Online Extremism:
Agents of Disruption in the Digital Age

By Jolene Jerard

SYNOPSIS

Online extremism is a fast-growing threat that disrupts and threatens to damage the social fabric of diverse communities. The extremists' exploitation of communication technologies to radicalise and incite violence presents a grave challenge to racial and religious harmony that will need to be addressed.

COMMENTARY

THE 2019 Christchurch Call to Action, spearheaded by New Zealand and France, epitomises a clarion call to eliminate terrorist and extremist content online. It is a step in the right direction. The pledge for action comes in the wake of the Christchurch mosque shootings by a white supremacist that was streamed live; the attacks reinvigorated ongoing discussions on the use of the Internet, and digital and social media platforms to promote hate and incite violence.

Broadly, online extremism refers to the exploitation of digital platforms by extremists of all shades to target individuals and groups to further their intolerant, extremist and exclusivist goals. It is characterised by the promotion of hate and incitement of violence relating mostly to racial, religious or political causes. Its pervasiveness in recent years has aggravated racial and religious faultlines and gravely undermined communal harmony in many societies.

Online Echo Chamber Effect

In Sri Lanka in 2018, the use of social media platforms to foment violence against the minority Muslim population through misinformation resulted in inter-ethnic violence. In Myanmar, hate speech on social media incited and perpetuated violence against the Rohingya community.

At another level, jihadists have continued to exploit communication technologies to incite violence, and to deliberately disrupt religious harmony in plural societies. They have used social media to target Christians, fellow Muslim opponents and others, denouncing them as "infidels" or "apostates".

Many have been radicalised globally by their online extremist narratives which continue to call for terror attacks. The ongoing radicalisation and terror attacks have fuelled hate crimes against Muslims and sowed deep divisions within affected societies.

Likewise, Western far-right extremists have also taken full advantage of technology to spread their conspiratorial and virulent narratives through the online echo-chamber.

The targetting of immigrants and minorities, particularly Muslims, Jews, Blacks and Hispanics, has polarised societies and led to violent attacks like those in the Pittsburgh (Pennsylvania) synagogue shootings in 2018 that killed 11 people, Christchurch that killed 51 people and more recently El Paso, Texas that killed 22 people. Monitoring groups have confirmed that far-right extremist attacks in Europe and the US have increased considerably.

Impact on Singapore

As in other countries, Singapore too has witnessed online platforms being used to spread extremist rhetoric as well as hate and offensive speech that can potentially threaten racial and religious harmony. The most recent was the rap video that was roundly decried as racist and offensive. The video was a counterblast against a controversial "brownface" advertisement that many found to be in poor taste.

On the terrorism front, a number of Singaporeans have been radicalised following constant exposure to jihadist online propaganda. Some of them were willing to go to Syria to undertake armed 'jihad', and at least two were reported to be willing to carry out attacks in Singapore. A recent detainee was a follower of Zahran Hashim, the mastermind behind the terrorist attacks on churches and hotels in Sri Lanka in April that killed 258 people.

The authorities view radicalised individuals as a security risk as they may carry out lone-wolf attacks if instructed by IS. Any terrorist attack will be a test to a country's resilience and social cohesion. In Sri Lanka, the church and hotel bombings had provoked an anti-Muslim backlash with attacks on Muslim-owned properties and places of worship. In Europe and the United States, jihadist terrorism has heightened Islamophobia and increased attacks against Muslims.

Agents of Disruption?

The burgeoning number of social media platforms, over-the-top service providers, and live streaming platforms, have revolutionised and augmented the manner through which present and future generations communicate and access information in a globalised and interconnected world.

The higher levels of digital literacy amongst the youth reaffirm the level of comfort that youth have in engaging with discussions and participating in debates online. In a study published by the Institute of Policy Studies in March 2019, 45.6 per cent of those between 18 to 25 years indicated that they would allow for publication extremist views online.

Today, online extremism can no longer be dismissed as a lesser voice compared to that of negative activism in the real world. Online extremism comes in a variety of shades, but they collectively stand against the values of tolerance and harmony. In an earlier study in 2012, Professor Gabriel Weimann, a communications scholar, noted that 90% of terror activities take place using social networking tools.

The theory of moral disengagement by Albert Bandura highlights the damaging consequence wherein supporters of intolerant, extremist and exclusivist views avoid distress, when supporting these negative views. In this instance, the tendency is to avoid self-censorship, and even dehumanise 'the other.' The extent of moral disengagement can project a range of harmful behaviours in both the real and the online domains.

Given the growing appreciation for freedom of speech even for those who espouse potentially dangerous views, societies must decide how to manage and mitigate the impact of these online extremist voices on racial and religious harmony and social cohesion. Society, including major social media providers today, have a responsibility to protect values such as mutual respect, tolerance and the acceptance of different cultures, religions and beliefs.

The 2018 workshop by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth with Facebook saw the launch of *#SpeakUpSpeakOut* to encourage community groups to speak up for values of cohesion and speak out against divisive, intolerant and extremist ideologies. Societies as a whole are obliged to counter disruptive agents who promote hate and incite violence.

Identifying Thresholds

Central to envisioning a response against online extremism is the attempt by states and societies to identify thresholds of what is deemed to be unacceptable in their specific contexts. For Singapore, online narratives that undermine the maintenance of racial and religious harmony is a threshold not to be breached. Any denigration of race and religion or incendiary language will not be allowed as it will raise communal tensions and lead to violence.

The Maria Hertogh riots in 1950 and the racial riots in 1964 and 1969 are grim reminders of the volatility of 'gut' issues and the fragility of communal relations. Contemporary incidences around the world, reiterate the unwavering volatility that has led to violence in many instances. Any similar outbreak of violence will damage Singapore's social fabric that will take years to heal.

To counter the negative effects of online extremism, a collaborative whole-of-society front in the form of "*education against hate and extremism*" may pave the way for a

positive change in eliminating the space for hate, violence and extremist ideology from occupying premium space.

In the near term, more immediate measures, such as strengthening existing laws, faster detection and removal of provocative online content, and ground-up initiatives that promote mutual respect, tolerance and moderation are needed. In matters concerning race and religion, prudence dictates the adoption of strong measures against extremists seeking to undermine racial and religious harmony and social cohesion with inflammatory rhetoric and incitement of violence.

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