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Al-Qaeda's Media Strategy: Internet self-radicalization and counter-radicalization policies

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Table of Contents

Abstract

Al-Qaeda was initially formed not as a terrorist organization, but as an independent Islamist military faction (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). The organization evolved around the ideology of the central and supreme leader Osama bin Laden (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). However, the ability for the group to change and adapt to different environments and cultures has allowed for the organization to spread especially to Western audiences (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). The evolution of their media strategy is the epitome of how al-Qaeda is adaptable (Torres, Jordán, & Horsburgh, 2006). The shift from centralized distribution of pamphlets to video and audio tapes to television and then to the Internet has allowed al-Qaeda to use the process of self-radicalization to its advantage (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The Internet allows people to trade ideas internationally with one another without being located geographically near one another (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The process is very much steeped in psychological processes that have the potential to be stopped at any of the three main steps (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Three methods for halting self-radicalization including censorship of information, public education, and intelligence gathering are all examined (Neumann, 2013). The potential for backlash is great, but there is an endless array of benefits that can be achieved through a well-orchestrated public awareness campaign about the process of self-radicalization.

Introduction

The well-known terrorist organization al-Qaeda has become quite fragmented over the last decade, being made up of international cells operating independently of one another. What remains constant, though, between each faction is the religious and political ideology that originated with al-Qaeda's found Osama bin Laden (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). As a leader, Osama bin Laden was unmatched in his charisma and his ability to relate to any Muslim (Sivek, 2013). Building on bin Laden's influence, the organization has spread its media campaign from pamphlets, to video and audio tapes, and finally to the Internet (Torres et al. 2006). With the rise of public accessibility to the Internet and subsequently to al-Qaeda's literature, came the rise of the self-radicalization of persons susceptible to the organization's messaging techniques (Torres et al. 2006). In order for the U.S. government to counteract the self-radicalization process, the government should avoid restrictive media censorship policies, while waging a public awareness campaign about the self-radicalization process and various warning signs (Neumann, 2013). The government should also take the chance to exploit the very system that allows al-Qaeda to have public access by collecting strategic and tactical intelligence (Neumann, 2013).

The formation of al-Qaeda

In order to understand al-Qaeda's self-radicalization tactics through the internet, there must be an examination of the group's formation. In contrast to popular belief, al-Qaeda did not form originally with American targets in mind. In Bergen and Cruickshank's article regarding the formative years of al-Qaeda, the authors counter many of the accounts and analyses of al-Qaeda's early formation and Osama bin Laden's primary goals in creating an independent Islamist military faction (2012). The authors break down the evolution of al-Qaeda into five distinct phases which include the initial six months of the organization when the Afghan war

with the Soviets was ongoing; the six months following the Soviet retreat from Afghanistan; the

year and a half following the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan during which bin Laden

resided and operated out of Saudi Arabia; the year following during which bin Laden returned to

Pakistan; and the four year after which bin Laden moved operations to Sudan (Bergen &

Cruickshank, 2012). Many of the sources initially examined by the authors that attempt to fully-

describe the early years of the organization are discounted by the authors as being either too

focused on al-Qaeda post-9/11, or focusing too much on the operational tenets of the al-Qaeda of

the mid-1990s (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012).

Bergen and Cruickshank argue that al-Qaeda was originally organized in order to fight

the Soviets who invaded Afghanistan during the Afghan War, and that the formation was not a

machination of U.S. investigators at the time (2012). During a meeting in Peshawar in 1988,

bin-Laden and his cohort clearly laid out a plan that would limit al-Qaeda's military and support

operations within the confines of the jihadist movements in Pakistan and Afghanistan (Bergen &

Cruickshank, 2012). In the minutes from the meeting at Peshawar, al-Qaeda's goals were

described as the following: "Al-Qaeda is basically an organized Islamic faction; its goal will be

to life the word of God, to make His religion victorious" (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012, p. 4).

The shift in bin Laden's ideology and attitude towards his paramilitary organization did not

occur until he crossed the border into Afghanistan and established a base there in the course of

the following two years (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). Osama bin Laden viewed his forces as

strong and resilient regardless of the numbers because they were willing to martyr themselves in

the name of Islam in order to fend off the Soviets (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). These

examples from the article demonstrate that al-Qaeda was not originally established as an

international terrorist organization, but rather an independent military organization.

It was not until the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan in 1989 that al-Qaeda leaders including Osama bin Laden and influential Egyptian Islamic militants collaborated on new goals for the organization that could be implemented internationally (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). The goals outlined ways in which the jihadist movements from around the world could become interoperable and spread their influences within their respective regions of operations (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). The anti-American sentiment did not develop until 1992 when American troops arrived in Saudi Arabia and Somalia. With the backing of his African supporters and ideologues, bin Laden set forth to dispel the Americans from the region (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012). The Americans were a threat to his ambitions of establishing and maintaining a Muslim majority in the Middle East. These ideas were exemplified by the audio tape known as the "Industry of Death" (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012, p. 19) which focused on opposing American occupation in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012).

The ideological transitions that were made allowed for a decentralization of the entire al-Qaeda organization. This enables to group to reach out to a wide audience, not limited to the Middle East Islamic radicalists, but also Americans who are disenchanted with Western society.

The evolution of al-Qaeda's media strategy

Al-Qaeda's media campaigns were non-existent at the creation of the organization. It was not until Osama bin Laden realized the value in internationally televised interviews that al-Qaeda was able to take the center stage. In Torres, Jordán, and Horsburgh's article on global jihadist movement propaganda, they analyze types of propaganda and the media used to distribute these messages worldwide from the year 1996 until the year 2005 (2006). While acts of terrorism and physical violence may instill fear in the enemies and destroy combatants in the process, terrorists can also send political messages or the aims of their groups via the very public

platform of a well-publicized terrorist attack (Torres et al. 2006). Kidnappings, bombings, and

targeted assassinations are potential vehicles of messaging for al-Qaeda (Torres et al. 2006).

However, this particular type of communication of messages via violence is not always effective

in reflecting the history and ideology of an organization (Torres et al. 2006). Understanding the

written and the auditory/visual propaganda elements of al-Qaeda's messaging is vital in creating

a cohesive counterterrorism policy along with public education of self-radicalization and its

warning signs (Torres et al. 2006). The authors analyzed a 2,878 sample of jihadist propaganda,

but this number is not reflective the fact that most propaganda in the early to mid-1990s was

distributed in hard copy from militant to recruit to individuals (Torres et al. 2006). The analysis

consisted of organizing the propaganda based on the target audience, the medium used, and the

overall theme of theme of message (Torres et al. 2006). The themes of the sample were centered

on a religious nucleus, based on the fundamentals of the Salafist movement of moving back to

the original forms of Islam; on a political nucleus in which the caliphate would be restored and

all of the Muslim nations would be combined forming a majority of Muslims in the region to

ensure the primacy of the religion; and on an instrumental nucleus in which there is a

mobilization of the Muslim world in order to achieve the religious and political objectives

(Torres et al. 2006). The majority of the individual items of the sample were discussions on the

current state of affairs, 220 pieces of the sample in 2005, and the re-vindication of an attack,

which included 2,025 pieces of the sample in 2005 (Torres et al. 2006).

The first phase: Creation - 2000

During the first definable phase of jihadist propaganda, al-Qaeda was not overtly active

in distributing literature on the organization (Torres et al. 2006). The videos and pamphlets that

were distributed centered on the charisma and personality-cult that was established around the

leader Osama bin Laden (Torres et al. 2006; Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Even much of this

propaganda was used internally by the organization for its members to recruit new persons into

al-Qaeda (Torres et al. 2006). Al-Qaeda did little to reach out to the mass media in the beginning

portion of the first phase (Torres et al. 2006). Only sympathizers of the organization and other

social circles on the inside viewed and consumed this information (Torres et al. 2006). Near the

second half and up to the end of this phase, Osama bin Laden was interviewed by international

media outlets including BBC, CBS, and CNN (Torres et al. 2006). Osama bin Laden saw this as

a chance to only promote himself as the protagonist and hero of al-Qaeda, but also to promote

the ideals of the organization (Torres et al. 2006). In 2001, al-Qaeda also filmed and distributed

video footage of the terrorist attack on the *USS Cole* which was over two hours in length (Torres

et al. 2006).

The second phase: September 11, 2001 – Mid 2000s

As described in the committee report, al-Qaeda has a long and extensive media history to

push their core ideologies including video tapes of terrorist attacks, and taped statements of

terrorists who committed suicide in the name of the organization and the organization's goals

(Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Ayman al-Zawahiri said, in relation to the al-Qaeda media

campaigns, that, "We [al-Qaeda] are in a battle, and more than half of this battle is taking place

in the battlefield of the media. And that we are in a media battle in a race for the hearts and

minds of our people" (Lieberman & Collins, 2008, p. 5-6). In the next phase of al-Qaeda's

media evolution, the group relied more on attacks, assassinations, and kidnappings as a way to

promote their ideology (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Al-Qaeda used the exposure of the

organization due to the September 11th, 2001 attacks to promote their cause worldwide in order

to internationally mobilize Muslims (Torres et al. 2006). The search for bin Laden intensified

the media's interest in the organization and its goals (Torres et al. 2006). With this in mind, al-Qaeda would release timely information and videos regarding senior members from all over the globe in order to maintain a high level of interest by the media and to not exhaust their true Muslim audience (Torres et al. 2006). With this new found attention, al-Qaeda set into motion two different methods of propaganda that have since been repeated many times by other: public and filmed assassinations that are posted on the Internet, and the model of Alneda.com for other jihadist websites (Torres et al. 2006). A specific example of these methods includes the filming and distribution of the kidnapping and subsequent assassination of the American journalist Daniel Pearl in Pakistan in 2002 (Torres et al. 2006).

Group decentralization.

The second phase of al-Qaeda's media evolution was marked by a large amount of decentralization of power across many different international cells and individual militants (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). As a result of the organization being able to use attacks as a media out-reach strategy, it allowed for susceptible persons across the world to learn of al-Qaeda's goals and ideology (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The ideology is adaptable across all cultures which encourages group decentralization. In Pregulman and Burke's case study regarding the evolution of homegrown terrorism since 9/11, the authors assert that the overall resonance of al-Qaeda's ideology will never be diminished by the U.S. government (2012). Al-Qaeda, as also described by Powell and Hutchison, is a highly adaptive and resilient organization that has evolved the scope of its tenets to include aspects of globalization by claiming the U.S. is targeting Islam (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). The authors recognize that no two homegrown terrorist and terrorist events are similar, but there are some characteristics among individual terrorists which cause these people to be privy to al-Qaeda's messaging. For example, David

Coleman Headley and Najibullah Zazi have familial links to their home country of Pakistan

while retaining legal residence in the U.S. (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). Each recruit sought

training in Pakistan, and carried out plans individually, separate of the organization (Pregulman

& Burke, 2012). The amount of decentralization in the modern al-Qaeda has made it

increasingly difficult for U.S. law enforcement and intelligence officials to track and capture

potential terrorists (Pregulman & Burke, 2012).

The third phase: Later 2000s and onward

In the third phase of its media evolution, Al-Qaeda has come to rely more exclusively on

the internet for dissemination of their audio and visual propaganda (Torres et al. 2006). Bin

Laden has taken a less violent approach in his rhetoric, and moved to mobilizing Western

Muslims against their governments (Torres et al. 2006; Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The

massive amounts of media being released not only by al-Qaeda but by all jihadist networks

decreased the amount of mass media attention given to these organizations (Torres et al. 2006).

As a result of the lack of mass media interest, al-Qaeda relied on the young adults who were

much more technologically savvy to digest and disperse their propaganda (Torres et al. 2006).

The overall quality of the graphics and sounds improved drastically, and the propaganda became

increasingly influential in the eyes of a younger audience (Torres et al. 2006). Recruitment of

terrorists in the U.S. has become even easier through the advent of social networking sites

including YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, various blogs, and Skype (Pregulman & Burke, 2012).

Outside terrorist resources can readily connect with inner-U.S. resources and recruits while

remaining almost undetectable (Pregulman & Burke, 2012).

Group connectedness.

The Internet usage by al-Qaeda is largely responsible for individuals self-radicalizing by creating a situation in which the individual is constantly exposing themselves to the ideology and comments of other militants (White, 2012). The Internet is a constant draw for individuals seeking personal connections with people who share the same angers and frustrations with the U.S. while also connecting with legitimate al-Qaeda recruiters (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). The new English spokesperson for al-Qaeda Adam Gadahn or Azzam al-Amriki took the place of Awlaki as the leader in U.S. al-Qaeda propaganda and media outreach (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). He has taken key parts in online videos entitled, "Send Me a Cruise Missile" and "Make Jihad with Me" (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). Al-Amriki is only one part of the larger force within the U.S. that is speeding up the radicalization processes of potential recruits by providing intermediary support internationally (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). These intermediaries provide the funding necessary for the singular American recruits to train and plan attacks overseas hands-on with al-Qaeda leaders (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). These increasing options for connections are alarming to U.S. officials. Even more alarming is the growth of the average number of thwarted domestic attacks to thirty-two plots with al-Qaeda links in 2009 to 2011 alone (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). Growth of information and communication technology along with al-Qaeda's ability to adapt has made cyber counter-terrorist policies difficult to construct with specific targets in mind.

In the United States Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs report on violent Islamist extremism and the internet, it thoroughly describes the methods and outlets al-Qaeda uses to target Americans at home (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The committee found that the internet not only provides the passive form of interaction through web pages, but

the internet also provides dynamic interaction between users through chat rooms, videos, web cam, and discussion boards in which like-minded people can connect (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Al-Qaeda has extensive media production outlets which include Al-Furquan, affiliated with Iraq; As-Sahab Media; Media Commission; and Sawt al-Jihad, based in the Arabian Peninsula (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The media messages include official banners and symbols along with music and subtitles, appealing to many different senses of the viewer (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The message's authority is assured by passing through many different media clearinghouses before receiving al-Qaeda's official seal of approval (Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

According to White, al-Qaeda is "taking the war to the web" (2012). Al-Qaeda has grown to understand that the Internet is an outlet in which the organization can create, monitor, and moderate its own messages without the interruption of other media organizations such as al-Jazeera (White, 2012). According to the article, "al-Qaeda now operates more than fifty website in approximately nine languages" (White, 2012). The author states that al-Qaeda itself has not relied on the Internet for recruitment so much as the organization relies on the tendency of individuals to seek out the websites and information, to contact the organization, and to, essentially, radicalize and indoctrinate themselves with al-Qaeda's ideologies (White, 2012). The recruitment process via the Internet is focused on a bottom-up strategy in which sympathizers, who are predisposed to be affected by the propaganda, indoctrinate themselves by repeatedly exposing themselves to these sites and videos (White, 2012).

Summary of media evolution

Al-Qaeda's move into using the Internet as their primary vehicle of propaganda has evolved the ways in which persons become potential recruits (Torres et al. 2006). Individuals viewing al-Qaeda's material on the Internet are interacting with the information in ways that could never have imagined at the creation of the organization. Not only are people able to view and listen to the propaganda, individuals from across the world are able to connect with each other and discuss topics relating to al-Qaeda while millions miles apart from one another (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). The decentralization of the organization has allowed for more covert operations to take place, making it difficult for authorities to track these underground militants (Pregulman & Burke, 2012). However, the decentralization is counteracted with the amount of group connectedness that the Internet allows (Torres et al. 2006). With all this being said, the evolution of al-Qaeda's media strategy has come to produce an environment in which individuals self-radicalize instead of having face-to-face contact with al-Qaeda recruiters. The discussion forums, videos, and instant messaging create an echo chamber in which persons of similar ideologies connect with one another from across the world (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The constant exposure to this type of militant ideology is what spurs the onset of the self-radicalization process to its end of jihadization (Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

Self-radicalization

The U.S. States Senate Committee report examined the stages of radicalization, and how the Internet media campaign waged by al-Qaeda affects a viewer during each stage (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). During the first stage known as the pre-radicalization and self-identification phase, the individual is initially interested in learning more about the ideology associated with violent Islamist extremism (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The websites that the individual

happens upon will lead them directly to the group's enlistment pages with stories of the group's

religious beliefs and core ideologies (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The site quickly lays the

ground-work for a battle between two forces: either one is a friend or a foe, or anyone outside of

the group is the foe (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). This is the seed of militarism in the site's

rhetoric. The websites are also specifically designed to target the younger populations. "With

online propaganda that is often flashy, hi-tech, and interactive, the Internet has helped enable

violent Islamists to deliver this message in a way that appeals to increasingly younger

demographics" (Lieberman & Collins, 2008, p. 11). The next stage is the indoctrination phase in

which the individuals have accepted the ideologies and core beliefs, and are now seeking ways in

which to participate and further the goals of the organization (Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

There are many resources that are accessible to these individuals including site design contests,

books on how to participate in jihad, and prizes for competitions that include firing a rocket at a

U.S. military base in Iraq (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). In the next stage jihadization, the

Internet connections with the group are crucial (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The individuals

need to the Internet to connect with other recruits and organization members in order to create

operation plans to carry out their own attacks (Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

Inspire, the digital magazine

The digital magazine by al-Qaeda titled Inspire is an example of how the self-

radicalization process can be completed through the use imagery and text that normalizes the

content in the context of Western media. In Sivek's article on the al-Qaeda-affiliated digital

magazine *Inspire*, the author investigates how the design and content contributes to an

individual's self-radicalization process (Sivek, 2013). Sivek argues that because al-Qaeda has

become so fragmented, that digital media outlets such as *Inspire* contribute to and speed up the

self-radicalization process by presenting narrow interpretations of Islam and by distortions of Western culture (Sivek, 2013; Lieberman & Collins, 2008). In Fort Hood, Texas, Army Private first class Naser Jason Abdo, 22 years old, was charged with conspiracy to conduct an attack on America soil using weapons of mass destruction (Sivek, 2013). In his apartment, investigators discovered copies of the magazine *Inspire* including articles on how to build bombs (Sivek, 2013). Officials in Germany and Britain have also arrested and charged individuals who are suspected terrorists that were inspired by the same digital magazine to take action in the name of Islam (Sivek, 2013).

Inspire was the idea of al-Qaeda leaders in the Arabian Peninsula in an effort to sensationalize Western Muslims (Sivek, 2013). Published and edited by Samir Khan and Anwar Al Awlaki, the magazine was designed by relatively young Islamist radicalists who had extensive knowledge of digital design and media outreach strategies (Sivek, 2013). The magazine was designed to reach many different Muslim sympathizers across the world, much to the dismay of Osama bin Laden prior to his assassination in May of 2011 (Sivek, 2013). The documentation discovered by officials in bin Laden's compound revealed the frustrations of bin Laden due to a fragmented al-Qaeda, and the effects the decentralization had on the precision and accuracy of the messaging (Sivek, 2013; Lieberman & Collins, 2008). The organization, as revealed in the documents found during the raid, was moving towards recruiting small groups of individuals motivated enough to carry out attacks on the West as lone wolves (Sivek, 2013; Lieberman & Collins, 2008). In an effort to reestablish credibility and relevancy, al-Qaeda has used the magazine *Inspire* to help recentralize the messaging and goals of the organization (Sivek, 2013; Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

Within the context of the self-radicalization process, *Inspire* uses a familiar Western-style magazine format through which to connect with potential sympathizers in the Western nations (Sivek, 2013). The format aids in normalizing the rather complicated and violent and political topics covered in the stories themselves (Sivek, 2013). The result of copying Western media styling in the *Inspire* magazine is almost a light-hearted, pop-culture appearance of topics relating to the militarization of religion (Sivek, 2013). For example, what may, "[look] like a how-to story for a home improvement project, laid out in steps with photos, is really a set of instructions for building a bomb "in the kitchen of your mom." What looks like an advertisement is really a joke satirizing a "traitorous" politician" (Sivek, 2013, p. 11). What Western readers expect from *Inspire* based purely on the stylizing of the articles and advertisements is a medley of inspirational and aspirational stories which contributes to the acceptance of the jihadi undertones without the reader actually realizing it (Sivek, 2013). *Inspire* has also tapped into hip-hop culture by incorporating simple yet militant-inspired rap lyrics such as the following from Sivek's article:

Al Qaeda is comin' for you

So you betta shape up as our war is anew

Smashin' and bashin', Cashin' and Slashin'

Is our fighting fashion

Pleasin' the enemy is not a choice

'Cuz it betrays Islam's voice (2013, p. 12)

Inspire not only uses innocent seeming rap lyrics to lure in youthful audiences, but the

magazine also uses abbreviations familiar to young people such as "LOL" and slang words such

as "diss" (Sivek, 2013). These particular elements that make the content relational to

sympathizers, also contributes to the reader's ability to accept the messaging (Sivek, 2013). If

the format is normal, then acceptance of the message seems even more reasonable to the most

rational of people (Sivek, 2013). Once the reader accepts the ideology, *Inspire* then establishes

the basis of religious duty to Islam as the creation of an Islamic nation through the utilization of

violence by eliciting fear and guilt of the readers (Sivek, 2013). *Inspire*'s Fall 2010 issue

included an article entitled "O Hesitant One: It's an Obligation!" which encouraged the action of

its believers: "Until when must the love of jihad remain just another one of those hobbies of

yours with which you while away your free time[?]"(Sivek, 2013, p. 14). The objective through

these types of articles is to mobilize the recruits and ready them for physical violence (Sivek,

2013). Once the recruits or readers accept the ideology and mobilization narratives, then the

recruit will seek out ways in which to achieve these goals (Sivek, 2013). *Inspire* provides step-

by-step instructions for those who are planning attacks (Sivek, 2013). The magazine provides

numerous ideas for waging violent jihad in the name of Islam (Sivek, 2013). For example, the

magazine provided detailed instruction on how to best destroy buildings – pictures included

(Sivek, 2013).

Countering self-radicalization

There are three types of methods that the government may use in combating and

identifying the process of self-radicalization among individuals located in the U.S. Neumann

argues in his article on countering Internet radicalization that there needs to be a comprehensive

approach to the problem by the U.S. government (2013). This policy should establish programs

that will enhance the education of the youth about these issues, counter the extreme Islamist

messaging, and exploit the very systems that the groups are using to infiltrate the United States'

homeland (Neumann, 2013).

Removal or censoring of information

The United States is limited in removing or censoring extremist content by not only the

Constitution but also by the expansive nature of the Internet (Neumann, 2013). The process of

removing or blocking information would be generally unconstitutional but also impractical in the

sense that there would need to be a large amount of federal oversight of website blacklists

(Neumann, 2013). Also, the judicial system would have to play an integral part of this process of

blacklisting and censorship in order to provide options for appeal for the affected website owners

(Neumann, 2013). Not only are there constitutional limits to the U.S. ability to block or restrict

certain content, the U.S. also presents itself as the "global champion of Internet freedom and the

free flow of information" (Neumann, 2013, p.438). Any attempt opposite of this public image

would cause international public relations nightmares. The U.S. would have to develop a

dynamic system for limiting the supply of this extremist messaging in which the parameters are

constantly changing every day, as is the nature of the Internet (Neumann, 2013).

Public awareness and education

Neumann describes the second strategy of reducing demand for extremist content as a

means to increase awareness of democracy, pluralism, and peaceful ideas for advancement

(2013). The author describes how the Internet can become a marketplace of peaceful ideas, but

there are some challenges to creating this environment (Neumann, 2013). One of the biggest

challenges to creating an open forum on the Internet for ideas is that the extremists and most

enthusiastic speakers and thinkers dominate the conversations everywhere, and thus drown out

the voices of moderation (Neumann, 2013). There is also a large gap in group associations and

challenges in that there are millions of groups online for any kind of user, but these groups

become smaller and smaller, and the users become less likely to challenge one another

(Neumann, 2013). These sites essentially become echo chambers for radicalization (Neumann,

2013). There is also a disproportionate amount of young adults and adolescents using the

Internet (Neumann, 2013). These young persons, while able to effectively navigate and utilize

the Internet, may not be able to contextualize or analyze the arguments, and may fall victim to

extremist messaging due to a lack of knowledge (Neumann, 2013).

＿＿＿＿With these challenges in mind, there are many different methods which are being used to

reduce overall demand for extremist literature and messaging. The first step is for governments,

communities, and parents to become aware of the processes involved in online radicalization,

and the ways in which their children are being targeted (Neumann, 2013). An example of

government-facilitated awareness campaigns is the U.S. National Counterterrorism Center that

developed a briefing made up of slide shows and videos that can be used in town hall meetings,

which encourages parents to take a more active approach in their children's online presence

(Neumann, 2013). The next step would be to facilitate the marketplace of ideas by aiding

moderate voices internationally to improve their website designs and overall messaging

(Neumann, 2013). For example, in 2012 the State Department hosted several online seminars for

Somali bloggers based in Canada, Africa, and Europe in order for them to exchange ideas and

teach each other on how to improve their websites' functionality and appearance while also

reaching out to a wider audience (Neumann, 2013). Countermessaging is also a strategy that can

help to reduce demand for extremist media on the Internet. The government can play a passive

role in this by bringing together groups of people affected by terrorism related incidents with

media and public relations groups in order to disseminate their stories effectively (Neumann,

2013). Engagement of the extremists through their respective websites is the most direct

approach the government can use to reduce demand for the radical propaganda (Neumann,

2013). In this method, the extremists are directly spoken to and, are engaged in dialogue that is

counter to their ideology (Neumann, 2013). The insertion of this countermessaging is important

in that these websites act as extreme echo chambers where every individual agrees on a

particularly extreme message (Neumann, 2013). The government can also promote media

literacy among young adults and adolescents as a long-term approach to reducing demand for

terrorist-related media (Neumann, 2013). Teachers and community organizations can run classes

on evaluating sources and evaluating source information for young persons (Neumann, 2013).

Strategic and tactical intelligence

The third strategy for countering online radicalization and terrorist recruitment involves

exploiting the very means in which the terrorists' disseminate their messages (Neumann, 2013).

Law enforcement and intelligence organizations can gather strategic and tactical intelligence by

simply using the terrorists' platforms against themselves (Neumann, 2013). The goals of

gathering strategic intelligence are, "to track and analyze online platforms – static websites,

online forums, blogs, Twitter, videos, and discussion threads – to detect shifts in intentions and

priorities, pick up on arguments, cleavages, fault lines, and new tactics" (Neumann, 2013, p.

450). For al-Qaeda, as an example, this means analysts observing the changes in battlefront

interests by jihadist militants in order for the respective government organizations to track the

appropriate levels of traffic for these foreign militants (Neumann, 2013). Strategic intelligence

can also reveal changes in modus operandi simply by analyzing the changes in the words used in

the messaging (Neumann, 2013). For example, in the extremist magazine named *Inspire*,

Awlaki and Samir Khan, editor of the *Inspire* magazine, called on recruits to act as "lone

wolves" (Neumann, 2013, p. 451) in attacking the United States (Neumann, 2013).

As far as tactical intelligence gathering is concerned, there are some minor things that

law enforcement officials must be wary of when monitoring specific websites and social media

sites for potential attacks (Neumann, 2013). Lone actors or lone wolves tend to have an

extensive online history in which they participate in online forums and organizations since they

may not be physically able or willing to connect with the organizations' headquarters (Neumann,

2013). While many participants in online forums are not terrorists, there have been certain cases

in which the lone actor has posted the plans for an attack online prior to the incident (Neumann,

2013). For example, Mohamed Osman Mohmoud, a 19 year old Somali-American from

Portland, Oregon who had attempted to bomb the tree lighting ceremony in his hometown in

2010, had extensive connections with Samir Khan, the editor of the radical magazine *Inspire*, for

many years (Neumann, 2013). Mohmoud was an active member of several al-Qaeda-supported

online forums and had published three different articles for Khan's online magazine, similar to

Inspire, called *Jihad Recollections* (Neumann, 2013). These articles described how Mohmoud

was going to physically and mentally prepare for carrying out an act of terrorism (Neumann,

2013).

These online sites and forums not only provide intelligence relating to potential attacks

and networks of individuals connect with terrorism, but the sites also provide evidence that can

be used in the court of law (Neumann, 2013). These conversations and articles, even when

deleted, are forever a part of the internet. Many of the potential terrorist recruits have extensive

histories of postings on Facebook and Twitter that could potentially incriminate them as far as

conspiracy to commit an act of terrorism charges are concerned (Neumann, 2013). As an

example of how extensive this online history can be British officials who are technological

experts of the London Metropolitan Police over six months and sixteen officers to analyze the

contents of one terrorism suspect's computer and internet usage (Neumann, 2013).

Accounting for policy backlash

The authors Faria and Arce argue in their article that proactive counterterror policies

conducted by a target government can create a situation in which, instead of discouraging its

citizens from taking part in terrorist activities, citizens become sympathetic and may provide

positive support for these organizations (2012). In creating an effective counterterrorism policy,

the target governments must wage an "information war to change public opinion regarding its

own policies and the ultimate effects of terror attacks" (Faria & Arce, 2012, p. 431). In fact, al-

Qaeda, while planning for the 9/11 attacks and for the Madrid train bombings of 2004, rely on

the target governments to implement extremely restrictive policies with respect to travel,

transportation, and communications in order to garner support from the repressed in the target

nations but also of the Islamic world abroad (Faria & Arce, 2012). The authors model their

study based on the concept that all counterterrorism policies result in benefits and costs which

are dynamic constraints on the target governments (Faria & Arce, 2012). Because of this

dynamic interaction between the costs and benefits of the counterterrorism policies, it becomes

very difficult for the governments to implement any policies that can effectively balance the two

factors (Faria & Arce, 2012). The conclusion that it is reached through this study of the

variables which affect public support of counterterrorist policies is that governments need not

overreact to terrorist activities because the government's impatience has the potential to cause

more terror in the citizens than the terrorist act itself (Faria & Arce, 2012). The government

must be able to balance their information war with implementation of the policies.

Conclusion

While al-Qaeda has become a very complex and highly-sophisticated terrorist organization (Bergen & Cruickshank, 2012), their media use has grown along with it (Torres et al. 2006). The use of the Internet through discussion boards, e-mail, instant messaging, videos with audio recordings, and publications of paper materials has made al-Qaeda's messaging and literature readily available to the masses (Torres et al. 2006). With this in mind, Western populations are also able to more easily access this information when they choose to seek it out during the first stage of the self-radicalization process (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Al-Qaeda branching out into the Internet has exponentially sped up the process of self-radicalization in generally normal Western populations (Lieberman & Collins, 2008). Authorities must remain informed and up-to-date on all types of new media on the Internet that al-Qaeda is using to target Western audiences (Neumann, 2013). The information on these websites must be analyzed for intelligence (Neumann, 2013). There must also be an effective public awareness and education campaign in order for the public to understand of what steps the process consists and what the warning signs are in the process of self-radicalization (Neumann, 2013). Being able to identify and understand self-radicalization can help the individuals who are falling prey to al-Qaeda's media exploits before attacks can be realized and planned (Lieberman & Collins, 2008).

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