

# Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism leverage technology for fighting online propaganda of Terrorists

Leaders from the G20 nations, including Prime Minister Narendra Modi, called for concrete steps to check radicalisation, hiring and arranging of funds for terror activities through misuse of internet and social media. Asserting that the rule of law applies online as well as offline, the G20 leaders issued a 21-point joint declaration on various steps needed to be taken to fight terrorism.

On October 31, 2017, a person drove a rented pickup truck into cyclists and runners for about one mile (1.6 kilometers) of the Hudson River Park's bike path alongside West Street from Houston Street south to Chambers Street in Lower Manhattan, New York City. The vehicle-ramming attack killed eight people and injured 11 others. Early reports suggested Saipov was "self-radicalized". John Miller, the deputy commissioner of the New York Police Department, said Saipov did it in the name of ISIS, a jihadist militant group fighting in the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars, and appeared to have followed "almost exactly to a T" the group's advice on social media on how to carry out vehicular attacks.

Terrorist groups increasingly using social media platforms like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to further their goals and spread their message, because of its convenience, affordability and broad reach of social media. The leaders called for countering radicalisation conducive to terrorism

and the use of internet for terrorist purposes. The counter terrorism actions must continue to be part of a comprehensive approach, including combating radicalisation and recruitment, hampering terrorist movements and countering terrorist propaganda, the declaration said.

The G20 leaders also underlined that appropriate filtering, detecting and removal of content that incites terrorist acts is crucial. "... we also encourage collaboration with industry to provide lawful and non-arbitrary access to available information where access is necessary for the protection of national security against terrorist threats," they said.

Major social media and tech companies including Twitter, Facebook, Microsoft and Google-owned YouTube are forming a new coalition called the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism. This consortium will pool technology, research, and counterterrorism tactics including "counter-speech," which tries to prevent terrorist recruitment and incitement.

"The forum we have established allows us to learn from and contribute to one another's counter-speech efforts, and discuss how to further empower and train civil society organisations and individuals, who may be engaged in similar work and support ongoing efforts such as the civil society empowerment project (CSEP)."

One of the technologies that the group is likely to share is artificial intelligence, something Facebook recently said it believed would be key to tackling the rise of hate speech and terrorist recruitment online.

## **Social Media Platforms Becoming a Tool of**

# Terror

There has been a dramatic increase in global terrorist violence in recent years. According to Aon's 2017 Risk Map, there were 4,151 terrorist attacks worldwide in 2016, a 14% increase from the 3,633 recorded in 2015, with oil and gas companies the target of 41% of attacks on commercial interests. Western countries experienced a 174% rise, up from 35 in 2015 to 96 last year, although this accounts for less than 3% of terrorist violence globally, with countries in North Africa and the Middle East the most at risk.

Social media platforms have a huge global reach and audience, with YouTube boasting more than 1 billion users each month. This breaks down into 6 billion hours of video that are being watched each month and 100 h of video are uploaded to YouTube every month (YouTube Statistics, 2014). Similarly, Twitter has on average 350,000 tweets being sent per minute and 500 million tweets per day (Twitter, 2014), whilst Facebook remains the largest social media network with 500 million active users and 55 million people sending updates (Fiegerman, 2014).

Al-Qaeda has an Internet presence spanning nearly two decades. Al-Qaeda terrorists use the internet to distribute material anonymously or 'meet in dark spaces'. The Czech Military Intelligence Service commented that Al-Qaeda are spreading its ideology among the Muslim community in Europe, mainly through the means of social media.

Taliban militants fighting the Afghan government and NATO-led forces to regain power in the militancy-plagued Afghanistan, have been enormously using the internet in the propaganda war. Today, the Taliban outfit has several websites to publish their military and political activities and put on wire for its readers across the globe. The Taliban has been active on Twitter since May 2011, and has many thousands of followers.

ISIS use of social media platforms have been as phenomenal as his successes in the battlefield. It is running a sophisticated propaganda campaign to broadcast its gruesome brutality online and recruit beyond the Middle East. Isis has proved fluent in YouTube, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, internet memes and other social media. Its posting activity has ramped up during a recent offensive, reaching an all-time high of almost 40,000 tweets in one day as they marched into the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.

ISIS posting its executions of James Foley, David Cawthorne Haines, Alan Henning, and Steven Sotloff, online are causing havoc among the population viewing them, and instill fear within the Western world. They are able to use these videos, tweets, Facebook posts and forums into online radicalisation tools, whereby they are able to glamorise 'extremism' and make it appear as though fighting with them is 'cool'.

Recently articles in IS propaganda have appeared giving instructions on how to carry out attacks, such as the "Just Terror" section in Rumiya, IS' latest English language publication, and instructional videos, such as "How to slaughter the disbelievers", released by IS in November 2016. In a study by Gabriel Weimann from the University of Haifa, Weimann found that, terror groups use social media platforms like Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and internet forums to spread their messages, recruit members and gather intelligence.

Some have suggesting putting more pressure on social media groups like YouTube, Facebook and Twitter to remove content produced by terror groups.

# Challenges of fighting online propaganda of Terrorists

Twitter noted that “there is no ‘magic algorithm’ for identifying terrorist content on the Internet, so global online platforms are forced to make challenging judgment calls based on very limited information and guidance.” Further, the same users could quickly open new accounts.

In a blog post, the company said its actions went beyond the account suspensions. “We have increased the size of the teams that review reports, reducing our response time significantly. We also look into other accounts similar to those reported and leverage proprietary spam-fighting tools to surface other potentially violating accounts for review by our agents. We have already seen results, including an increase in account suspensions and this type of activity shifting off of Twitter.”

Twitter added it works with law-enforcement agencies when appropriate and partners with groups that work to counter extremist content online. But it also acknowledged that regulating speech on Twitter wasn’t easy. It said: As an open platform for expression, we have always sought to strike a balance between the enforcement of our own Twitter Rules covering prohibited behaviors, the legitimate needs of law enforcement, and the ability of users to share their views freely – including views that some people may disagree with or find offensive. As many experts and other companies have noted, there is no ‘magic algorithm’ for identifying terrorist content on the internet, so global online platforms are forced to make challenging judgement calls based on very limited information and guidance.

The leaders of Islamic State (IS) and Al Qaeda and their subsidiaries—survive because they are quick to adapt to changes in the physical and virtual battlespace, writes Philip

Seib in Fortune. “For some of their online communication, this has meant moving from the easily accessible “surface web” to the “deep web” and then on to its deepest part, the “dark web.” This is where one can find drugs, pornography, weapons, and other contraband. The dark web is out of reach of the most common search engines, such as Google, and is difficult for hackers to penetrate. IS warehouses its propaganda videos and other material on dark sites, and has raised and transferred money using the dark web’s currency of choice, Bitcoin.”

## **Artificial intelligence to deter and remove terrorist propaganda online**

Artificial Intelligence and data analytics, tools have become critical in successfully preventing crime. Many police forces are already trialling forms of ‘predictive policing’, largely to forecast where there is a high risk of ‘traditional’ crimes like burglary happening, and plan officers’ patrol patterns accordingly, says UK’s Modern Crime Prevention Strategy. Data analytics can be used to identify vulnerable people, and to ensure potential victims are identified quickly and consistently. These tools can also be used to pinpoint and monitor pathways to radicalization, stop the spread of terrorist propaganda and better identify individuals being radicalized.

Facebook has started using the artificial intelligence programmes it uses to deter and remove terrorist propaganda online after the platform was criticised for not doing enough to tackle extremism. In a landmark post titled “hard questions”, Monika Bickert, Director of Global Policy Management, and Brian Fishman, Counterterrorism Policy Manager explained Facebook has been developing artificial intelligence to detect terror videos and messages before they are posted live and preventing them from appearing on the site.

“When someone tries to upload a terrorist photo or video, our systems look for whether the image matches a known terrorism photo or video. This means that if we previously removed a propaganda video from ISIS, we can work to prevent other accounts from uploading the same video to our site.

“We have also recently started to experiment with using AI to understand text that might be advocating for terrorism.” Facebook also detailed how it is working with other platforms, clamping down on accounts being re-activated by people who have previously been banned from the site and identifying and removing clusters of terror supporters online.

The social media platform, which is used by billions of people around the world, also explained it employs thousands of people to check posts and has a dedicated counter-terrorism team. “Our Community Operations teams around the world – which we are growing by 3,000 people over the next year – work 24 hours a day and in dozens of languages to review these reports and determine the context. This can be incredibly difficult work, and we support these reviewers with onsite counseling and resiliency training,” it said.

## **Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism**

In June, 2017, Facebook, Microsoft, Twitter and YouTube announced the formation of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism, which will help us continue to make our hosted consumer services hostile to terrorists and violent extremists.

The spread of terrorism and violent extremism is a pressing global problem and a critical challenge for us all. We take

these issues very seriously, and each of our companies have developed policies and removal practices that enable us to take a hard line against terrorist or violent extremist content on our hosted consumer services. We believe that by working together, sharing the best technological and operational elements of our individual efforts, we can have a greater impact on the threat of terrorist content online.

“Our mission is to substantially disrupt terrorists’ ability to use the internet in furthering their causes, while also respecting human rights. This disruption includes addressing the promotion of terrorism, dissemination of propaganda, and the exploitation of real-world terrorist events through online platforms.”

To achieve this, we will join forces around three strategies:

- Employing and leveraging technology
- Sharing knowledge, information and best practices, and
- Conducting and funding research.

The coalition said the companies share both technology and operational activities that it will refine and improve existing joint technical work, such as the Shared Industry Hash Database, and define standard transparency reporting methods for terrorist content removal. It will also be working directly with governments, civil society groups, academics and other companies to share information about the latest terrorist activities.

**In the next several months, we also aim to achieve the following:**

Secure the participation of five additional companies to the industry hash-sharing database for violent terrorist imagery; two of which have already joined: Snap Inc. and Justpaste.



Reach 50 companies to share best practices on how to counter terrorism online through the Tech Against Terrorism project in partnership with ICT4Peace and the UN Counter Terrorism Executive Directorate.

Conduct four knowledge-sharing workshops – starting in San Francisco today, with plans for further meetings later this year in other locations around the world

## **Counterterrorism Strategy**

Robert Hannigan, the new head of GCHQ, a British intelligence and security organization, has called for greater support from web companies, by trying harder to meet the security agencies half-way in a joint enterprise that will protect the privacy of most users while helping to identify those who would do us harm.

Although some counterterrorism programs use social media to push back against extremist rhetoric, these efforts are too limited. The internet propaganda has to be countered vociferously on the internet and social media. A prominent Syrian Sunni cleric condemned the ISIS killing of the American Peter Kassig and said that ISIS chief Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi “is going to hell.” “We have to speak loud and very clear that Muslims and Islam have nothing to do with this,” Shaykh Muhammad al-Yaqoubi told CNN’s Christiane Amanpour. “ISIS has no nationality. Its nationality is terror, savagery, and hatred.”

**Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger the authors of “ISIS: The State of Terror.” Have**

## **suggested six point plan to Defeat ISIS in the Propaganda War:**

1. Stop exaggerating ISIS's invincibility: A first step in countering ISIS is to put it in perspective. We should not downplay its threat below a realistic level. But neither should we inflate it. Strikes designed to degrade the group's real internal strength are good, but our targeting priorities should also aim to expose vulnerabilities for counterpropaganda purposes.

2. Amplify the stories of the real wives of ISIS, and other defectors: We need to amplify the stories of defectors and refugees from the areas that ISIS controls. Stories about the horrific real lives of jihadi wives need to be told, by women who manage to run away.

3. Take on ISIS's version of Islam: ISIS has developed convoluted arguments about why it engages in war crimes that are forbidden by Islamic law. Hundreds of religious scholars have taken on ISIS's interpretation of Islam. Those arguments need to get to the right audience: ISIS's potential recruits. At least some of those recruits can be reached via social media, including via one-on-one conversations.

4. Highlight ISIS's hypocrisy: ISIS makes much of its supposedly puritanical virtue and promotion of chastity, whipping women who do not wear attire ISIS considers appropriate and executing gay men by throwing them off the tops of buildings. Yet according to the U.N. and ISIS's own propaganda, its fighters are involved in a wide range of horrifying sexual abuse, from sexual slavery to the reported rape of men and women, including both adults and children. In this area and many others, ISIS's deranged double standards should be addressed head-on.

5. Publicize ISIS's atrocities against Sunnis: We need to fully exploit aerial and electronic surveillance and remote

imaging to show what really happens in the belly of the beast. We should pay particular attention to documenting war crimes and atrocities against Sunni Muslims in regions controlled by ISIS. It is patently obvious that ISIS has no qualms about advertising its war crimes against certain classes of people – Shi'a Muslims primarily, and religious minorities like the Yazidis. ISIS claims to protect Sunnis from sectarian regimes in both Iraq and Syria. While ISIS is happy to flaunt its massacres of Shi'ites and Iraqi military personnel, it has been relatively quiet in regard to its massacres of uncooperative Sunni tribes. Our countermessaging should highlight the murder of Sunnis in particular.

6. Aggressively suspend ISIS social-media accounts: There is a robust debate over the merits of suspending extremist social-media accounts, which encompasses a complex set of issues including free speech and the question of who should decide what content is acceptable. What we do know, based on an analysis of tens of thousands of Twitter accounts, is that suspensions do limit the audience for ISIS's gruesome propaganda. The current rate of suspensions is damaging the ISIS social-media machine. The practice should be maintained at the current rate at the very least – but it would be better to get more aggressive.

The nations fighting ISIS need an organization to run a counternarrative campaign. One model, still in a testing phase, is called P2P: Challenging Extremism. This initiative provides an opportunity for university students from the U.S., Canada, the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, Australia and Asia to create an online community whose goal is to counter the extremist narrative by becoming educated influencers.

UN Security Council said, "In addition to security, legal and intelligence measures, most also stressed the need to provide a counter-narrative to radicalization, addressing root causes

and working with communities in that regard.”

## **References and Resources also include:**

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