Chapter 13
New Media and Terrorism

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ABSTRACT

Beyond the widespread coverage of terrorism-related stories on international news outlets, we are witnessing the swift spread of alternative interpretations of these stories online. These alternative narratives typically involve digital transmediation or the remix, remediation, and viral dissemination of textual, audio, and video material on multiple new and social media platforms. This chapter discusses the role of new(er) media in facilitating the transmediated spread of extremist narratives, rumors, and political parody. Drawing from recent case studies based upon multi-modal analyses of digital texts on social media networks, including blogs, vlogs, Twitter, and Jihadist sites associated with acts of terror in Asia, Middle East, and North America, the chapter illustrates how digital transmediation significantly works oftentimes to construct counter narratives to government counter insurgency operations and mainstream media presentations. In discussing these examples, the chapter demonstrates how the new media points to varied narratives and reifies notions of national security, global politics, terrorism, and the media’s role in framing the “War on Terrorism.” Moreover, a critical examination of remix texts and digital mashups of popular artifacts inform a Web 2.0 understanding of how the creative communication practices of online prosumers (hybrid consumers and producers) contest dominant interests in the online ideological battlefield for hearts and minds.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between new media and terrorism is profound. It is traditionally charged with the utopic possibilities of new communication technologies to empower and fuel “netwar,” yet imbricated with the social and cultural conditions of glocalized contexts and novel user applications. On one hand, control over media content in times of terrorism and conflict historically represents strategic influence over insurgents and contested populations. On the other, the rise of the Internet, including burgeoning patterns of user generated content, raise significant debates about the evolving nature of mediated terrorism in general and propaganda and terrorism related rumors specifically. Participatory digital and social media use allows for increased exposure and interactivity

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between micro and macro level agencies as non-state actors enter the telecommunications arena and interact online (Payne, 2009; Winn & Zakem, 2009) This participation represents therefore an opportunity for lay persons to consume, construct, and share stories about terrorist events, which should lead us to reconsider the multifaceted nature of mediated terrorism.

Beyond the widespread coverage of terrorism related stories on mainstream and international news outlets, we are witnessing the swift spread of alternative interpretations of these stories online. These alternative narratives typically involve digital transmediation or the remix (Lessig, 2008), remediation (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), and viral dissemination of textual, audio, and video material on multiple and convergent new and social media platforms (Burgess, 2008; Deuze, 2007; Jenkins, 2006). This chapter examines the role of new(er) media in facilitating the transmediated spread of extremist narratives, rumors, and political parody. It illustrates how digital transmediation significantly work to construct counter narratives to government counter insurgency operations and mainstream media presentations. This chapter discusses how new media produsage, which involves lay consumption, creation, and remix practices of digital content (Bruns, 2008), facilitates the discursive and transmediated construction of terrorism-related rumor texts.

New media studies on developing a critical examination of remix texts and digital mashups of popular artifacts help inform a Web 2.0 understanding of how the creative communication practices of online prosumers (hybrid consumers and producers) contest dominant interests in the online ideological battlefield for hearts and minds. Social and political implications of this discussion on new media and strategic influence pertain not only to the viability of digital backchannel communication in a terrorist crisis, but also inform the study of online radicalization.

UNDERSTANDING THE DIGITAL TRANSMEDIATION OF TERRORISM: (RE) PRESENTATIONS IN CONVERGENT NEW AND SOCIAL MEDIA

As the meaning of “truth” is often a key feature of hegemonic struggles, one cardinal dimension in the relationship between new media and terrorism concerns the processes whereby individual and cultural “truth perspectives” may distort veracity, reinforce stigma, and amplify negative stories and images associated with insurgency and counter insurgency operators. In light of the fluorescence of web-enabled technologies, it is important to examine rumors (Sunstein, 2009), particularly how the digital rumor mill functions. That is, in this context, how rumors are created and spread online, by publics linked to the informational war related to terrorism. In many ways, rumors are integrally woven into the fabric of the alleged global war on terror. They reveal information about the narrative landscape, including the expression of social anxieties and the “mentality of the group in which it circulates” (Ellis & Haar, 2004, p. 36). They also help fill knowledge gaps in the wake of a situation of uncertainty and ambiguity (DiFonzo & Prashant, 2007), including the mayhem after a terrorist event.

More importantly, as argued in Narrative Landmines: Rumors, Islamist extremism, and the struggle for strategic influence (Bernardi et al., 2012), rumors in war zones can be very dangerous, as they are relatively low-cost and low-tech devices that circulate among lay populations, to instill fear and raise suspicion during times of social conflict, political upheavals, and information uncertainty. As rumors fit into and extend narrative systems and ideologies—and interact with factors particularly in the context of terrorism and counter-terrorism—they can counter elaborate pertinent government initiatives (e.g., outreach

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