Commission for Countering Extremism

COUNTERING EXTREMISM
DEFENDING FREE SPEECH

Don't Do Anything I Say in This Song: Countering Extremism with Candour, Not Censorship

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Liam Duffy

In 2015, American rapper, Tyler, the Creator, was refused entry to Britain, ahead of scheduled performances at both Reading and Leeds festivals. With ISIS close to its territorial peak in the Middle-East, the rapper was "being treated like a terrorist," he told *The Guardian* at the time.[1] Unbeknownst to him and thanks to years old lyrics from his mixtape days as a relative unknown, the *Odd Future* rapper's presence in the United Kingdom, it had been deemed by the state, was "not conducive to the public good". As it turned out, the rapper wasn't far off in connecting the verdict to counter-terrorism.

Around the same time, I attended a small meeting in government where one minor agenda item addressed the banning of foreign hate preachers from Britain, at a time when anxieties over extremism were at a particular high. Tyler, the Creator's name surfaced, and the themes of his deliberately transgressive lyrics were read aloud to the assorted civil servants and practitioners of schemes like Prevent. Had such utterances been made by a religious preacher, we were told, they would be considered just as objectionable and naturally would have constituted grounds for exclusion from the country.

The words weren't, however, delivered by a religious preacher instructing devout followers on how to lead their lives to avoid divine punishment. Instead, they were made by a pretty eccentric rapper through his even more outrageous alter ego. Reasonably certain I was in a minority in having heard of, much less actually listened to the rapper in question, I was more than a little concerned to look around the room only to see anxious nods of approval.

Tyler, the Creator is an oddball. He stands out from many of his mainstream rap contemporaries, dabbling in horror, gore and the macabre - lyrically speaking. While his music certainly isn't for everyone, he is clearly very talented. Some of his songs, released in the early days of his bootstrapped career, are written from the perspective of notorious American serial killers, such as Ted Bundy and Albert Fish. The grisly and murderous lyrics for tracks like "Blow", "Sarah" and "Fish", produced between 2007-2009, were likely the pivotal pieces of evidence resulting in the rapper's exclusion from both Britain and Australia.

Not that it would have made a lot of difference to the decision (which was by then a *fait accompli*), now I regret having felt far too junior and unassured of my positions to raise the should-be obvious distinction between a theatrical persona, and those directly inciting violent, misogynistic or homophobic acts in the name of religion. The distinction is not lost on Tyler, the Creator, himself, who after various controversies in the US felt compelled to caveat his 2011 release "Radicals" with: "Hey! Don't do anything I say in this song, it's fucking fiction," before launching into a particularly vitriolic entry to the discography.[2]

1 https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/sep/01/tyler-the-creator-comments-banned-uk-freedom-of-speech

2 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cy8Gk0zRBx8

In the then British government's eyes, and despite his own attempts at qualification, Tyler, the Creator's intentionally shocking, if fictional, lyrics put him in the same company as preachers barred for calling for the deaths of apostates from Islam, or perhaps the leaders of Westboro Baptist Church, refused entry to Britain in 2009.

At the time, the decision whiffed not just of middle-class, public-sector prudishness, but a pretty transparent attempt at even-handedness - given the means to block visiting speakers was most frequently being deployed against hardline Muslim preachers. In this attempt at culturally sensitive fairness though, the inadvertent result was a racially tinged decision. The year prior, there had been no border troubles for Eminem, with his murderous and ex-wife stalking alter ego, able to play sold out shows at Wembley Stadium - and rightly so, of course.

Admittedly, freedom of expression is not entirely straightforward when it comes to non-citizens visiting from overseas, and the Home Office was correct to state at the time that "Coming to the UK is a privilege," rather than an inherent right available to everyone.[3] Still, the decision to ban Tyler, the Creator was wrong on its own logic and merit, and has since been reversed.

With the benefit of hindsight, it was also an early symptom of the shifting grounds surrounding the relationship between rising fears over extremism and freedom of speech. In the years since, as this essay will argue, a complacency and cavalier attitude to freedom of expression from the various sectors involved in what we call countering extremism has emerged and deepened, with concerns over free speech too often dismissed as being advanced with cynical motivations. In Britain, this dynamic has in many ways, also become hostage to political polarisation in the United States, which has seeped into extremism analysis and discourse in Britain, where there is an entirely different picture.

The purview of this sector has also expanded well beyond terroristic radicalisation, to the point where radicalisation, which once described the process individuals underwent to accept the use of violence for political means, is now applied to all sorts of disparate political groupings or online communities which depart from the mainstream or offend the sensibilities of often politically homogenous professionals who staff Britain's various institutions. The same has happened to 'extremism' - an already highly contested term - whereby the sector initially erected to tackle both it and radicalisation has expanded its remit to take in even less clearly defined notions of hate, misinformation, disinformation and conspiracy theories.

As this discussion will attempt to demonstrate, the potential impact upon the bulwark of liberty, the freedom from which all others flow – free speech - has too often been an afterthought, downplayed or dismissed despite very real evidence of overreach. Worse still, the notion of

3 https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2015/sep/01/tyler-the-creator-comments-banned-uk-freedom-of-speech

concern over freedom of speech has itself become associated with the far-right in certain polite circles, or at the very least simply a thin veneer for the speaker's true intention: to spread bigotry and hatred against minorities.

As well as the consequences for free expression, the tendency to attribute every new and undesirable political development on online mis and disinformation, which therefore must be met with attempts to counter or even moderate and censor certain types of information, has betrayed a lack of imagination and superficial analysis which undermines effective responses. It is also, a form of denial which risks exacerbating the very dynamics of distrust, polarisation and, at times, very real extremism, to which it is mistakenly attributed.

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Putting aside the profound shifts in online content moderation prompted by Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter and both the political and aesthetic renaissance of Facebook founder, Mark Zuckerberg,[4] the removal of terrorist content from major social media platforms is now a given, but this was not always the case.

Prior to the summer of 2014, it was possible to participate in AMAs (*Ask Me Anythings*) with jihadists in faraway warzones on platforms like Reddit and Tumblr. It was also possible to seek out or stumble upon "ISIS Twitter": online milieus of jihadist men and women live-tweeting day to day life in ISIS territory, from the mundane to the murderous. Their reach was amplified by online fanboys around the world, who would relay bloody propaganda and rail against the West from their expensive IT setups.[5]

Terrorism scholar, J.M. Berger, even remarked on the surreal quality of his quotidian catch ups with an American fighter in al-Shabaab, and how it simply became part of his routine "to check in with a terrorist…on the other side of the world."

Although the likes of Facebook had already begun experimenting with violent and graphic material takedowns, the platforms had largely eschewed editorial responsibility for their users' content. That was, until the actions of a West Londoner in Syria changed Silicon Valley's relationship with the content it hosted almost overnight, and with it, the contours of online freedoms for the entire world.

On the 19th August 2014, ISIS media accounts began disseminating a highly choreographed video of the murder of American journalist, James Foley. The perpetrator, the yet unidentified Muhammed Emwazi, was a Kuwaiti-born West Londoner who became known to the tabloids

4 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7k1ehaE0bdU&pp=ygUZam9lIHJvZ2FuIG1hcmsgenVja2VyYmVy-Zw%3D%3D

5 https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/12/17/the-unmasking-of-an-islamic-state-twitter-troll-shami-witness-mehdi-mansoor-biswas/

as Jihadi John. Where other violent and bloody content from the Syrian civil war, or from Latin American drug cartels, and even earlier jihadist snuff had failed to prompt decisive action, the Foley video was different: "We have been and are actively suspending accounts as we discover them related to this graphic imagery. Thank you", then *Twitter* CEO Dick Costolo posted on the 20th August. Platforms like *Facebook* and *YouTube* quickly took similar action.

While few would argue against the shocking, gruesome quality of ISIS' stunt, as well as condemn those who sought it out, a raft of commentary recognised the significant implications of the tech companies' shift, with *The New Yorker* asking: "Should Twitter Have Taken Down the James Foley Video?".[6] While in an interview with US public broadcaster, *NPR*, a University of Southern California professor raised concerns over social media companies positioning themselves "as a proactive editor determining what is good or bad for their users".[7]

After Foley, ISIS continued to flood the web with their carefully stage managed *horrorism*:[8] the killings of helpless American, British, Japanese, Jordanian and Syrian hostages followed, with Emwazi often playing a leading role. Social media companies continued to try and stem the tide of terrorist gore, in tandem with mass suspensions of ISIS supporter accounts - from a high watermark of some 46,000-70,000 accounts according to a Brookings census.[9]

During the same period, the group's leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, took to the pulpit of Mosul's main mosque to declare his group's territory to be a *Caliphate*, instructing Muslims worldwide of their obligation to make *hijrah (to migrate)* to the newly declared Islamic State (IS). While mostly male would-be combatants had been travelling to Syria to join jihadist groups since the early days of the civil war in Syria, Baghdadi's proclamation flung open the doors to women, children, the elderly and entire families to come and live under his rule as Caliph. What followed was the most significant spike in recruitment and travel to join IS from around the world, including from Britain and other Western countries.

Many of those Western recruits defied fledgling moderation efforts and continued to taunt their home countries from the IS Caliphate, even going so far as to boast of public executions, Yazidi slaves, and to gloat over the bouts of mass murder orchestrated by their comrades in various European capitals.

While social media companies were getting to grips with policing their platforms, Western governments scrambled first to comprehend and then to control departures of their own citizens to join an openly genocidal project in the Middle-East. In seeking to explain the ostensibly incomprehensible, the term '*radicalisation*' forced itself into the mainstream vernacular.

6 https://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/twitter-taken-james-foley-video
7 https://www.npr.org/2014/08/26/343352103/beheading-video-stirs-debate-on-social-media-censorship
8 https://cup.columbia.edu/book/horrorism/9780231144568/
9 https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/isis_twitter_census_berger_morgan.pdf

People, as this notion had it, were abandoning British democracy and all the freedoms and rights that came with it because they had undergone or been subjected to this process known as "radicalisation". And whether or not it was the original intent, the image of radicalisation which emerged and cemented itself in so much of the commentary was of some kind of individual transformative process from mainstream and acceptable beliefs, in exchange for hateful and terroristic ones.

Often, in this telling radicalisation was something that happened to an individual, rather than something they actively participated in themselves. You could be forgiven for believing it was an almost exclusively online phenomenon, as the "teens radicalised alone in their bedrooms" trope was born, and no media story on ISIS recruitment was complete without motif of the mysterious hooded figure looming over their laptop.

For Western societies the online radicalisation trope, while light on evidence, served multiple, comforting, purposes. For governments, it allowed blame for radicalisation to be deflected onto big, faceless American tech companies who were accused of failing to protect people from terrorist content on their platforms. For society writ large, it allowed more searching questions about the appeal of an openly genocidal form of Salafi-jihadist ideology to a shocking number of their fellow citizens to be uneasily skirted around. There was also an understandable, perhaps subconscious, desire not to implicate Muslims and the Islam practiced by the vast majority in the horror.

Instead, this lens enabled the decision of thousands to abandon Western democracy for sexual slavery and theocracy to be put down to powerful and shadowy external forces. This recruitment, or, radicalisation, was more comparable to a virus or contaminant from outside, rather than it revealing any moral fissure at the heart of our societies. And so, conferences, panels, funding streams and more were convened to tackle the scourge of online radicalisation. Indirectly, an entire field was born, as think tanks, NGOs and academic centres scrambled to claim expertise on online radicalisation, or to position themselves as accredited interlocutors between bewildered governments and the dizzying online realm.

Online radicalisation, though, was largely a mirage. The realities of the phenomenon of jihadism in the West have been laid out in no starker terms than through the work of French scholar, Hugo Micheron. As Micheron points out, even talk of Western jihadism is something of a misnomer, when just four Northwest European states supplied over 80% of jihadists between 2012-2018: France, Germany, Belgium and Britain.[10]

Within those territories, a further half dozen to a dozen population centres were impacted

10 Hugo Micheron, *Le jihadisme français: Quartiers, Syrie, prisons* (French Edition) (p. 15). Editions Gallimard. Kindle Edition.

by departures for the Caliphate, where hundreds of others with similar demographics and socioeconomic profiles were left untouched by the mysterious phenomenon of radicalisation. And within those population centres, it is at times the same postcodes, streets or even the same building complexes which provided the bulk of jihadist recruits. Professor Jytte Klausen, for example, points out that for some of the talk of Birmingham as a jihadi hotspot, in reality most of the city's extremists came from just four wards.[11]

This is not to say that there were not cases where the radicalisation process was short lived and predominantly online, but it does not explain the phenomenon nor the sheer numbers involved – some 5-6,000 successful travellers from Europe, and many more supporters who did not, or could not make the voyage. Put simply, a phenomenon taking place primarily online could not be so intense in its geographical concentration.

Instead, it was physical networks of Salafi-jihadist activists and their relentless proselytising over months and years which proved decisive - networks which often gravitated around veterans of previous jihadi theatres such as Bosnia or Afghanistan, operating in neighbourhoods ideologically softened over decades by various other shades of Islamist political activism.

Many of those who would join ISIS had already been immersed in Islamist or Salafist activist milieus long before their decision to travel or take up arms against their home country. As Hakim el-Karoui and Benjamin Hodaye's extensive research points out, their moral, spiritual break with society often took place long before their travel to the Caliphate: We should therefore not think in terms of 'radicalisation' or 'brainwashing,' but of commitment, recruitment and activism".[12] And, as Professor Klausen's vast database of Western jihadists shows, Salafi-jihadist activist networks like al-Muhajiroun and the continental copycat 'Sharia4' organisations "functioned as transmission belts" to jihad in Iraq and Syria.[13]

In some cases, as looks likely with Salman Abedi and his brother, there was no event or period in their lives which might correspond to something we understand as the radicalisation process. Instead, the Manchester Arena bomber was simply born into a competing moral universe, thanks to extensive jihadist connections in the family.[14]

At the time, the over emphasis placed on online dynamics may have been frustrating and misled, but the spectre of online radicalisation has not dissipated with the fall of Islamic State's "Caliphate" and their worldwide recruitment efforts. Instead, the threat of online radicalisation

11 Jytte Klausen, *Western Jihadism: A Thirty Year History* (p.421). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.
12 https://www.institutmontaigne.org/publications/les-militants-du-djihad
13 Jytte Klausen, *Western Jihadism: A Thirty Year History* (p. 419). OUP Oxford. Kindle Edition.
14 https://www.manchestereveningnews.co.uk/news/greater-manchester-news/salman-abedi-manchester-arena-bomber-13601393

and the impressive infrastructure somewhat erroneously put in place to counter it has been applied to ever more contexts, whether terroristic or otherwise.

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Happening almost concurrently to the ISIS recruitment and subsequent terror wave – and inextricably linked to it – another development kicked concerns over certain types of online information into overdrive: the 2016 votes for Brexit, and later Trump.

Like the ISIS recruitment exodus, this populist uprising at the ballot box had been decades in the making, and – like the ISIS recruitment exodus – for many people the internet became the preferred explanatory mechanism. This time, it was not online radicalisation to blame, but online 'mis' and 'disinformation', sometimes purveyed by domestic actors, at other times by meddling foreign regimes. Occasionally, this narrative was entwined with one about resurgent 1930s style fascism, inviting concerns over far-right, or even "mass" radicalisation deemed to have taken place.[15]

Before long, the cumulative cultural weight of this perspective meant that the political preferences of millions of voters were being pulled into the purview of the countering radicalisation and extremism infrastructure which had emerged and grown at first in response to homegrown jihadist recruitment. Instead of maintaining the clear delineations between those radicalising towards terrorist violence and a variety of other political phenomena, the countering extremism sector too often lent into and fuelled this blurring of the lines.

In Britain, at first this meant that artificial attempts were made to produce parity between a group like the English Defence League (EDL) and ISIS, but the 2023 Independent Review made clear how far this trend had accelerated in just a few years. The review detailed how mainstream commentators on the right, and even some Members of Parliament, could be found in training materials and analysis on extremism and counter-terrorism, produced either directly by government departments, or by one of the many extremism NGOs and think tanks in their orbit.[16]

There may well have been a case for helping policymakers and practitioners understand the complexities and nuances of right-wing ideologies as a whole: where they overlap with and where they diverge from possibly extremist and violent extremist worldviews – yet this does not appear to be how the information was presented and is not how I have seen it presented in the meetings I have attended firsthand. Instead, various right-wing figures were included to make the case that they were some kind of gateway or conveyor belt to the extreme right, and

15 https://www.politico.com/news/magazine/2021/02/11/mass-radicalization-trump-insurrection-468746

16 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/63e26968d3bf7f17385a3421/Independent_Review_of_Prevent.pdf p.24

possibly even terrorism.[17] As the Prevent review made clear: "little care was made to clarify that these mainstream conservatives should not actually be considered part of the far right themselves," with the result to confuse practitioners and the application of policy.[18]

This kind of conceptual confusion has the potential to impact freedom of speech in several ways. In the first instance, I have seen myself how it can create an environment within Britain's counter-terrorism apparatus where professionals and practitioners are deterred from expressing certain views openly, for fear of their association with the right and potentially even the far-right. This has of course had the most resounding impact on discussion of Islamism. It is not uncommon for isolated practitioners, police officers and civil servants to reach out to public facing researchers, at times out of simple frustration, but in more serious cases out of desperation and even ill treatment by colleagues due to their work – often chosen not by them but tasked by superiors - on what is by far the most pronounced extremist threat to Britain. I can confirm this because I have received these pleas for help myself.

In the broader research environment, King's College academic Dr. Daniel Allington's paper for the Commission for Countering Extremism highlighted how "anxiety that politicisation might be distorting the field" was prevalent among interviewed researchers and academics.[19] Several expressed "a degree of scepticism about the validity of exposé-type research on the far right carried out by activist researchers."[20] In the research, one scholar of the far-right who identifies as firmly on the left lamented a "damaging orthodoxy" that conservatives were "not welcome" in the study of the far-right, and that holding progressive views was a condition of entry into the sub-field.[21]

That such views were expressed several times in private and anonymised interviews but rarely advanced publicly within the field reveals nearly as much as the content of the testimonies themselves. Scientists and social scientists have been sounding the alarm for several years over the potential harm inflicted by lack of ideological diversity within a given research field: how it can undermine the validity of research findings, lead to untested assumptions and asymmetrical scrutiny on politically favoured or disfavoured conclusions.[22]

That potential harm is perhaps disproportionately pronounced in a field which deals explicitly with political violence, and one which has the potential to influence government and social

17 Ibid
18 Ibid
19 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657882e20467eb000d55f636/Allington_2023_Extremism_Research_Environment.pdf p.30
20 Ibid p.30
21 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/657882e20467eb000d55f636/Allington_2023_Extremism_Research_Environment.pdf p.31
22 https://jsis.washington.edu/global/wp-content/uploads/sites/17/2019/07/political_diversity_will_improve_social_psychological_science_1.pdf

media firms' policy on who or what should be considered extremist or terrorist – and as a result, who is afforded an online presence and a voice.

On the outside, if a large share of voters feel that the key institutions dedicated to protecting them – such as those tasked with countering terrorism - do not represent their views or values and actively seek to suppress them, it is a recipe for producing and exacerbating growing distrust in those very same institutions. In recent years, certain institutions and NGOs involved in counter-terrorism or the analysis of extremism not just in Britain, in responding to short-term cultural pressures and financial incentives, have dangerously gambled with both the public good will and the trust of opposition political parties upon which they will rely in the longer term.

It is here that the politicisation of the subject and the erroneous focus on online information as catch all explainers for extremism and radicalisation intersect. Organisations which once claimed expertise on ISIS radicalisation and propaganda were pulled into – or even voluntarily stepped into – larger societal anxieties, even moral panics, over a range of political dynamics, from mis and disinformation, to rising populism at the ballot box, and the podcast listening habits of young men and boys.

It has seen a sector established largely in response to ISIS domestic radicalisation pulled into – and sometimes willingly volunteering to step into - larger societal debates over all sorts of political dynamics, from vaguely defined missions against hate or mis and disinformation, to rising populism and the podcast listening habits of young men and boys. This expansion of the field's purview has at times been used to help legitimise a variety of sanctions, such as demonetising or deplatforming, for legal and legitimate speech on both sides of the Atlantic.[23]

Again, not only was the arrangement of – often state funded extremism NGOs – producing sometimes politicised analysis and research to tech firms to influence moderation decisions concerning in its own right, it served to spark a significant backlash[24] which has overhauled online policies and likely left legitimate attempts to combat terrorist content or foreign state disinformation, for the time being at least, dead in the water.

In other words, in a predictable act of self-sabotage, the field dangerously overreached, while legitimate experts on extremism did not reign in those more overtly political and censorious initiatives, or inadvertently served to legitimise the broadening of the extremism net. What's more, those raising concerns from within the sector or field were often dismissed, or perhaps worse, it was taken as evidence of the suspect political affiliations of the concerned. For why else might someone wish to defend freedom of speech?

23 https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/05/08/disinformation-political-censorship-unherd-gdi/
24 http://judiciary.house.gov/committee-activity/hearings/censorship-industrial-complex

The Murder of David Amess

In October 2021, long-serving MP for Southend West, Sir David Amess, was holding a constituency surgery inside a church hall in Leigh-on-Sea, Essex. It was something he had always done, despite writing in 2020 of his concerns that the "great British tradition" of people meeting elected politicians was under threat due to security concerns, particularly following the murder of Jo Cox MP, in 2016, by a far-right assassin.[25]

After chatting with constituents on the steps, Amess headed inside the church, where he was due to meet with a young man who had booked an appointment under the auspices of discussing foreign affairs. Shortly after midday, Sir David Amess was stabbed 21 times by Ali Harbi Ali, in a "vicious and frenzied attack". The 25-year-old assassin attributed his attack to Islamic State.

Despite Harbi Ali claiming and perceiving himself to be part of the global jihadist movement, a movement which has killed several hundred Britons at home and overseas since (and including) 9/11, the media and political response which followed focused almost exclusively on the abuse which MPs receive on social media. The government was urged to "toughen up" the Online Safety Bill (now the Online Safety Act 2023) to address the "toxic environment" faced by MPs online, while others demanded an end to online anonymity.[26]

Needless to say, Ali Harbi Ali was not spurred into action by abuse on social media. The fallout from David Amess' murder though, is symptomatic of a political climate which seems only capable of interpreting events through the lens of what happens online and on social media, and to which the only fitting response, therefore, must be greater control or countering of certain forms of information in this environment.

This dynamic was again on display in response to the unrest and rioting which followed the Southport attack, perpetrated by Axel Rudakubana, in which three young girls were murdered in a Taylor Swift themed dance class. It was held that the rioting spread because of fast travelling disinformation about the identity of the attacker, particularly false rumours which posited that the atrocity had been perpetrated by a Muslim migrant.

Research by *The Financial Times*, however, mapped how rioting had overwhelmingly taken place in locales where migrants were being housed in hotels, likely flashpoints of local resentments and targets of far-right ire well before Southport.[27] Like the issue of ISIS radicalisation, such geographical concentration would be unlikely if rapid spreading online

25 https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/david-amess-mp-stabbed-jo-cox-b1939244.html
26 https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/oct/18/pm-urged-to-enact-davids-law-against-social-media-abuse-after-amesss-death
27 https://www.ft.com/content/c8317b53-ce27-42fc-bd67-59f9ac9267c9

mis and disinformation were the decisive factor in the violent and ugly scenes which followed. Similarly, research has demonstrated how rumour and falsehoods more often follow, rather than precedes riots, and that online falsehoods do not tend to persuade people to participate in unrest and violence.[28] Of course, people coordinated and communicated using social media around the rioting, but so did every person in the country watching the events unfold.

In fact, the atrocity in Southport must be understood in context and not in isolation. Beyond the much longer-term, the atrocity and subsequent rioting were immediately preceded by a series of flashpoint events which fuelled not just fury on the far-right, but a wider sense of disillusionment, often at the state and authorities' response – such as small scale unrest in Harehills[29] and a brawl with police in Manchester Airport.[30] Or, even slightly further back to the previous year, with the alleged 'scuffing' of a Quran by a teenage boy in Wakefield, and the subsequent attempts to diffuse tensions.[31] It is likely true that rumour and falsehood swirled online around each of these cases, but it is an error to disproportionately focus on this small piece of the picture when the essential facts of the events themselves generate sufficient anger without the help of half-truths and distortion. In fact, there are likely so many rumours and distortions that only very small numbers are ever exposed to each version.

Not long after Southport, when the issue of grooming gangs was once again thrust into the mainstream, it was again certain types of information spread online held as responsible. This thinking was reflected even in analysis produced by government, which posited that the notion of "two tier policing" in Britain was a "right-wing extremist narrative", and that right-wing extremists were exploiting "alleged [author emphasis] group based sexual abuse" to further certain narratives.[32]

This framing risks dangerously obscuring the deeper roots which may have contributed to the unrest. While terms like "two tier" entered the mainstream around Southport, it is more likely a configuration which rather than being about the policing response to the riots gives a name to a much deeper sense of unfairness and unevenness in the managing of community relations. As far back as 2005, voters in Keighley, West Yorkshire, told journalist, David Aaronovitch, of their perception of authorities' uneven treatment of different communities dependent on ethnicity.[33] This is not to judge the sentiment to be correct or otherwise, but to operate from the basis that it is a recently concocted narrative spread on social media is clearly unsatisfactory analysis which can lead to bad solutions.

28 https://theconversation.com/southport-riots-why-social-medias-role-in-unrest-is-overblown-235979?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=bylinetwitterbutton
29 https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cqjdqjdkj95o
30 https://edition.cnn.com/2024/07/25/uk/british-police-beating-uk-airport-intl-hnk/index.html
31 https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2023/03/uk-britain-blasphemy-laws-police-quran/673356/
32 https://policyexchange.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/Extremely-Confused-The-Governments-new-counter-extremism-review-revealed.pdf
33 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2005/apr/27/uk.election2005

Similarly, it was suggested in other quarters that the rhetoric surrounding grooming gangs could provoke violence, such as race riots or even a race war,[34] with the 2019 far-right terror attack on a mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand, even invoked.[35] But what does or does not constitute responsible rhetoric is clearly up for debate. For example, former SO15 Counter-Terrorism lead, Neil Basu, for example, suggested that accusations of a "cover up" could spark mass violence, but polling from the time shows that large numbers of Britons across all groups believe that to varying degrees, there was some kind of cover up.[36]

To most people, this likely doesn't involve belief in some grand conspiracy against their societal group, but the more pedestrian variety of looking the other way that has allowed all sorts of monstrous criminals and their abuses to continue unimpeded. In any case, recent history would suggest that the reverse is in fact true: that it is the deterring and quashing of open conversation and debate on sensitive topics which swings the door open for extremists and unrest.

Similarly, the polling showed that while a plurality agreed with various sentiments often framed as far-right, only a small minority held a favourable view of Tommy Robinson. Some things which far-right actors say and believe will be opinions similarly held by large numbers of people. This does not mean they arrived at these conclusions because of far-right actors, that they are therefore far-right, or necessarily mean that the far-right is seeping into the mainstream, as is frequently suggested. It also does not mean the far-right activists themselves have merely formulated, or "weaponised" an artificial narrative.

It is here that the mis/disinformation and conspiracy theories framing for each new concerning or confusing development not only undermines freedom of expression, but it is also a recipe for exacerbating the very dynamics it is meant to resolve: the rumbling distrust between groups and popular discontent, particularly aimed at once trusted institutions. Voters and taxpayers do not want their concerns dismissed as merely a "narrative", with the accompanying implication that they have been duped or manipulated into their anger. In conferences and roundtables of experts, practitioners and civil servants I have attended, it can seem like an afterthought that people on the outside of this professional class can take a look at the world around them and arrive at vastly differing conclusions, without the help of online falsehoods or rabble rousers.

34 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/05/curb-extremism-now-or-face-new-terrorist-threats-labour-warned

35 https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2025/jan/10/wes-streeting-new-zealand-mosque-massacre-warning-grooming-gang-rhetoric

36 https://jlpartners.co.uk/polling-results Grooming Gangs Scandal Polling Date: January 15th 2025

Finally, the delegitimising of widely held opinions simply because they may be held by extremist and unsavoury actors has done much damage already and deterred reasonable voices. Groups like the EDL were able to gain momentum precisely because of the perception that polite society and authorities were unwilling to adequately tackle, much less speak openly about, jihadist terrorism. On the continent, the same reticence from the liberal mainstream helped open the door for the populist outsider parties now securing electoral shock after electoral shock.

Conclusion

It has become something of a cliché in certain corners of the internet to invoke Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci's slightly misrepresented "time of monsters" to describe the current political "interregnum": whereby the previous political order is dying, "and the new cannot be born", giving rise to a "great variety of morbid symptoms".[37]

While whether the final nail has been hammered into the coffin of the old world is up for debate and remains to be seen, it is certainly true that the post-Cold War settlement in Western countries, and indeed the entire liberal global order is under unprecedented strain and challenge. The internet and social media have undoubtedly played a role, while hostile or conniving foreign states have of course stoked the flames.

As well as the well-documented rise of populist outsider parties across the West, a mood of discontent and frustration hangs in the air, punctuated by occasional outbursts of unrest, increasingly along ethnic sectarian lines. The depths of the internet have churned up new ideologies barely recognisable by the old dogmas of right and left, giving rise to concerns over "mixed, unstable and unclear" or "salad bar" ideologies. Even the power jihadists recently held over Western societies seems submerged by this reality, and their terror given less salience by the increasing prominence of Islamist politics and ethnic sectarianism.

This uncertainty has given rise to confusion and anxiety, especially on the part of those having their authority challenged: the formerly dominant political parties, the traditional media and the foundational institutions. Against this backdrop of unease and uncertainty, these institutions have reached for the explanations of misinformation and conspiracy theories, and increasingly turned therefore to the control of information as the solution. So far, much of both the analysis and enforcement of these solutions has been outsourced to non-government bodies and private businesses, so alarm bells vigilant only to state threats to liberty have remained dormant. In the process, the waters between genuine efforts to counter genuine terrorist

37 https://isreview.org/issue/108/morbid-symptoms/index.html

radicalisation or foreign state disinformation has been dangerously muddied with thought or speech simply deemed offensive or objectionable.

What could be termed online misinformation has probably accelerated the scepticism towards expertise and authority, but the roles key institutions have played in creating the conditions for the trust vacuum which misinformation and conspiracy have filled cannot be ignored and is not well understood by those inside them. As Greg Lukianoff and Angel Eduardo write, no amount of fact-checking or misinformation suppression from those same institutions will be effective with trust so badly decayed.[38]

Here, I intend to discard the free speech arguments and appeal directly to those tempted by such explanations and their corollary solutions, which are doomed to fail. No one would advocate for a return of the days of "ISIS Twitter" detailed early in this discussion, but now the drastic overreach in moderation and information control in the guise of combating misinformation and extremism has led to the major social media firms all but ditching these efforts altogether, with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg explicitly citing political bias in his decision,[39] and with serious funding and financial consequences for the academic centres and NGOs previously involved.

Of course, no one thinks what they are doing really counts as censorship, and as human beings we will find ideological justifications and euphemisms for why what we're advocating for isn't at all like that, or why the other person's speech doesn't really count as free speech, and is instead hate or misinformation which can therefore be removed or curtailed.

At the same time, in a time of instability and new ideologies, we do need real expertise on the movements and worldviews shaping and impacting our societies in various ways. This expertise, however, must fiercely guard the distinction between violent extremism, terrorist radicalisation and other, disparate phenomena. It must not respond so willingly to short term political or financial incentives and ephemeral cultural pressures, including the occasional moral panics which punctuate our discourse. It must also welcome political diversity within its research and practitioner fields in order to glean the most complete understanding of the world around us. And if there are to be efforts to combat terrorist or extremist content and disinformation, they should be considered with the utmost delicacy, with concerns over potential overreach not dismissed as having malign motivations.

The field must also regain its imagination. Yes, social media is now how we all communicate, it is how events in the world around us are reported and broadcast, but the information which spreads on it is not responsible for each new unsavoury development we see play out on the streets or at the ballot box.

38 https://eternallyradicalidea.com/p/the-misinformation-crisis-isnt-about
39 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cly74mpy8klo

Of course, people seek out likeminded communities online and at times those communities may hold, express or even be defined by their unsavoury views. This does not automatically justify their suppression, even if dressed up in the language of moderation and benevolence. Nor does this instinctive moral alarm display adequate curiosity about the potentially real or legitimate reasons people seek out these communities or ideas to begin with. Vague or ill-defined calls for clampdowns and crackdowns may temporarily put the lid on all sorts of simmering pans, but they will not turn off the hob.

Liam Duffy is a researcher on jihadism terrorism and Islamist extremism.