

Digital Jihad: How online networks are changing extremists

Rachel Briggs OBE

Research and Policy Director, Institute for Strategic Dialogue

Lord Carlile of Berriew QC

Shiraz Maher

Senior Research Fellow and Head of Outreach, the International Centre for the Study of Radicalization, King's College London

Chair: Frank Gardner OBE

Security Correspondent, BBC

2 March 2015

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.

10 St James's Square, London SW1Y 4LE T +44 (0)20 7957 5700 F +44 (0)20 7957 5710
www.chathamhouse.org

Patron: Her Majesty The Queen Chairman: Stuart Popham QC Director: Dr Robin Niblett Charity Registration Number: 208223

Frank Gardner

Well, welcome to Chatham House, everybody. Thanks very much for attending. If anybody comes in after this, do please show them to the front seats. This session is on the record. You can tweet it, Facebook it, blog it, do whatever you like with it.

We're incredibly lucky today, in fact, I'm quite surprised that all four of us are actually here at this really, really busy time. Clearly, we're not held in high enough esteem by our employers.

So this is very much the topic du jour, the whole online jihadism thing and how did we get here, how do we deal with it? What's the extent of the problem, etc.? And the plan is today that each of the speakers is going to talk for about eight to 10 minutes and if they go over, I'll start making odd hand signals and then we're going to take questions from you, from the floor. So do have some good questions in advance.

I'm just going to introduce them very briefly so Shiraz Maher, who I'm sure you've seen on every single TV outlet, is the go to expert on online jihadism at King's College. Lord Carlile is the previous independent reviewer of government terrorism legislation; also very, very active in this area and Rachel Briggs, who will introduce herself shortly but is an expert in many areas of all of this.

Shiraz, do you want to go first?

Shiraz Maher

Sure, thank you. In the context of speaking about online radicalization, I wanted to talk about a few key areas which I'll touch upon and then, actually, to talk about where the internet ends, where the edge of the internet is with regards to all of this radicalization and recruitment and mobilization that you see of people going out to Syria.

I think it is fair to say – we've certainly said it a lot from King's – that this is the most socially mediated conflict in history and you've seen the huge explosion in terms of the way young people are using social media to engage with this conflict directly, in a way that couldn't have been done before.

I remember when I started at King's in 2010 and we used to write about Al Qaeda; we were very much interested in that and the Taliban. It was all about having access to passive, restricted forums, where discussion would take place, essentially behind closed doors and you had to find a way to get yourself into those forums. And, of course, a lot of the discussion in those forums didn't take place in English either. So you had to keep filtering down until you had a very small community of people who were engaged and who were talking there and so on.

Today, of course, that's completely changed. Anyone can go on Twitter, anyone can go on Facebook. You can access this material; you can see it for yourself. And that hasn't just had the effect of broadening the availability and the scope of your audience but it has also changed the way in which the principal actors, those doing the fighting on the ground, are communicating with their audiences. So the old forums, for example, were reliant upon unidirectional travel, essentially. Al Qaeda would release a statement, it would go up, you

would read it and you would consume it. You might discuss it with your community but you weren't discussing it with the originator himself.

Today you'd have a direct dialogue with a fighter. You can ask him what life is like on the ground. You can ask them how they got there and that, in many respects, helps you overcome your own fears or whatever it is that's stopping you from going and you could have that direct contact to work out the logistics but, also, the more emotional side of things. How do you rationalize the process of getting out there? And, of course, you are talking to a peer; you're not talking to a 50 year old Jordanian cleric.

You're talking to another like-minded, 19 year old from Leeds or Bradford or Birmingham, wherever, who is just like you. And that's the key to the messaging and the most powerful part of the messaging that you see all the time, where they essentially say, 'I'm just like you. If I can do it, you can do it.' And that's a very, very powerful thing in this context.

I wanted to talk about how the platforms differ a little bit. So we've started to look at and monitor all the different ways, the different platforms are operating. A lot of these I hadn't even really been familiar with before the conflict started; a sign that I'm finding that I'm getting older.

But Instagram was something that I was very unfamiliar with but it's really powerful. And why is it so powerful? Because it's providing actuality; you can see what life is like tangibly and that has a very, very seductive effect on people because you can visualize it and the visualization of reality is far better than someone just explaining it to you in 140 characters on Twitter, for example. So it's very, very powerful in bridging that gap for young people.

And, of course, a lot of it is also to do with the whole masculinity issue associated with going, 'Look, here I am, very empowered with my AK-47, my RPG. There are tanks there. This is cool.' And that is, for a large number of people, a very, very important driver. So Instagram was a very important platform quite early on in terms of encouraging people to get out there with a very visual effect and appeal.

Then Ask.fm took on a life of its own and that's somewhere where you can have a greater, more extended conversation with fighters and you get to see the reality of what people are talking about and they're asking very important questions, 'How did you break it to your mother? How did you tell your mother that you came out here to Syria? How did you essentially get over and emotionally reconcile the fact that you're breaking her heart by doing this?'

And that's a very, very, again, important thing because it's not an abstract discussion. The person answering is telling you, 'I had to go through this. I went through it like this. This is how I made sense of it. My struggle is to come here and fight the jihad. My parents' struggle is to accept it.' And so, again, it's allowing you to get over a lot of the fears that might be prohibiting you from finally taking those steps to get out there and to make that journey.

The most important, of course, is Twitter. It is the single most important platform in all of this because it's providing you with real-time updates and information. It's allowing you to access fighters in the easiest possible way and that is the primary platform, I would say, that has this huge and important role in terms of driving the agenda.

But it's not just the fighters. There's a whole community of so-called [indiscernible] boys and so on that people talk about who operate. We call them disseminators and these disseminators are incredibly important insofar as because they are not on the ground, they are able to aggregate large amounts of information from multiple sources and to spread it and to spread it quickly so that you get to learn about what's happening on the ground.

The most important guy in this context was an individual called Shami Witness who operated a very influential account, which was very supportive of Islamic State until Channel 4 uncovered him and exposed him as living out in Bangalore and he was arrested and his account is still up; you can visit it but it's obviously not active. And I'd recommend you do, actually, to get an idea of the importance that these disseminators play online. They are virtual supporters who drive the conflict, who fuel the conflict and who have a very important role to play whilst, as I say, not physically being there but in terms of mobilization, recruitment and encouragement.

I'll end with this; here is a really important point to consider. We've talked a lot about social media. The public debate is a large part talking about social media but when you map who goes, when you look at who goes to Syria, it's still overwhelmingly based on real world connections. People who are groups of friends, who know one another in the real, physical world, who have similar interests, who go to events together, who radicalize and ultimately decide... they may make contact with fighters using social media. They may begin to investigate it and explore the issue of going through social media but, ultimately, it's groups of people who know each other and those real world connections are still wildly important.

This is why you see clusters originating from places that don't have the unique problem; there is nothing particular to Portsmouth or to Cardiff or Newcastle or any of these areas where you've seen people get up and go. But the fact is it's random. Someone went and then they told their friends to go and then their friends went and they told their friends to go and it's a cumulative process that has built up over time.

So there is a very clear edge to the internet is the point I want to make and the real world still matters massively and as I say, you can see this pattern – it doesn't just apply in the UK – you see the same thing in Belgium, same thing in Holland, same thing in Germany. It's real people who know each other who, ultimately, decide to go and social media in that context just plays a role sitting around it, which gives you information, which might give your ideas succour and great support but it's the individuals and the clusters that they are operating in together that ultimately tips the balance and takes them out there.

I'll stop there, thank you.

Lord Carlile

Well, Shiraz started by referring to, 'When I started at King's in 2010.' To show the diversity of the panel, I can say when I started at King's in 1966 and there is a reason for mentioning that and it is that when I started at King's as an undergraduate in 1966, nobody imagined that we would have global terrorism on this scale. There were some wonderful, brilliant academic inspirations there but this wasn't even in their blue sky thinking.

I want to make four points about what has happened. The first is that in my view, online radicalization has created what I describe as the online-offline syndrome. By this I refer to the ability to be someone completely different in the online sphere, where a sense of anonymity creates a lower threshold for engaging in extremist conversation, whilst offline maintaining a sense of conformity, keeping your radical views away from the public domain and even from one's nearest and dearest friends and relations. Think of the three girls who are now in Syria.

Before the exponential development in online access and sites, a person had to socialize and openly share views with like-minded individuals in a physical sense and Islamist radicalization was often linked to mosques and preachers. There was much more awareness in the authorities as to who was involved in these processes. The control authorities, police, MI5 and others, were better able physically to monitor radicalization.

The internet has changed all that. The case of Younes Tsouli, known online as Irhabi 007, provides an instructive example. At the time of the police raid on his address in 2005, in relation to his links to a terrorist plot in Bosnia and despite a serious investigation, the authorities had no idea that he was one of the early and intensive cyber jihadists in the world because they hadn't really seen it coming. And what has happened is that tracking radicalization and violent Islamism has become an increasingly difficult challenge.

My second point is that online networks have, the word, I suppose, is modernized extremism. It becomes instantaneous to find like-minded opinions and to distance oneself from the opposition is simple. You enter into a blogosphere in which you close down debate, enabling the avoidance of conflicting views, particularly when governments haven't yet got their heads around the best ways in which to present a convincing counter-narrative. In my view, that counter-narrative has to be presented using exactly the same tools that present the jihadist narrative; propaganda has to be met with propaganda, computer games with computer games, ideas with ideas.

Unfortunately, governments are very blunt instruments for doing that and I believe it's very important for government to engage with the private sector to present the counter-narrative.

And what we have to understand is that propaganda online is as powerful as any other propaganda. A grandfather like me would hardly have imagined until recently that people could be radicalized into, for example, cutting people's heads off with a knife or going on what is sometimes called the Mulan Trail, like those three girls from London, by a meeting on a screen and an exchange of words. But we now have to recognize that it's happened.

Connected with that is my third point, that online networking has professionalized extremism and it's professionalized it because it's recognized by people like ISIS that the networks can be accessed with utter simplicity; any fool can use it. This allows extremist cells to exist, cooperate and collaborate almost anywhere in the world. And in the case of Islamist extremism, it's involved from a place to meet to dark places to meet, where the most radical and dangerous views are proselytized; people are intimidated and new recruits are radicalized.

And the way in which these networks sometimes operate is starkly illustrated by the command and control system used for the Mumbai massacres. I don't know if any of you have ever seen the compilation prepared by Scotland Yard, by officers who were rushed over to Mumbai after the chief of the Mumbai police was himself killed by the terrorists walking down a street. But it shows terrorists being ordered to kill tourists in a room by somebody who is on a satellite phone many hundreds of miles away and you actually hear the shots being fired. That is the power of communication through the web.

And my fourth point is about the dark corners of the web. As an increased level of regulation comes into action and ISPs clamp down on extremist material, we are seeing the radical threat head into sometimes inaccessible places known as the dark web. This is a matter of huge concern. Where it was possible to observe and to an extent control extremist material such as radical chat rooms, material is now moving into the caves of the web, just as Al Qaeda in its earlier days hid in physical caves in the hills of Afghanistan and Waziristan and we see these virtual caves being used almost daily by ISIS.

And nation states need to address this. I spent most of last week in Abu Dhabi where an organization called Hedayah, backed internationally and with secondees from the British civil service, the Dutch civil service and others are starting to put together a level of international cooperation to deal with the dark web and other forms of radicalization that to date has not existed. I think we really do need to encourage our government to lead in international discussion of these issues, not necessarily using conventional international forums.

I was brought up believing that the United Nations might well save the world from many conflicts. Unfortunately, it's now become a weak organization, no more than something of a sacred drama with very little effective decision-making. So it's up to us as nation states affected by terrorism to help to bring about an international solution to dark web issues, which, of course, must not crush legitimate, lawful freedom of expression.

And my final comment is on that – and this may be slightly off the point of our debate today – I'm troubled by the politicization of the freedom of expression debate in this country. I think Grant Shapps is completely wrong in what he says and I think, maybe, Nick Clegg is wrong in what he says. And I think the problem is that they are fighting this on political fields. We should now return to a dispensation in which, as in the days of Northern Ireland terrorism, when I was a member of the House of Commons, although the law did evolve, it did it on a multi-partisan basis and these kinds of issues were never election issues. I would like us to return to that position.

Frank Gardner

Okay, that's one to explore in the Q & A, I think. Thank you, Alex.

Rachel Briggs

Thank you. I come at this challenge from two different perspectives. I am a senior fellow at the Institute for Strategic Dialogue, where, in a sense, we're doing the opposite side of the coin to what Shiraz and his colleagues are doing, excellent work analysing the problem. We decided to set up an innovation hub to actually go after the problem. So we're running a series of online experiments to try out counter-narrative and disruptive techniques online.

So, I bring that perspective to the table but I also bring to the table the perspective of being the director of a charity called Hostage UK, which supports hostage families during kidnaps. So I see from a very, very practical and hands on perspective just some of the damage that the individuals that we are ultimately talking about here today wreak on families, not just in the UK but in many of the western societies as well.

I wanted to start with a little bit – I'm not a historian – but a tiny bit of history, just to remind ourselves that what we're talking about here is not new. Violent extremists and terrorists have always used whatever technology is available as cleverly as they possibly can in pursuit of their aims, whether it's going back to the printing press and the production of pamphlets at the start of the previous century, the proliferation of cassette tapes – remember those – in the 1970s and the 1980s.

One of the first and most effective internet sites ever set up was, of course, Stormfront, a neo-Nazi website which still exists, which was set up in the mid-1990s, right at the birth of what we think of now as the internet. And, of course, it was back in 2002 that Osama bin Laden himself said that of the war that they were waging, 90 per cent of it needed to be fought in the media battle space, not in the physical battle space.

So this is, in a sense, not something new. However, I think what we do see with ISIS is that they are taking this use of technology onto an entirely new level, which we hadn't seen coming but we probably should have done. We are, of course, all far too familiar with what I would call murder videos, not beheading videos; they are murder videos. I think to call them beheading videos sort of puts them into a special category. They are people being murdered, whatever the means. We're all very familiar with those videos.

ISIS has developed its own Twitter apps. They are using social media incredibly effectively. We see fighters using GoPro cameras on the front line, as Shiraz says, bringing footage of the conflict right into the people's living rooms and on their smart phones in their back pockets.

They are using all of these modern tools for the purpose of propaganda to campaign; they are campaigners to inspire and to enlist. What I would say is new in the way that ISIS are quite frankly giving us a master class in how to use the internet and social media, is in three ways that I think we need to, perhaps, dare I say – it sickens me to say – emulate.

The first is that they are producing very, very high quality content. There is no expense spared. There is no expertise spared. It sickens me to say this but the films that they produce, as disgusting as they are, are incredibly well produced. They are throwing money and they are throwing their talents at them. And they are also emotionally engaging. They haven't forgotten the fact that you reach people's heads through their hearts and it's that emotionally engaging content, via social media, which is reaching our young people. Let us not skirt away from this, they are fighting very hard for the hearts and minds of our young people.

The second thing is the distribution game changer, which Shiraz has, I think, put very well. They are using social media incredibly effectively. I would also add that they are using our mainstream media very effectively. They know what will make a nice picture on the front of a national newspaper or its website and they are not daft in that regard.

The third game changer in the way that ISIS is using these new technologies is what I would call the mainstreaming effect. And rather than having to lure people to where they are, they are now coming to where we are. You look at the numbers, the proportion of the population that is now on Facebook, less so on Twitter but growing daily. We're all on YouTube daily. They are coming to where we are. They are mainstreaming their content and I think that is, perhaps, the biggest game changer that we've seen.

The mainstreaming effect, as I would call it, is, I think, in large part responsible for some of the trends we're seeing in terms of the drift of Westerners towards the conflict in Syria and Iraq. Firstly, I think this mainstreaming effect helps to explain the numbers. The numbers that we're looking at in Syria and Iraq already, in just 18 months or so, dwarf the number of western foreign fighters who went to all previous similar types of conflict in recent history. So they're already dwarfing those numbers.

I think, secondly, the mainstreaming effect helps to explain why people who would not normally be attracted to the types of plots we are used to, complicated, well planned and so on, are finding themselves in places like Syria and Iraq. There is a broader appeal and there is a normalization that going to fight is a way of answering one's grievances.

And I think the third impact of this mainstreaming effect is the appeal to women. And I would just say a few things on the appeal to women. Of course, we are terribly worried about what is happening to those three young girls who managed to find their way into Syria now. There was numbers released over the weekend from MI5 that there are, they think, 60 women or girls who have gone, the youngest being just 15 and 16. The European counterterrorism coordinator anticipates that of the Westerners going to fight in Syria and Iraq, it could be as high as 18 per cent who are women. That is a much higher proportion than we've seen in similar conflicts elsewhere.

Why are they going? And what are they doing when they get there? We know much less about the women who have gone than we do the men, although evidence is growing. We know that many of them go with men, as opposed to on their own. We know that they are driven by a variety of reasons, whether that is the desire to create the ummah, because, of course, they are seeing a successful ISIS. There is finally the caliphate. There is land. There is a success to chase, whether it is identity conflicts, both internally and

domestically, a sense of duty and some, no doubt, will be looking for the kind of adventure and fighting that, of course, we associate traditionally with men.

Just very briefly, to say something about what we can do about this and, perhaps, something we can pick up in more detail over questions. If ISIS is sort of mainstreaming its approach, that's what we have to do as well. And it saddens me that groups like ISIS are fighting with everything they possibly can for the hearts and minds of our young people and I do not see the same response in return on our side and that has to change.

We have got scale on our side. They are still the tiniest of tiny minorities. If we were only able to get active a tiny proportion of our majority population, we would soon out-dwarf them and we know that the algorithmic way in which the internet works is that you only have to mobilize a small proportion to suddenly start overturning the kind of content that will come up in search terms.

So there are a few things we need. Firstly, we need early prevention; we need to be active in schools, in places where young people are hanging out, in the real world as well as online, talking to them about extremism, taking the taboo away from this subject so that the point at which they come across these materials they feel comfortable going to have a conversation with somebody who will be a good influence on them rather than a bad influence.

We do need the counter-narrative, as Lord Carlile very rightly said. We have spent years talking about the counter-narrative and spending vast amounts of money flying people like me around the world to international gatherings to talk about the need for it. Our governments need to put their money where their mouths are.

The final point is that technology can offer a lot of the solutions here. Our technology companies are not doing enough. Experience shows us that when there is public opinion against them, where there are private interests with very deep pockets, they manage to use their technologies and find the innovative capacity to solve these problems. They have done it with relative effectiveness in relation to child pornography and copyright material. And it's time for those companies to not just put some money into this but to employ the excellent and genius engineers that they have within their companies to find innovative and technology based solutions to this awful problem.

Thank you.