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DISRUPTING ISIS RECRUITMENT ONLINE

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P R O C E E D I N G S

MR. McCANTS: Welcome. I'm Will McCants. I direct the project on U.S. relations with the Islamic world here at Brookings. We're here today to talk about disrupting Isis recruitment on line. This session, years ago, used to be called disrupting Al Qaeda recruitment on line, we just rebranded. It is a perennial question that has obsessed the U.S. government for over a decade now. And for those who have worked on the issue inside and outside of government there's a lot of frustration that goes along with it, but there has also been some notable successes. And today we're here to talk about what I think is a promising new endeavor that involves the private sector. For years the U.S. government tried to get the private sector interested in working on and tackling this issue. It took a long time, but now there are some folks, smart folks, outside of government who have started to work on it from a lot of different angles.

So, today we want to explore one of those and talk about a project that's been spearheaded by Jigsaw. But we also want to pull back and talk about this endeavor in general. Who takes the lead for it, who should take the lead for it, what's at stake, and what are the best tools and techniques and theories for tackling this problem, because despite the territorial losses of the Islamic State it's a problem that endures. Their reach on line far exceeds their reach on the physical world, and they continue to draw thousands of people to their cause. So it is a complex problem.

And I'm very happy today that we have with use three of the smartest people working on it. Joining me on stage in just a minute will be Yasmin Green, who is going to talk about the project, and she is with Jigsaw, which is a subsidiary of Alphabet, Inc. I don't know how you describe now it's relationship to Google, but it's "Google-y". (Laughter) Ross Frenett, who is with Moonshot CVE, which is a startup dedicated to promoting data driven innovation encountering violent extremism, which is a growth area.

And then Under Secretary Rick Stengel, who is the State Department Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs, who has been working on this issue for two and a half years. So we are very grateful for him making the time to come share his thoughts on this specific project today, but also his experience in working on this issue for the last two and a half years.

So, without further ado, I will turn things over to Yasmin.

MS. GREEN: Thanks, Will, and thank you to Brookings for hosting this conversation today.

A year ago my team and I asked ourselves a question, which is can we come up with a way to use the internet to confront extremist recruiting efforts, specifically those of the Islamic State. And we spent a year working with our partners, many of whom are here today, designing a method for marrying the on line demand for extremist material with the organic and credible voices that are debunking extremist narratives. And I want to talk to you a little bit about the redirect method.

There are three key phases. The first is research, the second is advertising, and the third is videos. So for the research part we wanted to understand how we could use the internet to reach that slice of ISIS' audience that is susceptible to their messaging, that has some positive sentiment or some sympathy toward the group. So we worked with researchers, some of them are here today, Nadia Wayda and Daveed Gartenstein-Ross from Valens, to look at ISIS' material and understand their recruiting themes and the key terms that they use. And we also spoke directly to former members and supporters of the Islamic State to hear from them about their experience and about their online preferences and browsing behavior. And our goal was to tease out the terms that are used on line that could distinguish those with positive sentiment towards ISIS and those who are just in the mainstream and interested in the group.

So let me give you some color on how we went about doing that. One of the ways is finding terms that are deferential towards ISIS the group, it's caliph, the caliphate and, for example, supporter slogans. Baqiya wa tatamaddad, for example. Enduring and expanding is a popular ISIS slogan. Terms like this were included in what we called our key word list. These terms that help us reach and target the specific audience on line.

Similarly, terms around ISIS' official and unofficial media outlets. So it turns out when you speak to individuals who have subscribed to ISIS' ideology, that they have a high level of distrust for mainstream media sources. One girl I spoke to in the UK who tried to join ISIS at just 16 years old described the first time she heard about the terrorist group, and she said it was on the BBC. And I said, go on, and she said well, I mean obviously I can't trust anything the BBC says to I thought whatever they were saying it must be the opposite. So brands really matter. My parents, for example, you know, they're interested in the reporting on ISIS and the BBC and the CNN's reporting is just fine for them. That is not so for our target audience. So terms like Al-Hayat, Al-Furqan, Al I'tisam, terms that show the individuals are interested in ISIS produced material, again we think might betray a mindset that they're sympathetic or supportive.

So that's the research and the key word generation part. Then we had to build the advertising campaign. A couple of -- three different formats for ads, there were textiles that show up on search results pages, the image ads that show up around the internet, and the video ads that show up in front of videos on YouTube. And I actually wanted to illustrate this with a few examples. Here you'll see some screenshots of a mobile phone, which of course is how many of the individuals we spoke to were researching the Islamic State, and you'll see searches for ISIS material. And above the search results you'll see ads. And there they have a red ring around them. These are

ads that were created by Moonshot CVE, who are a partner for the English pilot, directing individuals to their YouTube channel, which creates videos that I'll talk about. On the right hand side, you can see some more ad copy. And I want you to look carefully at what these ads say because the branding philosophy, really for the entire pilot, was not to appear judgmental or moralistic but really to pique the interest of individuals who have questions, questions that are being raised and answered by the Islamic State.

Here are some image ads, this is the second format I spoke about. On the top left you can see the ads in English, again created by Moonshot CVE for the English language campaign. And on the bottom right ads in Arabic. These are created by Quantum Communications, who are a partner for the Arabic language pilot. You can see the translations at the bottom. Again, different look and feel because they're created by different partners, but the same sentiment, which is give these individuals what they're looking for, answer their questions, don't prejudge. And as you can see with the Arabic language ads on the bottom, really borrow from the look and feel of the content that these individuals are looking for.

One more ad format here. These are the video ads that I mentioned that run in front of videos on YouTube. English language on the left, Arabic language on the right, and the translations below. And again you see that the questions the individuals have that we highlighted from our research, questions around ISIS' religious legitimacy, their military competency, their effectiveness as a governing state. These are the questions we know individuals have and that we're mirroring back to them in this material.

And the goal of all of these ads is to be clicked on and to redirect individuals to the videos. So we've had the key words, the ads, the destination, play lists on YouTube, curated videos from -- 116 videos from over 83 creators from around the internet. And we're really listening to the individuals who have supported ISIS in the past

and can tell us who are the credible voices to answer the questions that ISIS is raising if not ISIS. They are citizen journalists, they are Imams, credible Imams on the issue, and defectors. And you can see some examples of videos on the right hand side of -- content that has been found on the internet may not even be created explicitly for the purpose of countering ISIS, but again does answer the questions that our target audience has.

So we designed this pilot using these three phases. How did we do in terms of our goal of redirecting individuals? Over eight weeks the pilot campaign reached 320,000 individuals in Arabic and English who were exploring the internet for ISIS material. And collectively they watched over half a million minutes of curated videos that refute ISIS' messaging. That's the equivalent of you sitting down at your laptop without interruption for an entire year watching our play lists, for an entire year. So while we can't measure the delta between people who wanted to go and who ended up going as a result of the campaign, what we can measure is encouraging. We know we can find our target audience on line, we know we can engage them, and we know the material is out there that they will watch.

Hopefully what we're going to talk about today is, you know, where we go to next, how we can scale this campaign through our partnership model and hopefully -- you know, if we can do this in eight weeks think about the impact that we can do in a year or more.

Thank you. (Applause)

MR. McCANTS: Thank you, Yasmin, very much for the overview. I want to ask a very pedestrian question because I'm somebody who uses Google, I see the ad words pop up all the time. I don't think I have ever clicked on in my life.

MS. GREEN: Can I say something?

MR. McCANTS: Sure.

MS. GREEN: I've been watching -- well, now Jigsaw, before that Google, for a decade, and I've never met a person who's clicked on an ad. (Laughter) So you're not alone.

MR. McCANTS: So my question is, so these 320,000 individuals, they're individuals because you know they have distinct IP addresses.

MS. GREEN: We've estimated them a different way, but that's right.

MR. McCANTS: Why did these people click? Who are these 320,000 who would not just click an ad, but click an ad that's relevant to whatever specific search term they've put in?

MS. GREEN: There's $1 trillion e-commerce sector that's really underpinned by the merits of advertising and advertising helps a million organizations and individuals find their audience. So I've got to believe that somehow this is not all a Ponzi scheme and, you know, money is being made because people are finding ads relevant. And I think that's the key, that's both the key to our design philosophy and the key to why this works in general, is we were really trying to give these individuals answers to their questions.

So just a quick anecdote. I spoke to a girl in the UK who tried to go the Islamic State when she was 13. And when I was asking her about her impression, she said, well I thought I was going to join the Islamic Disneyworld. And I said, what about, you know, the beheadings and the sex slaves and the other stories and she said, oh, no, I was looking on line, I didn't look at any of that. She kept saying, you know -- and I kept probing her thinking she -- realize that that's -- ignoring and that's not a good thing to -- you know, that's not an acceptable answer. And she kept saying I just looked at the stuff I like, I just looked at the stuff I like. And it really drove home that's how we all operate, we just look for the stuff we line, on line, off line. No one goes into a, you know, a

cocktail party looking for the one person they're going to hate and make sure they have a conversation with that individual. And it's even more the case on line.

So the goal for us was really give people in these ads a reason to click by answering their questions. They have questions about Jihad, then put that in the ad. You know they have questions about the status of combat, put that in the ad. I mean something that Ross can speak to having crafted the ads, the English language ads, but I think it's really about relevancy and being provocative.

MR. McCANTS: And, you know, how is it that you decided to do it this way and not some other way? I mean I can see it; having heard you describe it, it sounds like a very Google approach to this problem. It's using the ad words and all -- did you consider some other approaches or is this just the one that naturally presented itself?

MS. GREEN: The start for us was wanting to reach an audience that is already sympathetic to the Islamic State. So I think there are many other programs that are maybe looking at inoculating the masses or changing the conversation around Islam or Islamophobia. We were really focused on that slice of ISIS' audience that is susceptible, and so we spoke to them. You know, we did a number of field trips actually. I was in Iraq myself speaking to former Arabs, Kurds and Arabs who had gone and defected, so former suicide bombers, drivers, to really understand why they went and how technology played a role in their journey. So we got a feel from them about what those credible voices, what brands and what messengers did they find plausible and compelling. And we thought maybe this stuff exists on line and maybe we can -- you know, using targeted advertising, which of course is a tool that Google and YouTube are using to serve advertisers and companies around the world, maybe we could use that to help those credible voices reach the audience that might otherwise be radicalized on line.

MR. McCANTS: So, Ross, Jigsaw turns to Moonshot CVE turns to

Quantum Communications and asks you guys to -- is it generate new content or is it to identify existing content that is effective, which is it?

MR. FRENETT: So we were presented with some of the research that the Jigsaw team had done and then some of our analysts augmented that. What we then did is ranked it and tried to synthesize it to turn it into a coherent narrative, because taking 10 videos from 10 different people who never intended them to be put next to one another and turning that into essentially a user journey, surprisingly difficult. The only content that we actually created ourselves were the trailers, one of which Yas showed you, which took elements of the various videos and tried to peak people's interest, and then the physical adverts themselves. And as Yas said, some of those were informed by Jigsaw's research and some of it was informed by ourselves looking at the kind of propaganda and the kind of questions that are being put forward and trying to understand what is it that these people want and why do they click on it.

And Yas already spoke to this, but about people who click on this material, I think sometimes a very, very digitally savvy audience, a very smart audience, sometimes forget that there is a degree of naiveté when you're talking about sometimes 13, 14, 15 year olds out there who will just click on content that is presented to them if it's presented in the right way. So it was an interesting line to walk where it was interesting enough that they didn't immediately think oaky, this is anti ISIS. So there's not an ad there saying here's why you shouldn't join, because they're not going to click on that, without accidentally crossing the line into making the material look like pro ISIS material. So it was a difficult line to walk and one that we constantly changed throughout the campaign. When we noticed something was working we replicated that ad and made different iterations of it. When we noticed something wasn't working we immediately shut it down.

MR. McCANTS: And working, defined as people clicking on it and staying to watch?

MR. FRENETT: Yes, exactly, not just clicking but also staying, engaging with the content and taking a look at it. In fact, one of the videos we had a handful of individuals underneath it, it was just lightly too much, too ambiguous, because we had a handful of individuals saying, hang on a sec, is this an advert for ISIS. And then immediately afterwards everyone else jumped in and was like no, no, if you click on the play list you can see X, Y, and Z. So it's a difficult tightrope to walk actually, but one that if you get it just right you can draw people in, because an awful lot of the counter narrative content, counter mastering content out there is of the kind of finger waving variety. And if these people were listening to their finger waving elders then we wouldn't have a problem in the first place.

MR. McCANTS: Right. And so if -- I don't mean to put you on the spot to think of something quickly but can you remember an ad that just was not working? Not because it was ambiguous, because it just stunk? And conversely, an ad that really got a lot of eyeballs? Because I'm curious as to why.

MR. FRENETT: Yes. So basically the closer we were able to get to that line where something was a little bit controversial, where it looked like, you know, if I click on this I might maybe get some good ISIS content. And that stuff tended to have a high click-through rate, and some of the -- because we did test out that -- all of this is about testing -- we did test out some ads that were a little bit more dull, and some of the more religious ones in particular, didn't have a high click rate at all. The exact phraseology I'm not able to come up with off the top of my head, but if something looked like it was dull, if it looked like it was anti ISIS, or it didn't have active verbs in it even, then the click through rate tended to be very low. So we had some ads that had over 10 percent click

rate and some ads that had less than 1 percent. So even with that we gathered an awful lot of data on what it is that these guys find appealing, which we're going to be able to take forward into future work.

MR. McCANTS: Rick Stengel, I want to bring you into the conversation. You have been in your current role as Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs at the State Department for over two and a half years. This has been --

MR. STENGEL: The longest serving in American history.

MR. McCANTS: That's right, and that is no small thing. (Laughter) You have seen it all, right? This is part of your portfolio, working on this problem. You have been pitched I'm sure any number of ideas, you have seen the government try things, you've seen private sector try things, in this country and other countries. I'm curious as to your take on this project in particular. Is there something unique or exciting about it, or is it part of a general trend right now in pushing back against extremist content on line?

MR. STENGEL: It's incredibly exciting, but I want to thank you, Will, for doing this and your own important work on the history of ISIS, or ISIL as we call it, and thank Brookings for convening this. Strobe Talbot was my first boss in Washington, so anything he ever asked me to do I'd do. So I do, I think the redirect method that Jigsaw is working on -- and we've been talking with Jigsaw pretty much the whole time, even before Jigsaw existed --

MS. GREEN: That's right.

MR. STENGEL: -- because we really believe that the private sector has many more answers in this space than we do. So I think this is an extremely promising method that other people, other nations, other groups, other NGOs should look at. It's particularly appropriate now as ISIL's own messaging is beginning to change, going from a more macro message to a more micro and targeted messaged. So they have -- you

know, I came from the private sector and the media and I look at ISIL as a niche brand that unintentionally grew into a macro brand because people liked their message. Their target audience was always very small, it was just to get, you know, 20 or 5000 or 30,000 foreign fighters, that's about the circulation of the New Republic, right, so that's a small magazine. And then it became a gigantic media powerhouse because people fastened onto it.

So one of the things I want to remind people, because I've been at this since the beginning, is that they're not just on social media. I mean we think they are only on social media because we're on social media. They're on billboards and they're on kiosks and they are on satellite television, which is the way most people in the Middle East get their news and information.

At the same time, we've seen a sea change in this battle against ISIL. There's a tremendous amount of good news. I mean, Will, you mentioned the physical caliphate versus the digital caliphate. The physical caliphate has basically ceased to exist, and it's shrinking and shrinking and shrinking; it's 40 percent less in Iraq, 25 percent in Syria. You had Mohammed al-Adnani, who was killed last week, but was the kind of voice of ISIL in his pre-Ramadan speech saying, you know what, don't come to the caliphate anymore because it will cease to exist, commit acts of violence wherever you are on anyone who is within reach with any means that you have and there are no innocents. That is ISIL 2.0, away from this macro messaging entity that was talking about the joys and beauties of the caliphate. And by the way, 80 percent of their messaging has always been positive and not negative. So they're moving in this new direction which his targeting lone actors.

So I think the method that Jigsaw is pioneering is actually really particularly useful in this new era where it's not macro messaging where you're getting

recruits and you're not competing in the macro media space, you're competing in this very narrow targeted space as well as the space that it's hard to compete in, which is the dark web and the encrypted web, which they're migrating to.

So that's my kind of little bit of a tour of the waterfront, having been at this for a while.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. And that's what excites me about it as well is the fact that it is targeted on people who are already interested in this content, because for years the focus was on putting out very broad messages to very big audiences, but the problem is really much smaller than that. But I'm going to ask the annoying question before we move on because it will be on everybody's minds, and that's about efficacy. You gave us metrics and that tells us a lot about what's being watched, but it doesn't give us a good sense of whether this is working or not.

Is this just a point that should be put the side because it's impossible to measure, or are the analytics good enough now where that could be a second state or a third stage to see how long line consumption habits change as a result of viewing this content.

And that's for any of you who care to answer.

MR. STENGEL: I'll just piggyback on my own comments because I'm not an expert on this, but the question about metrics -- which people in government are obsessed with metrics. I mean I came from the private sector where we know about metrics, but the ultimate metric is like the Congressman who said to me, Mr. Stengel, how many young men did you prevent going from Iraq and Syria today? On the one hand, it's an absurd question, on the other hand it is the question. So how do you measure that?

Well, I'm going to talk about the macro measurements. I mean the

Defense Department estimates the flow of foreign fighters to Iraq and Syria is down by 80 or 90 percent. That's a real metric. Is the cause the diminishment of messaging that they're doing because the tech companies have been so aggressive in that space, which they have? Maybe, but that's a real number. Another real number is -- because not only what Google is doing, but what Twitter is doing, and what Facebook is doing, they're so aggressive about not having their ecosystems polluted, that the number of ISIL fanboys has decreased by a very large number, the number of followers of ISIL fan boys is down by 70 or 80 percent. Those are real metrics. How that actually translates into people who may or may not commit violence, I haven't seen a good metric on that, but all of these things are good and positive metrics.

So I'll let you get to the more specific ones.

MR. McCANTS: Yes, Ross.

MR. FRENETT: Yes, if I could jump in that would be great. So this is -- I mean this is part of the reason literally that we set up Moonshot CVE, is that for years we operated in a sector that made assumptions that oh, well, you couldn't possibly measure X and the built project and whole projects, on anecdotes rather than data. And the idea that you can't measure behavior or consumption pattern changes on line is frankly absurd. And it's just something that we haven't managed to construct the right campaign to do.

So off the back of the redirect measure and what we partnered with Jigsaw to do, we're partnering with Jigsaw and the Gen Next Foundation, who are a venture philanthropy firm, to bring a second phase of this where we have a laser like focus on measuring behavior change. And the kids of methodologies that work in other areas, like randomized control testing for messaging, and then measuring the overall consumption patterns within groups that you've targeted versus similarly constructed

groups that you haven't targeted allow us to move toward a situation whereby we're not quite at the we know for certain that we've stopped 10 people from going, but what we can say, if we construct these things in a scientific manner and in a long-term manner, which is something again private sector involvement lets us do, we can say we haven't reduced the consumption of content within this target audience and then make larger assumptions around how this is affecting other audience. It's done in other sectors all the time and I think us and CVE need to hold ourselves to that same high scientific standard.

MR. McCANTS: Yasmin, do you want to say anything?

MS. GREEN: Just that in the same way the technology piece of this is not the entire problem, it's obviously not the entire solution, and one direction I'd like to see this go in is really to connect the on line piece that we've, you know, demonstrated with the redirect method with the off line piece, which is the one on one, you know, de-rad work that so many practitioners are doing on the ground. And I think that's something that, you know, we're working with the Gen Next Foundation on scoping in for the next phase.

MR. McCANTS: All right. So let me shift gears into talking about some of the -- what I anticipate the audience might be feeling or a little bit of the Orwellian tones of this exercise. I mean here you have a subsidiary of a tech company that is getting involved in challenging extremist ideas and the U.S. government is applauding that effort.

Now, from my own experience, both inside and outside government, I am very happy this is happening. But I can also understand people's concerns that we're moving into some very dangerous territory. You know, how far does this go, what counts as an extremist idea, should a think tank associated with Google really be getting involved in this sort of thing? And I know over the past year there has been some

criticism, and this isn't just -- I mean the initiative you're talking about, you know, it's not just redirecting to pictures of kittens, you know, it's redirecting to content that challenges a particular ideology. Do you think any of those concerns are valid, or do people just no understand fundamentally what Jigsaw does, but more importantly what it means to push back against these ideas on line?

MS. GREEN: I think it's a really important question to ask and I want to be really clear about what we've done as Jigsaw, which is firstly spoken to individuals who've gone and say that they were not well informed about what it is they were going to get. So the Iraqi young men that I mentioned, for example, they all describe subscribing to a narrative which was ISIS is fighting for our rights. That was really they thought they were signing up to aid in. And then they went there and they -- you know, the first order of business on arriving in the caliphate was that they had their passport confiscated and their mobile phone confiscated, so the symbols of their digital and physical freedom. And then they described not being able to move, you know, talk, use technology. And one of these guys actually used such an endearing analogy to explain to me what it felt like, and he said it was like in Tom and Jerry when Tom swallows the key. And I had actually -- even though he was speaking through a translator -- but I had the image in my head of that cartoon character where they key is going down his throat and you have that sinking feeling like I can't get out of here.

People that are signing up to something without understanding what it is. And this is really through our lens, you know, as a technology firm, this is about access to information. We're betting on people with more and better information making better informed choices. And I want to be crystal clear that the tools involved are readily available for anyone to use. These are YouTube videos that are public and targeted advertising which is used by a million, you know, individuals and organizations. So I kind

of welcome the opportunity actually to clarify exactly what this is.

MR. McCANTS: Yasmin, could an ISIS supporter buy ad words and redirect to their own content in the same way?

MS. GREEN: Another good question. So there are product policies that Google puts in place to make sure that -- I mean there is a whole category of ads that they disallow. Terrorist ads are firmly within that.

MR. McCANTS: Okay. Okay. Rick, I want to turn to you. As I said in my introductory remarks this is the kind of activity that the U.S. government has been trying to encourage for years, but I wonder (1) if you worry about the public perception that the U.S. government might be too closely tied or supportive of these efforts in some way. Does that undermine them in the long-term? And then related, but separate, I'm curious as to your thoughts of what you've seen that has worked in terms of encouraging the private sector to work on these issues. Is it the U.S. government and its convening power, is it grants, which lever has been the right one to pull?

MR. STENGEL: And I'm going to ally to your first question. I think one of the misperceptions is that the U.S. government and the tech companies are at loggerheads. There is a tremendous overlap of interest between the tech companies and the U.S. government, but I think I said the phrase before, it was someone from Google I think who said it, we don't want our ecosystem polluted by this kind of noxious, horrible content. You know, they have customers who don't like that, I have customers, U.S. citizens, who don't like that either. And so we have a kind of unanimity of interest there. Sometimes there are things that we oppose, but I have to say that I think the tech companies don't get enough credit for all the things that they've done. I've mentioned a few of them. And by the way, they don't want that credit either because they don't necessarily want to be seen to be linked up with us. So just the way we realized early on

that we're not the best messenger for our message because we're the U.S. government, you know, the tech companies also don't want to necessarily link arms with the U.S. government and say hey, we're in this together. And that is exactly as it should be. But again I think that they have been incredibly aggressive and they deserve a lot of praise.

To go back to your first question, though, about the speech issue and the Orwellian idea -- and again I'm in government now, but I've spent most of my life in media -- I was close to being a First Amendment absolutist as it's possible to be, yet nevertheless I do think that this is the kind of content that should be taken down. The tech companies don't have a First Amendment, they have terms of service, which are their constitutions and that allows them to take down this kind of content. And so I think all of that is good and the more aggressive they are the better.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. Ross, you're part of a startup that has grown up around a burgeoning, a small but burgeoning industry that's devoted to countering violent extremism. It's kind of a weird space to work in.

MR. FRENETT: Yeah.

MR. McCANTS: Yeah. So it's politically very sensitive. The U.S. government is very interested in it and, you know, I will say frankly it seems to me that some of the people operating in that space are willing to say and do whatever it takes to keep the money flowing and they're not willing to stand up and push back against bad ideas the government may have or to say no because that's how they're making their livelihood. I mean how do you respond to that criticism and also how do you ensure that you're walking that fine line between being useful and being innovative?

MR. FRENETT: I mean it's definitely a legitimate criticism and it's something that we worked very hard to avoid. I think it's based on a number of assumptions, the first of which is that the player in this field is government, and I use that

singularly. And in fact the redirect method, both phase one where we partnered with Jigsaw, and phase two, where the Gen Next Foundation are using their venture philanthropy model to fund it, proves that CVE efforts don't necessarily need to rely on government funding. And building something around that is incredibly important.

As a startup that operates on a startup model we have made a very conscious choice never to become too reliant on one funder for the exact reason that you just mentioned, which is you end up being captured by certain organizations and then looking around and saying, okay, well I'm going to have to fire my staff if I don't take X project. So we've worked very hard to make sure that we have funding from the private sector, from multiple governments, but also that's why we set up as a tech startup rather than as a charity. Because what we've seen from working inside CVE is, you mentioned it, it's a controversial field, it's one where risks need to be taken. And even the legal structures that sometimes exist within charities where board members are responsible for mistakes and where you're constantly looking for your next piece of funding doesn't necessarily work if you're looking to swiftly iterate and take risks.

So what we've been doing is using some of the projects we have where we know what we're doing, where we apply data to the sector to build up resources that allow us to then independently test things you could never get funded elsewhere. So we mentioned the physical space. Moonshot doesn't just look at hacking the digital space, we also look at hacking the physical space. So we're currently funding and running experiments inside Syria on the use of drones to distribute counter ISIS messaging. We're also applying and funding ourselves artificial intelligence to the field of identifying individuals on line for the purposes of actually engaging with them directly one to one in conversations. So all of that is only possible (a) because we partner with the private sector, and (b) because we have a private sector startup model rather than a government

university or charity model in order to push this stuff forward.

So I think that's -- I mean I hope that that's the way forward in this field.

MR. McCANTS: Yasmin and Ross, you've eluded several times to what the next step might be or what you hope it might be. What is the next step? What do you envision this project doing in the future?

MS. GREEN: So when we started developing this a year ago the goal was really to use targeted advertising to marry the demand for extremist material with the credible voices that could refute that messaging. I hadn't anticipated fully what we'd end up building, which is a machinery that can act on this challenge going forward. At scale, in other languages, you know, maybe even the successor for this terrorist group when it manifests itself. I think there's a really versatile model that doesn't rely on any single organization having all the skills to do this in one place. Right now we have Moonshot for English, we have Quantum for Arabic, and hopefully other partners for other languages who we can feed with the research insights about what works, the advertising savvy to do the targeting, and an understanding of the good, credible content that exists out there.

So I see scale in the languages that we've piloted and in future languages too.

MR. McCANTS: And is it you hope to have it privately funded or will it be a mix of funding? Because it sounds like this initial initiative was privately funded.

MS. GREEN: Yes, that's right. I personally think there is a space for both funding models for the scaling of this.

MR. FRENETT: Yes. In terms of the next steps, so we have -- there's kind of the phase three, four and five, but phase two is locked in. We're partnering with the Gen Next Foundation in order to have a North America focused second phase of this project, which focuses not just on Jihadism but also on far right extremism. We are very,

very conscious as our own organization, as I know Jigsaw are, that this is not solely a problem of one particular group.

The second phase of what we want to do is drill much more into the detail of gathering evidence of behavior change, but also there was an insight, which I just want to share with you briefly that we got from phase one that we very much want to pick up and run. I first met Yasmin years ago working with former extremists with the Against Foreign Extremism Network and have spoken and engaged with hundreds of former members of extremist organizations. And anyone that works off line with extremists will tell you, listen, ideology is only a small part of this, there's also issues around social belonging, around mental health, around employment, and we've kind of all accepted that. But for reasons beyond understanding, when we move to messaging campaigns, very often that's all forgotten and we just focus on the ideology and the politics.

So one small test that we ran during phase one that we want to scale in a serious way during phase two, is we didn't just look at things which countered the ISIS narrative directly, we also targeted individuals searching for high risk ISIS terms with content to do with mental health, asking them about do they feel anxious, do they feel depressed, do they feel hopeless. And we found in some instances people who were searching for extreme ISIS content were three times more likely than the standard population to actually click on this stuff, which indicates to us they do suffer from these issues. If we can build additional data on that, that completely revolutionizes how we think about counter messaging, because if we start to think about counter messaging as the whole person, mental health, education, other things, and if we can off ramp people not just by looking at the ideology, but by looking at meeting all of their various needs, then I think we can totally change how hits whole this is perceived, and that's something

that we want to build on with Jigsaw and the Gen Next Foundation during phase two.

MR. McCANTS: And your last point leads me to something I wanted to ask you and Yasmin just briefly, but what is it, aside from the mental health issues, that you have learned about ISIS supporters on line? I mean you have an immense amount of data now from this project. What kind of videos did they gravitate towards, what kind of messages were they interested in? I mean what have you learned about the folks who might be interested in joining this organization.

MR. FRENETT: So from our perspective at least we got data which actually backs up anecdotal evidence that I've had for years. The first time I sat down with a member of a terrorist organization was 11 years ago and people always used to ask, how did you get them to talk to you, how do you get them to engage. It's like, you ask. These people are generally -- they're human beings and even if they don't like you they will sometimes watch the stuff anyway for the sake of hate watching it. Then they'll engage in conversations. So what we learned off line is that people will generally engage with you one way or another, and that is actually something that we now have data for is people, even those that were giving us a thumbs down, they still watched the video through and they still tended to go from the first video through to the second video through to the third video, and so on and so forth. So what we've learned is we now have large data to back up what anecdotally we knew previously, which is that if you try and engage someone, if you meet them where they are, even if you don't completely agree with them, then they will want to engage in that conversation, and that is step one towards off ramping these people and getting them back towards a more peaceful path.

MR. McCANTS: So before I turn to questions and answers I have a final question for --

MR. STENGEL: Can I just drop in on that?

MR. McCANTS: Yes.

MR. STENGEL: Because I think that's a very important point that Ross makes, that most people who write and think about this don't understand. And someone very smart said to me early on, it's not a messaging model that you need to use, it's an epidemiological model because what they are targeting, they're targeting people with grievances, with mental health issues. ISIL 2.0 is much more about what we call the weaponization of vulnerability. And to just try to combat that with oh, your ideology is wrong or it's a bad view of Islam, is a way of not being successful.

So I think particularly what Jigsaw is doing in terms of targeting people individually, we have to move away from this zero sum ideological battle that people think we're in because that isn't the battle anymore.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. And so my final question is for you, Rick Stengel, and it has to do with your position at State Department. You have been there, as you said, longer than anyone else has been in that position. I'm just curious to know, given that I assume the clock is ticking and one day you will leave, what have you learned in that position, what is it that you figured out being there that you did not understand or thought completely differently about before you came into government?

MR. STENGEL: Yes, the clock is ticking, Will. (Laughter) I have to say, before I came into the State Department having been in media, I mean -- and traditional mainstream media, which is much debased these days -- of actually trying to tell the truth and trying to convey reality to people, thinking that that was something that was important. And indeed the media is the only Constitutionally protected industry in America and there's a reason for that. But the thing that has hit me in these two and a half years is the incredible rise in disinformation on the internet. We thought the internet was this great medium for information, which it is, but it's also an incredible engine of

disinformation in a way that we hadn't really anticipated. And my old senator, Pat Moynihan, you're entitled to your own opinions, you're not entitled to your own facts, but nowadays people feel like they're entitled to their own facts and they will dispute you with that. And I think the person who inherits my job needs to think not only about countering ISIL messaging, not only about countering violent extremist messaging, but countering propaganda and disinformation that undermines American values and ideas of free speech and freedom of religion and a free press and equality before the law. All of those things are at stake I think in a way that nobody really anticipated when we saw the rise of the internet.

MR. McCANTS: Well said. So I will throw it open for questions and answers. We'll start by going one at a time and then we'll do lightening rounds. So, yes? And there is going to be a microphone that comes around.

MS. McKELVEY: My name is Tara McKelvey and I wanted to -- Mr. Stengel, if you could tell us about what -- the clock is ticking, what that means, what things you want to accomplish before Obama leaves office.

MR. STENGEL: In this space or in general? (Laughter)

MS. McKELVEY: Yes.

MR. STENGEL: Well, the clock is ticking because we all turn into pumpkins on January 19, 2017. And I'm sorry, I'm just going to use that as an opportunity -- you know, my boss is John Kerry, who I think has done a fantastic job, and one of the things that he talks about is that people don't realize all of the foreign policy successes that the Obama administration has had. And this very simple idea that there's nothing foreign about foreign policy. I mean the President is about to come back from a trip to Asia and even the mainstream media is reporting about what ladder did he go down in China and what curse word did a certain, you know, remedial world leader

describe him as. The fact that people are missing the story that the world has changed, there is this reengagement in rebalanced Asia that in many, many areas the world is a much safer place than it was before.

So I think a lot of initiatives, you know, including the Iran deal, that people want to lock down before they get done. And I think in my particular case when it comes to this, and I've been remiss in not mentioning it, we created something called the Global Engagement Center, which is the successor to CSCC -- I see Dan Kimmage is back there in the audience -- which is to fight ISIL and extremist violent messaging. And one of the things that we want to do is really -- has a terrific leader in Michael Lumpkin -- we want to pass that onto to the next administration as a kind of engine of successfully fighting violent extremist content and doing that with private partners like Jigsaw that are already ahead of us in that space. So I think a lot of it is just how do we keep the success going and hand it off to the next folks.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. Yes, here.

QUESTIONER: (Off mic) -- some communications for the Arabic, but I'd like to ask how do you engage with let's say local content creators, for example, Iraq or Syria?

Thank you.

MR. McCANTS: Yasmin?

MS. GREEN: I think actually the Under Secretary can probably speak to that because of the local efforts that at least the U.S. government and other governments have established to support creators.

This project was a little bit different from traditional content creation efforts because it curated existing content. And I think that's a little bit counter current. You know, I think the conventional wisdom is (a) there's a dearth of content. There's

nothing to be done with what's out there. And (b) there's also another narrative that if we could just get more Hollywood polish in these videos, you know, the Islamic States would be -- its attempts would be futile. I think what we've shown with our approach is that (a) there's a lot of compelling voices, some of them don't consider themselves to be part of the counter ISIS campaign and they may not even know what the acronym CVE stands for. And some of our most engaging videos are actually very low res, you know, kind of low quality videos. So I certainly think we need to continue to support local creators and this approach was doing something that was pretty separate to that.

MR. FRENETT: On the look of the local creator's point, I think that when you are creating rather than curating as we were doing, the local element can't be emphasized enough. There is still an awful lot of CV efforts out there which are well meaning and well constructed that involve creating English content and then translating it to Arabic and kind of hoping it sticks. We have been building networks of creators inside Syria so that when we're looking for content that ISIS content folks in a particular area we can actually get in touch with someone that is 10 miles from the border -- well, the ever shifting border of the territory that ISIS controls. We found that the kind of content that we get out of them (a) have stunning quality. So we don't need Hollywood to make quality stuff -- these guys do the stuff on Macs, I'll show you on my phone afterwards -- and (b) is much, much stickier than the content which would be produced in the West for them. And just for the record (c) is also cheaper.

MR. STENGEL: I'm glad you asked that question. Terrific answers. We sometimes get a little narcissistic about thinking that we're the target of ISIL's messaging and we're not. And to me the least intelligent question that people ask is are we winning the information war. The question is whether Muslims around the world are winning the information war and I'm happy to say they are, there's more counter ISIL content than

there is pro ISIL content now. Two years ago there was none. And if I look at the people in who, you know, Yasmin is saying we need to help, the local players, it's kind of fantastic what's happening. I mean we did create a messaging center with the Emirates in Abu Dhabi called the Sawab Center, the Malaysians are creating a messaging center. But that ignores the whole private sector. We have worked with -- and by the way mostly just admiring from a distance, Dar al-Ifta in Egypt, which is the kind of think tank for the Grand Mufti in Egypt. We had a presentation the other day. Two years ago they handed me a gigantic sheaf of papers and saying, these are the fatwas we issued today. You know, two months ago they announced that they have a fatwa app and they're doing 2000 or more digital fatwas a day. I mean there's kind of fantastic stuff going on out there, which is frankly more important than anything that we do because that's the real audience and the information war will be won when governments don't have to do anything at all.

MR. McCANTS: All right. Let me see -- in the very back.

MS. SIEGEL: Thank you. I'm Tara Siegel and I'm a consultant at the World Bank. I'd like to briefly return to the question of efficacy in metrics. And I wondering if you'd been able to track how people are sharing this content and if that might be a metric for what should describe how effective this has been?

MR. FRENETT: I mean decoupling -- so on the metrics point, this is one of the very few downsides to curation rather than creation, is because there are independent audiences for each video because each video is produced by -- whether it's an organization in Kenya or whether it's whatever else. So they're the ones that sit behind and get access to all of the analytics. Sharing the play lists, I don't have it off the top of my head, but we did look at that as a stat. I think that actually -- and we also looked at inclusion of even some of our videos. Like the trailers we made, people started

building the trailers into their own play lists, which was an interesting point. But we're actually holding ourselves even to a higher standard in terms of we want to be able to actually have firm evidence that group A as opposed to group B that wasn't targeted are now consuming X percentage less pro ISIS content than they were a year ago when we started a very, very focused kind of targeting campaign.

So we're trying to hold ourselves to a very, very high standard. Sharing is definitely one of the metrics, but we actually want to push further than that again and evidence solid behavior change on line, which - we hope evidence of behavior change off line as well.

MR. McCANTS: All right. In the pink shirt.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Bobby Pestrank, citizen and a former public health official. Recognizing as you have the epidemiological antecedents which predispose someone to look for this information in the first place, and recognizing that you've had some success attracting people to the advertisements and other information that you're putting on line, what work are you now doing or will you be doing to connect these same people who formerly were predisposed to look for the information you're providing to the information, the services, and the opportunities which will no longer predispose them to look for the information that you're looking to dissuade them from?

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. Yasmin and Ross?

MR. FRENETT: I'm happy to jump in. So I think you've hit on basically where we need to go with this, which is what we're as a company, as an organization very focused on is building the sinews the on line videos and propaganda, one to one messaging on line, and then face to face programming. Too often in the CVE sector we've kind of looked at them as different things. It's like oh, well here's our video campaign and here's our off line intervention campaign and never the twain shall meet.

The gold standard for us is where we can replicate to a certain degree and that pipeline that not just ISIS but other extremist organizations use, where by someone engages with our content, then they have someone directly to speak to, and we're actually building software to speed that process, that can speak to them one to one. And from other sectors there's -- on line counseling is now an emerging sector. There's a whole range of applications and organizations that look for suicidal ideation on like and then engage with those people one to one and then bring them into off line programs. Building the sinews between those three steps is absolutely our final aim. And in North America we've already started talking to a number of organizations, who I won't go into detail with, about making sure that we build that into phase two.

So you've hit the nail on the head, sir.

MR. STENGEL: And I would just say that what we call CVE in the government at the State Department, countering violent extremism, is a long continuum. There's messaging at one end. I don't even know if that's at the end, but in terms of what we do at the State Department with public diplomacy, at the other end I mean there are education programs we do around the world, there are exchanges. There are all of these things which are closer to an epidemiological model because it's a person to person contact. And on the time/space continuum that's a long time, but ultimately again the battle is going to be won with those kind of engagements. And we're doing a lot, but I agree with you that the next step is how do you kind of fine tune it so that you actually have an interjection by a human being to dissuade someone from doing something.

MR. McCANTS: The gentleman in the plaid tie.

QUESTIONER: Hi, how are you. Faesel from (inaudible). I have actually a technical question about the dark web. Considering that like what's called -- the web we know is the one that's indexed by Google and stuff, but how about the dark

web, how can the counter messaging work? Is there any way -- is it impossible if like ISIS goes to the dark web, how will we able to track them or do any counter messaging?

MR. McCANTS: Well, can they really recruit over there anyway? I mean if it's so hard to get to, aren't the fish they're fishing for swimming in the more public ponds?

MS. GREEN: Yes, exactly. So the dark web, the part that isn't available to you and I without a special browser or special access approach is where -- and I've heard you talk about this before, Will, is where Al Qaeda was, you know, where the recruitment or the socializing of -- evangelizing of these ideas used to happen. Then there was a move to the open web and to social media sites to streaming content, which is alarming on one hand, but it's also -- you know, it's perverse to talk about this as an opportunity, but there is an opportunity there to reach those individuals and to inject new ideas and critical thinking. And so what the redirect method does, as you know, Faesel, because you've been one of the many advisors on this, is try to use targeted advertising to almost seize that opportunity.

I mean for the stuff that's happening in the dark web, it's often illicit and there are certainly private companies that are doing analytics and their own work often for governments to, for example, implant honey pots and detect the activity that's going on. It's not a space that Jigsaw is active in.

MR. FRENETT: So really briefly, I think that -- so as I mentioned previously, in addition to the messaging work we do, we're working quite hard to develop metrics and develop software around one to one engagement on line, even on solicited one to one engagement on line. And what we're trying to do there is isolate the variables that affect response rates, that affect the propensity for someone to respond. We started testing that out on the open platform, so on Facebook messenger and elsewhere, but

actually in terms of learning what works when you message someone, even if they're quite far down the path that methodology can also be applied in harder to reach places. So we're not doing it yet, but if we've very rigorous about gathering the data on what works then that could also be applied and it's probably more suitable to the dark web than messaging campaigns.

MR. McCANTS: All right. Let me take a few questions then. The gentleman here in the checked shirt.

QUESTIONER: Thank you. Joseph Barud from Carnegie. Two questions, one on the messaging targeting. You're going to a substantial differentiation between language, I mean Arabic and non Arabic regarding foreign fights, foreign recruits, none Islamic/Arab recruits. Is it a substantial differentiation?

The second question quickly. The refutation part, have you noticed that ISIS people or ISIS affiliated people go into the counter refutation of the refutation? They engage, are they proactive or they leave your space open and not engage with it?

MR. McCANTS: Thank you. I'll take a few more. We'll take a few more questions. Yes, just two rows back.

MR. VOLZ: Dustin Volz with Reuters. I'm wondering if you could talk at all about using the redirect method for other types of extremist groups in your future plans, specifically domestic extremist groups such as violent white supremacists. Are those plans under way? And do different groups such as those propose added challenges given that they don't have the same level of ideological concentration or consistency as ISIS, and certainly not the same level of notoriety?

Thank you.

MR. McCANTS: All right. We can take one more. Yes, just behind you.

QUESTIONER: Ryan Drisgo with Barbaricum. We've got the military

deployed in a lot of the theaters where ISIL is operating actively daily. I'm curious just to some thoughts to potential approach to best synchronize efforts across that domain.

MR. McCANTS: All right. Thank you. So we have a question about differences in targeting to English and Arabic speaking audiences, there is question about using the redirect method for other kinds of extremist groups, and then a final question about syncing up military efforts with messaging efforts.

And, Rick, you can probably speak to all three, but I imagine the third one in particular you'd be best suited for. So why don't we take the first two and then talk about synchronizing last.

Yasmin?

MS. GREEN: Yes, I might take the first and maybe we can take one each. But kind of having the vantage point of looking across the English and Arabic campaigns there were certainly differences, partly driven by what we heard from individuals that we spoke to on the ground, partly because the content out there was different. So, for example, in Arabic there is more religious debate about the concepts that the Islamic State is talking about because they're more native to the discourse in that language. One of the interesting things about Arabic, which of course you know, Joseph, is that it's a very nuanced language. So it's actually pretty difficult to talk about this topic without betraying your sentiment. So there's a term that the U.S. government uses that most individuals and governments use in the Arab world, which is Daesh, to refer to the Islamic State, which is a derogatory term. So you're faced with an Arab speaking -- you're faced with the option of either using Daesh, which is derogatory, or using al-Dawla, which is the state and it is respectful. It's interesting actually speaking to individuals who haven't -- to Arabs who haven't yet completed their de-radicalization process, they won't use the term Daesh, you know, they won't use it, and they know what

it means to use the term Dawla, so it's actually a little bit of an awkward dance having an interview with them about their thoughts. But I mean it's kind of -- this is a bit of a reflection of some of the other efforts and where they're aimed, is that there are a lot of other campaigns that talk about Daesh, you know, Daesh defectors or against Daesh. They're really reaching individuals who are not sympathetic to the group. If you want to reach individuals who are sympathetic, terms that are deferential to the group, like al-Dawla, supporter slogans, you know terms to refer to Baghdadi and Caliphate. Certainly in Arabic we were able to do a lot more of that nuanced targeting.

MR. McCANTS: Ross, the question on redirect for other extremist groups, can I put a finer point on it. Feel free to ignore it.

MR. FRENETT: I might. (Laughter)

MR. McCANTS: And the point is it's one thing to use this against ISIS, nobody is a fan of ISIS, it's polling is pretty wretched, it's another thing to use it on other groups that are labeled extremists, particularly those on the far right, I can imagine in Europe but also in this country. Do you worry about some of the politics surrounding using this method, working with a Google entity to, you know, shape extreme discourse on the political right in this country or in Europe?

MR. FRENETT: So do I worry? Yes is the short answer. And are we planning on doing it? Yes. So I won't leave it there, but yes, I mean we do. It's a concern that we have around the far right in particular and I very much don't want to get into politics, but because in various countries the center ground has shifted slightly things which previously might have been considered counter extremism work are now definitively in the realm of politics, and frankly an organization like ours that is focused on violent extremis shouldn't go anywhere near. Unfortunately, the United States and many other countries are not shy of organizations which fall under the category of violent --

pretty much terrorist organizations that are existing domestically and elsewhere. So we've seen this in Australia, we've seen it in the UK, and we've also seen it in North America.

So our efforts during phase two, and we're going to focus on the violent far right in America, we'll be very much focused on the small element of those that are violent. The interesting thing about how they behave is they're a little bit more brazen on line these days than ISIS fanboys. Now the question could be whether or not the policing of that in terms of take down of pages or everything else isn't quite as rigorous as it is with ISIS related content, or it could be just that -- I mean even content -- when we look at this in the UK versus America, in the UK if someone in their Facebook profile picture had a swastika and was pointing a gun at the camera that person is committing a crime, in the U.S. there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. So we found when we're looking for individuals that are generally at risk of carrying out violence that they're relatively open on line.

So it's going to be very interesting during phase two to see how they engage with the content is different to how ISIS fanboys engage.

MR. McCANTS: Okay, thank you. And, Rick Stengel, to you for last comment and any final thoughts.

MR. STENGEL: Right. And thanks for asking about the military space. I mean the military space and the information space are complementary. There's no better message than taking back Fallujah. That stands for something, that interrupts ISIL's victory narrative, which they had. So those two things work together. We have against ISIL and the coalition lines of effort. One of the lines of effort that we lead at the State Department, LOE 6, is about knitting up all the military information and the digital information. And it's not just military, it's what's happening in the economic space, so

what the Treasury Department is doing. ISIL's oil revenues are down by 30 percent. What we're doing in cultural heritage, which we do at the State Department, of kind of preserving cultural artifacts. So that whole coalition is knit up together.

And just as a final thought, I mean these government and private sector efforts are ultimately the way that we will win the day. And it's these kinds of innovations that are something that we very much support that we really want to be out there because they will make a huge difference.

MR. McCANTS: Thank you all and thank you for joining us today. Please join me in thanking the panel. (Applause)

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