

Radicalization, Terrorism, and the Internet

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Over the last 20 years the internet has grown in users by the billions. By nearly five times the internet has grown since 2005 to about five billion users. Billions of people use the internet on a daily basis for work or for their own convenience. With the amount of users paired with the amount of freedom it is no wonder that there is also a large presence of online radicalization and terrorism. There isn't a set definition for radicalization; however, according to United Nations office on Drugs and Crime radicalization is “The notion of 'radicalization' is generally used [by some States] to convey the idea of a process through which an individual adopts an increasingly extremist set of beliefs and aspirations” ('Radicalization' and 'violent extremism'). With this rough definition we can see how the internet can easily become a catalyst for radicalization amongst the users. The internet has also impacted terrorism which is “Violent, criminal acts committed by individuals and/or groups who are inspired by, or associated with, designated foreign terrorist organizations or nations (state-sponsored)” (**Terrorism**). Technology in general has made it easier for terrorism to occur, but the internet in general has also impacted the way terrorism is viewed as well.

So why radicalization? The internet has affected the way radicalization is perceived and how it is exchanged. Due to how unregulated and vast cyberspace is, it is very easy to exchange radicalist ideologies amongst peers. What is even more popular now due to the internet is the gradual radicalization of people who access this content. An example of how radicalization online is rapidly growing would be in 2020 when a thirteen year old boy was found leading an international terrorist organization (The Third Generation of Online Radicalization). This example shows just how devastating radicalization online can be. Almost everyone can access

thousands of online radical forums in an instance. Pair the accessibility with other issues such as politics and economics and it makes radicalization the easier it has ever been. Social media and online forums like 4chan and reddit have made the spreading of radical ideologies extremely easy. These websites are free and available to anyone who has a connection to wi-fi. Other platforms like twitter and facebook have shown to harbor lots of groups/posts centered around radical ideologies.

So we know why online radicalization is, but why is it such a big deal? Online radicalization spreads radical ideals that go against the social or political norm. Most of the sites where radicalization occurs have nothing but hatred and radical thinking. The more these ideas are spread online the more radical the internet becomes and the more people who use it become radicalized. With 5 billion people using the internet there is a guarantee that radicalization will occur.

Radicalization can be spread in many different ways, the most common type is by the use of memes. Users of the internet can create memes which are just pictures taken from popular media and then a caption is added. This can be a very easy way to spread radicalist ideas because most of the time they use humor to appeal to a certain group of people. A study showed that these memes carried out hatred towards black and other minorities as well as the LGBTQ+ community (Keen). Memes are very popular across the internet and they are hard to moderate because not all of them have words, sometimes the symbol itself can be used for spreading hatred. An example would be pepe the frog which was turned into a far right extremist meme used to represent white supremacy. Another way radicalization can be spread is through mementos of radical attacks. Patrick Crusius had written a memento and it was released online. This memento was written out of hatred and radical thinking and it involves political reasons for

why he did what he did as well as economic reasons for why he did what he did. These mementos can cause people to become radicalized and agree with what he was saying, especially people who believe in the great replacement theory. Radicalization can also be spread through mainstream media sources. This can lead to the viewers either hating the radicals or becoming radicalized, which is a very interesting predicament.

The main point of radicalization is to spread ideologies that are seen as radical to the general public and government. Lots of memes and online forums have a tendency to do nothing but spread hate and fear. With all of these sites and users what can we do as a society to help against the spread of online radicalization.

Radicalization is a very scary thing when we look at it and what its possibilities are. This is why it is important that we as individuals try and stop radicalization online. While this may seem like an impossible task, informing people on radicalization and hatred can really help deal with radicalization. Encouraging the software developers of social media companies to create reporting systems that undergo moderation often can also lead to the stopping of radicalization. Some sites on the internet that contain radical propaganda will never be stopped and that is ok, the more informed people are the less acceptable radicalism will be in the future.

Terrorism has changed drastically over the course of the last 20 years. With the introduction of the internet and social media terrorism has reached many more people than ever before. Platforms like twitter, reddit, and discord can be a haven for terrorist sympathizers and propaganda.

Why the internet? “The Internet is a powerful tool for terrorists, who use online message boards and chat rooms to share information, coordinate attacks, spread propaganda, raise funds, and recruit”(Kaplan). The internet amplifies terrorists by making their attacks easier to execute

and making their organization easier to grow and recruit. The internet has allowed terrorist organizations to obtain layouts of areas that are potential targets. This is a huge issue and why cybersecurity is essential for cyberspace to remain safe. Over the course of the past 20 years congress has announced that they have discovered over 5,000 jihadi websites (kaplan). That is a very large amount of websites considering each house an unknown number of terrorists and attack plans.

Separate from organizing online, terrorists now use the internet for propaganda to expand their numbers more than ever before. How can they do this? “The Internet provides a relatively unregulated and unrestricted place where terrorists can craft and disseminate propaganda through seemingly limitless numbers of websites and social media platforms, tailoring their pitch so as to target thousands of potential new recruits to join their organization and further their cause (Lieberman). Terrorists use propaganda to recruit people with similar ideologies and people who share a common enemy. ISIS is a terrorist organization that has been seen throughout the past 10 years using the internet for recruitment videos as well as execution videos to promote fear amongst everyone who watched. In several ISIS recruitment videos the targeted audience were actually youths. This is alarming because they can reach such a wide audience of people. The video depicted ISIS as heroes and acting as if real life was a video game (Lieberman). Due to the freedom that comes with online usage, terrorist organizations can also spread disinformation to make them appear as the good guys. Again ISIS has used this tactic in order to recruit members and gain sympathy. Spreading disinformation can be extremely dangerous because it can cause uninformed people to become radical and support terrorism.

What measures can the government and organizations implement in order to help stop the spread of terrorism and radicalization? As a cybersecurity major I believe that when people

practice proper cyber hygiene and limit their interactions with radical idealists online can lead to the radical people becoming obsolete. With proper cyber hygiene people should report every instance of radicalism that they come across to ensure that these ideas are ended before they spread and become something dangerous. I also believe that companies and developers of social media platforms should implement more advanced reporting systems to allow radical and terroristic content to easily be blocked and unspreadable. Doing so would allow the terrorist content to be removed quickly so that the ideas cannot spread. The addition of ip bans and account flagging could disqualify terrorists from ever posting again. And lastly as a cybersecurity major I believe that the field will keep evolving to further protect the internet from not only cybercrime but cyberterrorism. What is cybersecurity? “Cybersecurity is the art of protecting networks, devices, and data from unauthorized access or criminal use and the practice of ensuring confidentiality, integrity, and availability of information” (what is cybersecurity). With this definition in mind I believe that the internet is a place for the exchanging of information and ensuring that the information is not radical or of terrorist nature. We can create a safer place for people to browse and deal with their daily life. Cyberterrorism involves people committing terrorist acts over the internet. An example could be hackers causing power outages to hurt people or for political gain. Cyber terrorism is cyber crimes’ bigger brother and should be considered a very serious topic because of its potential threat of crippling the infrastructure and military operations (Weiman). Ways of combating cyber terrorism involve keeping tight cybersecurity policies for government and other infrastructure organizations. An example of a detrimental cyberterrorism event would be the 2021 Colonial pipeline attack. The pipeline was shut down for a couple of days causing a drought of fuel on the east coast. While the group only wanted money and restored the pipeline to its former functions it was still an extremely scary

ordeal for all occupants of the east coast. This attack could have halted military operations and other infrastructural operations on the east coast. This is a huge deal and shouldn't be taken lightly. Creating stronger cyber security frameworks and requiring mandatory checkups on cybersecurity can help reduce the threat of cyberterrorism and other forms of radicalisation.

Overall the internet has greatly impacted the way that terrorism and radicalization have evolved. From internet memes to ISIS propaganda the internet has provided these groups with a safe way to exchange their ideas and multiply. As more and more people use the internet it is important that people remain informed on various ways that these groups are trying to spread. Understanding that there is zero tolerance for hate is a great start to ending this pandemic of online radicalization. Action against the radical and terrorist groups should be taken seriously because as technology advances it will only get easier for these ideas to spread unless something is done to stop it early on.

Reflection

Over the course of this essay I have learned many new things surrounding the topics of radicalization online as well how the internet has aided the spread of terrorism. Something that really keeps my mind going is just how accessible these radical and terrorist ideas are. In just a couple of clicks we can have lots of information shared by radicalists on websites like 4chan and others like twitter. Growing up in this environment has almost made me indifferent towards online radicalization because I am so used to seeing it online, which is a very bad thing. Due to my cybersecurity background I have seen a lot of these elements in topics like cyber crime but I have never been given too much information on cyber terrorism and it is important that I have because it is an issue that I hope to help stop one day. As I have learned more and more about these radical topics online they become more and more obvious when I see them. They became very popular in my social media feed around the time of the Hamas attack. I noticed plenty of anti-jewish memes and other atrocious posts. I also realized just how much the terrorist and radical groups and ideologies were being covered on the news after I learned what they were. Overall I say that the course and this research has helped me become more aware of these issues online and I hope that with my degree I can help make a change so that eventually the internet can be a safe place for people to grow throughout their life.

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