The Role of Social Media in the Radicalization of Young People in the West

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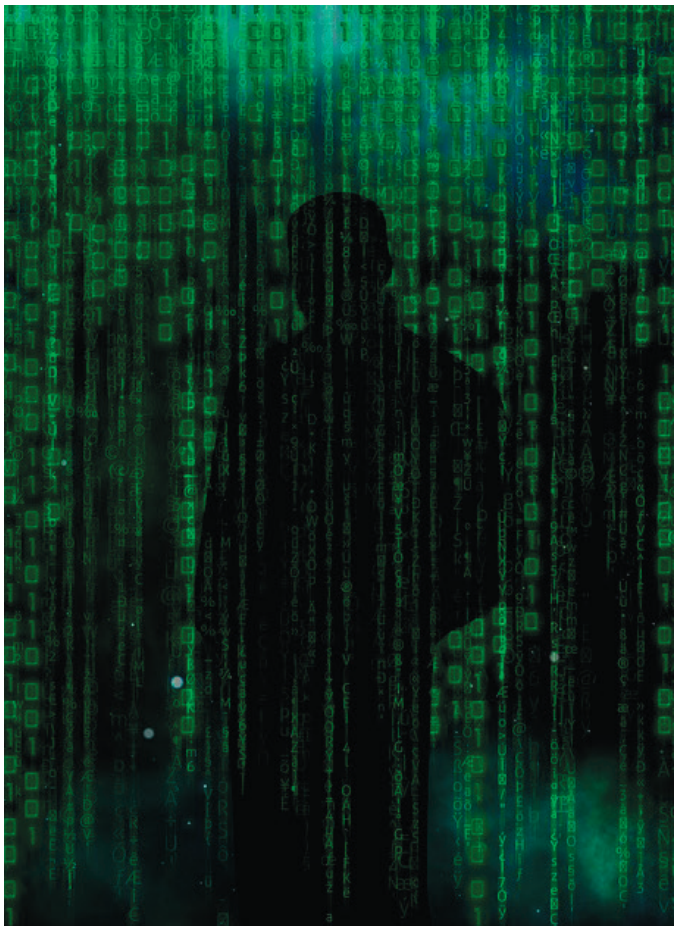
Recent years have seen a growth in the public's awareness of how radical jihadist movements, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, exploit the social media discourse to radicalize, recruit, and deploy young people in the West in service of their terrorist causes. This article traces the roots of these radicalization processes and explains the mechanisms that motivate young people, raised as citizens of democratic nations, to choose radical ideologies and serve organizations operating against those nations. The article claims that a broad spectrum of ideological, economic, and psychological factors—amplified because of the technological features of social media—have created a rich petri dish for sowing radicalization among normally law-abiding people. This has ramifications for the national security of democratic states, as the social media discourse is liable to generate polarization, violence, and permanent undermining of the social order, which threatens their citizens' identity and personal safety.

Keywords: Social media, radicalization, Islamic State, globalization

Introduction

In March 2017, Khalid Masood, a 52-year old former convict, massacred four pedestrians and wounded dozens more on London's Westminster Bridge with his car. He then proceeded to the Palace of Westminster, where he stabbed a policeman to death, before he was finally apprehended by other police officers. Later it emerged that Masood, a native of Kent, England,



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drew inspiration from the Islamic State (ISIS). The obvious question—why someone would commit such an atrocity in the name of radical Islam—has been asked repeatedly after similar incidents, such as the Boston Marathon bombing in 2013, the attack in San Bernardino in 2015, and the Orlando nightclub shooting in 2016. In all these cases, the perpetrators declared allegiance to global jihadist organizations despite having very few personal connections with them outside the internet.[1]

The success of radical movements such as the Islamic State to attract normal, law-abiding people is partly attributed to their skilled use of social media platforms—Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. These infrastructures provide a public forum where individuals and groups can have discussions

without significant supervision by the authorities and can disseminate their messages to audiences around the world. In recent years, appeals have been made to allocate resources to monitor and prevent the spread of radical content on the internet.[2]

The concern in the democratic West over radical organizations has grown, and although most of the activities of the global jihad is executed in Middle Eastern nations, their reach is not limited to that part of the world. Using well-oiled recruitment and propaganda mechanisms, they have succeeded in drawing supporters from all over the world. One of the reasons for the concern is the lack of understanding about the factors that bring young people to adopt radical perceptions.

Much has been said about the role of social media in the radicalization processes,[3] but not much has been written about the ways in which the social and technological contexts promote radicalization. Although personality traits and the persuasive abilities of radical Muslim preachers promote radicalization, there is the equally significant effect of social, economic, and technological circumstances, and to a large extent a growing social critique of political and economic trends rooted in the era of globalization. This critique, transmitted via the polarizing, toxic discourse typical of social media, generates a new sense of victimization and the dehumanization of both individuals and groups, which in turn has generated a sense of legitimacy in belonging to violent groups and personally engaging in acts of violence.

Changes in the Global Era

The era of globalization, in which national borders have been breached by commercial, political, social, and cultural connections due to technological changes, is not a new phenomenon.[4] International communications and trade have existed for hundreds of years. In the era of globalization, however, trends that started to emerge earlier have been amplified, and these changes are manifested in five major aspects:

1. **Scale:** The number of political, economic, and social connections among societies is greater than ever before.
2. **Speed:** Globalization shrinks the dimensions of space and time and creates an atmosphere in which events happening on the other side of the globe reach our doorstep almost instantaneously.

3. **Consciousness:** Globalization has led to a sense that the world is a global village, i.e., a shared space where all citizens of the world are interconnected in a web of shared interests, worldviews, and concerns.
4. **The economy:** The era of globalization can be described as one in which the neoliberal ideology has conquered almost every corner of the world. This process is manifested by nations edging out the idea of the welfare state and transitioning to a monetary economy with reduced regulation and greater international trade.
5. **Politics and society:** Globalization is a facilitator of democratic values, a catalyst for social mobility, and a factor in giving disadvantaged populations center stage in the sociopolitical and economic arena.[5]

Despite its inherent benefits, a growing criticism of globalization from governments and organizations, both in the liberal West and beyond, has contributed to an increase of anti-global sentiment. Its supporters are active in preventing the opening of new markets and are opposed to reducing the state's traditional functions. They believe that the globalization process has led to the loss of economic security for many people who have failed to adapt to the new global economy. Furthermore, the social mobility that helped marginal groups move to the center has destabilized previous social hierarchies and stripped power from the groups that used to have exclusive control. In parallel, these trends also have uprooted old norms that were based on racist or patriarchal views. Above all, globalization has discouraged nationalism while promoting universal cultural values such as pluralism and multiculturalism.

For many, the global world is an uncertain place where old, familiar ways of living are the objects of ridicule. For them, globalization, which generates new challenges all the time, undermines simple definitions, such as "who am I and who the other is," i.e., the binary structure by which social identity is defined. This state of affairs, as well as the government's decreasing role in people's economic and social lives, has created a vacuum which new groups and leaders have rushed to fill. These are borne aloft by the masses' desire for economic security and for reaffirming their social identity—two key socioeconomic aspects that have become unsettled by globalization. The loss of employment security, the change in social and national status, and the questioning of traditional institutions, the army, the church, and

even the traditional nuclear family, created a rift filled by two new forces: anti-establishment political movements and social media.

Social Media in an Era of Changing Identities

The end of the Cold War signaled the victory of the Western, liberal, democratic ideology. Still, for many, it generated more hardship and questions than solutions and answers. The era of globalization has been an era of troubled souls, of people who fail to find a sense of belonging or communal destiny. The disruption of their national identity has led them to search for an alternate identity, in order to provide—as part of a physical or virtual community—a sense of security that is no longer dependent on a territory. In a world in which the significance of a territory has diminished, the search for a permanent, lasting identity becomes a coping strategy.

For many, the answer to the lack of communal identity is found in social media networks. A social media network is an arena that provides informative, emotional, and experiential needs. It allows people to make contact with others across different continents and share information—from music and videos to ideas and ideologies. Therefore, the perceptions, feelings, and norms of conduct of individuals are influenced by the contacts and information to which they are exposed on social media. The sense of solidarity among members of a virtual community grows stronger over time as does their willingness to act together. In this situation, the communal solidary in cyberspace could motivate people to act in order to attain their shared social and political goals in the physical world.

The connection between technology and political action is the foundation of the theory of "technological determinism." The theory, as conceptualized by Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, refers to socio-historical trends as products of significant technological innovations.[6] Researchers who have adopted this theory think of social changes, such as the rise of nationalism, the Protestant Reformation, and introduction of democratic modern regimes, as outcomes of social actions motivated by a technological constraint.[7] According to this approach, the development of social media has greatly affected the growth of social movements around the world. People posts on Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and other forums to call for action, and others respond in real time. This potential was realized by protest movements such as Occupy Wall Street, the Tea Party, and the movements that launched

the Arab Spring, such as the April 6 Youth Movement. In every one of these protests, social media—especially Facebook and Twitter—served as a platform in the virtual sphere to disseminate information and promote demonstrations and other actions in the real world.

Social Media and Radicalization

> What is interesting is the power and the impact of social media . . . So we must try to use social media in a good way.
>
> –Nobel Peace Prize winner Malala Yousafzai

The concept of radicalization describes a process in which people are exposed to transformative ideological messages that result in replacing their moderate stances with radical ones. Radical thinking that undermines the existing order is not necessarily problematic in and of itself. On the contrary, it contributed to many positive historical developments. However, when radical thinking leads to violence or other criminal behavior, society could find itself under real, concrete threat.[8]

Despite the public interest in the radicalization of young Muslims, the process is hardly limited to members of any ethnic group, religion, ideology, or political party.[9] Radical groups are well aware of social media's inherent potential and exploit it to recruit young internet users. Radical right-wing political parties, such as PEGIDA (Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamization of the Occident) in Germany and the Britain First party in the United Kingdom, have amassed influence via social media where they are far more popular than the regular establishment parties.[10] This raises the question: What factors have helped radical, anti-global, hermetic movements to flourish primarily on social media platforms, ironically considered the locus of global, pluralistic, democratic values, and indeed, the epitome of the global village?

The function of the internet and social media in disseminating radical ideologies and values has been the subject on plethora of studies.[11] Researchers refer to social media platforms as an internet environment (or milieu) that adapts to users' needs based on their previous web browsing history and to content that they have marked as relevant by clicking "like." This adaptation (also known as filter bubble) identifies the user's personal tastes

using advanced algorithms. To make the user experience as pleasant and welcoming as possible, the filter bubble steadily provides people with content and message that suit their worldview, while concurrently hiding contradictory stances. This algorithmic feature traps users in very narrow positions and creates a Hermetic sphere that screens out challenging voices.

This hermetic spheres reverberating with radical ideas have the potential to lead to collective radicalization of community members and provide legitimacy to ideologies, positions, and types of behavior generally considered taboo. This leads to a honing of political ideas that were formerly considered marginal and increases their popularity. This is how the features of social media create a "bubble" in which people "naturally" become more extreme in their beliefs.

Another explanation relates to internet hate speech called "othering." Othering is a rhetorical method in which the narrative is dichotomously divided between "us" and "them." This is a familiar feature of a hate speech on the internet, such as stressing the region of origin of a social group in a dispute between veteran and new immigrants. This type of speech might lead to justifying malicious and even violent conduct toward the "others."[12] In extreme cases, "othering" takes the form of dehumanization.[13] While the traditional media is supervised by the state, which limits an us-them discourse, social media enables antagonistic rhetoric to flourish. This is how the internet has become a crucial sphere for creating and spreading antagonizing messages, while turning normal people into propaganda machines spreading disinformation, anxiety, and hatred.[14]

Ignoring the negative ramifications of the discourse of social media networks would be justifiable if they had remained a safety valve for blowing off steam. However, there is a reasonable concern that the way a person operates in the virtual sphere is similar to the way that same person behaves in the physical world, as the process of socialization that occurs on the internet does not necessarily stay there but gradually spreads into the physical realm. Thus, internet bullying is copied from the virtual sphere to the real world..[15]

An example of this phenomenon is demonstrated by the spread of the "incel" (involuntary celibates) movement. Incels, primarily active in social media, are men suffering from sexual frustration who blame their condition on women. The common monikers in communications between incels and their "opponents" are "Chads" for handsome men having sexual relations

and "Stacys" for pretty women having sexual relations while "Norms" are all those who are not incels. The community began in the early 2000s, as a forum where men with difficulties in finding a romantic or sexual partner shared their experiences. Gradually, the group began to change, in large part thanks to "masters of seduction" who saw the platform as providing an opportunity to hawk methods of seduction to frustrated men. After discovering that they were still incapable of attracting members of the opposite sex despite these methods and techniques, their rage grew, and the contents of the platform became increasingly and violently misogynistic.[16] David Futrelle, a journalist who has followed the incel movement, explained that the members of the movement take all the bitterness and sadness sometimes felt when facing sexual or romantic frustrations and turn them into a state of existence. Instead of urging young men to shake off their disappointment, the incel subculture encourages them to wallow in their grief.[17]

The most horrifying expression of this internet community made headlines in April 2018 after Alek Minassian, a young Canadian man, ran over dozens of people on a Toronto street, killing ten and wounding fourteen. Shortly before his rampage, Minassian wrote a post on his Facebook page where he expressed his support for the incel community: "Private (Recruit) Minassian Infantry 00010, wishing to speak to Sgt 4chan please. C23249161. The Incel Rebellion has already begun! We will overthrow all the Chads and Stacys!"[18]After the attack, researchers started to compare the radicalization between young, sexually frustrated men active in incel forums and that of young Muslims enlisting in ISIS. According to one article in the *Atlantic*, "Now they can come together online and find others to validate their grievances and encourage them to action. Dating is harder when you spend a lot of time being bitter online. Murder is easier when someone is whispering at you every few minutes, telling you the rest of the world deserves what it gets. These communities become, like ISIS, instruments of conscience-annihilation, and the lonely losers within them become desensitized and, ultimately, morally inverted."[19]

Social Media and the Global Jihad

Dozens of published studies show how terrorist organizations, such as ISIS, use social media to recruit activists. Their most conspicuous finding is that much of the radicalization occurs among people whose main connection

with the extreme ideology takes place through the computer rather than any physical encounter; in other words, these are people being radicalized via the internet. This was true of Osman Hussain, the British citizen found guilty of the 2005 London tube station bombings; this was also true of Colleen LaRose, a US citizen who tried to assassinate a cartoonist who had portrayed the Prophet Muhammad in an unflattering light;[20] and it was also the case for some German citizens who were planning to attack a train in Germany in July 2006. All testified that their radicalization happened as a result of being exposed to content on the internet.[21]

Studies on the radicalization of people who join extreme jihadist movements as a result of being motivated by the internet stress the fact that these are normal-seeming, law-abiding individuals. Often, radicalized people are educated and employed, have a family, and seem to be involved in their communities. At the same time, it has also been found that there is a tendency toward violence among young people, especially members of ethnic minorities who, in most cases, are second- or third- generation immigrants. The professional literature on the subject suggests that two main factors are responsible for increased likelihood of violent tendencies: socioeconomic inequality and an identity crisis.

From an economic perspective, radical Islam was—since its inception—the product of a class struggle. Muhammad Kattib explains, for example, that "North African immigrants felt trapped in the lower classes of French society. They realized they were outside the mainstream of society and had been robbed of opportunities. This understanding and their poverty were the fuel that inflamed the disgust they experienced with French society and its symbols of wealth. The radicals succeeded in harnessing this anger to create a conflict between Muslims and the 'kuffars.'"[22]

Several models explain a person's transition to an ideology that justifies terrorism. For example, Randy Borum's model includes four stages: The first "it's not right," in which people feel that a certain state of affairs is inappropriate; the second stage is "it's not fair," when people compare the state of affairs to better situations or to other people's situations and determine that the inequality is illegitimate or unjustified; in the third of "it's your fault," people point fingers at an external group whom they consider responsible for situation (and often the group will consist of "others"), and gradually they become subjected to dehumanization; and, in the last stage, "you're

evil," people generate negative stereotypes of the external group, applying these stereotypes to all members of the group and legitimizing violence against them because it is aimed at the "evil group" seen as responsible for all acts of injustice.[23]

Relatedly, the jihadist rhetoric exploits the psychological frustration experienced by people with economic and social difficulties and amplifies their sense of injustice by using imagery and symbols related to a general message of "holy war" against the oppression of Muslims.[24] Colleen LaRose, for example, who was active in jihadist groups using the name "Jihad Jane," described her process of radicalization by noting that she had watched videos of Palestinians being killed by the Israeli army and of Iraqis who were killed by the US military, which had motivated her to act. She claimed that, for a long time, she had been frustrated with her relatives' apathy toward these acts of injustice until she herself felt compelled to take action. Similar to LaRose, some young people see jihad as a "just" cause and over the years, are increasingly drawn into extreme movements and organizations, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.[25]

Another feature that may lead young people down the path to radical Islam is the identity crisis experienced by those who lack a sense of belonging.[26] For example, a French study of young people suspected of being al-Qaeda members found that as they matured—even though they did not grow up in strictly religious families—Islam provided them with a source of identity and self-esteem, having been rejected by French society.[27] Furthermore, many radical youths are motivated by a desire to be superheroes who rise up one day to exact revenge of their enemies, and many others are enchanted by the idea of belonging to a brotherhood of such heroes who seek vengeance on behalf of all Muslims. Others are motivated by the desire to make a name for themselves, and while "routine" crimes and murders generally do not attract much media attention, terrorism is granted a great deal of media coverage. It is interesting to note that such youths tend to have little or no connection with the greater Muslim community. In fact, some have even cut ties with their families and view the mainstream Muslim communities that promote integration as "betraying" the pure Islam.[28]

Movements and organizations such as the Islamic State identify the vulnerability of young people with these sorts of problems as having potential for recruitment and promote what is known as the "virtual umma"—a

communal idea spread by the organization's propaganda machine. These organizations address young people who are not only seeking answers in religion or ideology but also want adventure, a sense of personal empowerment, and belonging. These organizations therefore use identity and community as their main recruitment engine. The violence of jihadist terrorist organizations draw the attention of people living in the community's social, economic, and cultural margins, and this violence slowly but surely moves them to action. Because the young people are not always able to meet their peers in the virtual umma, the internet thus becomes an imagined community. Virtual umma members achieve a sense of spiritual unity nurtured by their participation in shared rituals, regardless of their physical location.[29] The recruiters make them feel needed while also feeding their frustrations with political, economic, and social issues and structuring their Islamist identity as the most important signifier of identity in their lives.[30]

The Chicken and the Egg: Does the Internet Cause Radicalization?

Another question of interest for internet researchers is the direction of causality: Does the internet radicalize people, or are we looking at people who have already been radicalized in the physical world who then seek out internet content that suit their worldview? In other words, do young people commit terrorist attacks because they were exposed to jihadist propaganda on the internet, or do they consume jihadist propaganda on the internet because they have already decided to commit attacks of terrorism?

The case of Roshonara Choudhry, the first British subject convicted of Islamist violence, gives credence to the hypothesis that the internet is, in fact, the factor motivating young people to such action. In 2010, Choudhry, then a student, stabbed a British MP after having watched videos featuring Anwar al-Awlaki, a Muslim cleric, on YouTube. Radicalization theories would refer to her as a pure lone-wolf terrorist, indoctrinated on the internet, lacking any direct connection to a religious institution or extremist group.[31] Choudhry testified that the videos al-Awlaki had posted were the only factor leading to her decision. Importantly, Choudhry is not the only young person to have been affected by the charismatic al-Awlaki: his sermons are among the most popular jihadist contents viewed on the internet.[32]

Nonetheless, most researchers question the significance of exposure to internet content. The skeptics claim that the idea that violence is motivated by extremists online does not pass any empirical test, since only a few of those exposed to this type of propaganda become radicalized. Moreover, it may be that exposure to extreme content increases viewers' resistance to extremism and violence, quite the opposite of what the producers of this content have in mind. According to these researchers, people who become active terrorists are not recruited online. Rather, they are affected by social connections with others in the physical world and only then do they become actively involved, consuming extremist content on social media.[33]

At the time of this writing, researchers have yet to determine if the internet is the cause for young people's radicalization. Seemingly, the internet reaches audiences that are impossible to access by other methods, yet very few studies have shown a direct link between the internet and the radicalization of terrorists. Research demonstrates that the internet is not a substitute for face-to-face encounters and only plays a complementary role in communications and actions in the real world.[34] Instead of thinking of social media as the infrastructure for disseminating the content that is the sole cause for radicalization, social media perhaps should be seen as a tool for ingraining and amplifying violence by transmitting and repeating ideological messages. Even if most terrorist organization members are radicalized though physical encounters with propagandists, members of virtual communities make it possible to entrench radical ideologies.

Furthermore, even if one doubts the importance of disseminating recruitment materials of radical organizations through social media, one cannot deny the effect of the polarizing, toxic, and inciting discourse flooding social media, manifesting people's willingness to adopt extreme social ideas based on hatred and dehumanization of groups and individuals in their communities and legitimizing violent political action against them.

Conclusion

The development of the internet from a platform of static websites to an interactive, multi-channel medium connecting billions of people has been a communications revolution. One unexpected drawback has been the increased spread of vitriolic, racist content, which bypasses the censorship mechanisms that still exists in the traditional media. One's personal internet

sphere can encourage an extreme discourse and provides a refuge for young people with racist inclinations where they can nurture their hatred and violent tendencies and can express positions calling for violence and political acts that, until quite recently, were considered illegitimate. The results can be incitement, violence, and participation in terrorist organizations.

Is the internet guilty of being the cause of radicalization? It seems not. The internet may help to establish such a process and allow it grow, but there is no decisive proof supporting the idea that the internet substitutes for encounters with people in the real world during the radicalization process. However, we must bear in mind that the internet's process of reinforcing, supporting, and amplifying radical positions is significant, as it brings people a step closer to being willing to participate in violent acts and prevents them from being exposed to other influences capable of stopping the radicalization process. This type of support from social media is especially important because the internet serves as a platform for young people's socialization. Therefore, the socialization of young people in more moderate climates is being replaced by political socialization that is much more extreme and inciting.

The concern of the Western security establishment with radical content transmitted on social media has led to many means of trying to filer the most toxic content but with little success. Former Mossad Chief Tamir Pardo noted the futility of these means, when he said that "social media creates new challenges that, to date, no statesman has been able to face or resolve."[35] Indeed, studies on government countermeasures to fight online radicalization indicate that censorship and filters are ineffective as they deal only with the symptoms of radicalization and not its causes. Censorship and filters can be bypassed via the deep web, VPNs, and even gaming platforms. Blocked content reappears online with barely any time lag and the social media giants—Facebook, Twitter, and the like—find it very difficult to filter them out. Recently, hate speech on the internet has become a legal issue in many nations, and prison terms have been meted out to people who have used the internet to spread hate based on religion, race, or sexual orientation. The United Kingdom, France, Denmark, and the Netherlands are leaders in the field of neutralizing some of the toxic discourse online,[36] but to date, there is no evidence that these tools are successful at rendering the internet discourse any less harmful.

Extreme, violent organizations have posed a threat to national security for many decades. But in the modern era—notable for its easy access to lethal weapons, global mobility, and improved global media—the potential of these organizations has grown from regional to global.[37] These developments are the result not only of the availability of radical content but also of changing perceptions of identity as a result of globalization and the information revolution. In a neoliberal era that sanctifies individualism at the expense of communal cohesion, organizations preaching communal ideologies have a tremendous opportunity to attract activists, including those groups preaching hatred, violence, and social polarization. The dissemination of messages of victimization and radicalism is particularly effective when done skillfully via attractive communications platforms. Through the prism of constructivism and national security, a better understanding of technology and especially of the social conditions where technology is assimilated and developed is critical for comprehending the security threats of the twenty-first century.

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