

Winter 2018

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## Recommended Citation

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Radicalization and the Internet

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## Introduction

Since the 9/11 attacks in 2001 the threat of terrorism has become a primary concern for security policy makers. Preventing future attacks and people from joining terrorist groups has become a top priority for the security community. Simultaneous to the rise of multinational, terrorist organizations has been the development and spread of the internet. Today the internet is a significant part of daily life with almost 90% of US adults using the internet (Pew Internet/Broadband, 2018). Most importantly, as will be discussed later, nearly 100% of adults aged 18-29 use the internet and over 80% of both men and women use the internet (Pew Internet/Broadband, 2018). The internet has become a tool for fringe groups, including al-Qaeda or ISIL, to spread their ideology quickly and anonymously, all over the world. This has led to the possibility that an individual no longer has to be in the home country of an extremist group to be radicalized and trained. Instead, individuals could be indoctrinated with ISIL's beliefs from their homes and then commit acts of terror in their own countries without ever having to leave their neighborhood. Though the internet would seem to be an important factor in understanding modern terrorism its role has been relatively unexplored by empirical research.

It has been established that extremist groups take advantage of the benefits that the internet provides, but the theory that someone can be radicalized and then commit an act of terror primarily through contacts on the internet is still controversial and requires more research. One of the major issues in establishing links between radicalization and the internet is that the process of radicalization is complex. It is unknown if the internet can replace personal contact with radicalizing sources or

recruiters for terrorist organizations. This paper will seek to determine the role the internet may play in the radicalization process. Specifically, four characteristics of the internet will be described that have been identified as significant factors in why the internet has become so important to extremist groups. The characteristics that will be discussed are the communicative uses of the internet, the large amount of extremist information available on it, the tendency of the internet to become an echo chamber, and how the internet appeals to demographics that are the most vulnerable to radicalization. These factors may also be able to explain how the internet could be a powerful source of radicalization.

In order to understand these factors this paper will review literature pertaining to each of these four characteristics and discuss their common findings. It will also review literature that has examined the relationship between radicalization and the internet will. Additionally, some data has been collected for this paper and will be used as an example to illustrate how social media platforms work and their tendency to become echo chambers. Although, this paper will not be able to explore causal links between the internet and a willingness to commit terror attacks, it will try to lay a foundation for future research in this area. Additionally, understanding how the internet and social media platforms work, who uses them, and for what purposes is instrumental in developing anti-terrorism and de-radicalization programs that are actually effective.

The data that was collected for this paper came from looking at what channels YouTube recommended after viewing a specific channel. This will be used as an example to illustrate how the algorithms of social media sites such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter determine what content a person sees and how this can naturally

create the conditions of an echo chamber. This data was collected by starting with an arbitrarily chosen political YouTube channel, in this case one that politically leaned right, and then recording what other channels YouTube claims are recommended or related to the original channel. The second set of channels is then visited and the channels that they recommended was then recorded. This process was repeated until there were four tiers of channels that have been recommended, and about 400 recommendations were recorded. However, some channels were recommended multiple times, so after accounting for repeated channels this came down to about 90 unique channels. All the channels were visited and their content analyzed to determine their partisan lean. A channel was either categorized as either right leaning, left leaning, or none if it did not have any political content. It should be noted that this data was selected as a convenient way to demonstrate how social media sites work. The echo chamber effects that it will be used to illustrate can apply to any group or political affiliation and can occur on most social media platforms.

### **Theories of Radicalization**

Terms like radicalization, extremists, and terrorism are often used in the media and academically but are not well defined, and their meanings will often vary depending on the context in which they are used. In general the term radicalization is used interchangeably with extremism and is contrasted with more moderate positions in a political party or organization (Sedgwick, 2010, pg. 481). However, this definition is very broad and may group terrorists with non-violent members of a political organization. Thus, the definition is usually qualified by emphasizing that radicalization is the willingness to use illegal or violent actions for political purposes (Sedgwick, 2010, pg.

483). For the purposes of this paper the definition will use the definition of radicalization as “the process (or processes) whereby individuals of groups come to approve of and (ultimately) participate in the use of violence for political aims” (Neumann, 2010, pg. 12). This paper will also consider radicalization and extremism as terms describing two separate ideas. Extremism will be considered beliefs that run counter to the mainstream views of society. In the United States these are mainly views that advocate against democracy, human rights, and promote racial or religious supremacy (Neumann, 2010, pg. 12). In general, radicalization could be seen as the process of acquiring extremist beliefs and using violence to achieve goals based on these beliefs (Borum, 2011, Extremism I, pg. 9). This paper will also define terrorism as “premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against noncombatant targets by a subnational or clandestine agents, usually intended to influence an audience” (Weimann, 2006, pg. 20). It is important to note that hypothetically, not all radicalized individuals will become terrorists, but this paper will assume that most terrorists have been radicalized to some degree. This paper will also use extremist group and terrorist group interchangeably due to the assumption that the underlying reasons people join both is similar, but it should be noted that an extremist group may not actually commit terrorist acts. Future research that tries to link the internet and committing acts of terror should take into account this distinction.

It is also important to understand the basic theories that have been proposed as to what the process of radicalization looks like. Though the process of radicalization has been studied for decades, it still remains poorly understood (Borum, 2011, Extremism I, pg. 15). Borum identified three main categories of general theories of radicalization

developed in the social sciences; Social Movement Theory (SMT), Social Psychology (SP), and Conversion Theory (CT). SMT proposes that radicalization results when an individual is socialized over time to become part of a group that wants to change some element of the current structure of society. Individuals therefore become radicalized not in isolation but through interacting with a community that has already been radicalized (Borum, 2011, Extremism I pg. 17). SP is concerned with the relationships between individuals, how people influence each other, and how groups function. SP notes some important lessons that may later help to explain some characteristics of the internet. First, groups have a tendency to generate extremism and cause an individual's beliefs to become more extreme over time (Borum, 2011, Extremism I pg. 20). Secondly, people will join groups with the hope of getting some benefit from them such as a sense of purpose or basic survival needs (food, shelter, etc.) (Borum, 2011, Extremism I pg. 21). Additionally, groups have a tendency to become more extreme over time as members compete to be more ideologically pure and the group tries to stand out as more committed or devout than other groups (Borum, 2011, Extremism I, pg. 22). Lastly, CT suggests that people become radicalized through a process by which they will seek out and join an extremist group as a solution to a major disruption in their lives. CT theorists also suggest that "relationships, rituals, rhetoric, and roles interact and reinforce one another (Borum, 2011, Extremism I, pg. 23)."

Law enforcement groups have developed theories that focus more on Islamic terrorist groups and attempt to define the radicalization process in terms of more concrete steps. Borum proposed a four stage model that attempted to explain how social grievance progress to hatred for a specific group and then violence is justified

(2011, Extremism II, pg. 38-39). The steps are that first an individual of group feels that their social conditions are not right, then they believe that these conditions are unfair. Next they identify another group that they believe is the source of these conditions, and then justify violence by labelling this group as evil (Borum, 2011, Extremism II, pg. 39). This model follows what is commonly called the relative deprivation model. Relative deprivation emphasizes that groups may turn to violence if they feel that they are being unjustly deprived of certain needs or freedoms (Crossett and Spitaletta, 2010, pg. 14). The New York Police Department developed a model in which a person first is exposed to Salafi-jihadi beliefs, then explores and adopts these beliefs. Next they are further indoctrinated through continued exposure to extremist beliefs and communities. Finally, they reach an end stage where commitment themselves to the cause and do whatever it takes to achieve their goals (Borum, 2011, Extremism II, pg. 41). Precht created a similar model for the Danish government but his final stage of the process was committing or planning acts of terror. He also noted that homegrown terrorism is often rooted in issues of belonging, identity, group dynamics, and values, and that religion is just a vehicle to obtain these goals, and not a cause of radicalization itself (Borum, 2011, Extremism II, pg. 42-43). This paper will not focus on what theory is correct but will link similar themes present in all of them and how the internet allows the radicalization process to progress.

### **Relationship Between Extremist Groups and the Internet**

One of the first major studies on the relationship between extremist groups and the internet was Gabriel Weimann's 2006 book "Terror on the Internet." This book attempted to describe how Terrorist groups use the internet and how the role of the

internet has changed from the 1990s to the mid-2000s. Weimann found that the late 1990s and early 2000s saw a rapid expansion in the presence of terrorist groups on the internet. Of the groups designated as terrorist groups by the US, less than half had an online presence in 1998. However, the next year nearly all had an established internet presence. By 2005 there were over 4,000 websites dedicated to terrorist organizations (Weimann, 2006, pg. 15). Weimann found that the internet offered several advantages to terrorist organizations. These include little regulation, anonymity, potentially large audiences, and the low cost of maintaining a presence on the internet (Weimann, 2006, pg. 30). There was also evidence that the rise of the internet had also aided the evolution of the structure of terrorist organizations. In the past terrorist groups had a hierarchical structure with clearly defined leaders, such as the core of al-Qaeda. However, after the 2001 US invasion of Afghanistan, terrorist groups had begun to change into loosely connected networks of terrorist cells (Weimann, 2006, pg. 114-115). In this new structure there is no clear central leadership, and instead the organization is broken into regional branches that have significant autonomy. This decentralization of terrorist organizations makes it more difficult to destroy these groups (Weimann, 2006, pg. 114-115). The internet makes it very easy for separate groups to communicate and coordinate with each other. It also allows these groups access to a larger audience in order to gain recruits.

A study by the RAND Corporation looked at the role the internet had in the radicalization of 15 terrorists in the United Kingdom (Behr et al, 2013, pg. xi), and attempted to test five hypothesis

1. The internet creates more opportunities to become radicalized

2. The internet acts as an 'echo chamber': a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by other like-minded individuals
3. The internet accelerates the process of radicalization
4. The internet allows radicalization to occur without physical contact
5. The internet increases opportunities for self-radicalization

The RAND study found a number of interesting things. First, the internet has had a role in creating more opportunities to be radicalized (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 18). The internet has broken down geographic and social boundaries and allows radicalizing content to reach a larger number of people than traditional radicalizing methods would. For example, women or introverted individuals, who can often be socially isolated from contact with extremism, could now interact with extremists because of the anonymity afforded by the internet (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 18). In all cases studied the internet was also an important source of information and communication with other extremists.

The RAND study also found that the internet had a tendency to act as an echo chamber. Radicalized individuals tended to only view information that confirmed their beliefs and many did not engage in views that challenged their own (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 18-19). Additionally, being surrounded by like-minded individuals created an illusion that the radicalized individual's beliefs were normal and were shared by the rest community (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 27). However, the study could not determine if the internet accelerated the radicalizing process, or replaced other sources of radicalization. The internet may facilitate the radicalization process but that may not mean that it causes the process to go faster than normal (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 28). Finally, the RAND study did not find any conclusive evidence that the internet allows an individual

to become self-radicalized. All cases had some offline factor that may have caused them to be radicalized such as family members, friends, contact with a recruiter, or some other variable (Behr et al, 2013, pg. 29-30).

Another study by Daniel Koehler interviewed former German right wing extremists to see the role the internet played in their radicalization process. One of the most important properties of the internet was that it was an inexpensive way for members of the movement to communicate with each other and organize meetings. According to one interviewee 70 to 80 percent of networking was done through the internet (Koehler, 2014, pg. 118). The internet also provided an important way to distribute banned music and literature. Koehler also found that the internet helped the ideology of extremists to adapt and be updated for new audiences (2014, pg. 120). This was due to the fact that a new generation of members could participate in online discussions and directly contribute to the ideology of the movement. This gave even the lowest member of the movement the feeling that they could directly influence their movement and shape its beliefs.

Koehler also found that the internet gave new members the perception that the movement was large and powerful enough to achieve its goals even if it was actually very small in reality, similar to the findings of the RAND study. New members also had the opportunity to get in contact with veteran members and become motivated to become further involved in activities both online and offline (Koehler, 2014, pg. 121). One interviewee said explicitly, "I felt, this is a big thing. I thought, if I make a name for myself in chat rooms, etc., I can make it outside as well, become part of the movement, and really change something" (Koehler, 2014, pg. 121). This sentiment is significant

since it mirrors some of the social theories for radicalization which emphasized that people join extremist groups to find a purpose in life and gain some personal benefit. The social movement theories would emphasize that the ability to interact with each other helps create a cohesive community that then furthers radicalization. New members would be indoctrinated into the movement over time as they interact with the online community. Radicalization through the internet can therefore be seen not as an isolated process, but instead as a process of an individual being socialized into an already radicalized community.

### **Demographics of the Internet**

The first characteristic of the internet that will be analyzed is what are the demographics of people who have been radicalized and how do they compare to the demographics internet users. Robert A. Pape collected data on 462 suicide attackers from 1980 to 2003 and were members of various terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda or the Tamil Tigers. He found that nearly 55% of suicide attackers were between 19 and 23 years old (Pape, 2005, pg. 207). Almost 33% of the attackers were over 24 while only 13% were aged between 15 and 18 (Pape, 2005, pg.207). He also found that almost 85% of suicide bombers were male (Pape, 2005, pg. 208). Another significant finding was that the vast majority of male suicide bombers, over 60%, were aged 19-23 years old (Pape, 2005, pg. 210). Borum's survey of empirical research on radicalization found similar results. In nearly all the studies the average age of the terrorists was in the mid-twenties. Most were males, and they were distributed over a wide range of social classes and education levels (Borum, 2011, Extremism II, pg. 47-49). This suggests that people in their teens and twenties seem to be the most likely to join extremist groups,

and that men in this age range are especially vulnerable to being radicalized. This is significant because, as mentioned above, nearly 100% of people in this age range have access to the internet.

The introduction of social media greatly expanded the platforms that extremist organizations have to spread their message to this target demographic. Sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram allow an organization to reach a larger, more mainstream audience that is largely young adults. In 2008 only about 25% of US adults used at least one social media site, however, that number has risen to almost 70% by 2018 (Pew Social Media, 2018). Nearly 88% of 18-29 year olds use at least one social media site (Pew Social Media, 2018). The prevalence of extremist content discussed below on YouTube is especially notable given that over 90% of 18-29 year olds and 75% of males use that site (Pew Social Media, 2018). This all means that extremist messages on the internet could easily reach the demographics that are most likely to be radicalized or join a terrorist organization.

### **Echo Chamber Effects**

Looking at the recommended YouTube channel data that was collected a few interesting facts stand out. The channel initially chosen was one owned by Stefan Molyneux, a right wing author, podcaster, and YouTuber. Eleven channels were said to be related by the YouTube algorithm and all of them were also had a right-leaning partisanship. Following the YouTube recommendations from one channel to the others eventually got 393 recommendations, most of these were repeated recommendations, so only 96 different channels were actually recommended. However, some of these

channels are owned by the same person so the total was narrowed down to only about 82 different YouTubers that were recommended. What this means is that one channel would recommend another channel, and this new channel would then also recommend the previous channel. The result was that a small group of channels were constantly linking to each other and therefore inflate their representation in the sample. This created something similar to an echo chamber where only ten different channels accounted for almost half of the 393 recommendations, all of which had a right leaning partisanship. An individual could therefore be exposed to the beliefs of only a small group of similar channels.

Table of the ten channels recommended the most times

Number of times recommended	Name of channel	Partisan affiliation
26	Fox News	Right
23	The Daily Wire	Right
21	The Thinkery	Right
20	Stefan Molyneux	Right
20	StevenCrowder	Right
20	Styxhexenhammer666	Right
19	Sargon of Akkad	Right
13	Black Pigeon Speaks	Right
12	Vee	Right
11	Rebel Media	Right

These high numbers of similar recommendations are due to the nature of the YouTube recommendation algorithms. YouTube, and other social media platforms, are designed to recommend videos or channels that are similar in content to what a user has already seen under the assumption that this content is what they like and that they would want to see more. Therefore, viewing a right wing channel will result in more

similar channels being recommended. This would most likely also occur for any channel devoted to a certain topic, or a specific ideology. The consequence is that someone could only be exposed to content that promotes their own beliefs and constantly shield them from opposing viewpoints. This could cause a viewer to become part of this echo chamber that has been created by a small group of YouTube channels.

It should also be noted that these channels are not small and obscure. Many have hundreds of thousands of subscribers and have videos with millions of views. For instance, the Molyneux channel that was started with has over 800,000 subscribers. This large audience size is especially important because it means that there is a possibility for a large number of people that could be caught in this specific echo chamber. This is even more concerning considering that some of the channels that were recommended promote racist or white supremacist views and that YouTube is used by demographics that are the most likely to be radicalized by these views. The fact that fringe or extremist beliefs can be introduced alongside more mainstream beliefs adds legitimacy to them and can cause them to spread easily and cause the group to become more extreme due to the nature of the echo chamber. Social psychology theory found that groups tend to get more extreme over time and a small group of YouTubers should be no exception. These YouTubers can also create a community similar to what can develop in forums. Most of these YouTubers also have Twitter and Facebook accounts that allow them to directly interact with each other and with the supporters. Many can also livestream discussions with each other that can create an intimate community between them and their fans. SMT suggests that this community would undergo a radicalization process similar to the discussion forums studied by Koehler.

Therefore, the most dangerous effect of the echo chamber is its tendency to increase in radicalism as time goes by. In the YouTube data this can be seen in the shift from mainstream conservative views of Fox News and Steven Crowder to more explicit far right and white supremacist views are expressed from channels like Styxhexenhammer666 and Black Pigeon Speaks. The study by Koehler found that it was possible to make profit off of the members of a movement but only if the vendor was radical enough to maintain the loyalty of their customers (2014, pg. 122). YouTubers primarily make money off ad revenue or donation sites like Patreon. Sargon of Akkad, for example, has 3,580 patrons of Patreon generating about \$12,000 a month in revenue. However, ad revenue and donations only grow if people actually watch the YouTube videos. This means that to make money a content creator must make videos that become popular enough to cause the YouTube recommendation algorithms to promote their content to new viewers. This could encourage YouTubers to make more extreme or clickbait content to make the videos more popular. This is similar to descriptions given by social psychologists to explain why groups become more radicalized. Specifically, competition between groups over a finite support base will drive them to become more extreme and therefore seem like the more legitimate group.

Cass Sunstein identified the trend where groups of like-minded individuals that are insulated from alternative views will become more extreme as group polarization (2001). This is especially noticeable on internet groups since very few of sites with an identifiable point of view will link to sites with opposing viewpoints, but will instead promote other sites with the same viewpoints (Sunstein, 2001). Sunstein identified two possible reasons for why groups of people will become more radicalized. One reason

may be that members start to identify with the group and in relation to the dominant beliefs of the group (Sunstein, 2001). Another reason is that individuals may want to be seen more favorably and will therefore modify their beliefs to align with what is most popular in the group (Sunstein, 2001). The internet has played a major role in allowing like-minded people to communicate with each other and reinforce their views and has allowed isolated individuals to unite around their shared beliefs (Sunstein, 2001).

A study of Neo-Nazi online discussion forums found a similar trend in increasing radicalism as time went by. For example, a thread was created on a white supremacist website that featured an opinion poll about the site member's racial attitudes. The poll found that 65% of the members supported separating or segregating people by race (Wojcieszak, 2010, pg. 644). However, the study analyzed the comments and found that they were filled with the most extreme members who advocated for complete extermination of non-whites. These commenters posted things such as "I voted for extermination. Solves the problem completely" or "We must purify our world" (Wojcieszak, 2010, pg. 644). Other commenters were eventually persuaded to switch their support from separation to extermination by these comments and left responses like "The more I think about the more I agree [with extermination]" (Wojcieszak, 2010, pg. 644). Separation would have a temporary effect..." Another user responded with "just kill them all then" when he learned that sterilization of non-whites would be very expensive (Wojcieszak, 2010, g. 644). This study also found that dissenting views within the echo chamber merely reinforced the beliefs of its members (Wojcieszak, 2010, pg. 647). Posters on white nationalist forums say that opposing arguments strengthen their white nationalist beliefs because these arguments are revealed to be

nonsense or that people with opposing views seem to not know what they are talking about or have views that are not actually based on reason (Wojcieszak, 2010, g. 647). In the end, there seems to be a positive correlation between extremism and forums or social networks that are dominated by people with similar beliefs (Wojcieszak, 2010, pg. 649). It can also be observed that groups on the internet can easily grow more extreme and create echo chambers that could radicalize some of their members.

### **Communicative Uses of the Internet**

The importance of the internet was quickly realized by prominent members of terrorist groups like al-Qaeda. Anwar al-Awlaki was an America imam that played a prominent role in developing the ideology of al-Qaeda and recruiting new members. He recognized that the internet could be a useful means of spreading al-Qaeda's message and directed his followers to create websites devoted to news about jihadist activities, jihadist literature, and urged the importance of founding what he called an internet mujahedeen (Rudner, 2017, pg. 11). The internet is extremely useful for spreading information because the digitalization of material means that a document can be infinitely copied and spread repeatedly without any loss in quality or content (Rudner, 2017, g. 12). Every person in the world, theoretically, can have access to the exact same literature as long as they have access to the internet. This meant that extremists groups now had a global network to spread information and propaganda. The internet has also allowed groups like al-Qaeda to expand their reach outside the Middle East and radicalize Muslim communities in Europe or the United States (Rudner, 2017, pg. 12). Moving extremist discourse to chat rooms, social media, and forums has also appealed to young people who can establish contacts and other radicalized individuals,

but do not have access to the more traditional centers for radicalization (Rudner, 2017, pg. 15).

Jytte Klausen looked at the Twitter accounts of 59 Westerner fighters operating in Syria (2015, pg. 5). She found that the jihadists used social media for the same purposes as discussion forums were used in the early 2000s (Klausen, 2015, pg. 10). In general, they used Twitter for instruction on religious matters, reporting on the battles and daily life in Syria, and as a means of communicating with their followers and other fighters (Klausen, 2015, pg. 10-11). Pictures and videos also played an important role in the use of social media as a means of spreading propaganda (Klausen, 2015, pg. 12-13). Pictures are used to show fighters living happy lives in Syria and the comradery that exists between groups of fighters. Images are also used to glorify martyrs and vilify dead enemies (Klausen, 2015, pg. 13).

The internet's benefit as a means of communication therefore extends beyond just allowing two extremists to talk to each other or to share files. The internet is also very useful means of spreading propaganda both visually and in text. Some estimates have suggested that there may be as many as 46,000 twitter accounts that support ISIL and each account can easily purchase thousands of followers to boost their visibility and importance (Cohen, 2015). Jenkins described terrorism as a theatrical act that is designed to attract coverage from the media and the public (Jenkins, 1974, pg. 4). Before, this meant that terrorist groups had to rely on the media to spread their message and report their activities. Now, with the internet, an extremist group can create and distribute its own propaganda without relying on other outlets. Digital media

production companies can produce professional and high grade videos and advertisements that promote ISIL's ideology (Cohen, 2015).

Using Twitter to document their daily lives in Syria allows fighters and followers to form bonds that mimic being close friends. A young person can see someone just like them out fighting for their cause and enjoying their life. This message directly appeals to young people looking for a purpose in life. Social media can therefore be a powerful means of forming groups of easily radicalized individuals who can be drafted into the ranks of an extremist network. Since these twitter accounts are run by extremist propagandists they will only contain a biased information. Individuals following these accounts are therefore only going to see this propaganda and probably have other similar accounts recommended to them by Twitter. This therefore creates a similar echo chamber that is intimately tied to an extremist group. Social media then becomes a means of creating echo chambers that are free and easily accessible to the millions of people.

### **Availability of Information on the Internet**

The other main benefit the internet has had for radicalization is the large amount of information that is easily available to an individual. The Islamic States online magazine Dabiq can be found in its entirety online. Just searching the term Dabiq magazine on google yields 104,000 results. Additionally, the full texts of the anti-Semitic Protocols of Zion or the Turner Diaries, a Neo-Nazi book, can be easily found by online. A Google search of the term "bomb making" will yield over 100 million results, and books on how to make explosives like the Anarchist Cookbook can be purchased on

Amazon. Thus, not only is the propaganda for extremist groups readily available but material that would aid individuals willing to commit a terrorist act is also widely available.

Anne Stenersen's study examined how terrorist groups use the internet to spread information. She found that there was a large amount of instructional material available online, much of it coming from sources like military field manuals or were written by jihadi fighters in Afghanistan. The most common subjects were weaponry, explosives, guerilla warfare tactics, and physical training (Stenersen, 2008), Pg. 217). Islamic terrorist groups also began compiling information into one document. For example, the oldest is the 1,500 page Encyclopedia of Jihad that was compiled from manuals used by Arab fighters in Afghanistan. This document covers a wide range of topics from recruiting and organization to instructions on assassination and manufacturing explosives (Stenersen, 2008, pg. 219). Other material produced by extremists include a nearly 10,000 page instruction manual for jihadist groups, and a large amount of videos and periodicals that provide instruction and training for potential terrorists (Stenersen, 2008, pg. 219).

The wide availability of information and propaganda, and the ability to directly communicate with Social media is also very useful for recruiting new members. Al-Shabaab was well known for its sophisticated social media presence that targeted Somalis living in the United States and Canada in the attempt to get them to come and fight in Somalia (Rudner, 2017, pg. 16). This use of recruiting members all over the world raises a significant threat of lone wolf terrorism to countries like the United States. The internet has significantly raise the threat of lone wolf terrorism because it is now

possible for an individual to be radicalized and trained at their own home. This raises the prospect that someone could carry out an attack without having traveled to the Middle East to train or meeting recruiters in person. For example, in December 2014 al Qaeda's online magazine even promoted individual acts of terror by providing detailed instructions on how to make undetectable bombs and how to place them on airplanes (Rudner, 2017, pg. 18). This means that al Qaeda could get its supporters to plant bombs on planes without having to directly teach them how to do so.

### **The Internet's Role in the Radicalization Process**

All the elements discussed can be used to paint a picture of the internet's role in radicalizing individuals. Though the effects of the internet may not be enough to cause someone to commit terrorist acts it still can facilitate their adoption of extremist beliefs that can be used to justify and inspire acts of terror. The biggest advantage the internet has for extremist groups is its ability to spread information and propaganda. Before the internet, groups like al-Qaeda would have to create physical recordings of extremist preachers or print physical copies of books and pamphlets. These copies would then have to be concealed, shipped, and distributed in person to potential recruits. Spreading a group's message was limited to the amount of paper or tapes available and could be spread without being intercepted by state authorities. The internet completely changed the way and amount of information that can be spread. Now one person with a computer can create scans of literature, their own books, or digital recordings and upload one copy that can be seen by anyone with internet access. A document can be uploaded to a website and then copied as many times as is needed and instantly sent to or downloaded by anyone who wants to see it.

The internet therefore allows an individual to have access to a vast amount of information. Groups like al-Qaeda have compiled thousands of pages of information on everything from theological doctrines to bomb making. Books on how to make any kind of weapon or explosives can be found with a simple google search. Even instructions on how to make chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons can be found somewhere on the internet. Of course having instructions for these weapons doesn't replace the skill and resources necessary to actually make and use them. This means that for the average radicalized individual, the internet probably is best for accessing an extremist group's beliefs and doctrines. Viewing web publications or websites that spread extremist beliefs are probably have more impact on the radicalization process than the copious amount of training manuals on terrorism. However, the fact that someone could hypothetically plan and carry out a terrorist attack solely using information found online does greatly increase the threat of lone wolf terrorism compared to the days before the internet.

Another role the internet plays in the radicalization process is its use as a means of communication between members of an extremist group. The internet radically changed the way extremist groups can communicate, recruit, and run their organizations. Before, the members of an extremist group had to meet in person with each other or potential members. This significantly increased the chances of being caught by authorities and limited the amount of people that could be contact and the range that a group could operate in. Now, people all over the world can talk with each other instantly on social media platforms. New recruiters can talk to potential recruits instantly from anywhere in the world through discussion forums or websites like

Facebook and Twitter. Using the internet also has the benefit of providing an anonymous space for extremist organizations. Social media apps like Yik Yak, Whisper, and Kik are all anonymous which makes them very useful for recruiting and communications. People can interact with fighters and view a glamorized version of their lives. This serves as a way to inspire potential recruits and convince them that fighting in the Middle East is a fulfilling and adventurous lifestyle. Internet forums also often allow users to post things anonymously and their accounts need little personal information. These features greatly reduce the risk of getting caught and can effectively hid their activities from public or governmental view.

### **Conclusion**

These are some of the ways the internet has benefitted extremist groups, but it is only part of the reasons that the internet has made radicalization easier. Another major advantage the internet has for radicalization is its tendency to act as an echo chamber. Forums and social media sites are designed to promote certain beliefs and attract only the people who have those beliefs. For example, a white supremacist forum is obviously designed for white supremacists and to promote those beliefs. Thus, an individual will only be exposed to similar beliefs and will be isolated from opposing ideas. The nature of the programming that recommends similar content rewards hyperbolic and clickbait content in order to stand out in the large amount of content. This means that to become more visible in a community an individual must become more extreme. Therefore, members of an extremist forum will be exposed to increasingly extreme beliefs and be further radicalized. Individuals with opposing viewpoints can be suppressed by other members or banned by moderators. An individual can get a steady stream of extremist

content from their computer simply by watching YouTube videos are participating in forums.

This means that the internet is both used by extremist groups and can make the radicalization process easier. However, this may not mean that individuals are actually being radicalized online. Certainly extremist content on the internet can reach the most vulnerable demographics. The internet is available in some form to millions of people and especially to nearly all people in western and industrialized societies. The internet can be accessed in homes, public buildings, schools, and in internet cafes. Young people in their teens and twenties are the most likely to be radicalized, and are also the most likely to use social media and the internet. Males in this age range are more likely to be radicalized and also are very likely to use the anonymous discussion forums that are most useful to extremists. Therefore, not only is the internet good at spreading extremist messages and radicalizing individuals, but it is also very good at reaching the people most receptive to those messages and most vulnerable to the radicalization process.

It is also important to understand how the various theories pertaining to radicalization can help explain the social dynamics of online groups. According to Social Movement Theories, individuals will become radicalized by interacting with online communities. If a community is radicalized then it can radicalize new members over time. Social Psychology suggests that these groups would also become more radicalized over time. Therefore, not only will new members be radicalized, but existing members will become even more extreme which then influences the beliefs of the new members. Social Psychology also suggests that this increasing radicalization is partly

caused by competition between members to be seen as the more ideologically pure or the most devoted members of the community. This is especially important for the internet where a content creator's visibility is dependent on website programming that favors individuals who can get the most viewers. Finally, Conversion Theory emphasizes that the relationships and repeated interaction will reinforce the radicalization process.

All of these factors combine to potentially create a threat to national security. The fact that the internet makes it easier for an individual to become radicalized, work with a terrorist group, and learn the skills to commit an act of terrorism could lead to an increase in terrorism. For the United States this means that terrorists could spring up in the US without any warning or direct contact with terrorist groups in the Middle East. The spread of the internet could mean that lone wolf terrorism starts to replace organized acts in the West. However, there is a significant difference between having extremist beliefs and actually attempting to kill people. Individuals may sympathize with terrorist groups but will not actually take part in terrorist activities. The RAND study looked at a group of terrorists and found that though the internet played a role in radicalizing them they still had in person contact with sources of radicalization such as family, friends, or recruiters. Therefore the internet may lack key variables that would cause someone to cross the line into terrorism. What these variables are and how the role the internet has in driving someone to commit acts of terror should be important questions for future research, but are outside the scope of this paper. What this research does do is demonstrate that the internet has important characteristics that not

only facilitate the radicalization process, but also exposes larger and more susceptible audiences to this process.

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