## S. RAJARATNAM SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES
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# RSIS COMMENTARIES

## Countering Internet Radicalisation:
## A Holistic Approach

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*The recent detention of Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid adds to the numerous examples of individuals who embraced radical ideologies via the Internet. To counteract this growing trend, both government and community may have a role to play.*

### Growing Threat of Online Radicalisation

BY ALL accounts, Muhammad Fadil Abdul Hamid appeared to be an ordinary Singaporean citizen pursuing a diploma at a local polytechnic when he was first exposed to extremist religious ideologies on the Internet. He became radicalised, contacted the radical Islamic preacher Anwar al-Awlaki and a suspected Al Qaeda recruiter with the hopes of undertaking militant Jihad in places such as Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan. Chillingly, Fadil appeared to be following the footsteps of fellow Singaporean Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader, a lawyer and lecturer who also became self-radicalised by extremist contents on the Internet. These two cases demonstrate that even in the absence of a recruiting jihadist network in Singapore, the Internet can nonetheless act as a forceful substitute.

The phenomenon of self-radicalised individuals via the Internet is not exclusive to Singapore alone. Perhaps the most well-known example is that of Younes Tsouli, the son of a Moroccan diplomat residing in the United Kingdom. Tsouli started off as a netizen looking for extremist materials and later evolved to become a producer of extremist materials himself. The recent examples of Umar Farouk Abdulmutallab, Major Nidal Hasan, and Faisal Shahzad all share a common thread in that the internet was a feature of their radicalisation process.

### The Irresistible Allure of the Internet

The notion of the Internet as a double-edged sword is well-documented, and the attending dangers of Internet usage extend to all walks of life, from gaming addictions to sophisticated cybercrimes.

However, in the field of religious radicalisation, the Internet proves to be a particularly dangerous medium in view of the following characteristics. First, the Internet is an unlimited repository where radical content can easily be uploaded and accessed. Second, it is difficult to monitor and track every individual who searches for and accesses such content. Third, such individuals have the comfort of accessing radical content from their own personal space instead of having to go through the inconvenience of physically attending radical religious gatherings. Fourth, the Internet empowers a netizen to evolve from a mere consumer to a producer of extremist materials, while conferring on them the relative safety of anonymity. Most importantly, not confined by time and space, the Internet brings together like-minded individuals from all around the world to form a virulent network of extremist ideas.

**Possible Counter Measures**

While extremist content on the Internet may not always be the starting point of radicalisation, it is no doubt a strong `facilitator', especially among those who are young, vulnerable and seeking direction. Countering such radicalisation through the Internet therefore requires the collaborative efforts of both government and society, involving both `hard' and `soft' options.

The hard options available include ensuring that there are appropriate legislation and policies dealing with web content that instigates violence. For example, the Media Development Authority's Internet Code of Practice requires all licensed Internet Service Providers to use best efforts to ensure that what is listed as prohibited material is not broadcast; this includes *inter alia*, material that "glorifies, incites or endorses ethnic, racial or religious hatred, strife or intolerance". The recent arrest of two Singaporean teenagers for posting racist comments on Facebook clearly illustrates the employment of such hard measures in the domain of Internet usage.

Social networking websites such as Facebook, MySpace and YouTube, which have evolved into powerful social institutions in themselves, should consider implementing tougher policies against allowing extremist materials such as lectures of Anwar Al-Awlaki on their websites. While there needs to be a balance struck between observing rights of free speech and censorship, the freedom to express oneself is not unbridled and always subject to the greater good of society. In this connection, to allow Al-Awlaki's messages to be easily accessed on such websites borders on being morally and socially irresponsible.

**Government-Private Sector Collaboration**

Given the gravity of the dangers at hand, another option to consider is collaboration between governments and the private sector. An encouraging example can be found from the recent signing of a memorandum of understanding between the Swiss authorities and eBay in a bid to combat illicit trafficking of cultural property through the Internet. In similar vein, authorities of concerned countries can collaborate with the private sector players such as YouTube and Facebook to filter out radical contents from their websites.

It must be recognised that there are limits as to what the government and Internet service providers can do to prevent radical messages from reaching its intended target, especially for those who actively search for such contents. Families and the wider social circle of an individual which includes teachers, friends, and religious mentors need to be proactive in ensuring that an individual does not become enamoured by radical materials. The role of parents is especially crucial in nurturing the correct mindset for the young. The use of tools such as Internet filters is useful in allowing parents to monitor and protect their young from negative influences.

In the final analysis, there is no one specific remedy which can cure the evil of online extremist contents. However, the implementation of the above suggestions may act as the building blocks of an

effective "firewall" against online extremist ideologies.


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