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# Making ‘Countering Violent Extremism’ Sound Sexy

BY JUSTINE DRENNAN

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JUSTINE.DRENNAN

@JKDRENNAN

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Just as it’s easier to make war than peace, it’s apparently much easier to put out sexy social media if your message is rage-filled jihad rather than “[Countering Violent Extremism](#).” That, at least, would seem to be the lesson of the past several months, as the Islamic State has put governments’ and competing extremist groups’ PR efforts to shame, firing off tens of [thousands](#) of tweets per day and flooding the internet with viral clips that riff on flashy, violent video games like “[Grand Theft Auto](#)” and “[Call of Duty](#).”

But some university students are trying to out-campaign the extremists. Since January, students at 23 universities around the world have taken part in a “peer-to-peer” competition to research, design, and launch U.S. State Department-backed social media campaigns aimed at countering the influence of the Islamic State and other terrorist groups in their communities.

Competing against teams in countries from Serbia to Morocco to Germany to Singapore, 25 students in Kuwait developed a platform to connect young, isolated Muslims with an online community. An Australian team developed an app to give Muslim youth positive daily messages, and students from Canada sought to correct inaccurate ideas about Islam.

The winning team announced Thursday, however, came from Missouri State University in Springfield, where students developed a Common Core-compatible curriculum that could be used to teach middle-schoolers about extremism, spread the hashtag #EndViolentExtremism across social media, and made contact with people in about 90 countries. The Missouri students were among three top teams that flew to Washington to present their work to judges from a range of U.S. agencies, who want to learn from their efforts.

“Our goal for this project is for American communities, working with partners internationally, to identify the challenges, figure out what works best, and then find the solutions to extremism on their own for their own communities,” Kelly Keiderling, principal deputy assistant secretary of state for educational and cultural affairs, told [Foreign Policy](#). While government officials often “aren’t the most engaging voices to reach those youth,” she said, these campaigns can speak the language of their own communities, literally and figuratively.

The team from Australia’s Curtin University — one of the others that presented in Washington on Thursday — developed an app called [52Jumaa](#) that offers young Muslims daily positive messages about Islam, helps them connect with each other, and every Friday asks them to complete a challenge (e.g. “Feed a homeless person”) to engage with their society. Working with the \$2,000 provided to each team, the Curtin students tested their app with teenagers in their Perth community, many of them members of the Somali diaspora. Based on the teens’ feedback, the team plans to modify the app to let users create challenges for each other, said 21-year-old team member Ruby Avis.

The third team to present in Washington, from Mount Royal University in Calgary, Canada, developed a [campaign](#) aimed at changing misperceptions spread by extremist groups of Islam as a violent, vindictive religion, through offerings ranging from on-campus photo exhibitions to online quizzes on topics like “What Muslim Hip Hop Artist are You?”

Winning team member Rosella Short said the Missouri-based campaign, known as [One95](#), hoped to collaborate with the runners-up in the future. “We chose One95 because it’s not a country-specific problem, violent extremism is not an ethnic-specific problem — it’s a global issue,” she said.

The U.S. government is giving the top three teams’ universities \$5,000, \$2,000, and \$1,000, respectively, and is sending the two international groups on a 10-day trip to Minneapolis and San Francisco, where they’ll get advice on developing their campaigns. This fall, the “peer-to-peer” program will double to include 40 to 50 universities due to high levels of interest, according to Tony Sgro, founder and CEO of San Francisco-based EdVenture Partners, the peer-marketing consulting group that the State Department hired to organize the program and advise the college teams.

But the initiative’s longer-term future isn’t clear. It’s up to each team and its university to decide if and how it will continue its campaign, and the State Department stressed that the whole program is a pilot as officials assess its worth. The haziness reflects a broader debate going on in the government — and elsewhere — about how best to fight the Islamic State, or even what to call that fight.

In fact, members of the Missouri State team told [Foreign Policy](#) that having to use the State Department’s preferred term, “Countering Violent Extremism,” had made it harder to communicate with their peers.

“We were throwing ‘violent extremism’ out there, and they’re like, what is that?” said Addison Reed, a 22-year-old advertising major on the team. “But the second we said ‘terrorism’ or ‘ISIS’, they’re like, ‘Oh, that makes sense.’”

So far, full-blown Islamic State supporters, as opposed to “at risk” youth the program targeted, seem to have left the student campaigns alone. That’s a relief to worried university administrators and parents, said Sean Ferrell, EdVenture Partners’ senior vice president and project manager. On the other hand, he admitted, organizers did sometimes find themselves thinking, “Hey, wouldn’t that kind of be a measure of success, if the campaigns were out there enough that they draw attention from extremist groups?” But, Ferrell said, “We’ve learned that a lot of those extremists, if you come at them head-on with some facts and try to expose the hypocrisy, really kind of shy away pretty quickly, because they realize, ‘You’re not my target.’”

While that might be true, the lack of response does raise obvious questions about how much these campaigns can really accomplish. Even leaving aside broader criticisms about the ineffectiveness of “clicktivism,” it’s worth noting that judges evaluated each student project only by how well it conveyed its messages to its chosen community, without weighing whether that population was a large or important target for extremist recruitment. And although violent extremism may threaten all countries to some degree, it’s perhaps striking that the three top-ranked campaigns all came from wealthy countries where the English language dominates.

Although some campaigns — such as the one from the Morocco team — naturally engaged with their target audience in Arabic, the State Department required that final presentations be made in English. Other campaigns, like one from Serbia, were “brilliant, but their submission didn’t have the sophistication, the language, to be able to be competitive” in the judging, said Sgro of EdVenture Partners.

Maybe #EndViolentExtremism will end up going viral, but if it does, it might not be in English.

Image credit: EdVenture Partners/Curtin University

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## **EPA Finds No Major Water Impacts From Fracking (Sort Of)**

Since the “fracking” revolution began in the United States several years ago, environmentalists have **warned** that blasting open underground shale formations with concentrated chemical cocktails could threaten water supplies.

On Thursday, the Environmental Protection Agency appeared to give fracking a clean bill of health, concluding in a **long-delayed study** that hydraulic fracturing has not produced evidence of any “widespread, systemic impacts on drinking water resources.”

The draft study, which has been in the works for four years, doesn’t address all the possible environmental impacts from fracking, focusing instead on the potential threat it poses to drinking water. But the generally favorable report, coming from the Obama administration’s always zealous environmental regulatory arm, seems to sweep away the threat of any new federal regulations to control fracking’s impact on water supplies.

“At first blush, today’s study appears to largely vindicate hydraulic fracturing,” said ClearView Energy Partners, an energy consultancy, in a note. The oil and gas industry also cheered the study, saying it reinforces their claim that proper techniques for drilling wells and disposing of millions of gallons of wastewater from fracked wells can minimize the environmental impact from the revolutionary technique.

But many environmental groups like the Sierra Club seized upon the report’s cautious language to warn that fracking still poses risks. The report noted that there have been cases of groundwater contamination, but that the number of incidents is very small compared to the thousands of wells that have been fracked. The study also noted that a paucity of data makes it hard to draw definitive conclusions about all of fracking’s impacts on water supplies.

With its cautious conclusion, the EPA report quickly turned into a Rorschach test for both supporters and detractors of the practice. “EPA’s report on hydraulic fracturing confirms what we have known for over 60 years when the process began in Duncan, Oklahoma — hydraulic fracturing is safe,” said Sen. James Inhofe (R-Okla.).

Sen. Ed Markey (D-Mass.) read the same study but found the glass half empty. “This draft report verifies what we have known for years, that hydraulic fracturing and related activities have the potential to severely impact drinking water and endanger public health and the environment,” he said.

The EPA study focused solely on fracking’s impact in the United States. But it could have an impact overseas, too. A number of nations, including [Argentina](#), [China](#), [Algeria](#), and the [United Kingdom](#), have been trying to copy the U.S. fracking revolution to unlock cheap oil and gas, but have faced vocal public opposition at times, in part because of concerns over water supplies. The seemingly clean bill of health from the EPA could assuage those environmental worries. But it will do little to affect the [fundamental hurdles](#) that have slowed the shale gale’s spread overseas, including tricky geology, weak regulation and fickle government policies, and a dearth of nimble energy companies that can quickly drill hundreds of wells.

Even in the United States, concerns over fracking’s impact won’t be put to rest by the EPA report. Some cities, even in frack-happy Texas, are [fighting](#) to ban the practice. Some states, such as New York, have [banned](#) fracking outright after warning of much graver environmental threats than the EPA has yet discovered.

And the EPA report did not address one of the growing areas of concern around the longer-term impact of fracking and wastewater disposal: A sharp uptick in the number of “man-made” [earthquakes](#) in places like Oklahoma.

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