The Evolving Capabilities of Terrorism on Social Media

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Introduction

In a coordinated attack on September 11th, 2001, al-Qaeda agents boarded and hijacked four East Coast commercial planes. Two of these planes crashed into the World Trade towers, one hit the western side of the Pentagon, and one crashed into a field in Pennsylvania after passengers attempted to take back control of the plane from the hijackers (History Editors, 2011). This attack fundamentally changed how the world viewed acts of terrorism and the groups that carried out said acts. However, the attack also changed how different terrorist groups conducted their operations and evolved their scope of influence and ability to operate under increased scrutiny. This paper intends to show how the rapid expansion of the internet and social media platforms allowed terrorist organizations to expand their scope of influence and flourish despite governmental resolve to eliminate the threat that they pose.

This paper will begin with a review of the existing literature surrounding modern-day terrorist organizations. The literature review will provide a structure for the case studies selected. All of the literature reviewed in this paper focuses on secondary sources and media reports that explored high profile terror arrests and independent investigations. The summary will examine three groups that fall within the existing theories and will show how each group used social media to expand their scope of influence. To conclude, the discussion will focus on the implications of mobilization through the use of social media for terrorist networks as technology continues to rapidly evolve.

Literature Review

The ability to observe how different groups use social media in real time proves to be a useful tool in creating different categories for understanding the functions of these networks. This review will examine the use of social media by using three distinct categories: influencing the narrative, raising funds, and appealing to vulnerable individuals. Taking into consideration the diverse range of terrorist organizations and the differing methods and ideologies, these categories provide a general understanding of how they operate. With such a diverse range of terrorist groups and variation of methods and ideologies, it would be a daunting task to explain how every group has tailored their actions to achieve their goals.

Influencing the Narrative

The largest obstacles different groups face during their campaigns are the risk of counter narratives and mass media turning the public opinion against said groups (Tufekci, 2017). Throughout the 20th century, mass media has controlled and directed the mainstream discussion in society and this gives them the power to choose what was and was not discussed (Tufekci, 2017). [A1] Because of this dominance, there was little opportunity for terrorist groups to promote their agenda to a larger audience. For instance, al-Qaeda had limited success in using media network, Al Jazeera, as a platform to promote their agenda to a larger audience, as their appearance on the platform was not without critical follow-ups by the network (Soufan, 2017). The act of being criticized by the very networks that broadcast them can best be explained by Joseph S. Tuman's explanation of critical media theory. Critical media theory considers the monopoly that

mass media has over the news cycle to be a result of mass media's (?) ability to set the agenda of topics covered, as well as how these topics are framed (Tuman, 2010).

The narratives selected are based on viewer interest and the prospect of higher ratings. An excellent example of this selectivity was the lack of coverage and therefore a lack of a reaction to the bombing of the USS Cole by al-Qaeda in 2000 (CNN, 2018). Ali Soufan explains that at the time of the bombing, America was captivated by the upcoming Supreme Court decision on the Clinton administration and therefore all major media outlets focused solely on that, ignoring the USS Cole Bombing and provoking al-Qaeda to attempt a larger attack to regain the attention of the media (Soufan, 2017).

However, the introduction of social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter have allowed different groups and individuals to share their own narratives with a wider audience. Zeynep Tufekci describes a historical shift in the ways that social groups operate due to the ever-expanding reach of the internet. Groups have started to set their own agendas and rewrite the narratives around their actions while simultaneously amplifying their movements on a level that could not have been imagined in 2000 (Tufekci, 2017). The ability to move beyond relying on mass media to share their narratives has ironically made the actions of terrorist groups one of the best ways to capture the attention of an audience. As a result, mass media has begun to rely on the accounts given by the groups about their actions, placing these narratives at the center of every major news cycle (Tuman, 2010). The change in media priorities has created an environment that has allowed groups to flourish on social media without the constraints of traditional media outlets. This phenomenon has amplified the scope of their narrative to include actions that go beyond the spread of ideology.

Raising Funds

A determinant for the success of a terrorist group is their ability to access necessary resources. In order to obtain these resources, groups must obtain a consistent source of funding. Without that source of funding, the group will either dissolve or be forced to amalgamate into a larger group.

Historically, there have been three ways that groups have been able to access funds as listed in Steven Everson's House Committee testimony: mock charities, money-laundering through corporations, and the use of banks to move money quickly through different countries (House Committee on Oversight and Investigation, 2002). However, all three methods allowed governments to trace the sources of their income and freeze their accounts (Levitt, 2003). Coupled with increased global cooperation in the wake of 9/11, counterterrorism coalitions have been able to hack different groups and disrupt their sources of income (Nance & Sampson, 2017).

Faced with the possibility of losing all sources of funding, groups turned to the internet to appeal to their supporters for donations. Weimann explains that this change in sources of funding is not a new tactic, but the natural step in the evolution of the modern-day terrorist organization (Weimann, 2006). Many of the same approaches are still used, but are framed in a new light. For example, the group Hezbollah uses a charity format that is similar to that of World Vision, in which they create fundraising campaigns claiming to raise donations to support orphans of killed soldiers or to support the rehabilitation of an injured soldier (Weimann, 2006). Aside from the fact these funds are framed to appeal to the donor's sense of humanity, they also provide a level of anonymity. Programs such as PayPal allow payments to be processed quickly and securely with no

information to track and it also introduces the option for groups to set up fake profiles in order to further avoid detection (Jacobson, 2009).

Appealing to Vulnerable Individuals

In the 20th century, the ability to recruit new members to different terrorist organizations was limited by geographical restraints and the inability to effectively spread one's ideology. A group was typically limited to small regions where one actor would draw others to them like a lightning rod. Any potential for cross-border expansion was only possible through chance encounters between organized terrorist groups, lone wolves, and individuals that are vulnerable to radicalization. Soufan categorizes Osama bin Laden as a lightning rod actor, citing his ability to draw others toward him in Saudi Arabia and uniting them under a common goal (Soufan, 2017). A chance encounter between bin-Laden and Saif al-Adel gave bin-Laden access to the resources and connections al-Adel had which allowed him to spread the influence of al-Qaeda throughout the Middle East[A2] (Bandy & Smith, 2005).

The potential for chance encounters to expand a group's recruitment and growth has been replaced by targeting vulnerable individuals who would be susceptible to a group's ideology. This is commonly referred to as 'radicalization' and involves the process of an individual adopting the ideology of a terrorist group that is fundamentally opposed to the society that the individual lives in (Neumann, 2013). Radicalization creates lone wolf terrorists who adopt the ideology of terrorist groups and are motivated to attack their own society in the name of those groups (Weimann, 2012). However, despite their allegiance to a group, the lone wolves are able to maintain a level of anonymity that the

group does not have. This allows them to carry out devastating attacks across the globe while typically catching emergency and counter-terrorism units completely off-guard (Weimann, 2012). The emergence of lone wolves and radicalization has allowed groups, to not only spread their influence across the globe, but also to gain plausible deniability should an attack go wrong (Spaaij, 2010).

Case Selection

For the purposes of this paper, we have chosen to explore three distinct terrorist groups: al-Qaeda; Boko Haram; and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL). Each group has created a distinct presence on social media and has become adept at using the techniques of one of the three previously mentioned categories. Raising funds will be explored by examining al-Qaeda's methods and how they have evolved since 1990. The ability to influence the narrative will be explored by examining Boko Haram's struggle to change public opinion in Nigeria. The process of appealing to vulnerable individuals will be explored by tracing ISIL and analyzing how the rapid acceleration of their social media presence drew individuals towards them.

The different social media platforms that we will be referring to in this paper are Twitter and YouTube. Throughout the initial analysis of the literature, these two platforms came up as the preferred for the groups that will be examined and therefore are the most applicable to the study.

Al-Qaeda

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, al-Qaeda was getting its funding from contributions of both members and supporters, corporations and Islamic charities, kidnapping and physical bags of cash brought to them (Abuza, 2003). However, the war on terrorism quickly began to disrupt the flow of funds with many assets being seized or frozen (Levitt, 2003). This naturally created an issue for the group and when combined with the relentless bombing of Kandahar by US forces, al-Qaeda was looking at potential defeat by resource exhaustion (Soufan, 2017). However, there was hope in the methods demonstrated by Babar Ahmad and Sami al-Hussayen in the late 1990s (Jacobson, 2010).

Babar Ahmad used his technical skills to create websites advertised as charities in order to secure funding for al-Qaeda beginning in 1997 (BBC, 2005). The websites used scare tactics like urging all Muslims to use their resources to prepare for Jihad by claimed that training for war was obligatory and encouraging them to carry gas masks and nuclear suits to protect themselves against the coming attacks (BBC, 2005). The use of scare tactics and sensational, grand statements captured subscribers' attention by preying on their fears and unwillingly caused subscribers of the website to become emotionally involved. By preying on the fears and emotions of vulnerable peoples, Ahmad created a new standard for fundraising that would become highly influential in the coming years (BBC, 2005).

But Ahmad was not the only individual attempting to use the internet to generate funds for al-Qaeda. Sami al-Hussayen, who was a computer science graduate student at the University of Idaho at the time of his arrest, was also arrested for raising money to fund terrorism (The Washington Post, 2003). While he was never convicted of aiding

terrorism, Hussayen's websites did support the use of suicide bombings and was closely associated with another al-Qaeda charity front, *Support the Needy* (Egan, 2004).

These new approaches to fundraising through false online charities became one of the core sources of funding for al-Qaeda Weimann, 2012). As the financial sector of the Internet advanced and payment processing became more secure, al-Qaeda expanded its false charity methods, heavily promoting themselves under names such as *Muslim Aid* (Williams-Grut, 2015). The most important part of this method is that it brings in an incredible amount of money for the group with their yearly operating expenses estimated to be $10 million, and while not all of that funding comes directly from false charities, a high portion does (David, 2017).

But the real issue here is that all governments and counter-terrorism task forces have known that this is where a high amount of al-Qaeda's funding has come from. So why haven't there been any large-scale crackdowns on the donors or any halts on transactions? This is because encryption programs, such as SSL/TLS Protocols and Tokenization, have made eCommerce payments incredibly secure (Wrobel-Konior, 2018). Any type of code written to bypass the current encryption system poses a risk to the financial security of the rest of the eCommerce sector. This is the same argument that Apple used in 2013 when they refused to write a code to bypass an iPhone's security system in the case of the San Bernardino terrorist, where they argued that any code written would create a permanent possibility for a security breach that spy agencies and hostile countries could abuse (Khamooshi, 2016). This same threat is now proving to be a major factor in the fight against al-Qaeda and a major win for al-Qaeda as they can take

comfort in knowing that unlike their courier and physical donations, their digital funds will not be halted in the near future.

Boko Haram

Boko Haram is best known for the 2014 kidnapping of more than 200 schoolgirls from their school in Chibok, Nigeria (Abubakar, 2014). Regardless of the presence of social media, this story made global headlines due to its horrific nature. Yet Boko Haram uses social media to ensure that all of their operations and messages reach a wide audience within Northern and Eastern Africa. Their main goal has been to cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Nigerian government while also instilling fear in the population to ensure that no one will dare to rise up against the group (Ogobondah & Agbese, 2018).

Initially emerging in 2002 as a part of a less successful regional branch of al-Qaeda, Boko Haram remained far below anyone's radar until 2009, when the group attacked police forces in Maiduguri (Ogobondah & Agbese, 2018). This incident provided Boko Haram with a platform to officially declare their Jihad against the government of Nigeria as a result of the government's shift to secularism and corruption permeating every level of office (Ogobondah & Agbese, 2018). Immediately after declaring their jihad, Boko Haram began their propaganda campaign grounded in radical discourse on Twitter. Part of the group's success on Twitter has been attributed to the lack of regulations about the content tweets and the Twitter's general reluctance to actively moderate dangerous content and proactively delete accounts associated with hate speech. The lack of moderation has allowed Boko Haram to freely attack the Nigerian government (Chiluwa, 2015).

What has made Boko Haram so successful in the jihad against the Nigerian government has been their focus on changing the pre-existing opinions held in Nigeria that the government is good and Boko Haram is the enemy (Chiluwa, 2015). But Boko Haram has also created a name for themselves on YouTube by publishing videos of the group beheading innocent victims that they claim are acting against them (Ogobondah & Agbese, 2018). The combination of these two tactics has given the group a terrifying reputation that has led many in, not only Nigeria, but the world to fear them. If these two tactics were used alone, the group would most likely have turned the group's image into that of a ruthless group with a sole focus on violence, but Boko Haram have managed to avoid this.

A large part of Boko Haram's digital discourse is centered around undermining the Nigerian government. This discourse has two main focuses: blaming the underdevelopment of Nigeria on government corruption and reducing the credibility of the government by highlighting every mistake that they make (Onuoha, 2012). One of the group's most public attempts to delegitimize the government came in the immediate aftermath of the 2014 schoolgirl abduction. Due to an extreme miscommunication, the Nigerian government claimed that there were approximately eight school girls missing the day after the abduction when in reality, the total was over 200 (BBC Africa, 2014). Boko Haram used that mistake to perpetuate their views of the government as a weak and untrustworthy entity (Ogobondah & Agbese, 2018).

This is part of how Boko Haram takes control of the narrative in Nigeria; they capitalize on every opportunity that they get, to either make themselves appear strong and stable, or to make the government appear weak and corrupt (Ogobondah & Agbese,

2018). But the issue is that this strategy is working, because of the lax monitoring on Twitter and YouTube, and the disinterest of the companies in controlling hate speech that has begun to flourish on both platforms. Until this policy changes, Boko Haram and other similar groups will continue to share their propaganda and ideology undeterred.

ISIL

ISIL began as a sub-group under al-Qaeda before breaking ties in 2013 to pursue their goals undeterred (Berger, 2014). Their tactics gave the group a reputation for being brutal and built on bloodshed. But this view does not explain the thousands of Westerners going to Syria and Iraq to fight for ISIL, including both Canadians and Americans (Shane & Hubbard, 2014). What accounts for the mass recruitment is the group's social media savvy methods, especially on Twitter (Shane & Hubbard, 2014)?

ISIL's focus on the radicalization of vulnerable individuals has only strengthened them, with each new recruit bringing in new funding, a resolve to fight and an appearance of diversity to highlight on their social media (Gates & Podder, 2015). This element of diversity is critical to ISIL's social media strategy because it enables the group to craft their own narrative to appeal to a range of potential recruits. These sides range from videos of journalists being executed, to how the members find inventive ways to charge their smartphones, to a group rejoicing after finding a jar of Nutella in a store (Klausen, 2015). ISIL's ability to come across as a sort of brotherhood allows them to reach individuals who may feel alienated or out-of-touch with their own society and are therefore more susceptible to the idea of becoming a part of something bigger than themselves (Shane & Hubbard, 2014). This has been extraordinarily effective in recruiting

young men who feel insecure about their prospects of success in their own society by making them feel as though they will achieve some form of greatness by joining ISIL's fight (Gates & Podder, 2015).

One of the most frustrating aspects of ISIL's media strategy is the pure volume of posts that go up on a daily basis. The volume peaks at times when the group actually involved in the most conflict. One clear example is that on the day that ISIL marched into Mosul, they tweeted approximately 44 000 times (Farewell, 2014). An important note on that number is that it is not including all of the accounts that retweet ISIL tweets or mention ISIL accounts in their own tweets. Nor does it include the tweets from the personal accounts of radicalized individuals (Farewell, 2014). The pure volume of content being produced on a daily basis has the potential to reach millions of other accounts with the potential to radicalize each of them and encourage lone wolf terrorism (Liang, 2015). It also creates an issue that is similar to the one in the case of Boko Haram wherein the platforms that are being mobilized by these groups have very lax or non-existent hate speech monitoring, allowing the group's influence to spread (Klausen, 2015).

The utilization of social media also presents a problem for governments looking to halt the spread of ISIL propaganda because very often, ISIL accounts use fake names and locations to protect the identities of the members and, when an account is shut down or removed, the user can simply create a new account and continue to spread propaganda (Liang, 2015). As a result of the rapid regeneration of ISIL twitter accounts, counterterrorism groups are being forced to redesign their approaches to countering this type of terrorism as censorship and account deletion have proven ineffective at halting the sources of propaganda (Liang, 2015).

Conclusion

Terrorists on social media present a problem similar to that of the Hydra. If you cut off one head, two more will take its place. It you shut down one ISIL tweet, delete one Boko Haram video or freeze one fake al-Qaeda charity, two more will be created to take their place. Naturally, this is incredibly frustrating and has created a sense of paranoia. After all, you don't actually know what you neighbour does on their computer nor do you know what charities your colleague donates to or even what the barista at your favourite coffee shops watches in their spare time. But this paranoia should not consume the everyday lives of individuals nor should it prompt them to retaliate against those that they assume to guilty of these crimes. But as technology evolves and terrorists expand their scope of influence, the scope of hate and fear within societies expands as well, hurting individuals on the basis of assumed crimes.

One of the more depressing aspects of this analysis is that only three groups were covered when in reality, there are hundreds of active terrorist groups operating on a daily basis. These groups all have their own media strategies and goals. To even try to understand the motives of every group would be futile as there is a common theme of groups connecting, breaking apart, being assimilated, rising up and disappearing. But they are still out there and while they may not have the resources or capacity to carry out the world's next 9/11, they still have the ability to carry out distinctive acts of violence against the respective communities.

The conclusions of this paper are not optimistic. The abilities of terrorists will continue to evolve and expand as technology evolves and expands. Governments and counter-terrorism units will most likely be playing catch-up for the foreseeable future as

well. But it would be a mistake to assume that there is no chance of us winning the war on terror and there is no excuse for letting paranoia and fear consume us for, a society that is divided will not stand. After all, the hydra was eventually defeated. It just took some time to understand how.

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