Interview with Boston University College of Communication Dean Thomas Fiedler on Tuesday, September 20, 2016 at 4 pm.

*Q: Why do you think it appears that ISIS is "winning" on social media?*

A: "Well, I don’t know if they are, but they certainly have some successes there. I think the ability to win on social media comes about by having success in making sure the message that they have connects with a person who is hungry for that message. And somehow, what I think ISIS has been able to do is find those people. In most cases it is young men who are disconnected from their current cultures, even from their families in many cases. If you look at who they are, they're people who are angry. They think the world has been unfair to them, they somehow blame that on western civilization, in general, and America in particular. And somehow that anger that needs to find something to blame for that. And then their message is, ‘come help us and you can strikeout against these people who have been responsible for your anger and your hurt.’ So I think if you have a message to counter that, you have to find that same group that are feeling dispossessed and angry. They feel discriminated against. You have to be able to show a different message, one that’s much more about hope than of anger, despair, or revenge. My thought is that vengeance is what this is all about.”

*Q: Which group in the US do you see as the most "vulnerable" to ISIS influence?*

A: “People that in some way feel that they are misfits. Maybe they’ve been bullied, maybe not, but they feel that they're somehow the outsiders and that they’ve been shunned or punished or left behind. The Tsaernav brothers, I think, are a good example in particular. I think of the older brother, the one who was killed. He drifted from job to job, he went back to what where was it in eastern Europe to be radicalized but he had a chip on his shoulder. The younger one was kind of a puzzle for me, because he seemed to have adjusted well in high school and in UMass Dartmouth. He seemed to have made the connections to be embraced by our culture and our way of thinking. He was under the spell of his big brother. Not to make excuses for him … what we see almost always is people who have been alienated within this culture and they're angry about it and find a way to strike back.”

*Q: Why do you think efforts to counter ISIS seem to have been largely unsuccessful?*

A: “That’s a great question. I don’t know the answer because I don’t know exactly what has been tried that has failed. My sense is that probably very little has been tried so this effort could be really effective just to try make a breakthrough. If there are efforts that have failed, first off, they could've not identified the correct people who are in that situation: consumers of social media who are so desperate to reach out and take action against whoever they felt their persecutors were. If there has been no effective outreach on social media yet, then it’s probably because we haven’t identified that target and then it didn’t have a message that was able to turn that anger into something more positive. To redirect the anger… that’s not an easy thing to do. I don’t pretend to have the answer of how you can make someone who feels angry and alienated somehow feel that ‘oh, okay there's hope for me.’ That’s the first step. You’ve got to identify the audience and you’ve got to put a message in front of that audience that fills whatever need that they are desperately feeling.”

*Q: Do you have any broad advice for us?/ Any resources you think we should tap?*

A: “I think maybe the people who have some answers to this might be the people who are in the psychology department or even at the medical school in psychiatry. People who have studied the behavior of alienated people and the messages that cause alienated people perhaps to connect are good resources. Who deals with people like this? Psychologists do or psychiatrists might. See what thoughts they might have about which social media they might respond to. Maybe even the anthropology department because they can help identify differences in cultures and how to bridge them. Part of the alienation comes from somebody trying to make an adjustment from a culture that they grew up in and feel comfortable in. The change, when they come here, is disturbing to a lot of people. It is a dramatic change that someone goes through when shifting from one culture to another, particularly when they are not successful at integrating into the new culture. Those people may respond to a certain message in a certain way, and an anthropologist might know that.”