Chapter 7

Getting out of the Armchair: Potential Tipping Points for Online Radicalisation

Omer Ali Saifudeen
National Security Coordination Secretariat, Prime Minister’s Office, Singapore

ABSTRACT

This chapter will explore possible factors (both online and real world) that can ‘tip’ an ‘armchair jihadi’ towards real world extremism. This entails examining social psychological research on tipping points that can be translated to the process of radicalisation. Prominent cases of jihadists will then be examined to illustrate the physiognomies behind their tipping points and the applicability of such theories. Finally, strategies to incorporate tipping point mechanisms towards countering violent extremism will be discussed. This chapter emphasises how the key to understanding tipping points in extremism lies in understanding the cognitive, social and emotive barriers to extremist thinking and action. There is thus an imperative need for more research and experimentation on persuasion tactics and in particular tipping points. Extremist counter-narratives can only be successful if they incorporate the energies of youth and other key individuals at the grassroots towards crafting, spreading and adding credibility to counter-narratives.

INTRODUCTION

Online militant jihadi sympathisers are at times reproached by those more active in the real world for being an ‘armchair jihadi’. This chapter will begin by exploring the concept of ‘tipping points’ from a multidisciplinary perspective that analyses the epistemology behind this term and its subsequent development. It will also examine and illustrate via case studies the challenges involved in identifying tipping points in radicalisation cases, and the kind of surface inferences such analyses produce. This will be juxtaposed against the current understanding of attitude shifts based on social psychology, and how the Internet presents an ideal environment for transforming and creating new beliefs. If tipping points do matter in the process of radicalisation, then this inevitably brings in the question of how one goes about identifying them. A framework for identifying tipping points can primarily be of use in extremism risk

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assessment models that can help identify individuals who are about to move from ‘talking about it’ to ‘doing something’.

This will be followed by further illustrations describing why the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria’s (ISIS) messaging strategies have been so persuasive and how jihadi messaging has incorporated strategies for creating tipping points towards an extremist trajectory. Finally, the chapter will explore practical applications for countering violent extremism that can be built around the concept of the tipping points and resultant factors for creating persuasive messaging. This will culminate towards suggestions for reworking current counter-narrative strategies. These suggested changes aim to promote initiatives for the development of effective and credible counter-narratives, platforms that can reach and resonate with targeted individuals at risk, and the creation of an exponential counter-extremism momentum with the potential to overwhelm extremist voices and arguments.

EPISTEMOLOGY OF TIPPING POINTS

One of the earliest uses of the term ‘tipping points’ in sociology can be seen in the pioneering work of Morton Grodzins who observed how in a particular neighbourhood in the late 1950s, white individuals who lived in areas dominated by non-whites started moving out in droves when the number of non-whites exceeded a certain threshold (Grodzins, 1958, 2007; “The original tipping point”, 2009). Mark Granovetter (1978) later expanded on this concept in his threshold model. In this model, Granovetter stated that individual behaviour is contingent on those who are already partaking in that behaviour. It is not simply about following others or about being influenced by them. Rather, the tipping point depends on the number of individuals who eventually ascribe to the act and is based on a cost-benefit calculation for partaking in the act or leaving it.

Applying this to the radicalisation process, an individual may choose to join an extremist group at a threshold point where the cost of partaking is low compared to the benefits of being in the group, and vice-versa for leaving. Different individuals naturally have varying thresholds (Granovetter, 1978). The key contribution from the threshold model is in revealing the importance of barriers to action as compared to simply focusing on forces of attraction. These barriers (i.e., threshold points) are in fact synonymous with the idea of what tipping points actually constitute. Over time, social interaction models have also recognised that one’s choices are at times dependant on the choices of others following their interactions, and this leads to a complex dynamic with ‘multiple equilibrium and tipping points’ (Card, Mas, & Rothstein, 2007).

Various disciplines in social psychology have attempted to elucidate the myriad factors leading to this elusive tipping point. What is less emphasised are the factors that keep this individual at ‘equilibrium’. Again in reference to the radicalisation process, this would refer to the competing forces that balance and maintain the individual at a particular stage of radicalisation. The Cyber Extremism Orbital Pathways (CEOP) model is essentially an inferential pathway model for online radicalisation based on the characteristics of the Internet (Saifudeen, 2014). The rationale for using circular orbits in this model is to emphasise how for every stage of radicalisation, there are competing forces that maintain that stage and keep it in equilibrium. However, there can be influences which culminate towards tipping points that upset the equilibrium at each stage of radicalisation. These influences ultimately steer an individual who may have initially only harboured radical thoughts at the cognitive level towards actual violent behaviour.