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Jihadist Web Postings and Popular Social Media: A Forensic Psychological Analysis

by

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The development of the Internet has made it easy for individuals to communicate with others around the world, especially with the increased ease of social media. The Internet is used for interpersonal communication such as social media, meeting new people in chat rooms, joining interest distribution lists, among others leisure activities (Lennings, Amon, Brummert, & Lennings, 2010). According to Pew Research (2014), 74% of adults, with 89% of individuals ages 18-29 using social media extensively. This statistic is particularly important as it is estimated approximately 70% of the individuals recruited to engage in terrorism are ages 18 to 23 (Lennings et al., 2010).

Social media has revolutionized the way terrorists communicate. Terrorists groups, such as Jihad, utilize web postings and social media to recruit followers and spread their propaganda. Terrorists have two primary goals, which include demonstrating their strengths and making authorities feel vulnerable by inducing fear. Online extremism have moved the radicalization process into suburban living rooms, and made it possible for Al-Qaeda agents to recruit “homegrown” terrorists via the Internet (Klausen, Tschaen Barbieri, Reichlin-Melnick, & Zelin, 2012). However, the Internet can be used to gain sympathy for a cause (Lennings et al., 2010). This can work in terrorists groups favor, leading to fundraising, recruitment, and a sense of belonging (Lennings et al., 2010).

Theories of Utility

Various types of social media affect people in many ways, drawing them into
affiliations with terrorist organizations. Behind these ways, are theories explaining how people can grow to become further integrated into the subcultures of these social media sites. By becoming more integrated in subcultures of these sites, people begin to develop character traits that would elevate a person’s status within a subculture, and may eventually apply the ideas and behaviors learned there to situations of differing contexts. The two core theories examined in literature explaining how terrorist networks lure followers are Positioning theory and Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximate Development.

**Positioning Theory**

Schmidle (2009) described positioning theory is the study of how individuals interact as a part of a group and learn to behave as a function of that group, and then, in turn, develop individual behaviors that are practiced outside of the group setting. Positioning theory postulates that people learn their place in the group, their duties to the group, and how to respond based on previous interactions with the group. There are three components of what Harre and van Langenhove posited as a triangular heuristic framework: a person’s position, a person’s speech or other act, and the storyline (see Figure 1) (Ghosten, 2012; Schmidle, 2009).

![Triangular Heuristic Framework](image)

In positioning theory, one is expected to act in context of his or her own role in the group. So with the position, there is a set of ascribed rights and duties that a person is
expected to act upon. Ghosten (2012) defined “rights” as certain entitlements belonging to a position, and “duties” as actions that a person in a certain position is expected to perform. For example, a person may take interest in a particular forum after watching a few videos and observing conversation. When he or she begins to participate, the person is of a lower status, and would be expected to participate some and follow the rest of the group as he/she learned the social rules well enough to elevate to higher status (Ghosten, 2012).

Ghosten (2012) described the speech or other act is the particular action that is taking place at any given point. The action a person performs is seen as coming from a person in a particular role, and then, is responded to accordingly (Ghosten, 2012). If a person with lower status went against the common ideas of the group, the ideas might be refuted or dismissed. However, if a person with higher status were to do the same, individuals of lower status would need to take the action more seriously and deeply consider the rationale behind it.

The storyline is considered the full context in which the individual operates (Ghosten, 2012). This part of the theory assumes that people learn through others’ reactions to their behaviors. In turn, people act according to how they expect others to react to their new actions or behaviors. If a person was chastised in the past for challenging a collective idea of the group, then he/she will learn to either not challenge the collective idea, or will attempt to present it differently if trying to avoid conflict and negative feedback.

Schmidle (2009) described how Al Qaeda operates within this framework. Al Qaeda positions the members of a specific society as reprehensible and deserving of
destruction, placing the duty on themselves to do so. Within this context, the target is
demonized, turning them into an evil object that must be eradicated rather than another
group of people. In this storyline, Al Qaeda does not seem themselves as a group of
terrorists, but as a group of martyrs, fighting for a cause (Schmidle, 2009). These same
ideals can be fostered and implemented in daily life and moral reasoning not only through
this heuristic framework, but also through Vygostky’s theory.

Vygotsky’s Zone of Proximal Development

Vygotsky theorized in the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) that learning is a
process much akin to an apprenticeship (Danish, Peppler, Phelps, & Washington, 2011;
Gray & Feldman, 2004; Schmidle, 2009). Vygotsky theorized that children learn through
studying the behaviors of others and behaving how they understand they are supposed to
behave. Adults teach them by providing them with new ways to act as well as feedback,
so the children learn the best way to operate in situations in the future (Danish et al.,

According to Schmidle (2009), these same principles can be applied to not only
children, but adults as well. As adults take on mentors, they are provided with feedback
and new tools until they pass from the ZPD to the Zone of Full Development. Once a
person has all of the tools and training they need to succeed in a position, he/she no
longer needs a mentor and can operate fully on his or her own. When a person goes from
being an observer occasional participant in conversation on one of these recruitment sites,
and is mentored until he/she has fully honed his or her skills, then the mentor gains a
teammate. This person would then take on the same role as his or her former mentor, to
Teach, and induct new recruits to the particular cause (Gray & Feldman, 2011; Schmidle,
2009).

**Theoretical Implications**

One can make the argument of comparing social media to being held hostage. It would most likely not surprise people to learn that certain types of retaliatory clandestine opportunities have become popular to step into the dark underworld of Social Media aimed to target and immobilize social media trolls. Social media applied to terrorism is yet another vast universe of dark electronic alleyways where shadowy people lurk to engage in a variety of covert activities intended to create a global culture of fear and intimidation. Military officers around the world share in the concern over social media, especially when they monitor Westerners who are subject to recruitment from Islamic extremists. Drawing from the discussion above, it is most likely social media complemented by electronic hackers will end up being a serious threat to any nation. Secret operations can produce a plethora of options intended to counter social media based digital masked bandits or other underground groups who want to conceal themselves from their targets.

Terrorists use a variety of popular social media to get their point across. Weimann (2010) described an incident where an individual had asked a terrorist how to create a bomb and the two of them communicated back and forth on Twitter. A primary reason terrorists use social media is to recruit individuals. The more supporters the terrorist group has, the more likely the government will act. Gerwehr and Daly (2006) suggested that terrorist groups tailor recruitment techniques to the cultural climate and social needs of an audience.
Advantages of Internet Use

Ease of access, lack of regulation, real time information sharing, anonymity, and vast potential audiences are simply a few of the benefits afforded to terrorism societies utilizing the Internet (Rogers, 2003; Weimann, 2010). As websites seemingly appear and disappear on almost a daily basis, changing addresses and reformatting; tracking the individual behind the message becomes a nearly impossible feat. These advantages have not gone unnoticed among various terrorist groups, as they have gone beyond Internet use via websites, extending to use of email, chat rooms, YouTube, google earth, and various social media sites.

Prior to the use of technology, recruited terrorists needed to travel to camps to make contacts and learn how to build bombs (Rivers, 2013). The Internet made it so that once an individual follows a terrorist group on social media, he or she can make the necessary contacts to gain admission into private forums where instructions for creating bombs exists. Because of this, individuals have “self-radicalized” without coming face to face with a terrorist in real life. This makes it possible for lone wolf terrorists to surface, acting without the direction of a legitimate terrorist organization. Although there has been a depth of research on recruitment through means of the Internet, there is no empirical evidence indicating individuals have been recruited via the Internet (Lennings et al., 2010).

The Internet has become the primary source for terrorism communication (Weimann, 2006, 2010). Terrorist groups create Internet forums and participate in social media for various reasons. The first Jihadist terrorism forum was created for Muntada Al Ansar Al Islami, which began in 2003 (Torres-Soriano, 2013). Each time a website was
put up by a terrorist group, it was taken down. The terrorist groups decided to send materials to several sites that they trusted which ensured their message was maintained. Torres-Soriano (2013) discussed advantages of using Internet forums, which includes ease of use, reinforcing the global jihad rhetoric, encouraging a sense of belonging to a single community, facilitating communicating and creating networks, and strengthening virtual recruitment.

**Internet Forums**

Many existing Internet forums contain the same links, videos, and propaganda that originate from a smaller group of larger sites (Salem, Reid, & Chen, 2008; Torres-Soriano, 2013). These other sites and mirror sites keep the information circulating at such a rapid pace that most of the information evades authorities’ attempts to shut them down (Amble, 2012). It was found through the examination of these posts and past literature, that most sites have a difficult time maintaining a consistent group of radical followers. A need exists between the hosts of these sites and the users for mutual trust to not interact with people against their cause (Salem, Reid, & Chen, 2008; Torres-Soriano, 2013). The forums establish these trusts by linking the direct terrorist sites to the forums usually run by people who have broad networks of social contacts to connect a large group of users. Some forums, however, initially form independently of terrorist website connections, but eventually gain enough credibility to gain associations with these groups (Torres-Soriano, 2013).

Torres-Soriano (2013) ran analyses over seven Jihadi Internet forums, examining the dynamics of numbers of users, discussion topics, and posts. Most forums are broken up into sections, the first of which is the “statement section,” which contains direct
messages and propaganda from the terrorist networks which are limited to the posts of authorized spokespersons. The “general section” is completely open to participation from all members where they can post comments, news, videos, links, or anything jihad-related. Some other sections include history, translations, trainings on bomb-making and weapons, and discussion boards on a variety of topics (Torres-Soriano, 2013). Additionally, analyses were conducted on other Jihadi websites to analyze the user content of their related forums.

In 2011, Abdulla conducted a descriptive content analysis of the three most popular Arabic-language portals on the Internet. Through these analyses, the researcher observed conversations discussing members’ feelings about 9/11 such as refutations, indifference, or justifications for the ideas. Although Abdulla did not account for conversations outside of those referencing Islam, 9/11, and sympathy towards victims, these are the types of the online environments that can launch discussions to help people fully develop their opinions, debate differences, and forms subgroups of people with similar common traits and/or common interests (Abdulla, 2011).

**Social Media**

Social media is a popular electronic platform and it is expected to continue to explode well into the future. Globally, people who have been disconnected are finding the instant ease of access to an infinite world of information, industries, groups, and other people, not to mention different perspectives of life to include ideologies. Business owners are divided over the value of social media. Social media marketing has the potential to improve business and mass market to a wide variety of potential customers; conversely, negative feedback has the potential to produce negative business outcomes.
The argument that social media opens up a vast universe to find attention is not understated. For some, the exposure to posting a YouTube video is a major milestone in their lives. The social psychology and analysis of instant gratification and ability to say certain things behind the electronic screen can be described as exciting. Others may take the view using social media is a cowardly way of not having the courage to say something in front of those who are being discussed. Some private enterprises offer monitoring services of social media to keep an online reputation from being subjected to negative comments. Some of these services have some success either having the comments removed and or burying the information by inserting new and positive comments. Regardless, it is difficult for any business to control for social media comments.

Anybody can use social media and say pretty much anything without concern for their subject matter content, opinion, and statements. It is common sense to say much of the information could be false and intended for sinister acts. Most experts in business agree that it has not been productive nor is it smart to engage in social media discussions to defend negative comments. Although it is possible to initiate legal action, many times the lower socio economic status of engaging electronic trolls does not make much sense.

Facebook is another site used to post bomb recipe as one would post a recipe for a dinner dish. In May 2009, a Facebook group for Ansar Al-Mujahideen members, a jihadist terrorist group, were created and called themselves “Islamic Jihad Union” to connect with other Jihadist supporters (Weimann, 2010). The Department of Homeland Security (2010) stated that Facebook acts as a gateway for further radicalization. Jihadist can post information on weapon maintenance, propaganda, ideology, as well as post
additional links to Internet forums (Department of Homeland Security, 2010). Facebook is considered more efficient than the Internet forums because Jihadists can reach out to individuals instead of waiting for people to come to them.

Jihadist terrorists also use the video site, YouTube. Terrorists can use video anonymously and it can reach thousands of people. YouTube based jihadist channels promote violent acts, broadcast threats and announce and direct events or demonstrations (Weimann, 2010). Terrorists use social media in creative ways. Terrorists recruit individuals, incite fear, spread propaganda and ideology, and to create virtual friendships by just a click of a button. Terrorists use the Internet to create propaganda, which includes showing videos of their acts which then in itself because their message.

Twitter another social networking site utilized by Jihad terrorist organizations. Altman (2014) described Twitter as a free megaphone used to reach a large audience. In 2013, terrorist organization live-tweeted a commentary as allied fighters carried out a terrorist attack at a nearby shopping mall. Twitter has a policy against posting acts of violence, threats, and harassment and government agencies can request to have posts remove; however, twitter is primarily unmonitored (Altman, 2014).

Future Directions

Jihadists use web posting and social media for a variety of ways. Jihadists use the Internet to incite fear and recruit followers to either fund their terrorist acts or engage in their terrorist acts. Jihadists use Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube for demonstrating and live commentating terrorist events. It is difficult to deter terrorists from using social media, as sites are not monitored closely. Another issue is there is little empirical on terrorist’s use of social media. Future researchers should focus on the impact these social
media outlets have on the public.
References


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