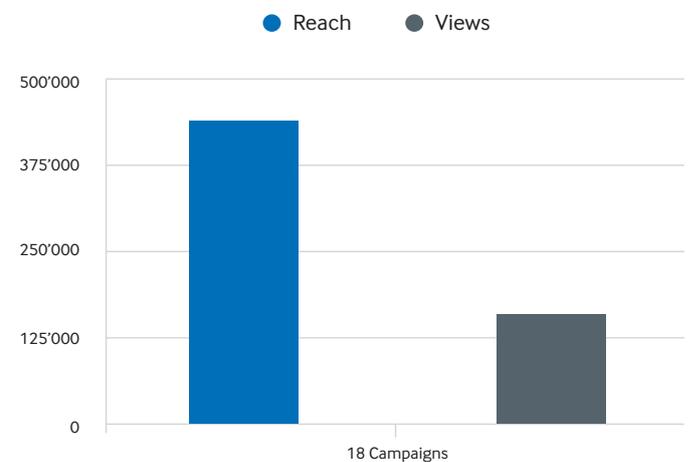


Figure 6. Total reach and view figures of the 18 campaigns deployed on Facebook.

The video views and the retention rate, of course, do not always correlate. Some videos might have a high view rate with a low retention rate, and vice versa. This can be seen in a few of the counter-narrative videos deployed. One counter-narrative video had approximately 111,000 views, with an average view time of 0:08 seconds out of a 1:13 minute video length. A more effective video gained 64,000 views, but with a better retention rate: 0:19 seconds of a 1:24 minute video length.

To further explore viewer retention rates, Facebook analytics include metrics that indicate the 50% audience drop-off point (the moment at which 50% of the audience stop watching the video). The average drop-off point for the 18 videos was 00:14, with the average video length 2:11. This indicates that the initial few seconds of a video are important for ensuring audience retention. In terms of variance, the lowest drop off point was 00:00, compared to the highest drop-off point, 1:25. This variance could be caused by a number of factors, including filmography and emotional impact, as well as how creatively and quickly the subject matter is presented to the viewer.

Engagement

Reactions, shares and comments

The campaigns collectively produced over 23,000 reactions, 5,000 shares, and 1,600 comments. Surges of activity in response to the campaigns occurred immediately before, during, and after the initial presidential election of 8 August, the Supreme Court's nullification of this election result on 28 August, and the final rescheduled election on 26 October. The recent expansion of Facebook's "like" feature, to include "laughter," "love," "shock," "sad," and "anger", provided additional metrics with which to measure engagement among viewing audiences.

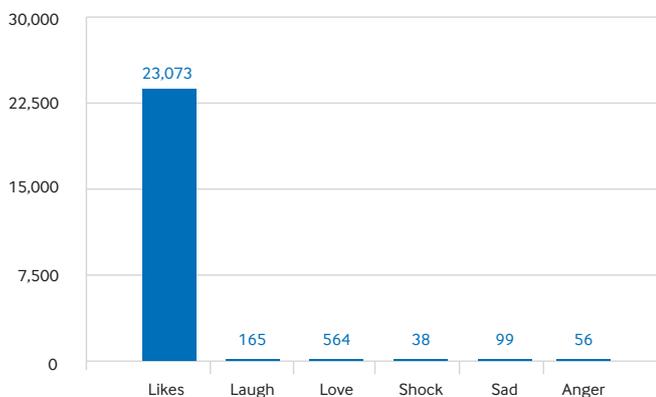


Figure 7. Total reactions received on the 18 campaigns on Facebook.

The 23,000 reactions for the campaign videos were overwhelmingly "likes", followed by the "love" and "laughter" reactions. It's important to note that the reactions cannot be analysed on their own. Depending on the content narrative, the storyline, and the campaign title, viewer reactions can be analysed in different ways.

For example, a religious intolerance counter-narrative video that aimed to combat religious profiling received 33 angry reactions. This video shows a woman being harassed because of her religious attire, and the angry reactions could be interpreted as the viewer's discontent with such behaviour – a net positive, due to the counter-narrative storyline. Another counter-narrative video that received six angry reactions interpreted these reactions negatively, as this video was a song about unity and integration. This particular counter-narrative video was not meant to incorporate negative connotations, thus the angry reactions could be interpreted as unjustifiable. Having said this, it is still difficult to interpret these reactions as having any kind of meaningful impact due to the oversimplification (by design) of the "like" form of engagement.

Comment Analysis

Comments on the content offer more in-depth source material for the analysis and understanding of the impact of the counter-narrative campaigns, particularly when they result in an extended discourse. In total, the 18 videos generated over 1,600 comments on Facebook during the campaign period. The complete framework for comment analysis has been illustrated in Appendix A. Our analysis of the comments in light of the related campaign content on Facebook showed the comments were influenced by the following:

Campaign theme

A predominant theme evident in the comments section of campaign videos was that of real or perceived injustice. These comments were mainly in response to videos that more directly advocated messages of peace and non-violence. A typical comment argued that peace is not possible while gross injustices remain in Kenya.

Other comments focused more on specific incidents relating to the Kenyan elections, such as instances of people losing their lives without their killers being prosecuted, or on the acts of corruption that people witness on a daily basis. Among the 1,600 comments left on the counter-narrative campaigns, over 600 comments directly related to the injustices in Kenya as part of the election process and the election's tribal undertones. Comments highlighting these grievances were prevalent across all of the counter-narrative campaigns and highlighted the limitations of counter-narrative content that fails to address these grievances;

grievances that, naturally, are exploited by violent extremists and incorporated into their narratives.

Below are examples of these types of comments:

"Peace comes with justice"

"We just want peace let pray to God he will listen to our prayers"

"With who... Why d'on't u preach justice to our nation. We love our country. Yes but those Who are killed with bullet are not Kenyans?"

"Tell that to Pe'do's parents or Musa'do's wife"¹⁴

"T'at's nothing without justice. If hate, discrimination, dishonesty, tribalism and corruption become law, resistance becomes irresistible."

"Peace without justice is a bitter pill to swallow ask Musa'do's Family"

"Stupid!...tell us about justice we will be all ears"

Campaign title

Similarly to most existing online video public messaging content, the majority of the counter-narrative campaign videos produced had low retention rates. That is, viewers did not watch the videos all the way through to the end. Despite this, many still had high levels of engagement. Our analysis of the 18 campaigns deployed suggested that the videos that prompted the most comments tended to have titles that posed direct questions to the viewer. The comments then seemed to respond directly to the question, rather than the content of the campaign video itself.

On the non-affiliated page, a counter-narrative video aimed at countering a common practice of politicians bribing young men was deployed with a title asking whether it is alright for politicians to use men to bring about violence. Although this video had a retention rate of 0:11 seconds out of a 2:10 minute length, and only 2.2% of the followers finished watching the video, the video had over 200 comments. Of the 50 most recent comments, two in every three seem to be direct answers to the video title.

Similarly, another counter-narrative video aimed at countering religious intolerance titled, "How does fighting help us?" earned a low retention rate of 0:18 seconds out of a 1:00 minute length, with only 18% of individuals finishing the video. Yet the video had over 100 comments, with over 50% directly responding to the video title.

In contrast, campaigns that posed a direct statement to viewers were not as successful in prompting

engagement. For example, a campaign that aimed at countering Islamist extremism through unity and compassion had a video titled "Love Your Country and Countrymen." This video had a retention rate of 0:07 seconds out of a 1:52 minute length, but attracted only 17 comments. These comments were mostly individuals typing "Amen" to the title statement, but beyond that, the message was not sufficiently thought-provoking enough to spark a discussion.

It should be noted that although the video title seemed to have a significant effect, our previous research has shown that other factors could have influenced these findings, such as the time the video was posted, the thumbnail image of the video, and conditions in the offline environment.

Campaign placement

The site on which a video was uploaded and promoted also appeared to have an impact on the nature of the subsequent engagement. More specifically, different types of Facebook placement resulted in distinct differences in the comments posted in response to the videos. On the neutral, non-affiliated page which hosted anonymous videos created by multiple CSOs, individuals tended to express more negative sentiments, including even some justifications of violence. On official CSO pages hosting videos created by the organisations themselves, viewers tended to praise the organisation and individuals in the campaigns. Negative sentiments were also expressed on the CSO pages, but not to the same extent as on the non-affiliated page.

CSO pages are naturally followed by supporters of the organisation and, unsurprisingly, are supportive of that organisation's posted content. It may also be an indicator that viewers can be more abusive online if they are responding to an anonymous site's video, the brand and purpose of which the viewer has no prior connection with.

Page following

Although all of the campaign videos on Facebook were posted and boosted for a week's 'sprint', with US\$100 of promotional in-kind support from Facebook, the organic reach of the videos (the reach independent of paid advertising boosts) posted on some of the CSO pages was higher than the boosted reach. Content boosted on the non-CSO affiliated page also received engagement during the boosting period. However, after the 'sprint' came to an end, the videos ceased to attract engagement.

In contrast, depending on the popularity of the CSO's page, engagement with the posted counter-narrative content persisted beyond the period of promotional spend. A useful demonstrative example of this sustained

engagement was seen on one CSO's Facebook page – the page that in fact had the highest following of all of the CSOs, with over 9,000 followers. As of mid-January 2018, one of the counter-narrative videos on this CSO's page, which aimed at countering religious intolerance and bigotry, reached just over 1.5 million individuals, with 75% of the reach coming from organic viewers and just 25% coming from promotional spend.

A campaign posted on the non-affiliated page, also aimed at countering religious intolerance, reached approximately 300,000 individuals, with 96% attracted through the paid promotion/boost and only 4% through organic reach as of mid-January 2018.

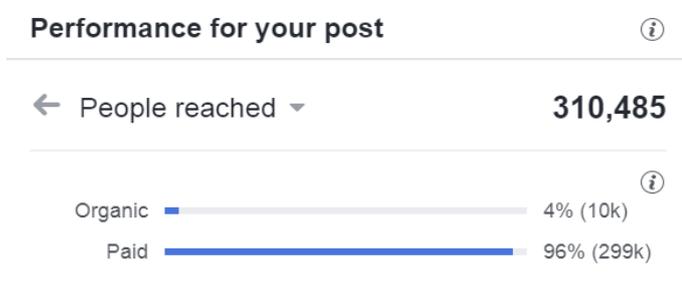


Figure 8. Organic versus paid reach for the non-affiliated page

Facebook analytics allow a six-day range for examining video views. When the dates were examined for both the affiliated and non-affiliated pages, the difference in CSO affiliation becomes clear. On a CSO page that earned over 1.5 million views for a campaign video, the same video received 112 views between 15 December and 21 December 2017. The same video on the non-affiliated page received a mere 17 views from 19 December to 25 December 2017. Additionally, a post on the CSO's page received over 1,800 shares, while the same post on the non-affiliated page received 316 shares. Because the video was marketed to the general Kenyan public from a well-established CSO page, this appears to have enabled the post to have a further reach, possibly helping individuals who were gullible or vulnerable to extremism, and demonstrating an element of added sustainability.

Performance for your post

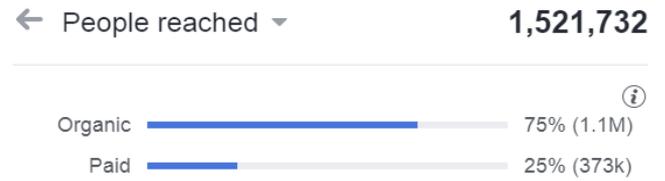


Figure 9. Organic versus paid reach for the CSO's page.

Narrative arc

The majority of the counter-narrative content created by CSOs during these campaigns tended to follow a story format, while others had a more creative format, with songs and poems. Two of the counter-narratives had an individual dictating to the camera what the viewer should or should not do. We found that such an approach was less effective and efficient. For example, one video featured a man pointing at the screen, dictating to people that they should stop hate speech. Although the video received 106 comments, fewer than 40% of the comments agreed with or debated the narrative presented. In fact, over 50% of the video comments were abusive, with some commenters suggesting that the video was trying to restrict their freedom of speech. Examples of this type of response can be seen below:

"We're tired of mediation" (Translated from Swahili)

"Let us feel free and flexible sometimes please." (Translated from Swahili)

"My friend, talk of something, but 'on't let me hate you for nothing. We're tired." (Translated from Swahili)

"Who's tired of the notions of hate speech and peace like me...? Tell this man he's boring." (Translated from Swahili)

*"Wat **** men ,get ova DAT ****,no one cares about ur goddman speeches anymore the sooner the better...!!!"*

This strongly suggests that less rigorous counter-narrative content can not only be ineffective, but it can also even be counterproductive, especially in an environment where tensions are high.

Evidence of impact

These counter-narrative campaigns were designed and disseminated with the intent of minimising the influence of the extremist narratives present on social media in Kenya shortly before, during, and after the 2017 elections. Combining all of the 18 one-week sprints with organic reach and engagement up to January 2018, the campaigns reached over 4.4 million individuals across Kenya, with over 1.6 million views, over 23,000 reactions, over 5,000 shares and over 1,600 comments. The average video retention rate was 5%, leaving an estimated figure of over 72,000 Kenyans who watched the videos in full.

Furthermore, amongst the 1,600 comments that the campaigns generated, over 40% of these comments were positive in nature – agreeing with the narrative, offering alternative narratives in support of the campaigns, or promoting supportive messages of peace and unity. Of the remaining comments, 55% were negative, leaving a minority of neutral comments (5%).

It's important to note that, although comments may be negative in response to a counter-narrative video, they demonstrate the fact that the campaign reached its target audience and can offer a window of opportunity for further engagement. For the CSOs that posted content on their own pages, ISD provided an online engagement strategy for responding to negative comments in a way that minimised risk. This type of engagement needs to be done with care, but can begin with trained CSOs simply and calmly posting comments or alternative views in response to negative comments. Beyond this, other content viewers replied to negative comments to five videos in particular, offering their own alternative, positive viewpoints.

One specific counter-narrative video that had better results than others retained 50% of its audience until 1:25 minutes through the video, where the majority of videos kept their audience until the 00:20 mark. This specific video had the most comments (265), the most minutes watched (66,000), and the highest average view time (00:47), putting it first amongst all of the counter-narrative content produced. This video was aimed at religious intolerance, depicting a woman subject to misconceptions because she wears an abaya/burqa.

Qualitatively, we believe this higher engagement was the result of three factors: the platform, the narrative relatability and the video's quality. This video was hosted on the Facebook page of a CSO with immense credibility in Mombasa, with over 9,000 followers, which resulted in greater organic engagement on this platform than from paid boosts. The video also featured an actual event that occurred in Mombasa, where a woman was harassed by a security guard due to her clothes. The standard of the videography was above average, with the problem to be addressed made clear within the first 15 seconds. A serious problem is also tackled in the video with wry humour, and one comic scene alone elicited 50 comments. All of this produces some evidence that creativity is essential to creating impact.

🗨️ Campaigns reached over 4.4 million across Kenya, with over 1.6 million views, over 23,000 reactions, over 5,000 shares and over 1,600 comments. 🗨️

Conclusion

This initiative represented the first long-term, coordinated effort by ISD to map and respond to extremist recruitment and messaging online in sub-Saharan Africa based on the methodologies we have developed primarily within Europe and North America. It would not have been possible without the efforts of and partnerships with Kenya’s growing anti-hate and counter-extremism CSO sector. The risks they have taken to mitigate threats from Islamist and tribally-motivated violence both on and offline, with minimal resources, are those many similar organisations in the West simply would not consider taking.

This process, of course, was not without its setbacks, faults, and shortcomings. The grievances many hold within Kenya will not go away soon. However, the campaigns collectively were able to reach 4.4 million users – over 10% of Kenyans online – with minimal resources during the election season.¹⁵ Comparing the death and injury tolls from the 2007/8 elections, when over 1,000 people were killed, with those of the 2017 elections, where at least 45 lost their lives,¹⁶ we can at least be reassured that the promoters of extremist and tribal division online did not succeed in replicating the devastation this time round.

It is also important to note that counter-narrative campaigns – essentially 1-2 minute videos – cannot be expected to win the argument alone. Rather, they serve as the start of a conversation which will hopefully end with people adopting a more nuanced, tolerant viewpoint. Even a campaign that provokes negative commentary can be viewed as effective if it engages its target audience. Conversely, a campaign that receives 80% positive views can be seen as preaching to the choir. In all cases, a qualitative and quantitative analysis will be needed to determine progress.

But importantly, now is the time to build on these efforts to ensure that Kenya’s citizens are more resilient to those promoting violence. To this end, the quality and quantity of influential and credible counter-narrative content needs to increase and the bars to creating this content should be lowered. Other factors that address efficacy in creating content, such as video quality, creative discipline, time sensitivity, and relatability, can be studied further within local contexts in Kenya and elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa.

On a broader level, we also hope that this report encourages a different view of tribalism as a political and security threat. Although tribalism is sometimes viewed

“ While the international community is focused on Islamism, local Kenyans see tribalism as an issue of equal or greater importance. ”

from the West with a colonial mind-set, it manifests itself in ways that are familiar to those observing the resurgence of ethno-nationalism taking shape not only in Europe and America, but around the world. It is through this lens that tribalism should be viewed, as a cultural or racial polarisation that has translated itself into the political realm. Supporters of both Islamism and tribalism have shown their willingness to disrupt or subvert political processes, as we saw in the 2017 elections, but they have also shown the intent (if distant) to replace them (through al-Shabaab’s claim to Somalia, or movements to take apart Kenya’s political structure by tribes). Both of these phenomena are likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

Internationally, we have seen greater resources made available by Western funding bodies to combat Islamist extremism. It should be noted, however, that while the rest of the international community is focused on Islamism, local Kenyans, including many of the CSOs we worked with, see tribalism as an issue of equal or greater importance. As we have seen, there are parallels between many of the messaging and recruitment techniques of the two groups, not to mention calls for violent action. Resources can be shared efficiently to build the resilience of Kenyan society to both phenomena.

We hope that the CSOs that were trained in effective counter-narrative production in this process, including learning the efficient use and monitoring of social media platforms, can share their skills with others and further improve their own output by testing new campaigns and ideas. With additional resources and support from companies like Google and Facebook, both of which have recently set up policy teams in East Africa, there is ample opportunity to ensure that disruption and threats from extremists online can be kept to a minimum and the citizens of Kenya can continue to work towards their true potential.

Appendix A: Comment Analysis

Engagement Breakdown		
Positive	Neutral	Negative
Agrees with narrative	Comments on the content, but does not wholly endorse narrative	Summarily dismisses narrative without considering argument
Offers alternative narrative challenging extremism	Includes both positive and negative elements of engagement	Advocates or defends the use of violence
Indicates re-evaluation of support for jihadi views		Promotes (racial, religious tribal or other) division
Promotes messages of peace		
Promotes (racial, religious, tribal or other) unity		

Appendix B: Propaganda Sub-Narrative Framework

ISD's Propaganda Sub- Narrative Framework			
Identity	Emphasis of an individual's identity within an ideological framework over other factors - either on a religious or social ethnic level	Abuse	Content mentioning potential personal abuse suffered whether physical or mental
Belonging	Emphasis on the belonging an individual can experience when part of an extremist or terrorist group (e.g. the ummah)	In group / Out group	Emphasis on the dichotomy between those who do and do not support an extremist group, emphasizing the moral superiority of the "in" group
Loyalty / Duty	The importance of loyalty to an extremist group over any other ideological allegiance	Victimhood	Emphasis on the victimisation of the social experience in an international sense (e.g. as a result of Western imperialism)
Isolation	References to feelings of loneliness or distance felt by individuals of a perceived minority (ethnic or cultural)	Us vs. Them	Content that stresses the polarisation of the world as one between an 'us' and 'them' (using language surrounding a 'clash of civilization')
Social Grievance	Discriminations the individual has been exposed to that are detrimental to society as a whole (e.g. Islamophobia, racism, preferable treatment)	Dehumanisation	The 'offering' of the 'out' group. Often accompanied by calls for extreme violence against them
Political Grievance	Content that raises questions around organised injustice an individual might feel (e.g. foreign policy counter, counter-terrorism strategy, immigration rates)	Means-to-an-end	Stressing how involvement in violent extremism is the best way to achieve the ultimate goal, emphasizing the importance of involvement in the fight.
Actualization	Content that stresses involvement in a group or movement as empowering, giving purpose through individual self-realisation.	Situational / Reactional	Direct reactions to events: terrorist attacks, developments in current affairs.

Endnotes

1. Anzalone, Christopher. "Continuity and Change: The Evolution and Resilience of Al-Shabaab's Media Insurgency, 2006–2016." *Hate Speech International*, November 2016.
2. *ISD utilises two different social listening and monitoring tools: Crimson Hexagon and Method52.*
3. *It's important to note that several extremist Facebook groups exist that discuss grievances that apply to the East Africa region as a whole. If the admin users of these groups were Kenyan, the page was included in the data set. The majority of non-geo-tagged Swahili pages that discussed East African grievances were discounted due to researchers being unable to determine their origin.*
4. http://kenyalaw.org/kenya_gazette/gazette/volume/MTMwNg--/Vol.CXVIII-No.25
5. Anzalone, Christopher (2016). "Continuity and Change: The Evolution and Resilience of Al-Shabab's Media Insurgency, 2006–2016." *Hate Speech International*.
6. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/africaandindianocean/kenya/10326863/Tweeting-terrorism-How-al-Shabaab-live-blogged-the-Nairobi-attacks.html>
7. <http://gs.statcounter.com/social-media-stats/all/kenya>
8. *Note: This account did not interact with these individuals for ethical purposes.*
9. *The group was either deleted or the account was removed from the group in December 2017.*
10. <https://www.tuko.co.ke/234758-al-shabaab-surprising-allegations-august-general-election.html#234758>
11. <http://www.dw.com/en/in-kenya-politics-split-on-ethnic-divide/a-37442394>
12. Amanullah, Birdwell, Silverman, Stewart; *The Impact of Counter-Narratives* (2016), http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Impact-of-Counter-Narratives_ONLINE_1.pdf
13. Silverman, Tuck; *The Counter-Narrative Handbook* (2016), http://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Counter-narrative-Handbook_1.pdf
14. *Pendo and Musando refer to individuals who died in Kenya during the electoral period.*
15. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/business/article/2001236985/kenya-now-has-39-4-million-internet-users>
16. Human Rights Watch, *Kenya Elections 2017*, <https://www.hrw.org/blog-feed/kenya-elections-2017>

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