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Is Internet Radicalization Possible?

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Ideas on the Internet do not independently transform people. The Internet is but a medium for communicating ideas that reflects society. If the content of the Internet is to be changed, it will be necessary to address the particular problems in society that the Internet mirrors.

Internet the Problem?

IT IS NOW almost eighteen months since the arrest in Singapore of former solicitor and law lecturer Abdul Basheer Abdul Kader under anti-terrorism legislation. This well-educated individual is held by the authorities to have ‘self-radicalized’ under the influence of radical Islamist websites. Many seem to worry that the Internet offers cheap, fast, secure and anonymous connections to supposed radicals. So what do we know about how this process works?

The answer, unfortunately, is ‘not a lot’, if we go by various reports including those by the New York Police Department and the Homeland Security Policy Institute in the United States. Whilst much effort has been expended to demonstrate a possible association between extremism and Internet usage, the indicators of the linkage between the two are far less clear.

Irrespective of this paucity of evidence, numerous agencies advocate a range of ‘solutions’ to address what they ‘know’ to be the problem. These range from censorship of particular websites to the promotion of so-called ‘counter-narratives’, by which they hope – or pray – for the misguided to be dissuaded from their path.

It is our contention that these approaches are highly unlikely to work. This is because by focusing narrowly on the phenomena themselves – the existence of jihadist websites, videos and chat rooms – which are not in dispute, they fail to address the content that these platforms convey and connect with. What is it in this content that resonates with the lives and experiences of those who seek these sites out, rather than stumble across them by accident?

Sense of Identity and Meaning

Surfing the web may appear to be a passive experience to the uninitiated. It is far from being so. Users endlessly select and reject content according to their own preferences. In an uncritical culture, this may lead to a tendency to only view, hear and engage with opinions and beliefs one may already hold, thereby amplifying these further.

This also explains why the vast majority of individuals, coming across supposedly ‘radicalizing’ content, will simply ignore or reject it. People are not mindless sponges, absorbing content and acting upon it. Rather, they actively choose what they want according to previously developed interpretations and models of the world that they have internalized. This selection process usually reflects their own experiences and the content they choose then provides some kind of ‘meaning’ to this.

No individual approaches the Internet in isolation. They come to it already bearing a vast number of ideas, assumptions and emotions. To this extent web users cannot be caricatured and analyzed as vulnerable little children operating in isolation, but rather as wilful agents, actively engaging with its content. This may be even more so when communicating with others online, as we should distinguish between thought, talk and action.

The notion that an individual surfing the Internet may come across websites that lead them directly to altering their behaviour suggests a fairly diminished view of human nature. Ideas on the Internet do not independently transform people. And for every radical website an individual may find, there are clearly hundreds of thousands of others that are not.

The web is a reflection of society in microcosm. Any problems on the web exist elsewhere in the first place. It almost seems as if hard debates about the problems of society are avoided by some in their pursuit of the technical manifestations and transmissions of such problems on the Internet. The focus is then on the battlefield rather than the content of the ideas themselves.

Rehabilitation

Groups working to rehabilitate people who have been rescued from a cult often note that it was the absence of meaningful relationships and bonds within everyday life that led these individuals astray. As such, it is not so much the assumed magnetism or ideology of maverick organizations operating online or anywhere else that need to be studied, understood and countered. Rather, it is the absence of any clear structure or sense of shared purpose within the mainstream.

Likewise, rather than becoming obsessed with the apparently mystical ability of the Internet to warp minds into becoming extremists, we would do well to examine what it is that modern culture provides as an alternative. By this, we do not mean as a ‘counter-narrative’ to others, but rather a narrative of our own. Without a system of coherent values, or mechanisms to confer and affirm a positive identity, it is likely – maybe even inevitable – that young people will seek these elsewhere.

What’s more, by labeling those ideas as extreme or radical, mainstream society effectively admits to its own inner bankruptcy. The message seems to be that you can believe anything you like so long as you don’t believe it too much. There may be no better way to propel precocious and hungry young minds into the hands of those who, on the surface at least, appear to have some principles.

What can be done?

The role played by the Internet remains largely misunderstood. Like rock music and computer games before it, it appears to some to be the route to all evil. This is to grossly underestimate the active and critical role played by those who use it. This also overestimates the power of the ideas and content

within it in isolation from their far broader social expressions.

Of course, professional security agencies will want to keep an eye on the web, just as they would on any other public space. It may make sense to focus their scrutiny on purposeful searches, as well as chat rooms and other interactive areas online. But even this approach may not suffice; much work on the identification of societal triggers remains to be done.

Ultimately, the Internet is a medium for communicating ideas that reflect society. If we want to see the content of the cyberworld changed, it is best achieved by addressing the issues in society at large – in the real world -- that the Internet manifests.

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