

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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### BQ 495 – No. 34/2017

## Does social media help promote extremism and populism?

### Seminar of IIRF and CISG at Global Media Forum

**A PRESS RELEASE BY THE GLOBAL MEDIA FORUM: [HTTP://WWW.DW.COM/EN/DOES-SOCIAL-MEDIA-HELP-PROMOTE-EXTREMISM-AND-POPULISM/A-39343062](http://www.dw.com/en/does-social-media-help-promote-extremism-and-populism/A-39343062)**

(Bonn, 14.07.2017) As support for extremist ideologies and populism becomes more visible worldwide, media and social networks face increasing criticism. But experts say this is just an easy excuse that covers up more complex social issues.

After terrorists drove a vehicle into pedestrians in London on June 3, British Prime Minister Theresa May responded by saying that internet companies like Google and Facebook provided space for extremist ideologies to “breed.” May also called for Britain to lead democratic governments to “reach international agreements that regulate cyberspace to prevent the spread of extremism and terrorism planning.”

At DW’s Global Media Forum, the debate over the media’s role in facilitating extremism and populism took center stage, with journalists and experts coming together to question how people become radicalized, how governments manipulate media and if social networks are really to blame.

Ahmad Mansour is a leading international expert on radicalization who works with vulnerable youth to identify the roots of radicalization. He addressed the Global Media Forum panel discussion, hosted by the Center for International Security and Governance (CISG) and International Institute for Religious Freedom (IIRF), entitled “If search for identity is the question, is radicalization the answer?”

Growing up as an Israeli Arab, Mansour said he was an Islamist as a teenager and his outlook changed after he studied to become a psychologist. Mansour said that many



CISG and IIRF as partners – entrance of Global Media Forum © BQ / Schirmmacher



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Islamists are in fact “good psychologists” who can identify how young people lack identity and ideology and will use this to coerce them into feeling identified and oriented. Rather than the media directly contributing to extremism, Mansour said the media provides vulnerable individuals the chance to identify with a group.

According to him, isolation, lack of identity and family hardship are the primary factors in determining whether an individual will be vulnerable to extremist ideology. Mansour also underlined that civil society needs a new definition of violence.

“Violence doesn’t start when we shoot at each other,” he said. “Conspiracy theories are a type of violence, denigrating others is a type of violence, putting people in fear is a type of violence.”

## ‘A radical needs a network’

Christine Schirmacher, Professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn in Germany, noted during the discussion that while the Internet is widely considered to be a major factor in extremism, most research does not bear that theory out.

“The real starting point is a personal connection to a mentor and a group,” she said. “A response space and a personal connection are necessary.” She added that people who sit alone online and entertain extremist ideas were not likely to radicalize in action. “A radical needs a network,” she said.



Ahmad Mansour © Heike Steinweg

Some groups of media experts at the discussion said that [the media needed to be careful about how it explained terrorist acts](#) and use terminology that doesn’t reproduce stereotypes or reproduce prejudices that can contribute to a narrative of radicalization. Others said that the media could contribute to creating a more positive narrative by publishing stories about individuals who faced social difficulties but didn’t turn to radicalization.

## Cultural isolation and confusion

Mohammed Hashemi, a journalist and political analyst from Iran attending the panel, said that in his personal experience, living in a foreign culture means someone needs to be proactive or they would become isolated. “Terror groups like IS can provide people with something adventurous, give them a weapon and promise excitement,” he said. “Imagine if someone is left alone and you provide them with this.”

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## Workshop description with bios

### Radicalization as search for identity: What the media can and should do before or after

After a short statement about the relevance of the topic for global security and media, two experts will describe what we presently can know from research and personal experience, how radicalization works and how it relates to the loss and search for identity. The experts will span the topic from personal case studies to global perspectives.

The workshop in small group discussions will circle around the question, how the media can report about biographies of those radicalized and de-radicalized biographies in a way, that does not itself further radicalization but helps media users to find a self-confident identity beyond extremism and violence.

The results will then be mirrored back to the experts in a final plenary discussion about the question what role media play in radicalization and what media can and should do to either help prevent radicalization or help with de-radicalization.



Christine Schirmacher lecturing at Global Media Forum  
© BQ / Schirmacher

### Moderator

Prof. Dr. theol. Dr. phil. Thomas Schirmacher, PhD, ThD, DD, earned three doctorates in ecumenical theology, in cultural anthropology and in the sociology of religion and is professor of the sociology of religion at the State University of the West in Timisoara, Romania. As President of the International Council of the International Society for Human Rights and as director of the International Institute for Religious Freedom (Bonn, Cape Town, Colombo, Sao Paulo), he regularly testifies in the parliaments worldwide and courts and at the UN. He has authored and edited 102 books, his newest including 'Fundamentalism – When Religion becomes violent', 'Racism', 'Human Rights', 'Suppressed Women', and 'Human Trafficking'. The German major newspaper 'Die Welt' calls him one of the three leading experts on religious freedom globally and "Pope Francis' most loved Protestant".

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### Introduction

Prof. James D. Bindenagel for many years served the USA as diplomat and ambassador in different countries. Later he became a leading expert on transatlantic political relations and vice-president of the DePaul University in Chicago. Since 2014 he is director and professor of the Center for International Security and Governance (CISG) at the University of Bonn.

### Expert 1

Ahmad Mansour was born into an Arab family in Israel and as teenager was drawn towards Islamism. He studied psychology in Tel Aviv and 2004 moved to Germany, where he built up an anti-violence and de-radicalization-center for youth in radicalization. He works for a center for democracy in Berlin and for the EU in Brussels. He is author of the book "Generation Allah".

### Expert 2

Prof. Dr. habil. Christine Schirmmacher is professor of Islamic Studies at the University of Bonn/Germany and the Protestant Theological Faculty (ETF) Leuven/Belgium. She also teaches at different federal government and security institutions like the Foreign Office. Recently, she has been appointed to the "Academic Advisory Council of the Federal Agency for Civic Education" by the German Federal Minister of the Interior and to the "Advisory Board of the German Institute for Human Rights". Her research focuses on transformation processes of culture, society, law and theology in the Muslim world, especially extremism vs. women's and minorities' rights and interreligious dialogue.

#### Downloads and Links:

- [Photo 1](#): CISG and IIRF as partners – entrance of Global Media Forum © BQ / Schirmmacher
- [Photo 2](#): Ahmad Mansour © Heike Steinweg
- [Photo 3](#) and [Photo 4](#): Christine Schirmmacher lecturing at Global Media Forum © BQ / Schirmmacher
- [Photo 5](#): CISG and IIRF as partners – entrance of Global Media Forum © BQ / Schirmmacher
- [Photo 6](#): Ahmad Mansour © Pamela Haling

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