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The Use of Information Technology by Terrorist Organisations

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The story of the presence of terrorist groups in cyberspace has barely begun to be told.

The truth is that the use of the internet by terrorists has been growing like wildfire. In 1998 Under the US Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death penalty Act 1996 , 15 of the 30 organisations designated as ‘foreign Terrorist organisations,’ had websites.

By 2000 virtually all the terrorist groups had established their presence on the internet.

By 2004 literally hundreds of websites serving terrorists and their supporters came into being. Now there are over 7,000, and nearly everyone has seen some of the their images from propaganda videos broadcast on worldwide networks.

Today’s Al Qaeda has no need for offices – even basic training are taken care by the Internet connection. AlQaeda’s virtual university is taking care of that.

The real danger has been the response by the authorities. They have focussed on the threats they face by interception and hacking – cyber crime. Many people feel they should concentrate more on the numerous uses that terrorists make of the Internet every day.

We see today an increasingly sophisticated terrorist presence on the World Wide Web. Terrorism on the Internet is a very dynamic phenomenon: websites suddenly emerge, frequently modify website address; disappear then reappear in a slightly different mode.

Tracking them is a challenge. Al Qaeda's websites locations and contents change almost daily. The principal one is As-Sahab which is largely used for promotional purposes. Their on-line publishing website is Sawt Al-Jihad. The new Al-Qaeda news website is Al-Lewa with latest statements by the terrorist group and its leaders.

Uses are varied:

1. Psychological warfare
2. Gathering and dispensing information
3. Training
4. Fundraising
5. Propaganda
6. recruitment
7. Planning terrorist acts
8. Co-ordinating terrorist acts

Just think for a moment what a monumental tool the internet is. Today about a billion users across the globe are now clicking on.

The early utopian visions of the internet back in the 1980s for the promise of developing the 'global village' spreading new ideas, stimulating and sustaining democracy has been hijacked by pornography and violence on the one hand, and terrorist organisations on the other.

The very nature of the Internet is an ideal vehicle for terrorist activity.

It offers:

1. Easy access
2. Little or no regulation, censorship, or other forms of government control
3. potentially huge audiences spread throughout the world
4. anonymity of communication
5. fast flow of information
6. Cheap to develop and maintain.
7. a multi-media vehicle ie. the ability to combine text with graphics, audio, and videos as well as allow users to download films, songs, posters, books etc.
8. The ability to shape coverage in the traditional media, which increasingly uses the Internet as a source of stories.

9. Hidden instructions, manuals and directions in coded messages or encrypted files

Overview of terrorist websites

Websites are not the exclusive preserve of any one group. All terrorist organisations no matter their political orientation use them; Islamists, Marxists, nationalists, separatists, racists and anarchists – all find the internet alluring.

All active terrorist organisations – about 40 – maintain websites, and many more than one and in several languages.

Most are transnational in character.

A few Eg.

From the Middle East:

- Hamas
- Lebanese Hezbollah
- Al Aqsa brigades
- People's Mujahedin of Iran
- Al Qaeda
- Ansar Al Islam

From Europe:

- IRA – Ireland
- Basque ETA movement

From Latin America

- Peru's Tupak-Amaru
- Colombian National Liberation Army

From Asia

- Huzb-ul Mujehideen in Kashmir
- Pakistan Lashkar-e-Taiba
- Sri Lanka, the LTTE – Liberation Tigers
- Rebel movement in Chechnya

Content

Typically a site will provide a history of the organisation; its activities, a detailed review of its social and political background, accounts of its notable exploits, biographies of its leaders, its founders and heroes, information on its political and ideological aims, fierce criticism of its enemies and up-to-date news.

Nationalist and separatist organisations generally display maps of the areas in dispute. The Hamas site shows a map of Palestine, the FARC site shows a map of Colombia, the LTTE site presents a map of Sri Lanka and so forth.

Despite the ever present vocabulary of “armed struggle” and “resistance”, what most sites do not feature is a detailed description of their violent activities.

Even if they expound at length on the moral and legal basis of the legitimacy of the use of violence, most sites refrain from referring to the terrorists’ violent actions or their fatal consequences. This reticence is presumably inspired by propagandist and image-building considerations. Two exceptions to this rule are Hezbollah and Hamas whose sites feature updated statistical report of their daily actions (“daily operations”) and tallies of both “dead martyrs” and “Israeli enemies” and “collaborators killed”.

Audiences

Whom do Internet terrorists target at their sites? An analysis of the content of the websites suggests three different audiences.

- *Current and potential supporters.* Terrorist websites make heavy use of slogans and offer items for sale eg T-shirts, badges, flags, videotapes, audiocassettes – all aimed at sympathisers. Often an organisation will target its local supporters with a site in the local language and will provide detailed information about the activities, internal politics of the organisation, its allies and its competitors.
- *International public opinion.* Not necessarily directly involved but may have an interest and could be influenced. Such sites are in several languages eg ETA’s site is also in Castilian, German, French and Italian. IMU sites uses Arabic, English and Russian.
- *Foreign journalists are targeted.* Press releases are often placed on websites in an effort to get the organisation’s point of view into the mainstream media. The detailed background information is also very useful for international reporters. One of the Hezbollah’s sites specifically address journalists, inviting them to interact with them via email.
- *Enemy publics.* Efforts to reach enemy publics (ie. citizens of the states against which terrorists are fighting) are not as clearly apparent from the content of many sites. However some sites do seem to make an effort to demoralize the enemy by threatening attacks and fostering feelings of guilt about the enemy’s conduct and motives. In the process they seek to stimulate public debate in their enemies’ states, to change public opinion, and to weaken public support for the governing regime.

How Terrorists Use the Internet

Psychological warfare

- They use the internet to spread disinformation,
- To deliver threats intended to distil fear and helplessness,
- To disseminate horrific images of recent actions, such as the brutal murder of American journalist Daniel Pearl; the beheading of British businessman Ken Bigley or the shooting of British resident Margaret Hassan in Iraq.
These videotapes and more have been replayed on several terrorist websites and can still be seen today.
- Cyberterrorism is generated when concern about what a computer attack could do eg. Bringing down airliners by disabling traffic control systems or disrupting national economies by wrecking the computerized systems that regulate stock markets. All these are amplified until the public believes that an attack will happen.
- The internet – an uncensored medium that carries stories, pictures, threats or messages regardless of their validity or impact – is particularly well suited to allowing even a small group to amplify its message and exaggerate its importance and the threat it poses.

Al Qaeda are highly sophisticated in these techniques. Osama bin Laden and his followers concentrate their propaganda efforts through their own websites and above ground organisations such as Al Jazeera and other broadcasting media to provide access to pre-recorded videotapes, audiotapes, CD-ROMs, DVDs, photographs and announcements.

Despite the massive onslaught it has sustained in recent years with arrests and deaths of many of its members, the dismantling of its operational bases and training camps in Afghanistan and the smashing of its bases in the Far East, Al Qaeda has continued to conduct an impressive scare campaign. Since 9/11 they have festooned websites with a string of announcements of an impending “large attack” on US targets. The warnings received considerable media coverage, which has helped to generate a widespread sense of dread and insecurity among audiences both in the US and globally.

Interestingly Al Qaeda has consistently claimed on its websites that the destruction of the World Trade Centre has inflicted psychological damage, as well as concrete damage on the US economy. The attacks were depicted as an assault on the trade mark of the US economy, and evidence of their effectiveness is seen in the weakening of the dollar, the decline of the US stockmarket and a supposed loss of confidence in the U.S. economy.

Publicity and propaganda

The Internet has been the answer to the terrorist’s prayers. It expanded their opportunities to secure publicity – a factor which had been denied them through traditional media sources, be they the press, tv or radio. Now they have direct control of the content of their messages and able to target their audiences accordingly.

Most terrorist sites ignore their own violent activities; instead prefer to concentrate on two issues:

- Freedom of expression and the plight of comrades who are now 'political prisoners'
These resonate well with their own supporters and calculate to elicit sympathy from Western audiences who cherish freedom of speech and frown on measures to silence political opposition. The terrorists' protest at being muzzled is particularly well suited for the internet, which for many users is the symbol of free, unfettered and uncensored communication.

Terrorist sites justify reliance on violence for the following reasons

- They had no choice. Violence is presented as a necessity foisted upon the weak as the only means to respond to an oppressive enemy. Ignore their own violence and how they victimize others, the forceful actions of governments through police and armed forces are characterized as 'slaughter', 'murder' and 'genocide.' The terrorist organisation is depicted as constantly persecuted, its leaders subjected to assassination attempts and its supporters massacred; its freedom of expression curtailed and adherents arrested.
- This tactic portraying the organisation as small, weak and hunted down by a strong power or state, turns the terrorists into the underdog.
- Violence is justified by demonizing and delegitimizing the 'enemy'. They are freedom fighters, forced against their will to use violence because a ruthless enemy is crushing the rights and dignity of the people in their group.
- Note also how they make extensive use of the language of non-violence as a bid to counter their bloodied image. Many of their sites claim they seek 'peaceful solutions', and that their ultimate aim is a diplomatic settlement achieved through negotiation and international pressure on a repressive government.

Data Mining

The internet is the most superb library in the world. The World Wide Web offers about a billion pages of information – much of it free – and much of it of real interest to terrorist organisations.

They can learn about targets, transportation facilities, nuclear power plants, public buildings, airports and ports – and even about counterterrorism measures. Maps, diagrams of potential targets, and so on. One captured Al Qaeda computer contained engineering and structural features of a dam. They have managed to hack into programming instructions for digital switches that run power, water, transportation and communications grids.

Numerous tools are available to them including the obvious search engines, e-mail distribution lists, chat rooms and discussion groups.

Fundraising

Like many other political organisations, terrorist groups use the internet to raise funds. Al-Qaeda has always depended heavily on donations and its global fundraising network is built upon a foundation of charities, non government organisations and other financial institutions that use websites. The Sunni extremist group Hizb Al-Tahrir uses an integrated web of internet sites stretching from Europe to Africa asking for money for the jihad.

Banking information including the numbers of accounts into which donations can be deposited is provided on a site in Germany. Chechnyan fighters publicize the numbers of bank accounts to which sympathisers can contribute. One incidentally was discovered in Sacramento, California. The IRA's website contains a page on which visitors can make credit card donations.

Terrorists build up a database of sympathisers on a particular cause or issue. They are then invited to make donations, typically through emails sent by a front group (ie. an organisation broadly supportive of their aims but operating publicly and legally –and usually having no direct ties to the terrorist organisation. Eg. Hamas benefited from money collected via a Texas-based charity, The Holy Land Foundation for Relief and Development. This has now been closed down as indeed others with a similar remit. Not exclusive to the US. This happens in countries all over the world.

Recruitment and Mobilization

The Internet is a useful tool to recruit and mobilize supporters to play a more active role in support of terrorist activities or causes.

Terrorists capture information about users who browse their websites. Those who seem most interested or well suited to furthering their aims are then contacted.

Recruiters may also use more interactive Internet technology to roam online chat rooms and cybercafés, searching particularly for young people. A factor we have certainly found in Britain.

Inversely some would-be recruits use the Internet to advertise themselves to terrorist organisations.

Ziyad Khalil enrolled as a computer science major at Columbia College in Missouri. He also became a Muslim activist on the campus developing links to several radical groups and operating a website that supported Hamas. Thanks in a large part to his internet activities he came to the attention of Osama bin Laden and his lieutenants. Khalil became al Qaeda's procurement officer in the US, arranging purchases of satellite telephones, computers and other electronic surveillance technologies. Just how and why he remains free is hard to determine. He has had his home and offices raided; been arrested but somehow the saga remains up in the air.

More typically terrorists' organisations go looking for recruits rather waiting for them to turn up.

The SITE Institute in Washington, DC – a terrorist research group has provided chilling details of a high-tech recruitment drive launched by Al Qaeda's Internet Communications team in 2003 seeking to recruit fighters to travel to Iraq and attack US and coalition forces. Potential recruits are bombarded with religious decrees and anti-American propaganda, provided with training manuals, and given specific instructions via chat rooms on how to make the journey to Iraq.

Many terrorist websites stop short of enlisting recruits for violent action but do encourage supporters to show their commitment in other ways. The power of the internet to mobilise public support is illustrated by the response to the arrest of Abdullah Ocalan, leader of the Kurdish terrorist group the PKK. When Turkish forces arrested Ocalan, tens of thousands of Kurds around the world responded with demonstrations within a matter of hours – thanks to the power of the Internet.

Training manuals

The Internet is home to dozens of sites that provide information on how to build chemical and explosive weapons. Many of these sites post *The Terrorist's Handbook* and *The Anarchist's Cookbook*, by William Powell, two well known manuals that offer detailed instructions on how to construct a wide range of bombs. Another manual *The Mujahadeen Poisons Handbook* by Abdel-Aziz published in 1996 published on the official Hamas website details in 23 pages how to prepare various homemade poisons, poisonous gases and other deadly materials.

A much larger manual, *The Encyclopedia of Jihad'* and prepared by Al Qaeda, runs to thousands of pages, distributed through the internet offering detailed instructions on how to establish an underground organisation and execute attacks. One AlQaeda laptop found in Afghanistan had been used to access *Sabotage Handbook* with sections on planning an assassination and anti-surveillance methods.

This kind of information is sought after by both the sophisticated terrorist but also by disaffected individuals prepared to use terrorist tactics to advance their own idiosyncratic agendas. The Madrid train bombers downloaded the plans from the internet to make their deadly bombs.

In London David Copeland on trial for killing 3 and injuring 9 in London pubs with nail bombs, admitted that he learned his deadly techniques from the Terrorists Handbook and How to Make bombs, Book 2

The Al Qaeda relied heavily on the Internet in planning and co-ordinating 9/11. Thousands of encrypted messages had been posted in a password-protected area of a website. These came to light on the computer of arrested Qaeda terrorist Abu Zubaydah who reportedly master minded the 9/11 attacks.

Hamas activists use chat rooms to plan operations and exchange information coordinating actions across Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and Israel. Instructions in

the form of maps, photographs, directions and technical details of how to use explosives were often disguised by means of steganography, the hiding of messages inside graphic files.

Conclusion

The terrorist organisations know and understand the use of the Internet only too well. They have honed their experiences gained in putting together the 9/11 attacks.

Today, terrorists of all ideological persuasions – Islamist, Marxist, nationalist, separatist, racist and so on – have learnt how to make the most of the Internet.

The great virtues of the Internet – ease of access, lack of regulation, vast potential audiences, fast flow of information and so on, have turned to their advance.

How should societies respond?

1. There should be more focus and we should be better informed about the uses the terrorist put the Internet.
2. We should be monitor their activities more thoroughly.
3. too much emphasis has been on how security agencies, policy makers and so on concentrate too much on the threat of hacking into sensitive material and paying insufficient attention to the more routine uses made of the Internet.
4. It is imperative that that security agencies continue to improve their ability to study and monitor terrorist activities on the Internet.
5. the Internet is almost the perfect embodiment of the democratic ideals of free speech and open communication. It is a market place of ideas. But: it is also vulnerable to abuse from groups, who paradoxically are themselves often hostile to uncensored thought and expression.
6. the Internet cannot be regulated although of course it can be curtailed as in China, but that defeats the whole object of free thought and communication.

In the end countering terrorism comes from many quarters and agencies. In the end, it is all about public communication. Government agencies are not by nature great communicators; the leaden hand of their material, are hardly the way to promote our values. We should not leave it to politicians.

We do need to look at ourselves; and be left hesitant in promoting the values that we believe to be true, fair and enduring is our great mistake. To speak and promote the obvious may seem unnecessary but in the end we have no choice. We need to be confident in ourselves, and confident in reaching out to the vulnerable who having lost a vision and purpose are drawn into the insidious and destructive purposes of the terrorists groups.

