Chapter 17

Twitter as Virtual Battleground: The Case of HSM Press in Somalia

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ABSTRACT

Somalia has been plagued by political instability and ongoing conflict for over two decades. Yet, that does not mean Somalia has been completely isolated from modern technologies and new media. The construction of cell phone towers and other means of communication is a popular and profitable business in Somalia. One of the more recent additions to Somali new media is the use of microblogging. On December 7, 2011, Somalia’s al-Shabaab began a Twitter feed in both English and Arabic. In its first two months of tweeting, al-Shabaab promoted its successes on the ground, condemned what they see as unjustified acts of violence perpetrated against them, and engaged in a Twitter war with the Kenyan Defense Forces. This chapter seeks to analyze these first few months of al-Shabaab’s Twitter activity. What are the main goals of al-Shabaab’s use of Twitter? How effective have they been? How does their use of microblogging compare to other extremists’ (such as the Taliban) use of Twitter? As Somalia is largely considered a failed state and internet penetration is not particularly dense, who is the intended audience?

INTRODUCTION

Somalia has long been the quintessential example of a failed state. The regime of Siad Barre collapsed in January 1991, and Somalia has been without an effective government ever since. Being a failed state does not mean that Somalia is without contact with the rest of the world, nor does it mean that new technologies have eluded the country. Indeed, even hardline Islamists have taken to social media sites like Twitter in an attempt to craft a public image and engage with people around the world.
Gabriel Weimann’s *Terror on the Internet* (2006) effectively outlines the major uses of the Internet by extremist groups—communication among members, transfer of information such as instructions on bomb-making or training videos, research of potential targets, and cyber-terrorism. Since the publication of Weimann’s book, we have seen the rise of social media and, with it, the ability to craft an image and recruit new members has become a major component of extremist Internet usage.

De Koster and Houtman’s (2008) work looks at the workings of online communities focusing primarily on chat rooms. Now with new and more public ways of communication such as Facebook and Twitter, we see these online communities not just talking to each other but engaging in dialogues with non-members as well. In the case of Somalia, we see this type of online communication and social media activity happening in the context of a failed state and a civil war.

On December 7, 2011, Somalia’s *Harakat al-Shabaab al-Mujahideen*, better known as al-Shabaab, began using the popular microblogging site Twitter. Through the site, al-Shabaab has promoted their military successes on the ground, condemned what they see as unjustified acts of violence perpetrated against them, and engaged in a Twitter war with the Kenyan Defense Forces. This study examines the objectives and effectiveness of the first few months of al-Shabaab’s Twitter campaign and compares al-Shabaab’s use of microblogging to other Islamist extremists, such as the Taliban. It will also touch on the idea of technological determinism as it relates to manner in which modern extremists utilize social media.

A BRIEF LOOK AT RECENT SOMALI HISTORY

After the fall of the Siad Barre regime, Somalia fell into a state of chaos. Various warlords vied for power and were able to effectively carve out little fiefdoms across the country. A series of United Nations Security Council Resolutions led to the creation of UNOSOM I (United Nations Operation in Somalia I) (United Nations, 1992). The UNOSOM troops proved ineffective at their peacemaking mission and in December 1992, the United States began Operation Restore Hope. The U.S. mission was to protect the UN peacekeepers and create an environment in which humanitarian aid could be delivered. UNOSOM I and Operation Restore Hope were eventually replaced by UNOSOM II. This mission consisted of a much larger force and seemed better able to cope with the chaotic situation on the ground. However, in October 1993, a U.S. attempt to apprehend Mohamed Farah Aidid, one of the most powerful warlords in Mogadishu, led to the Battle of Mogadishu. Also known as the Black Hawk Down incident, this disastrous encounter precipitated the eventual withdrawal of U.S. troops from Somalia. UNOSOM II was weakened without the U.S. support and ended, in failure, in March 1995.

While the failed state environment has allowed warlords to prosper, it also has provided an opening for Islamist groups to shape Somalia with their particular ideological orientation. Over the ensuing years, various groups emerged and numerous Islamic courts were formed. These courts developed across southern Somalia, with a large portion of them concentrated in Mogadishu.

The courts were often dominated by members of a particular clan, who would mete out harsher punishments to members of rival clans. In other words, there was an obvious clan bias in sentencing. In 2000, the various Islamic courts in Mogadishu merged and formed the Islamic Courts Union (ICU) to consolidate power and rectify clan bias. Each court had a militia to enforce its rulings, and those militias merged into the ICU’s own armed wing. The ICU was then able to establish a sense of limited control. It outlawed the use of *qaat*, a popular narcotic plant, and imposed order and security, as opposed to the warlords who would intentionally foment chaos. Seeking to create
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