



**Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats:  
The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency from  
2002 to 2022—The Information Lever of Power**

*Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats Report*

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## **ABOUT THE PROJECT**

This interim report is part of the project, “Global Responses to Asymmetric Threats Project,” part of the Asymmetric Threat Analysis Center (ATAC), a joint program between START and UMD’s Applied Research Lab for Intelligence and Security (ARLIS). ATAC is funded by the Department of Defense under award no. HQ003421F0481. Any opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this report are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense.

## **ABOUT START**

The National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) is a university-based research, education and training center comprised of an international network of scholars committed to the scientific study of terrorism, responses to terrorism and related phenomena. Led by the University of Maryland, START is a Department of Homeland Security Emeritus Center of Excellence that is supported by multiple federal agencies and departments. START uses state-of-the-art theories, methods and data from the social and behavioral sciences to improve understanding of the origins, dynamics and effects of terrorism; the effectiveness and impacts of counterterrorism and CVE; and other matters of global and national security. For more information, visit [www.start.umd.edu](http://www.start.umd.edu) or contact START at [infostart@umd.edu](mailto:infostart@umd.edu).

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## Introduction

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The analysis contained herein is a companion report to a previous study, *Government Responses to Asymmetric Threats: The State of the Literature on Counterinsurgency from 2002 to 2022*, examining a large sample of counterinsurgency (COIN) literature published in academic journals, reports, and policy and practitioner focused outlets.<sup>1</sup> The methodologies used to collect, classify, and extract the relevant COIN literature are detailed in that report. This report focuses on a subset of the full COIN literature sample from the first, full report: publications that contain analyses of the information lever of power. *Joint Doctrine Note 1-18* defines the information lever of power as rooted in efforts to create, exploit, or disrupt knowledge to obtain an advantage over another party.<sup>2</sup> This entails: 1) “communication synchronization” to “understand and engage key audiences” in the pursuit of national interests; and 2) technical information activities aimed at denying adversaries access to crucial information systems and data, enhancing the state’s capacity to gather and analyze its own data, and using that information to guide activities.<sup>3</sup>

As detailed in the full report, each piece of literature in our COIN sample was coded for the presence of analysis relevant to nine levers of state power: Diplomatic; Information; Military; Economic; Financial; Intelligence; Law Enforcement; Development; and Governance. In that report, we found that many publications touch on several levers. However, not all publications feature each lever of power as a core piece of analysis: i.e., they may be mentioned only in passing or used in a brief example. This report therefore distinguishes publications that have a “core” focus in a specific lever of power, wherein analysis of the lever is a substantive component of the relevant piece of literature, from those that do not.

Using this core coding, 79 pieces of literature from our full sample of 405 COIN publications (almost 20 percent) were coded as containing a substantive focus on the information lever of power. The analyses that follow are therefore based on this subsample of publications. This report proceeds through a robust descriptive analysis of the features of this subsample, including the distribution of empirical research publications and non-empirical literature, the dominant publication outlets for the literature, the geographic and temporal coverage contained in the literature, the independent and dependent variables contained in the literature, and major findings on the efficacy of different information strategies in counterinsurgencies. The report concludes with a discussion of knowledge gaps and recommendations for future research.

## Findings

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### Research Type

We distinguish between empirical research publications—i.e., pieces of literature that focus on testing hypotheses or examining relationships between variables (qualitative or quantitative); theoretical pieces that postulate possible variables and relationships without testing them; review articles that summarize

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<sup>1</sup> Radziszewski et al. (2023).

<sup>2</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018:II-6).

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

past knowledge; and policy pieces that focus on policy gaps and practical recommendations. Over 63 percent of the publications in the information lever subsample are coded as empirical research pieces. This indicates that for articles in our sample containing analysis relevant to the information lever of power, a majority contain some sort of empirical analysis.<sup>4</sup> However, as will be seen in subsequent sections, much of the empirical literature remains decisively qualitative and dominated by case studies.

### What is Explained?

The following sections present analysis of factors that have been examined in the subsample of publications relevant to the information lever of power. This includes a summary of the dependent and independent variables for empirical pieces and concepts for non-empirical pieces, helping identify which explanatory factors researchers have considered important as well as their empirical significance.

#### COIN-Relevant Dependent Variables and Concepts

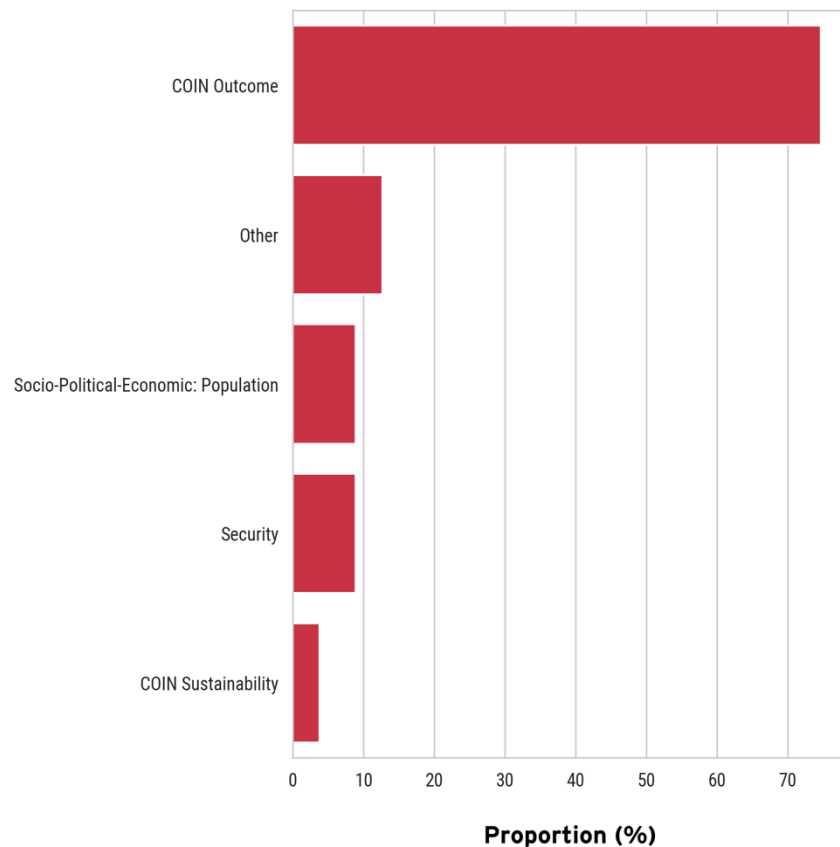


Figure 1: Dependent Variable & Concept Categories in the Information Lever Subsample

Building on the dependent variable and concepts categories developed for our full report on the COIN literature, Figure 1 plots the frequency of the categories across the information lever subsample. These

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<sup>4</sup> See Radziszewski et al. (2023:4) for a discussion of how we determine if an article should be coded as an empirical research publication.

categories include: COIN Outcome, or variables and concepts relating to the winners and losers of conflicts; COIN Sustainability, or variables and concepts relating to how well COIN efforts are sustained over time; Security, or variables and concepts relating to explaining levels of violence; and Socio-Political Economic: Population, or variables and concepts relating to the success or failure of COIN initiatives aimed at the general public, the types of initiatives, and the scale of the initiatives.<sup>5</sup> As can be seen, the most frequent category of dependent variable is COIN Outcome (considered in almost 75 percent of publications in the subsample)—a finding that is consistent with our full report.

Equal numbers of literature contain dependent variables or concepts considering socio-political-economic factors involving the public/individual and dependent variables or concepts considering security (8.9 percent each). Dependent variables focusing on the sustainability of COIN operations are present in just under four percent of publications, while “other” dependent variables are present in just under 13 percent of pieces. Overall, these findings confirm what was observed in the full report: there is a large focus on COIN outcomes in the literature considering government use of information-related sources of power in responses to insurgencies.

### COIN-Relevant Independent Variables and Concepts

Like the dependent variable and concepts analysis from the full report, for each article in the information lever subsample, we assigned an analytic category to each unique independent variable and/or concept, at the publication level, included in a piece of a literature.<sup>6</sup> For the information lever subsample, this resulted in the annotation of 152 unique independent variables and concepts. Through this process, four major categories were developed: 1) Cyber-Operations (i.e., strategies that leverage computational resources and methodologies to assist COIN in the digital domain); 2) Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness (i.e., strategies aimed at embedding COIN in local cultural and social practices so as to mitigate blowback); 3) Strategic Communication (i.e., the use of propaganda and messaging in multimedia domains to assist in winning populations’ hearts and minds); and 4) Other, which is used to bucket variables that are not explicitly about the information lever of power. Generally, variables and concepts in the Other category are used to evaluate other hypotheses or research questions not directly about the information lever of power (for example, variables and concepts that are used to capture how other factors may mediate the effectiveness of information lever relevant factors, such as combining development aid with strategic communication).

As Figure 2 shows, the Other category is the most frequent independent variable and concept group (41.4 percent of independent variables). This is expected, as most articles consider several factors in addition to those strictly relevant to the information lever. Strategic Communication is the largest independent variable and concept group with direct focus on information, accounting for 37.5 percent of variables and concepts, while Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness comes next at just under 16 percent of independent variables and concepts. The Cyber-Operations category accounts for the lowest proportion of independent variables and concepts at 5.3 percent.

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<sup>5</sup> See Radziszewski et al. (2023:9-11).

<sup>6</sup> As was done in the full report, for policy, theoretical, and otherwise non-empirically coded publications, the research team *inferred* the concept being articulated by the author(s).

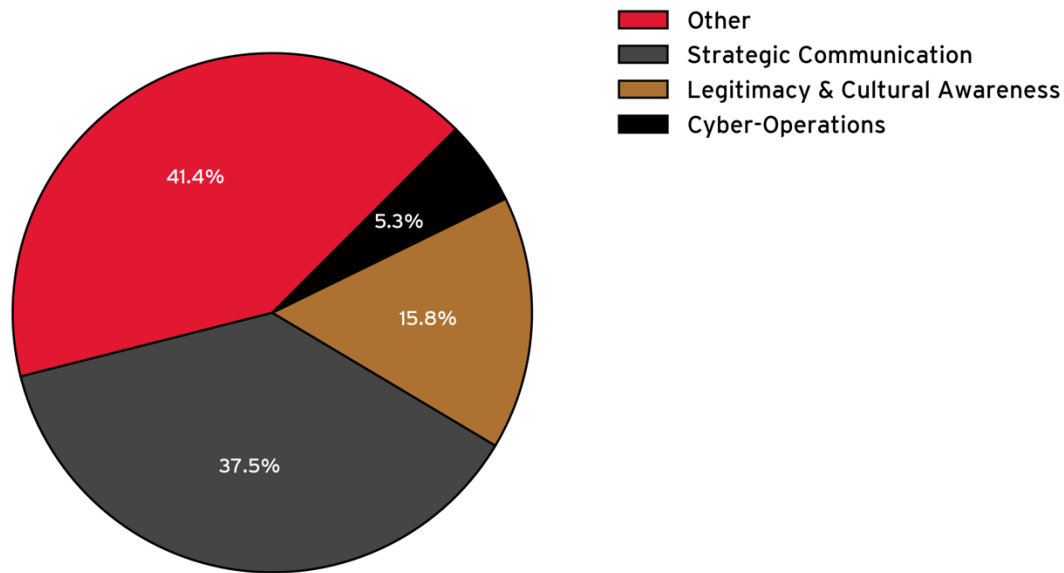


Figure 2: Independent Variable & Concept Categories in the Information Lever Subsample

### Conditional Effectiveness: Strategic Communication

While it is important to note how different COIN factors are discussed in non-empirical publications to understand which factors and concepts have been covered in the COIN literature, in terms of analyzing the efficacy of COIN strategies that use the information lever of power, I focus exclusively on empirical literature. Considering empirical findings from the Strategic Communication cluster, the relationship between the use of propaganda strategies—such as radio and media broadcasts, leaflets, and newspaper messaging—and COIN outcomes is a major theme. Findings in this area suggest that strategic communication is more likely to succeed when it is implemented as part of the broader, proactive strategy with relevance to local values and social relations.

For example, the successful Australian-led Regional Assistance Mission to Solomon Islands (RAMSI) combined radio messaging with a variety of other information lever capacities, including distributing leaflets, newspaper messages, face-to-face interactions between civilians and COIN forces to explain the purpose of RAMSI, and equipping police officers with information cards to hand out to the local population during patrols.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, another study shows that U.S. forces in Iraq were able to deploy effective strategic communication campaigns with respect to Abu Musab al-Zarqawi’s violent actions, which alienated segments of the Iraqi population. Along with radio broadcasts, COIN forces used television spots, newspaper coverage, internet posts, loudspeakers, and locally distributed handouts to delegitimize al-Zarqawi in the eyes of Iraqis and strip him of his heroic image.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Glen (2007).

<sup>8</sup> Henriksen (2005).

Importantly, a series of RAND reports by Paul et al. (2010) and Paul et al. (2013b) analyzing the efficacy of strategic communication across a large dataset of insurgencies finds strong support that strategic communication leads to positive COIN outcomes. For these studies, the authors constructed a novel dataset consisting of more than 70 COIN cases and analyzed them using qualitative comparative analysis.<sup>9</sup> In the first study, the authors find that in all but two insurgencies in which COIN forces succeeded, they deployed at least two strategic communication concepts as part of their counterinsurgency strategy.<sup>10</sup> In the second study, the authors find that in every single case where COIN forces succeeded, they deployed at least three strategic communications concepts as part of the counterinsurgency effort.<sup>11</sup> These studies suggest that strategic communication may be critical to obtaining successful COIN outcomes and that there may even be an multiplicative effect: i.e., using *more* strategic communication factors as part of the counterinsurgency may lead to compounding improvements the efficacy of the messaging.

Other research points to how strategic communication can be used to bolster other levers of power in COIN operations to obtain successful outcomes. For example, a study evaluating U.S. counterinsurgency efforts in Mindanao, Philippines, shows that a public information campaign that highlighted the programs being instituted by USAID via media reports about the project's impacts helped the COIN effort succeed by building support for both COIN forces and the local government, thereby sustaining peace in the region.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, another study finds that both the Soviet forces in the 1980s and Canadian forces in the twenty-first century have successfully utilized radio broadcasting alongside other strategies, including development programs, in Afghanistan.<sup>13</sup> Likewise, an article re-evaluating the 1963 to 1975 Dhofar insurgency finds that while strategic communication alone (e.g., propaganda, radio broadcasts, pamphlets) did not lead to success against the rebellion, British and Omani psychological warfare experts were able to exploit divisions between the secular Marxist-Leninist ideology of the insurgents and the traditional Islamic culture of Dhofar through strategic messaging the helped undermine popular support for the rebellion.<sup>14</sup>

However, other literature shows that strategic communication may not always be a successful strategy. In some cases when strategic communication fails, it is because the authorities implementing the strategies do not enjoy population legitimacy. This was the case for the propaganda campaigns run by the South African government during the Namibian War for Independence via pamphlets and the spreading of rumors about internal discord within the South-West African People's Organization (SWAPO), neither

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<sup>9</sup> The 2010 study contained 30 cases, but this grew to 71 for the subsequent 2013 study (see Paul et al. 2010, 2013b).

<sup>10</sup> Paul et al. (2010:55-58). These factors are: "Delivering on promises" (COIN force and government actions were consistent with messages); "Expectation management" (COIN forces maintained credibility with local populations); messages cohering with the overall COIN approach; messages and themes were coordinated across all involved government agencies; there was an "earnest information operations, psychological operations, strategic communication, or messaging effort;" and there was unity of effort in mission command (Paul et al. 2010:56-57).

<sup>11</sup> Paul et al. (2013b:111-113). The authors consider the same factors above except for unity of command and the use of an "earnest information operations, psychological operations, strategic communication, or messaging effort."

<sup>12</sup> Stuebner and Hirsch (2010).

<sup>13</sup> Tchantouridzé (2013).

<sup>14</sup> DeVore (2012).



of which prevented SWAPO from winning a resounding victory in the 1989 Namibian election.<sup>15</sup> This was largely due to widespread distrust of South African authorities, anger at racist government policies, and brutal policing tactics, all of which delegitimized the government. Empirical findings of ineffective strategic communication efforts also suggest that failure can be attributed to the state actor's inability to establish proactive control over narratives in the information domain. When the government is put in the position where it is primarily *reacting* to the narratives of its opponents, then its strategic communications efforts are likely to fail. This was the case with Britain's strategic communication campaign in Palestine from 1945 to 1948, for example.<sup>16</sup>

Finally, if a state's strategic communications efforts are in tension with the cultural values of the target population, then the state risks delegitimizing its COIN efforts and inadvertently increasing the legitimacy of insurgents amongst the local population. This was the case for Russia in the Second Chechen War, where its anti-Islam information campaign came into conflict with local values.<sup>17</sup> Similarly, the importance of values and social relations is noted in a study that investigates the efficacy of "come home" radio programming targeting recruits into the Lord's Resistance Army (LRA) in Uganda,<sup>18</sup> which examines the use of voices of former insurgents in the messaging, as well as the voices of recruits' own family members. As come home messaging targeting the LRA expanded into new territories, initial success appeared to drop off, and the broadcasters often faced violent threats.<sup>19</sup> Overall, the researcher points out that the efficacy of the radio messaging campaigns depends on the scale and depth of social relations between the radio station and the audiences it was trying to reach.

#### Mixed Results: Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness

The Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness category contains empirical variables related to aspects of how COIN forces manage their image with respect to the cultural and social values of the local population to secure broad support for the counterinsurgency mission. This requires that COIN forces have sound information about the social environment they will be operating in and effectively use this knowledge in actionable ways (i.e., meeting the demand for communicative synchronization) to obtain population legitimacy and support all other levers of power.<sup>20</sup> For example, one article evaluating the Republic of Korea's (ROK) population-centric approach during the Vietnam War found that ROK soldiers' familiarity with Confucian cultural norms allowed them to structure their engagements with village leaders in a way respectful to local customs, leading to the development of positive attitudes towards Korean forces as indicated by a survey commissioned by the ROK to the local Vietnamese population.<sup>21</sup> Other research analyzing the ROK in Vietnam arrive at similar conclusions.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> de Visser (2013).

<sup>16</sup> Utting (2007).

<sup>17</sup> Kim and Blank (2013).

<sup>18</sup> Ross (2016).

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Joint Chiefs of Staff (2018:II-6).

<sup>21</sup> Ban (2021a)

<sup>22</sup> For example: Ban (2021b).

Research shows that maintaining a positive image among the local population and thus securing their support for COIN operations, however, can be hampered by either insufficient or excessive use of kinetic power. There is blowback from either excessively emphasizing image at the expense of the usual military operations or blowback from extensive use of force that can result in negative perceptions of the government and damage any efforts to cultivate positive image. For example, sometimes, COIN forces draw on their past colonial experiences and knowledge of how being perceived as an occupying power can quickly undermine counterinsurgency missions and de-emphasize the importance of kinetic operations. An article looking at recent French COIN practices in the Sahel shows that the French are very cautious with respect to the use of force and direct intervention due to the country's colonial history. Instead, France primarily aims to build legitimacy for the COIN operation by limiting its role, projecting an image as a partner and not an occupying power by providing aid and material supports, and tasking local security forces to oversee kinetic operations.<sup>23</sup> However, the same study finds that the lack of more direct French involvement may be resulting in suboptimal outcomes, inefficiencies in kinetic operations, and increasing the probability of a protracted conflict.<sup>24</sup>

Like the Strategic Communication category discussed earlier, the findings for the Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness category are mixed. A RAND study analyzing COIN outcomes across a large dataset of COIN cases, for example, did not find that COIN forces who emphasized cultural awareness practices in their counterinsurgency efforts were more successful than those whom did not.<sup>25</sup> What is consistent across these studies, however, is a recognition that legitimacy remains a focal point of COIN doctrine, though it appears to exist in tension with the kinetic aspects of counterinsurgency practice.<sup>26</sup> These findings need to be approached with caution, however, as the small number of articles that investigate these variables across different contexts limits generalizability. More research is needed in this domain.

Finally, only a small number of publications contain concepts from the Cyber-Operations cluster, and none of them are empirical research articles. Instead, cyber-operations feature exclusively in policy-oriented and theoretical pieces in the information lever subsample. This entails publications arguing that training engineers (including “hacktivists” who can use malware and other disruptive technologies) in, and building infrastructure for, a variety of open-ended cyber-operations (e.g., information operations, bug bounty programs) will be pivotal to obtaining successful outcomes in contemporary COIN missions.<sup>27</sup> However, beyond recommending cyber-oriented strategies, these literature do not offer specific empirical tests for the efficacy of different cyber-operations. Relative to other independent variables and concepts in the subsample, those focusing on cyber-operations appear to be rare and understudied in empirical articles in the subsample.

Overall, this analysis reveals that variables relevant to strategic communication, information operations, and propaganda have received the most study. Often, the findings suggest that strategic communication

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<sup>23</sup> Shurkin (2021).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Paul et al. (2013b:125-128).

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Anderson (2010).

<sup>27</sup> Bates (2005); Mills (2011); Pascoli and Grzegorzewski (2022); Pendall, Wilkes, and Robinson (2013).

can be effective, though other research cautions this by noting that propaganda efforts are likely enhanced when paired with activities from other levers of power, such as development aid. Nevertheless, some research shows that the success of strategic communication efforts is highly contingent, and even when well organized, may ultimately have little or no effect. Other pieces of literature highlight the ineffectiveness of strategic communication when, for example, it clashes with local values or is merely reactive. Legitimacy & Cultural Awareness occupies a smaller share of variables and could use more empirical analysis in the global response literature to develop more generalizable knowledge. The Cyber-Operations category is understudied in this subsample. The only literature pieces with an explicit cyber-operations focus are not empirical research publications, pointing to a need for more scientific study in this area from a global responses angle. Finally, nearly all the findings discussed above come from small-*N* qualitative case studies. This points to an overall lack of methodological diversity and an absence of large-*N* analyses in this subsample. The implications of these gaps are discussed in the concluding section of this report.

### Publication Venue

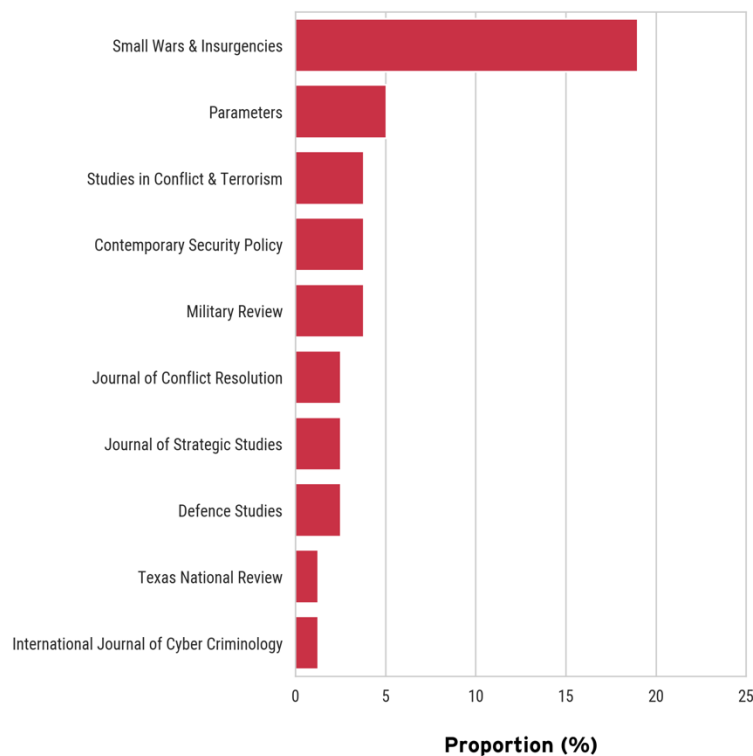


Figure 3: Top 10 Most Frequent Publication Outlets in the Information Level Subsample

In terms of publication venue, there is considerable similarity between the information lever subsample and the full sample from Radziszewski et al. (2023), as Figure 3 shows. *Small Wars & Insurgencies* dominates, encompassing nearly 19 percent of the subsample and almost four times as much as the next most frequent

publication, *Parameters* (5.1 percent). *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, *Contemporary Security Policy*, and *Military Review* each represent an equal proportion of articles in the subsample (3.8 percent). This pattern is repeated for the next four most frequent publications—*Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *Journal of Strategic Studies*, *International Security*, and *Defence Studies*—which cover 2.5 percent of the subsample each. The remaining publications, which include journals such as *Defense & Security Analysis*, the *American Journal of Political Science*, and *Strategic Studies Quarterly*, represent a single article each in the information lever subsample. Overall, there is not much diversity in the subsample and interest comes from predominantly qualitative publications and from outside the leading journals.

### Frequency of Publications over Time

There is less normality in the distribution of articles in the information lever subsample over time than in the full sample, as Figure 4 shows. The first year we see entries in this subsample is 2005. Over the remainder of the time series, the counts peak and fall, reaching equal highs in 2007 and 2011 (9 articles in each year). These increases in frequency are interesting, as they correspond with two important COIN-relevant events: 1) the surge in Iraq in 2007; and 2) President Barack Obama’s formal ending of the War in Iraq in 2011. Crucially, the 2007 surge in Iraq inaugurated a shift in COIN strategy to a more decisively “hearts and minds” approach under the influence and leadership of General David Petraeus, with more focus on improving communication between the population and troops. However, given the lag between the time when a manuscript is submitted for publication and the actual time at which it is published, it is not clear if this is reflective of an actual trend in COIN analysis.

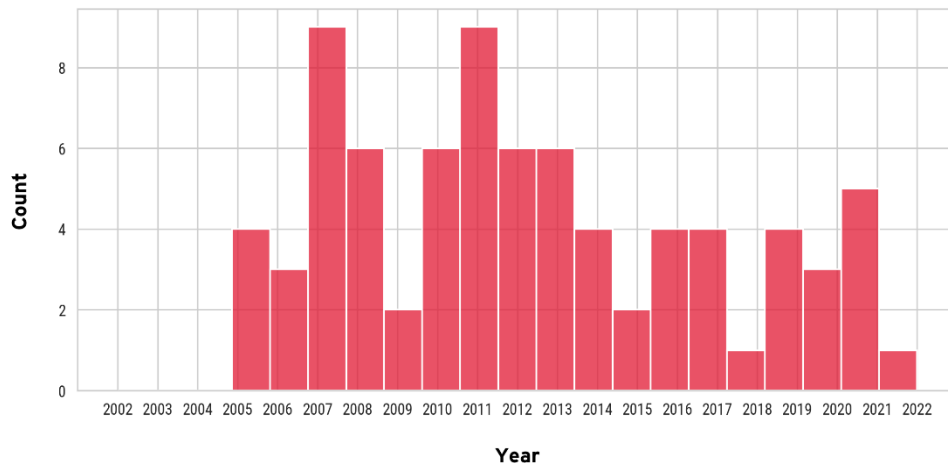


Figure 4: Distribution of Publications Over Time (2002-2022)

### Methodological Focus

Considering the empirical research publications only, as Figure 5 illustrates, a super-majority (88 percent) of the publications within the information lever of power subsample are exclusively qualitative pieces.

Only five (10 percent) of publications in the empirical research information lever subsample are exclusively quantitative, and a single article contains mixed methods. This is consistent with findings from START’s full report, which showed that qualitative analysis dominates the COIN literature.

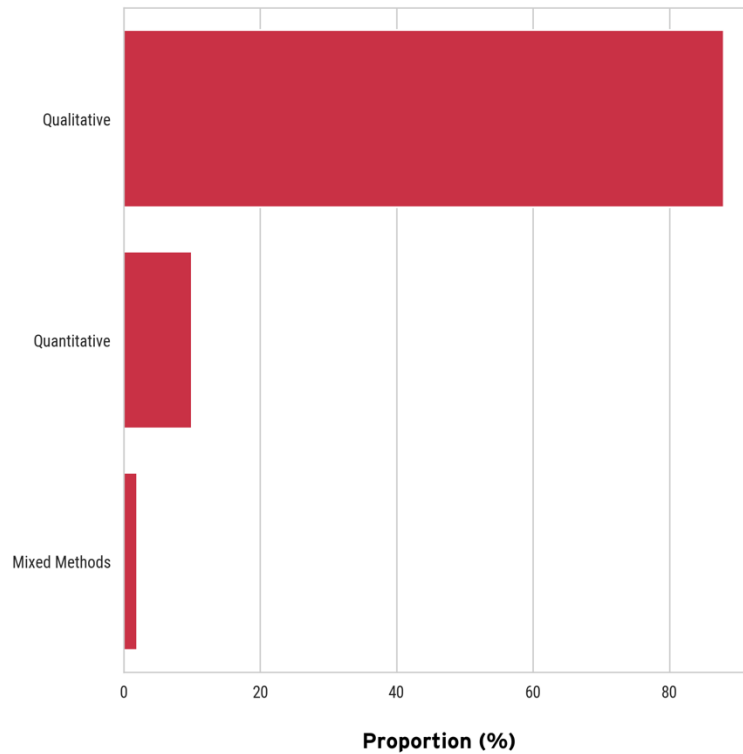


Figure 5: Distribution of Publications Over Time (2002-2022)

Most of the quantitative methodologies are conventional statistical models (Table 1), such as ordered logit models for predicting categorical COIN outcomes like government victories, losses, or draws,<sup>28</sup> as well as the ordinal intensity of governments’ hearts and minds strategies targeting civilians.<sup>29</sup> One unconventional quantitative methodology notable in this subsample is the Quantitative Dynamic Systems Analysis approach. In the article deploying this method, the author designs a sophisticated model to simulate the efficacy of COIN tactics and strategies pulled directly from the *Counterinsurgency FM 3-24*, with a key finding that the use of propaganda to tell the government’s side of the story while simultaneously discrediting insurgent narratives is associated with positive COIN outcomes, especially when combined with economic development programs, effective intelligence gathering, and a balanced use of military force.<sup>30</sup>

**Table 1. Quantitative Methodologies in the Empirical Information Lever Subsample**

<sup>28</sup> For example: Peic (2014).

<sup>29</sup> For example: Sullivan and Karreth (2019).

<sup>30</sup> Anderson (2011).

Method	Proportion of Empirical Articles
Ordered Logit	6.0%
First-Difference Model	2.0%
Linear Regression	2.0%
Quantitative Dynamic Systems Analysis	2.0%
<b>Note:</b> these statistics are not mutually exclusive. A publication can employ multiple methodologies.	

Considering publications that employ empirical qualitative methodologies (Table 2), we observe that the use of case studies dominates, covering over 93 percent of the publications.<sup>31</sup> Importantly, these statistics are not mutually exclusive: a publication can include interviews or fieldwork (17.8 percent of publications), such as an article assessing the development of U.S. COIN doctrine through interviews with authors of the FM 3-24<sup>32</sup> and an article using focus groups of combat infantry personnel to understand the efficacy of British COIN practices in Afghanistan.<sup>33</sup> Finally, a small number of publications (6.7 percent) deploy expert elicitation methods, such as RAND reports using the Delphi Expert Elicitation Method.<sup>34</sup>

These findings are largely consistent with those of START’s full report on COIN literature. In that report, we similarly identified a disproportionate use of qualitative methods in empirical analyses of COIN and global responses to asymmetric conflicts. Especially prominent were case studies, which continue to dominate in the empirical subsample of the information lever relevant publications.

<b>Table 2. Qualitative Methodologies in the Empirical Information Lever Subsample</b>	
Method	Proportion of Empirical Articles
Case Studies	93.3%
Interviews & Field Work	17.8%
Expert Elicitation	6.7%
<b>Note:</b> these statistics are not mutually exclusive. A publication can employ multiple methodologies.	

<sup>31</sup> For example: Briggs (2014); Hughes (2009); Tovy (2012).

<sup>32</sup> Alderson (2007).

<sup>33</sup> Catignani (2012).

<sup>34</sup> Paul (2011); Paul et al. (2013a).

## Geographic Focus

As we showed in our full report, the literature in our database is geographically biased towards the COIN experiences of Western powers. Additionally, our findings showed that geographic coverage was often limited to specific, single countries with an overall lack of truly global coverage. These biases remain in the information lever subsample.

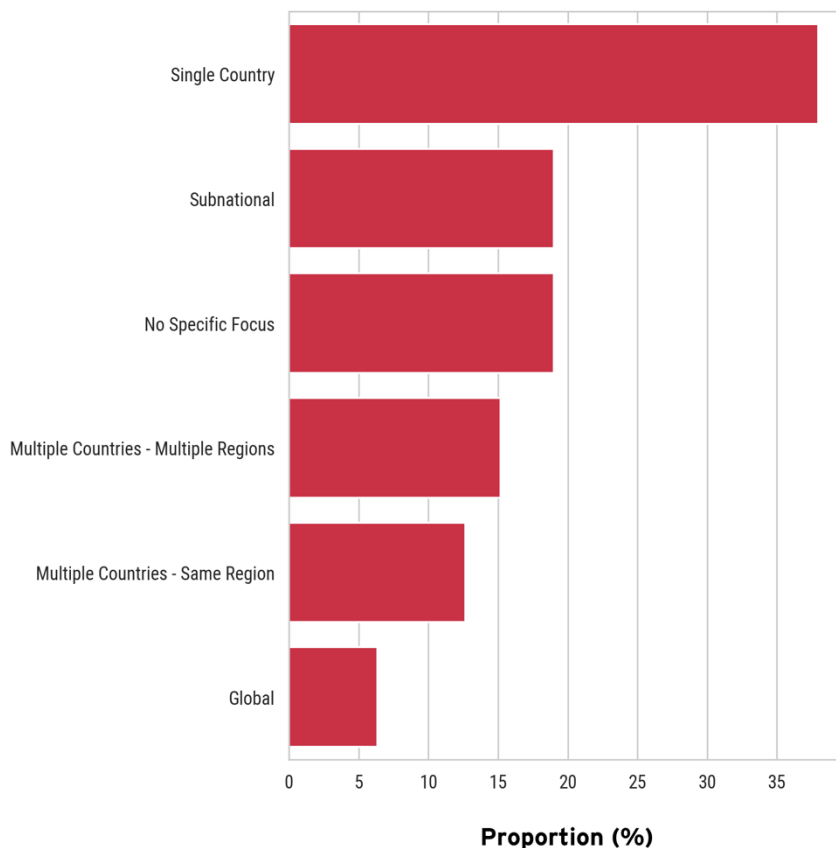


Figure 6: Geographic Coverage of COIN Literature

Figure 6 plots the geographic scope of all articles in the information lever subsample. Importantly, it is possible for a single article to have multiple analyses that span multiple geographic scopes, meaning that these categories are not mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, a large portion of articles (almost 38 percent) contain analyses focusing on a single country. Just under 19 percent of publications contain analyses focusing on subnational regions within countries, such as provinces, 15.2 percent contain analysis of multiple countries in different regions, and 12.7 percent contain analysis of multiple countries in the same region. Only a very small number of articles contain a truly global analytic focus (6.3 percent), while a sizable 19 percent of articles contain analyses without any specific geographic focus. Generally, publications without a specific geographic focus are theoretical or policy pieces, though a very small number of publications contain analyses with no specific geographic focus, such as an article employing interview

methods with experts and soldiers on the writing and implementation of contemporary U.S. COIN doctrine.<sup>35</sup>

In terms of specific countries, Afghanistan is analyzed the most frequently (27.8 percent of publications) followed by Iraq (21.5 percent of publications), Vietnam (13.9 percent of publications), and Malaysia (6.3 percent of publications). India and Israel are analyzed in an equal number of publications (3.8 percent). While other countries from across the world are considered, including those in South America (e.g., Columbia) and Africa (e.g., Burkina Faso, Chad), most of these countries are only included in one or two publications in the subsample. These findings are consistent with those of the full report, which suggests that the major recent insurgencies in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as historically salient cases like Vietnam and Malaysia, loom large in the COIN literature.

### Target

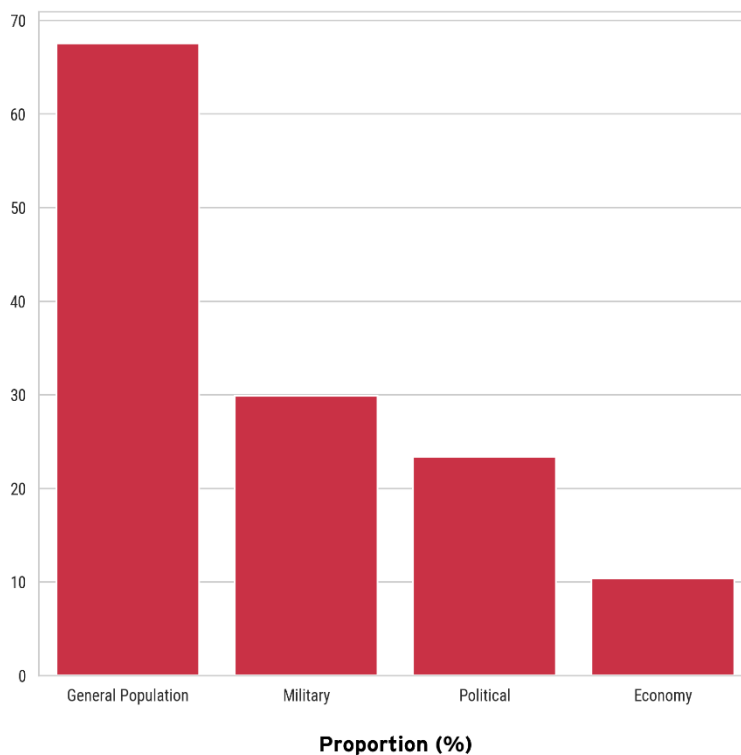


Figure 7: State Targets of COIN in the Information Subsample

This section analyzes which types of actors are targeted during counterinsurgency campaigns in the information subsample. Targets can be both state and nonstate actors. For state actors, there are four target types: the general population; the military; political institutions; and the economy. For nonstate actors, there are three target types: members of the nonstate group (including leaders of these groups); sympathizers of the nonstate group; and constituents of the nonstate group (i.e., the population the nonstate group claims to represent).

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<sup>35</sup> For example: Alderson (2007).



Figure 7 plots the frequencies of different state targets considered in the information lever subsample. As can be seen, a large majority of articles consider the general population as a target in analysis (68.4 percent). Many articles also consider the military as a target (nearly 32 percent of publications). Political institutions are considered as a target in 25.3 percent of articles and the economy in 10.1 percent. Overall, these findings are largely consistent with those from the full report.

Figure 8 plots similar frequencies, but this time for nonstate targets. A very large number of publications (nearly 80 percent) consider the members of insurgent or rebel groups—including their leaders—as targets in their analysis. High numbers are also observed for sympathizers and constituents (included in nearly 70 percent of publications each). These frequencies are slightly larger for this subsample than for those observed for the full report. However, the relatively high frequency of non-state targets in COIN publications remains consistent. These findings do not offer substantively new insights relative to the full report.

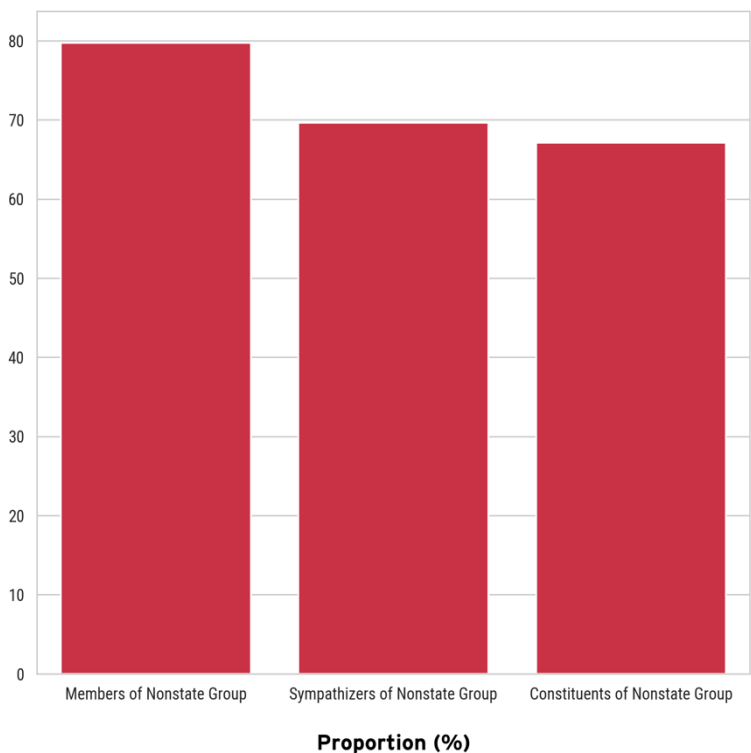


Figure 8: Non-state Targets of COIN in the Information Subsample

## Research Gaps & Recommendations

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Based on the foregoing analysis of the information lever of power subsample from our larger full sample of COIN literature, three areas for future research are identified. These are: more quantitative and large sample research; a broader, more global-oriented, geographic focus; increasing the operationalization of independent variables relevant to the information lever of power; and exploring the governments' use of digital platforms against insurgents. Each of these items is discussed below.

### **More Quantitative Research and Large Sample Analysis**

The COIN literature analyzed in the general report is dominated by qualitative research articles, particularly small sample case studies. As illustrated above, there is no exception with the information lever of power subsample examined in this report. While some case studies take a comparative approach, examining COIN efforts and outcomes in different countries, regions, or time periods, generally, only one or two countries are analyzed at a time. These considerations raise the risk that the findings gleaned from the empirical research may lack generalizability.

Large sample quantitative studies enable comparative analyses of many insurgencies and COIN campaigns at once across a variety of factors and levers of power, though the development of more fine-grained databases may be necessary to facilitate large sample quantitative data analysis, especially with respect to the information lever of power. Part of this may be due to the lack of relevant independent variables in major datasets relevant to COIN, although these existing datasets are often good resources for dependent variables, requiring novel data collection efforts.

### **Expanded Geographic Reach**

The COIN experiences of the major Western powers are overrepresented in our full sample of COIN literature, as well as in the current subsample of information lever relevant publications. This has led to an emphasis on cases such as Afghanistan, Iraq, Vietnam, and Malaysia, as these tend to correspond with American, British, and French historical experiences. Oftentimes, historical case studies will reappraise these COIN efforts to determine what, if any, lessons learned may still flow from these counterinsurgencies. Empirically, this has merit, as these were indisputably major counterinsurgency efforts that should be critically analyzed. However, this has led to an imbalance in COIN analyses and the downplaying of non-Western experiences with countering insurgencies.

Future research should consider counterinsurgencies beyond the conventional Western scope of vision and set of historical experiences. In cases where Western powers continue to be involved, future research should examine cases beyond the major examples indicated above. An expanded geographic scope such as this could be accomplished by pursuing the large sample database design and quantitative analysis discussed in the previous section.

Expanding geographic vision in this way will provide researchers with novel opportunities for comparative analysis across cases that may not seem obvious at first glance. It will also facilitate truly global analysis that can provide insights into how geographic context matters for different COIN strategies and techniques. For the information lever of power, which must be attuned to the nuances of place and culture to be successful, such large-scale global comparative analyses are especially warranted.

## **Operationalizing and Measuring Information Lever-Relevant Variables**

COIN literature examining the information lever of power in counterinsurgency operations could benefit from more specific operationalizations of information lever concepts. Once operationalized, these concepts can then be transformed into more precise variable measures for use in research. While operationalizations and practical measurements will be especially beneficial for large sample quantitative analyses, these measures do not have to be restricted to quantitative studies. Codebooks could be developed with well-defined operationalizations of core COIN concepts that qualitative researchers can then use for coding case studies or engaging in content analysis of primary or secondary sources. For qualitative research specifically, this will provide a scientifically reproducible approach to case analysis that may enhance generalizability and improve opportunities for comparative case studies. One common trait of qualitative research looking at the information lever of power in COIN is the aggregation of information lever factors into generic “population centric” or “hearts and minds” categories that can, and should, be disaggregated into more precise discussions of specific information-relevant variables.

Developing measures for information lever relevant factors in counterinsurgency may have to occur in tandem with the creation of new databases and data resources, as discussed above. Nevertheless, this is a worthwhile task for the information lever of power due to a dearth of specific operational measures in the literature. Moreover, because the population and population legitimacy are so conceptually significant to COIN, much of the COIN literature will either allude to or reference information lever relevant factors in their articles. However, these references are often brief and underspecified, requiring conceptual clarity and more analytical rigor parsing out specific information lever capacities from general notions of winning hearts and minds. Finding new ways to measure information lever concepts within the context of counterinsurgencies, and irregular warfare more generally, should be an important goal of future research efforts.

### **Focus on Digital Platforms**

Finally, the role of the internet in insurgencies and counterinsurgencies is understudied in the subsample analyzed here even though it has been highlighted as an important factor in contemporary COIN.<sup>36</sup> While there is a large literature on how state actors, state proxies, and nonstate actors use the internet to advance strategic goals, these studies tend to focus on great power competition and terrorism.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, rebels and insurgents have proved extremely capable of using the internet since the turn of the century, leveraging the affordances of digital technologies to build local support, globalize their struggles, and to sustain their movements.<sup>38</sup> COIN research focusing specifically on effective global responses to insurgencies should, therefore, build on the methodologies and insights from the terrorism studies and great power competition literature to develop focused empirical studies of both insurgent and counterinsurgent activities on digital platforms and within online networks.

Operationally, this might involve experimenting with agile open-source intelligence (OSINT) techniques that organizations like Bellingcat use to identify networks of malign actors to unearth the strategies these

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<sup>36</sup> For example: Metz (2012).

<sup>37</sup> For example: DiResta et al. (2018); Gill et al. (2017); Starbird, Arif, and Wilson (2019).

<sup>38</sup> Walter (2017).

actors deploy to organize digitally and pursue their agendas. In the case of ISIS, for example, Bellingcat used OSINT to illustrate how the insurgent group has used platforms like Telegram in a modular and flexible way, which poses severe difficulties for governments trying to combat insurgent threats like ISIS.<sup>39</sup> Moreover, organizations like ISIS often have dedicated digital leadership teams, meaning that simply banning accounts and censoring social media content will not suffice. Rather, governments could pursue strategies to marginalize insurgents to as few online platforms as possible where they can be more closely monitored by partnering with social media platforms to experiment with online counternarrative campaigns that can be widely disseminated across social media.

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<sup>39</sup> Bindner and Gluck (2017).

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