Chapter 1
Understanding the Psychology of Persuasive Violent Extremist Online Platforms

Loo Seng Neo
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Leevia Dillon
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Priscilla Shi
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Jethro Tan
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Yingmin Wang
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

Danielle Gomes
Home Team Behavioural Sciences Centre, Ministry of Home Affairs, Singapore

ABSTRACT
Exploiting the benefits afforded by the Internet, violent extremists have created and utilised a myriad of online platforms (e.g., websites, forums, blogs, social media) that have abetted and enhanced their recruitment campaigns across the world. While the idea of countering violent extremists’ online presence is a matter of considerable security interest, the paucity of research analysing the persuasiveness of their online platforms to certain target audiences impedes law enforcement agencies’ capability to deal with them. There is a need to understand why their online platforms are so persuasive to certain target audiences. Focusing on these online platforms, this chapter will examine the features of these platforms that enhance the appeal of violent extremist messages.

INTRODUCTION
The ease with which violent extremist groups have utilised the Internet highlights the growing volatility of threats facing law enforcement today. The Internet has allowed violent extremist groups to disseminate their propaganda messages more easily, and has become the ideal platform to communicate with one another and with their followers (Aly, Weimann-Saks, & Weimann, 2014; Hussain & Saltman, 2014;
Understanding the Psychology of Persuasive Violent Extremist Online Platforms

Weimann, 2004; Weimann & von Knop, 2008). Based on this line of thought, a significant amount of research and analysis has gone into the question of how the Internet has enhanced and contributed to the persuasiveness of violent extremist online propaganda.

In general, research trying to decipher the factors underlying the persuasiveness of violent extremist online propaganda can be attributed to a range of factors, two of which is of interest to this chapter: understanding the messages, and the online platforms that house these messages.

In terms of the message, insights derived from the research on ‘sticky ideas’ suggest that the persuasiveness of online propaganda messages can, to some extent, be attributed to the presentation and structuring of the message. For example, Heath and Heath (2008) in their book titled ‘Made to Stick’ identified six principles that would enhance the appeal of a message. A persuasive message would be characterised by its simplicity (i.e., contain content that is simple and easy to remember); its unexpectedness (i.e., contain counter-intuitive content that catch the target audience’s attention); its concreteness (i.e., contain content that the target audience can relate to); its credibility (i.e., contain content that needs to be perceived as legitimate to the target audience); its emotional content (i.e., contain content that must appeal emotionally to the target audience); and the presence of stories (i.e., contain stories that aid the target audience in recalling the message). Similarly, Gladwell (2004) highlighted that message that provides practical advice and has personal alignment would appeal more as compared to one that does not. This suggests that the way a message is packaged may influence the appeal of the message to its targeted audience.

In the context of violent extremism, analysis (e.g., Al Raffie, 2012; Lia, 2008; Saifudeen, 2014) of the propagandistic messages released by groups suggests that they have leveraged on some of the principles put forth by Gladwell (2004), and Heath and Heath (2008). A related literature also focuses on the wider role of the creator and sender of the messages on the persuasiveness of the violent extremist online propaganda (see Ramakrishna, 2015).

However, it is instructive to consider the target audience as individuals who are active both in the selection of the information they pay attention to and in the interpretation of the messages. If so, this seems to suggest that the medium through which the messages are presented would also influence the persuasiveness of the online propaganda. That is to say, there is a need to look not only at the factors underlying the appeal of the messages, but also at the nature of the online platforms (which is the focus of this chapter) that enhances the appeal of these messages.

Online Violent Extremists’ Platforms

Much has been written about the wide repository of online platforms utilised by violent extremist groups. However, less has been written about how violent extremists have been able to exploit the features of these platforms to enhance the appeal of their propaganda messages. Research into hypermedia seduction for violent extremist recruiting (e.g., Conway, 2005; Dauber & Winkler, 2014; Hussain & Saltman, 2014; Rogan, 2006) has hinted that features of these online platforms may influence how an individual reacts to violent extremist online propaganda.

Some have focused on the initial response of the user when one comes into contact with violent extremist online platforms. After the brief initial confrontation with online radical content, it is envisaged that the individual would experience a range of emotions from apathy to repulsion to exhilaration that might influence one’s decision to either ignore the materials, or to continue the search for more relevant materials (Neo, Singh, Khader, Ang, & Ong, 2013). Fighel (2007) in his research on radical Islamic Internet propaganda also suggested that the presence of additional materials (e.g., images, videos) that