COUNTER
EXTREMISM
PROJECT

OK GOOGLE, SHOW ME EXTREMISM: ANALYSIS OF YOUTUBE'S EXTREMIST VIDEO TAKEDOWN POLICY AND COUNTER-NARRATIVE PROGRAM

Introduction

ISIS and other extremist groups, as well as their online supporters, have continued to exploit and misuse Google's platforms to disseminate propaganda material, despite the company having repeatedly announced increased measures to combat online extremism.[1] On July 21, 2017, Google announced the launch of one such measure—its Redirect Method Pilot Program. The program is intended to target individuals searching for ISIS-related content on YouTube and direct them to counter-narrative videos, which try to undermine the messaging of extremist groups.[2] The Counter Extremism Project (CEP) monitors and tracks ISIS and other terrorist organizations' material on YouTube. Between April 3 and April 4, 2018, CEP reviewed a total of 710 YouTube videos for extremist and counter-narrative content. The result of CEP's searches highlights the extent of the enduring problem of terrorist content on YouTube and undermines claims touting the efficacy of the company's efforts to combat online extremism.

Key Findings

- Of the 710 videos sampled by CEP, **53[3] videos** (more than 7.4%) were determined to include extremist propaganda, glorification of extremism, or violent extremism associated with the following extremist or internationally-sanctioned terrorist organizations: ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Nusra Front, the Taliban, Hezbollah, Hamas, the Nusra-affiliated Jaish al-Fateh (Army of Conquest), Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Ahrar al-Sham, the ISIS-affiliated Liwa Dawoud, Ansar al-Islam, Ajnad al-Kavkaz, Harakat Sham al-Islam, and the Mujahideen Shura Council of Jerusalem (ISIS-aligned).
- Of the 53 videos found to have included extremist content, a total of **25 videos** (47.2% of the 53 extremist videos, 3.5% of the 710 videos checked) **were explicitly violent in nature and/or showed gore**.
- By comparison, CEP found **15 videos** (2.1% of the 710 videos checked) that may include counter-narrative messaging, meaning that **a user searching for extremist material on YouTube was more than three times as likely to encounter extremist material than counter-narratives.**
- Only 8% of the extremist videos found were what CEP characterized as official ISIS propaganda releases. However, 34%—more than three times as many—were official propaganda releases from non-ISIS extremist groups. The remaining 58% were various unofficial propaganda videos, combat footage, or photo montages.

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[1] Sam Shead, "Google on tackling terrorism: 'We, as an industry, must acknowledge that more needs to be done,'" Business Insider, June 19, 2017, http://www.businessinsider.com/google-announced-four-steps-to-help-tackle-terror-videos-on-youtube-2017-6.

[2] For more, see Google's Redirect Method, "A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism": https://redirectmethod.org/downloads/RedirectMethod-FullMethod-PDF.pdf.

[3] CEP has subtracted duplicate URLs in cases where the same videos appeared twice in the data set. CEP has accordingly employed the number 53, representing distinct URLs, throughout this report to represent the number of distinct extremist video URLs found on YouTube.

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Methodology

To gauge the efficacy of Google's counter-extremism efforts—in particular its Redirect Method Pilot Program—CEP conducted searches on YouTube for a total of six terms related to Islamic extremism. CEP focused on four keywords or phrases explicitly referenced in Google's Redirect Method Pilot Program as "suggesting positive sentiment towards ISIS."[4] These terms are (1) "الإسلامية الدولة" ("Islamic State" in Arabic), (2) "Al Dawla Al Islameyah" (the English transliteration of "Islamic State" in Arabic), (3) "تتمدد و باقية" ("Remaining and Expanding" in Arabic), and (4) "Baquiyah wa Tatamadad" (the English transliteration of "Remaining and Expanding" in Arabic). CEP also identified two additional Arabic-language keywords and phrases associated with Islamic extremism, (5) "المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic), and (6) "استشهادي" ("martyrdom" in Arabic).

CEP conducted unfiltered searches on YouTube for each of the six terms and reviewed the first 100 video results for each search. For these searches, results were automatically organized by YouTube's default search algorithm for relevance. Additionally, CEP conducted filtered searches for the single term "Islamic State" in Arabic and compared these results to those of the unfiltered search. The first filter used limited the search results to videos uploaded only in the past week, and the second filter organized video results by highest view count. Once again, CEP reviewed the first 100 video results for each search. In cases where the results yielded fewer than 100 videos, CEP checked all results for extremist content. In all, CEP's searches—conducted on April 3, 2018 and April 4, 2018—manually checked 710 videos for extremist content.

Each of the 710 videos was analyzed to determine if extremist propaganda, glorification of terrorism, and/or acts of terrorist violence were present.[5] Each of the 710 videos was also analyzed to determine if counter-narrative material was present. CEP captured various data points on each of the videos checked, including the extremist group affiliated with the video (if applicable), whether or not the videos included violent content,[6] the upload date of the video, the number of views the video amassed by the access date, and the name of the account that uploaded the video. Extremist content was coded into three categories: official ISIS propaganda releases, official non-ISIS extremist propaganda releases (e.g. on behalf of the Nusra Front and others), and various unofficial pieces of propaganda uploaded by individual supporters of extremist ideologies or organizations.

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[4] For more, see Google's Redirect Method, "A Blueprint for Bypassing Extremism":
https://redirectmethod.org/downloads/RedirectMethod-FullMethod-PDF.pdf.
[5] Videos posted by news organizations unaffiliated with terrorist groups were not tagged under this category, even if the outlets were reporting on terrorist violence and accordingly included scenes portraying acts of terrorism.
[6] Violence here is defined as an act committed by an individual against another person designed to result in injury or death. This includes suicide bombings as well as violent acts taken against vehicles or buildings believed to be housing individuals.

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YouTube Unfiltered Search Results

In order to assess what a typical user searching for extremist content on YouTube would likely encounter, CEP viewed and analyzed the first 100 videos of the unfiltered search results (i.e. sorted only by YouTube's default algorithm for relevance) for each of the six terms specified in the methodology, reviewing a total of 510 videos in the process.[7] Counter-narrative videos only outnumbered videos with extremist content for the search results of one term—"الإسلامية الدولة" ("Islamic State" in Arabic). Although "Al Dawla Al Islameyah" and "باقية و تتمدد" ("Remaining and Expanding" in Arabic) were also specified by Google's Redirect Method as terms targeted for counter-narrative messaging, the former had more extremist videos than counter-narratives in its results, and the latter had no counter-narratives in its results at all. For "Baquiyah wa Tamatadad"—another term specified by the program—neither extremist nor counter-narrative videos appeared anywhere in its results.

The two terms not specified by Google's Redirect Method—"المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic) and "استشهادي" ("martyrdom" in Arabic)—had the most extremist videos in their search results. The search results for these terms lacked counter-narrative content almost entirely, with only one counter-narrative video appearing in the results for "المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic).

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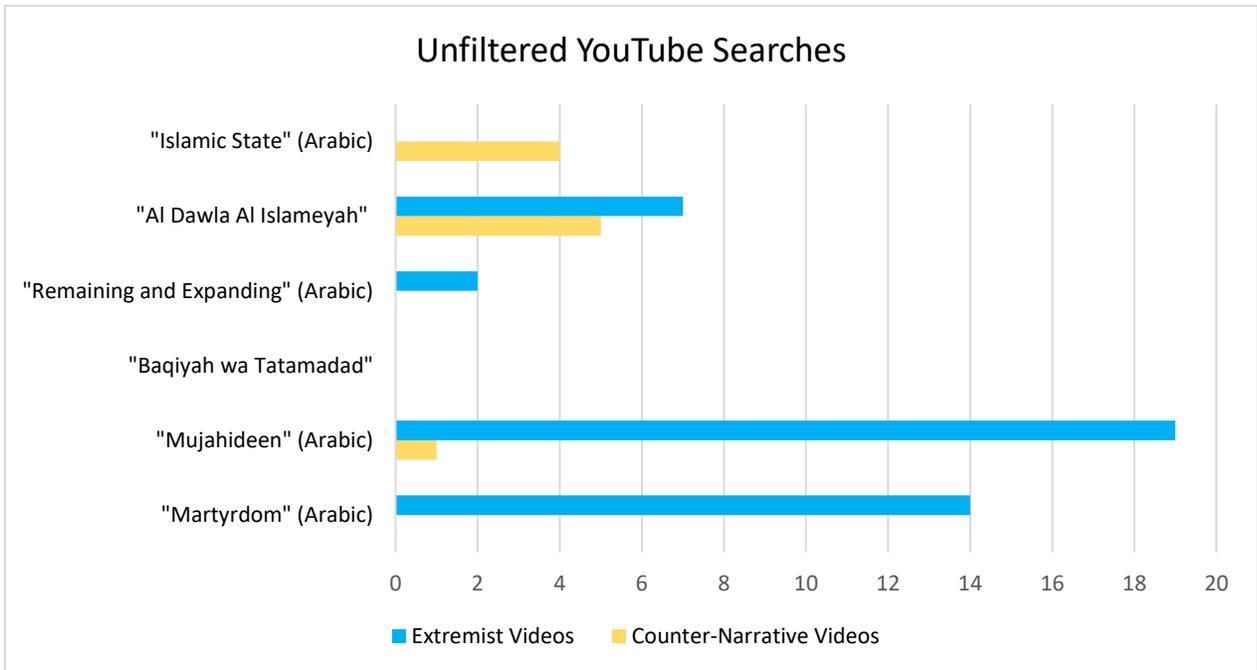
[7] In some cases, search filter algorithms yielded less than 100 videos. When this occurred, the maximum number of available videos (<100) were viewed.
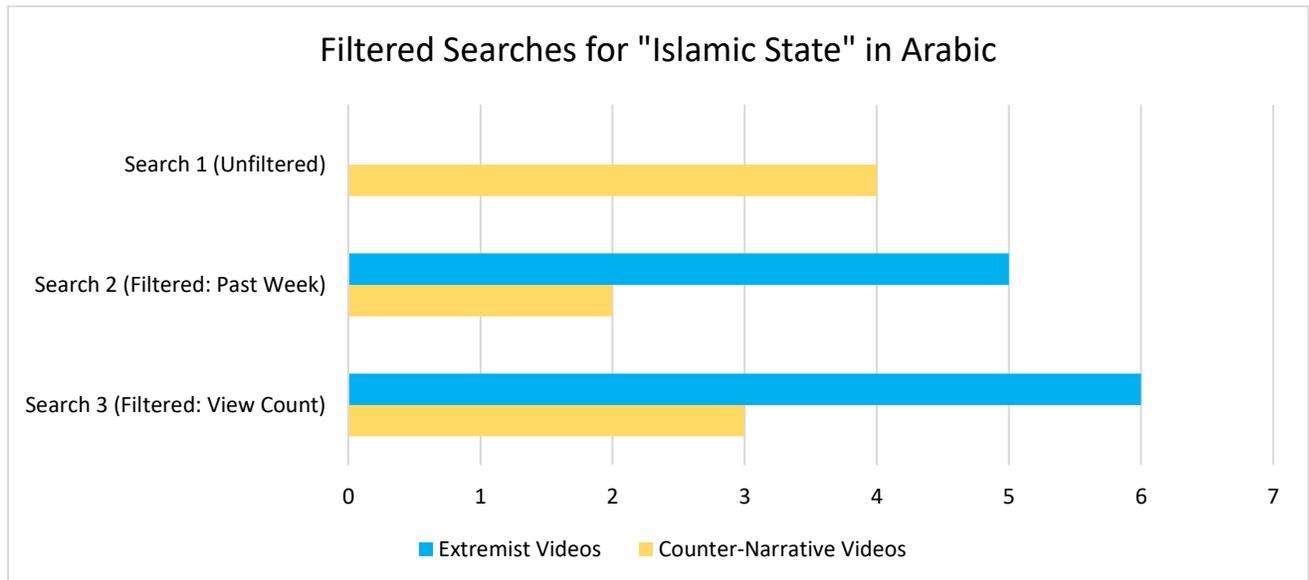
Complete findings are as follows:

- الدولة الإسلامية ("Islamic State")
    - 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
    - CEP found 0 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - CEP counted a total of 4 counter-narrative videos using this search term.

- Al Dawla Al Islameyah (English transliteration of "the Islamic State")
    - 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
    - CEP found 7 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - 3 of the 7 videos included explicitly violent content.
    - CEP counted a total of 5 counter-narrative videos using this search term.

- باقية و تتمدد ("Remaining and Expanding")
    - An unfiltered search for this term only resulted in 10 videos. All 10 videos were reviewed.
    - CEP found 2 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - 1 of the 2 videos included explicitly violent content.
    - CEP counted a total of 0 counter-narrative videos using this search term.

- Baqiyah wa Tatamadad (English transliteration of "Remaining and Expanding")
    - 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
    - CEP found 0 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - CEP counted a total of 0 counter-narrative videos using this search term.

- المجاهدين ("Mujahideen")
    - 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
    - CEP found 19 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - 12 of the 19 videos included explicitly violent content.
    - CEP counted a total of 1 counter-narrative video using this search term.

- استشهادي ("Martyrdom")
    - 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
    - CEP found 14 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
    - 5 of the 14 videos included explicitly violent content.
    - CEP counted a total of 0 counter-narrative videos using this search term.

YouTube Filtered Search Results

For the single term "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic)—which was specified by Google's Redirect Method as a term targeted for counter-narrative messaging—CEP conducted two filtered searches in addition to the unfiltered search already conducted. The first filter used limited the search results to videos uploaded only in the past week, and the second filter organized video results by highest view count. CEP reviewed the first 100 videos for each search, reviewing a total of 200 additional videos in the process.

For all six terms assessed by CEP, "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic) was the only one for which no extremist content was found in the first 100 video results of an unfiltered search. Additionally, since four counter-narrative videos *were* found, it was also the only search term for which counter-narrative content outnumbered extremist content. However, extremist content was easily found by simply applying filters to the search. In both of the filtered searches conducted for "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic), extremist videos outnumbered counter-narrative videos. Furthermore, the total number of counter-narrative videos found in each filtered search was less than the number found in the unfiltered search. This suggests that even if Google's counter-extremism efforts target specific terms, they may not target unfiltered and filtered searches equally, and an individual can potentially access more extremist content by simply adding filters to a search.

Filtered Searches for "Islamic State" in Arabic. Horizontal bar chart comparing Extremist Videos (blue) and Counter-Narrative Videos (yellow) across three searches. Search 1 (Unfiltered): Counter-Narrative Videos = 4, Extremist Videos = 0. Search 2 (Filtered: Past Week): Extremist Videos = 5, Counter-Narrative Videos = 2. Search 3 (Filtered: View Count): Extremist Videos = 6, Counter-Narrative Videos = 3.

- o Search 1 (Unfiltered):[8] 100 videos were reviewed from an unfiltered search.
  - CEP found no videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
  - CEP found 4 counter-narrative videos.
- o Search 2 (Filtered: Past Week): 100 videos were reviewed that were uploaded in the past week (3/28/2018 – 4/3/2018) and sorted by YouTube's algorithms for relevance.
  - CEP found 5 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
  - 1 of the 5 videos included explicitly violent content.
  - CEP found 2 counter-narrative videos.
- o Search 3 (Filtered: View Count): 100 videos were viewed that were sorted by highest view count and unsorted by upload time.
  - CEP found 6 videos that included extremist propaganda, glorified extremism, or were violent extremist videos.
  - 3 of the 6 videos included explicitly violent content.
  - CEP found 3 counter-narrative videos.

Video Types

Of the 53 videos that were tagged as extremist content from all searches performed:[9]
- 4 (8%) were what CEP characterized as official ISIS propaganda releases (i.e. from known ISIS sources such as al-Hayat Media Center, Amaq News Agency, and Al Bayan Radio).
- 18 (34%) were official propaganda releases from non-ISIS extremist groups.
- 31 (58%) were various unofficial propaganda videos, combat footage, or photo montages.

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[8] The data "Search 1 (Unfiltered)" is taken from the unfiltered search conducted for "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic) in the previous section, "YouTube Unfiltered Search Results." The 100 videos referenced here comprise part of the 510 videos analyzed in the previous section.
[9] This analysis includes the 710 total videos reviewed from all searches conducted—unfiltered and filtered.
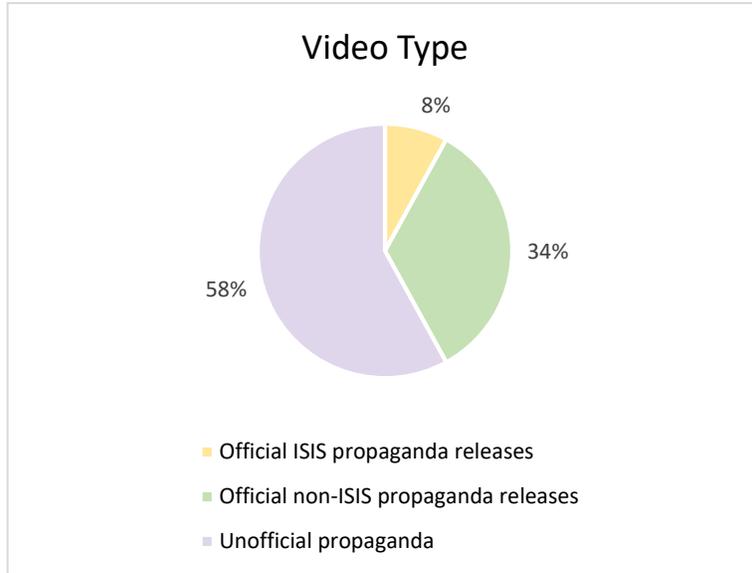
Of the 4 videos classified by CEP as official ISIS propaganda releases, all were found either in the search results for "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic) or its English transliteration, "Al Dawla al Islameyah"—terms specified by Google's Redirect Method.
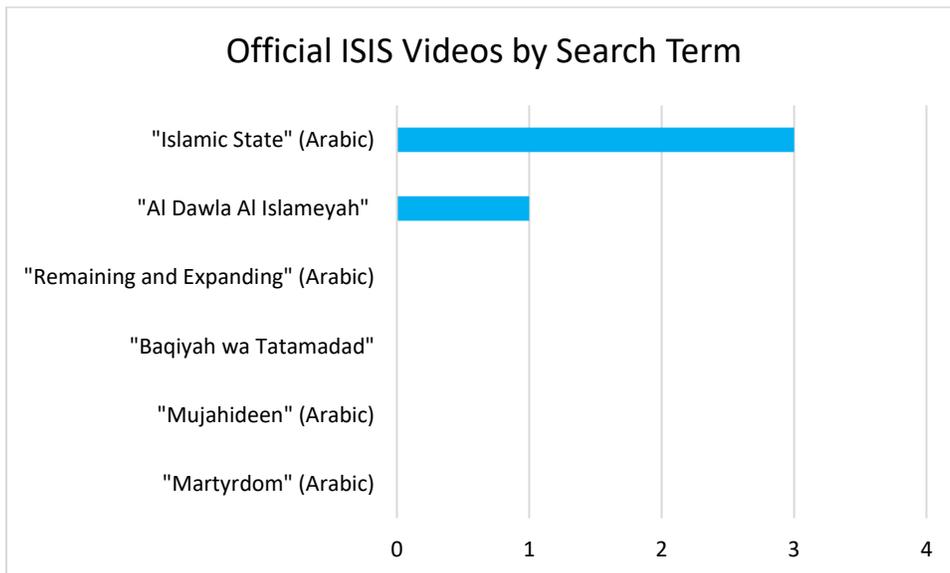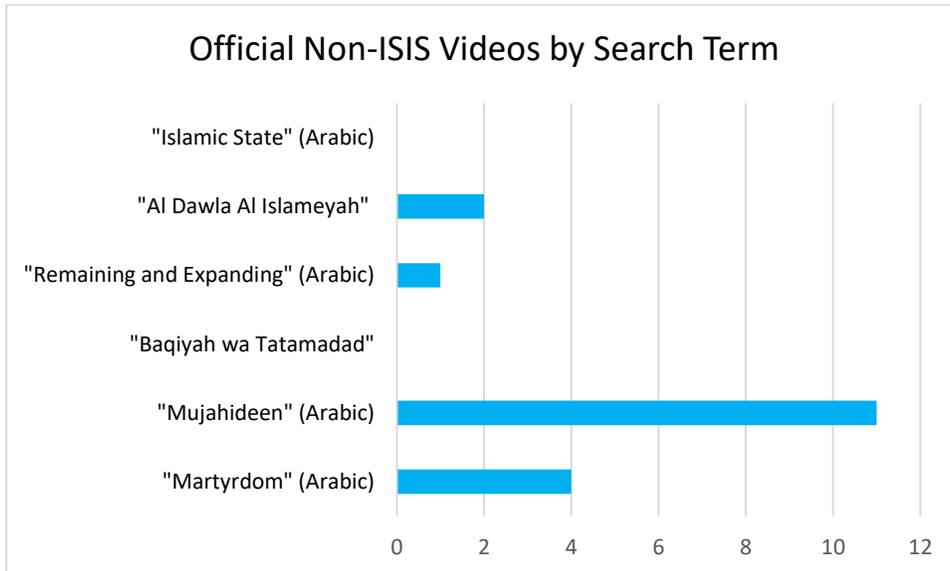

Of the 18 official videos from non-ISIS extremist groups posted to YouTube:
- 4 were from the Nusra Front, though 1 of the 4 was also produced in conjunction with Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest).

- 3 were from Ahrar al-Sham, though 1 of the 3 was also produced in conjunction with Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest).
- 2 were from Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam).
- 1 was from al-Qaeda.
- 1 was from Hamas.
- 1 was from the Taliban.
- 1 was from the ISIS-affiliated Liwa Dawoud.
- 1 was from Harakat Sham al-Islam.
- 1 was from Ajnad al-Kavkaz.
- 1 was from Ansar al-Islam.
- 1 was from the Mujahideen Shura Council.
- 1 was from an undetermined extremist group.

More than half (11) of the 18 official non-ISIS extremist videos were found in the search results for "المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic). This is not a term targeted by Google's Redirect Method. In contrast, only **one counter-narrative video** was found in the search results for this term.

Official Non-ISIS Videos by Search Term

Search Term	Value
"Islamic State" (Arabic)	0
"Al Dawla Al Islameyah"	2
"Remaining and Expanding" (Arabic)	1
"Baqiyah wa Tatamadad"	0
"Mujahideen" (Arabic)	11
"Martyrdom" (Arabic)	4

The 31 unofficial propaganda videos were dispersed throughout the search results. Unofficial propaganda videos expressed support for a variety of extremist groups. 13 expressed support for ISIS, 13 for an undetermined extremist group, and the remaining 5 expressed support for al-Qaeda, Jaysh al-Islam (Army of Islam), Jaish al-Fatah (Army of Conquest), Hezbollah, and Hamas. The most (10) were found in the search results for "استشهادي" ("martyrdom" in Arabic). This is not a term targeted by Google's Redirect Method, and **no counter-narrative videos** were found in the search results for this term.
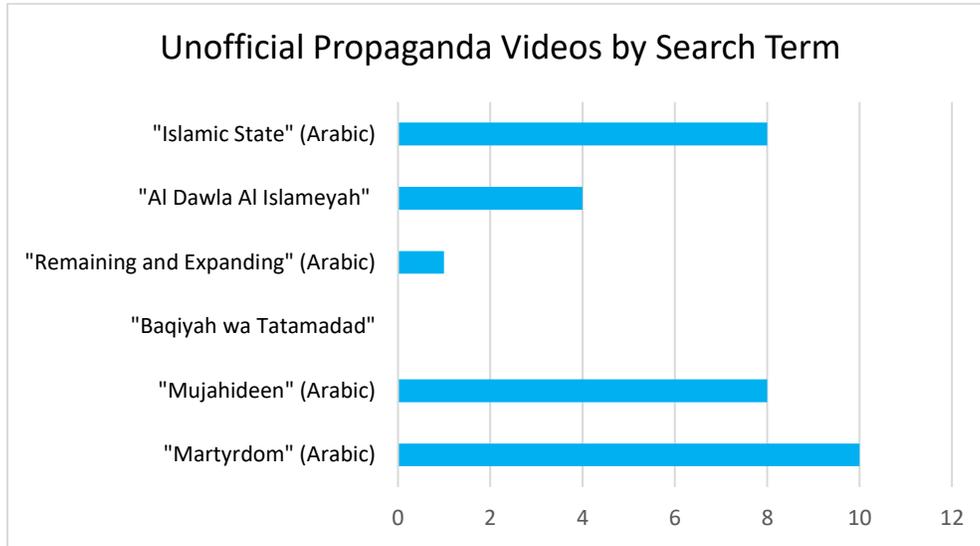
Counter-Narrative Videos

A total of 15 counter-narrative videos were found in all of the search results,[10] representing only 2.1% of the 710 total videos reviewed by CEP. In contrast, extremist videos comprised more than 7.4% of the total. 14 of the 15 counter-narrative videos appeared in the searches for "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic) and its English transliteration, "Al Dawla Al Islameyah," which are identified explicitly by Google's Redirect Method as keywords targeted for counter-narrative messaging. However, no counter-narrative videos at all appeared in the searches for "باقية و تتمدد" ("Remaining and Expanding" in Arabic) or its English transliteration, "Baqiyah wa Tatamadad"—though they are also identified explicitly by Google's Redirect Method as keywords targeted for counter-narrative messaging.
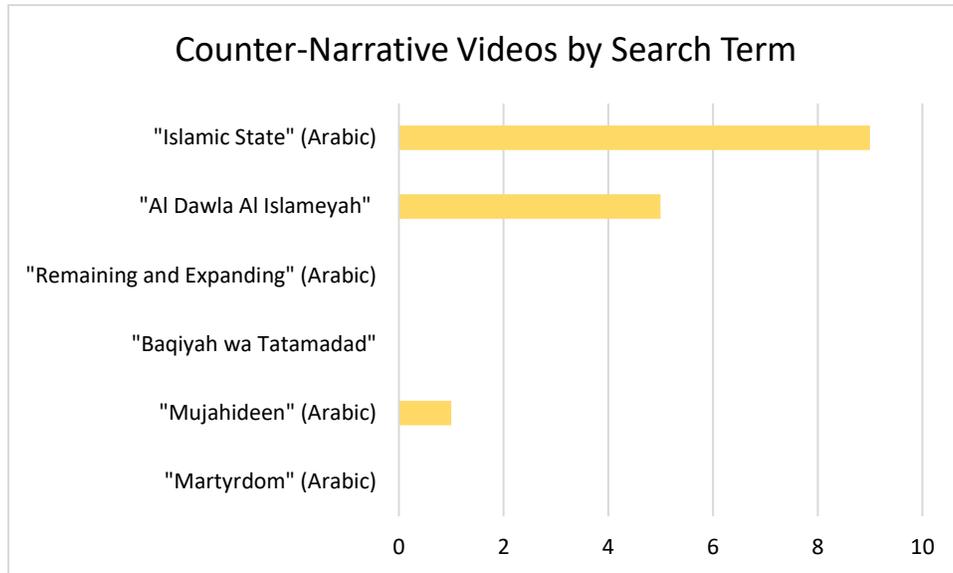
Only one counter-narrative video was found in the search results for "المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic)—despite having the most extremist content found in its search results.[11] No counter-narrative videos were found in the search results for "استشهادي" ("martyrdom" in Arabic)—despite having the second most extremist content found in its search results.[12]

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[10] This analysis includes the 710 total videos reviewed from all searches conducted—unfiltered and filtered.
[11] This remains true even when the additional two filtered searches for "Islamic State" in Arabic are taken into account. In total, 11 extremist videos were found in the three searches for "Islamic State" in Arabic. In contrast, 20 extremist videos were found in the single unfiltered search for "Mujahideen" in Arabic.
[12] This remains true even when the additional two filtered searches for "Islamic State" in Arabic are taken into account. In total, 11 extremist videos were found in the three searches for "Islamic State" in Arabic. In contrast, 14 extremist videos were found in the single unfiltered search for "Martyrdom" in Arabic.

Counter-Narrative Videos by Search Term

14 out of the 15 counter-narrative videos (93%) were targeted at ISIS. Only one counter-narrative video found was targeted at a non-ISIS extremist group. The counter-narrative video that was found in the search results for "المجاهدين" ("mujahideen" in Arabic) was targeted at al-Shabab.

Additional Concerns with Google's Redirect Method

In addition to the fact that the amount of extremist content on YouTube far exceeds the presence of Google's counter-narrative videos, there are also three key concerns regarding the design and efficacy of the company's Redirect Method.

First, disregarding unwanted content is easy for every user—including jihadists. When people deal with large quantities of information, they sort it based on its immediate usefulness. A user searching the Internet for a specific video will easily disregard extraneous content. Though counter-narrative videos can be compelling or deeply affecting, they can also be easily ignored. Counter-narrative content is also often recognized and pointed out for what it is by YouTube users in comment sections. For example, almost all of the 80 comments on one counter-narrative video uploaded to YouTube feature obvious pro-ISIS rhetoric, and several others point out the fact that the account that uploaded the video blatantly features the U.S. State Department's logo as its icon.[13]

Second, the problem of extremist content on YouTube isn't only about watching and searching for videos on the site itself. ISIS supporters use other platforms, such as the

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[13] الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام)داعش)تقدم لكم ," الدولة الإسلامية في العراق والشام)داعش)تقدم لكم," YouTube video, September 20, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LN0l4tx59FU.

encrypted messaging platform, Telegram, to regularly post and share links to videos on YouTube and other video sites. The videos posted on these sites are often private or unlisted, meaning they cannot be searched for using keywords and can only be found on YouTube via their specific URLs. No matter how much counter-narrative content YouTube adds, the online supporters of ISIS and other extremist groups will continue to purposely post and link to extremist content there from platforms outside of YouTube.

Third, Google's measures come woefully late, given that they were first announced in February 2016. In the roughly 26 months since Google previewed what later become the Redirect Method, a high-profile terrorist attack has been linked to content found on YouTube. Manchester bomber Salman Abedi relied, in part, on ISIS bomb-making instructional videos on YouTube to build his explosive device.[14] That same video was still on YouTube almost two months after the May 22, 2017 suicide bomb attack. The members of the Barcelona terrorist cell who accidentally blew themselves up prior to the August 2017 vehicular attack in the city were making a TATP-based explosive device with the same chemical composition as the DIY bomb presented in the ISIS bomb-making video on YouTube.[15]

Conclusion

Extremist propaganda—including violent propaganda—is still readily accessible on YouTube. **Out of the 710 videos manually reviewed and analyzed by CEP, 53 videos (more than 7.4%) contained extremist content.** Out of those videos, 25 included content that was explicitly violent or gory. However, official ISIS propaganda is fairly difficult to find. Only 4 videos found were official ISIS propaganda releases, while 18—over four times as many—were official propaganda releases from non-ISIS extremist groups, and the remaining 31 videos were unofficial propaganda videos. These numbers suggest that although YouTube may have improved its takedown practices, especially for ISIS videos, terrorist networks and their supporters still employ the platform to spread official propaganda videos and violent content.

Meanwhile, Google's efforts to promote counter-narrative content appear to be inconsistent and insufficient. **For the 710 videos checked, CEP was over three times more likely to encounter extremist material than counter-narratives.** 14 out of 15 total counter-narrative videos were found in the search results for two terms that Google's Redirect Method specified were targeted for counter-narrative messaging—"الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic) and its English transliteration, "Al Dawla Al Islameyah." However, no counter-narrative material was found in

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[14] Fiona Hamilton and Alexi Mostrous, "Manchester Arena killer Salman Abedi used YouTube to build bomb," *Times* (London), June 24, 2017, https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/ariana-grande-manchester-concert-killer-salman-abedi-used-youtube-to-build-bomb-qzcbs55s3.

[15] Paul Cruickshank, "Source: Early assessment finds TATP at Barcelona attackers' bomb factory," CNN, August 19, 2017, https://www.cnn.com/2017/08/18/europe/spain-terror-attacks-tatp/index.html; Joshua Fisher-Birch, "Continuing Availability of ISIS Bomb Making Videos on Google Platforms," Counter Extremism Project, January 11, 2018, https://www.counterextremism.com/blog/continuing-availability-isis-bomb-making-videos-google-platforms-0.

the search results for "باقية و تتمدد" ("Remaining and Expanding" in Arabic) or its English transliteration, "Baqiyah wa Tatamadad," though they are also terms that Google's Redirect Method specified were targeted for counter-narrative messaging. Furthermore, Google's efforts to remove extremist content and promote counter-narrative messaging do not appear to be equal between unfiltered and filtered searches. Though extremist content was not found in the unfiltered search for "الدولة الإسلامية" ("Islamic State" in Arabic), it was easily found when filters were applied.

YouTube's efforts to combat terrorist content on its platform appear to be primarily targeted at ISIS, but the company does not seem to have made the same efforts to target non-ISIS terrorist and extremist content. CEP found nearly four times more official non-ISIS extremist content than official ISIS content, but found only one counter-narrative video targeted at a non-ISIS extremist group. CEP encourages YouTube to focus on ensuring a more consistent and encompassing application of counter-narrative messaging, as well as the removal of *all* extremist and terrorist material from its platforms, in line with YouTube's own public statements and company policy.