TV, TWITTER, AND TELEGRAM: AL-SHABAAB'S ATTEMPTS TO INFLUENCE MASS MEDIA

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Abstract

This research paper examines and assesses how members of the Somali jihadi-insurgent group al-Shabaab have attempted to influence the mass media for strategic communications purposes. Using the group's activities between the years 2005 and 2017 as a case study, this paper asserts that al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media for news coverage purposes, despite its own operational security concerns since it withdrew from Mogadishu in 2011, is forward-looking, fast-paced, aggressive, and by and large successful. But the conclusions also assert that despite the group's focused strategic communications and its opportunistic use of Propaganda of the Deed, its successes correlate directly to the failure of the poor and generally uncoordinated communications efforts of the international coalition working to counter it.

The generally poor handling of strategic communications by an expensive combination of the Somali government, the African Union Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the United Nations (UN), and some members of the international community has allowed the strategic communications of al-Shabaab a relatively free, unchecked, and unchallenged passage.[1] In some cases related to major

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1 Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 11.

attacks, al-Shabaab's strategic communications are even viewed by members of the mass media as more authentic, realistic, timely, and truthful, than those of those of the coalition working to counter it.[2]

Keywords— *Al-Shabaab, social media, traditional media, mass media, influence, audience, terrorism, strategic communication, strategic communications*

About the Author

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Introduction

> **Bilal:** You mentioned that jihadists have cut off the media and developed their own media outlets. But (the mass media) can damage their publicity.

> **Author:** So you believe it's unnecessary for jihadi groups to use traditional media?

> **Bilal:** Yes, if we consider the fact that societies that support the cause don't trust or rely on traditional media. But the neutral public can be affected by the media, and that can cause the jihadists a great deal of harm if they don't prove the media wrong on the ground. That's because legitimacy is crucial to the jihadi cause.[3]

The above exchange is between Bilal, a self-proclaimed member of the Somali jihadi-insurgent group al-Shabaab, and the author working in her capacity as a journalist. The conversation took place over an encrypted electronic messaging application called Telegram.

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2 Tristan McConnell, email interview with author, 21 February 2017.
3 Bilal, Telegram messages to the author, 2014–2016.

In 2011, worried about journalists being followed by security services, or phone calls being traced and subsequent attacks being delivered from the air as a consequence, members of the militant group insisted that they could no longer conduct interviews with journalists via mobile phone or in person. Thus, in December of that year, after being driven from the capital, Mogadishu, al-Shabaab began its first known forays into networking electronically through social media, addressing and engaging members of the mass media, both hostile and sympathetic.

These electronic conversations, such as the one above, highlight an important shift in al-Shabaab's operational security and how members of the jihadi-insurgent group strategically communicate with members of the press when they can no longer do so in person. While jihadi insurgents using the Internet is not a new phenomenon, and the symbiotic,[4] oxygenic[5] relationship between the media and insurgents is well documented, just *how* jihadi insurgents attempt to influence members of the mass media for news coverage purposes has not been as closely interrogated.

This article asserts that al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media, by exploiting its successes and distorting its setbacks, and simultaneously minimising the successes and emphasising the setbacks of its enemies, is extremely aggressive, forward-looking, opportunistic, fast-paced, and focused, particularly on its target audience, or *audiences*, at the time of dissemination. Especially considering the group's decreasing size and resources since its withdrawal from Mogadishu.

However, al-Shabaab's communications capabilities are in no way remarkable. They are only bolstered by the fact that its foremost enemies at the time, in this case the UN-backed AU Mission to Somalia (AMISOM), the Federal Government of Somalia (FGS), and elements of the international community, have had generally poor and uncoordinated strategic communications efforts. In short, AMISOM and its partners have failed to counter effectively al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media, despite not having the same operational security concerns and constraints as the militant group. An even more concerning consequence is that AMISOM and its partners have at times proved even less credible in the eyes of the news media and the public than the

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4 Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York, Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 56, 201.
5 Margaret Thatcher, 'Speech to American Bar Association', South Kensington, Central London, 15 July 1985.

jihadi-insurgent group they pledge to fight.

This article will explore the better-known dissemination techniques used by al-Shabaab's jihadi insurgents to ensure maximum mass media coverage or interest, most notably through terror attacks, as well as the tools used to document and spread word of their terror or Propaganda of the Deed (POTD). In the past such tools have included radio broadcasts, press releases via audio file and e-mail, battlefield updates, and still photographs. However, here particular attention is paid to more modern electronic techniques that members of the group have more recently employed, namely its made-for-TV-news video production through its media arm Al Kata'ib News Channel and its cyberspace operations, most notably its use of Twitter.[6] The author will also investigate the effectiveness of the lesser-examined one-on-one approaches jihadi-insurgent groups make to journalists via encrypted messaging applications, in this case Telegram, to ostensibly alert journalists of upcoming soon-to-be published material, but also to sharpen their relationship with members of the media or to explain their cause(s). Finally, al-Shabaab's murky use of disinformation and fabricated online personas to influence the mass media to maximise coverage of incidents of POTD will be examined.

Al-Shabaab serves as a useful case study because 'a lot of what ISIS is doing now, Shabaab did first', and there are critical lessons to be learned from the successes and failures of al-Shabaab's strategic communications operations when it comes to its attempts to influence the mass media, some of which shall be explored in the conclusion.[7]

Methodology

This research relied much on personal experiences and contacts of the author in her capacity as a journalist in East Africa, covering Somalia and al-Shabaab, from 2011 to 2017. Primary resources such as videos, press releases, and tweets produced by al-Shabaab during this time period, most of which the author saved since those Twitter accounts have since been deactivated, were used extensively, as were the daily monitoring reports via email from a strategic communications expert working on the ground in Somalia to counter al-Shabaab and promote the work of the Somali government. In addition to these primary sources, the author

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6 Al-Shabaab Communique, NEW: AL KATA'IB NEWS CHANNEL (2010).
7 Christopher Anzalone. Stig Jarle Hansen. Bronwyn Bruton, 'Continuity and Change: al-Shabaab's Media Insurgency', Atlantic Council Webcast, Washington DC, 10 November 2016.

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also spoke to four international journalists on the record, and several more off the record, who are currently based in Nairobi, Kenya, and cover Somalia and al-Shabaab. The author also interviewed two strategic communications experts and one security expert, all working to counter the group. The author also spoke to one Somali journalist, working for an international news organisation, who wished to remain anonymous, as well as exchanging more than a thousand messages online with an alleged member of al-Shabaab in Somalia via Twitter and Telegram from 2014 to 2016. Portions of these conversations are featured in this article. News articles in their online form, written by journalists from traditional international mass media outlets such as Reuters, BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera, AFP, and AP, featuring al-Shabaab and their attacks or instances of POTD from 2007 to the present, were also consulted. A clearer delineation of what the author means by the phrase 'mass media' is included below. The author selected these outlets because they are regarded as having very high international reporting and ethical standards, and are also considered by many Somali experts as having the most accurate and reliable international coverage of Somalia and its neighbours.[8]

Literature Review

Previous academic and other research and analysis on Somalia, al-Shabaab, and AMISOM has been utilised throughout this article. In particular, the work of Stig Jarle Hansen, who authored the sole book on al-Shabaab, Christopher Anzalone, who has written much on al-Shabaab's media operations, and Paul Williams, who has critiqued AMISOM and its troop-contributing countries' efforts since AMISOM's inception, have been both primary and secondary sources. In his recent book *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Williams is quite critical of AMISOM's efforts to counter al-Shabaab's information operations, saying 'deploying a mission without the capabilities to wage an effective strategic communications campaign is a major error'.[9]

All of the above writers looked thoroughly into al-Shabaab's methods to disseminate its own strategic communications, their effectiveness, and the group's agility and ability to reach their target audiences, and on the other hand AMISOM's effectiveness in countering the group's communications. However, they all stopped short of examining al-Shabaab's *specific* attempts, both overt

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8 Paul Kellett, Whatsapp conversation with the author, 22 May 2018.
9 Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Chapter 11.

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and covert, to influence members of the media. The mass media should be considered one of al-Shabaab's key target audiences; it is here that this paper hopes to shed some light.

The majority of researchers in the field broadly agree that despite the group's diminishing size and resources, their communications efforts remain very effective, disciplined, and fast-paced, albeit opportunistic. They also all agree that the poor handling of communications by the anti-Shabaab coalition forces simply adds credence to the jihadis' cause. However, there is some contention over whether al-Shabaab's goals are essentially national or global.

More generally, much has been written about the relationship between terrorism and the media, as well as how jihadi insurgents use social media to communicate. Neville Bolt's theory that 'today's revolutionary uses the weight of the media against the media' is especially pertinent to this paper,[10] as are Philip Taylor's comments on today's news media, particularly television, being suited to report on terror attacks because of its 'pre-disposition to simplify'.[11] Bolt, David Betz, and Jaz Azari analyse Propaganda of the Deed as highly symbolic in the digital age of media, and something that permeates every facet of society; they view jihadi insurgent strategic communications and POTD as 'political marketing'.[12] In the light of their work, we can adopt Williams's formulation of the conclusion that 'an organisation at war would seek to market itself and its communications wherever it can and use whatever means at its disposal'.[13]

Several papers have been written about al-Shabaab's use of Twitter, particularly during the Nairobi Westgate attack, as well as an enlightening unpublished empirical survey examining the usefulness of al-Shabaab's tweets by journalists, by East-Africa-based correspondent Pete Martell. In particular, Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens's research paper 'Lights, Camera, Jihad' investigated the use of the language in al-Shabaab's tweets. He found the operators of the account to be promoting unity and 'present[ing] an image of a just and honourable organisation', which was useful to this study and could be more thoroughly

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10 Neville Bolt, *The Violent Image: Insurgent Propaganda and the New Revolutionaries* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012). pp. xviii.
11 Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the Present day,* Third Edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 274.
12 Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari, 'Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon', RUSI Whitehall Report, 11 September 2008, p. 8.
13 Paul Williams, Twitter Direct Message, 6 March 2017.

investigated, looking at a wider range of al-Shabaab's strategic communications.[14]

The research question 'how does al-Shabaab attempt to influence the mass media?' is appropriately narrow, due to the sheer volume of information collected during the research phase. It could potentially be expanded to '*how* and *how effectively* do jihadi-insurgent groups attempt to influence the mass media?', but this would likely warrant some quantitative research into whether al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media yielded positive or negative depictions of the group, or increased the number of news stories about it.

This article seeks to engage a mix of theoretical frameworks. These include the theories of insurgency and political communications, set squarely 'at the heart of the contemporary Information Age',[15] which, since the advent of social media, now has a 'direct route to the population'.[16] Al-Shabaab's media strategy, almost from its inception, 'became an integral part of its insurgency'.[17] Over the next decade the organisation ran a capable and adept, multi-faceted media and information operations campaign'.[18] The author agrees with the premise that the efforts of insurgent groups such as al-Shabaab 'are directed towards winning over and controlling a variety of locally and sometimes globally dispersed sympathisers and target populations',[19] but, with the advent of globalisation, the effects of the Internet, Somalia's decades-long civil war, and the ensuing refugee crisis, both al-Shabaab's target audiences and its narratives have shifted over time. Those groups seeking to counter it have not been as successful in this regard, says Williams; '[a]s circumstances changed, however, so AMISOM's strategic communications needed to evolve'.[20] The author agrees with the assessment that they have not and delves further into some of those challenges evolving from the changing and *globalising* media landscape, of which it is observed that its 'most salient feature is instantaneous connectivity, promoting cultural overlap and fragmentation'[21] and what that means for both sides of the fight. Both sides of the *communications* war in Somalia are 'engaged just as intensely in a

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14 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens,, Shiraz Maher, James Sheehan, *Lights, Camera, Jihad: Al Shabaab's Western Media Strategy*, International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. (London: King's College London, 2012) p. 33.
15 Daniel Bell in 1999, quoted in Bolt, *The Violent Image.*
16 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 8
17 Christopher Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change: The Evolution and Resilience of al-Shabaab's Media Insurgency 2016–2017', Hate Speech International, November 2016, p. 4.
18 Anzalone (2016) p. 38 as quoted in Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia*, Chapter 11.
19 Bolt, *The Violent Image* p. 46.
20 Williams, *Fighting for Peace,* Chapter 11.
21 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 12.

propaganda war as […] in a traditional military war',[22] because so much of the success in this war is based on public opinion worldwide and not only on the opinions the Somali people.

While this article looks at all facets of how al-Shabaab works to influence the mass media, certain logistical limitations have meant that it will focus mainly on how al-Shabaab attempts to influence the international or foreign press, as explained below. How al-Shabaab has attempted to influence members of the Somali press writing in the local language is also certainly a topic for future study.

Definitions

The RAND Corporation's research group notes that Somalia is 'a case that defies definitions' for a number of reasons.[23] First, al-Shabaab's goals have been to overthrow the Somali government, to rid the country of foreign forces, and to rule Somalia themselves as a 'fundamentalist Islamic state';[24] the fact is that for many years Somalia has 'lacked any semblance of a central government' to overthrow.[25] Second, in addition to the newly formed Somali government and its forces, al-Shabaab is also battling an internationally-backed African Union peacekeeping mission with more than twenty-two thousand 'peacekeepers' on the ground in Somalia from various African nations, a mission that is really engaged in peace-enforcement operations against al-Shabaab.[26] This tenuous situation has led in the past to accidental civilian deaths in combat,[27] a tragedy that al-Shabaab delights in exploiting.[28]

» **Propaganda or Strategic Communications?**

The use of the word 'propaganda' is contentious amongst political scientists, particularly because of its negative historical connotations with organising public opinion and because of its 'wide catchment area'.[29] Bolt prefers thinking

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22 John Mackinlay and Alison Al-Baddawy, *Rethinking Counterinsurgency* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2008), p. x.
23 Seth G. Jones, Andrew Liepman, and Nathan Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia: Assessing the Campaign Against al-Shabaab* (Santa Monica, California: RAND Corporation, 2016) p. 6.
24 Claire Felter, Jonathan Masters, and Mohammed Aly Sergie, '*Al-Shabaab Backgrounder*' Council on Foreign Relations. 9 January 2018.
25 Jones, Liepman & Chandler, *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 6.
26 AMISOM Mandate, African Union Mission in Somalia Website.
27 AMISOM, 'Statement on Death of Civilian in Mogadishu' 15 December 2016.
28 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: 6 Somali civilians killed (5 men,1women) after #AMISOM forces attacked their minibus near #Qoryoley town- Residents #Somalia' (18 December 2016)
29 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 33.

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of the insurgent as a political marketer or strategic communicator, rather than a propagandist, which this author also finds accurate.[30] POTD is loosely defined as a political action meant to be an example to others; and in the case of al-Shabaab this usually translates into large and small scale attacks. POTD and strategic communications are commonly analysed in terms of the narrative, the deed, and the audience. This study examines the decisions al-Shabaab has made to publicise and exploit certain events in the mass media and to downplay and mute others, by assessing the narrative, the deed, *the medium*, *the tools*, and the audience(s).

» Mass Media

'Mass media' is used in this context to include traditional news media, such as independent and government-controlled radio and television broadcasts, wire agencies, newspapers, and online news publications, all operated by professional journalists.

While in theory the phrase 'mass media' includes members of the hugely important local Somali press as well as the international journalists covering Somalia and al-Shabaab, we will focus mostly on the work of al-Shabaab's strategic communicators in relation to members of the international press. This is largely because of the language and communication barriers faced by the author, as well as her inability to verify the credentials of some local Somali journalists working either independently or for various local media, a few of which have been accused of having questionable agendas. The author did interview a renowned and respected Somali journalist employed by an international organisation, who provided invaluable insight into how al-Shabaab deals with the local press; small portions of this interview are included in this text, however the journalist wishes to remain anonymous.

The phrase 'mass media' does *not* include self-proclaimed journalists who post only on Twitter, Facebook, or small blogs; these accounts sometimes cannot be verified, and the users could be sympathetic or vulnerable to either al-Shabaab or to coalition forces fighting the insurgent group. Social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook, therefore, are referred to as *tools* journalists use to do their job, and not included in the definition of mass media.

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30 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. xxi.

> **Target Audience**

Al-Shabaab has more than one target audience, but this article will focus on al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media as a target audience. In the study of psychological operations (PSYOPS), the United States military analyses and identifies a target audience by looking at its common characteristics. While PSYOPS is an outdated term—the US military no longer refers to their influence operations as PSYOPS—elements of the basic definition are appropriate in this case.

'[P]otential target audiences are [i]dentified and analysed for *power* (their ability or capacity to perform effectively), for *accessibility* (by U.S. PSYOP media), and for *susceptibility* [and vulnerability] (the degree to which they may be manipulated)'.[31]

The *power* of the mass media is fairly apparent. They can choose to disseminate news of a suicide bombing in a small market in Baidoa to 100 people, or to a million. Although the advent of the Internet and the jihadi insurgents' increased use of social media, where 'images spread virally, exponentially like self-generating epidemics',[32] may seem to have eroded this power, the coming chapters provide evidence of just how important jihadi insurgents still find the traditional media for their strategic communications.

The *susceptibilities*, or vulnerabilities, of the media include journalists' multiple deadlines, the demand to fill the 24-hour news cycle with information, and the 'commoditisation […] and tabloidisation'[33] of whatever their medium is, for example TV, that is specifically suited to reporting on terror attacks.[34] Bolt neatly refers to it as 'today's image-driven media ecology'.[35] Journalists' susceptibilities or vulnerabilities include financial constraints, possible equipment shortages, technical failures or transmission problems, the media's requirement to get both sides of the story, and the inevitable dilemma that reporting on terror incidents arguably serves as the spread of fear and sometimes terror ideology.[36] For local Somali journalists especially, safety is their main vulnerability. Sixty-

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31 US Army, *Field Manual 33-1-1 Psychological Operations: Techniques and Procedures*, May 1994, Chapter 6, 'Target Audience Analysis'.
32 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 8.
33 Neville Bolt, David Betz and Jaz Azari, 'Propaganda of the Deed 2008: Understanding the Phenomenon', RUSI Whitehall Report, 11 September 2008, p. 12.
34 Taylor, *Propaganda and Persuasion*, p. 274.
35 Bolt, *The Violent Image*, p. 9.
36 Michael Jetter, 'Terrorism and the Media', Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA) Discussion Paper No. 8497, Bonn, Germany, September 2014, p. 2.

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two journalists have been killed in Somalia since 1992, making it one of the deadliest places for journalists in the world.[37] Local journalists often cannot afford the armed security that foreign journalists use. If they report on sensitive or unpopular issues, they too run the risk of becoming targets of al-Shabaab or other armed groups, including in the past even the Somali government.[38]

The mass media's accessibility, or access to information, is also a major factor at play in Somalia, often in favour of al-Shabaab. The jihadi insurgent group provides information in various ways to journalists about events as they happen. With a few rare exceptions, the jihadi insurgents cannot risk meeting journalists in person. AMISOM and the Somali government do not have those same operational security concerns, yet AMISOM still often avoids interacting with members of the media, much to their own detriment.[39]Although more willing to indulge journalists, the government of Somalia frequently provides them with inaccurate or conflicting information, albeit sometimes unintentionally.

Al-Shabaab's Significance

While this article focuses on al-Shabaab's strategic communications capacities and the way they interact with the mass media, it is important to mention that 'most insurgent groups are inherently imitative', and therefore some of al-Shabaab's communications strategies and techniques are relevant to other salafi-jihadi groups.[40] Most importantly, al-Shabaab's narrative has often imitated that of al-Qaeda Central's (AQC), , sometimes despite its own particular strategic objectives.[41] This is important because just as insurgent groups copy one another, so can the groups or coalitions working to counter them.

In 2012, al-Shabaab and AQC announced their allegiance in a video disseminated online;[42] thus al-Shabaab formally became part of the global jihad movement, although documents seized during the Osama Bin Laden operation revealed

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37 Committee to Protect Journalists, 'Report on Somalia: Impunity Index—Getting Away with Murder', 22 February 2017.
38 Abdi Sheikh, 'Somali Government Shuts Down Newspaper, Arrests Journalist', Reuters News Agency, 17 October 2016.
39 Jamal Osman, 'Exclusive: Inside an al-Shabaab Training Camp', Channel 4 News, 16 December 2013.
40 Charlie Winter, *Media Jihad: The Islamic State's Doctrine for Information Warfare*, (London: International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence, King's College London, 2017), p. 7.
41 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*. AQC refers to the original Al Qaeda organisation, hereafter referred to as AQC.
42 Nelly Lahoud, 'The Merger of Al-Shabaab and Qa'idat al-Jihad', *CTC Sentinel*, Vol 5. Issue 2, February 2012, p. 3.

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that he was in touch and advising al-Shabaab's leadership well before then.[43] Al-Shabaab's media division uses AQC's training techniques and sponges off its dissemination capability. 'By doing this, al-Shabaab has maintained and perhaps even increased public perceptions of its capabilities.'[44]

One reason the study of al-Shabaab is fascinating and relevant is that despite an aggressive US-led programme to degrade and eradicate the group, including the use of air and ground forces, al-Shabaab has proved effective and resilient,[45] albeit opportunistic. Although it is a small organisation, al-Shabaab is extremely agile, well structured, and tightly organised; therefore their communications efforts define their successes.[46] Al-Shabaab began as a small insurgent group, but soon controlled large swathes of Somalia, behaving, according to most experts, more like a government than an insurgency. The capacity of their media division for dynamic information operations adapted as the organisation changed, flourishing with its victories and often waning quietly with its defeats. However, the group failed to advertise sufficiently its successes early on to the people in the rural Somali heartlands where it first began.[47]

Another reason for al-Shabaab's significance as a case study is due to the implementation of a 'tailored engagement'[48] model by US, EU, UN, and UK forces in Somalia, mirrored elsewhere on the African continent such as in the campaigns against ISIS in Libya and against Boko-Haram in Nigeria. This tailored engagement model is a 'low investment, light footprint'[49] approach to counterterrorism, helping 'Africans solve African problems'[50] by equipping, training, and mentoring those African armies perceived as friendly. These tailored engagements, along with the presence of well-resourced Special Operations forces on the ground, are being emulated elsewhere in the world by coalition forces. The jihadi insurgents, however, are fighting back with equally, if not *more* advanced information operations, responding to these 'tailored engagements' by producing messages directed against Western nations and third-party counterinsurgency forces. Those messages have inspired attacks abroad, including attacks by ISIS and AQC in Europe and the US. In al-Shabaab's case,

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43 Osama Bin Laden, 'Letter to Mukhtar Abu al-Zubayr, English Translation, 7 August 2010.
44 Stephen Harley, e-mail interview with the author, 18 February 2017.
45 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change,* p. 13.
46 Kellett, Paul. Skype interview with author, 25 February 2017.
47 Ibid.
48 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 33.
49 Greg Jaffe, 'White House Officials Defend Somalia Strategy as Counterterrorism Model' *Washington Post*, 3 April 2015.
50 Eric Schmitt, 'US Army Hones Antiterror Strategy for Africa, in Kansas', *New York Times,* 18 October 2013.

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attacks have been launched in AMISOM member countries such as Kenya, Uganda, and Djibouti.

Al-Shabaab has also waged communications wars with competing jihadi insurgent groups in Somalia, such as the Islamic State, led by al-Shabaab defector Abdulqadr Mu'min.

A Brief History of al-Shabaab's Communications

Al-Shabaab has transformed quickly from a small group of roughly thirty people in the centre of the country in 2005–2006[51] to a 'de-facto authority, governing […] some 40 thousand square kilometres including the capital Mogadishu'[52] with approximately 10 to 15 thousand soldiers at most.[53] Once expelled from the capital in 2011 it morphed once again into the smaller, guerrilla-style movement it is today. Al-Shabaab is still able to launch devastating, complex, hit-and-run style attacks within both Somalia and its neighbouring countries, but it 'no longer [poses] a strategic threat to the existence of the Somali Government', it neither controls nor governs a significant territory.[54]

When AMISOM troops entered Mogadishu in 2007, al-Shabaab shifted the targeting of its strategic communications from Somali government members, the Ethiopians, and their international supporters, to the troop-contributing countries of AMISOM, which were mainly Uganda and Burundi at that time. The group consistently labelled them as Christian invaders, 'crusaders' and 'kāfirs' [non-believers]. Al-Shabaab accused the foreign soldiers of being corrupt[55] and killing innocent Muslims. The group consistently utilised language that suggested 'the war in Somalia [is] part of a wider global "clash of civilizations"'.[56] AMISOM had very little to offer in return in terms of strategic communications.

The years 2011 and 2012 marked a turning point for al-Shabaab; its losses of territory, particularly the major cities, caused revenue collections for the group to slow drastically. When the US designated al-Shabaab as a Foreign Terrorist

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51 Williams and Anzalone both maintain that the exact timing of the formation of al-Shabaab is disputed because the group was operating clandestinely.
52 Paul Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations 2005-2015: A Concise Overview,* Unpublished Paper. Draft Version. (Washington DC, USA, 2015), p. 1.
53 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change,* p. 13.
54 Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations,* p. 1.
55 Al-Shabaab Film, 'Badr al-Ṣūmāl', 2006.
56 Williams, *Al-Shabaab's Information Operations,* p. 5.

Organisation its revenue streams from abroad were seriously affected; as more stringent checks and balances were initiated at airports, the arrival of foreign fighters to join al-Shabaab was curtailed.

In February 2011, AMISOM and the Somali government began a series of offensives against the militant group; al-Shabaab withdrew from Mogadishu in August. Kenya and Ethiopia joined AMISOM at the end of 2011, and by 2012 nearly all of al-Shabaab's major finance-generating hubs had been captured and were under AMISOM and Somali government control. It was here, amidst the constant threat of US bombardment from the air and UK surveillance and reconnaissance missions, that al-Shabaab stopped communicating with journalists by phone, and, with a few notable exceptions,[57] stopped communicating face-to-face as well. The jihadi insurgents went underground and their strategic communications tactics transformed accordingly. Its media division began releasing videos featuring the group's asymmetric warfare[58] 'including pinpoint mass assaults on isolated AMISOM [and] Somali government'[59] positions. Anzalone also states that the 'pace of insurgent media production […] slowed periodically'[60] although its strategic communicators were still able to release 'polished'[61] videos throughout this period. Just as their battlefield techniques had to change, so did their communications strategy. It was then that they began to 'pioneer'[62] the jihadi insurgent use of Twitter, Facebook, and other electronic communications techniques to capture the attention of the press, particularly but not limited to the foreign press.

In early 2010, a severe drought struck East Africa, ravaging in particular the southern part of Somalia. It was the militant group's handling of the crisis and the resulting famine that is one of the factors attributable to the group's decline, as it served to severely undermine al-Shabaab's support base.[63] This is one example of al-Shabaab's inability to influence the mass media or other target audiences.

Despite these setbacks, it is also no coincidence that it was around this time that the African Union/United Nations Information Support Team (IST) was

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57 Mohamed Hamza, 'Exclusive: Al-Shabaab Moves in on Central Somalia', Al Jazeera English, 14 November 2016.
58 Al-Shabaab Film, 'The Burundian Bloodbath: Battle of Daynille', 2010.
59 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 21
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
62 Stig Jarle Hansen, Skype interview with the author, 6 March 2017.
63 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 53.

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formed 'in support of the AMISOM operations from 2010 onwards'.[64] The IST, contracted to the private public relations firms Albany Associates and Bell Pottinger, successfully brought in numerous international media and strategic communications experts and 'changed the narrative of AMISOM, previously viewed as murderous Christian mercenary invaders [by much of the Somali public] and created the space for the move from the transitional government to the Federal Government of Somalia'.[65] The contract is described by a former IST employee, Richard Bailey, as 'a desperate and ultimately very successful attempt to reverse the appalling headlines emanating from Mogadishu about AMISOM'.[66]

The IST also facilitated embedded reporting trips with AMISOM troops for many journalists, generating much-needed local, regional, and international press coverage of the organisation. Journalists were finally able to visit a now 'liberated' Mogadishu and the areas around it again, and cover more stories from AMISOM's perspective with sufficient operational security. This worked directly against al-Shabaab, who were unable to converse with journalists, even by phone, to provide their perspective. The IST, however, experienced severe setbacks after the private firms lost their UN contract at the end of 2014.

Al-Shabaab's foreign fighter pool also began to dry up in 2013 for two reasons: one, because potential recruits started to travel to Iraq and Syria to fight rather than to Somalia, 'severely constrict[ing] a once-important recruitment pool for al-Shabaab'[67] and two, because of al-Shabaab leader Ahmed Godane's perceived internal purge of foreign fighters to ensure what he believed would be the group's longevity.[68] Godane believed the foreign fighters, most conspicuously Omar Hammami, had brought unwelcome attention to al-Shabaab from the international community through their online influence on members of the mass media; and he thought that al-Shabaab's POTD were having a 'scatter-gun marketing' effect on subsequent news coverage, simply because of the foreign involvement.[69]

Godane was killed in a US drone strike almost one year to the day after the attack on Nairobi's Westgate Mall in Kenya. It was around that time that al-

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64 Harley, e-mail.
65 Ibid.
66 Richard Bailey, e-mail to the author, 3 March 2017.
67 Jones et al., *Counterterrorism and Counterinsurgency in Somalia*, p. 52.
68 Kellett. Skype.
69 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed 2008*, p. 12.

Shabaab's recruitment campaign began to focus more regionally, attempting, it would seem, to attract Muslims in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda, appealing to them in their native languages through 'refined' videos, while lamenting the poor treatment of Muslims in their respective countries.[70] Al-Shabaab's attempts to influence the mass media also became more focused on promoting its attacks on AMISOM, decrying the 'lying' governments of its contributing countries and promoting attacks on Kenyan 'Christian' targets, such as the Mpeketoni attack in 2014,[71] and the Garissa University attack in 2015.[72]

In October 2017, al-Shabaab launched its most devastating attack to date, at a crowded junction in the centre of Mogadishu. According to one watchdog group, more than 500 people, mostly civilians, died in that attack,[73] which al-Shabaab is yet to publicly claim. Most experts and the general public, however, believe the militant group is responsible.

'The Lion Must Learn to Speak'[74]

An African proverb states that 'until the lion learns to speak, the tale of the hunt will always glorify the hunter'. This is true of al-Shabaab's strategic communications capabilities when compared to those of its enemies. Al-Shabaab continues to present a major challenge to AMISOM and the Somali government because the militants repeatedly demonstrate that they can neither be contained nor eradicated, thus making their enemies look incompetent. Al-Shabaab does this by its consistent use of high-profile attacks and the media coverage that follows them. The group's hard targets include AMISOM, Somali army bases, and the Somali government's secure sites, such as the presidential palace and the prime minister's residence. Their soft targets include hotels housing government officials, restaurants, and markets, which the group claims are frequented by Somali security forces.

The media coverage that follows depends on the instance of POTD the group employs. The desired narrative, audience, medium, and therefore the required

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70 Hansen, Skype.
71 Staff Writer, 'Kenya Attack: Mpeketoni near Lamu hit by al-Shabaab Raid', *BBC*, 16 June 2014.
72 Alexander Smith and Robert Windrem, 'Kenya Attack: al-Shabaab Targets Christians at Garissa University College', *NBC News*, 2 April 2015.
73 Abdi Sheikh, 'Somali Government Shuts Down Newspaper, Arrests Journalist', *Reuters,* 17 October 2016.
74 Patrick Gathara, e-mail to the author, 14 April 2016.
(Note: this E-mail interview was initially conducted for a CNN story about the same subject. See reference for 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre' under secondary online sources. Portions of the interview, not used in the CNN report, were featured in this article with Gathara's permission.)

tools, together dictate whether the group will receive what they see as positive or negative coverage. Positive coverage might be coverage that leads to increased notoriety for the group, more credibility on the global terror stage, an upsurge in recruitment, an increase in public support from the Somali diaspora, as well as the all-important support from the local population. Negative media coverage of an event, effectively negative publicity, potentially leads to negative public opinion; 'the average person can explain away the targeted assassination of an oppressive political leader [b]ut the indiscriminate blow-out from a bomb in a public place, that is different'.[75] Negative publicity might also lead to an increased response or a crackdown, meaning tighter security in the capital and fewer chances for al-Shabaab to employ POTD, thus leading to a downturn in recruitment and a loss of support from the Somali diaspora because of tougher measures imposed by the international community, which would mean fewer resources, fewer safe havens, and inevitably much less help. Al-Shabaab aims to avoid this type of negative publicity, as does AMISOM and the Federal Government of Somalia, but both sides hope to exploit the misdeeds of the other side in the eyes of the public.

The counter-narrative is also extremely important and can be exploited just as astutely. Attacking a beachfront or park filled with Somali civilians, women, and children, will undoubtedly, if exploited by enemies of al-Shabaab, have negative blowback from the local population; more civilians would be willing to inform on the group's activities, and fewer would be willing to join the group because of their perceived anti-Somali, anti-Muslim brutality. But, if news of the attack is not carefully and quickly managed and disseminated by Somali security forces and the Somali government, then it will take on a narrative of its own, or, even worse, it will take on the narrative of al-Shabaab's communicators. Al-Shabaab frequently claims that its soft targets are chosen because they house or host Somali government forces, members of the Somali government, or foreign troops. However, dozens of civilians are also killed in attacks by al-Shabaab and often these don't get sufficient mention, if any, during the ensuing news coverage. These stark and important omissions were highlighted in Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin's research paper that studied the effectiveness and targeting of al-Shabaab suicide bombers. Basing much of their research data from information contained in online traditional media stories, they asserted that 'al-Shabaab's suicide bombing efforts appear to be tactically planned to

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75 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed 2008*, p. 3.

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target and degrade specific enemy institutions and especially personnel, and not simply to generally engender shock and awe in civilian populations'.[76] If the news media continues to report that al-Shabaab solely attacks institutions that cater to al-Shabaab's enemies, and fails to report and address adequately the fact that there were numerous civilian casualties as well, if this is indeed the case, then this is a significant failure by the coalition working to counter al-Shabaab's communications campaign. Attacking an AMISOM military base, on the other hand, as shall be examined later in this section, can serve to boost the pro-al-Shabaab, anti-foreign invasion sentiment. But so much of this depends on how events are depicted in the media.

» Mall Attack, Nairobi, Kenya, 2013

On the 21 September 2013, four al-Shabaab militants carrying AK-47s and hand grenades stormed the upscale Westgate Mall in Nairobi, Kenya, killing sixty-seven people, including more than a dozen foreigners. The media swooped in, reporting live on the ensuing hostage situation, which lasted for eighty hours. The terror generated by al-Shabaab from this attack was felt around the world, with breaking news coverage reported around the clock from the scene. In al-Shabaab's usual fast-paced style, the group's media division used Twitter to get their message out, 'live-tweeting' the attack and posting audio online, allegedly of phone calls with the attackers inside the mall, who explained that Kenyan troops needed to leave Somalia and stop 'killing [their] children'.[77]

The coverage of the attack was a victory for the militant group in general, and generated extremely negative publicity for its enemy, Kenya. The Kenyan government mismanaged nearly every aspect of the incident under the scrutiny of the world's media,[78] consistently releasing inaccurate information, and handling their strategic communications unilaterally with no help from AMISOM's IST. They claimed, for example, that there were thirteen–fifteen attackers inside the mall and then said all the attackers were dead. The Kenyan response to retake the mall during the attack also lacked any semblance of a tactical plan and generated terrible publicity.[79]

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76 Jason Warner and Ellen Chapin, 'Targeted Terror, the Suicide Bombers of al-Shabaab', *Combating Terrorism Center at West Point,* 13 February 2018, p. 12.
77 Staff Writer, 'After Kenya Mall Attack, Children Scarred with Trauma', Associated Press Appearing in *USA Today*, 13 October 2013.
78 Daniel Howden, 'Terror in Nairobi: the Full Story of al-Shabaab's mall attack', *Guardian*, 4 October 2013.
79 Kellett, Skype.

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Once the fight was over, and the attackers dead, the army proceeded to loot the shops at the mall and drink alcohol at the various restaurants, at times stepping over bodies with shopping bags of stolen goods in tow.[80] Most of this was captured on CCTV footage, which was seized by the Kenyan security services and later leaked to the media. Al-Shabaab used the video and news clips from the attack in anti-Kenyan messaging, labelling the government and troops as corrupt liars, cowards, drunks, and thieves.[81] Al-Shabaab's live-tweeting and quick claims of responsibility, versus the government's inaccurate and slow responses, also highlighted al-Shabaab's adeptness at improvising publicity.

It was a powerful, 'viscerally repugnant' message of insecurity for Kenya.[82] The fallout devastated Kenya's tourism industry.[83] The country's economy and, most importantly, the perception of security by Kenya's own citizens, took major blows. The calls for Kenya to withdraw its troops from Somalia had begun and would only get louder.[84] This was a smashing strategic communications win for al-Shabaab.

» **El Adde, Somalia, 2016**

Early in the morning of 15 January 2016, al-Shabaab attacked a Kenyan military base in El Adde, southern Somalia. This proved not only a military disaster for the Kenyans, with an estimated 170 dead, but also proved to be a public relations debacle for the military and government. Yet it generated, at least initially, extremely limited media coverage. In what had become a standard method of attack, al-Shabaab drove a car packed with explosives into the base, after which some 300 to 500 militant fighters breached the base's perimeter. This was a tried and tested method, extremely effective on small AMISOM outposts too far away from any major hub that might be able to assist with a quick reaction force. Al-Shabaab had successfully used the same modus operandi on a Burundian base,[85] a Ugandan base,[86] and an Ethiopian base,[87] all of which yielded high death tolls of AMISOM soldiers.

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80 Staff Writer, 'Westgate Attack: Kenya CCTV Shows Soldiers Looting', *BBC News*, 21 October 2013.
81 Al-Shabaab Film, 'The Westgate Siege: Retributive Justice', 2015.
82 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 3
83 Jacob Kushner, 'Mall Attack to Cost Kenya $200 Million in Tourism', Associated Press, appearing in *USA Today*, 1 October 2013.
84 Faith Karimi, 'Kenyans Debate: Time to get Troops out of Somalia?', *CNN*, 28 September 2013.
85 Staff Writer, 'Al-Shabaab Kills Dozens of African Union Troops at Base in Somalia.' Agence France-Presse for *Guardian*, 26 June 2015.
86 Staff Writer, 'Al-Shabaab Kills Dozens of African Union Troops at Base in Somalia.' Agence France-Presse for *The Guardian*, 26 June 2015.
87 Robyn Kriel, 'Ethiopia Seeks Leadership Role in Fight with al-Shabaab', *CNN*, 26 July 2015.

In El Adde, the Kenyans were surprised, quickly overwhelmed, and massacred.[88] Al-Shabaab filtered news of the attack through its radio stations, claiming responsibility for the attack, and advertising the high death toll. They also emailed press releases to select journalists and spread the news through Twitter accounts suspected to be sympathetic to al-Shabaab.[89] Local Somali journalists eventually got information from villagers and Somali soldiers operating nearby, but given the remoteness of the location it was some time before international and Kenyan media could verify reports of the attack. Initially, in a written statement, the Kenyan Ministry of Defence said that the base was occupied solely by Somali government troops, and that the Kenyan soldiers had simply rushed to help them. But, as soon as that was disputed by diplomatic sources working with AMISOM, the Kenyans went silent. Like many of the jihadi insurgent's military operations before that, al-Shabaab documented the attack using video and still photographs. The photographs were quickly posted online, showing numerous Kenyan fatalities and equipment that had been seized or destroyed. Eventually it was proven that at least 141 Kenyans died that day;[90] however sources say the death toll was closer to 170. This is the highest death toll incurred in a military operation in Kenya's history. The Kenyan government never admitted this, avoiding journalists' calls for comments. Once the huge death toll was proven, Kenya was once again delegitimised in the eyes of the international community, media, and their own citizens, and accused of a cover-up.

The success of the attack also made clear just how uncoordinated AMISOM was in terms of operational security, information sharing, and strategic communications. Instead of strategic communications being managed centrally by AMISOM's IST, public relations were handled unilaterally by Kenya. The media were left in the dark by the Kenyan military, and once again had to rely instead on al-Shabaab for information. 'Not only was AMISOM deployed without the capacity to conduct an information campaign, its contributing countries were not always willing to implement the communications strategy that was subsequently developed',[91] writes Williams. Veteran British journalist Tristan McConnell, who has been covering al-Shabaab for more than a decade from Nairobi, states: 'the tendency of Kenya in particular to lie in its press

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88 Robyn Kriel and Briana Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre', *CNN*, 31 May 2016.
89 Stephen Harley, 'Daily Media Monitoring Report', e-mails, 2015–2017.
90 Kriel and Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre.'
91 Paul Williams, 'Strategic Communications for Peace Operations: The African Union's Information War Against al-Shabaab', *Stability: International Journal of Security and Development* 7 (1) P3 (2018). Abstract.

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statements means that we've reached the thoroughly disheartening situation in which the terrorists seem more honest than the government'.[92] This is a textbook example of insurgent theorist David Galula's famous advice, that 'the insurgent […] is free to use every trick; if necessary, he can lie [...]. The counterinsurgent is tied to his responsibilities […]. If he lies, […] he may achieve some temporary successes, but at the price of being discredited for good'.[93] Again this provides perfect strategic communications ammunition for al-Shabaab's communications war. 'To compete effectively in the media arena, the Kenyan Defence Force must learn to be fast, first and provide accurate facts', Patrick Gathara said. 'Even, and perhaps especially, when it is bad news. Better the public hear it from KDF and not from al-Shabaab. Our lion must learn to speak.'[94]

Counter Narrative Failures

The problem in Somalia may be not as much the effectiveness of al-Shabaab's strategic communications, as the failure of AMISOM's IST to counter them.[95] Stephen Harley is a strategic communications expert and a founding member of the IST, credited for many of the initial successes of anti-al-Shabaab communications. He blames the success of al-Shabaab's influence on the mass media on a 'collective' failure of AMISOM, the Somali government, and the donor nations, to recognise the critical importance of communications at a counterinsurgency level.[96] According to Harley, the IST also suffered from a lack of resources, a high turnover of personnel, and the inappropriate hiring of professionals who lacked knowledge of the local languages and a solid understanding of Somali culture. These are all important reasons why the influence of AMISOM and the government of Somalia has dwindled. 'AMISOM should move away from the 1980s control messaging: deny, deny and maybe lie. Al-Shabaab has consistently proven it will release convincing video of the attacks, yet individual governments still attempt to deny what happened,' Harley says.[97]

Another failure of the anti-al-Shabaab coalition's counter narrative to overcome the jihadis' strategic communications is their lack of understanding of the needs

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92 McConnell, e-mail.
93 Galula, David, *Counterinsurgency Warfare: Theory and Practice* (London: Praeger, 1964), pp. 14–15.
94 Gathara, Patrick, e-mail to the author, 14 April 2016.
95 IST was reformed when the UN/AU contract was awarded in a bidding process from Albany & Associates/ Bell Pottinger to another organisation
96 Harley, e-mail.
97 Harley, e-mail.

of their own target audience, namely journalists. Deadlines, timeliness, access to accurate and reliable information and relevant material, to name a few. Perhaps, with more access to these tools, journalists would be more likely to report from the perspectives of AMISOM and the Somali government, and in essence be more influenced by them, and less by al-Shabaab. 'Al-Shabaab gets their message out fast. Their claim [of responsibility] is fast. They call journalists as the attack is happening to drive their line of events […]. They record audio during the attack and air it on local radio.'[98] With gunshots sounding in the background of those calls, it makes for gripping news coverage. In order to control the counter narrative, AMISOM and the Somali government need to do the same, or better.

A stark example of where counter messaging tried and failed was the response to the October 2017 bombing of a junction in Mogadishu that killed close to 500 people, most of whom were civilians. Interestingly, al-Shabaab did not ever publicly claim responsibility for that bombing, most likely due to the public outcry that ensued. However the impetus to use this bombing to show the true brutality of al-Shabaab was quickly lost. Initially, crowds of young people took to the streets to show their anger towards the insurgent group, and people wore red ribbons to show their disgust at al-Shabaab's cruelty and to honour the victims. First responders were hugged and kissed by the demonstrators and hailed as heroes. But the movement did not gain enough traction because it was quickly politicised by members of the Somali government. Without journalists on the ground, it was difficult for media houses, many of which don't have permanent offices in Mogadishu, to put names to the victims. Many deem Mogadishu too dangerous to send their personnel without adequate security and time to plan. As a result, the pictures of the bombing site and closed circuit television footage of the truck laden with detonating explosives, dominated the media space on television and online. Despite the death toll making this one of the worst suicide attacks in history, many international media houses moved on too quickly, about 24 hours after the bombings, to other news stories located in places easier for their journalists to access than Mogadishu. Today, not even a memorial exists for the victims of that atrocity.

Another example of a *missed* counter-narrative opportunity was responding to the revelation that al-Shabaab was recruiting young children to fight in some of their bloodiest battles.[99] Despite being given ample time to respond to the story,

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98 Anonymous Somali Journalist, e-mails, Twitter, and direct messages, 9 March 2017.
99 Kriel and Duggan, 'Kenya Covers Up Military Massacre.'

it took two weeks for AMISOM to formulate a counter-message, by which stage the story had already been published and the momentum was lost.[100] Often, too, al-Shabaab's communicators would merge dangerous lies with elements of truth, saying, for example, that an aerial strike, or a Somali Army or Kenyan ambush, had 'killed innocent villagers'. But, when met with silence from AMISOM and the Somali government, such lies take on a life of their own.[101] The coalition fighting al-Shabaab would do better to follow this advice: 'Gaining momentum means dominating the news agenda […]. You must always rebut a political attack […]. You must do it instantly, within minutes at best, within hours at worst, and with a defence supported by the facts'.[102]

A final missing component to the lack of counter-narrative comes from one key member of the international community, the United States. 'There is intense secrecy around the government and international community's [offensive] strikes against al-Shabaab: no video footage from drones, no helmet camera footage from Somali Special Forces raids [often working with US and other support]. Often strikes are left unattributed and unexplained.'[103] While operational security needs to be maintained, the US often tries to downplay its role in Somalia through its tailored engagement approach. Most, if not all, anti-al-Shabaab reporting is reactionary and by the time it goes to press, it is too little too late. The ensuing narrative becomes more about 'America's secret war'[104] than anything that can be used to combat al-Shabaab's media campaign substantively.

Al-Shabaab and TV: Jihadi Journalism[105]

Al-Shabaab's video releases, produced by its media channel al-Katā'ib, are believed to be edited in Canada,[106] but bases have also been identified in Scandinavia in the past.[107] The videos are published online with secret, downloadable links to file-sharing sites. Sometimes they are loaded onto public platforms such as YouTube, but there they are usually taken down quickly by authorities. Because

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100 AMISOM, 'Al-Shabaab Violating Human Rights by Recruiting Child Soldiers', Video News Release, 18 April 2016.
101 @HSMPress Tweet: 'bombs dropped from #Kenyan aircraft pulverized the home of poor 67-year old man &his family. He died &his only daughter is severely injured', (8 December 2011)
102 Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Abacus, 1998), p. 294.
103 Harley, e-mail.
104 Colum Lynch, 'Is the U.S. Ramping Up a Secret War in Somalia?', *Foreign Policy*, July 23, 2013.
105 Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change', p. 1.
106 Anzalone, Atlantic Council Webcast.
107 Hansen, Skype.

of the remoteness, lack of infrastructure, and inherent danger, many parts of Somalia have been long inaccessible to the press. Al-Shabaab's videos are among the group's most powerful strategic communications tools, and they are hugely useful to the media as evidence that what al-Shabaab claims happened actually did happen, despite AMISOM's denials. These videos also make up a major part of the scanty material from inside Somalia that can be used to depict the story of the war against al-Shabaab, unless AMISOM releases video footage, which is extremely rare, and often outdated or lacking newsworthiness.[108] Television news, which is described as having a 'built-in bias'[109] towards reporting on 'any conflict in terms of the visible brutality',[110] is extremely suited to reporting on issues of terrorism. This works in favour of the jihadi insurgents because of the tendency of the medium to simplify stories into good and evil, black and white, and to focus on negative rather than positive coverage.[111]

The ever-increasing number of deadlines journalists must now meet also play into the hands of the jihadi insurgents. The media, particularly TV, are caught 'in the shrinking time and space […] an ever-shrinking timeline between event and broadcast' that the forces fighting al-Shabaab have thus far failed to take advantage of.[112] Not to say that AMISOM and the Somali government don't *ever* release information, it is just not always information the news industry can use. 'AMISOM and the Somali government shared [stories] we weren't interested in—such as your typical PR products, ribbon-cutting, ceremonies, etc.—and suppressed the things we were, often because it made them look bad, incompetent or beaten,' McConnell says.[113]

Al-Shabaab often documents attacks for the purpose of legitimating them. The 'deed' is filmed by jihadis, often with more than one camera wielded by fairly skilled operators. These films, particularly those with English narrative, appeal to al-Shabaab's international audience; they are narrated by a well-spoken jihadi with a pleasant voice and a British accent. The footage is compelling, well edited, clearly presented, and with good natural sound. Anzalone coined the phrase

108 E-mails from AMISOM newsroom: thenewsroom@auunist.org featuring press conferences, 27 February 2016 and 9 March 2017.
109 Robin Day, 'On Television Warfare', 1970, quoted in Philip Taylor, *Munitions of the Mind: A History of Propaganda from the Ancient World to the present day*. Third Edition. (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 274
110 Ibid.
111 Richard Bailey, e-mail to the author, 3 March 2017.
112 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 12.
113 McConnell, e-mail.

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'jihadi journalism' to describe such productions.[114] It is easy to see why they might appeal to a potential recruit living a quiet life on the other side of the world, looking for community acceptance, as well as purpose, excitement, and drama.

Al-Shabaab, Twitter and Fake News

» **@HSMPress**

Between 2010 and 2011, the group 'spearheaded the jihadi use of Twitter' using the handle @HSMPress; the account was shut down numerous times, and reopened under similar usernames.[115] This real-time social media platform was an excellent way for the group to provide up-to-the-minute information about what they were doing, allowing the jihadis to deliver messages during various ongoing events. The account-holder or holders tweeted in English, and almost always responded to tweets from people located outside of Somalia.[116] During an eight month period in 2011 and 2012, Pete Martell analysed al-Shabaab's usage of Twitter to communicate with Somali and international journalists. He found that Twitter 'allowed a swift and easy connection with reporters […] while having freed terrorists from the need to rely on traditional media to self-broadcast their message'.[117] Although it cannot be proven that the group's access to and engagement with mostly foreign media on theological or operational grounds led to an *increase in positive reporting* on the group, it did lead to *increased reporting* and, at the very least, increased attention and arguably a more sympathetic understanding of the group.[118] In fact, in 2014, 'the phrase "al-Shabaab Twitter Feed" was one of the suggested searches in the Google search engine when the name al-Shabaab [was] entered'.[119]

With more than 15 000 followers at one time, @HSMPress's 'audience', in the form of Twitter followers, included dozens of foreign journalists. In addition to live-tweeting the Westgate attack, the account was also known to spar with

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114 Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change', p. 1.
115 Anzalone, 'Continuity and Change', p. 22.
116 Pete Martell, *Somalia's Al-Shabaab's Other War: Examining a Terrorist Group's Engagement with 'Hostile' Media,* Unpublished Paper (Centre for the Study of Political Violence, University of St. Andrews, 2012).
117 Ibid.
118 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens, Shiraz Maher, James Sheehan, *Lights, Caera, Jihad: Al Shabaab's Western Media Strategy,* International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence. (London: King's College London, 2012) p. 33.
119 Stewart Bertram and Keith Ellison, 'Sub Saharan African Terrorist Groups' Use of the Internet', *Journal of Terrorism Research*, Volume 5, Issue 1 (Special Issue), Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence, February 2014, p. 1.

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journalists; in fact two of the top ten accounts @HSMPress exchanged tweets with during the period Martell researched were international journalists.[120] Al-Shabaab also tweeted battlefield updates, claims of responsibility for attacks on AMISOM and Somali government troops, and short press releases. Another account that featured in al-Shabaab's 'top tweeted' list was Major Emmanuel Chirchir, spokesman for the Kenyan Defense Forces. Towards the end of 2011, after Kenyan forces began fighting al-Shabaab, @HSMPress engaged in several public arguments or 'twars' (Twitter wars) with Major Chirchir, even spontaneously hijacking questions from journalists to promote their own opinions.[121] @HSMPress was often successful in making the Major appear extremely volatile and, in some instances, bumbling and misinformed. '[Al-Shabaab] was able to influence news coverage of Somalia and the ongoing conflict […] particularly during periods of crisis, and successfully manipulate the media environment.'[122]

» @Daudoo: Live From Mogadishu

Another sophisticated use of Twitter is the maintenance of accounts that are suspected to belong to sympathisers or agents of al-Shabaab posing as eyewitnesses or journalists. The account user **@Daudoo** is a fascinating example. A prolific tweeter, suspected of being more than one person, or at least a funded account,[123] the account-user describes himself as a 'freelance journalist in Somalia […] specializing in al-Shabaab and global conflict updates'.[124] But he has neither published any work, nor linked to any work he has published. When contacted by the author, he said that his name was Daud, but refused to give further information, claiming fears for his safety. No journalist the author has spoken to knows his true identity or any of his writing. Strategic communications specialists working in Somalia accuse **@Daudoo** of being a 'pro-al-Shabaab tweeter', but it has never been proven outright that he is involved with the group, nor has he ever openly declared sympathy or support for them.[125] A one-week, rudimentary analysis of **@Daudoo's** tweets in February 2017[126] revealed

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120 Martell, *Somalia's Al-Shabaab's Other War* .
121 **@author Tweet** "@MajirEChirchir AS claims it has attacked a #Kenyan convoy in lower juba region today killing several Kenyans can you confirm/deny?" *In Response:* **HSMPress HSM Press Office** *"@author* The Major seems to have fatfingered the pin on his recently acquired smartphone as he fumbled with the keys, and might not answer." (19 March 2012)
122 Anzalone, *Continuity and Change*, p. 22.
123 Harley, e-mail.
124 Twitter account @Daudoo
125 Stephen Harley, 'Daily Media Monitoring Report', e-mails, 2015–2017, 18 January 2016.
126 Tweets from @Daudoo 13 February to 19 February 2017

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the following: **@Daudoo** routinely breaks news of attacks in all major towns and the rural areas of Somalia.[127] He also breaks news of al-Shabaab's claims of responsibility for such attacks and provides exclusive, regular news on the group in the form of press releases[128] and battlefield updates,[129] all the while claiming that his information comes from witnesses or from sources within the group.[130] He also disseminates anti-Somali government and AMISOM messages,[131] as well as messages that contain negative sentiments about foreign involvement in Somalia;[132] he seems particularly hostile towards the US.[133] In addition, **@Daudoo** routinely releases photographs and other forms of clearly pro-al-Shabaab strategic communications. One example of this is a photo tweeted by the account in March 2017, showing an alleged food distribution centre set up by al-Shabaab to help those affected by the drought that gripped the country.[134]

Each of **@Daudoo's** tweets receives dozens of 'retweets' and 'favourites' from journalists covering Somalia and from the public, thus spreading the messages very effectively. By keeping his tweets neutral and dispassionate, with somewhat crude journalistic lingo, **@Daudoo** acts as a gatherer and disseminator of information, albeit solely on Twitter. He can still broadcast the message just as a spokesman might, but with an added veneer of neutrality. By maintaining the persona of a journalist, the account user avoids the risk of having his account shut down by Twitter authorities.

At best, **@Daudoo** is indeed a journalist who is clearly sympathetic towards al-Shabaab, operating nearly 24 hours every day, completely in secret, with sources

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127 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Massive car bomb kills atleast 25 ppl, incl. soldiers & civilians in #Mogadishu's Wadajir dist. Death toll could be higher. #Somalia' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833280987748499456> (19 February 2017).

128 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: In its first official comment, #AlShabaab describes #Somalia's new President as "apostate", vows to keep fighting against his govt' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833217167080427521> (19 February 2017).

129 @Daudoo Tweet: 'Convoy of #Somalia and #US troops heading towards @AlShabaab controlled town of Harardhere in Mudug region. Drones hovering over town-Source' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/831582433288060928> (14 February 2017).

130 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Senior #Somalia intelligence official, Hassan Dhere, wounded in drive-by shooting in #Mogadishu. Bodyguard killed- Witnesses' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/832879355831447552> (18 February 2017).

131 @Daudoo Tweet: 'A traditional elder assassinated in #Mogadishu this evening, 8-yr-old boy also killed after being run over by a #Somalia army vehicle' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/831947082487459841> (15 February 2017).

132 @Daudoo Tweet: '#Somalia govt plans to file legal complaint against #UAW over #Somaliland military base #Berbera' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/832163146810916865> (16 February 2007).

133 @Daudoo Tweet: 'BREAKING: Senior #Alshabaab leader, Hassan Yakub says #Farmajo is 'American puppet' &they will fight against his govt & its allies. #Somalia' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/833226226584150017> (19 February 2017).

134 @Daudoo Tweet: '#Alshabaab distributes emergency food aid in drought hit areas under its control in Lower Shabelle region #Somalia' <https://twitter.com/Daudoo/status/838491685655052288> (5 March 2017).

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across Somalia. At worst, **@Daudoo** is an outright supporter of the group and is only pretending to be a journalist. If the latter is accurate, then it is an extremely clever way of disseminating pro-al-Shabaab information without the media catching on.

At his peak, @Daudoo had 73 000 followers, but his account was shut down in late 2017. He quickly opened another account under a slightly different username; this new account has also been shut down, but in the interim he published archives of tweets from his former account.

» **Looks Like Real News**

In January 2017, al-Shabaab attacked the Dayah Hotel in Mogadishu, where a political meeting of parliamentarians was being held. Harley noted that the group seemed to use a new tactic: a 'communications plan that was pre-prepared, and activated once the attack was successfully underway'.[135] The link, provided by Harley, was to an ordinary-looking website, in the Somali language, that featured alleged interviews with the attackers inside the hotel.[136] On closer inspection the stories were all distinctly biased towards al-Shabaab and in opposition to AMISOM, the Somali government, and the West. Because there are fewer checks and balances in Somalia due to a lack of experienced independent journalists and the small number of international media located there, news from such a website—eyewitness accounts and pieces by local journalists or fixers—could filter through and make it into the international domain. 'There is a consistent failure to message in any way against al-Shabaab's high-profile attacks. There is no preparatory work in terms of reporting suspicions, no rapid response messaging once the incident starts [and] no follow-up messaging to clarify what happened,' Harley criticises.[137]

Al-Shabaab and Telegram: The One-on-One Approach

In October of 2014, in her capacity as a journalist, the author encountered what she believes to be a very effective method by which al-Shabaab attempts to influence media for strategic communications purposes. A Twitter user called **@somalaffairs** disagreed with her reporting on Somalia, and the two began to Direct Message or DM. The account user, calling himself 'Bilal', eventually

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135 Stephen Harley, 'Daily Media Monitoring Report', e-mails, 2015–2017, 25 January 2017.
136 Somali Memo Website, 'Al-Shabaab Claims Responsibility for Attack on Mogadishu Hotel', in Somali, translation available online, 25 January 2017.
137 Harley, e-mail.

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identified himself as a member of the Somali diaspora who had returned to Somalia as a jihadi fighting for al-Shabaab. The author could not independently verify this until January 2017, when she authenticated Bilal's identity with another reporter from a prominent US newspaper who had also been communicating with him after the two were introduced by a senior member of al-Qaeda. Bilal has proven useful to the author providing her with insider information, links to new videos, ideological and theological information, and context regarding the inner-workings of the group.

Like a typical political marketer,[138] Bilal sought to establish a rapport with the author so that she could better understand the jihadi mindset. Communication with Bilal spanned a range of issues, from the jihadi life, the ISIS influence in Somalia, and what Bilal called the 'accidental' killing of civilians in al-Shabaab's guerilla-style attacks, which he claimed he did not condone. This communication lasted until April 2016. It first took place via Twitter and later via the encrypted messaging application Telegram, after an alleged friend of Bilal's contacted the author to explain that he had been summoned by al-Shabaab's leadership and killed. The friend claimed that al-Shabaab's leaders were unhappy with Bilal for helping another jihadi leave the country during its purge of ISIS supporters and accused him of defecting to ISIS.

Obviously this story is nearly impossible to verify, but the information Bilal passed on always proved accurate, and his insights were at times helpful in understanding what drives a group like al-Shabaab and its jihadi insurgents. It is uncertain whether this electronic outreach to journalists was coordinated by al-Shabaab's leadership, or if Bilal was in contact with members of the press of his own volition without their knowledge and consent. Nonetheless, this method of attempting to influence members of the mass media is extremely forward-looking. Above all, it allows for a timely and 'direct, professional exchange' between journalist and jihadi insurgent.[139]

Conclusion

It is only reasonable that an organisation at war would seek to use any means possible to market itself; al-Shabaab is no exception. In order to ensure maximum news coverage, the group's strategic communicators employ a variety of means.

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138 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 8.
139 Aaron Lammer. Longform Podcast #129, Part 1, 18 February 2015.

Some are quiet and surreptitious, such as electronic approaches to individual journalists or posing as journalists or eyewitnesses on Twitter; others are more overt and headline-grabbing, such as large-scale suicide attacks. In its attempts to influence the mass media, al-Shabaab's strategic communicators are fast-paced, forward-looking, and focused, despite the group's decreasing size and resources. As the group has lost territory and funding over the last few years, the pace of their strategic communications has slowed, but they remain impressively resilient. However, al-Shabaab's information operations would not be nearly as impressive were it not for the poorly coordinated strategic communications emanating from the coalition forces of AMISOM, the Somali government, and members of the international community.

The author, however, acknowledges the important role the traditional media play in aiding jihadi-insurgent communications via POTD, with their wall-to-wall coverage of large-scale terror attacks, particularly suicide attacks.[140] But the fact is that this is unlikely to cease, because it makes for compelling coverage and ultimately boosts ratings.[141] The onus falls, therefore, on those working to counter the narratives of militant groups. They must try to dominate the communications space during these attacks and other crises, and harness the wall-to-wall media coverage for their own messaging purposes. 'Insurgent planners and TV news editors recognise that violence sells: "if it bleeds, it leads". Both depend on the viewer loyalty to further their aims', and it would be useful if strategic communicators for the Somali government and AMISOM recognised that too.[142] Providing timely and newsworthy information to journalists and allowing them access are keys to success. Williams states that 'effective strategic communications in AMISOM required an expeditionary mindset and a willingness to take risks, including to generate and support media access in difficult circumstances'.[143] He also states the importance of dependability in the eyes of the media, saying 'to be effective also means building trust and remaining credible'.[144]

The coalition has missed many valuable opportunities to capitalise on al-Shabaab's brutality and weaknesses and leverage its own successes. And it

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140 Bruce Hoffman, 'The Logic of Suicide Terrorism', *Atlantic*, June 2003.
141 John Koblin, 'Coverage of Paris Terror Attacks Lifts Network News Ratings', *New York Times*, 24 November 2015.
142 Bolt et al., *Propaganda of the Deed*, p. 5
143 Paul Williams, *Fighting for Peace in Somalia: A History and Analysis of the African Union Mission (AMISOM), 2007–2017* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), Chapter 11.
144 Ibid.

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is the Somali people who have suffered most, for a prolonged period, as a result. Kenya, too, will have significant problems in future unless its strategic communications are not refocused from the very highest levels. This becomes even more apposite if al-Shabaab continues to launch devastating attacks across its border and recruit disenfranchised Kenyan Muslims to join its ranks. If Bilal is to be believed, legitimacy is crucial to a jihadi's cause. AMISOM, the Somali government, and the international community would be wise to assume that it is crucial to *their* cause as well.

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