



Surfing the Jihadisphere

How the Internet can Facilitate
Violent Radicalisation

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This paper presents a brief exploration into the potential for the internet to facilitate radicalisation into violent extremism. By examining the social processes, environments, and behavioural patterns thought to underpin this process, it explores the ardent enthusiasm of extremists to exploit communicative innovations in order to reach larger audiences quickly, cheaply, and anonymously. This paper highlights how progressive technologies and modern internet landscapes have transformed the way people engage with and disseminate information, and how such developments have created new types of social arena, promoting the effortless production, consumption, and re-distribution of extremist content. I shall argue that emergent online environments have also helped cultivate the networks, relationships, and bonds argued to be prerequisites to violent radicalisation. Not only by promoting and encouraging increasingly extremist frames, but also by potentially illustrating, validating, and reinforcing offline narratives, interactions, and experiences. Reference will be made to relevant case studies throughout, as well as applicable paradigms from social science, examining conceptions of online communities and social deviance. In concluding, many of the *security-vs-liberty* challenges this poses for policymakers, as well as the need for cross-disciplinary collaboration in formulating an integrative understanding of online radicalisation, shall be discussed. In doing so, I seek to stimulate further analytic research and debate within this new and burgeoning field of security studies, whilst simultaneously encouraging theoretically informed, research driven, countermeasures seeking to combat radicalisation and, ultimately, reduce terrorism.

In addition to demarcating its particular remit, at this preliminary stage it is important to acknowledge this paper's restrictions and limitations when approaching such expansive topics¹. Firstly, distinguishing 'online radicalisation', as discussed here, from 'cyber-terrorism' is essential. The fundamental distinction being the former concentrates on the communicative, cognitive, function of the internet, the latter on the utility of the internet as a weapon in its own right. Similarly, this paper does not tackle the direct operational use of the internet to plan terrorist acts. Secondly, although many themes articulated here have broader validity and application, this paper's primary focus is Islamist fundamentalism and jihadist online radicalisation, as such caution should be exercised in making wider generalisations or drawing direct parallels with other extremist groups. Finally, whilst reference shall be made to '*the internet*', in its strictest technical sense, much of what follows concerns the '*World Wide Web*' (W3), and not the internet per se. Therefore, in order to address the question adequately, and avoid being ensnared by abstract definitional quagmires debating controversial terms, it is essential to deploy solid working definitions from the outset. This paper therefore takes Berners-Lee's definition of 'W3' as "the universe of network-accessible information, resources and users on the

¹ Shipman, (1997)

Internet... using Hypertext-Transfer-Protocol”, accessible via software browsers². Where used, ‘cyberspace’ refers to Stevens³ depiction of the “total landscape of technology mediated communication”. It takes Hoffman’s⁴ definition of ‘terrorism’ as “the deliberate creation and exploitation of fear through violence, or the threat of violence, in the pursuit of political change”. It utilises Neumann’s⁵ account of ‘violent extremism’ as the use of violence to realise extreme “political ideologies that are opposed to a society’s core (constitutional) values and principles”. It takes ‘violent radicalisation’ as describing “a process in which radical ideas are accompanied by the development of a willingness to directly support or engage in violent acts”⁶.

The information revolution and the exponential rise of the internet is a global phenomenon which, alongside other manifestations of globalisation and late modernity, will likely come to define our period of human history as the enlightenment or industrial revolution has previous centuries⁷. It has transformed the way people communicate, connect, work, socialise, shop, identify and place themselves in increasingly ‘glocal’ societies⁸. Technological innovations saw internet penetration increase from 16 million to 2.2 billion from 1995–2011, bringing about huge advancements in speed and accessibility, as well as the systems and virtual architecture that construct and sustain cyberspace⁹. Apart from some remote regions of Africa and Asia, internet penetration is not limited to particular demographics or certain social movements. We should not be surprised, therefore, that terrorist groups, and especially al-Qaeda, are utilising cyberspace to reach audiences, self publicise, release propaganda, rally support, raise funds, and mobilise activists¹⁰. Indeed, Osama bin Laden’s successor, Ayman al-Zawahiri, stated over a decade ago the need to “get our messages across to the masses....through the use of the internet!”¹¹

Early literature concerning terrorism online is particularly security centric in outlook, focusing on technical target-hardening, protecting vulnerabilities, and potential cyber-warfare capabilities¹². Despite moral panics of an inevitable “electronic pearl harbour”¹³, with perhaps the exception of the Tamil Tigers’ disruption of Sri Lankan communications, and Estonia’s accusations of a Russian state sponsored cyber-attack in 2007, no unequivocal case of cyber-terrorism has occurred¹⁴. The distinctly low-tech nature of 9/11 demonstrated traditional methods of terroristic violence had altered little, and scholarly focus shifted toward non-technical analysis¹⁵, with a growing interest in how extremists communicated and interacted online “just like everyone else”¹⁶. Preeminent contributions in this regard, such as those from Conway¹⁷ and Chen *et al*¹⁸, have concentrated on meticulous website content-analysis. Whether dedicated to terrorist groups, theologians or

² Berners-Lee, (2001)

³ Stevens & Neumann, (2009:10)

⁴ Hoffman, (2006:40)

⁵ Neumann & Rogers, (2007:12-13)

⁶ Dalgard & Neilson, (2010:178)

⁷ Bauman, (2000)

⁸ Roudometof, (2005);Appadurai, (1990);Giddens, (1991)

⁹ IWS, (2012);Knight, (2003:15);Ahlgren, (2005);Edensor, (2001)

¹⁰ Stevens & Neumann, (2009:5)

¹¹ Al-Zawahiri, (2001)

¹² Laqueur, (2000);Denning, (2005);Furnell & Warren, (1999);Cohen, (2002)

¹³ Schwartau, (1996)

¹⁴ Hayward, (1997)

¹⁵ Stephens & Baker, (2006);Weimann, (2006);Conway, (2004);Thomas, (2003;2005)

¹⁶ New, (2004)

¹⁷ Conway, (2005)

¹⁸ Chen *et al.* (2005;2006)

ideologues, commemorating martyrs and fighters, or cataloguing the musings of radical commentators, websites remained the predominant form of extremist online representation throughout the 1990s and early 2000s¹⁹.

In the last decade however, the dominance the 'official website' has been supplemented and surpassed by an array of quasi-official, independent, message forums and chatrooms. Facilitated by forum administrators, often grassroots sympathisers themselves, members are largely responsible for topics discussed, material posted, and information shared. Reliance on the hosted locality of media as testament to its authenticity has also changed, adopting 'packet systems' where data concerning the origin, content, producer, and intended destination/audience of the 'parcel' is integrated into each standalone media package²⁰. Websites benefit from being sanctioned, direct, single channels of communication, but are vulnerable by this very static nature and, if compromised, the re-establishment of contact with audiences and the re-circulation of material can be difficult. Message forums are resilient, both in number and by seldom producing the content they dispense, operating as podiums for terrorist organisations, or as marketplaces for the exchange of extremist media content²¹.

In the case of Islamist militancy, these developments have resulted in the emergence of distinct jihadist media production and distribution entities (MPDEs), such as Al-Sahab, Al-Fajr and Global Islamic Media Front, which imitate mainstream news agency templates in their attempts to portray credibility and candour. The individualised logos, styling, and branding of media packets by MPDEs allow for the immediate identification of their output by the end user, as a means of assessing the source, regional battlefield, and authenticity of material²². Varying degrees of credibility, authority, and status are similarly attached to the forums and chatrooms themselves, often dependent upon the presence of influential contributors or figureheads, privileged access to new content, or being used as platforms to release official statements for specific factions or groups²³.

The evolution of such self-sustaining, resilient, stable infrastructures, MPDEs, and encoded, standalone propaganda packets, are products of advancing computer mediated communication (CMC) capabilities and are associated with prevailing W3 trends more generally. The sharing, swapping, and reposting of material, combined with increasing user generated content, multi-channelled communication, and group interaction, is termed *Web 2.0* and is typified by the mainstream social media website Twitter. An understanding of such CMC developments should be viewed as essential to appreciating contemporary online social environments, and how virtual relationships and encounters have evolved. Sageman²⁴ describes radicalisation as predominately consisting of psycho-social processes, dependent upon interaction and socialisation within small clandestine 'cliques'. Personal attachments, networks, and relationships facilitate the introduction, internalisation, and reproduction of extremist attitudes, values and beliefs. New communicative platforms and Web 2.0, or what the al-Qaeda affiliated Al-Boraq Media Institute²⁵ dub jihadist "media exuberance", have

¹⁹ Musawi, (2010:4-6)

²⁰ Ramsay, (2008:7)

²¹ *ibid.*, (2008:7-8)

²² Kimmage, (2008:2-6)

²³ Musawi, (2010:8-12)

²⁴ Sageman, (2004;2008)

²⁵ Al-Boraq, (2006)

direct implications for violent radicalisation, as they help forge these networks, and foster the spread extremist content in cyberspace.

As boundaries between ‘consumers’ and ‘producers’ of content have begun to blur, forum members feel closer to social movements, especially when actively participating, contributing, and sharing content²⁶. Brachman²⁷ terms such individuals ‘jihobbyists’, as they are not direct members of terrorist organisations, yet actively seek to propel an extremist agenda forward. They often participate by providing technical skills and/or facilitating narratives reaching and resonating with audiences, becoming the “base that keeps the movement afloat”. The most infamous example is that of Younes Tsouli, aka ‘*lrhabi007*’, who evolved from a harmless agitator to one of the most prolific jihobbyists, arguably becoming the central ‘eHadi’ hub for al-Qaeda in Europe²⁸. Beginning as a curious dissenter with no previous association with militant Islam, Tsouli quickly became an active consumer of online extremist content from his Shepherds Bush home in West London. His talent for programming and hacking online security defences, as well as his flair for compiling and packaging media content into convenient, bite-size files, earned him a reputation as a technical expert. Tsouli became adept at distributing videos of radical ideologues, battlefield insurgencies, beheadings, and military training. He produced instructional manuals explaining the intricacies of hacking websites, anonymous browsing, cracking software, and assembling suicide vests²⁹. He emerged as a pivotal and respected online jihadist personality, eventually claiming with credibility to be the official Western spokesman for Abu al-Zarqawi and al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)³⁰. The case of *lrhabi007* maps the evolution of an individual’s radicalisation through curiosity, consumption, participation, and dissemination of online extremism, but essentially also created a rubric for future jihobbyists to replicate³¹. It also illustrates the critical adhesive function al-Qaeda’s layer of middle-managers have in connecting the top echelons to the grassroots, affording ‘new’ or newer terrorism the decentralised structure and operational reach that arguably typifies it³².

As touched upon, understanding the social processes at the core of radicalisation requires an appreciation of the Interactionist premise that all communication shapes and informs our everyday lives, perspectives, and behaviours³³. Sanderson and Fortin³⁴ describe how large-scale adoption of CMC combined with Web 2.0, has dissolved boundaries of physical locality which have traditionally informed the sociological understanding of what constitutes a ‘community’. Amit³⁵ also observes how contemporary anthropological perspectives of community have shifted, from assuming material space and “actualised social form[s], to an emphasis on community as an idea or quality of sociality” through a shared purpose, belief system, or interest. Interestingly, Neumann³⁶ describes ‘new terrorism’ as also increasingly de-territorialised, yet united around common ideologies. As online engagement and interaction has increased, in line with CMC innovations, isolated extremists are able to congregate, interact, and socialise in cyberspace in ways they are potentially unable to

²⁶ Haddon, 2004);Change Institute, (2008)

²⁷ Brachman, (2008)

²⁸ Cutler, (2007)

²⁹ Labi, (2006)

³⁰ Swann, (2008)

³¹ Cutler, (2007)

³² Neumann *et al.* (2011)

³³ Wessels, (2009)

³⁴ Sanderson & Fortin, (2001)

³⁵ Amit, (2002:3)

³⁶ Neumann, (2009)

offline. Renninger and Shumar³⁷ view online communities as places which: members return to over time, facilitate communication between users, and allow individuals from different real-world locations to assemble virtually. Somewhat bizarrely then, jihadist message forums and chat rooms have come to exhibit many characteristics of online communities, albeit unified and united around the propagation and progression of violent extremism³⁸.

Such communities can facilitate radicalisation in a number of important ways, and contributions from social and behavioural sciences have significant import here³⁹. Primarily, online communities allow networks of likeminded individuals to develop communicative links beyond their isolated locales. Additionally, the dissociative anonymity of W3 mitigates the risks of accountability and reduces inhibitions in the users online interactions⁴⁰. Bessière⁴¹ describes how virtual worlds and online communities allow for the recreation of an “idealised virtual self”, irrespective of real world constraints. Turkle⁴² notes how W3 can allow users to put “fantasies-into-action”, when seemingly freed from societal checks and balances of normative behavioural conduct⁴³. Analytical perspectives from psychology, criminology, and terrorism studies, afford further insights into online radicalisation. Wellman and Gullia⁴⁴ suggest that although virtual arenas, for better or worse, “foster the formation of social networks and personal communities”, such environments are distinctly insular and retreatist in nature⁴⁵. If ones primary social contact occurs within a small, introverted, clandestine milieu, high-risk behaviours can be cultivated⁴⁶. Janis⁴⁷ notion of ‘groupthink’ has particular bearing here; where uncontested conformity to the majority-worldview, or prototypical group position, sidesteps critical evaluation, and groups can collectively rationalise and neutralise their actions. This expurgates dissent, but also allows a morally distorted consensus to be reached, reinforcing skewed perceptions and group polarisation⁴⁸. Suler⁴⁹ notes how CMC can produce ‘solipsistic introjection’, assigning out-groups elaborate, imagined, traits which reinforce their own ‘reality’. Users socialising within such online echo-chambers, favourable to the articulation of extreme views, can undergo a ‘risky shift’ towards increasingly extremist positions, adopting a progressively violent prognosis⁵⁰. Sutherland’s⁵¹ ‘differential association’, articulates how deviant behaviours are learnt, adsorbed, propagated, and escalated within criminogenic environments, resulting in a distorted rationality. Within a Classicist paradigm, Crenshaw⁵² further emphasises violent extremism as a hedonistic ‘strategic

³⁷ Renninger & Shumar, (2002)

³⁸ Feather, (2004)

³⁹ Stevens & Neumann, (2009)

⁴⁰ Suler, (2004)

⁴¹ Bessière *et al.* (2007:10)

⁴² Turkle, (1995:226)

⁴³ Jones, (2006:104)

⁴⁴ *cited in* Steinkuehler, (2006:1)

⁴⁵ Jenny, (2008)

⁴⁶ Wiktorowicz, (2002)

⁴⁷ Janis, (1972)

⁴⁸ Sia *et al.* (2002)

⁴⁹ Suler, (2004)

⁵⁰ *ibid.*; Shaw, (1976)

⁵¹ Sutherland, (1947)

⁵² Crenshaw, (1998)

choice', where an act of terrorism is cognitively calculated as the only 'logical' option, a choice which to the out-group may appear utterly irrational⁵³.

Convicted for possessing and distributing terrorist material in 2006, Irfan Raja provides an illustrative case in point. Despite the Court of Appeal overturning his conviction, due to subtle legalistic interpretations of what constitutes ownership, what remains interesting is the central role the internet played in his radicalisation⁵⁴. Raja, of Ilford, East London, was never involved in an Islamist counter-culture, indeed his online extremist tendencies were unbeknown to his family and school friends⁵⁵. His radicalisation occurred almost entirely online, amassing and exchanging a "profusion of Islamist propaganda" including; classical jihadist texts, al-Qaeda training manuals and speeches, explosives schematics, insurgency, and suicide videos⁵⁶. Raja's chatroom transcripts progressively justified martyrdom, expressed a longing for militant training, and aspirations of becoming a *mujihadeen* warrior⁵⁷. Although Raja had no real world connections, he successfully formed strong relationships, loyalties, and commitments with an extremist milieu⁵⁸. Communicating exclusively online, this introverted group eventually collectively decided to join al-Qaeda and attempted to travel to a Pakistani training camp.

Whilst illustrating how differential normative patterns and extremist collective logic are perpetuated within enabling environments, such cases also demonstrate how the audience, constituency, and membership of extremist online communities has shifted. Brighton⁵⁹ notes the significance of Western foreign policy as a driver of homegrown radicalisation, and indeed jihadist message forums arose from two factors converging circa 2003/4. One has been mentioned with respect to the dialects of globalisation and late modernity – technological innovations which afforded faster broadband connections, download speeds, and the emergence of Web 2.0 as a cultural and communicative phenomenon. The second, concerns the insatiable demand for media, news, and information from foreign battlefronts during the Iraq war. At this time, no one was more media savvy than Abu al-Zarqawi, later the *Emir* of AQI, who in 2004 embarked on an internet marketing and PR campaign to raise his profile and showcase his exploits amidst the mounting chaos and turmoil unfolding in Iraq. Conway⁶⁰ notes how in uploading his most horrific activities to cyberspace, infamously the decapitation of American businessman Nicholas Berg in retaliation for the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuses, Zarqawi harnessed the internet's multiplying effect, controlling "both the interpretation of his violent message and achiev[ing] greater impact with smaller operations".

The importance of messages reaching and resonating with audiences is particularly acute for effective radicalisation processes to occur. Wiktorowicz⁶¹ comprehensively describes how perceived and real injustices make individuals more cognitively receptive to extremist narratives. Radicalisation is particularly effectual when worldviews appear representative of one's own plight, and resonate with one's individual experiences. This is achievable through appeals to pre-existing 'sentiment pools', leading to congruence or alignment

⁵³ Sageman, (2004;2008)

⁵⁴ Philips, (2008)

⁵⁵ Neumann & Rogers, (2007:89)

⁵⁶ Gardman, (2007)

⁵⁷ Casciani, (2007)

⁵⁸ Neumann & Rogers, (2007)

⁵⁹ Brighton, (2007)

⁶⁰ Conway, (2012:5)

⁶¹ Wiktorowicz, (2005)

between one's own beliefs and the 'frame' espoused by extremist ideologies. The emergence of message forums and online jihadist content in English, French, German, Spanish, and Dutch not only made messages instantly accessible to wider domestic audiences, but also the issues, themes, and topics became increasingly applicable and relevant to 'disenchanted' Western Muslims⁶². Proliferation of Western targeted propaganda was vehemently championed by Anwar al-Awlaki who, as an American citizen, had developed a keen eye for marketing, designing, and packaging material with the Western consumer in mind⁶³. His most famous brainchild, the jihadist *Inspire* magazine, published such articles as "I am proud to be a traitor to America", "How to build a bomb in the kitchen of your Mom" and "Message to the American People and Muslims in the West"⁶⁴. Interestingly *Inspire's* editor, Samir Khan, was also originally a message forum fan, blogger, and prolific contributor, before he made the transition to joining al-Qaeda in the Islamic Peninsula⁶⁵. A typical appeal to Western sentiment pools could be videos which may portray Palestinian subjugation by Israel, carefully edited alongside police brutality in North London⁶⁶. Such videos attempt to 'prove' the West's war against the entire *Ummah* (Muslim nation) by framing such narratives on the doorstep of audiences, and in doing so can substantiate and corroborate perceived and real grievances, as well as advance core ideological precepts through visually powerful media⁶⁷.

Less sophisticated attempts to reach English speaking sympathisers are found in the surreal musical contributions of Al Shabaab's (AS) Omar Hammami. Alabama-born Hammami, who enjoyed an online existence before joining AS in Somalia, has crudely attempted to recruit through the production of half-a-dozen rap tracks, which extol the virtues of jihad whilst vilifying the West⁶⁸. Although Hammami's hip-hop may be farcical, and fairly ineffective as a recruitment tool, *Inspire's* releases were eagerly anticipated, and its readership has included a number of convicted terrorists⁶⁹. Whether such media packets have caused radicalisation is contentious, what is notable however is the capacity for video and imagery to convey, re-enforce, and magnify narratives heard in the offline domain. Pyszczynski⁷⁰ further demonstrates how media packets reflecting upon mortality and death produce a 'mortality salience' amongst audiences, and an increased support for violence and martyrdom. The cases of Rami Makanesi and Hammaad Munshi provide illuminating examples. of Frankfurt-born Makanesi, who had a history of drug abuse, converted to Islam after a Tabligh-i Jamaat workshop, and became extremely passionate about his faith which he saw as pivotal to his rehabilitation⁷¹. His enthusiasm prompted an online 'religious seeking'⁷², subsequently coined 'Sheikh Google'⁷³, and stumbled upon emotionally poignant jihadist content depicting the suffering of Palestinian children. Makanesi gradually became an active forum member, establishing rapport with a moderator, and regularly exchanging extremist content. Inspired by battlefield videos, speeches, sermons, books,

⁶² Bell, (1997)

⁶³ Meleagrou-Hitchens, (2011)

⁶⁴ Al-Awlaki, (2010)

⁶⁵ Temple-Raston, (2010)

⁶⁶ Poulos, (2010)

⁶⁷ Awan, (2007)

⁶⁸ Ryan, (2011)

⁶⁹ Miller & Samuels (2010)

⁷⁰ Pyszczynski *et al.* (2006)

⁷¹ Flade, (2011)

⁷² Wiktorowicz, (2005)

⁷³ Birt, (2008)

stories, and Anwar al-Awlaki lectures on Paltalk⁷⁴, he eventually sought 'links to the jihad' and joined militants in Pakistan⁷⁵. Munshi's case was also one of curiosity, bolstered by mutual reinforcement⁷⁶. A substantial part of his radicalisation took place online through watching videos and downloading recipes for napalm and explosives, but this was strengthened by the malign real-world influence of extremist associates in Drewsbury, West Yorkshire⁷⁷.

Such cases further demonstrate how, through Web 2.0 and catering for Western audiences, extremist content has become increasingly accessible and material, hitherto buried in the depths of cyberspace, can spill-over onto mainstream websites. People may stumble across extremist content by accident, or form integrative links to clandestine organisations through conventional websites. Despite the common consensus that personal bonds and intra-group dynamics (real or virtual) are prerequisites for radicalisation, in some extreme cases individuals have become indoctrinated in relative isolation⁷⁸. This has resulted in instances of 'lone wolf terrorism', what Sageman⁷⁹ defines 'leaderless jihad', or, in keeping with the topic and in the words of *Inspire* magazine, "open source jihad"⁸⁰. This certainly appears to be the case with Roshonara Choudhary, who stabbed Stephen Timms MP. Choudhary was definitely not a staunch Islamist; she had no links to extremist forums, no history of politicised religiosity, or radical activism, she was not even a member of moderate Islamic organisations or institutions, she did not attend a mosque and prayed almost exclusively at home, alone. Her radicalisation seems to have occurred, not through acceptance into an extremist milieu, but from social exclusion and indoctrination from viewing hours of Anwar al-Awlaki lectures on YouTube⁸¹. Chodhury's reclusive nature, combined with increasingly extreme sermons, seems to have gradually consumed her to the point she embarked on a solo mission of vengeance for the war in Iraq⁸². Similar mainstream spill-over occurred with the 'Virginia Five', who attempted to attend a Pakistani training camp after exchanging comments with fellow jihadists on YouTube⁸³. However, whilst homegrown self-starters have increasingly become the focus of countermeasures, and may indeed be reflective of the decentralised nature of contemporary terrorist organisations, cases of isolated self-radicalisation remain very rare. Where radicalisation is facilitated virtually, it should be seen as part of an iterative, symbiotic-relationship with the real world, and therefore it is important to anchor policy in the offline domain, as well as in cyberspace⁸⁴.

In summary, the internet as a medium to socialise, congregate, discuss, and debate issues has become a major facilitator for the radicalisation of individuals into violent extremism. Online radicalisation can be seen as a complex process comprising of societal malaise, interaction and immersion within an introverted and isolated counterculture milieu, resulting in the acceptance of an extremist doctrine as representing absolute truth. Any act advancing the dominance of this ideology becomes defined as virtuous. These online

⁷⁴ Holtmann, (2011:4-6)

⁷⁵ Kirby, (2007)

⁷⁶ AVID, (2012)

⁷⁷ Sturcke, (2008)

⁷⁸ Sageman, (2004)

⁷⁹ Sageman, (2008)

⁸⁰ Al-Awlaki, (2010)

⁸¹ Dodd, (2010)

⁸² Githens-Mazerhttp, (2010)

⁸³ Gillani & Tavernise, (2010)

⁸⁴ Stevens & Neumann, (2009:3-6)

communities, or *jihadispheres*⁸⁵, have become virtual 'enabling environments' which encourage intricate networks to form and act as echo-chambers for extremist narratives and mortality salience⁸⁶. Media packets illustrate and amplify messages heard in the offline domain but can, occasionally, indoctrinate and radicalise individuals with limited human contact. As part of a deliberate strategy to tailor standalone content to Western audiences, and as a consequence of the emergence of terrorist MPDEs, extremist content has become remarkably easy to obtain, download, and disseminate. Resultantly, this media is finding its way into mainstream cyberspace. Such developments have been facilitated by wider technological and communicative trends in the W3 landscape, and reflect the increasingly decentralised structure of contemporary terrorist organisations.

This phenomenon has significant implications for countermeasures tackling radicalisation and recruitment⁸⁷. The shifting dynamics of online usage and infrastructure present new challenges and dilemmas for policymakers and security practitioners. Nevertheless, the crux of the issue remains constant; *how to protect liberal democracy, those vulnerable to malign influence, and not allow virtual recruitment grounds to flourish, without eroding the very rights, freedoms, and civil liberties one seeks to defend?* This has tended to result in policy prescriptions following one of two schemata. On the one hand '*Negative measures*', centred around denial of service and restriction of access to extremist material, such as the removal of websites, and the filtering, monitoring, censoring, and blocking of content, have been adopted by numerous governments who have been enthusiastic about technical solutions for what are often perceived as principally technical dilemmas⁸⁸. However, policies advocating state censorship raise all manner of civil liberty questions and, whilst potentially effective if utilised appropriately, technical measures can also be crudely implemented and overzealous. Additionally, it has been proposed that non-violent extremist forums may offer a 'safety valve' for radicals to vent their frustrations, actually mitigating the likelihood of violent extremism in the long-term⁸⁹. It may even be the case that monitoring forum discussions has greater value to intelligence gathering, recognising emergent security concerns, and acknowledging community grievances, than knee-jerk negative measures⁹⁰. Furthermore, the enormity and transnational reach of the internet means efforts to infiltrate, shutdown, or block forums, even if ethically and technically tenable, are only nominally disruptive. This is due to the constant circulation of standalone, user generated content, the sheer quantity of active online forums⁹¹, and their exploitation of legal ambiguities, restrictive jurisdictions, and disclaimer clauses⁹². '*Positive measures*', on the other hand, aim to offer alternative counter-narratives to directly challenge and neutralise extremist messages found online. Whilst conceptually solid, in reality many government-endorsed programmes experience problems regarding 'audience share', legitimacy, and credibility. Nonetheless, there are a range of alternative options beyond the false dichotomy of exclusively negative or positive choices, these include: Combining strategic, commensurate, negative measures with the effective prosecution of prolific online extremists, jihobbyists and MPDEs, deterring the production and distribution of extremist

⁸⁵ Ducol, (2012)

⁸⁶ Richardson, (2006:21-36)

⁸⁷ AIVD, (2012); Post *et al.* (2000); Webb, (2006)

⁸⁸ Stevens & Neumann, (2009:3-6)

⁸⁹ Leiken, (2007)

⁹⁰ Musawi, (2010:69-75)

⁹¹ Ramsay, (2008); Kimmage, (2008)

⁹² Stevens & Neumann, (2009:15-21)

content, and therefore its availability⁹³. Empowering online communities to self-regulate through strengthening internal report and complaint mechanisms, as well as promoting conduct awareness and positive normative behavioural patterns, simultaneously minimising state intervention and extremist spill-over into mainstream spheres⁹⁴. Bolstering critical media literacy through comprehensive educational programmes, which strengthen the abilities and skill-sets of the end user to gauge, evaluate, and assess online content, will help reduce extremist media appeal. Finally, encouraging informed, credible, counter-messages by nurturing grassroots projects to challenge online extremist narratives, thus helping stimulate debates independent of state involvement, undermining the legitimacy claimed by extremists.

This paper neither alleges to identify *static* social truths, nor makes Positivist claims towards the conclusive. There is no archetypal radicalisation guide waiting to be discovered because there is no generalisable terrorist typology. There is a real call for sober, outcome driven, research within this field, which needs to remain as fluid and adaptive as the subject matter it seeks to investigate. Although actor-centric, content focused, methodologies add to a comprehensive appreciation of online extremism, they are not tangible frameworks for understanding social radicalisation processes. Equally, violent radicalisation viewed through a single theoretical lens can be misleading, and drawing upon several conceptual tools is essential when exploring how cultures, settings, and interactions inform and shape our normative behaviours and worldviews. Therefore, the synthesis and application of multi-disciplinary, ideal typical discourses is required to better grasp the subtleties of several concurrent social phenomena converging at one time⁹⁵. This paper seeks to contribute towards a sophisticated understanding of online violent radicalisation, a research field still in its infancy, and attempts to 'bridge the gap'⁹⁶ between academia and rigorous, yet commensurate, counterterrorism and de-radicalisation policy.

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⁹³ *ibid.*

⁹⁴ Ryan, (2007)

⁹⁵ Poggi, (2006)

⁹⁶ George, (1993)

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