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On the Cumulative Role of Different Types of Media in the Radicalization Puzzle

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1 Introduction: Radicalization and Media

It seems that the balance among different social, religious and national communities has been fundamentally upset on a global level since the 9/11 attacks (Kimmel & Stout 2006). In both the United States and Europe, interethnic tensions have increased significantly between dominant (religious) majorities and other (religious) minority groups as a direct result of the War on Terror (Rousseau et al. 2015). Those tensions are inextricably linked to the strong increase in polarization and discrimination in Western society (Ciftci 2012). Recent attacks in Paris (2015) and Brussels (2016) strengthened the public debate on radicalization in Western Europe.

The catalyzing impact of media on the radicalization and polarization processes has thereby frequently been discussed. Specifically new media technologies have been held responsible for making radical ideologies effortlessly accessible to adolescents and young adults. For example, smartphones and online communicative environments—enabling youngsters to communicate with the world by fundamentally transcending the spatial borders of the family life (Ishii, 2006)—are seen as the conveyor belts through which radicals deliver their message deep into young people's private lives in such a way that they can become radicalized and recruited for terrorism even in their bedrooms, cfr. "bedroom radicals" (Ahmed & George, 2016). While existing studies usually concentrate on specific media channels through which radical narratives circulate, the specific content and effects of these narratives remain underexplored. Therefore, the present study examines the media's role in radicalization from a multidimensional communication perspective, focusing both on the media content and on the media effects dimension. This means that we set out to investigate two sides of the communication process, i.e. (A) what types of media narratives are disseminated, and (B) the potential consequences of these narratives on the members of the audience. Accordingly, the design of the current mixed methods study is two-fold.

First, by means of an in-depth content analysis, we explore the argumentation techniques that extremists use in their media outlets. In this case, we specifically consider the prevalence of moral and psychological argumentation in ISIS's (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) main written propaganda medium Dabiq. We concentrate on Dabiq for two reasons. First, Dabiq was during its glory days ISIS's main written propaganda outlet. It has therefore been thought of as one of the richest sources for ISIS's (A) body of thought and (B) recruitment narratives (Gambhir, 2014). Second, Dabiq has been considered to be one of the flagship recruitment tools and propaganda media that was centrally produced and distributed by ISIS's official media mouthpiece "Al-Hayat Media Center" (Atwan, 2014; Wignell, Kay & Lange, 2017). Although we shift our focus to Salafi-jihadist media content only, it should be mentioned that we do not neglect the massive

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online prevalence and availability of other extreme content, more in particular far-right media. The concentration on Salafi-jihadist content is more an indicative case study. Furthermore, Salafi-jihadist inspired terrorism, rather than far right extremism, appeared to be significantly more relevant to the public and political agenda: Belgium provided the highest amount of foreign terrorist fighters per capita in Europe (cfr. Neumann, 2015) and (most of) the suspected terrorists behind the Paris and Brussels attacks were born and raised in Belgium.

Second, we investigate by means of a crosssectional survey how and to what extent young adults encounter and consume these types of recruitment tools and to what degree they internalize the moral and psychological arguments therein. For this, we surveyed 317 youngsters who attended secondary schools in metropolitan areas such as Brussels and Antwerp. These schools were consciously sampled as they attract pupils from a wide variety of cultural, religious and ethnic backgrounds. The aim of this pioneering study was to investigate the amount of extremist narratives—as content-analyzed in part one of this study—in these young people's media diet. Similarly, by means of this questionnaire, it is our ambition to expose the potential associations between moral arguments in extremist narratives on the one hand and personal moral views of its consumers on the other.

Even though both studies are mainly explorative, we argue that only by combining both perspectives we can move beyond the current state of the art and identify the potential effects of extremist media on radicalization.

This chapter is roughly built up of three parts. Firstly, it opens with a brief overview of the current state of the literature on the reciprocal associations between (extremist) media and extremist ideation. The theoretical paradigm followed is the 'radicalization puzzle' by Hafez and Mullins (2015), suggesting that radicalization is not a unidimensional linear process but rather a personalized jigsaw in which a few elementary pieces fall together. In the second part, we will dive into extremist media content by discussing the in-depth content analysis. Thirdly, the crosssectional survey procedures and results will be discussed, to conclude with a general discussion on the results of both the content and the reception part of the story.

PART 1: STATE OF THE ART IN BRIEF

1.1   From radicalization process to radicalization puzzle

In their synthesis of recent empirical literature on radicalization, Hafez and Mullins (2015) expose a plurality of approaches to the concept of radicalization. The concept is primarily associated with related concepts such as (violent) extremism. The authors, however, distinguish three elements around which a consensus can be found in the literature. Firstly, radicalization is seen as a process; however, it is recognized that this process is not linear and that radicalization cannot be narrowed to specific archetypes. Secondly, the radicalization process involves a certain extremist belief system. This belief system is situated on an ideological level, and may also have a dogmatic religious interpretation. Thirdly, there is general agreement that we can speak of radicalization when the aforementioned belief system is based on violence and eventually leads to violence. Instead of searching for one specific cause of radicalization, Hafez and Mullins suggest looking at several factors which together constitute a *"radicalization puzzle"*. The authors differentiate four factors based on empirical research with a focus on Islamic extremism in the West: grievances, networks, ideologies and enabling support structures. Other studies primarily point to the importance of factors on micro, meso and macro levels (Schmid, 2013). In their review of studies on radical jihadism in the West, King and Taylor (2011) distinguish different conceptual models that correspond to psychological radicalization factors, namely relative group deprivation, identity conflicts, and personality traits.

Despite these different views and conceptualizations of the phenomenon, scholars seem to unanimously agree that radicalization thrives, at least for an essential part, on media and communication technologies. In particular forms of online communication are an increasingly strong presence in research into radicalization (Conway 2017). Although several studies indicate that digital and social media can have a strengthening effect on radicalization, there remains some debate on how far-reaching these effects are (Hafez & Mullins 2015: 968-970). Overall we can say that research

into radicalization and media revolves around two themes, each of which focuses upon online media platforms.

1.2 online networks

The first theme concerns the role of online networks and possibly radicalizing effects of the Internet. Reflecting widespread concern about the extent to which online environments can contribute to the radicalization of groups and individuals, there is frequent mention of the way the Internet can act as a homogenous "echo room" in which the views of participating individuals are reinforced by like-minded prospects (RAND Europe 2013). Conway (2012) thus defines online social networks and communities as (potential) radical environments. Social media platforms are regularly described as the ideal environment in which radical ideas can thrive (Levin 2015; Pearson 2016; Thompson 2011; Weimann 2016). Several authors do, however, also critique the limited scope and depth of much existing research into radicalization and online media (Conway 2017) and draw attention to convergences between old and new media platforms (Archetti 2015). Moreover, argues Archetti (2015), the impact of social media cannot automatically be assumed and must always be situated in its social and local contexts by looking at specific cases.

1.3 online recruitment and propaganda

Another important theme in the literature is the use of online media platforms by radical groups and organizations for propaganda and recruitment. It is known that their ability to spread messages has increased exponentially through digital and social media (Weimann 2014). The majority of the studies involve (limited) case studies or reconstructions of messages intended for both supporters and potential sympathizers (Prentice et al 2011; Qin et al. 2007; Torres Soriano 2010; Wright & Bachmann 2015). Recent research focuses among other things on how extremist messages are made attractive in the context of social media (Huey 2015).

1.4 Radicalizaton, Media and Moral Disengagement: Developments and Shortcomings

In a critical study, Aly (2017) presents an agenda for future research on the relationship between violent extremism and (online) media, arguing that essentially, more attention should be paid to the audience of extremist media messages and the importance of various forms of media, in particular the meanings that groups and individuals give to extremist content. It is striking that in the above-mentioned literature, the causal link between extremist media content and effective radicalization is hardly touched upon. The relationships between media content and the networks and individuals who are confronted by it are often based on assumptions that lack convincing empirical support. The present study, although still exploratory and based on cross-sectional data, attempts to offer a broader view through embedding the implications of using different types of media platforms and content in research on psychological and sociological characteristics and developments of young people. Our survey will be preceded by an exploratory content analysis of extremist media messages (Dabiq) as an example of a media offering that may be inspiring some young people.

Moral disengagement is a key concept in the analysis of the perspective of media users (receivers) and when looking at the meaning of extremist media content and the possible radicalization that may follow from it. Moral disengagement, or moral detachment, implies the justification of behaviour that does not fit within one's own normative framework (see inter alia Bandura 2002). The *Selective Moral Disengagement Theory* (Bandura, 2002) assumes that in principle it is not in human nature to cause another person harm, unless one can renounce one's own moral objections. More concretely, the SMDT states that people supposedly have a primary consciousness of moral boundaries with respect to others. Those limits would then ensure that they are aware of 'good' versus reprehensible social behaviour. Bandura (1999) theorized that in the case of inhumane behaviour towards others, offenders must first put aside or dissolve their own moral boundaries in order to justify themselves.

1.5 Research questions

The above research, including its demonstrated shortcomings, led to the following research questions in the present study (its "flow" can be seen in figure **??**):

RQ1.1: What 'narratives' and arguments are presented by extremist groups in jihadist propaganda in order to inspire their readers/supporters and morally disconnect themselves from society? (study 1)

RQ2: How prevalent are these extremist media in youth's media diets? (study 2)

RQ3: To what extent do readers of extremist media sources internalize the moral arguments therein? (study 2)

RQ3.2: What is the role of moral disengagement in the development of radical/extremist ideas? (study 2)

RQ3.3: What is the mediating role of feelings of exclusion/discrimination and moral disengagement in the relation between exposure to media and the support for radicalization? (study 2)
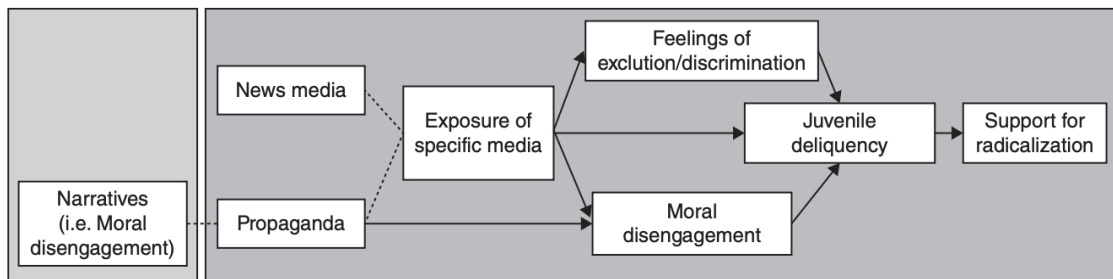

Figure 1: Flow of research

As our tests were performed on crossectional data, the hypothesized associations in the survey study do not reflect any causal relationship. Even though it seems logical to assume that (radical) thought is (partly) shaped by one's communicative environments including media, or that criminal behavior is a result of specific moral schema in one's mind, it is perfectly arguable that inverse effects might be true as well. For example, someone who already supports radical ideas might be more inclined to proactively consult extremist media following the selective exposure paradigm. Nonetheless, in order to be consistent with the dominant discourse within both media and communication effects literature and (psychology of) radicalization literature, we treat media as a hypothesized predisposition and the other variables as possible outcomes. Having said that, and with respect to the correlation-causation debate, we encourage future research to test the proposed associations over time by means of a longitudinal research design that enables to infer causality.

1.6 Two Explorative Studies: A Content Analysis and A Crossectional Survey

This study followed a multidimensional approach in order to study the cumulative impact that different types of media can have on a process of radicalization. We concentrated upon two crucial factors in the communication process: the media message and the media user. In doing so, we divided the study into two successive trials. First, a deductive message analysis was conducted on the jihadist propaganda periodical of IS, Dabiq. The focus here was on the arguments IS employs in its ideology in order to justify the caliphate and its actions. Second, a cross-sectional, exploratory media reception study was conducted among adolescents and young adults aged 15 to 30 years (n = 317) on exposure to media, including jihadist propaganda and its connection with radical ideology. In view of the different nature of the methods and techniques, the two studies are explained separately below.

2   Introduction

Propaganda is considered one of the most critical providers of ideologies (Jowett & O'Donnell, 2012). A study of propaganda messages is therefore particularly relevant for understanding how ideological meanings are created and how they are taken over by other mass media. We therefore first carried out a descriptive content analysis of the ideology and discourse of IS as exhibited in their English-language propaganda magazine Dabiq, employing the theoretical framework of the *Selective Moral Disengagement Theory* (SMDT) (Bandura, 1999, 2002) to gain insight into the empirical content of radical Islamic propaganda. In addition, the content of the magazine was compared with actual developments in Syria and Iraq, as reported in a consistent and detailed manner by the Wilson Center (Wilson Center, 2016), in order to assess the veracity of the propaganda messages. The design of the study is discussed below.

3   Corpus Description

This first study specifically focused on the English-language propaganda magazine Dabiq of IS, the most dominant contemporary radical Islamic terrorist organization (Byman, 2016). The reason for this is threefold. First, Dabiq is considered one of the richest sources of information on the radical Islamic ideology of IS (Gambhir, 2014). IS distributes an average of 38 different propaganda publications per day (Winter, 2015), of which Dabiq is said to contain the most detailed collection of all output of the organization's ideas in both the religious as well as the military-political spheres. Second, the publication is directed at a Western audience, with the ultimate goal of convincing readers of their radical Islamic ideology and recruiting them for armed jihad in Syria and Iraq (Feddes, Nick Olson, & Doosje, 2015). Finally, although (1) Dabiq is one of the most important written propaganda resources of IS, and (2) such propaganda messages are considered *"radicalizing material"* (Pauwels & De Ruyver, 2015, p. 258), scientific and systematic content analyses of IS's persuasion techniques in Dabiq seem to be scarce: we refer to Vergani and Bliuc (2015) for a more linguistic approach and Ingram (2016a, 2016b), and Novenario (2016) for a comparative study between Dabiq and al-Qaeda's Inspire. The current study primarily looks at social cognitive argumentation techniques that could possibly incite radical ideology.

A data set was drawn from all available articles from the first 14 issues of Dabiq (See Table **??**). This resulted in a total sample of 279 items (average number of articles per journal = 19.93; standard deviation = 4.01; min = 13, max = 25. Average number of characters per article = 7854; standard deviation = 10 181; min = 57 197; max = 253 011).

In addition, each article was categorized in a thematic genre. These themes were compiled on the basis of Dabiq's own generic labels used in the index (e.g. "war report" or "Islamic State Report"), and expanded with a number of theoretical labels after a first exploratory walk-through (e.g. political or religious foundations) (see also Gambhir (2014)) (see table **??**). This approach allowed us to examine what themes were dominant in Dabiq and in particular how they evolved over time.

3.1   Operationalizing the theoretical lens of the Selective Moral Disengagement Theory

According to the Selective Moral Disengagement Theory (SMDT), inhumane behaviour goes through eight selective psychological justification practices: (1) moral justification, (2) sanitizing language, (3) advantageous comparison, (4) displacement of responsibility, (5) diffusion of responsibility, (6) disregard or consequences, (7) dehumanization, and (8) attribution of blame. Following a first exploratory walk-through, however, the current study proposes a more detailed categorization, particularly for the mechanism of dehumanization. Given the wide variety of insults for different

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[1]This section is partly based on a previously published study on IS's rhetoric in the Dabiq magazines. See for more information and a lengthier discussion, Frissen T., d'Haenens L. (2017). Legitimizing the Caliphate and its politics: Moral disengagement rethoric in ISIL's Dabiq. In: Krishna-Hensel S. (Eds.), Authoritarian and Populist Influences in the New Media, Chapt. 6, (pp. 138-164) Routledge. DOI: 10.4324/9781315162744-7

Issue	Title	Release date	#articles	#characters
*Dabiq*1:	The Return of the Khilafah	July 5, 2014	21	57,197
Dabiq 2:	The Flood	July 27, 2014	20	75,403
Dabiq 3:	A Call to Hijrah	August 31, 2014	23	76,641
Dabiq 4:	The Failed Crusade	October 12, 2014	15	114,053
Dabiq 5:	Remaining and Expanding	November 22, 2014	16	70,345
Dabiq 6:	Al-Qa'idah of Waziristan: A Testimony from Within	December 30, 2014	13	154,981
Dabiq 7:	From Hypocrisy to Apostasy: The Extinction of the Grayzone	February 12, 2015	23	194,285
Dabiq 8:	Shari'ah Alone Will Rule Africa	March 30, 2015	19	185,305
Dabiq 9:	They Plot and Allah Plots	May 21, 2015	25	198,707
Dabiq 10:	The Law of Allah or the Laws of Men.	July 13, 2015	22	253,100
Dabiq 11:	From the Battle of al-Azhab to the War of Coalitions	September 9, 2015	24	214,837
Dabiq 12:	Just Terror	November 18, 2015	25	252,996
Dabiq 13:	The Rafidah: From Ibn Saba' to the Dajjal	January 19, 2016	18	165,482
Dabiq 14:	The Murtadd Brotherhood	April 13, 2016	15	185,917

Table 1: Corpus description Dabiq 1 - 14

Generic genres		Occurrence in %
Foreword		3.68
Newsreport	News story	2.31
	Islamic State report	3.78
	War report	5.87
Personality cult	Interview	6.73
	Homage	3.46
Contextual feature	Opinionated item from internal actor	8.10
	Opinionated item from external actor	9.08
	Religious contextual background	24.21
	Political contextual background	17.25
	Dispute with al-Qaeda	9.79
Persuasive text		5.73

Table 2: Prevalence generic genres in the total sample (in %)

opponents, and the corresponding subtle variety of connotations, in total four subdivisions of the dehumanization category were produced: (1) Firstly, a 'dehumanization local' was created for local enemies/opponents. This subclass refers to words like 'tawaghit' or 'Murttad', e.g. *"[...] shake [off] the tawāghīt* [derogatory term for the local regimes, referring to "false leaders" that do not strictly govern via the Sharia] *and cleanse the Muslims' lands* [...]*"* (Dabiq 6, 2014, p. 28, "Action in the New Wilayat"). (2) Secondly, a separate division was created for dehumanization arguments in the context of the Crusades, in which 'the West' is structurally reduced to Crusaders, for example: *"[...] in order to terrorize the crusaders waging war against the Muslims"* (Dabiq 7, 2015, p. 73, "Interview with Abu 'Umar al-Baljīkī"). (3) Thirdly, not only were Westerners in general labeled as crusaders, dehumanization epithets were also used specifically against Western (super)powers, for example, *"[...] the dog of the White House [...]."* (Dabiq 10, 2015 p. 42, "They Are Not Lawful Spouses for one Another"). (4) Finally, there is a fourth and final subclass compiled for dehumanization in general, which could include diseases or lifeless objects, e.g. *"a devastating cancer has emerged, mutated, and spread, attempting to drown the entire Ummah* [...]*"* [about the Muslim Brotherhood]. (Dabiq 14, 2016, p. 28, "The Murttad Brotherhood").

In addition, we drafted a new category within Bandura's (2002) concept of SMDT. In today's context of terrorism, it seems that not only the process of dehumanizing the enemy is relevant, but attributing superhuman/animal characteristics to the perpetrators themselves can also act as a powerful justification mechanism. Dabiq, for example, makes regular use of lion metaphors: *"The lions of the Islamic State advanced and continued capturing one position after another [...]"* (Dabiq 2, 2014, p. 42, "Islamic State News"). Equating IS with a powerful predator, namely the king of the animal kingdom, could then become an effective argument to be inhumane/conduct uncivilized behaviour (Bastian et al., 2013). In other words, such a metaphor can be attractive and persuasive for individuals who feel excluded from society or who struggle with feelings of humiliation and inferiority (Hafez & Mullins, 2015). It is believed that SMDT mechanisms are structurally present in the public communication or propaganda of terrorist organizations (Bandura, 2004; Weimann, 2008).

To test this empirically, we developed a *coding instrument*. In addition to the above-mentioned twelve SMDT arguments (eight main classes, four subclasses), a number of descriptive variables (e.g., *genre, number of characters, actors, issue number, etc.*) and additional characteristics (e.g. *political references versus religious references*) are included. The coding took place at the *sentence level* (with an average Krippendorf's α of 0.81 on the key variables after double coding of a random 10% sample of the data set) and was recorded systematically using a software package for qualitative

data analysis (NVivo 10 for Windows). After the coding at sentence level, analysis took place at the *item level*, in view of the prevalence of the proposed SMDT variables and other characteristics. In concrete terms, this means that the number of SMDT arguments were added together for each item and could be calculated as a total score and average prevalence per item (see table **??**). This approach proved valuable for the quantitative approach to the dominant justification arguments that IS communicates in its ideology.

In a subsequent step, the data were aggregated at *issue level* using IBM SPSS Statistics 24 for Windows. As a result, more explanatory analyses were carried out with regard to the passage of time. Several multiple regression analyses were performed, in which we examined the mutual relationship between the various SMDT-arguments and other features of the articles (for example thematic genre), in interaction with the publication number. The next step was to study the relative prevalence of specific thematic genres in order to gain insight into the evolution of the most dominant themes. For this, a binomial logistic regression model was used, whereby the time of publication was used to predict the probability that an article was written in a specific theme.

4   Results

Our exploration of all Dabiq articles revealed two notable trends. First, the articles discussing the political foundations of IS appeared increasingly dominant. This finding emerged out of a trend analysis of Dabiq's various thematic genres. Generally there are three dominant genres: religious background stories, political background stories and pieces about the conflict with al-Qaeda. Particularly religion-oriented stories, with articles like *"Hijrah to Sham's From the Millah or Ibrahim"* (Dabiq 3, 2014, pp. 10-11), proved to be the most prominent, with 24.21% of all the texts. The second most common theme consists of "political and militaristic stories", accounting for about 17.25% of the total text and articles, e.g. *"From the Battle of Ahzab to the War of Coalitions"* (Dabiq 11, 2015 pp. 46-54). Finally, almost 10% was devoted to the conflict with, or superiority over al-Qaeda, in which both political and religious elements could be found. An example of this last theme is *"The Allies of Al-Qa'idah in Shame"* (Dabiq 8, 2015, pp. 7-11).

A comparative analysis over time shows that the proportions of these three main genres vary greatly from issue to issue. Figure **??** displays the dynamic development of the genres in Dabiq: The horizontal axis represents all expenditures from number 1 to 14, while the vertical axis presents the percentage for the three main genres per issue. Through a more detailed analysis of the chart, three remarkable findings need to be discussed here. First, issue 4 shows a sudden increase in politically motivated articles, and a sharp decline in religious-oriented pieces.
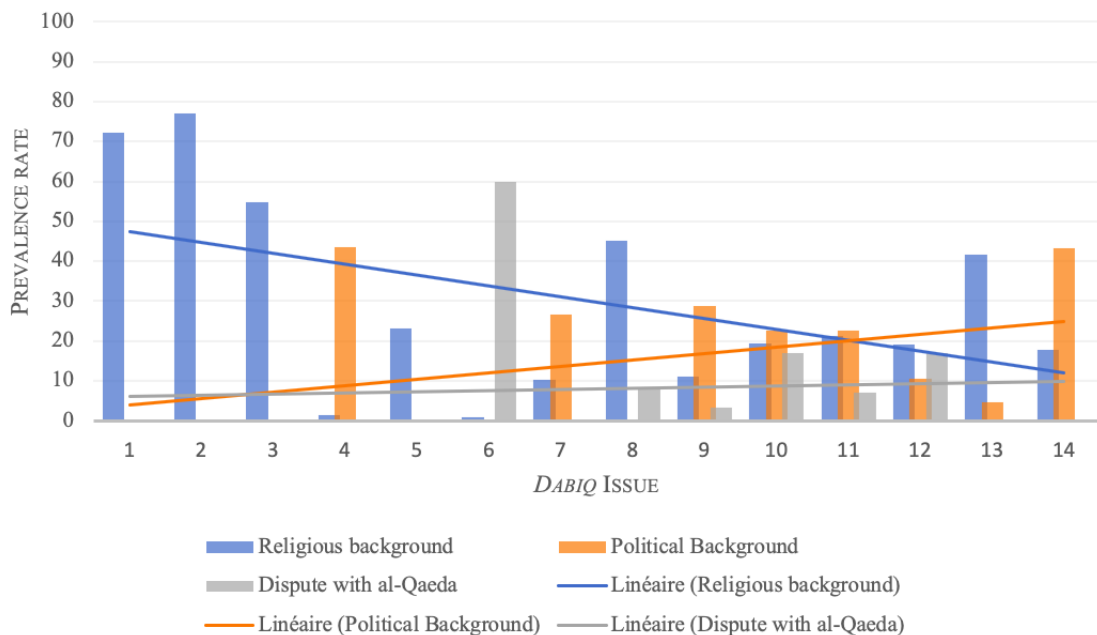

Figure 2: Plot depicting the dynamic prevalence rates of the main stories throughout the Dabiq-series.

It seems that this mainly has to do with issue 4 being a specific thematic issue about the invasion of Iraq by coalition forces. Second, a closer look at issue 6 shows that the prevalence of both political- and religious-oriented articles decreases while the proportion of al-Qaeda-related articles peaks at 59.86%. This anomaly seems to be explained by the fact that this issue is a thorough critique of al-Qaeda. Articles in issue 6 are primarily concerned with arguing why al-Qaeda is not a true Salafi-jihadist organization, whereas IS is. Finally, in issue 13 the prevalence of religiously oriented articles rises again briefly due to its focus on the conflict between Sunni and Shiite Muslims.

A next step tested the statistical significance of the increase in politically-oriented articles and the decline of religious background articles. A binary logistic regression analysis was performed. This method allows us to model the odds of a binary-categorical dependent variable, given a unit change in another variable. In the current study, this analysis was used to predict the odds of an article being religiously or politically oriented. Table **??** shows a summary of the statistics of this test. It turned out that publication number was a significant predictor of both politically and the religiously oriented contents. Specifically, the logistic regression showed that the odds for religiously oriented articles were 0.895 times lower (95% CI [0.836:0.959]) per new issue of Dabiq (e^{β}religious=0.895; βreligious=-0.111; p<0.005). Nevertheless, it appeared that odds increased sharply for politically oriented pieces – by 1.201 times per issue (95% CI[1.033 - 1.397]) per issue (e^{β}political=1.201; βpolitical=0.183; p<0.005). In other words, with the release of each new publication, the odds that an article offers political arguments increases with about 20

Model 1: Religious contextual background	B	SE	OR	(95% CI)	Wald
Issue number **	-0.111	0.035	0.895**	(0.836 ; 0.959)	10.003
Constant	-0.228	0.275	0.796		0.688

Model 2: Political contextual background	B	SE	OR	(95% CI)	Wald
Issue number ***	0.183	0.077	1.201**	(1,033 ; 1,397)	5.643
Constant****	-4.414	0.805	0.012***		30.089

	Model 1			Model 2	
Hosmer-Lemeshow Goodness of fit: χ^2 (df=8)	12.054			5.965	
Omnibus test Model χ^2	10.374*** (df=1)			6.644** (df=1)	
Nagelkerke R2	0.053			0.066	

Table 3: Binary logistic model with theme as dependent variable.

A second trend that became visible through the data analysis was that IS's justification rhetoric has declined slowly from passive-defensive to active-hostile. Following Weimann's (2008) hypothesis that very specific justification mechanisms should occur in the communications of terrorists, all Dabiq articles for this finding were subjected to an analysis through the moral disengagement lens of Bandura (2004). Specifically, we studied the frequency with which SMDT argumentation techniques were employed in Dabiq. Overall, it was found that the 279 items were saturated with moral disengagement arguments. Almost all twelve proposed justification mechanisms were used by the Dabiq editors, among which the extraordinary prominence of dehumanization practices and insults against opponents was especially striking. Because these categories occurred much more than the others, and could thereby bias the results, we decided to discuss the results in two stages. Table **??** shows the frequency and relative prevalence of the arguments for the first step, leaving out the more detailed measurement of dehumanization arguments, as well as the second step, where the dehumanization subclasses were included in the total of the arguments.

Overall, it can be said that moral disengagement arguments indeed are selectively employed to justify the behaviour and the existence of IS. The second column shows that five practices account for around 80% of all SMDT arguments contained in Dabiq. Sanitizing language (26.48%) and attribution of blame (15.52%) in particular are common. This is also evident from Figure **??**. Apparently Dabiq editors prefer arguments that can take away a certain guilt or sense of personal vulnerability. A good example of this can be found in the use of sanitizing language in the context of suicide incidences.

In Dabiq these incidences are systematically referred to with the term *"istishhādī operations"*, which more or less means 'martyr-actions'. Blunt terms such as 'suicide' are avoided, thereby glossing over the fatal consequences that are inextricably linked to a suicide attack and moreover,

		Without detailed dehumanization subdivisions		With dehumanization subdivisions	
		Frequency	In% of total	Frequency	In% of total
Behavior-oriented	Moral justification	291	15.11	291	6.17
	Sanitizing language	510	26.48	510	10.81
	Advantageous comparison	155	8.05	155	3.29
	Displacement of responsibilities	243	12.62	243	5.15
	Diffusion of responsibilities	211	10.96	211	4.47
Effects-oriented	Disregard of consequences	73	3.79	73	1.55
Opponent-oriented	Dehumanization: general	111	5.76	111	2.35
	Dehumanization: crusaders	-	-	651	13.80
	Dehumanization: local adversaries	-	-	2,064	43.77
	Dehumanization: the West	-	-	75	1.59
Perpetrator-oriented	Attribution of blame	299	15.52	299	6.34
	Dehumanization/Predatorization: lion	33	1.71	33	0.70
Total		1,926	100	4,683.00	100

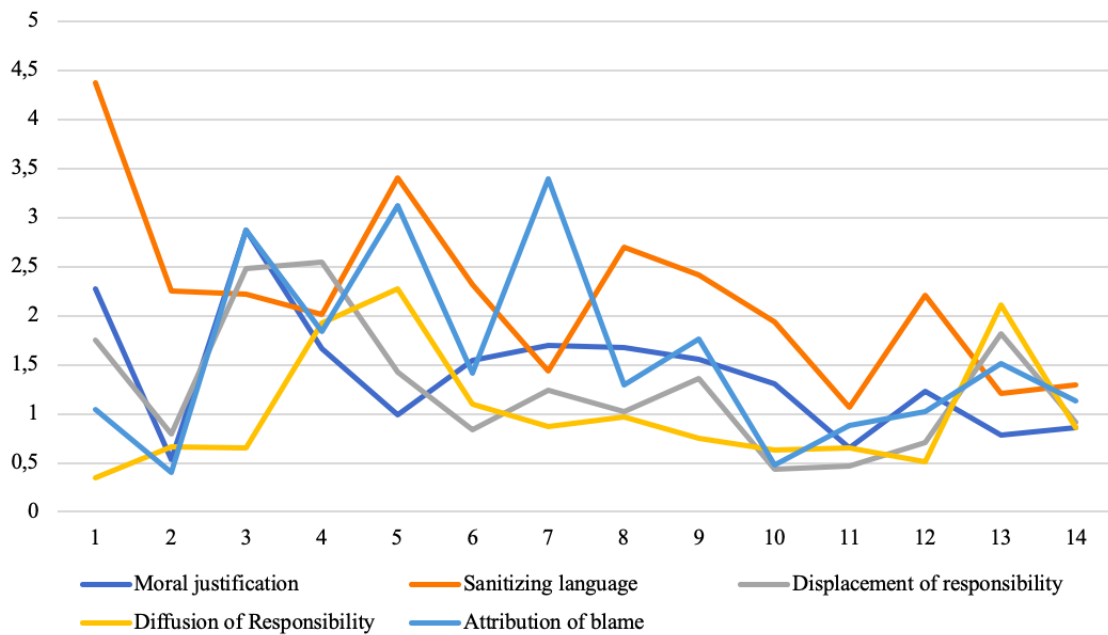Table 4: Moral disengagement practices and the frequencies

Figure 3: Trend lines based on the relative weighted frequencies for the five dominant disengagement practices.

presenting the attacks as a ticket to *"the loftiest chambers of Jannah* [paradise]*"* (Dabiq 13, 2016, p. 20, "The best of shuhadā").

In addition, it is important to point out the peak in the attribution of blame arguments in issue 7. This issue was published a month after the attacks on the Charlie Hebdo editors in Paris, and is full of argumentation techniques to justify these acts. The 'serves you right – it's your own fault' attitude on the part of the IS can be seen as a rhetoric of shifting the blame, or the attribution of blame technique. A lot of text in this issue is also devoted to explaining the burning alive of Jordanian pilot Moaz al Kasasbeh, an act that is presented as a retaliation for the bombing of the IS that he performed on behalf of the coalition. Specifically, Dabiq refers to the Sharia concept of qisas, which can be compared with the 'eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth' principle.

One of the most remarkable findings is the gradual decline of the most frequently utilized arguments over time. This could be because a displacement effect occurs with dehumanization practices. To investigate this, the next step of the analysis was performed, in which the subclasses of dehumanization were also included. As we can also learn from Table ??, these are by far the most common techniques of argumentation, with a total of 67.85% of all SMDT arguments. As can be expected, IS focuses on the dehumanization of local enemies (43.77% of all the arguments used). Examples include *Tawaghit* (referring to the "false leaders" of the regimes), *Kufr* [infidels] and *al-Salul* (derogatory term for the royal family of Saudi Arabia). This is consistent with the IS military-political core strategy, which, unlike al-Qaeda, sees the local powers as the main enemies (Lister 2015).

When the relative prevalence, weighted for the number of characters used in each issue, is again pictured in a graph (see figure ?? and ??), we can see that a displacement effect of the argumentation techniques does indeed occur. Whereas the first issues of Dabiq primarily used sanitizing language and retaliatory arguments, the last issues above all used arguments that stripped opponents of their humanity.

Despite the fact that there are two distinct trends occurring throughout the entire Dabiq series, identifying the underlying reasons for the changes in the techniques of argumentation remains guesswork. On the one hand, the increase in hostile language and number of politically and military-oriented articles may have to do with the increase in air strikes by the coalition (Wilson Center, 2016), which strongly threatened the existence of IS. On the other hand, one also has to consider the possibility that the smart and sophisticated media team of IS was increasingly directing its recruiting pitch to an audience where the biggest driver for radical ideas was no longer
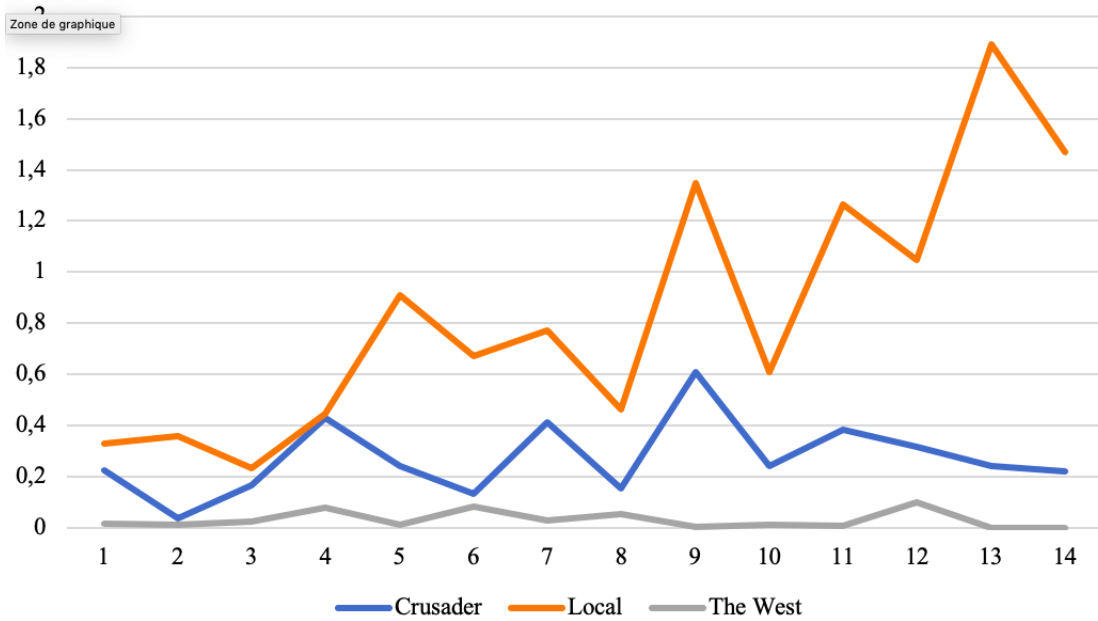
Figure 4: Trend lines based on the relative weighted frequencies for the for the opponent-oriented disengagement practices, i.e. dehumanization language

necessarily religion (Robinson, 2014), but rather a complex interaction of feelings of exclusion, hostility and moral distance from the (host) society. This necessitates an exploratory study of the potential audience for Dabiq, as carried out in our Study 2 below.

PART 3: CROSS SECTIONAL AUDIENCE RESEARCH

5 Introduction

In line with the research by Bhui, Warfa and Jones (2014), we will examine the underlying factors for the (over)sensitivity of radical ideology by way of a cross-sectional questionnaire study in an effort to gain a broad understanding of radicalization in the general population. With respect to the exploratory nature of this study, we focused this questionnaire on three basic psycho-social concepts in connection with radicalization: (1) feelings of social exclusion / feelings of discrimination, (2) moral disengagement from the (host) society, and (3) exposure to various types of media.

6 Method

Because the ultimate goal of this study was to gain insight into ideological radicalization within different groups in society, we decided upon a disproportional stratified sample with an over-representation of young people with Arab or Muslim backgrounds. This was necessary to make comparisons between groups statistically valid. Unlike a systematic random sample, this method enables one to engage with highly targeted respondents having specific demographic characteristics. Since the target population for this study was defined as young people between ages 15 and 30 from different cultural backgrounds, it was decided to limit the sample to young people from metropolitan areas. Thus, a two-stage approach was followed: First, a convenience sample was adopted, drawing from secondary schools of inter alia Brussels and Antwerp. Second, respondents were recruited on the basis of a sampling frame of the accessible students in the selected schools. To supplement, respondents were recruited through a deradicalization centre in Flanders.

This method resulted in a sample of 528 respondents. After a thorough inspection of the data, incomplete questionnaires were removed, leaving the final usable responses numbering 317.

6.1 Description of sample

Of the total 317 respondents, there were 129 (40.7%) men and 188 women (59.3%). Their average age was 18.14 years (n = 317; min = 15, max = 29, M = 18.14, SD = 1.984), and the vast majority (83.6%) was still in high school. Of these, 15.1% followed the ASO direction (i.e. general secondary education), 68.7% the TSO direction (i.e. technical) and 16.2% the BSO (i.e. vocational) direction. Out of the respondents who confessed a religion, the majority appeared to be Muslim (32.8%). The other religions were less represented: 25.2% being Christian youth and 5% of other faiths (Jewish, Hindu, Buddhist or otherwise). The largest group in the sample (36.9%) reported not being religious. A remarkable distribution was also found vis-à-vis the different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. A high proportion of the younger people in the sample (35.6%) had a migration background – that is, both their father and mother had been born in a country other than Belgium. In addition, it appears that about one in five respondents (18.6%) had him/herself been born in another country. One in four young people in the sample (25.9%) had as mother tongue a language other than French or Dutch.

6.2 Instruments of measurement

The concepts in the current investigation were studied by means of various existing as well as new metrics. Taking current state of the art ideas as a point of departure, this study took up a number of key concepts, or in imitation of Hafez and Mullins (2015), studied the following 'puzzle pieces': (1) moral disengagement, (2) perceptions of discrimination / social exclusion, (3) juvenile delinquency, (4) media exposure, and (5) radical ideology. These were measured by validated scales from previous social science research and / or psychology literature. A number of new metrics for exposure to specific extremist media were subsequently prepared and tested for internal validity.

Puzzle piece 1: Moral disengagement with respect to the (host) society. In connection with the theoretical lens from study 1, the Selective Moral Disengagement Theory, the Civic Moral Disengagement Scale (Caprara, Fida, Vecchione, Tramontano, & Barbara Martinelli, 2009) was used in this questionnaire study. This scale can be used to measure the extent to which people employ moral disengagement arguments to justify inhumane and uncivilized behaviour. Today, it seems the most applicable measurement to assess one's acceptance of socially undesirable behavior, found to consistently correlate with delinquent and aggressive behavior in youngsters (Pelton, Gound, Forehand, & Brody, 2004). The CMD-scale consists of 32 items: four items per disengagement argument. Each item is a statement such as "People who evade taxes need not be punished because tax money is also wasted by the government" (distortion of consequences), and respondents were required to answer on a five-point Likert scale where 1 = totally disagree and 5 = strongly agree. A subscale can then be created for each mechanism, but because the internal consistency of the subscales varies widely, and is in some scales even very low, Caprara's (2009) approach was followed, using the scale as a one-dimensional construct. A reliability analysis showed a very strong internal consistency with (Cronbach's α = 0.941). A higher score on this scale thus indicated a stronger tendency to justify uncivilized behaviour in society.

Puzzle Piece 2: Perceptions of discrimination / social exclusion. This puzzle piece is mainly considered as a covariate in the current study. That is to say that it is not used as a central piece of the puzzle, but will be included as a control variable in all analyses. We made use of two scales to measure the perceptions of discrimination. Firstly, respondents had to answer in a dichotomous 'yes' or 'no' to the question *"Discrimination refers to the feeling of being unfairly treated because of physical (skin color, disability, ...) or personal attributes (religion, ethnicity, ...). Have you ever felt that you were discriminated against?"* Secondly, the Dutch translation of the Everyday discrimination scale (Williams, Yu, Jackson, & Anderson, 1997) was used. This scale was used to operationalize social exclusion. In total, the Everyday Discrimination Scale consists of 11 items, such as *"How often do you have to deal with these situations in your daily life?"* (1) [*"less well served than others in a restaurant, shop, etc."*] or (2) [*"insulted or verbally abused"*] Respondents had to answer using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 'never' to 'almost every day'. A reliability

analysis showed a high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.878$).

Puzzle Piece 3: Juvenile delinquency. For the measurement of juvenile delinquency, we used the validated Dutch 'Crime-Questionnaire' of Baerveldt, Van Rossem, & Vermande (2003). In this questionnaire, young people are presented with nine items following the question "Have you done any of these things in the last year?" Sample items include: "Stolen something from a store" or "deliberately beaten or kicked someone on the street, in the disco, in the pub, or at school." Respondents were then able to respond with $1 =$ never to $4 = 4$ times or more. In the current study, the crime-list showed a good internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.801$).

Puzzle Piece 4: Media exposure. Because this study focuses on the cumulative role of media in the development of radical ideas, a scale was included in the questionnaire in which several news sources (online and offline) were enumerated. Specifically, young people were asked about the ways they keep abreast of the Middle East conflict. Using a Likert scale ranging from $1 =$ never to $5 =$ (almost) every day, young people could indicate the intensity of their usage per media form.

In addition, young people were asked about their exposure to alternative media sources, namely extremist media. This was questioned in two ways. Firstly, young people were introduced to eight different kind of media (*Dabiq, Inspire,* beheading videos, etc.). On a scale of $1 =$ Never heard of it, $2 =$ heard of it, but never watched, to $5 =$ Yes, heard of it, and 'I watch this often', young people could indicate to what extent they were aware of the medium. Secondly, a scale was set up to ascertain whether these young people actively sought out jihadist or extreme right-wing media (e.g. seeking jihadist information) or if they simply encountered it while surfing media (e.g. scanning jihadist information). These two scales are an adaptation to those for gathering information from previous research by Shim, Kelly, & Hornik (2006) in the context of disease information. Respondents were asked to indicate where they then encountered/sought out such media (e.g. Twitter, Facebook, Blogs, through friends/family, etc.). For each respondent, a total score was calculated for both his/her own active search (seeking extremist information) and the accidental encounter (scanning extremist information).

Puzzle Piece 5: Radical ideas. For the last puzzle piece, we traced to what extent young people displayed radical ideology. This concept was operationalized with two different scales. Firstly, use was made of a modification of the *Sympathies for Radicalization Scale (SyFoR)* of Bhui et al. (2014). Because not all items from the original scale proved useful in a Belgian context, nine significant items from the total scale of 16 items were selected for this study. The SyFoR can be used as a one-dimensional construct, or may be divided into two sub-scales, namely (1) defensive violence, and (2) radicalization. Respondents had to answer the question *"to what extent do you approve or disapprove of the following forms of behaviour?"* The response categories ranged from -2 = total rejection to +2 = total approval. For each item it was possible for the respondent to indicate "I refuse to answer". In the *defensive violence* factor, four items were presented, such as *"Use of violence by organized groups to protect their people."* The scale for radicalization consisted of five items, such as "Use of weapons or bombs to fight injustice." In the current study, both scales had a strong internal validity, with Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.877$ for defensive violence and $\alpha = 0.902$ for radicalization.

Secondly, we made use of the Radicalism Intention Scale (RIS) (Moskalenko & McCauley, 2009). In their study Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) used one single scale, which proved sensitive to the differences between the concepts of political activism and political radicalization. We included only the radicalization component in the current study. Respondents were presented with a total of four behaviours, such as "Supporting an organization that defends the rights of my group, even if that organization's means of doing so is to use violence." Respondents had to choose an answer out of five categories between -2 = total rejection to +2 = total approval, or they could simply indicate that they refused to answer. RIS also proved to be a reliable construct for the current sample, with a Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.891$

6.3 Analyses

The statistical analyses in this study are mainly descriptive. The focus is on (hierarchical) regression analyses in order to reveal the links between the main metric variables. Because the sample

was, as intended, disproportionally distributed, all analyses were conducted under the control of socio-demographic characteristics such as gender, age, migration background and/or religion. Mediation and moderation analyses were carried out using Hayes' PROCESS Macro (2013).

7   Survey results

With respect to the current literature, this study attempted to examine the most important pieces of the radicalization puzzle (see Hafez & Mullins, 2015) in an empirical way. As regards the cumulative role of media in a process of radicalization, it is essential to first begin with a brief overview of descriptive statistics of the central media variables (Table ??).

First, respondents were asked about the frequency with which they informed themselves about the Middle East conflict. A small majority (53.10%) reported following the news about the ME conflict at least once a week. The ME conflict was monitored daily by 21.8%. No significant differences were found in the frequency of media use between groups of young people with other ethnic (t (201) = 0.216, SE = 0.233; p = 0.829) or religious (t (192) = - 0.556, SE = 0.265 ; p = 0.579) backgrounds.

When it comes to the types of media used by the respondents to keep abreast of the ME conflict, different preferences emerged among young people with a migration background in comparison to young people without a migration background. Especially the top three most used media differ significantly (see Table ??): Youngsters with at least one parent born in Belgium mainly used Belgian television (M = 3.39, SD = 1.328) to keep up with the news. Facebook and the printed newspaper are respectively in second (M = 3.29, SD = 1.285) and third place (M = 2.95, SD = 1.315). Among young people with both parents born outside Belgium, Facebook is the most used media source (M = 3.32, SD = 1.428). In the same group, Belgian TV (M = 2.73, SD = 1.369) and the digital newspaper (M = 2.32, SD = 1.390) represent the second and third most common sources.

In addition, the students were asked if they knew of specific jihadist propaganda (see Table ??). Given the recent rise of far-right voices on the Internet (Caiani & Parenti, 2013), we used this survey as well as an opportunity to investigate the reach of extremist right-wing propaganda. Although young people will likely tend to give socially-acceptable answers on such sensitive subjects, it appears that in general most of both jihadist and extreme right media are little known and/or seldom viewed. Beheading videos were the most known and/or viewed among both youngsters with a migration background (M = 2.06, SD = 1.029) as well as those without a migration background (M = 2.37, SD = 0.972), with those lacking a migration background knowing of/viewing such videos significantly more (t(312) = 2.666, SE = 0.117; p = 0.008). This finding might be explained by the fact that such videos attract often global attention in traditional news media (Friis, 2015). As table ?? pointed out, those respondents without a migration background tend to consume slightly more traditional news. Hence, it might well be that this group comes across these videos in rather traditional news. This is supported by the findings in table 6, in which videos of beheadings are less scanned by respondents with a migration background, but sought slightly more by youth with a migration background. These differences appear, however, merely a trend in our data, as they are not statistically significant. Further research on a larger sample should explore this suggestion more in detail. An interesting finding that emerges in the table is that Geert Wilders's film Fitna was significantly more known/watched by young people whose parents had been born outside Belgium (t(215) = - 2.501, SE = 0.088, p = 0.013).

When looking at the proportion of youngsters in the sample who come in contact with extremist media and specifically the extent to which they search for these media themselves, an interesting finding emerges. Generally only a small group of young people ($M_{without\ migration\ background}$= 10.84%; $M_{with\ migration\ background}$= 12.05%) truly actively seeks out extremist media. A larger group of young people ($M_{without\ migration\ background}$ = 22.99%; $M_{with\ migration\ background}$ = 24.79%) admits to encountering the media now and then. The fact that about one in five young people has sometimes come across extremist media is consistent with the idea that it is widely available and accessible through online sources.

For our second research question, we looked at whether the 'puzzle piece' of moral disengagement had an impact on the development of radical ideology. A correlation matrix of the core variables of the present study shows that *moral disengagement* is indeed a central concept in the

Type of Medium	Average	
	Without migration background	With migration background
TV		
Belgian***	3.39	2.73
Arabic/Turkish/in mother tongue, other than NL/FR**	1.47	1.95
Radio		
Belgian***	2.85	1.34
Arabic/Turkish/in mother tongue, other than NL/FR	2.15	1.57
Paper newspaper		
Belgische*	2.95	1.36
Arabic/Turkish/ in mother tongue, other than NL/FR*	2.58	1.66
Digital newspaper		
Belgian***	2.88	2.32
- Online reactions	2.26	2.09
Arabic/Turkish/in mother tongue, other than NL/FR*	1.40	1.68
- Online reactions*	1.44	1.75
Online		
Facebook	3.29	3.32
Discussion fora**	1.48	1.87
Twitter	1.89	2.02
YouTube*	1.92	2.31
Other	1.23	1.44

*P $<$0.05; ** P $<$ 0.01; *** P $<$0.0001

Table 5: Average preferences for various types of media for news involving the ME conflict. Subdivision vis-à-vis youth without and youth with a migration background (both parents born outside of Belgium). Measured on a scale of 1-5, where 1 = never and 5 = every day.

Type of medium	Knowledge of (averages)		Scanned		Sought	
	Without MB	With MB	Without MB	With MB	Without MB	With MB
Jihadist-inspired propaganda						
Dabiq (Islamic State)	1.33	1.31	17.2%	18.6%	8.8%	8.0%
Inspire (al-Qaeda)	1.26	1.33	12.7%	17.7%	7.8%	8.8%
Videos (e.g. of Shari4Belgium/IS/etc.)	1.79	1.72	41.2%	34.5%	13.2%	13.3%
Discussion fora	1.53	1.62	21.6%	31.0%	10.8%	16.8%
Videos of beheadings	2.37**	2.06**	66.7%	61.1%	22.5%	23.0%
Extreme Right-oriented propaganda Discussion fora (such as Pegida/Voorpost)	1.46	1.43	18.6%	23.9%	10.3%	8.8%
Fitna	1.26*	1.48*	10.3%***	31.0%***	6.9%	11.5%
Other	2.15	1.21	5.9%	11.5%	6.4%	6.2%

*P <0.05; ** P < 0.01; *** P <0.0001

Table 6: The knowledge of, scanning, and search for jihadist and extreme right-oriented propaganda for youth with and without migration-background (MB)

development of radical ideas (see Table **??**). The table also shows that of the measurements for radical ideas (SyFoR), *the radicalization* component held the strongest links with the other core concepts. This probably has to do with the way the questions were posed. The (SyFoR) *defensive violence* and the *radicalism intention* suggest namely more defensive behaviours, whereas the (SyFoR) radicalization actually gauges attitudes with respect to violent extremist behaviour.

Because media influence is also seen as a key puzzle piece in the current study, we also traced the relations between the core concepts and the media variables (see Table **??**). This shows that mainstream news media generally exhibit little to no connection with the other central radicalization puzzle pieces. It is, however, noteworthy that exposure to extremist media positively correlated with the acceptance of moral disengagement arguments, juvenile delinquency and radical ideology.

More concretely, this means that exposure to extremist media is statistically significantly associated with a higher degree of acceptance of arguments justifying uncivilized behaviour. In other words, at a cognitive level, there seems to be a connection between consulting jihadist or extreme right-wing media and a positive attitude towards arguments justifying inhumane and uncivilized behaviour. Taking into account the fact that study 1 proved that jihadist propaganda is drenched with arguments justifying inhumanities,, these findings support that there might indeed be a link between the consumed radical media content and one's radical beliefs.

In addition, there seems to be a statistically significant positive relationship between extreme right-inspired media and involvement in juvenile crime in the last year. In other words, respondents who were frequently exposed to extremist and right-wing media in particular are apparently also more involved in delinquent behaviour. In this sense, exposure to such extremist media might be related not only to cognitive processes that may justify certain unwanted behaviour, but may also be directly linked with such undesirable behaviour.

To further explore these links, exploratory mediation analyses were performed. A first test studied the extent of the relationship between exposure to extremist media and radical ideas through a two-stage model, through an indirect link with cognitive moral disengagement processes

To this end, we examined jihadist and extreme right-inspired media sources in separate models. A first mediation analysis (Figure **??**) showed that exposure to extremist media has a direct connection with radical ideas ($\beta = 0.238$***), under the control of Civic Moral Disengagement and socio-demographic factors. An indirect two-stage connection was also found to cognitive moral disengagement processes. Concretely, this model shows that actively consulting jihadist media tends to be associated with more radical ideas, and that this process occurs both directly and indirectly through an intermediate stage of moral disengagement arguments. It is important to emphasize that this association was found only for respondents who reported themselves as proactively looking for such media.
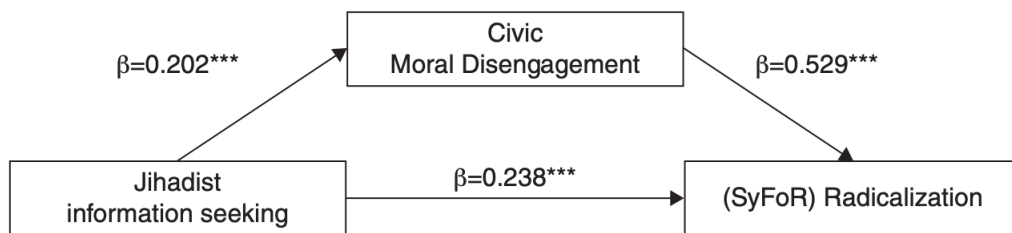

Figure 5: Controlled for sex, age, migration background, and feelings of discrimination. (R^2=0.362; $F_{(6, 286)}$=27,002); p=0.000)

No statistically significant relationships were found for the larger group of respondents who indicated merely knowing of such extremist media, or having run across it by accident. Figure **??** shows that a similar model could be developed for the consultation of the extreme right-inspired media. We controlled for various socio-demographic processes in this model as well, such as gender, age and migration background.

Because the correlation matrices showed that besides cognitive moral disengagement processes, behavioural elements also related to the core pieces of the radicalization puzzle, delinquent behaviour was added to the models (see figures **??** and **??**).

A remarkable finding that emerges when delinquent behaviour is added to the model is that the direct link between (1) the active search for extremist media and (2) radical ideas seems to

	Civic Moral Disengagement	Pupils' delinquency	SyFoR) Radicalization	(SyFoR) Defensive violence	Radicalism Intention Scale
Civic Moral disengagement	1				
Juvenile delinquency	0.325***	1			
(SyFoR) Radicalization	0.539***	0.4394***	1		
(SyFoR) Defensive violence	0.474***	0.287***	0.648***	1	
Radicalism Intention Scale	0.530***	0.336***	0.644***	0.519***	1

† P < 0.10; *P <0.05; ** P < 0.01; *** P <0.0001

Table 7: Core psycho-social variables and their intercorrelations.

	TV BE	TV A/T/M	Facebook	Discussion fora	Newspaper online BE (reactions)	Newspaper online A/T/M (reactions)	Radio BE (A/T/M)	Newspaper offline BE (A/T/M)	Jihadist-inspired media	Extreme right-inspired media
Civic Moral disengagement	-0.140*	-0.011	-0.138*	-0.027	-0.170** (0.040)	0.170** (0.065)	-0.118† (0.023)	-0.092 (0.041)	0.160**	0.171**
Juvenile delinquency	-0.045	0.139*	0.026	0.025	-0.061 (-0.004)	0.070 (0.082)	-0.044 (0.062)	-0.128* (0.071)	0.096	0.218***
(SyFoR) Radicalization	-0.133*	0.024	-0.174**	0.078	-0.120† (-0.008)	0.003 (0.049)	-0.092 (0.037)	-0.114† (0.046)	0.149*	0.141*
(SyFoR) Defensive violence	-0.105†	-0.051	-0.119†	-0.039	-0.168** (-0.013)	-0.077 (-0.050)	-0.127* (-0.036)	-0.107† (-0.047)	-0.008	0.003
Radicalism Intention Scale	-0.070	0.070	-0.092	0.062	-0.059 (0.047)	0.028 (0.090)	-0.037 (0.043)	-0.070 (0.043)	0.099	0.114†

Table 8: Core psycho-social variables and their associations with media variables.

β=0.229*** Civic Moral Disengagement β=0.530***

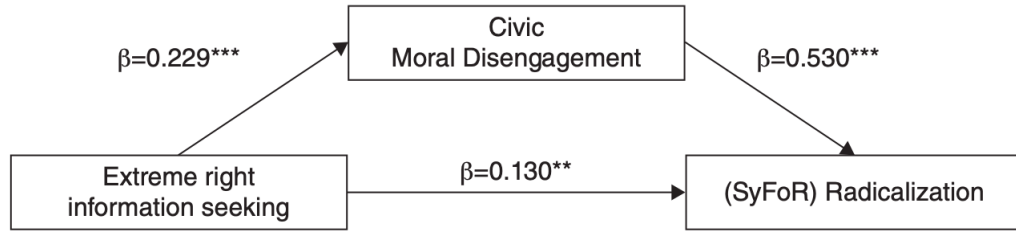Extreme right information seeking β=0.130** (SyFoR) Radicalization

Figure 6: Controlled for sex, age, migration background, and feelings of discrimination. (R^2=0.362; $F_{(6, 286)}$=29.998); p=0.000)

disappear. However, indirect paths remain statistically significant. These relationships were found again for both jihadist and extreme right-wing media. At the same time, they were also purely statistically significant for the active search for extremist media, but not for just knowing of it or accidentally encountering it. The fact that the direct link between extremist information seeking and (SyFoR) *radicalization* disappears when a behavioural component is added into the model supports the idea that media and specific propaganda do not directly lead to radical ideas, but rather that there is a complex relationship between cognition, attitude and behaviour.
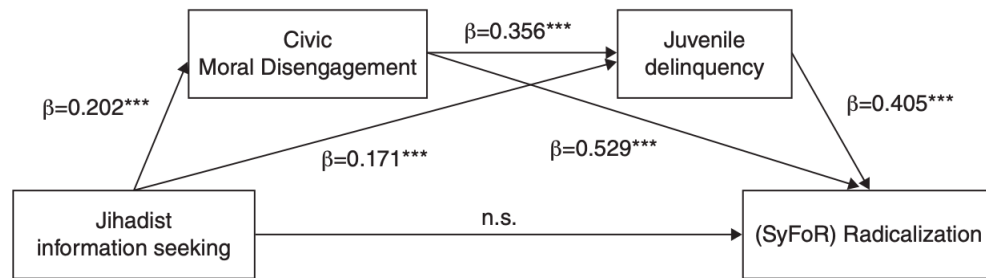
Civic Moral Disengagement β=0.356*** Juvenile delinquency

β=0.202*** β=0.405***

β=0.171*** β=0.529***

Jihadist information seeking n.s. (SyFoR) Radicalization

Figure 7: Controlled for sex, age, migration background, and feelings of discrimination. (R^2=0.412; $F_{(7, 285)}$=28.533); p=0.000); p=0.000)

Civic Moral Disengagement β=0.327*** Juvenile delinquency

β=0.253*** β=0.274***

β=0.273*** β=0.457***

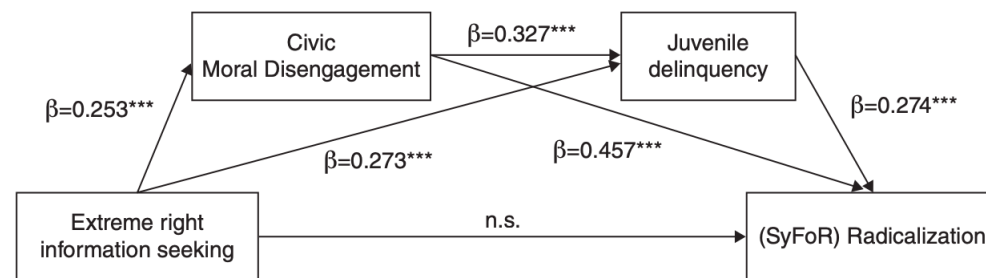Extreme right information seeking n.s. (SyFoR) Radicalization

Figure 8: Controlled for sex, age, migration background, and feelings of discrimination. ($R^2$0.409; $F_{(7, 285)}$=28.183); p=0.000); p=0.000)

As a final step, the same exploratory analysis was still performed to assess what role Facebook would have on the development of a radical ideology. The descriptive statistics showed that Facebook was generally the most used medium for reporting on the Middle East conflict. From Figure ?? it can be seen that Facebook keeps a statistical relationship with two of the three central pieces of the puzzle, namely with moral disengagement and (SyFoR) radicalization. It is noteworthy that a negative trend was found for these two links: the more young people used Facebook, the less they agreed with moral disengagement arguments and the less they supported radical ideology. In addition, Facebook use appears to be rather independent of criminal behaviour in the last year. Based on this model we can speculate about a potential buffer role that Facebook could play in the development of radical ideology. This potential buffer could operate directly in radical ideology,

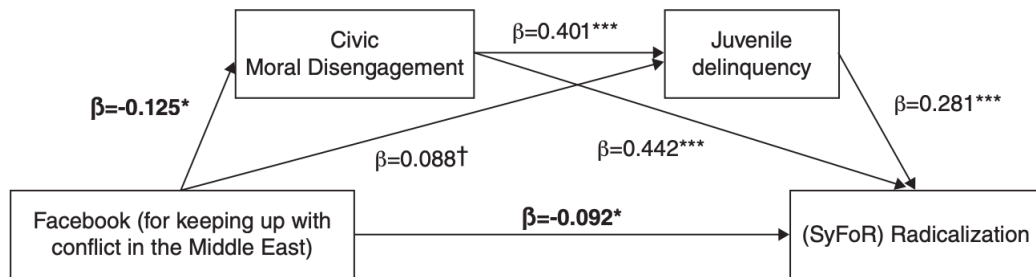and also indirectly through a lesser degree of moral disengagement reasoning.

Figure 9: Controlled for sex, age, migration background, and feelings of discrimination. ($R^2$0.409; $F(7, 285)$=28.183); p=0.000); p=0.000)

7.1 Limitations

Despite the fact that the above models account for a significant portion of the variance in the (SyFoR) radicalization scale ($R^2 = 0.362$ to R2 = 0.412), it is important to view the models with necessary nuance and precaution. First, it should be noted that no conclusions can be drawn about the causality of the associations; one cannot determine on the basis of the current data whether proactively looking for extremist media actually causes radical ideas to arise (cfr. cultivation hypothesis) or vice versa (cfr. selective exposure). It is perfectly arguable that a prerequisite for any media effect is that audiences need to select specific media contents consistent with their own attitudes and beliefs (Winter & Krämer, 2012). For example, research on the cognitive dissonance theory (cfr. Festinger, 1957) showed that individuals tend to turn attention only to information supporting their own position while counter-attitudinal messages will be avoided (Schulz & Roessler, 2012). Nevertheless, the arrows in the visualized models are merely hypothesized directions based on the predominant body of literature suggesting that media is a trigger or dispositional factor rather than an outcome (see for an overview Bryant & Oliver, 2009). Second, these models are based on a relatively small subgroup in the current sample (about 10% to 12% of respondents). Our goal is to examine the links proposed in this exploratory study in more detail in a follow-up study using a much larger sample.

8   A need for alternative media sources?

The above quantitative data and insights tell us very little about the motivations of young people to seek out extremist media content. However small this subgroup of our sample is, it is important to examine where the need for alternative sources comes from. The current study offers a modest start to this investigation, but we recommend designating a more qualitative study to this end.

In the course of the questionnaire, two open questions were asked. One asked into the respondents' concrete imagination of the future: *"Everyone has his/her imagination or idea about what the future will look like in the world. Can you tell us how you think the future (within the next 20 years) will look like in the Middle East and Europe?"* The second open question focused on the respondents' possible dissatisfaction with how the Middle East conflict is portrayed in the mainstream western news media. The participants were asked to judge the fairness/impartiality of the portrayal (or lack thereof). Some noteworthy findings emerged here.

First, regardless of religious or migration background, it seems respondents generally express themselves equally often 'positively' and 'negatively' when it comes to their personal vision and imagination of the future. However, when we look at their answers to the open question about what they think the Middle East and Europe will look like in 20 years, we see a very negative image. There is a lot of despair ("I do not know" or "something will change, but I do not know exactly what"). The overall picture is pessimistic: respondents predict there will be a lot of war and division, and conflicts in the Middle East will continue to affect Europe. Respondents point to the realistic possibility of a third world war. A clash between religious and cultural values plays a clear role here.

> *"I have an idea. There's already been a First and Second World War, so why not a Third?*
> *I think what happened in Zaventem, Brussels and Paris is just the beginning."*
> (17-year-old female without migration background)

A number of non-religious respondents referred to a fear of the Islamization of Western society, while there are a number of Muslim youths in the sample highlighting a religious clash. It is interesting to note that young people point to the possible influence of the media in 'brainwashing' and 'spreading hatred through media'. Some respondents report experiencing this as a threat:

> *"More and more people are coming to hate Islam (my religion). More hate exists in the*
> *world, all because of the media. Not many people even know what Islam really is. They just*
> *get brainwashed by the media – people believe everything they see."*
> (18-year-old female, father born outside of Belgium)

Another remarkable finding is that young people are well informed about current events and the geopolitical debate. Some respondents, for example, referred to their fear of Donald Trump.

> *"I'm afraid that Donald Trump will be elected. That will be bad for people who live in Europe*
> *and the Middle East. I hope that there are no more attacks, but if there are, I especially*
> *hope that Islam isn't blamed for them."*
> (16-year-old female without migration background)

Nevertheless, there is a strong tone of hope and faith: faith in the fact that their generation can change something, faith in diversity, in knowledge, faith in the force that religion can offer, faith in Bernie Sanders defeating Donald Trump.

> *"A lot less apartheid, a lot of multi-cultural awareness. All the events that are happening at*
> *this moment should ultimately bring people closer together."*
> (25-year-old male without migration background)

Our respondents did not elaborate too much on the open question regarding the extent of fair media portrayal; most stated very succinctly that media tend to twist reality or give an incomplete picture. They see the media as being too partisan for 'the West' (generally or specifically 'USA' or 'Europe') or for 'Israel'. Again, these answers seem independent of different socio-demographic profiles. Young Muslims in the sample refer a bit more explicitly to the fact that the image of Muslims is tarnished or that bias exists for non-Muslims. Interestingly, some respondents express their discontent not in geographical or religious terms, but rather in terms of the weak/strong, the rich, or the offenders.

9   General discussion and conclusion

This study started from the idea assumed in most radicalization models – that 'the media' play a major facilitating role in fueling radical ideology. Contemporary media ecology is supposedly a central piece of the complex radicalization puzzle. Specifically the Internet is often designated as one of the areas where so-called "bedroom radicals" can be inspired and recruited (Ahmed & George 2016).

This study examined the extent to which these theoretical assumptions make sense empirically. To this end, a multidimensional communication research design was followed, where both the message side and the receiver side were studied. We examined in two steps which reasoning practices are used in extremist media accessible through the ordinary Internet (Study 1), and to what extent these arguments are accepted by young readers when they come into contact with such media (Study 2). The ultimate goal was to map the cumulative role of different types of media in the development of radical ideology. In view of this goal, three important general conclusions can be drawn.

First, moral disengagement arguments indeed seem inextricably linked to radical ideology. Not only is IS's main propaganda output Dabiq imbued with them, also the link between proactive exposure to extremist media and radical ideology seems to go through a cognitive route whereby

moral disengagement arguments first need to be accepted. This raises the question to what extent media can indeed shape young people's moral values and/or moral reasoning. This is particularly important in the context of countering violent extremism initiatives. For example, what kind of moral arguments can be developed in order to counter ISIS's moral disengagement rhetoric?

Second, the cumulative role of media can play both an intensifying as well as a protective role within the radicalization puzzle. On the one hand, actively consulting extremist media supposedly indirectly goes hand in hand with a stronger radical ideology, through moral disengagement reasoning and criminal behaviour in the past. On the other, Facebook, the most dominant media platform in the context of news concerning the Middle East conflict, is directly and indirectly associated with less radical beliefs. Both findings give cause for further investigation. Specifically, future studies may focus on unraveling the 'direction' of these associations, i.e. Do certain media behaviours lead to radical ideas or is it rather the other way around? Finally, even though this study was carried out on a relatively small group of young people, the data show the importance of nuance in the case of measuring media exposure. Subtle differences in the present study between the active search for extremist media vs. happening to come across them indicated the necessity to be more sensitive in future studies with respect to media behaviour in the development of radical ideas – as opposed to mere media exposure. It seems no clear answer can be formulated to the question of the cumulative role of the media in the development of radical ideology. A complex and reciprocal interaction among different types of media, but also the dynamic interplay involving cognitive processes and behaviours, provide grounds for further research.

Third and last, one of the most striking results that emerged in both the content analysis as well as in the media reception study is the small role that religion plays in radical ideology. It appeared that the radical worldview in the IS publication Dabiq pays less and less attention to religious foundations, in favour of political and military foundations. Our media reception study also revealed that a religious background was hardly a contributing factor to radical ideology, and that actively seeking out extremist media was actually independent of religiousness or faith. This seems to fit with the idea that a religion or ideology often acts as a guiding force in the development of radical ideas, but is not a necessary premise (cfr. Hafez & Mullins, 2015).

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