Online Extremism:
Challenges and Counter-Measures

By Navhat Nuraniyah

Synopsis

The propaganda function of the Internet is arguably more significant than its function as a virtual terrorist training camp. The long-term answer to online extremism requires preventive measures that are concerted online and offline.

Commentary

THE TRANSNATIONAL militant organisation Islamic State (IS) which has seized control of large swathes of Iraq and Syria in the past year, recently published its online magazine, *Dabiq*. Its articles in Arabic and several other languages including French, German, Russian, and Indonesian, focus on ideological and strategic narratives, unlike Al-Qaeda's Inspire magazine that contained bomb-making recipes and other terrorist instructions. *Inspire* and *Dabiq* represent two major challenges of online extremism, namely Internet as a terrorist learning laboratory and the spread of extremist narratives to promote online radicalisation.

The spread of terrorist tradecraft online and the appearance of e-learning courses on explosives on certain extremist forums have heightened concerns about the use of the Internet as terrorist learning sources. Although the utility of online manuals is somewhat limited as they only provide abstract knowledge, real world training and combat experience in conflict areas such as Syria and Iraq remain the chief avenues for acquiring terrorist skills.

Internet as propaganda tool

The value of online media as a virtual terrorist class might not be as significant as initially thought due to the limitations of terrorist online manuals. The Internet, however, has been particularly useful as a propaganda tool as it allows extremists to spread their messages to a global audience on an unprecedented scale. While preventive measures need to be implemented both online and offline, an effective counter-narrative calls for a coherent strategy comprising three key elements: the message, the messaging and the messenger.

That said, the emergence of simple, easy-to-follow manuals such as *Inspire* magazine's "Make a Bomb in Your Mom's Kitchen" is particularly useful to lone-actor and small-cell terrorists such as the

Boston Marathon bombers. Such materials were also instrumental in the radicalisation of the bombers of Indonesia's Cirebon police mosque and a church in Solo, Central Java. Their radicalisation into violent behaviour was also largely driven by online terrorist tradecraft that are framed and justified within jihadist narratives. Knowing the limitation of online tradecraft, groups such as Al-Qaeda aim to use them not as replacement for real-world training, but to inspire lone-wolf terrorists and the culture of "solo terrorism".

Extremist narratives and online radicalisation

The Internet is a convenient propaganda tool for extremists for the following reasons. First, online media ranging from video web to interactive forums and social media could cater to different kinds of personality and cultural background. IS propaganda, for instance, consists of varying mixtures of humanitarian and violent elements, depending on the targeted audience. Messages that stress the humanitarian element of the Syrian conflict appeared to be more successful when targeting Western audience as opposed to the Arab one that could relate more to the violence dimension.

Second, extremists have managed to establish resilient, multi-lingual online networks by combining various online and social media platforms. A certain Indonesian Twitter user who translates and retweets IS' Arabic and English tweets in Bahasa Indonesia has over 11,000 followers. These networks enable uninterrupted campaigns and constant reproduction of materials to a wider audience. Consequently removing online extremist materials would be a pointless exercise.

While many studies have been done on extremist narratives and how they are being propagated, the influence of such propaganda on the audience is often less understood. For example some people who consumed extremist materials online became radicalised but not others. The mechanism and tipping point for violent extremism could vary among different individuals.

In fact, individuals actively try to understand the information they receive, and the way they interpret extremist narratives is largely influenced by their context. For instance, the extremist master narrative that emphasises injustices on Muslims and the need for revenge might resonate more with someone who has personally experienced discrimination or had difficulties integrating within Western society. Therefore, it is instructive to understand the contextual factors and social milieu that could allow extremist narratives to find resonance.

Counter-measures

While the Internet posed new challenges to counter-terrorism, it could also provide some of the solutions. Available analytics tools such as big data and profiling techniques could help gather a large amount of data from social media and extremist online forums that are essential to support any theory on online radicalisation. Long-term solution to online extremism, however, requires more preventive measures through a concerted online and offline efforts. To this end, the role of civil society is indispensable given the significant influence of social context on individual radicalisation. Grassroots initiatives such as youth engagement programmes through sport and arts might be more effective to reach out to young people.

Ultimately, education is vital in preventing the spread of extremist ideology. The education system in many countries does not prioritise critical thinking skills. The role of educators, family and civil society organisations in promoting critical thinking is needed to encourage youth to question and challenge assumptions, especially in the current information age.

Finally, counter-narrative remains key in confronting online extremism. This could be improved through three elements: the message, messaging and messenger. The message promoted in counter-narratives should be positive and not just reactive, such as by promoting the ideology of peace. Counter-strategists could learn from extremist online campaigns to come up with creative messaging methods that appeal more to the audience.

A positive message and appealing campaign strategy would not work well without a credible messenger. Local religious and community leaders have a considerable role in this regard. To move forward, there is a need to bring out more terrorism victims' voices in order to show the harm inflicted by terrorists to the lives of common people.

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