UNAOC

Connecting the dots:
Preventing Violent Extremism,
Media & Information Literacy
& the Sustainable Development Goals

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In the paper "Check the web: Assessing the ethics and politics of policing the internet for extremist material" by Ian Brown and Josh Cowls, published in 2015, this illustration, titled, "Pathways to violent extremism" by Akil Awan is included.

We can appreciate the complexity and the difficulty of the process, the transversality and multiplicity of possible causes that eventually could push a young person towards joining a violent group aiming at destroying the social system we have now in place.

The idea that by simply showing-discovering a mediatized new world on the internet is sufficient for a young person to make his or her mind, pack a suitcase, and joint ISIS is far to simplistic.

Even if Daesh uses very slick and elaborated platforms that young people can identify with for their design, which mimic the West's own public-relations and advertisement iconic imaginary.

		Most of the Western efforts to address the radicalization of youth and their willingness to actively participate in terrorist groups focus on military action to isolate and defeat the groups that called their attention and inspired their illusory into a new world order.
		Or, in the best cases, the West supports efforts creating digital counter narratives such as the video game Abdullah-X, developed by a former Islamic extremist, that is promoted via YouTube and social media platforms proposing narratives that,
		it is expected, will influence young people into critically assessing and thinking twice positively responding to ISIS own narratives.
		But for the most part these initiatives preach to an audience already converted. Outcomes have yet to prove if they are in deed effective in changing the hearts and minds of young people who are seriously thinking of joining ISIS or similar terrorists groups.
		It has to be proved as well the efficacy of initiatives such as the United States' State Department "P2P: Challenging Extremism", where university students, mostly from the US, were asked to create digital projects designed to counter

	violent extremist narratives. Who are these initiatives reaching out to? How effective are they preventing violent extremism? It is not clear to me that they help to change in any substantial way the mind of a young person who has decided to joint ISIS or is getting ready to commit a terrorist act in his or her own community.
	Other responses to countering violent extremism, such as the proposed by Jared Cohen, the Director of Google Ideas, in a recent article in Foreign Affairs, bring to the digital world similar techniques to the ones implemented on the ground: waging a broad-scale counterinsurgency.
	A full-scale digital war that, recognizing the power of ISIS digital promotional outreach, goes to war in cyberspace against it. The many battles of this war include tracking social media footprints and de-activating Twitter accounts,
	Facebook accounts, YouTube accounts and other social media that openly support the insurgents. In his article Cohen points out that in 2014 the British Counter Terrorism Internet Referral Unit working closely with Google, Facebook and Twitter flagged for removal more than 46,000 pieces of violent or hateful content.
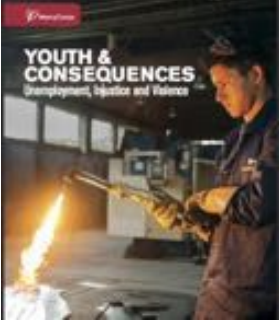
	That same year YouTube took down approximately 14 million videos. In April 2015, Twitter suspended 10,000 accounts linked to ISIS on a single day. Cohen recognizes that this broad and global digital counterinsurgency will force ISIS
	to operate on the so-called dark-Web, the part of the Internet not indexed by mainstream search engines and accessible to only knowledgeable users. Cohen concludes that "compelling terrorists organizations to operate in secret does make plots more difficult to intercept, but in the case of ISIS, that is a tradeoff worth making.
Steve Emerson says ISIS managed to get a senior IT official of a Western law enforcement agency to defect in the past year	Every day –he continues- the group's message reaches millions of people, some of whom become proponents of ISIS or even fighters for its cause. Preventing it from dominating digital territory would help stanch the replenishment of its physical ranks, reduce its impact on the public psyche, and destroy its most fundamental means of communication. "
	But this form of challenging ISIS and ISIS-like digital presence on the Internet, in addition to having untested results, has, indeed, serious repercussions on the general notion of freedom of expression.

	In their publication on policing the Internet for extremist material, Brown and Cowls, clearly estate that "Defining online 'extremist' material that should be subject of police attention, while protecting freedom of expression and other rights, is a difficult and contentious task. The boundaries –they continue- between "extremist" material meriting police attention, and speech that in the words of the European Court of Human Rights may "offend, shock or disturb"- but is still protected under freedom of expression rules- are extremely difficult to define in general terms."
	The fact is that there are now many more people around the world accepting violent extremist acts and terrorism as means of expression against the West that there were in 2001.
	The many trillions of dollars spent in military actions (and its consequences) in Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Nigeria, Mali, Libia, Syria, etc. are not giving the expected results, I mean: peace, security, stable and prosperous societies.

	The United States, its allies and the pseudo military forces (the huge array of security contractors) have been in Afghanistan and Iraq for 15 years already. The conflict is spilling around the region and beyond.
	How many more years it is expected for this cruel, destructive, bloody and horrendous spectacle to continue?
	How many more millions of refugees are we ready to accept in the West? Clearly this approach is not working.
	But then what can be done to prevent young people, such as these three teenage girls from the UK, from joining the ranks of ISIS. What is pushing them to do so?
	A recent report from Mercy Corps concludes that

"Every year, Western donors deploy vast sums of development assistance to dampen the appeal, among the world's youth, of militias, pirates and terrorists. But |

	guided by little in the way of empirical evidence, it is an enterprise plagued by unclear payoffs and unintended consequences. Drawing on interviews and surveys with youth in Afghanistan, Colombia and Somalia, the report points out that the principal drivers of political violence are rooted not in poverty, but in experiences of injustice: discrimination, corruption and abuse by security forces. For many youth, narratives of grievance are animated by the shortcomings of the state itself, which is weak, venal or violent. Young people take up the gun not because they are poor, but because they are angry."
	As the report also points out "Unemployment most could accept – as circumstance, poor luck, the will of God. "Those are not things you fight against," said a young Afghan man. Corruption by public officials, however, makes them angry, as do discrimination and being cheated or humiliated. Early experiences of violence – being roughed up by security forces, for example – are associated with pushing young people into violent groups. Yet rarely is the choice to take up arms simply an economic one. Ideas and experiences appear to be more important. Dignity matters, not dollars.

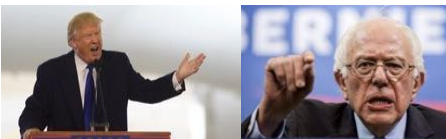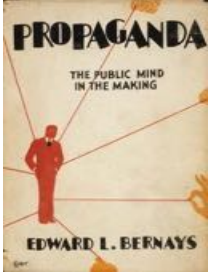|	
	A young Afghanistan boy told the Mercy Corps researcher, "I did not join the Taliban because I was poor, I joined because I was angry. Because they (the West) wronged us."
Original post, 6:46 p.m.: With 15 minutes to go before the Republican primary polls close in South Carolina, here are some interesting **exit-poll factoids from ABC:** • The top concern of voters asked to say whether immigration, the economy, terrorism, or government spending was the most important issue facing the country was terrorism at 32 percent. • Everyone is VERY ANGRY! Ninety-two percent of voters said they are "dissatisfied or angry" about the federal government vs. only 8 percent who said they are "enthusiastic or satisfied."	Anger is these days fuelling a lot of political discourse, not only young people getting ready to joint ISIS, but we also find anger in the main street of political arenas, as we can witness in the current presidential campaign in the US. At a recent polling, 92% of the Republican voters expressed being angry with the federal government.
	As Noam Chomsky points out, anger is the main factor behind Donald Trump's ascendancy in the American political landscape.
Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump Voters Share Anger, but Direct It Differently	But it is not only Trump's supporters who are energized by anger, so are many of the followers of the Democratic Party candidate Bernie Sanders. Even though the anger is placed on different areas of the social system. The American Psychological Association defines **Anger as** "an emotion characterized by antagonism toward someone or something you feel has deliberately done you wrong."

	Historically there have been many violent expressions of anger against the social system in the West.
	In the late 18 hundreds and early 19 hundreds bombs in public places thrown by anarchists were common.
	In 1908 Barcelona burned for a week when the workers expressed their discontent and anger with the central government's drafting system for the colonial war in northern Morocco.
	Jumping many others examples of expressions of social anger, was it not some form of anger and a sense of exclusion –real or perceived- being expressed by the young people torching buildings in London in the summer of 2011? So perhaps it is anger, and again, the real –or perceived- sense of exclusion that youth experience what needs to be addressed when thinking in

	the best ways to challenge the appeal towards violent extremism that some youth feel.
	This is echoed in many studies, as, for example, on the International Peace Institute's report titled "Violent extremism: Towards a strategy of prevention in the francophone region", the paper's conclusions clearly estates that "the dominant strategy guiding the current policies in the fight against violent extremism are quite inefficient because they mainly use violent approaches that they in turn just generate more violence". The report concludes that "certain extremist movements provide individuals with answers that either society or governments have been able to provide, particularly answers to existential questions, as well as a way to combat injustice and perceived inequalities as well as a sense of belonging".
	In the preamble of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2178 of 2014, the General Secretary clearly states that "over the long term, the biggest threat to terrorists is not the power of missiles – it is the politics of inclusion." Point 16 of the resolution "*Encourages* Member States to engage relevant local communities and non-governmental actors in developing strategies to

counter the violent extremist narrative that can incite terrorist acts, address the conditions conducive to the spread of violent extremism, which can be conducive to terrorism, including by empowering youth, families, women, religious, cultural and education leaders, and all other concerned groups of civil society and adopt tailored approaches to countering recruitment to this kind of violent extremism and promoting social inclusion and cohesion. (…) And point 19 *underscores* the role education can play in countering terrorist narratives."

On Daniel Heinke's recent article "German Jihadists in Syria and Iraq: An Update", the author underlines that the vast majority of departees were radicalized in "real life environments". In most cases the internet played no major role, and only a few individuals were purely radicalized online." This assessment confirms Benjamin Bowyer and Joseph Kahne's article "Youth comprehension of political messages in YouTube videos" where they conclude that "individuals' levels of political knowledge and their predisposition to agree with the message contained in the video are strong predictors of comprehension (…) the potential impact of incidental exposure to online political

		communications is smaller that many scholars have assumed, particularly when the message is inconsistent with the viewers' prior beliefs."
		The results of these studies reaffirm Edward Bernays' original ideas. Bernays, the father of contemporary public relations and the advertisement industry, already stated on his seminal book of 1929, "Propaganda," that "propaganda is of no use to the politician unless he has something to say which the public, consciously or unconsciously, wants to hear." This goes very well along with political populism and other narratives of anger. The audience connects with a narrative with which they are already predisposed to connect with. And this is of capital relevance. No counter-narrative digital or not will change the mind of a future ISIS volunteer if what it is being said does not conform to what the individual is already inclined to believe because his or her anger and perception, real or not, of marginalization.

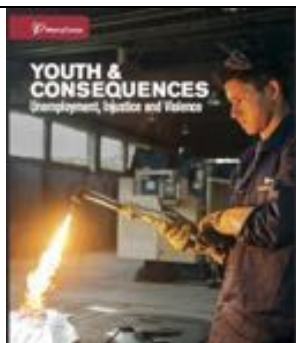|	
	From this perspective, to prevent violent extremism is in fact an invitation to re-assess our societies. Again, as the UN General Secretary pointed out "the biggest threat to terrorists is not the power of missiles – it is the politics of inclusion." Of real inclusion and opportunity, of policies aiming at true implementation of social justice, facilitating youth political empowerment, supporting gender representation, of policies fighting corruption in all areas of society, of policies energizing public education, critical thinking skills, media and cultural literacy, civic and global citizenship education. These policies, reforming and deeply reshaping not only our societies but at a global level have a much better chance to effectively prevent violent extremism.
	As the Mercy Corps research points out, "what we found is that unemployment status is a very poor predictor of whether a person is going to join an insurgent group or not. A far better predictor is the experience of injustice, discrimination, marginalization, being on the receiving end of corruption, and being abused by the police, security forces, or having a family member killed". The study concludes that "if poverty and

	unemployment were driving terrorism, there would be a lot more terrorism, since there are millions of people living in poverty –why aren't more of them joining armed movements? The fact is that most young people are peaceful. They want a future, and they are often optimistic in spite of their circumstances"
	The UN Plan of Action to Prevent Violent Extremism also points out that investment in education and developing youth inclusion programs are key elements towards that goal.
\n\n10 things you didn't know about the world's population	But the reality is that despite the fact that the world is getting younger, in some areas, areas of conflict, extremely young in deed; almost 65% of Afghanistan's population is bellow 24 years old, in Somalia the percentage of this age group in 63%. Globally, 25% of the world's population (almost 2 billion) is between 10 and 24 years old
	But despite these facts and the global alarm of how to challenge the spread of violent extremism, despite all this, a report from 2014 by Liesbet Steer underlines the serious shortcomings of education budget allocations and resources globally. In the

	meantime the military budgets keep growing, current data estimates the global budget for military purposes at around 18 hundred trillions. 1.5% of this figure would guaranty basic education to all children in the 46 low and middle-income countries. But currently these countries have a 50% gap in their educational budgets needs, leaving millions of children and youth with few, if any, educational options.
	It is reveling to see how education budgetary needs are being cut (please see the global chart) while at the same time the treat of violent extremism is developing and the percentage of youth population in the world increases. These policies are clearly contradictory and inconsistent with the needs of our times. Inconsistent, as well, with much of the political speeches we hear. While education is recognize as a key player in preventing violent extremism, education resources are being reduced.
Civic engagement programs, isolated from meaningful governance reforms, are unlikely to mitigate political violence. Indeed, such programs may be priming a confrontation.	As the Mercy Corps study concludes "civic engagement programs, isolated from meaningful governance reforms, are unlikely to mitigate political violence. Indeed, such programs may be priming a confrontation."
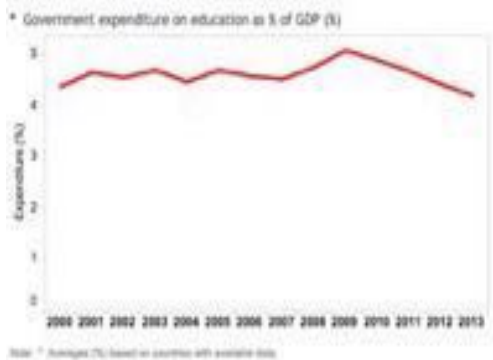
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At times these educational budgetary deficiencies are counterbalanced by other educational opportunities that often taint the vision of the world with particular tonalities. As Maryam Abdillahi Hassan, a researcher at the Puntland Development Research Center, in northern Somalia, says "When the Salafis started supplying local schools with history books, it changed young people's view of the world. A school is a marketplace of ideas, she continues, and now people talk all the time about Israel and Palestine. From listening to them, you'd think Muslims are oppressed and the only option is to fight."

We, as society, can build on the challenges that violent extremism presents to our communities; but not by further developing a militaristic world, a police state, filled with censorship, imprisonment and torture. But by realizing that perhaps our hyper materialistic world, our obsession with consumerism and the neo-capitalist greed that is developing around us might need to be re-assessed. There is anger in the world and pretending that the order we have contributed to create is perfect, or quasi, and that the anger we sense is unfounded and irrational, denying it, will certainly not solve the problem, or eliminate the horrendous and misplaced violent expressions of that

	anger. Perhaps we need to seriously think about evolution if we want to avoid a revolution.
	Media and Information Literacy could be the platform, the channel, to invigorate once again the humanistic education that it is now dwindling in the new curriculum across schools around the world.
	A curriculum stressing STEM education (focusing on science, technology, engineering and mathematics) while cutting funding and classroom time from arts and other humanistic educational programs will not solve the problem. Focusing solely on STEM education is a disservice to our communities and has the potential to backfire, by producing mindsets that are more conducive to be attracted to the exclusive ways of thinking that often develop into violent forms of expression, into violent extremism.

IMMUNISING THE MIND How can education reform contribute to neutralising violent extremism? Martin Rose www.britishcouncil.org	In "Immunising the Mind: How can education reform contribute to neutralizing violent extremism?", a recent report by Matin Rose published by the British Council, a strong case is made for the development of critical thinking skills in the primary and secondary educational curriculum.
	Media and Information Literacy is the perfect platform for this. Education policy makers across the world should be made aware of this and be encouraged to include, in the mandatory curriculum, Media and Information Literacy education.
THE GLOBAL GOALS	A more peaceful world might depend on it. A world where the Global Goals will have indeed an opportunity to flourish.
UNAOC United Nations Alliance of Civilizations Jordi Torrent jordit@unops.org www.unaoc.org/what-we-do/projects/media-and-information-literacy	Thank you!