Chapter 29

Persuasive Propaganda: An Investigation of Online Deceptive Tactics of Islamist, White, and Zionist Extremists

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ABSTRACT

Various persuasion methods are used on the internet to sell products or ideas, as individuals are highly susceptible to believing much of what they access online. With about 4 billion netizens and counting, the internet provides wide access to gullible individuals. In this context, terrorist and extremist groups are witnessing an unabated increase in their membership and support, largely by employing deception-based persuasion techniques, inciting religious, regional, or racial sentiments. While religion-based Islamist terror is infamous for its large-scale adverse global impact, there are two other groups driven by the motives of racial and geographical hegemony that impact the world – the white supremacists and the Zionists. The chapter purports to achieve a three-part aim: (1) to examine these three groups in context of the deceptive information they put up online, (2) to analyze why such deceptive content has such an impact on the general public that it convinces them to resort to extremism, and (3) to discuss some methods of identifying and preventing online deception.

INTRODUCTION

Violent extremism has risen exponentially over the past few years, as a result of volatile socio-political conditions around the world. The quest for establishing hegemony has particularly motivated the emergence of various extremist outfits. Extremism is characterised by radical belief systems within social, political, or personal spheres. It includes advocacy of violence against, separation from, defamation of, deception about, or hostility toward others based on their race, religion, ethnicity, gender, or sexual orientation (Franklin, 2007; Kurtz & Turpin, 1999). Groups endorsing extremism comprise individuals
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who often share a common goal of opposing or eradicating certain populations from the world, citing them to be threats to their group and beliefs. The organised hatred stemming from religious, ethnic, or geo-political extremism, which is incitement, is most likely to culminate into terrorism (Baker, 2012), with the sole purpose of eradicating individuals who are believed to be threats to the group. All forms of extremism operate under the paradigm that most other groups are ‘threatening outsiders’. Such perceived outsiders are often depersonalized and labelled (Alava, Frau-Meigs, Hassan, Hussein, & Wei, 2017) and paranoia is created around the narrative that these outsiders are a hazard to the group’s heritage or lineage.

Radicalization of Individuals Based on Propaganda

Radicalization of individuals forms the very crux of extremist outfits. This is because extremist beliefs themselves are formulated based on the worst possible perceptions of others, and therefore the group members often attempt to further their agenda by portraying themselves as the victims of unfair treatment. Individuals (especially youth) are manipulated into partaking in extremist activities, under the pretence of doing service to their own ‘ingroups’ (social and political), or to their deities (religious). In exchange of playing a role in furthering relevant propaganda or causing some form of harm to the supposedly threatening outgroups, they are often promised a better future. In cases of religious extremism (particularly Islamic), there is a confirmation of a lucrative and lubricious afterlife. Such a belief is propagated by religious leaders, who cite holy texts as the basis for such an outcome. Gullible individuals, who feel strongly about their group affiliations or are lured by the material, spiritual, and at times even romantic offers made to them, often buy into the propaganda, and aid in furthering it (Blaker, 2015; Milton & Dodwell, 2018; Shorer, 2018).

There is a public notion that radicalization of individuals is frequently facilitated by family members or close friends. However, there is no scholarly work that suggests this. Moreover, in several instances of radicalized children, parents are either found to be unaware about the situation or too scared to intervene (Sikkens, San, Sieckelinck, & Winter, 2017). In cases of religious extremism, places of worship are often cited as being complicit in recruiting individuals to perpetrate extremist activities (Horgan, 2009). However, for other forms of extremism, recruitment strategies may vary. Over the last few years, a more expedient form of recruitment has emerged for the extremists, and terrorism and extremism has experienced a shift from terrestrial modes of recruitment. Various extremist organizations are using the Internet to further their propaganda, and galvanize individuals to carry out terrorist activities; this shift is to online media, which includes websites, social media, and personal messaging applications.

Role of the Internet in Furthering Propaganda

As of 2018, it is estimated that more than 4 billion individuals use the Internet, of which approximately 3.92 billion are social media users. This number is increasing by 12% each year (Kemp, 2018). Various social media groups are adept at amassing like-minded individuals in order to discuss topics of common interests, or exchange information regarding common goals. Through this, the members are able to seek solidarity with like-minded people, and engage in unencumbered communication regarding their thoughts and motives. While such solidarity may be used to propel social movements, it could also enable individuals to express their hatred without inhibitions (Keum & Miller, 2018; Koehler, 2015). The cloak of quasi-anonymity that the Internet provides also proves to be beneficial, and is perhaps the primary appeal of racist and extremist dialogue online (Lauterbach, 2009). Extremists have banked upon