Out of Their Heads and Into Their Conversation: Countering Extremist Ideology

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ideology is often ignored or deemed irrelevant to strategic communication because it is an old, possibly leftist, idea that is associated with academic social critique. It is treated as something that lives in the heads of individuals, driving them to radical action. From this point of view the concept is not really practical because by the time someone has adopted an ideology, it is too late.

We advocate a different view of ideology, as a system of ideas about how things are or ought to be that circulates in social discourse. This is a more practical view because it treats ideology not as an idea stuck in someone's head, but as something that is subject to influence through strategic communication. To be effective in these efforts we must understand culture and narrative, and have a clear grasp of what ideology does.

Ideology has four functions. We illustrate these with detailed examples. *Naturalizing* means turning socially constructed, politically-motivated, and fluid ideas into taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and meanings. Doing so makes them seem fixed, objective, and "naturally occurring." *Obscuring* is denying or hiding contradictions in ongoing systems of meaning, making them seem to be seamless, coherent, and unified worldviews. *Universalizing* means presenting the interests or concerns of those in power as the interests of all group members. And *structuring* involves creating rules and resources in a social system that preserve an ideology.

Adopting this point of view we can see that the way to resist ideology is to interfere with its functions. To undermine naturalizing we can focus on challenging assumptions, beliefs, and meanings behind an ideology. To fight obscuring we can target contradictions, pushing them into the open. To target universalizing we can engage subgroups and their leaders, politicizing the differences in interests that ideology tries to smooth over. And to resist structuring we can place stress on the structures and/or promote alternatives that might replace, undermine, or circumvent them. We provide several examples of each of these ideology countermeasures.

Of course these same methods are used by extremists against us. This makes it imperative that we avoid at all costs giving adversaries ammunition with which to challenge our assumptions, target our contradictions politicize our groups, and breach our structures.

A DIFFERENT CONCEPTION OF IDEOLOGY

Ideology is often ignored or deemed irrelevant to strategic communication. In part this is because it is an old idea. Some also associate it with leftist discourse that seems stuck in a rickety drydock of Marxist thought, bordered by a deep and impenetrable quagmire of sociological critique.[1] Academic uses of the term often lead to over-simplification (e.g., "it's all about power") or over-complication of power relations on the ground. Ideological critique may be an edifying pastime for academics, but it seems a little too "precious" for strategic communication: It tells us nothing about how ideologies get into people's heads to begin with—how they circulate, develop, and spread—or how those processes might be interrupted.

What exactly *is* ideology? That is a crucial question for the purposes of countering ideological support for terrorism (CIST), because our conception of what ideology is frames our thinking about how it can be countered. For some people, ideology has a negative connotation. Ideology is an evil force, as in Nazi or communist or terrorist ideology.

While ideology can be sinister, it can also be benevolent. For example the United States has a democratic ideology that values political participation, representation, and control of government by the people. So at base, ideology is not necessarily good or bad. It is best thought of as a taken-for-granted *system of ideas* about how society should work.

What our understanding of ideology lacks is an awareness of local cultural and communication contexts.

Many theorists treat ideology as an internalized guide for living that makes people think and act in a particular way. Stigler, for example, calls ideology "an image of society and a political program."[2] These definitions tend to treat ideology as a *fait accomplis*, something that is somehow implanted, fully formed, into the heads of individuals. Once implanted in the brain, ideology—without interruption—drives actions. What this narrow and rigid "mentalist" conception of ideology lacks is what years of ethnographic fieldwork in contested cultures has consistently shown to be true. Namely, lived experience is always understood and enacted by community members through ideas that adapt and mutate based on shared meanings in local contexts.[3]

Those shared meanings are shaped by historical and cultural narratives, present perceived political and religious circumstances, and economic, social, and familial realities. They are enabled by everyday exchanges and interpretations of opinions, rumors, and accounts. They are influenced by direct application of persuasion and propaganda by information leaders. In other words, *what is lacking in our understanding of ideology is an awareness of the local, cultural and communication contexts that allow for, even encourage, the viral spread of these ideas*.

Until we understand that, we can know nothing about how ideologies get into people's heads to begin with—how they circulate,

develop, and spread—or how those processes might be interrupted. In this paper, we outline an alternative approach to ideology as a meaning-based and meaning-making communication activity. In this paper our goal is to explain how a meaning-based approach to ideology can enhance and sharpen our strategic communication practice. We begin by explaining this different conception of ideology, then turn to a discussion of its implications for ideology countermeasures.

FOUR FUNCTIONS OF IDEOLOGY

From a communication perspective, ideology refers to basic, often unexamined, systems of ideas about how things are or ought to be, which circulate in public discourse. Since ideology tells its adherents what exists, what is good, what is bad, and what is possible, it prevents alternatives to these judgments from developing.[4] Interfering with these functions is a key to ideological countermeasures.

Ideology can be explicitly articulated. For example it can appear in speeches, sermons, propaganda, and so on. But it usually operates implicitly, woven into the fabric of everyday life, particularly in narratives and snippets (fragments) of narratives that are shared and reproduced in everyday conversation. Ideology comes to be understood as simply "the way things are" because it is built into the routine interactions and narratives in families, communities, workplaces, and media.

Ideology usually operates implicitly through narratives that are reproduced in everyday conversation.

Ideology is, fundamentally, what makes power and control possible. From a communication point of view, ideology accomplishes its power and control through four political functions: Naturalizing, obscuring, universalizing, and structuring.[5] In the pages that follow, we give examples of these functions based on U. S. ideological foundations as well as those of violent extremists. Our purpose in using the U.S. examples is *not* to suggest that U.S. ideology is similar to extremist ideology. Rather it is to (a) illustrate the four functions with examples from our readers' own culture, (b) demonstrate that ideology is not just something that the Bad Guys have but something universal and familiar, and (c) show that these ideas apply to benevolent as well as malicious ideas. After detailing the four functions, we explain how viewing ideologies in this way opens up possibilities for countering or interfering with them.

Naturalizing

The first communicative function of ideology is to turn socially constructed, politically-motivated, and fluid ideas into taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and meanings. They are made to seem fixed, objective, and "naturally occurring." For example, in U.S. culture, we are familiar with the symbolism of the American flag, the lyrics of the National Anthem, statements that our country is the strongest and best in

the world because of our freedoms and adherence to democracy, and so on. Individually, these images, words, phrases, and sounds are *fragments* of ideology, but in everyday practice they become woven together in a coherent ideological narrative—The American Story. The narrative underscores values we routinely take for granted, so our American ideology becomes "naturalized" and reinforces our democratic political agenda, which is always a work-in-process.

In the Islamist extremist orbit, a dominant naturalizing narrative is outlined in Said Qutb's book, *Milestones*.[6] In it, he recalls the *Jahiliyya,* a period of ignorance, polytheism, and barbarism that preceded the revelations to Muhammad. The Prophet rectified these conditions, according to Qutb. But since Muhammad's death there has been a steady erosion of Muslim culture, partly through the efforts of the enemies of Islam. This has brought a gradual return to conditions similar to those that existed before the revelations, according to Qutb—in other words, a *new* Jahiliyya. In order to rectify the situation, it is necessary to go back to the way things were before. The new Jahiliyya thus becomes a sort of "back to the future" narrative that functions ideologically.

Qutb's narrative naturalizes several assumptions that are key to extremist ideology. These include the idea that the worldwide Muslim community, the *Ummah*, is in a state of continuing decline, that this is a result of forces working against it, that to be in this state of decline is against the wishes of God, and that it is the Muslims' duty to fix the situation just as the Prophet did. If you accept Qutb's narrative and the assumptions that flow from it, then it is natural to conclude that you must take action against the enemies of Islam and support others who are doing so. It is also natural to think that because the crisis is extreme, extreme methods are justified in dealing with it.

Community members need not tell Qutb's whole story in order to reproduce and uphold the ideology. They only have to invoke the term "new Jahiliyya" or bemoan the decline of the Ummah to bring its ideological force to bear in everyday conversations.

Obscuring

A second function of ideology is to obscure or deny contradictions in ongoing systems of meaning. Ideologies work effectively when they are perceived as seamless, coherent, unified worldviews. The problem is that meanings are by their nature ambiguous and contradictory[7] *because* they are based on words and other symbols that require interpretation. Ideology solves this problem by smoothing over tensions, contradictions and paradoxes that are inevitable in systems of meaning.

For instance, in American culture, we live in a democracy where one of our highest principles is "one person, one vote." So why do we

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routinely give up this democratic ideal at work, letting a few "bosses" make unilateral decisions about what is best for the rest of us? Our capitalist ideology obscures this glaring contradiction by providing reasons to deny or ignore it. It says that work is different from civic life, a special situation where "one person, one vote" does not apply. Or it invokes "efficiency" arguments by suggesting that "one person, one vote" at work would result in system inefficiencies that would interfere in the doing of business and the making of profit.[8]

Islamist ideology also works to obscure contradictions. A prime example of this is terrorist operations that kill innocent people, especially Muslims and Muslim children. One of the Hadiths quotes Muhammad as saying: "Whoever killed a person having a treaty with the Muslims, shall not smell the smell of Paradise though its smell is perceived from a distance of forty years."[9] And the Qur'an says:

> They are lost indeed who kill their children foolishly without knowledge, and forbid what Allah has given them forging a lie against Allah; they have indeed gone astray, and they are not followers of the right course. (6:140)

Extremist ideology makes jihad into a special situation where rules against killing Muslims don't apply.

Terrorist operations clearly kill other Muslims and their children, and this creates a contradiction that extremist ideology must somehow smooth over. One tactic is to argue that there is a legitimate war between the House of Islam (*Dar al-Islam*) and the House of War (*Dar al-Harb*, i.e. countries ruled by non-Islamic governments), and that it is the duty of Muslims to prosecute this war.[10] Because the realities of war mean innocents might be unavoidably killed, such killing is acceptable. As the influential cleric Sheikh Yousef Al-Qaradawi explains,[11]

> the Muslim clerics, or most of them, have agreed that it is permissible to kill Muslims if the army that attacks the Muslims hides behind them, that is, uses them as barricades or human shields, and sets them at the front so that the fire, arrows, or spears of the Muslims will harm them first. The clerics have permitted the defenders to kill these innocent Muslims, who were forced to stand at the head of the army of their enemies… Otherwise the invading army will enter and annihilate their offspring and their harvests. There was no choice but to sacrifice some [of the Muslims] in order to defend the entire [Muslim] community… Therefore, if it is permitted to kill innocent Muslims who are under coercion in order to protect the greater Muslim community, it is all the more so permissible to kill non-Muslims in order to liberate the land of the Muslims from its occupiers and oppressors.

In this case, ideology functions to deny the fundamental contradictions. Just as the workplace is a context for Americans where the rules of democracy don't apply, jihad is a special situation for Muslims where the rules against killing innocents don't apply. The extremists make many other arguments as well[12] because, as we argue below, this is a crucial contradiction for them to obscure.

Universalizing

Whereas the obscuring function works to gloss over ideological contradictions, universalizing works to present the interests or concerns of those in power as the interests of all group members. Ideologies are most effective when they enable elites to maintain their power without appearing to enforce that power with an "iron fist."

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Until fairly recently, large salaries for CEOs in the United States have been framed, ideologically, as good, right and natural—a reflection of what the market will bear. The hope, of course, for Americans who do not earn such salaries is that we might one day reach these lofty heights ourselves. The cultural narrative of the American Dream reinforces the idea that CEO salaries, at even 350 times the rate of average employees, are good for all of us, because they're good for business.[13] A careful unpacking of the situation reveals that existing wage structures are good for CEOs and their interests, but it's questionable how much they help the "universal" average employee. Yet ideology pushes the interests of the powerful CEOs into the background, away from scrutiny. It even withstood significant public outrage about pay practices that arose during the 2008-2009 economic meltdown.

Stigler notes that terrorists present the group's desires in the broadest, most universalizing possible fashion. Such universal positioning "may aid the leaders' efforts to inspire their current followers, gathering recruits, and attracting sources of funding."[14] One communication strategy of terrorist leaders is the offering of martyrdom in exchange for an act of violence and self-destruction. Jessica Stern describes the process this way: "After a prospective *shaheed* (martyr) is recruited, he will be referred to as a 'living martyr.' In the last days before the operation, he writes letters to family and friends, explaining his decision and his expectation of paradise."[15]

This process frames martyrdom as something that benefits the community and the individual martyr, not the leaders of violent groups (who, by the way, don't tend to offer themselves up as martyrs). It is a communication activity that involves family, friends, and community members in a terrorist activity. Terrorist leaders use it to position martyrdom as representing the universal (religious) interests of *all* members of the community, including the would-be suicide bomber.

Structuring

Taken together, the three previous functions work in concert to enable a fourth function. Structuring involves creating rules and resources in an organization (or broader system) that preserve the ideology. Eisenberg, Goodall and Trethewey describe this process as follows:

> Through ideological communication "power and control are not explicitly exercised as much as embedded in routine thoughts, actions, and [everyday] processes. Ideological control is subtle and indirect, but highly effective. . . . [It] works most effectively when the world view articulated by the ruling elite is actively taken up and pursued by subordinate groups.[16]

Like Mark Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and his band of willing fence painters, ideological control benefits from the ability to create rules of the game that induce others (who may not be as well served by those rules) to play along.

The balance of powers in the U.S. Constitution is a good example of a structure that preserves the ideology of representative democracy. It is by design a conservative mechanism, meaning that if even two branches of government want to implement some course of action, the change can be prevented by the third. To make permanent changes to the status quo, it is necessary to have the active or at least passive consent of all three branches. As a result, the principles of representative democracy as they are written in current law automatically resist change. The default situation is for them to go on being reproduced as exactly they are.

The structuring function of ideology explains why Islamist groups denounce democracy and work hard to establish Shari'a law.

The structuring function of ideology also explains why extremist groups like al-Qaeda and the Taliban are so strident in denouncing democracy and so intent on establishing Shari'a law. They expend much rhetorical effort to cast democracy as a "religion" that amounts to polytheism. Abu Muhammad al Maqdisi,[17] in a treatise entitled *Democracy: A Religion!,* goes on at length to explain why democracy means that men assume the duties of God because they presume to legislate rules. He exhorts, "So this is the freedom of democracy: to be free from Allah's religion and His legislation and exceeding His limits." Indonesian extremist Abu Bakr Basyir makes similar arguments:

> We want an Islamic state where Islamic law is not just in the books but enforced, and enforced with determination. There is no space and no room for democratic consultation. The shari'a is set and fixed, so why do we need to discuss it anymore? Just implement it![18]

These positions come not just from extremist ideologues like al Maqdisi and Basyir. More mainstream Salafis who have recently come to power in Kuwait have set about placing restrictions on women that they interpret as being consistent with Shari'a law.[19] This is probably the first step in establishing overall rule by Shari'a, which the alliance responsible promised to do during its campaign.[20] In general, the push to establish Shari'a law and eliminate and prohibit democracy creates a structure that reproduces extremist ideology in everyday life in these communities. When community members actively uphold or fail to resist such laws, the ideology of extremists is, however unintentionally, preserved.

RECOMMENDATIONS: IDEOLOGY COUNTERMEASURES

Fortunately the four communicative functions of ideology described above also offer potential ways to contest the ideologies of extremist groups. Doing this requires a shift in attitude about ideology, away from the fixed-in-the-head view that is common now. We explain this further before addressing ways of intervening in the four functions, and raising a caution about or own ideology.

If we think of it as a communication process, ideology is an ongoing and changeable thing, not a fixed and stable "belief system." In other words, ideologies do not exist separate from the interactions that sustain them. They are made and remade in everyday conversations, in the stories and images of media, and in the practices of organizations and institutions. If we continue to treat ideology as something that is already "implanted" in individuals' or groups' heads, then removing that ideology is nearly impossible. It would require an "ideology transplant"—replacing one ideology with a new one.

The fulcrums for change, even in ideological systems that appear rigid and unyielding, are conversations and stories.

If we think of ideology as a process that requires ongoing participation, then a less invasive approach to change is possible. Instead of having to do ideology transplants, we can take a preventive maintenance approach where ideology is changed bit by bit in interactions of everyday life. The fulcrums for change, even in ideological systems that appear rigid and unyielding, are conversations and stories. Conversations and narratives become a form of "transformational feedback" that can change senders, receivers, and entire ideological meaning systems.[21]

Local conversations can serve as pattern-interrupts that may encourage members of a system to begin reorganizing and reinterpreting their existing worldviews.[22] If we understand that ideology is an ongoing process that can be countered in everyday exchanges, the four functions described above can be used to direct us toward effective entry points for influencing those exchanges.

Challenge Assumptions, Beliefs, and Meanings

The first function of ideology described above is naturalizing. Its objective is to turn certain ideas into taken-for-granted assumptions, beliefs, and meanings. If ideology seeks to make ideas seem fixed, objective, and "naturally occurring," then the appropriate countermeasure is to emphasize their variable, complicated, and subjective nature.

Emphasize the variable, complicated, and subjective nature of ideas like jihad.

Efforts to challenge and complicate the meanings of "jihad" might, for example, amplify the voices of "centrist" Muslim scholars, like Shaykh Yusuf al-Qaradawi. In his latest book, *Fiqh al-Jihad,* Qaradawi argues for a "jihad of the new age." According to Halverson, jihad of the new age is "the notion that jihad should move away from violence 'to the realm of

ideas, media, and communication,' such as the internet, video, and satellite television."[23]

There is also a prominent Muslim leader from history who viewed jihad as a peaceful enterprise. Abdul Ghaffar Khan was an ethnic Pashtun, born in 1890 near the city of Peshawar before the modern nation-states of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India, existed.[24] Much like today, Pashtun society was tribal, governed by an ancient honor code that emphasized hospitality, honor, and revenge. Around 1910, Abdul Ghaffar Khan began to travel from village to village, building schools, speaking out against tribal violence, and encouraging greater rights for women. Following the example of Mohandas Gandhi, he called for non-violent protest against British rule on the Northwestern Frontier. Khan founded the *Khudai Khidmatgars* (Servants of God), a disciplined "army" of nonviolent soldiers. At its peak, the Servants of God included 100,000 Muslims, each of whom took the following oath:

> I am a Servant of God, and as God needs no service, but serving His creation is serving Him, I promise to serve humanity in the name of God; I refrain from violence and from taking revenge, I promise to forgive those who oppress me or treat me with cruelty.

Khan died in 1988. In contemporary Pashtun society his message is almost forgotten, submerged in the naturalization of violent jihad. However it remains a potent resource for encouraging questions, and thereby denaturalizing often unquestioned assumptions about jihad as a violent enterprise.

Target Contradictions

The second function of ideology is to obscure contradictions. It works to smooth over tensions, inconsistencies and paradoxes that question the logic of a particular way of thinking. The appropriate countermeasure is to push contradictions into the open wherever possible.

A major contradiction for Islamist extremists is the tendency of their operations to kill innocent people, especially Muslims.

As we noted above, a major contradiction for Islamist extremists is the tendency of their operations to kill innocent people, especially Muslims. After the 9/11 attacks, prominent Muslims, including scholars[25] and other leaders[26] condemned the killing of innocent people. It is widely believed that the Iraqi terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his organization, al-Qaeda in Iraq, perished because they killed innocent Muslims, a practice al-Qaeda leadership pleaded with them to stop.[27]

This issue continues to dog al-Qaeda. In a recent Q&A session with supporters,[28] Ayman al-Zawahiri was peppered with questions like this:

> Many people in the Islamic World and the Land of Haramin in particular complains that Al-Qaeda organization was behind many operations that targeted innocents civilians and Muslims within the Islamic nations and many Muslims

and children died as a result of such operations, do you think not that you are shedding prohibited and innocents blood (TC: according to the Islamic Sharia)?

And this:

What's your opinion on the daily civilian victims of al-Qa'idah's bombings in Iraq and other Muslim countries? If the US is your enemy, what have these civilians done to deserve this? Their loved ones grieve for their loss and they having nothing to do with this conflict. Aren't they monotheist Muslims?

To answer these questions, al-Zawahiri was at pains to give complicated explanations about exceptions to the rules, and circumstances where it really was permissible to kill innocent Muslims.

The fact that al-Qaeda has expended so much effort defending themselves on this issue indicates that they see it as a significant vulnerability. As Jarret Brachman concluded, "whatever he [Zawahiri] is ranting about is what he's most concerned about."[29] There are undoubtedly other such contradictions for al-Qaeda and other extremists groups. The more they can be kept in the public eye, the harder they are to obscure.

Engage Key Leaders and Groups

Politics is fundamentally about conflicting interests between groups. The universalizing function of ideology manages political difference by presenting the interests or concerns of people in power as the interests of all group members. The countermeasure to universalizing, then, is promoting, highlighting and amplifying the competing interests of subgroups that an ideology tries to unite.

For example, U. S. government agencies would do well to amplify the local narratives of Muslim youth who recognize the politically motivated and narrowly self-interested messages of their own extremist religious leaders. Last year, an expose published in the *New York Times* suggested that young people are growing disillusioned with religious leaders whose call to violence has restricted and narrowed their lives. Young people are questioning the authenticity of religious leaders, and even poking fun at them. They warn one another not to give their

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cellphone numbers to religious men. "If he knows the number, he'll steal the phone's credit," the journalist said. "The sheiks are making a society of nonbelievers."[30] By calling into question their motivations and authority to lead, local members of communities are crafting a counter narrative about the negative consequences of suicide missions and, by extension, the value of martyrdom. In effect, they are countering the "universalizing" function of martyrdom narratives that their leaders circulate.

This situation shows us that there are always multiple ideologies at work in a given contested population, even if some may be more dominant than others. David Kilcullen argues that we have effectively lumped all

extremists in the same group, thereby glossing over the ideological fissures that may offer the potential for effective intervention. Specifically he says, we have been "insufficiently agile in distinguishing different and contradictory forms of extremism from each other and have failed to listen to Muslim allies who understand the problem and potential solutions in more nuanced detail than we do." As a result, we have unintentionally unified these disparate groups with their contradictory and competing ideologies in the "face of a [singular] common external foe."[31]

It is very important to avoid actions that support this kind of in-group/out-group comparison. Extremists are a (would be) in-group with their audience, and their adversaries in the West are the out-group. It is well known that when groups are evaluated on *common criteria* that lead the in-group to be judged positively and the out-group to be evaluated negatively, solidarity with an in-group and bias against an out-group are amplified,[32] promoting universalization of in-group interests. We can disrupt this process by disaggregating the extremists and constructing them as outsiders relative to other subgroups. By supporting those community members who call extremist leaders out on their self-interested goals, we can help discourage and dampen the universalizing function of extremist ideology.

Breach Structures

The last function of ideology, structuring, involves creating rules and resources in a social system that favor reproduction of the ideology. Because these structures become institutionalized, they can be the most difficult to counteract. Obviously then, attempts should be made to prevent these structures from being put into place to begin with. Failing that, countermeasure best practices place stress on the structures and/or promote alternatives that might replace, undermine, or circumvent them.

New media have significant potential for undermining existing structure and creating new structure.

New media have significant potential for undermining existing structure and creating new structure. Authoritarian governments realize this, and take steps to limit their use. For example, earlier this year in advance of the anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre China shut down the micro-blogging service Twitter .[33] During the recent Iranian election unrest, authorities shut down text messaging services.[34]

A terrorism-related example is the 2008 anti-FARC protests in Colombia. The case is too complex to go into fully here. But in late 2007, after years of conflict with the government, efforts developed to achieve the release of FARC kidnapping victims. A structure of intermediaries helped the guerillas negotiate with the government. In effect, this created a structure in which the FARC was treated as a legitimate group with legitimate interests, i.e. a group that deserved to be engaged by the government.

Several hostage releases took place and things seemed to be proceeding well. Then a planned hostage release in December 2007 went wrong when the FARC promised to release a young hostage they did not, in fact, hold. A public backlash against the group developed, and a Facebook group was launched to organize opposition. Only weeks later, in February 2008, an anti-FARC protest took place involving an estimated 4.8 million Colombians, and there were simultaneous protests in 44 other countries around the world.[35] While Facebook did not cause the protests, it was a vehicle for organizing them and undermining the balance of power that existed between the guerillas and the government. It diminished the guerillas' social capital and ideological power.

Another example shows how new communication technology circumvents intact ideological structures. In Saudi Arabia, the sexes are segregated and young women are not allowed to interact with young men and would-be suitors. Women are sometimes engaged before they are allowed even a phone call with their partner. Generally, this segregation is not questioned. However, social networking sites provide a way around rules that forbid women from speaking to male strangers. As one young woman explained, "with the phone, everyone can agree that is forbidden, because Islam forbids a stranger to hear your voice. Online he only sees your writing, so that's slightly more open to interpretation."[36]

External action can also create conditions that stress meaning systems and leadership structures.

External action can also create conditions that stress meaning systems and leadership structures. A recent ideological clash between Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi and his some of his younger and more radical audience members has been amplified by Western analysts. Earlier this year, Maqdisi cited reports by the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point to reassure his audience that he was, indeed, a hard-liner and bemoaned the fact that Westerners seem to understand his message better than his own community.[37] Forcing extremists to have to account for their positions and to reinforce and make explicit their own ideological positions, rather than assume that those positions are taken-for-granted, stresses leadership structures and can push systems to their breaking points.

WHAT'S GOOD FOR THE GOOSE...

Our own contradictions are being exploited by extremist groups using the methods above.

We conclude with a cautionary note that the techniques we just proposed cut both ways. For example, our own contradictions—smoothed over by the obscuring function of our ideology—are being exploited by extremist groups using the methods above. Our assumptions of our moral superiority, grounded in the democratic principles of the constitution, should serve as a shining light to those living under oppressive regimes. Yet when our practices do not match the democratic ideals that we claim to abide by, the fissures in our own ideologies become apparent. They are used, often immediately, as fodder by extremists against us. Admiral

Michael Mullen, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, made this point succinctly in his recent essay:

> Our enemies regularly monitor the news to discern coalition and American intent as weighed against the efforts of our forces. When they find a "say-do" gap—such as Abu Ghraib—they drive a truck right through it. So should we, quite frankly. We must be vigilant about holding ourselves accountable to higher standards of conduct and closing any gaps, real or perceived, between what we say about ourselves and what we do to back it up. [38]

In other words, in addition to resisting the ideology of the Bad Guys, the United States must at all costs avoid giving our adversaries ammunition with which to challenge our assumptions, target our contradictions, engage our groups, and breach our structures. The perspective on ideology we have outlined here—as something that is in-play in communication systems rather than fixed in individuals' heads—offers a way of understanding how we can best achieve that goal.

In the end, "hearts and minds" are not likely to be won by our ideas alone.

Finally, it is important to remember that there is no good reason we can't beat the extremists at their own game. After all, the U.S. is home to the best storytellers in the world—from Hollywood to Anytown, USA. No one anywhere understands the power of narratives to shape strategic and political outcomes any better than we do. Our challenge is not one of creativity or talent or narrative, nor is it that we lack a "message."

What we have lacked is a *communicative* understanding of a seemingly old and irrelevant idea—ideology. It is capable of providing useful historical knowledge and practical insight into where, how, and why strategic communication and counter-narratives can be successful. In the end, "hearts and minds" are not likely to be won by our ideas alone. That is the old way of thinking about ideology. Instead they will be won by the power of our narratives to disrupt the everyday circulation and easy cultural acceptance of extremist ideology, and by the force of our own example.

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