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The Extremists' Next Web Outlet: YouTube and Friendster

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Trends in the Southeast Asian extremist websites call for some attention in this area. Extremists are exploiting emerging technologies to transmit their messages. But what can be done about this?

Trends in Southeast Asian Extremist Websites

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS in Southeast Asian websites have caused quite a stir in the field of research on extremism in the Internet. As some of the websites are manned by Southeast Asian radical groups, monitoring these websites can reveal some patterns, especially in four main areas. These are group development, group tradecraft, extremist propaganda and the ideology undertaken by these radical groups and their supporters.

These websites in fact provide a convenient, though small, window into the thinking and spread of the extremist community both on the web and in the real world. Importantly, the web is used to highlight real-world activities through advertisements of seminars and launch of magazines, books and other products. The Southeast Asian groups have learned from their Arab brothers to make the websites very subtle, so as to lessen the possibility of attracting government attention.

The extremists entice their audience by using seemingly moderate scholars espousing innocent religious doctrines and images. The true intent becomes quickly apparent when the sites emphasise a violent political objective, such as the idea that "Muslims are being attacked. Thus Muslims have to fight back". The use of vivid and graphic videos from Iraq and Afghanistan reinforce the violent objectives of these sites.

The ominous presence of these extremist websites is further aggravated by the development of forums. Usually password-protected and containing reminders of maintaining vigilance against the authorities, these forums allow only those who share the same ideology to participate. Those with clashing opinions would simply be barred from entering.

Thus the "free" discussions are restricted to a narrow interpretation of the world creating a perilous

echo chamber environment for the impressionable minds. Forums are interactive and create a virtual *ummah* where participants can confide in each other. This further concretises their angst towards the West, building hatred and desire to use violence to vent their political frustration and dissatisfaction.

The echo chamber appears to drive the process of radicalisation from being a means of sharing news of *mujahideen* in Muslim countries, to more aggressive activities. In the last year, Southeast Asian forums have regularly exchanged tradecraft materials from hacking manuals to bomb-making and weaponry. The almost predictable pattern has emerged -- first passive internet use, then active internet activity, and once the knowledge has been transferred, an intention to become active *mujahideen*. The Internet may not have created the conditions for extremism, but it has accelerated the spread and its potentially violent application.

Limitations of Extremist Websites

Notwithstanding the enabling effect of the Internet, there are limits to the impact of these websites, particularly in Southeast Asia. There are four critical limitations (1) virtual vs real world; (2) language barriers; (3) timeliness and access; and (4) security scrutiny.

Firstly, extremist websites may not pose a direct threat to security. It takes more than just the reading of tradecraft manuals for one to launch an actual attack. Secondly, where language issues are concerned, Southeast Asian websites do produce their own original materials, although the main radical web activities still take place in the Arabic websites. But because the main language used in the Southeast Asian extremist websites is mainly Bahasa Indonesia, there is a limit to and a time lag for the impact of any individual site.

There is more content available than Arabic speakers in the region. This means that few in the region can immediately gain access to the ideology, let alone the news and tradecraft materials. This constricts the overall number of individuals who can actively participate in the forums. Thirdly, these extremist websites are generally inaccessible. One would usually need to already know the name of the websites before one could find them on the web. Once discovered it is easy to access the wider extremist world.

Once into the Internet, the forums are usually password-protected; one would have to register and follow several instructions before being given full access to the forums, a process that takes a few days. Links provided to download materials are sometimes difficult to get to. The forums or websites themselves are sometimes down. Finally, the increasing scrutiny, as evidenced by the number of password-protected sites, makes them potentially vulnerable to being disrupted or contaminated.

With a more realistic picture of the Internet, a more appropriate response can be developed. The wider community, however, should not miss an emerging area of threat -- the use of YouTube and social networking platforms.

Role of YouTube and Social Networking System

The ability to watch TV programmes on the web and contact long lost friends through Facebook and related sites have enabled extremists to also exploit these to overcome some of the limitations they face. While links to videos and audio downloads in extremist websites are sometimes inaccessible and take time to download, the videos in YouTube are usually easy and convenient to find, access and download. There are a myriad of extremist videos in YouTube, from the attacks of *mujahideens* on Western targets in Muslim countries to speeches advocating violence and hatred.

Friendster too allows an even neater and structured network that is even better than forums. Friendster accounts allow for a wider network, and bolder pronouncements. The accounts are built on general

contacts rather than a self-selecting group as in forums. Here a wider range of people can gather, opening a wider pool for potential recruitment.

It is not clear why, but extremists in Friendster appear to be bolder, appearing with air rifles and in environments that appear to be training camps. This is not currently happening in forums. Part of the answer may be the effort to make the life of a jihadi to appear glamorous, thereby attracting the wider audience found in these social networks.

What is to be Done?

One must realize that the materials mentioned above are available in all languages and in many locations. The Internet and other related sites did not create the problem, only accelerated the access and reach. The advantage that the response community has now is that the reach and scope of the problem is better known, unlike before 9/11.

The important lesson to learn is that while there is a need to monitor, contaminate, close, and counter the extremist websites, other emerging technologies like YouTube should not be ignored. Failure to understand and develop strategies to address social networking sites can also lead to problems as extremists shift to the latest technology.

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