

Chapter 30

Social Media and the Use of Discursive Markers of Online Extremism and Recruitment

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines the shift toward the use of social media to fuel violent extremism, what the key discursive markers are, and how these key discursive markers are used to fuel violent extremism. The chapter then addresses and critiques a number of radicalisation models including but not limited to phase based models. Discursive markers are covered under three broad narrative areas. Narratives of grievance are designed to stimulate strong emotive responses to perceived injustices. Based on these grievances, active agency is advocated in the form of jihad as a path that one should follow. Finally, a commitment to martyrdom is sought as the goal of these discursive markers.

INTRODUCTION

Social media has now become the mainstream recruitment platform for online radicals and extremists. In order to better understand this phenomenon, it is necessary to map the discursive markers that are present online. In addition, it is important to understand the models that help to contextualise these discursive markers. Consequently, this chapter covers these three broad areas: the shift towards social media; the main discursive narratives both from the literature as well as a longitudinal study of Facebook; and finally a review of several models as they relate to the discursive markers and how these apply to radicalisation.

SHIFT TOWARDS SOCIAL MEDIA

In order to propagate their discourses toward as wide an audience as possible, online terrorist strategies have undergone significant evolution in recent years. In their initial stages, the main source of jihad

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propaganda was from terrorist websites with most in Arabic and very few in English (Awan, 2007). However, not only has there been an exponential growth in the number of websites but also a shift in how terrorists use online media (McNeal, 2007). Increasingly, there has been a shift towards incorporating more interactive and Western forms of social media such as Myspace, YouTube, Facebook, Yahoo services and Twitter (Michael, 2009; O'Rourke, 2007; Weimann, 2010). These social media services provide new opportunities for terrorists including greater anonymity and protection from law enforcement (Dean, Bell, & Newman, 2012). Consequently, terrorist organisations including jihadist groups have been very quick to take advantage of them.

As an example, Weimann (2011) notes Al-Qaeda's use of Yahoo services including chat, email and Yahoo Groups. Another case in point is Facebook. As the largest social media site in the world, Facebook is a useful terrorist tool to attract like-minded radicals especially through its group pages (Dean et al., 2012). Networks and group pages can quickly grow with more moderate or sympathiser pages being linked to more hard line propaganda pages (Dean et al., 2012; Holtmann, 2011). Given these benefits of social media, it is no surprise that the latest research indicates that 90 percent of terrorist activity on the Internet takes place using some type of social networking tool (Weimann, 2012).

Not only do these forms of media allow for more savvy forms of presentation, but also more interactivity and participation from potential recruits (O'Rourke, 2007). Radicals can actively participate by creating and uploading videos from smartphones or computers, other propaganda or useful terrorist links (Brachman, 2012). Additionally, they allow an easy medium to display propaganda in a variety of formats aimed at attracting young recruits (Brachman, 2012).

Spiritual mentoring is regarded as an important process in online radicalisation and is well accommodated in social media forums (Michael, 2009). In essence, this means that online jihadists can make contact directly with terrorist representatives to receive instruction, mentoring or learn how they can make a contribution to the cause of jihad (Weimann, 2012).

Social media forums provide an easy means for those who are like-minded to easily connect (O'Rourke, 2007) as well as provide a strategy for terrorists to specifically target certain population subgroups using sophisticated narrowcasting strategies (Weimann, 2010). Social media is specifically designed for like-minded people to collaborate and share ideas and files (Dean et al., 2012). This is especially problematic for individuals who may think twice normally before sharing extremist views; who on social media can easily gain confidence with like-minded extremists with the possibility of leading to violent acts (Weimann, 2012). However, it is important to note that the shift towards social media forums does not mean that traditional jihad websites are obsolete; in fact, there is often an overlap and cross links between different media forums where links are made to these traditional sites for important propaganda or practical information (Michael, 2009).

According to Sageman (2008), the most significant threat is from terrorist wannabes that are recruited online especially via social media forums. Such individuals, as previously mentioned, have no direct organisational affiliations but have been recruited, socialised and trained online. Similarly, Weimann (2012) terms this threat the lone wolf terrorist. In fact lone wolf terrorists rely heavily on social media networks for support and backing, and are part of a virtual community of extremists with similar ideologies (Weimann, 2012). Social media communities are becoming more important to terrorists for recruiting and indoctrination (Weimann, 2012). Terrorist attacks and cases of those recruited online who have been convicted on terrorism charges reveal that this is a real and ongoing threat. Significantly, almost all lone wolf attacks in recent years have involved the use of electronic social media (Weimann, 2012).

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