

## Theologians, Poets, and Lone Wolves: Mapping Medium-Specific Epistemologies of Radicalization

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Examinations into the roots of Islamist terrorism have frequently presented the phenomenon as a result of either perverting political–religious epistemologies into distorted, caricatured fundamentalisms, or, alternatively, as a return to form, whereby a pure, root ideology/metaphysic is rediscovered. The former approach reflects a discourse rooted in print media and characterized by logical argumentation, linear chronology, and deference to the text. The latter approach reflects a discourse rooted in modes of secondary orality, which posit a font of ideal essence that precedes expression. The figure of the digitally engaged lone wolf undermines these discourses. His violent extremism appears only Islamically inflected through an accretion of contradictory mediated encounters linking representations of violence, Islam, and the lone wolf himself. This article argues that a new approach and discourse should therefore emerge, specific to the hypertextual and rhizomatic qualities of multiplicity and contradiction that characterize the digitally engaged lone wolf.

*Keywords: terrorism, extremism, ISIS, Islamophobia, radicalization, discourse, medium theory, hypermedia, affect*

Scholars have identified successive waves of terrorist tactics and ideological pretexts in both the contemporary Islamist domain (Esposito, 2003b; Kepel, 2002; Sageman, 2008b) and historically (Chaliand & Blin, 2007; Laqueur, 1999; Rapoport, 2002). Today, with ISIS's regional fortunes waning (Abdul-Zahra, 2017) and many of its foreign fighters returning home (Meleagrou-Hitchens, Hughes, & Clifford, 2018), we may find ourselves on the cusp of yet another wave. This latest cycle in the larger age of Islamist terror is characterized by a transition from terror attacks outside the bounds of ISIS's would-be caliphate—such as the July 2016 truck attacks in Nice, France (Borger & MacAskill, 2016)—and toward a period of terror defined by so-called “lone wolf” attackers (Hamm & Spaaij, 2017).

As in prior cycles of Islamist terror, models of radicalization lag behind shifts in modalities of violence. Discourse speaking to al-Qaeda's period of strong centralized leadership proved insufficient to address its subsequent phase of smaller, self-organized groups (Sageman, 2008a, p. 164). Operationally mature approaches to al-Qaeda were no less historically and circumstantially contingent, and therefore were of limited transferability to the rise of ISIS (Clarke & Moghadam, 2018). And lessons learned from ISIS are similarly

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Date submitted: 2018-06-12

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unlikely to meet the challenges posed by a new wave of lone wolf terror. It is therefore crucial that the figure of the lone wolf and the patterns of his (and, increasingly, her) radicalization be anticipated prior to the crest of this latest wave. This calls for a theoretical approach given that empirical data emerge primarily through successful terror attacks—an outcome to be avoided. Because the radicalization processes of lone wolves are almost by definition subject to greater mediation than that of Sageman's "bunch of guys" model, media and communication studies are uniquely poised to contribute to this understanding (Sageman, 2004).

In this article, I begin by identifying two categories of discourse that have attempted to understand radicalization during the waves of Islamist terror that preceded our current moment. Here, *discourse* is meant in the broad Foucauldian sense, as an area of social knowledge that "constrains—but also enables—writing, speaking and thinking within . . . specific historical limits" (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p. 31) and that also constitutes "a material condition (or set of conditions) which enables and constrains the socially productive 'imagination'" (McHoul & Grace, 1993, p. 34). These discourses may be organized into two categories: On one hand, there are those that position Islamist extremism and terror as a perversion of Islam; on the other hand, there are those discourses that position violent extremism as the purest expression of Islam.

The first discourse, that of perversion and religious dogma "taken too far," is characterized by assumptions of linearity, appeals to the logic and authority of the text and of the "proper" interpretation of the Quran and Hadith. These discursive qualities are most commonly found in the statements of government and nongovernmental organizations, mainline Muslim theologians, and certain scholars. They tend to suggest the epistemological influence of print media. The second mode of discourse—that of a return to pure essence—rarely makes its argument through textual appeals. It is poetic rather than linear, assertive rather than dialectical. If the style of the first discourse can be described as linear and textual, this second, reactionary discourse is best described as *annunciative*—pertaining to an epistemic regime of secondary orality as defined by Walter J. Ong (2002). This annunciative discourse of radicalization is found most commonly in the communications of extremist Islamists themselves—and, perhaps unsurprisingly, in the communications of Islamophobes in the United States, Europe, and elsewhere. This discourse tends to suggest the epistemological influence of aurally and visually rich media (audio and video).

Both of these approaches to theorizing radicalization have their merits. However, neither is well suited to understanding the case of the lone wolf. This is particularly true in the case of the lone wolf who has self-radicalized with significant use of online resources. A new discursive mode is called for to discuss and understand this figure of the lone wolf. Where predominating discourses are by turns linear/textual and secondarily oral/annunciative, this new discursive modality should adopt the inflections of the media and communication technology that characterize the digitally connected lone wolf's process of radicalization. That is, this new modality should be *hypertextually* inflected, rhizomatic, reflecting the nonlocal, yet contiguous path that communications take when produced in an online environment.

### **Diversion or Perversion? Violent Extremism as "Going Too Far"**

The discourse commonly legitimated by government entities, nongovernmental organizations, and other international bodies straddling the line between public and private sectors presents the relationship between Islam and groups such as ISIS as one of perversity and misdirection. In this formulation, "there

exist certain foundations from which cultural—especially religious—streams, divisions and sects depart and develop separately or even antithetically to their relative strains” (Antúnez & Tellidis, 2013, p. 119). This epistemological trend we may term “text-based thinking,” and it suggests “taking a ‘fixed point of view’ and searching for a fixed ‘truth’; being concerned with linear, logical sequence” (Meyrowitz, 2003, p. 191). By this reckoning, violent Islamist belief originates in the same scriptural body as “true” (that is to say, mainline) Islam. But through misinterpretation of dogma (Quran, Hadith, *aqidah*)—via hyperliteralism, or errors of cultural and historical context—the extremist is brought to erroneous conclusions as to the political and spiritual dimensions, and corresponding behavioral expectations, of Islam.

It is no coincidence that this discourse emerges from a media milieu populated by prepared speeches, white papers, highbrow periodicals, and university libraries. The print medium inclines itself toward communicative styles favoring qualities of linear thought, appeals to logical argumentation, and the authority of the text. In prepared remarks, former U.S. President George W. Bush (2002) stated that “our enemy doesn’t follow the great traditions of Islam. They’ve hijacked a great religion” (p. 10). “Hijacking” quite literally means to seize and divert off-course. Bush’s successor, Barack Obama (2015), echoed this theme in prepared remarks to a White House summit on violent extremism, saying, “We are not at war with Islam. We are at war with people who have perverted Islam” (p. 15). Secretary of State Hillary Clinton described the Islam professed by Pulse Nightclub shooter Omar Mateen as “distorted” (Beckwith, 2016, p. 90). And British Prime Minister Theresa May addressed the London Bridge attacks of 2017 as “a perversion of Islam and a perversion of the truth” (Samuelson, 2017, p. 17). Even former Trump administration national security advisor H. R. McMaster deployed the language of digression, stating that “the phrase [‘radical Islamic terrorism’] is unhelpful because terrorist organizations like ISIS represent a perversion of Islam, and are thus un-Islamic” (Perez, 2017, para. 3). McMaster’s choice of terminology caused no small uproar among the far right, suggesting that these semantic formulations do indeed convey deep meaning as to the epistemological approaches by which we understand violent extremism claiming the mantle of Islam.

According to Schmid (2013), “‘radicalisation’ is not just a socio-psychological scientific concept but also a political construct, introduced into the public and academic debate mainly by national security establishments faced with political Islam in general and Salafist Jihadism in particular” (p. 19). And indeed, the “too far” epistemology of centrist politicians strongly correlates with the prevalence of phase modeling radicalization. These phase models seek “to give a chronological definition of the different stages people allegedly go through in a radicalisation process” (Veldhuis & Staun, 2009, p. 2). Originating in the textual milieu described above, phase modeling also reflects “reasoning in a sequential linear fashion . . . categorizing and classifying data” (Norden, 1969, p. 7). It, too, is implicitly “guided by the way the contents of books are arranged” (Eisenstein, 1993, pp. 88–89) as according to sequential chapters and categorizing indexes. Print, Eisenstein (1993) argues, affected a shift in focus from individual style toward standardized patterns through its mechanization of production and commodification (p. 83). This process rationalized idiosyncrasy, while simultaneously giving new meaning to the richness of the singular individual—the external reader encountering chapter and index-bound topics and personages (Eisenstein, 1993, p. 85).

Such a dynamic is echoed in a 2016 Department of Justice white paper synthesizing several phase models. It acknowledges that “no agreement exists on how many stages there are to the process—or even if distinct stages exist” (Klausen, 2016, p. 7). Thus, this hybrid of phase models acknowledges the

idiosyncrasy of the subject while insisting on his or her simplified categorization as a matter of “reducing ambiguity” (Klausen, 2016, p. 7). By rationalizing the subject, this model seeks to pinpoint the individual’s point and process of departure, the phase at which the individual’s Islam ceased to be “true” and becomes idiosyncratic and “extreme.” So the report explains, it can only “estimate radicalization trajectories by working backwards from the time of action” (Klausen, 2016, p. 7), that is, by tracing back the sequential arrangement of the rationalized idiosyncratic subject.

This epistemology of diversion and perversion bears consequences. The NYPD’s 2007 report *Radicalization in the West: A Homegrown Threat* (which the Department of Justice white paper draws on) has become notorious for the way in which its modeling treated Islam itself as a risk factor for violent extremism (Aaronson, 2013). The United Kingdom’s Prevent program, which likewise has in the past relied on phase models of radicalization (Her Majesty’s Government, 2011), has come under fire for this same reason: Phase models make a racialized “suspect community” of all Muslims regardless of origin, and lend credence to the position that any violent extremism claiming the mantle of Islam originates—however perversely—in Islam itself (Awan, 2012; Kundnani, 2012; Silva, 2018).

The discourse of perversion, distortion, and Islam led astray is by no means unique to non-Muslim sources. The body of such theological refutations constitutes practically its own publishing genre, including books (al-Yaqoubi, 2015; Royal Aal al-Bayt School for Islamic Thought, 2012), fatwas (Aboulkheir, 2014; Marrakesh Declaration, 2016; National Centre for Contemporary Islamic Studies, n.d.), think-tank series and white papers (McCants & Olidort, 2015; Wilson Center, 2015; Schmid, 2015), articles (Rashid, 2017; Sultan, 2015; Wright, 2015), video (Goodstein, 2016), and an open letter to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi (“An Open Letter,” 2014) cosigned by 126 “esteemed” (Muhammadin, 2016, p. 2) and “high profile” (Muhammadin, 2016, p. 9) Islamic scholars and religious leaders. Works such these constitute a performance of *fiqh*: the contingent and practical interpretation and implementation of the divine and eternal shari’ah as revealed in the texts of the Quran and *sunnah* (Esposito, 2003a, p. 87). Juridical consensus is deployed to right the gravest of errors: the perverse interpretation and application of divine will itself.

Strategies built around the epistemology of perversion have demonstrably successful applications, despite their similarly demonstrable potential for blowback and abuse (Hughes, forthcoming). Strategies built on the assumptions of linearity and textual authority yield results, given subjects who themselves share an affinity to the epistemologies of the text. Sageman (2008b) describes the phenomenon of “traditional theologians” debating the Quran with captured terrorists: “If the terrorists succeed in convincing them, then the theologians say they will join the jihad. If the prisoners lose, then the terrorists are invited to abandon violence” (p. 37). Sageman convincingly suggests that the fetish of the text offers a key to understanding the radicalization process of engineers among the ranks of terrorists (pp. 59–60). Given that a certain pathological literalism and proceduralism seem to guide the thinking of engineers-turned-jihadis (Gambetta & Hertog, 2016), strategies targeting this substantial population of violent extremists may make good use of the print/linear discourse.

Likewise, this modality is useful as a means of understanding those violent extremists whose position does emerge from passionate engagement—however misinterpreted—with the text. The case of John “Yahya al-Bahrumi” Georgelas is a perfect subject for this interpretive approach. Georgelas, an

American pilgrim to the nascent Islamic State, was an expert in “Islamic law, classical Arabic language, and literature” (Wood, 2017, p. 7) whose expertise was instrumental in arguing for the declaration of a caliphate. Georgelas’ ex-wife, who accompanied him in hijra to Syria, describes Georgelas’ progression, saying that “Jihad wasn’t about academia, theory and dreaming [any more]. . . . Now it was real” (Pesta, 2017, p. 35):

[Georgelas] showed a staggering mastery of Islamic law and classical Arabic language and literature . . . in early 2014, Yahya had pressed the leaders of what was then the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) to declare a caliphate. He began preaching that the conditions for the declaration of a valid caliphate had been met—the group held and governed territory, and its leader, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was a physically and mentally fit male of Qurayshi descent, capable of ruling according to Sharia. Delaying further would mean disregarding a fundamental obligation of Islam. (Wood, 2017, p. 8)

If any example exists for which the model of a literalist Islam perverted to violent extremism is appropriate, surely it is that of Georgelas. It is against extremists of his type that the opposition of the signatories of the Letter to Baghdadi is addressed. And although few, if any, like him seem to have been moved by the 126 scholars’ arguments, these intellectuals nevertheless are fighting this element of violent extremism on its own terms. For bystanders of a similar print/linear epistemic inclination, and those at risk of radicalization similar to Georgelas, this is an ideal approach.

Of course, the above examples are merely anecdotes. This discussion is not meant to imply that they represent the totality of discourse nor that the print/linear modality is always distinct from other epistemic approaches to the question of Islam, violent extremism, radicalization, and any connections that may or may not exist among them. Furthermore, although these print/linear/logical tendencies by no means dictate the content or character of discourse, this discourse does both reveal and shape the epistemology of actors operating within it. As such, an understanding of the print/linear discourse, and the epistemologies it gives rise to, is primarily useful for interrogating the positions of those thinkers and policymakers outside extremist Islamism. It offers only little insight into the mode by which violent extremists who claim the mantle of Islam view themselves. For this, another modality must be identified.

### **Secondary Orality and Violent Extremism as a Return to Essence**

The founder of Al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and the man credited for setting in motion many of the events that would lead to the birth of ISIS, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi was no theologian. Instead, the religious justifications for so many of ISIS’s extreme (even by Salafi-jihadi standards) behaviors (*takfirism*, suicide bombings, etc.) would come from theologians close to Zarqawi. The first of these, Abu Muhammad al-Maqdisi, was “an ideological pioneer for radical Islam” (Kazimi, 2005, p. 59) and an early religious mentor for Zarqawi, whose metaphysics of antidemocratic monotheism would define ISIS’s totalitarianism. Primary among these principles was Maqdisi’s strict interpretation of *tawhid*—the indivisibility of God (Brooke, 2006). *Tawhid*, as Maqdisi understood it, demanded a radical assertion of *al-wala wa-l-bara*—loyalty to God and disavowal of un-Muslim practices and peoples (Wagemakers, 2009). The indivisibility of God, Maqdisi asserted, demanded commensurately complete indivisibility of scripture, society, and law.

This is the logic of secondary orality as described by Ong set upon society as a whole. Here, the individual word, like the individual man, may not be understood to exist as a discrete unit (Ong, 2002, p. 60), but only as a dimension of a speech-action, or ultimate unity. The oral word "never exists in a simply verbal context," but as "modifications of a total, existential situation" (Ong, 2002, p. 67). But in contrast to the primary orality of preliterate societies, which "made itself felt in the additive, redundant, carefully balanced, highly agonistic style, and the intense interplay between speaker and audience" (Ong, 2002, p. 135), this secondary orality grows out of a foundation "based permanently on the use of writing and print" (Ong, 2002, p. 134). In contrast to the additive, redundant, and agonistic qualities of primary orality, the logic of secondary orality presumes an a priori existential situation analogous to the text itself, a pure, preannunciative moment, out of which the utterance issues forth, resounding outward through space and time, progressively decaying in validity in direct proportion to its distance from the preannunciative moment: "The oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered" (Ong, 2002, p. 39).

The discourse of the Islamist extremist in conditions of secondary orality therefore attempts to reach truth not by logically analyzing annunciation itself (i.e., deferring to speech-as-text), as in the print/linear modality described above. Nor does it attempt to reach truth through performative agonism, and additive dialogue, as would be the case in a culture of primary orality. Instead, the discourse of Islamist extremism in conditions of secondary orality attempt to recapture the pure essence out of which the original utterance emanated. Just as the speech act produces multiplicity out of this unitary annunciative moment, so too does democracy produce multiplicity in lieu of *tawhid*. Democracy is therefore apostasy, a polytheism unto itself, which positions man over God as the source of earthly law (Wagemakers, 2009, p. 292).

In much the same way that Maqdisi's radical metaphysics of *tawhid* would provide justification for AQI's, and later ISIS's, choice of targets, Maqdisi's successors would offer theological justification for an expansion of tactics. Abu Abdullah al-Muhajir, like Maqdisi, would draw his justifications not from logical extrapolation of holy texts, but by appeals to preannunciative conditions analogized by the text. The acceptability of suicide bombing has long been a subject of theological debate, as the Quran expressly forbids suicide (Arya, 2017). By way of justification, Muhajir offered Zarqawi "a theological fix that allows any who desire it to sidestep the Koranic injunctions against suicide. Essentially, his position boils down to the attack's 'purpose and intent'" (Winter & al-Saud, 2016, p. 11). In this, Muhajir justified suicide not through some arcane parsing of textual meaning, as would a theologian operating within the print/textual épistémè. Instead, the purity of the preannunciative moment is sought as the font of justification.

The annunciative essentialism of the AQI/ISIS epistemology extended outward as well, ultimately shaping ISIS's communications with the world at large. Abu Bakr Naji, another theologian, would argue for presenting violent struggle in terms that are nearly explicit in their attempt to overturn the more contemplative print/textual discourse. Naji complained that "the way jihad is taught 'on paper' makes it hard for young people to absorb its true meaning" (Hassan, 2016, p. 17), and that to convey the meaning of jihad required "excessive violence—'savagery'—because it attracts extensive media coverage" (Kraidy, 2017, p. 1197). Naji's preference for violent spectacle is echoed in the Islamic State publication *O' Media Worker, You Are a Mujahid!*, a work that "casts communicative jihad (or 'jihad of the tongue') as more important than military jihad ('jihad of the self')" (Kraidy, 2017, p. 1197). As Kraidy (2017) describes, ISIS implemented this instruction through the production of "image-events"—effectively imbuing recorded and

reproducible visual media with the rawness of audile immediacy (pp. 1198–1199). So, too, is the spoken word “always an event, a movement in time, completely lacking in the thing-like repose of the written or printed word” (Ong, 2002, p. 74). This remediation of image into event preserves the vitality of preannunciative inspiration in spite of recording and reinstantiation, forcing those who encounter it (both supporters and victims) into a preannunciative immediacy.

Of course, each of these men justified his position as obedience to the literally interpreted words of holy scripture (Kibble, 2016). But what must be understood is that the “textual” fundamentalism they espoused in fact reveals a profound mistrust of the text. In fearing to stray from the text’s most elementary (seeming) semiotic referents, the fundamentalist admits that the text itself represents a departure of the reader from the divine. Perhaps this unrecognized concern that the text of holy writ obscures rather than points to its own essence also accounts for the Islamophobe’s fixation on “naming radical Islam” (Hirsi Ali, 2017). Indeed, the discourse of both Islamophobes and violent Islamists frequently inheres to rhetorical forms and cognitive tendencies pertaining to communication in the mode of secondary orality. In both groups, there is an insistence that the essence of Islam precedes and supersedes the interpretations of even the most rudimentary (or sophisticated) exegesis. Yet, in the case of Islamophobia, the hidden, preannunciative essence becomes an object of fear and loathing instead of pursuit and longing.

The “New Atheist” movement, for all its claims to neutrality, reserves special ire for Islam, which it treats not according to the behaviors of the overwhelming majority of Islam’s practitioners, nor even the exegeses of its theologians, but according to a paranoid essentialism that is the mirror image of the Salafijihadi. The new atheists, “in the main . . . admit to no meaningful distinction between moderate and extremist Islam” (Emilsen, 2012, p. 524). Sam Harris (2005), whose top-ranked New Atheist podcast (Podbay, 2018) establishes him as a prominent operator within this discourse, explicitly declaims the print/linear discourse of extremism as perversion, stating that it “is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims” (p. 85).

Similarly, Muslim renunciate Ayaan Hirsi Ali states that there “are Muslims who are *passive*, who don’t all follow the rules of Islam, but there’s really only one Islam, defined as submission to the will of God” (van Bakel, 2007, p. 39). Here, too, it is a preannunciative will that defines the faith. But whereas for the extreme Islamist, this will is divine, for the Islamophobe, this will is directed by an essential risk of violence that lurks prior to any act of practice. The staggering majority of Muslims who want no part of Islamist extremism (Lipka, 2017) are not, in Hirsi Ali’s estimation, practicing a legitimate interpretation of the Quran’s instruction; they are not practicing at all. In her formulation, true knowledge of this essence precedes interpretation; indeed, it precedes codification. And failure to implement the violence lurking in the preannunciative essence of pure Islam is no guarantee against future violence. So long as the faith persists, so, too, does the danger.

Unfortunately, it is not merely the pop intellectuals of New Atheism who partake in the essentialist mysticism of the oral/postliterate discourse. Scholars and serious journalists alike have fallen into this trap. *The Atlantic*’s Graeme Wood ignited a firestorm of controversy with his piece “What ISIS Really Wants.” In it, he writes,

The reality is that the Islamic State is Islamic. *Very* Islamic. Yes, it has attracted psychopaths and adventure seekers, drawn largely from the disaffected populations of the Middle East and Europe. But the religion preached by its most ardent followers derives from coherent and even learned interpretations of Islam. (Wood, 2015, p. 12)

Subsequent debate suggested that Wood had badly misinterpreted the work of Mideast scholar Bernard Haykel. Haykel (2016) describes ISIS and al-Qaeda in terms familiar to the discourse of secondary orality, pointing out that “for these religious revivalists, Muslim empowerment will come about by a ‘return’ to the ‘true’ message and teachings of Islam” (p. 72). However, Haykel is careful to qualify that the extremisms of ISIS and other Salafi-jihadi groups “have arisen from specific and local political and material realities, despite being global in their ambitions, recruitment, and reach” (p. 72). AQI’s, and eventually ISIS’s, appeals to *tawhid* were, in Haykel’s words “ahistorical.” Here, we have the fundamental danger of failing to distinguish between a print/textual discursive approach and one following the logics of secondary orality. Haykel’s technically accurate, print/textually discursive, portrayal of ISIS and its ahistorical appeals to *tawhid* are mistaken for agreement with ISIS’s claims to preinterpretive religious purity.

The work of Walter Laqueur has similarly been criticized for this essentialism (Kundnani, 2012; Silva, 2018). Religious fanaticism, Laqueur (1999) writes, lies at the heart of a “new terrorism.” This new terrorism, of which Islamist violence is the exemplar, “is interpreted not as a return to the words, to the holy texts of a religious, but as a return to the uncompromising spirit of its early days . . . as a regression to the spirit” (Laqueur, 1999, p. 98). Compare this with Laqueur’s assessment of the so-called Patriot movement, whose “real grievances and beliefs [are] deeply anchored in the American tradition,” albeit for “the irresponsible ‘loose cannons’ that have given the militia movement and patriots in general ‘adverse publicity’” (p. 113). In the Laqueurian reckoning, violence in the name of Islam reflects an essential core of the faith, whereas right-wing terror represents strategic overreach in the service of otherwise healthy libertarian values.

Perhaps Laqueur and Wood only err in taking the *takfirists* at their word, failing to probe into the truer, more unstated causes of violent extremism. The confusion of scholars and journalists such as Laqueur and Wood only points to the importance of distinguishing between motives/root causes and rationalizations. This distinction becomes more apparent—and important—as we turn our attention to the figure of the lone wolf and the need for a proper discourse by which to know him.

### **Lost in the Hypertext: Affect and Ideology in Lone Wolf Violence**

The figure of the lone wolf terrorist in the digital age profoundly undermines the epistemic assumptions that underpin both the print/linear radicalization model found among respectable sources and its reactionary counterpart in regimes of secondary orality. This is because the processes of ideological and theological accretion that shape the lone wolf’s stated beliefs and motivations increasingly are forged not in textual analysis, nor in pursuit of a primordial spiritual wellspring, but in nonlocal, multimedia networks of digital communication technologies—the Internet in general and World Wide Web in particular. Here, the processes of ideological and theological accretion, which we take as markers of radicalization, are without center, constantly changing shape. All points are potentially conterminous, and any point may constitute a rupture, a beginning, a link, or a dead



end. The hypertext expands and shifts shape as it moves through space and time. It contains infinite paths, blazed by each user/reader. In doing so, it shares the salient characteristics of the *rhizome*, as charted by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987) in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*: connection, heterogeneity, multiplicity, asynifying rupture, cartography, and decalomania.

In its connections and heterogeneity, the hypertextual mode is the offspring of digital pioneer Ted Nelson's (1999) Xanadu project, a database wherein all information would be conterminous; each datum linked directly to every other as "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7), in a document of infinite density and ever-expanding scope, which lives on in truncated form in today's Web's HTML architecture (Berners-Lee & Fischetti, 2011). The hypertextual mode thus produces a straying, arbitrary zigzag of belief, which often takes the lone wolf through illogical and even contradictory ideological watersheds. And yet they adhere by virtue of some attractor within the lone wolf: That attractor is *affect*.

*Affect* is used here in the Deleuzian sense. Massumi summarizes it as "a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. xvii), that is, a kind of libidinal flux that occurs at the site of encounter between two things—in this case, between the lone wolf and the axial points of the hypertext. As the lone wolf half-encounters, half-conjures these axial points in the "acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21) of the rhizomatic hypertext, the preemotive intensities that characterize his pathology gradually accrue in a profuse *decalomania* of ideological and theological selection, which clash and contradict in the absence of "a General and without an organizing memory or central automaton" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 21). Indeed, given the other rhizomatic qualities of the hypertext mentioned above, this is almost inevitable.

No case better exemplifies the odd, straying intricacies of the affective, decalomaniac accrual of ideology than that of Omar Mateen, who in June 2016 committed the then-worst mass shooting in U.S. history at the Pulse Nightclub in Orlando, Florida. The FBI has confirmed that Mateen was radicalized at least partly (which is to say perhaps totally) online, and the ensuing years have not turned up other potential sources for his radicalization. By turns, he claimed membership in Hezbollah, pledged solidarity with al-Qaeda and al-Nusra, and dedicated his final act of violence to the Islamic State (Comey, 2016). He sought employment in law enforcement and security, yet railed against the application of American state power overseas (Swisher, 2016).

Another killer—Man Haron Monis of Sydney, Australia—further demonstrates this sequential yet nonlocal, incoherent yet compelling, connective illogic of the digital lone wolf's journey. In December 2014, Monis took 18 patrons of a Sydney cafe hostage. He killed two before dying himself in a gunfight with police (Kampmark, 2017). Monis was, among other things, a convert from Sunni to Shiite Islam. He was a self-proclaimed sheik and a "spiritual healer" who pursued forbidden esoteric disciplines such as astrology and fortunetelling. He was once a pledge of the Rebels motorcycle gang (rejected for "being too weird"; Ralston, 2015). He maintained an active Web presence, and after facing charges related to sexual assaults connected to his faith-healing racket, compared himself with Wikileaks founder Julian Assange ("Man Haron Monis," 2014). Like Mateen, Monis "ceaselessly establish[ed] connections among semiotic chains, organizations of power, and circumstances relative to the arts, sciences, and social struggles" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 7). This process of connecting ideologically and theologically disparate axial points differs from the process of logical connection

that characterizes the print/linear mode of radicalization. It is unique to the hypertext, and should be thought of according to the (il)logics that render it unique.

Through Mateen and Monis, we may better understand how the idiosyncrasies of the lone wolf—psychological, technological, or otherwise—shape the trails he blazes through the hypertext. These paths are unique to each user, for “every hypertext reader gets her own version of the complete text by selecting a particular path through it” (Manovich, 2001, p. 42). Deference to authority—textual, rhetorical, or otherwise—is purely voluntary and constantly undermined by each successive hyperlink. Hence, the megalomania of a Mateen or Man Haron Monis goes not only unchallenged, but is in fact fostered, as the lone wolf writes his own ideological and theological reality in the hypermedia document. This is the principle of *multiplicity*, in that “it ceases to have any relation to the One as subject or object” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 8). Logic and linear thought recede as his hypertext-in-microcosm is produced by the articulation of a unique path through nonlocal, yet contiguous, digital media and content. For those with fantasies of power, this unrecognized authorship takes on the authoritative quality of the divine itself.

In much the same way, the digital lone wolf defies both the phase model approach to understanding radicalization and the cruder reactionary view that Islam itself is the root and branch of radicalization. The lone wolf demands we develop more sophisticated root cause models for violent extremism, models that take into account that the ideological and theological professions of the lone wolf are more ornament than motive. We must “make a map, not a tracing,” for the map “is entirely oriented toward an experimentation in contact with the real . . . open and connectable in all of its dimensions” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 12). The theological, ideological, overlapping, and ambiguous decals that accrue throughout the lone wolf’s process of radicalization cannot be relied on to point backward as according to the sequential logic of print media. They themselves may emerge and recede in significance to the lone wolf during the process of radicalization, like the rhizome, which “may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9) by a logic of *asygnifying rupture*. In the absence of a codifying and reinforcing social group to “restore power to a signifier” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 9), one may track theological or ideological conditions that emerge to influence a radicalization in process, but may not treat these conditions as the proper targets of deradicalizing or preventative measures.

What lies at the root of this meandering, paradoxical, and contradictory process of hypertextual/rhizomatic radicalization is affect. If Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are correct, it is possible that the process of exteriorization even renders his affect more violent and unpredictable. The lone wolf accrues consonant ideational experiences that may not only ornament, but also exacerbate his journey to violence. For when feelings “become uprooted from the interiority of a ‘subject,’ to be projected violently outward into a milieu of pure exteriority that lends them an incredible velocity, a catapulting force: love or hate, they are no longer feelings, but affects” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1986, p. 9).

This helps to account for the similarities frequently found in the contradictory self-professed allegiances of Islamist and far-right lone wolves and of nominally apolitical mass shooters. Chris Harper-Mercer was a community college student of mixed race who reportedly frequented the 4chan website’s politically extreme /pol page. He expressed admiration for the Irish Republican Army, but was known to wear an iron cross, and singled out Christian students in a shooting spree at Umpqua Community College in Oregon that left 10 dead, including

Harper-Mercer himself (Ford & Payne, 2015; Miller & Wang, 2015). Corey Johnson, a 17-year-old self-professed Muslim, left a digital trail detailing his fascination with ISIS, Timothy McVeigh, and the Ku Klux Klan. Johnson reached the final chapter of his hypertextual saga when he stabbed two 13-year-old boys and their mother, killing one child (Almasy & Johnston, 2018). Devon Arthurs, of Tampa, Florida, had links to the satanic neo-Nazi militia Atomwaffen (a group currently tied to at least five murders), before declaring himself a Muslim, murdering his neo-Nazi roommate, and taking the patrons of the Green Planet head shop hostage (Bromwich, 2017; Mathias, 2017). Nikolas Cruz, who killed 17 and wounded 17 more when he attacked students and teachers at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, in 2018, was reported to the FBI prior to the shooting. The tipster who reported him warned, "He's so into ISIS and, um, I-I'm afraid this is, so-something's gonna happen" (Wilber, 2018, p. 2) based on Cruz's Instagram account. That same account included an image of Cruz sporting a Trump-boosting "Make America Great Again" hat and American flag bandana (Evon, 2018).

As with Mateen and Monis, each of these young men amassed his collection of affiliations via that "hypertext model of the World Wide Web [which] arranges the world as a nonhierarchical system ruled by metonymy" (Manovich, 2001, p. 65). However, for these young men, the greater metonymic whole for which these groups and ideologies stand in is none other than their own violent affect. In the digital trails these young men left, we see the accretions of clashing ornament and justification reflecting an affective consistency of (often gendered) aggrievement, entitlement, domination, and revenge (Gambetta & Hertog, 2016; Kimmel, 2018).

Of course, digital technology does not determine the lone wolf's quality of radicalization any more than literacy or orality determines his more collectively organized terrorist counterparts. However, it is equally improbable that the modes by which radicalized individuals communicate—and are communicated to—bear no influence on the shapes that radicalization takes. Indeed, there is no doubt a complex and case-specific dynamic that defines each lone wolf's journey to violence, as "consciousness . . . does not always precede action, but may arise in the process of carrying out an action. These are processes that develop simultaneously, mutually influencing and reinforcing each other" (Sageman, 2008b, p. 75). The purpose of developing a hypertextual discursive turn in countering violent extremism scholarship is not to define a unitary radicalization model for digitally mediated lone wolf radicalization (indeed, it is unlikely such a model exists). Rather, the hypertextual discursive turn may provide a modality with which to most effectively discuss the many and varied floridities of the lone wolf type in the digital age. We cannot understand these many floridities from the epistemic position of print/linear discourse nor from that of secondary orality. Our epistemic position must reflect that of the digitally engaged lone wolf, through a hypertextual/rhizomatic discourse that captures the many and varied contradictory connections and disruptions of his apparent convictions.

### **Conclusion**

Congruities among the representatives of this discourse reveal fascinating resonances, suggestive of correspondence among media, ideology, and cognitive processes. The hypertextual model may remove some of the ideological determinism that plagues common understandings of radicalization. By emphasizing the accretive characteristic of radical ideology, theology, and their complex cleavages and overlaps, one hopes to turn attention to the commonplace sources of radicalization and extremism, as understood by countering violent extremism and deradicalization experts: humiliation, a need for identity, youth culture, and so on (Idriss-Miller, 2018; McCauley & Moskalenko, 2016).

The self-radicalized lone wolf of the digital age will remain not fully understood until such time as our discursive approach can grapple with the hypertextual quality of his "radicalization." The hypertextually engaged lone wolf radicalizes not through a perverse interpretation of holy writ, spun violently out in a *reductio ad extremis* as in the case of print/linear modalities. Nor is his path a return to some divine center or ideological essence, of which the words of holy writ are mere echoes, as in the modality of secondary orality. But as the process of online self-radicalization progresses, it assumes the characteristics of its own communications media: a mass of contradiction, accruing in a succession of affective encounters, all while moving toward its end. Our epistemic approach to the digitally engaged lone wolf must quickly learn to account for these qualities if it is to reckon with the possible emerging trend of such violent lone actors.

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