Chapter 11

An Internet-Mediated Pathway for Online Radicalisation: RECRO

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ABSTRACT

This chapter proposes an Internet-mediated radicalisation model, RECRO. It consists of five phases: (1) the Reflection phase details the triggers, needs, and vulnerabilities that an individual may have which increase one’s receptiveness towards alternative belief systems; (2) the Exploration phase details the period where the individual begins making sense of the information put forth by violent extremists; (3) the Connection phase details the influence of like-minded individuals and the online community on the individual’s new worldview; (4) the Resolution phase details the period during which the individual gains the momentum to translate one’s radical beliefs into action; and finally (5) the Operational phase details the period during which the individual is ready to commit violence to further one’s radical objectives. This model provides a basis for understanding and informing judgements about an individual’s level of involvement, and paves the way for future empirical work.

INTRODUCTION

The use of the Internet by violent extremists has become the focus of an increasing amount of academic research, particularly as it pertains to the potential functions of this technological innovation in the radicalisation process. Violent extremists of all affiliations have exploited a plethora of online services to spread their ideas, connect and radicalise potential followers and sympathisers. As Shahar (2007) explains,

*Without the Internet, the radical groups making up the global jihad’s cadre of militants would remain as a widely dispersed and isolated group of cells that happened to claim the same historical roots … it is the Internet which has globalised the jihad movement. The network of global jihad is a product of the communications revolution.* (p. 140)

Hence, there is a real concern over the proliferation of radical ideas and the threat of individuals becoming radicalised in the online domain. This chapter seeks to propose a phase based model ‘RECRO’ to account for the phenomenon of Internet-mediated radicalisation. The first section describes the threat of violent extremism on the Internet. The next few sections then detail each of the five phases of the Internet-mediated radicalisation model (RECRO: Reflection, Exploration, Connection, Resolution, Operational). For the purposes of this chapter, a working definition of online radicalisation would be “the process by which an individual is introduced to an ideological message and belief system that encourages movement from mainstream beliefs toward extreme views, primarily through the use of online media such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube” (Community Oriented Policing Services [COPG], 2014, p. 1).

THE EXPLOITATION OF THE INTERNET BY VIOLENT EXTREMISTS

The advent of the Internet has altered the relationship between violent extremism and the media. The Internet and the opportunity it offers, allow violent extremists to expand the functionalities of their propaganda efforts beyond the boundaries of the traditional, mainstream media (Conway, 2012; Europol, 2014; Weimann & von Knop, 2008). Violent extremists are therefore no longer dependent on traditional media outlets to disseminate their propaganda materials.

In fact, violent extremists have become so adept at exploiting the Internet that they have developed a wide variety of digital medium (e.g., websites, forums, social media platforms) to fulfil their radical agenda. As their use of the social media proliferates, it has increased the outreach and types of information that can be shared by violent extremists. In many ways, this grants violent extremists the platform to take control of the content of their messages, undercut the legitimacy of mainstream media organisations, and sustain their movements over time (Conway & McInerney, 2008; General Intelligence and Security Service [AIVD], 2012; Seib & Janbek, 2011). Similarly, the sharp increase in online publications with violent extremist ownerships indicates that it is an increasingly important means for violent extremists to achieve their cause (Lemieux, Brachman, Levitt, & Wood, 2014; Rieger, Frischich, & Bente, 2013; Rogan, 2007).

More importantly, the Internet has afforded violent extremists the channel to influence those sympathetic to their narratives (Edwards & Gribbon, 2013; Neo, Khader, Shi, Dillon, & Ong, 2015; Torok, 2013). For example, the enormous outreach of the Internet makes it the perfect instrument to establish an online community of shared knowledge, norms and interest without temporal or geographical restrictions (Powers & Armstrong, 2014). It also offers the opportunity for violent extremists such as Abu Musab al-Zarqawi (former leader of Al-Qaeda in Iraq) to exploit the Internet to shape their audience’s worldviews. Before al-Zarqawi began his online propaganda campaign, it is essential to note that he would have to kill large numbers of people in order to grab the attention of supporters and media (Conway, 2007). However, through these online videos, al-Zarqawi was able to achieve greater impact and media publicity albeit using fewer resources.

Another line of evidence comes from the use of the Internet by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) to reach out and encourage others to adopt its worldview (Nuraniyah, 2014). Through social media platforms, ISIS has managed to portray a consistent public image as an organisation that delivers results (i.e., both online and offline) and establish its presence internationally (Bernard, 2014; Saifudeen, 2015). Rather than alienating potential recruits, these propaganda materials have instead succeeded in attracting...