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The Internet as Ideological Battleground

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Recent global events that have brought to light the use of new technologies by terrorist groups have focused attention on the role of the internet in the radicalisation of vulnerable individuals and groups towards a violent extremism. In 2007, the case of Abdul Basheer, a law graduate in Singapore arrested for attempting to join the Taliban in Afghanistan drew attention to the use of the Internet as a source of inspiration and information for would be terrorists. More recently Sydney man Belal Khazaal became the first person to be convicted on the charge of making a document connected with assisting in a terrorist act after using material already available on the internet to develop his own publication "The Rules of Jihad - Short Judicial Rulings and Organisational Instructions For Fighters And Mujahideen Against Infidels". Both cases point to the developing role of the Internet in the process of radicalisation and suggest that the Internet has become an important tactical tool in the terrorists' repertoire. The role of the Internet in radicalisation and the extent to which it contributes to the process through which latent beliefs translate into violent actions is not fully understood. However, with the developing strand of terrorism studies that deals with the diffusion of intent as an integral component of counter terrorism efforts has come an understanding of terrorism as a battle of words and ideas. Nowhere is this more evident than on the internet.

RADICALISATION

Radicalisation may be described as a process by which individuals progress from a passive or inactive belief in a particular political, social or ideological dogma to extreme or violent action. Several theories have been put forward to describe this progression, particularly in the context of radical or extreme Islamism. Many draw on the behavioural sciences for theoretical models of how terrorist groups indoctrinate and influence members. The combined works of Kuran (1998), Sustein (2002) and Koker and Yordan (2006), for example, place group pressure as fundamentally sustaining the dynamics of terrorist groups. According to Koker and Yordan (2006)

> *Terrorist organisations are pressure groups with an inner hard core of activists and an outer ring of non-activists. By definition, hardcore activists seek recruits by propagating their views in order to win more support for their particular cause. Recruits, who tend to be non-activists at the time of recruitment, increase the organisation's power base. The resulting collectivity professes support for a specific cause, forming a pressure group.*

Despite an increased awareness and understanding of radicalisation, the reasons why some individuals become radicalised to violence remain ambiguous. Experts on terrorism are still at odds with regards to any kind of psychological predilection for terrorism and have concluded that it is difficult, if not impossible to, profile terrorists. The absence of any viable psychological profile of terrorists, suggests Payne (2009, p.116), is indicative of the limited success of al Qaeda propaganda which he contends has "failed to mobilize the masses, or to control any significant territory". Yet, most scholars are in agreement that terrorism relies on the circulation and proliferation of key messages that construct the world in terms of a battle between good and evil: where Islam is under threat of annihilation at the hands of Western forces and where "They [the West] are aiming to destroy us [Islam] ... we are under attack, we are being destroyed" (Aly 2007, p.36).
The counter terrorism responses of Western nations reflect a concern with the ideological battleground and recognition of the need to incorporate measures that address four dimensions of security:

1. Monitoring threat through intelligence and evidence assessment;
2. Neutralising capability through disruption tactics
3. Crisis management and;
4. Defusing intent by addressing the personal and environmental factors that contribute to radicalisation.

Since the terrorist bombings of the London public transport system in 2005, the UK has responded to the threat of 'homegrown' terrorism by introducing measures aimed at preventing radicalisation through social reform. In March 2009, the United Kingdom's Home Office revealed *Contest 2*: *The United Kingdom's Strategy for Countering International Terrorism*, a reinvigorated version of the original *Contest* strategy developed in 2003. The strategy

emphasises a preventative approach to the threat of home-grown terrorism and highlights the challenge for democratic societies to maintaining the delicate balance between democratic freedoms and national security. The strategy also recognises the importance of soft approaches designed to prevent radicalisation by engaging vulnerable members of Muslim communities. These measures such as addressing disadvantage and inequality and actively engaging with Muslim communities are framed by an understanding that radicalisation is more likely to thrive among the disadvantaged and disenfranchised. A similar approach was taken by the Netherlands which has adopted a strategy that focuses on polarisation and isolation of individuals and groups as key indicators of a dispensation towards radicalisation. Likewise, the United States Government's *National Strategy for Homeland Security* (October, 2007) recognises community engagement and outreach as significant elements of counter-radicalisation. In Australia also, community engagement and social harmony feature strongly as mechanisms for combating radicalisation to violent Islamist ideologies. The *Counter Terrorism White Paper: Securing Australia, Protecting our Community* released in 2010 consists of four key elements: Analysis, Protection, Response and Resilience. Resilience refers to "building a strong and resilient Australian community to resist the development of any form of violent extremism and terrorism on the home front". Typically resilience relates to crisis management and defensive activities. However, in the *White Paper* it is used to refer to a soft counter terrorism approaches that emphasises community harmony and targets groups vulnerable to radical or extremist influences.

EXTREMIST CONTENT ON THE INTERNET

Among Muslims in Australia, the term 'Sheikh Google' has become a popular slogan to describe the trend for Muslims in diasporic communities to seek religious guidance on the internet. The use of the term belies a complex set of issues relating to Muslim identity in secular states like Australia (see for example Aly, 2007) but also reflects the ubiquity of the internet in all matters of everyday life; religion included.

A simple Google search on the internet using the term 'mujahideen' yields well over 1 million returns. Sifting through the various conservative think tanks, blogs and policy documents takes only minutes and the discerning user is quickly and easily able to access a plethora of extremist content: terrorist propaganda videos; graphic videos of beheadings and other terrorist operations; and 'how to' manuals such as "The preparatory manual of explosives"; "Illustrated Manual of Sniper Skills"; and the "Organic Chemistry of Explosives" all of which are freely available through the *Unjustmedia* website.

Extremist websites on the internet vary in their content, purpose and origin ranging from sympathetic websites dedicated to 'inciting believers' to those run by militant Islamist groups that openly advocate the use of violence. Some websites use propaganda to validate the terrorist cause in religious, political and ideological terms. These websites promote conspiracy theories but do not openly endorse the use of violence. Regardless of where extremist websites sit on the spectrum of sympathy for the terrorist cause to the open call for armed conflict, all present a worldview that is embedded in a construction of oppositional forces of good versus evil, honour versus dishonour and Muslim versus the West. The audience is compelled to take a side: to be either with us or against us. Being with us offers potential recruits to the terrorist cause incentives of honour through martyrdom.

One website features biographical narratives of "Prominent Martyrs of Iraq". The story of Abu Umair As Suri al Halabi, known as the Ascetic Worshipper, is a typical example of the kind of propaganda used to woo new recruits with the promise of renown, religious absoluteness and martyrdom. An abridged version of this narrative appears below:

Martyrdom is a privilege bestowed on only the greatest of the Ummah's sons. In Iraq, many brothers are desperately waiting their opportunity to carry out martyrdom attacks because these type of operations can not be controlled by the occupiers.

Abu Umair, may Allah have mercy on him, came to the theatre of Jihad alone where he met the martyr Abu Khattab Al-Yemeni Al-Hindi Al-Hijazee, who we will talk about later insha'Allah. Together they travelled to the city of Fallujah, the city of Honor and Jihad and resided with one of the Sheikhs who used to help the Arab Mujahideen. However Allah destined that he should become a Martyr, and he talked with me about his intense desire to join our ranks. I replied to him: "Do you pledge to us to die (for the sake of Allah), for we do not accept but the one who seeks martyrdom." That day he laughed and said: "I am searching for it, I intensely desire it, do we aim for anything other than that? Then I gave them an appointment and moved them to the house of Abi Abdullah Ash-Shami.

Indeed, a group of audacious and daring brothers had gathered in that house. These brothers were marked by shining light on their faces; they used to select their words carefully so as not to hurt others. They were indeed brothers for the sake of Allah, whom you could sit with to increase your Faith. When mentioning Allah, you would

feel their souls humble before them, the Qur'an in their hands, with smiles upon their faces, they would pray day and night seeking to get closer to their Lord.

While this hero was waiting for the moment that Allah would cure the breasts of the believers, an intelligence battalion identified a crucial target being the general headquarters for the Polish army in Karbala city. The heroes took a look around the place until they found a security hole in the facility. A building located near a sub-street had been erected to house the unbelievers' servants and as they became more comfortable, they let their guard down and a gap in security resulted.

With that, Abu Umayr al-Suri, his brother Abu Zubayr al-Kuwaiti and another brother set off to execute the plan. Abu Umayr broke through the gates and struck the towers that had been raised high in the sky and mixed with the impure blood. Soon after, Abu al-Zubayr drove a truck filled with five tons of explosives into his target. The number of casualties for the enemy was estimated in the hundreds but alas, this was suppressed in the media, one of the enemy's best tools.

Narratives found on similar websites that aim to promote public support for terrorists causes by constructing appealing to the concept of violence and death as a pathway to achieving martyrdom adhere to a strict format. In this format the narrative typically presents the qualities of the martyr as:

- The martyr is always devout and his religion unquestionable;
- He is not from among the poor, the uneducated or the disenfranchised;
- He demonstrates absolute submission to Allah and an intense desire to fulfil the greatest possible demonstration of his piety
- He makes contact of his own accord, is never selected, recruited or radicalised but is 'destined' to join the ranks of martyrdom

Internet sites maintained by terrorist or extremist groups can be broadly classified into three categories:

1. Media sites
2. Organisation sites
3. Interactive sites.

Media sites are typically online television and newspaper resources that offer videos and reports of aggression against Muslim populations in Palestine and Iraq. The Arab television network al Manar (based in Lebanon) for example, produces and broadcasts propaganda videos as part of its normal programming. Al Manar has been banned in France, the United States, Spain and Germany for its anti- Semetic content and servicing issues have made it unavailable to audiences in Australia, South America and Canada. Despite these bans and broadcasting issues, al Manar videos and propaganda are freely available to audiences on the World Wide Web.

Propaganda videos are also disseminated on the popular video sharing site Youtube. JihadMedia TV is a channel hosted on Youtube where users can view over one hundred videos ranging from messages and interviews by prominent 'jihadists' to videos produced by the Global Islamic Media Front that document 'martyr operations' and by Revolution Muslim.org that propagate the notion of war between Islam and the West. Among the videos available to view are those that capture graphic footage of American soldiers being killed in Iraq, terrorist training videos, propaganda videos that advertise the terrorists' cause and messages from prominent terrorists and religious figures. In its first six months of operation, JihadMedia TV acquired almost 300 subscribers; an indication that the channel is achieving some measure of success in reaching its intended audience.

Organisational sites are the official or unofficial websites of groups such as the Muslim Brotherhood. Such sites are open sites that offer news and information about the organisation's mission, its history and its ideology. Their format is similar to news media websites but often also have links to their own media statements, publications and video channels. These sites offer news blog, links to Youtube channels, lectures and statements by religious figures and online journals.

Interactive sites are social networking sites such as bulletin boards and forums where discussions range from everyday banal topics such as family life and education to religious or ideological discussions. These social networking platforms offer access to an audience of like minded individual and groups through secure forums.

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNET IN RADICALISATION

Notwithstanding the various radicalisation models that are available in the literature, there appears to be a dearth of research devoted to exploring what actually motivates individuals and groups to seek out radical or extremist content in the first place. Scholars and experts in terrorism agree that dissemination of the terrorists' message through propaganda is a key factor in the progression of al Qaeda from a 'base' to a global Islamist ideology. The extant literature on the contemporary phenomenon of international terrorism concurs that the War on Terror is essentially an information war where the ideological battlegrounds exist in cyberspace (see for example Aly 2009; Dauber 2009; Payne 2009).

Several analyses have been offered regarding how terrorists use new technology including the internet to develop their capability in terms of both financial and human capital (Dauber, 2009; Bergin et al, 2009). Apart from being a central component of the terrorist media strategy, the utility of the internet for terrorists has expanded to encompass tactical functions. In the contemporary terrorist environment in which psychological warfare plays an integral part, having a presence on the internet is as critical to the terrorists' success as financial, tactical or organisational capability. The internet offers a communicative space where terrorists can identify, recruit, indoctrinate and influence potential members using the various utilities available on the internet.

From the perspective of the terrorists' audience, there is value in looking at the role of the audience as active agents in the communicative process with a view to understanding the particular appeal of the internet.

Research into how the media serves the needs of audiences have yielded several classifications of user needs broadly based on the informational and entertainment functions of the media. Contemporary approaches recognise the following four needs (Katz et al, 1973, McQuail, 1983):

1. Information– relates to the cognitive needs and the desire for understanding which are served by the surveillance function of the media;
2. Personal identity- relates to strengthening confidence and credibility and value reinforcement;
3. Social integration and social interaction- relates to personal relationships and the need to strengthen social contact and affiliate with a group; and
4. Entertainment- relates to the need to escape and release tension.

This model is known as the uses and gratifications model and describes how use needs motivate media use. In applying this model to the role of the internet in the radicalisation process, it is necessary to position internet use within a broader context that takes into account the social realities that create needs in the first place and are antecedent to internet usage. Aly (2009) identified the following factors that characterize the contemporary context of Muslims and their media needs:

1. Transnationalism and the emergence of a Muslim diaspora;
2. The development of a shared identity among Muslims around the globe grounded in victimhood and validated by the concept of the 'ummah'- a brotherhood that transcends boundaries of nationhood, ethnicity or race;
3. A widely held perception among Muslims in the diaspora that the Western media is a complicit actor in a conspiracy to undermine Islam and subsequent disengagement with the Western media as a source of news and information; and
4. Access to new media.
5. The presence or perceived presence of a personal and communal crisis. This crisis is framed in terms of an ideological battle for the survival of Islam and expressed in terms of a war (violent jihad) between Islam and the West.

These five factors form the context in which Muslim media needs are constructed and which provide an antecedent to media use. Such an approach positions terrorist propaganda on the internet in the context of a range of motivations and needs. It suggests that exposure to propaganda alone cannot account for radicalisation in its entirety but that propaganda may satisfy informational, personal identity or social integration needs.

At the same time context alone should also not be mistaken as the singular cause of radicalisation and efforts to counter radicalisation should not be solely directed at the social situations of vulnerable individuals or groups. The internet, through its various media functions, acts as a facilitator of needs both in terms of content (news, information, propaganda, images, training manuals) and attributes (real time, interactive, consumptive, productive,

participatory). The social situations of Muslims generate media needs that are gratified by different content and functions of the internet. These content and functions are generated by the aims of terrorist organisations to identify, inform, influence and indoctrinate potential members. The role of the internet in radicalisation lies in the presentation of alternative realities and alternative truths through which people can engage with a social network where the boundaries of belonging are set by terrorists. These boundaries are ideological belief but also common victimization, common enemy and a shared hatred of the enemy.

The diagram below illustrates the internet radicalisation model showing the interface between context, user generated needs, internet functionality and extremist generated content:

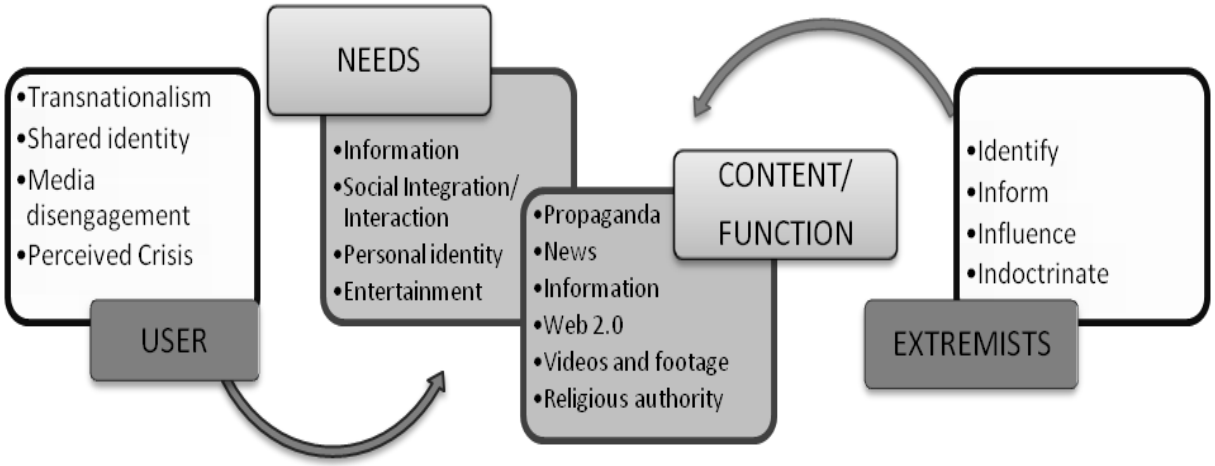

Figure 1. A Uses and Gratifications Model of Internet Radicalisation (Aly 2009)

The model of internet radicalisation distinguishes between four elements: the user or audience context; the use or audience needs that motivate internet use; the internet content and functions that meet these needs; and the terrorist groups' goals for which they generate internet content. These four elements present different aspects of internet radicalisation that need to be addressed with different counter measures.

Arguably, terrorists have always made strategic use of the media and new technologies for publicising their cause, influencing audiences and gaining potential recruits. The invention of the printing press presented Anarchist groups in the 1800s and early 1900s with a communication mechanism for spreading their ideology across borders through books, newspapers, pamphlets and journals. Widespread distribution of the Anarchist ideology and technological advances in communications and transport meant that Anarchy was able to spread throughout Europe, America and Asia. In the contemporary information age, almost all terrorist groups incorporate the use of media technologies as an important and central component of their media strategies. Governments and agencies charged with countering terrorism are facing a new challenge of countering extremist violence on the internet. The role of the internet in the process of radicalisation is still not fully understood while the Australian government is exploring possible strategies for combating violent extremism online. Within this context, technical solutions and legislative or policy options are limited in their capacity to address the growing problem of internet radicalisation. Firstly such strategies tend to target the producers of internet sites (often hosted in countries outside of Australia) and focus attention on content. Secondly, the Hydra-like quality of internet terrorism means that cutting off one head will only grow more in its place. An approach, which also attends to the terrorists' internet audience, would address the reasons why certain people become attracted to the internet as a source of inspiration.

While significant focus in counter terrorism strategies has been on social reform and to activities that engage Muslim communities, attention could also focus on the motivations for seeking information or social networking functions on the internet. In particular the trend towards seeking religious guidance and affirmation of religious identity using Person to Person (P2P) and Person to Content (P2C) applications which allow users to participate in religious discussion and offers charismatic leaders real time access to ready audiences needs addressing. Further exploration of the role of the internet in religious identity would be a useful addition to the literature and to inform future strategies.

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