

The background of the entire page is a light teal network diagram consisting of several interconnected nodes (small circles) and lines. The word "RESOLVE" is written in a large, bold, dark teal sans-serif font at the top left. Below it, the word "NETWORK" is written in a smaller, all-caps, dark teal sans-serif font. A thin, dark teal diagonal line is positioned to the right of the word "RESOLVE".

**RESOLVE**  
NETWORK

**Researching Jihadist  
Propaganda:  
Access, Interpretation,  
& Trauma**

Charlie Winter

The views in this publication are those of the author. They do not necessarily reflect the views of the RESOLVE Network, its partners, the U.S. Institute of Peace, or any U.S. government agency.

# ABSTRACT

This chapter explores three key challenges that arise in the context of research on violent extremist propaganda. While this chapter is focused specifically on research on violent extremist materials from jihadist groups,<sup>1</sup> including the Islamic State (IS) and al-Qaeda (AQ), its lessons may be of use in research on other types of violent extremist propaganda. The chapter has three sections. The first addresses the fact that most primary sources in this area are difficult to access for large audiences. This is a significant barrier to entry for most researchers and means that those who do have access to online violent extremist jihadist networks are beholden to accurately represent their observations. The next section deals with issues associated with intended meanings, polysemy, and subjectivity, addressing the issues that arise in analysis of violent extremist content. The last section focuses on trauma and the potential for research on IS, AQ, and other extremist propaganda to cause lasting psychological harm to researchers. This section also returns to the issue of researcher responsibility, specifically regarding when and how to make primary source materials available to others. This chapter aims to provide researchers of violent extremism with a set of baseline considerations to take into account early in the research process, especially in the data collection and methodology selection stages.

## INTRODUCTION

The jihadist propaganda research field has boomed in recent years<sup>2</sup> due to two factors. First, the barriers to entry are lower today than a decade ago. As jihadists altered their online behaviors—using online platforms to further their reach and disseminate information and propaganda—they became easier to track and monitor. Second, there is increased demand for research on extremist propaganda. The security risks associated with IS and AQ propaganda metastasized in the 2010s to such an extent that it became unignorable, deemed to be directly associated with terrorist attacks all over the world.<sup>3</sup> This, in turn, incentivized research on the various causes and effects of extremist propaganda.

As the field has matured, three significant research challenges came to the fore.<sup>4</sup> The first is access. Back in 2013, 2014, and the first half of 2015, jihadist propaganda was easily accessible to nearly anyone. This ease of accessibility was due to the fact that, at that time, jihadist outreach efforts centered

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- 1 The author uses the term “jihadist” to define violent extremist groups, including the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, who define themselves and their ideologies as Islamic and advocate for violent “jihad”. It is important to note that the term “jihadist” can carry multiple meanings and does not necessarily connote violence or violent extremism.
  - 2 Bart Schuurman, “Topics in Terrorism Research: Reviewing Trends and Gaps, 2007-2016,” *Critical Studies in Terrorism* (2018); Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Audrey Alexander, and Nick Kaderbhai, “The Impact of Digital Communications Technology on Radicalization and Recruitment,” *International Affairs* 93, no. 5 (2017): 1233-49.
  - 3 See, for example: Theresa May, “Home Secretary Theresa May on Counter-terrorism,” November 24, 2014, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/home-secretary-theresa-may-on-counter-terrorism>; David Cameron, “Prime Minister on ISIL at UN General Assembly,” September 29, 2015, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/prime-minister-on-isil-at-un-general-assembly>; Theresa May, “Manchester Attack: Theresa May Terror Threat Speech in Full,” *BBC*, May 23, 2017, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-40023457..>
  - 4 These challenges are based on the author’s own experience and perspectives as a researcher of jihadist propaganda.

around open, mainstream platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. However, since mid-2015, jihadists started to favor other, lesser-known, and less-accessible platforms, Telegram foremost among them. Today, jihadist propaganda dissemination is primarily carried out behind closed doors, on apps and sites that only a small number of researchers have access to. This has significant implications for the field.

**The second challenge is interpretation.** With the move of propaganda to less accessible platforms, researchers who do manage to access relevant data can end up acting as gatekeepers to information. These gatekeepers play an important role in illuminating trends in online jihadist activities. However, with so few researchers accessing jihadist content, the risk is high that those gatekeepers with access may bring to light, either unintentionally or intentionally, only those aspects of jihadist media they consider especially important or problematic. This risks concealing other aspects of the material that elucidate important findings or context and has significant implications for the field and puts a small group of people in a position to dictate what is happening on jihadist social media to the rest of the world, even though they may only be referencing a fraction of the total actual activity. Because of this phenomenon, content aggregators such as Aaron Zelin’s website Jihadology have never been more important.<sup>5</sup> Notwithstanding their potential misuse by extremists, these content aggregators open access to jihadist propaganda to a wider audience of researchers.<sup>6</sup>

**The third challenge is trauma.** Jihadist propaganda can be extremely distressing, as its intent is to upset viewers. However, even the most violent materials are in need of consideration by researchers, because they not only help us understand what drives terrorism at an organizational and individual level, but also contain valuable intelligence insights on jihadist activities.<sup>7</sup> The potential harm inflicted upon practitioners working on issues associated with violent extremism— those employed by law enforcement agencies or technology companies—are increasingly well-known.<sup>8</sup> However, there is less awareness of how those same issues are or could be affecting academic researchers psychologically.

This chapter explores these three key challenges in detail. After providing an overview of the literature on jihadist propaganda, the chapter addresses the issues of access, interpretation, and trauma for research

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5 See [www.jihadology.net](http://www.jihadology.net), which styles itself as a “clearinghouse for jihādī primary source material, original analysis, and [a] translation service.”

6 This issue was hotly debated in late 2018 and early 2019. See: David Bond, “How Extremist Videos are Hitting UK Relations with US Tech Groups,” *Financial Times*, December 3, 2018, <https://app.ft.com/content/53ce7e78-f480-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>; Graeme Wood, “Don’t Shut Down the Internet’s Biggest Violent Jihadist Archive,” *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/dont-shut-down-internets-biggest-violent-jihadi-archive/577630/>; “Hating in Plain Sight” *On the Media*, NPR, March 22, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/podcasts/452538775/on-the-media>.

7 See, for example this account of its potential benefits: “Jane’s Militant Propaganda Analysis,” IHS Markit (2019), <https://ihsmarkit.com/products/janes-militant-propaganda-analysis.html>.

8 Andrew Arsht and Daniel Etcovitch, “The Human Cost of Online Content Moderation,” *Harvard Law JOLT Digest* (March 2, 2018), <https://jolt.law.harvard.edu/digest/the-human-cost-of-online-content-moderation>; Jennifer Beckett, “We Need to Talk about the Mental Health of Content Moderators,” *The Conversation*, September 27, 2018, <https://theconversation.com/we-need-to-talk-about-the-mental-health-of-content-moderators-103830>.

on violent extremism. The author analyzes each issue in general before tying it to his own experiences. This discussion provides researchers with a set of baseline considerations to take into account early in the research process, especially in the data collection and methodology selection stages.

## A BRIEF HISTORY OF JIHADIST PROPAGANDA RESEARCH EFFORTS

There are four main clusters of jihadist propaganda research, all of which can be impacted by all three of the abovementioned challenges. The first research cluster—**bulk analyses of the volume of organizational output**—is production-focused and characterized by Islamic State-focused studies, particularly from authors including Zelin, Milton, and Winter. Their respective efforts revolve around analyzing the archives of previous and current official jihadist media output, similar to Kimmage’s earlier examination of the strategic communications of al-Qaeda in Iraq, the Islamic State’s predecessor.<sup>9</sup> Their findings are consistent with one another: each identifies a net decline in the amount of propaganda that has roughly correlated with—but not been necessarily caused by—the so-called caliphate’s territorial contractions since 2015. The consensus, however, is not quite complete; an isolated account by Fisher contends that there has been no such productivity decline in the output of official jihadist propaganda.<sup>10</sup>

The next research cluster is content-focused and comprises mixed-methods analyses of **individual genres of propaganda**. There have been myriad explorations of English-language jihadist magazines, such as the Islamic State’s *Dabiq* and *Rumiyah* and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula’s *Inspire*, with some also turning their attention to the former group’s Arabic-language equivalents, *al-Naba’*.<sup>11</sup> Others, e.g.

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9 Daniel Kimmage, “The al-Qaeda Media Nexus: The Virtual Network Behind the Global Message,” *RFERL* (2008), [https://docs.rferl.org/en-US/AQ\\_Media\\_Nexus.pdf](https://docs.rferl.org/en-US/AQ_Media_Nexus.pdf); Aaron Zelin, “Picture or It Didn’t Happen: A Snapshot of the Islamic State’s Media Output,” *Perspectives on Terrorism*, 9, no. 4 (2015); Daniel Milton, “Communication Breakdown: Unravelling the Islamic State’s Media Efforts,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (October 2016), <https://ctc.usma.edu/communication-breakdown-unraveling-the-islamic-states-media-efforts/>; Daniel Milton, “Down, but Not Out: An Updated Assessment of the Islamic State’s Visual Propaganda,” *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point* (July 2018), <https://ctc.usma.edu/down-but-not-out-an-updated-examination-of-the-islamic-states-visual-propaganda/>; Charlie Winter, “Apocalypse, Later: A Longitudinal Study of the Islamic State Brand,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 35, no. 1 (2018): 103-21.

10 Ali Fisher, “ISIS: Sunset on the ‘Decline Narrative,’” *Online Jihad*, June 1, 2018, <https://onlinejihad.net/2018/06/01/isis-sunset-on-the-decline-narrative/>.

11 Haroro Ingram, “An Analysis of Islamic State’s *Dabiq* Magazine,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 51, no. 3 (2016): 458-577; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, “Mapping the Thematic Landscape of *Dabiq* Magazine,” *Australian Journal of Political Science* 71, no. 6 (2017): 591-620; Julian Droogan and Shane Peattie, “Reading Jihad: Mapping the Shifting Themes of *Inspire* Magazine,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 30, no. 4 (2018): 684-717; Haroro Ingram, “An Analysis of *Inspire* and *Dabiq*: Lessons from AQAP and Islamic State’s Propaganda War,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 40, no. 5 (2016): 357-75; Nuria Lorenzo-Dus, Anina Kinzel, and Luke Walker, “Representing the West and ‘Non-believers’ in the Online Violent Jihadist Magazines *Dabiq* and *Inspire*,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2018) [Online only]; Carol Winkler, Kareem El Damahoury, Aaron Dicker, and Anthony Lemieux, “The Medium is Terrorism: Transformation of the about to Die Trope in *Dabiq*,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2016) [Online only]; Peter Wignell, Sabine Tan, and Kay L. O’Halloran, “Under the Shade of AK47s: A Multimodal Approach to Violent Extremist Recruitment Strategies for Foreign Fighters,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (2017): 429-52; Logan Macnair and Richard Frank, “Changes and Stabilities in the Language of Islamic State Magazines: A Sentiment Analysis,” *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11, no. 2 (2017): 109-20; Orla Lehane, David Mair, Saffron

Winkler et al. and Adelman, have focused on deciphering terrorist infographics, while researchers such as Nanninga and Dauber and Robinson have concentrated on video propaganda.<sup>12</sup> El Damanhoury, Milton, and Anfinson are among the few to have examined the still images produced by jihadists.<sup>13</sup> Notwithstanding their diversity of subject matter, these genre studies often reach similar conclusions, identifying the dominant presence of mainstream Western visual rhetoric in jihadist propaganda.

The third cluster focuses on the other side of the communication equation, [exploring jihadist supporter dynamics on social-networking and file-sharing platforms](#). Between 2014 and 2017, jihadist activism on websites such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube attracted a lot of attention. Carter, Maher, and Neumann's investigation was one of the first such efforts to map supporter dynamics, followed by similarly orientated explorations from Klausen and Berger and Morgan.<sup>14</sup> Later research on the same issue by Conway et al. and Alexander illustrates that the presence of jihadists on mainstream platforms has declined since 2015, as new, privacy-maximizing services take their place as preferred communication hubs.<sup>15</sup>

The fourth cluster is strategic communications-focused and revolves around the [doctrinal literature jihadists produce on information warfare](#)—that is, the use of information, mediation, and communication to gain a competitive tactical or strategic advantage over adversaries. Relatively few have approached the study from this angle. Among them are Rogan, whose 2007 monograph on al-Qaeda's approach to propaganda was one of the first comprehensive analyses of jihadist outreach.<sup>16</sup> Studies by

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Lee, and Jodie Parker, "Brides, Black Widows and Baby-makers; or Not: An Analysis of the Portrayal of Women in English-language Violent Jihadi Magazine Image," *Critical Studies on Terrorism* (2018) [Online only]; Dounia Mahlouly and Charlie Winter, "A Tale of Two Caliphates: Comparing the Islamic State's Internal and External Messaging Priorities," *VOX-Pol* (2018), [https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol\\_publication/A-Tale-of-Two-Caliphates-Mahlouly-and-Winter.pdf](https://www.voxpol.eu/download/vox-pol_publication/A-Tale-of-Two-Caliphates-Mahlouly-and-Winter.pdf).

12 Pieter Nanninga, "Meanings of Savagery," in *The Cambridge Companion to Religion and Terrorism*, ed. James R. Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 172-90; Cori Dauber and Mark Robinson, "ISIS and the Hollywood Visual Style," *Jihadology*, July 6, 2015, <https://jihadology.net/2015/07/06/guest-post-isis-and-the-hollywood-visual-style/>.

13 Kareem El Damanhoury, Carol Winkler, Wojciech Kaczkowski, and Aaron Dicker, "Examining the Military-media Nexus in ISIS's Provincial Photography Campaign," *Dynamics of Asymmetric Conflict* 11, no. 2 (2017): 89-108; Daniel Milton, "Fatal Attraction: Explaining Variation in the Attractiveness of Islamic State Propaganda," *Conflict Management and Peace Science* (2018); Aaron Anfinson, "The Treachery of Images: Visualising "Statehood" as a Tactic for the Legitimation of Non-State Actors," *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1585818>.

14 Joseph A. Carter, Shiraz Maher, and Peter R. Neumann, "#Greenbirds: Measuring Importance and Influence in Syrian Foreign Fighter Networks," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (April 2014), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2014/04/ICSR-Report-Greenbirds-Measuring-Importance-and-Influence-in-Syrian-Foreign-Fighter-Networks.pdf>; Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (2015): 1-22; J.M. Berger and Jonathon Morgan, "The ISIS Twitter Census: Defining and Describing the Population of ISIS Supporters on Twitter," *Brookings* (March 2015).

15 Maura Conway, Moign Khawaja, Suraj Lakhani, Jeremy Reffin, Andrew Robertson, and David Weir, "Disrupting Daesh: Measuring Take-down of Online Terrorist Material and Its Impacts," *VOX-Pol* (2017), [http://doras.dcu.ie/21961/1/Disrupting\\_DAESH\\_FINAL\\_WEB\\_VERSION.pdf](http://doras.dcu.ie/21961/1/Disrupting_DAESH_FINAL_WEB_VERSION.pdf); Audrey Alexander, "Digital Decay: Tracing Change over Time among English-language Islamic State Sympathisers on Twitter," *George Washington University's Program on Extremism* (October 2017), [https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/DigitalDecayFinal\\_0.pdf](https://extremism.gwu.edu/sites/g/files/zaxdzs2191/f/DigitalDecayFinal_0.pdf).

16 Hanna Rogan, "Al-Qaeda's Online Media Strategies: From Abu Reuter to Irhabi 007," *Norwegian Defence Research Establishment* (2007), <https://www.ffi.no/no/Rapporter/07-02729.pdf>.

Whiteside,<sup>17</sup> Price and al-'Ubaydi,<sup>18</sup> and Milton<sup>19</sup> are also worth bearing in mind. Jihadist groups tend not to translate and broadcast their doctrines too widely. As a result, former and current military practitioners—those who are well-placed to access and navigate through captured document archives—have dominated this part of the research field.

Inherent within all of these clusters are issues of data access and interpretation. It is important not to understate the issue of trauma to researchers undertaking studies in each of these clusters, even if it seems less immediate because it is less tangible.

## ACCESSING DATA

Between 2013 and 2015, groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda used Twitter as the initial point of dissemination for their official media output.<sup>20</sup> Their principal objective at that time was to maximize their visibility, so they built up broadcast networks using hashtags, specially designated accounts for disseminating new materials, and automated programs for media amplification.<sup>21</sup> When technology corporations and governments realized the scale of the problem, they fought back, pushing jihadists off open social media networks such as Twitter.<sup>22</sup>

It was in this context that the use of Telegram skyrocketed. Telegram is a social media platform owned by the Russian brothers behind VKontakte—a Facebook-like social network that was also once favored by jihadists.<sup>23</sup> Blending the broadcast functionalities of Twitter, the monodirectional information flow of Facebook, and the peer-to-peer nature of WhatsApp, it was ideal for propaganda dissemination and, in

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17 Craig Whiteside, "Lighting the Path: The Evolution of the Islamic State Media Enterprise (2003-2016)," *International Centre for Counter Terrorism – The Hague* (2016).

18 Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Media Fitna in the Islamic State," *Jihadology*, September 2017; Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi, "Internal Conflicts in the Islamic State's Media Department: A Letter of Complaint," *Pundicity*, December 21, 2018, <http://www.aymennjawad.org/21906/internal-conflicts-in-the-islamic-state-media>; Muhammad Al-'Ubaydi and Bryan Price, "The Islamic State's Internal Rifts and Social Media Ban," *CTC Perspectives* (June 21, 2017), <https://ctc.usma.edu/ctc-perspectives-the-islamic-states-internal-rifts-and-social-media-ban/>.

19 Charlie Winter, "Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare," *International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation* (2017), <https://icsr.info/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/ICSR-Report-Media-Jihad-The-Islamic-State%E2%80%99s-Doctrine-for-Information-Warfare.pdf>; Charlie Winter, "Understanding Violent Jihadi Stratcom: The Case of the Islamic State," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 13, no. 1 (2019): 54-62.

20 Zelin, "Picture or It Didn't Happen"; Charlie Winter, "The Virtual Caliphate: Understanding the Islamic State's Propaganda Strategy," *Quilliam* (July 2015).

21 Berger, "The ISIS Twitter Census"; J.M. Berger, "How ISIS Games Twitter," *The Atlantic*, June 16, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/06/isis-iraq-twitter-social-media-strategy/372856/>.

22 Steven Stalinsky and R. Sosnow, "Germany-Based Encrypted Messaging App Telegram Emerges As Violent Jihadis' Preferred Communications Platform," *MEMRI*, January 3, 2017, <http://cjlabs.memri.org/lab-projects/tracking-violent-jihadi-terrorist-use-of-social-media/germany-based-encrypted-messaging-app-telegram-emerges-as-violent-jihadis-preferred-communications-platform-part-v-of-memri-series-encryption-technology-embraced-by-isis-al-qaeda-other-violent-jihadis/>.

23 Tetyana Lokot, "The ISIS Internet Army has Found a Safe Haven on Russian Social Networks — For Now," *PRI*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.pri.org/stories/2014-09-12/isis-internet-army-has-found-safe-haven-russian-social-networks-now>.

the early months of its use by jihadists, almost totally unregulated.<sup>24</sup> After the 2015 Paris attacks, Telegram began to take a more active stance against its use for the dissemination of jihadist content.

For researchers of jihadist propaganda, including myself, the shift from Twitter to Telegram made life much easier. There was much less counter-narrative noise, or extraneous data and content, on Telegram, and, because it had the appearance of greater security, jihadist groups were more overtly active. A good way to demonstrate what this meant is to compare the process for archiving jihadist materials from Twitter with the process for archiving jihadist materials from Telegram. When I built my first full archive of Islamic State propaganda in the summer of 2015, the group was still using Twitter for dissemination. This meant I had to spend three hours each day going through each of the three dozen hashtags the Islamic State used to tag its official materials. Many tweets using these hashtags were comprised of counter-Islamic State materials—anything from Manga cartoons<sup>25</sup> to hardcore pornography.<sup>26</sup> Sorting through this irrelevant material was a time-consuming task. When the Islamic State shifted its dissemination corps to Telegram a few months later, the same task was immeasurably easier. There was just one dissemination channel for all materials and it was monodirectional in nature. This meant that there was no noise to sort through.

This process became much more difficult over time, however. From the summer of 2016 onwards, Telegram started to become more inhospitable to jihadist groups and their supporters—although not so inhospitable to lead them to abandoned Telegram in favor of another platform. Dissemination channels that were once public—searchable and open to anyone who had an account—started to become private, and their accessibility has decreased almost exponentially since.

While this made things more difficult—increasing barriers to researcher (and jihadist) entry and making everything more time-consuming—it did not stymie research efforts entirely. Tracking jihadists online became more challenging but not technically impossible. Researchers just had to spend more time trying to stay inside jihadist networks by looking out for new invitation links to secret channels and joining replacement and reserve channels whenever they became available. However, it was not entirely without obstacles, and governments around the world began to institute new legislation that makes the handling of jihadist content illegal or at least legally questionable.<sup>27</sup> This meant that researchers have had to bear greater risks while conducting their work. Most legislation makes provisions for academic inquiry, asking that researchers are clear about what they are researching and how.

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24 Stalinsky and Sosnow, “Germany-Based Encrypted Messaging App Telegram Emerges As Violent jihadis’ Preferred Communications Platform.”

25 Anna Johansson, “ISIS-chan – The Meanings of the Manga Girl in Image Warfare Against the Islamic State,” *Critical Studies on Terrorism* 11, no. 1 (2018): 1-25.

26 Jacob Bogage, “This Hacker is Fighting ISIS by Spamming Its Twitter Accounts with Porn,” *Washington Post*, June 14, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/06/14/this-hacker-is-fighting-isis-by-spamming-its-twitter-accounts-with-porn/?utm\\_term=.7242fde81c21](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2016/06/14/this-hacker-is-fighting-isis-by-spamming-its-twitter-accounts-with-porn/?utm_term=.7242fde81c21).

27 For example: Lizzie Dearden, “Clicking on Terrorist Propaganda Even Once Could Mean 15 Years in Prison under New Law,” *The Independent*, February 12, 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/terrorist-propaganda-website-online-prison-sentence-uk-isis-a8776226.html>.

For those not familiar with Telegram, though, the structural challenges continue to be greater. By 2019, it was much harder to gain access to jihadists using the network—the entry of new researchers into jihadist networks had to be facilitated by others. This is not entirely problematic. If researchers find it more difficult to access jihadist networks, it follows that extremists and would-be extremists also find it more difficult to access jihadist networks.<sup>28</sup> Still, the challenge for researchers remains, independent of any positive security externality.

It is critical that more experienced jihadist propaganda researchers help early-career or cross-disciplinary researchers participate in this space alongside them. Individual researchers can co-author and collaborate on larger scale research projects. This solution, however, is not necessarily scalable as it requires connections and access to senior terrorism scholars, which many early career researchers may not have. The only real solution to this data barrier is the continued existence of content aggregators such as Jihadology, which scrapes the jihadist internet, rendering its materials available to everyone at no cost.<sup>29</sup>

## INTERPRETING DATA

There are two sides to the issue of interpretation in studying jihadist propaganda. The first is access-based. Due to the nature of the online jihadist landscape today, a relatively small number of people can dictate what they think the reality of jihadist propaganda is, even though others, if they were able to access the same materials at source, might interpret it in a different way. The second side of the interpretation issue is analysis-based. By its very nature, qualitative research—and quantitative too—requires that researchers make conscious decisions about what things mean. People are naturally subjective, and media are inherently polysemous—i.e., imbued with many possible meanings depending on who is consuming it—which can give rise to content misinterpretation or divergent interpretations at the very least. While these challenges have not been the subject of much examination, they are important to note and to keep in mind while conducting or consuming this type of research.

### Access-Based Issues

As mentioned in Section I of this chapter, the barriers to entry facing new or multidisciplinary researchers of jihadist propaganda are higher now than they have been for at least a decade. Researchers who are already well-embedded on jihadist propaganda networks have an outsized interpretative role for the rest

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28 Alexander, “Digital Decay.”

29 It is worth noting that Jihadology came under fire in late 2018 for providing too-easy access to propaganda. Discussions between its founder Aaron Zelin and various private and public stakeholders resulted in it establishing an access wall, meaning that users had to register with it prior to being able to watch or download any materials. See David Bond, “How Extremist Videos are Hitting UK Relations with US Tech Group,” *Financial Times*, December 3, 2018, <https://www.ft.com/content/53ce7e78-f480-11e8-ae55-df4bf40f9d0d>; Graeme Wood, “Don’t Shut Down the Internet’s Biggest Violent jihadist Archive,” *The Atlantic*, December 10, 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2018/12/dont-shut-down-internets-biggest-violent-jihadi-archive/577630/>; David Bond, “Library of Violent Jihadi Material to Restrict Access to Most Sensitive Material,” *Financial Times*, April 10, 2019, <https://www.ft.com/content/55338012-5ae0-11e9-9dde-7aedca0a081a>.

of the research community and, consequently, for media and policy communities. While one would hope that none of these researchers have malign intent, there is no question that they bring a range of political beliefs to the table. This is not in itself a problem, but it does result in different opinions regarding what is and what is not important in the propaganda sphere.

Thus, the field risks being steered by the “gatekeeper effect”, in which a small number of people filter out information they do not deem to be important, while over-focusing on the information they do.<sup>30</sup> This could manifest accidentally, as a result of seemingly inconsequential decisions on the part of researchers. The fact that relatively few people have hegemony over the interpretation of an issue as globally significant as jihadist propaganda is not ideal and should give pause for thought. This is exactly the type of issue that the academic review process is set up to resolve. A continuous critical peer review process can mitigate the interpretative concerns that may arise from this “gatekeeper effect”.

In my experience, this ongoing review process has been exceptionally useful. Being able to compare and corroborate my own findings with those of others—of Zelin, Milton, or Nanninga—has directly improved the quality and standard of my research.<sup>31</sup> Even Fisher’s account, which goes against my own observations, was useful because it prompted me to think about how to better elucidate my archiving and codification methodologies. It is critical that researchers keep an open mind when reading others’ views on the same data, even when their findings conflict, just as it is crucial that those consuming the research understand that findings may vary based on the individual researcher’s access to and use of data. Findings from other studies that conflict with a researcher’s own present an opportunity to learn and refine their understanding of the object of their research, rather than an upset or something that completely invalidates their own research findings.

## Analysis-Based Issues

The second issue related to interpretation is how researchers analyze data. Different media products mean different things to different people. When the meaning of something seems obvious, it is only obvious in the cultural context of the individual observing it.<sup>32</sup> In the context of jihadist propaganda, this issue of polysemy can be especially problematic because researchers are required to think outside of their own cultural habitus when conducting their analysis. As with all good research practice, there is no place for personal opinions, socio-cultural views, and religious beliefs in a researcher’s interpretation of data. However, jihadist materials are often explicitly geared towards degrading viewer neutrality by provoking viewers using graphic images of acts of extreme violence. Such provocation means that it can be more difficult to keep values and worldviews out of the research process.

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30 For more on this, see: Pamela J. Shoemaker and Timothy Vos, *Gatekeeping Theory* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

31 Zelin, “Picture or It Didn’t Happen”; Milton, “Communication Breakdown”; Pieter Nanninga, “Branding a Caliphate in Decline: The Islamic State’s Official Video Output (2015-2018),” *International Centre for Counter-Terrorism-The Hague* (2019).

32 For more on polysemy, see: John Fiske, “Television: Polysemy and Popularity,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 3, no. 4 (1986): 391-408.

This issue has been particularly prominent in the context of the Islamic State. Consider its 2014 video, “A message to America,” in which a British foreign fighter beheaded the American photojournalist James Foley.<sup>33</sup> For those who were not supporters of the Islamic State, it was almost unanimously regarded as an abhorrent event, something that demonstrated the group’s depraved savagery. However, it meant something very different for its supporters. As a triumphalist expression of retributive justice, the video was something to be celebrated, not shunned.<sup>34</sup> For the most part, terrorism researchers attempt to decipher the thought processes of this latter demographic. In order to do that, they have to be able to place themselves outside their cultural habitus. To this end, researchers must continuously strive to be reflexive in their work and train to identify and correct the injection of their own biases while interpreting data.

There are two ways to get around these issues of interpretation. The first is to take advantage of the fact that, for the most part, the English-speaking terrorism research community is collaborative and encourages constant exchange of opinion through anything from academic journal articles and books to opinion articles and social media. However, a lot more could and should be done to understand and, if necessary, improve access to collaborative opportunities between English and non-English-speaking researchers. The second, which is especially relevant to issues associated with polysemy and interpretation bias, is to prioritize the use of grounded theory-based research methodologies that allow the data in question to speak for itself.<sup>35</sup> While still imperfect, these methodologies analyze data inductively, allowing researchers to look at materials with fresh eyes and attempt to keep latent, deductive biases in check. Again, an open, non-combative attitude and a willingness to share data amongst researchers can help mitigate bias in data selection and bias within the jihadist propaganda research community.

## RECOGNIZING AND ADDRESSING TRAUMA

As noted earlier in this chapter, the impact of trauma among researchers is less immediately tangible than the two issues of access and interpretation, but just as, if not more, important in conducting research on terrorism and violent extremism. There is evidence to suggest that prolonged exposure to harmful content may cause post-traumatic stress disorder-like symptoms, but, as of yet, this evidence is purely anecdotal.<sup>36</sup>

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33 Chelsea J. Carter, “Video Shows ISIS Beheading U.S. Journalist James Foley,” *CNN*, August 20, 2014, <https://edition.cnn.com/2014/08/19/world/meast/isis-james-foley/index.html>.

34 Ian R. Pelletier, Leif Lundmark, Rachel Gardner, Gina Scott Ligon, and Ramazan Kilinc, “Why ISIS’s Message Resonates: Leveraging Islam, Sociopolitical Catalysts, and Adaptive Messaging,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 39, no. 10 (2016): 871-99.

35 For a good, critical analysis of the advantages (and disadvantages) of grounded theory, see: George Allan, “A Critique of Using Grounded Theory as a Research Method,” *Electronic Journal of Business Research Methods* 2, no. 1 (2003): 1-10.

36 Arsht and Etcovitch, “The Human Cost of Online Content Moderation”; Beckett, “We Need to Talk About the Mental Health of Content Moderators.”

Jihadist propaganda can be extremely distressing. Videos of mass executions, captive torture, and pre-teen suicides are routine in this sphere, as are close-up photographs of rotting and defiled corpses.<sup>37</sup> Unpleasant though it may be, even the most violent content is deserving of study.

Employee welfare is usually factored into the clerical duties of technology companies and law enforcement. However, the same cannot be said of academic institutions, where it is often up to individual researchers to mitigate the potential for psychological harm without support. Institutional review boards—the university bodies in charge of ensuring that research programs are conducted in an ethical manner—usually require researchers to demonstrate that they are not causing **physical harm** or potential harm to themselves or their colleagues, but they do not generally require them to demonstrate they are not causing **psychological harm**. Symptoms of psychological trauma rarely seem to be directly related to the workplace—they can manifest in anything from a generalized loss of appetite to problems with sleeping. As such, it is easy for researchers to dismiss as normal those behavioral changes that may indicate deeper psychological trauma.<sup>38</sup>

We do not know much about the psychological consequences of this work. To date, there is no publicly available academic or clinical literature on the short-, medium- or long-term impact of researching or working with jihadist content.<sup>39</sup> Given that social media and propaganda analysis became one of the most fertile areas of terrorism research in recent years, this is untenable. It is wrong to dismiss the potential for lasting psychological trauma as some sort of possible work-related inconvenience. Instead, this is an issue that should be foregrounded, studied, and factored into the research design itself.

There are a few things individual researchers can do to improve their psychological resilience. This advice, which I received from an independently-sought counsellor, is not exhaustive, nor is it necessarily generalizable. Even though it appears to be working for me, researchers should seek additional advice from a suitably qualified expert. First, researchers should make a concerted effort to fully process distressing information.<sup>40</sup> It is not enough to just watch a video of an execution, switch it off, and move on to something else. Rather, researchers should think through what they witnessed, and discuss it with someone, or write about it. In my experience, it is better to actively consider such materials than to leave them sitting, abstracted, in the mind's eye. Taking the time to mindfully process the content viewed allows for something akin to rationalization—provoking thoughts probing why the content came into being, rather

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37 Vivek Venkatesh, Jeffrey S. Podoshen, Jason Wallin, Jihan Rabah, and Daniel Glass, “Promoting Extreme Violence: Visual and Narrative Analysis of Select Ultraviolent Terror Propaganda Videos Produced by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2015 and 2016,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2018), <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09546553.2018.1516209?af=R&journalCode=ftpv20>.

38 “Symptoms of PTSD. Anxiety and Depression Association of America,” Anxiety and Depression Association of America, <https://adaa.org/understanding-anxiety/posttraumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/symptoms>; “PTSD,” Mind, <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/23538921/ptsd-2018.pdf>.

39 The closest extant study is perhaps: Betty Pfefferbaum, Elana Newman, Summer D. Nelson, Pascal Nitiema, Rose L. Pfefferbaum, and Ambreen Rahman, “Disaster Media Coverage and Psychological Outcomes: Descriptive Findings in the Extant Research,” *Current Psychiatry Reports* 16, no. 9 (2015), <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4144190/>.

40 See, for example: “Post-traumatic Stress Disorder: How Can I Help Myself,” Mind, <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/post-traumatic-stress-disorder-ptsd/self-care-for-ptsd/#.XKnQIzhKg2w>.

than contemplating the nature of the content itself. Second, researchers should try to keep grounded when handling these materials, even if this means actively trying to remain detached from them.<sup>41</sup> While a researcher’s empathy is important, so too is their ability to separate themselves from the subject of study; it means they remain analysts and avoid becoming participants. Simple mindfulness techniques—breathing exercises—can assist here, as well as such tricks as watching content in minimized windows or with the volume muted.<sup>42</sup>

Those leading research projects and those funding them have a responsibility to consider both the physical and psychological welfare of their research team. This should be a standard, not an exception to the rule. It is upon institutional review boards to always ensure that the necessary systems are in place, especially if students are enlisted in project delivery.

Moving forward, more clinical research into this issue is critical. As things stand, the research on trauma is not even in its nascency. Given that more people are working with jihadist and violent extremist propaganda than ever before—not just in technology companies, law enforcement, and professional research, but students too—there has never been a great need for it. It is critical that actual studies are conducted in this issue, because it is likely to become only more problematic in years to come.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter explored three key challenges that arise in the context of jihadist propaganda research that, while specific to research on jihadist propaganda specifically, contain lessons translatable to similar research on violent and violent extremist content. The first section addressed difficulties associated with accessing most primary sources in this area, which is a significant barrier to entry for most researchers. The second section dealt with issues associated with interpretation, considering the “gatekeeper effect” and polysemy. The last section focused on the issue of trauma.

This chapter hopes to provide researchers with a set of baseline considerations to take into account early in the research process. It also hopes to provide the policymakers and practitioners who commission said research with some ideas as to what they should push for as methodological and ethical standards. Access, interpretation, and trauma issues are by no means unique to studies of violent extremism and terrorism. However, given the violent nature of the content and the legal issues surrounding it, these research problems are especially pronounced. It is critical that researchers account for and keep in mind these issues when designing projects and engaging in analysis. Doing so will foster a collaborative atmosphere and improve the aggregate research product—researchers will have better access to sources and other innovative methodologies.

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid.

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