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IS THE INTERNET THE MAIN MEDIUM OF TRANSMITTING TERRORISM?

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Abstract
The influx of virtual media platforms has allowed extremists and terrorists to transmit their messages to wider audiences without passing through a gatekeeper or being a subject to editorial policies existed in traditional media outlets. Thus, extremists and terrorists exploit virtual media platforms to report their actions; propagate their ideologies and ultimately to boost their objectives, because these mediums enabled them to have control over time and space. As a result, some governments work to deprive extremists and terrorists from this ‘oxygen’ through monitoring the cyberspace to block the suspected virtual media platforms. The reactions of some governments to face the extremists and terrorists' manipulation of virtual media platforms have shown currently that the Internet is the main medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism. In a similar vein, some key Islamic figures, such as the Grand Mufti of Australia, blame the Internet on radicalising young Muslims. Drawing on this assumption the question is: Is the Internet the main medium of transmitting terrorism? This paper answers this question, considering that the Internet is just a medium to transmit extremism and terrorism, because the heinous ideologies and callings for violence are transmitted historically and still by other means of communication.

Keywords
Cyberspace; Extremism; Internet; Terrorism

INTRODUCTION
This paper aims to discuss a current assumption that accuses primarily the Internet for spreading terrorism. Thus, it intends to answer the question: is the Internet the main medium of transmitting terrorism?

Before proceeding in the analysis and debating the literature, this paper points briefly to the meanings of extremism and terrorism. In order to achieve its aim, this paper is contextualised by shedding light on the historical correlation between media and terrorism.

In this vein, this paper points to the significance of media outlets, particularly virtual media platforms, to extremists and terrorists in the line of achieving their agendas. To answer its question and draw its conclusion, this paper reviews the archival data about extremism and terrorism and describes the nature of the reality of this phenomenon, because the current trend of countering extremism and terrorism pays further attention on technology rather than ideology.

By answering the postulated question, this paper argues that other effective ways to combat extremism and terrorism should be sought. These ways are not limited to the use of force and can be a part of overall efforts to counter extremism and terrorism.

EXTREMISM AND TERRORISM
Extremism and terrorism, including their etymologies, are used in political and media discourses. However, these terms do not have the same meaning. Extremism refers to political ideas or agendas that are not accepted by the public (Sotlar, 2004). However, terrorism signifies the use of violence to achieve a political agenda (Frey & Wellman, 2003).

Hoffman (2006) investigated the meaning of terrorism literally and conceptually, traced the root of this word and its historical usages since the eighteenth century. Although it is difficult to find an ubiquitous definition of terrorism, it denotes "violence - or, equally important, the threat of violence used and directed in pursuit of, or in service of, a political aim" (ibid, pp. 2 & 3).
Drawing on the definitions of both terms, extremism turns into terrorism through seeking violence to achieve the unacceptable agendas and objectives. As a result of this difference, extremism may lead to terrorism and terrorism entails extremism.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE INTERNET TO EXTREMISTS AND TERRORISTS

Media is significant to extremists and terrorists. Historically, extremists and terrorists were aware since 1960s of the significance of media as a propaganda tool to achieve their agendas and disseminate their ideas (Dadge, 2006; Martin, 2010; Qureshi, 2009; Suter, 2008). In a counterstrategy policy, governments tried to deprive the extremists and terrorists from gaining a media access to transmit their messages and thus, for example, the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher warned in 1980s that, “publicity is the oxygen of terrorism” (cited in Qureshi, 2009, p. 237). This notion embarked an academic debate about the media responsibility of reporting terrorism (Schlesinger et al., 1983; Weimann & Winn, 1994) and if there is a link between media coverage of terrorism and the increase number of terrorist attacks (Goodin, 2006).

The September attacks in 2001 against the United States of America paralleled with the outburst of satellite televisions, particularly in the Middle East. This communication development enabled terrorists, particularly Al-Qaeda organisation, to broadcast its messages via Al-Jazeera (El Zein, 2012). As a result of media scoop by this satellite and other media outlets which provided terrorists with a platform, the United States warned the public from the influx of Al-Qaida propaganda and paid attention to the role of American media outlets in launching the war on terrorism (Dadge, 2006; El-Nawawy & Iskander 2002).

However, the emergence of the Internet, or by other words online media, which embeds virtual media platforms, has enabled the extremists and terrorists to have their own webpages (Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007). Some of these webpages used to recruit fighters in Western countries (Carter et al., 2014; Likmeta, 2014). In addition to this function of gaining support, some terrorists use the Internet for funding (Hoffman, 2006).

Furthermore, virtual platforms are used by organisations, such as the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS); which is also called Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); as a part of its military tactics, in the context of propaganda and psychological warfare. In this regard, this notorious organisation controls its media operations and outputs, including the online accounts of its members (Khatib, 2015).

In an attempt to categorise the use of virtual media platforms by extremists and terrorists based on the current literature, it can be argued that there are two types of users: organisations and individuals, including the sympathisers.

Regarding the organisational use, many extremist and terrorist organisations, such as ISIS (Khatib, 2015), tend to use various forms of media outlets, including online mediums, to transmit their messages whether to market their ideology; to address the followers and sympathisers; or to wage a psychological warfare against their enemies.

Lachow & Richardson (2007) point out that the Internet provides terrorists with an ideal platform for five reasons: the control over time in sending messages; the low cost of using the Web; it allows a small organisation to reach global audiences; it allows disseminating complex and sensitive information; and "modern encryption technologies allow Internet users to surf the Web, transfer funds, and communicate anonymously—a serious (though not insurmountable) impediment to intelligence and law enforcement organizations trying to find, track, and catch terrorists” (ibid, p. 100).

The use of the Internet by extremist and terrorist organisations tends to be professional in terms of reflecting their identity and their agendas (Khatib, 2015). In the same vein, the followers and the sympathisers use the virtual platforms occasionally. They do not spend further time on these platforms nor they do focus on the content. Thus, they do not have the same professional capabilities and time as their organisations.

To face the cyber propaganda and protect the public, some governments are monitoring the suspected virtual mediums and calling the operators of social media platforms to shut down the accounts of extremists and terrorists (Kimmage & Ridolfo, 2007).

This counterstrategy posits the problem in the virtual media platforms as the main source of extremism and terrorism. In this regard, the Grand Mufti of Australia Doctor Ibrahim Abu Mohammed accused these platforms of brainwashing the minds of some Muslim youths inciting them to commit terrorists’ attacks (Olding, 2015). However, the policy of this counterstrategy and Mufti’s accusation postulate a hypothesis that the current main medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism is the Internet.
The theoretical nature of the problem

To answer the question of this paper, it is crucial to take a critical stance through considering that understanding the cause of a phenomenon is significant in order to deal with it. In this regard, the current counterstrategy showed the problem of extremism and terrorism is epistemological rather than ontological. It posits the problem in a technological form.

Any reality can be viewed in an objective, or a subjective way (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). However, viewing the reality of terrorism and the means of facing this phenomenon can be objective, or subjective. The belief that terrorism exists and represented by a number of organisations and individuals implies that this phenomenon viewed in an objective way. As there are many ways to deal with this phenomenon and there is no census on the counterstrategy, facing terrorism is subjective. But, this subjectivity may embed a sort of misunderstanding of the phenomenon of terrorism.

Contrary to the current assumption, which considers the Internet is the main medium of transmitting terrorism, this paper redefines the nature of the problem of this phenomenon in order to deal with this reality. Under the umbrella of critical theory, the nature of reality is "historical realism virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values; crystallised overtime" (Lincoln et al., 2011, p. 100).

Drawing on this theory, understanding the nature of extremism and terrorism from different perspectives is crucial to illuminate the mediums used by extremists and terrorists to transmit their messages and also is crucial to illuminate the means to face this phenomenon. If the Internet is considered the main medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism, the counterstrategy will pay further attention to the use of technology to face this phenomenon.

Nevertheless, the use of technology to face extremists and terrorists whether through blocking their virtual media platforms, or through launching a military campaign against them and their strongholds should be intertwined with cultural, ideological, social, political and economical actions to dry the source of extremism and terrorism. Thus, the problem is not in the medium. It is represented by the messages that create the discourse of hatred and violence. On the other hand, the data collected in this paper are archival and gleaned from press, articles and books.

DISCUSSION

Many terrorist attacks occurred before the age of the Internet (Goodin, 2006). Generally, the extremists and terrorists entice media outlets to cover their violent actions, because they are bad news harming the national and global security (Rosie, 1986). In this context, and as noted earlier, the extremists and terrorists need media to gain publicity (Qureshi, 2009).

However, the emergence of the Internet as a result of the developments in communication technologies "enables terrorist groups to operate as either highly decentralized franchises or freelancers. Similar to information age businesses, these groups use the Internet to create a brand image, market themselves, recruit followers, raise capital, identify partners and suppliers, provide training materials, and even manage operations" (Lachow & Richardson, 2007, p. 100).

Currently, some countries, such as Australia and the United Kingdom, assume that igniting a security campaign to block extremist and terrorists' virtual platforms can secure the youth from radicalisation and exposure to the devil propaganda and consequently securing the community from terrorist attacks (Brant, 2015; Donoughue & Fahey, 2015). Although this governmental action is deemed to be one of the tools to combat extremism and terrorism, it seems that considering the virtual media platforms are the major problem is exaggerated.

Instead of facing the main problem, this counterstrategy leads to two further problems. Firstly, it provides some influential figures an excuse to not act against this phenomenon, allowing them to accuse Sheikh Google and Sheikh Twitter for transmitting extremism and terrorism (Olding, 2015). Secondly, this strategy may ignore other platforms that transmit extremist and terrorist ideologies, because the Western governments shifted their focus into the ways to prevent recruiting fighters through virtual media platforms (Brant, 2015; Carter et al., 2014).

In their attempt to set a recommendation for the United States to combat the use of the Internet by extremists and terrorists, Lachow & Richardson (2007) suggested that Washington "needs to focus more resources into two areas: countering the operational effectiveness associated with terrorist use of the Internet, and undermining Internet-based terrorist influence operations" (p. 103). This recommendation calls for other means alongside the cyber war on terrorism in order to undermine the media strategy of extremists and terrorists and stop the propagation of their messages and ideologies.
By and large, the source of extremism and terrorism is the political and/or ideological agendas which they can be translated into attacks disrupting the social order (Sotlar, 2004). Drawing on this understanding, the problem of extremism and terrorism is represented by the ideas embedded in the minds of groups and individuals. In reviewing the reasons of terrorists’ attacks conducted by groups such as Al-Qaida and ISIS, it can be argued that the drive of their actions is their interpretations of old Islamic texts (Gambhir, 2015; Khatib, 2015). Thus, the counterstrategy to fight these groups should pay focus attention on the cause of their actions in order to set a plan achieves an adequate preventable measure against extremism and terrorism.

The ideas that spread and advance extremism and terrorism exist in certain minds and objects, such as books. However, ideas need communication to be transmitted to the others in order to achieve the agendas behind these ideas. In this context, virtual media platforms are considered a way to transmit extremism and terrorism, but they are neither the only nor the effective medium. For example, extremist and terrorist organisations, such as Taliban in Afghanistan, used all the available means of communication, including booklets, to propagate its ideology (Karzai, 2009). In this regard, face-to-face communication and one communicate with a group are the two traditional ways to transmit the extremist and terrorist messages. Consequently, the home, the school, the mosque, the community and friendship have a major role in spreading extremism and terrorism. Thus, virtual media platforms cannot be solely the power behind boosting extremism and terrorism.

If all the extremist and terrorist virtual media platforms blocked, does that mean extremism and terrorism cannot be spread and evil acts cannot be occurred?

Although it seems to be impossible to block all such platforms, extremism and terrorism are difficult to be stopped, because this problem is global and stipulates various measures and means to wane it. As a result, if the Internet is the main medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism, the focus of combating this phenomenon will be on technology. If not and the Internet is just a medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism, as this paper argues, the focus of combatting this phenomenon will pay further attention on the ways to defeat the heinous ideologies and agendas of extremists and terrorists.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to answer the question: is the Internet the main medium of transmitting terrorism? Before debating the literature to approach its question, the paper provided the meanings of extremism and terrorism, concluding that extremism turns into terrorism through the use of violence.

In its theorising to the nature of the problem embedded in its question, this paper points to the significance of understanding the of reality extremism and terrorism to counter this phenomenon. In this regard, this paper posits the problem of extremism and terrorism in ideology and any countering strategy should consider other effective means to fight this global phenomenon.

The paper reviewed the literature about the significance of media to extremists and terrorists. It found out that the Internet served to wide spread the extremist and terrorist ideologies. As a result, the virtual media platforms can allow some extremists and terrorists to deepen their ideologies; to gain support and funding; and to recruit other individuals.

Although the Internet provides extremists and terrorists with a significant platform to achieve their media strategies, it is difficult to consider it the main medium to boost extremism and terrorist attacks.

In this regard, this paper argued that the Internet, such as other media outlets, is not the main medium of transmitting extremism and terrorism. It concluded that extremism and terrorism are existed before the Internet and they can be transmitted by other ways of traditional communication. Thus, blocking their virtual media platforms may not prevent extremists and terrorists from propagating their ideas.

In a nutshell, the extremists and terrorists benefitted from the Internet to represent themselves and contaminate the freedom of press and speech by their viruses. As a counterstrategy, it is the role of the concerned academics and governments to re-represent extremists and terrorists in order to wane their heinous ideologies and polluted cultures.

REFERENCES


