



Digital Terrorism: The Weaponization of Social Media Platforms

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ABSTRACT

Immediate worldwide connections are now possible with the help of social media, which has revolutionized communication. But internet also gives terrorist and extremist groups powerful tools for radicalization, recruiting, finance, planning, and dissemination.

While the Internet has made it simpler to identify terrorist activity on social media and through browser history, the popularity of social media and the dark web has also acted as the ideal anonymous medium for long-distance terrorist recruiting and communication. This study focuses on the use of social media a tool for promoting extremist and terror propaganda by terrorist organization. This study uses qualitative approach using interview method technique. Purposive sampling has been used to draw the sample of the experts and security analysts. Finding of the study suggest that social media is being used for promoting terror agenda by various terrorist organizations. There are certain challenges to cope with the situation. However, the effective use of social media and internet-based checks can produce effective outcomes.



Introduction

Social media's ascent has transformed international communication by facilitating previously unheard-of levels of engagement and idea sharing. Social media has many positive effects on society, but it has also been used to spread terrorist ideology, which presents serious problems in the digital age. Social media is essential to contemporary radicalization because it gives radicals channels to spread propaganda, find supporters, and defend their positions (Apata, 2025).

Since social media makes it easier for violent beliefs to spread, it is essential to comprehend the practical effects of digital involvement. The issue is made worse by social media's unregulated nature, which makes it possible for violent extremist narratives to proliferate quickly. Counter-

extremism tactics can benefit from an understanding of the connection between social media and terrorism (Alardin, 2016).

Social media has become increasingly popular in terrorist activities, causing a significant change in communication strategies from the use of traditional media like television and newspapers. Editorial monitoring and censorship of traditional media sources frequently worked to refute terrorist propaganda. They did not, however, have the dynamic interaction between the information sender and the recipient, which made it challenging to cultivate the solid social ties necessary for the establishment of terrorist networks (Torok, 2015).

Extremists and terrorists have also recognized the potential of social media and have used it to further their operations and agendas. According to the United Nations Interregional Crime and Justice Research Institute, organized crime and violent extremist groups have effectively used social media flaws to influence people and spread conspiracy theories. Numerous social media sites, particularly YouTube, X, Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram, have emerged as the main sources of recruits for extremists and are an essential tool used by terrorist organizations to disseminate their ideas, beliefs, plans, and tactics as well as to find new members. Terrorists have benefited greatly from excessive internet use, including the capacity to hide, coordinate constantly, and locate funding sources outside of governmental and central bank oversight (Hussain, 2025).

The revolutionary benefits currently provided by modern social media platforms are demonstrated by a comparison of the news production processes used by traditional media. These technologies drastically change terrorist organizations' communication strategy by providing previously unheard-of means of recruiting members, coordinating operations, and spreading propaganda. Social media platforms like Facebook, X, and Telegram allow for the production and distribution of content with no regulation, making them perfect venues for the spread of terrorist beliefs (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012).

These platforms' widespread use and ability to transcend national borders have allowed terrorist organizations to reach a huge audience and rally support on a never-before-seen scale. These networks' anonymous qualities also make it easier for contemporary terrorist beliefs to spread because there is no accountability, which surely makes violent acts more likely to escalate. For example, Platform X makes it possible for information to spread quickly, which makes it a perfect tool for terrorists to coordinate operations and spread propaganda. On the other hand, Telegram offers encrypted spaces that are ideal for clandestine communications and organizational planning, while Facebook promotes recruitment procedures and the growth of terrorist societies (Cohen, Johansson, Kaati, & Mork, 2014).

It is frightening enough that terrorists and extremists are increasingly using social media as weapons, but much more terrifying is the possibility that these groups will use new technologies—like artificial intelligence (AI) and encrypted messaging apps—to spread their beliefs. Although it is too soon to tell how AI will affect extremist organizations, there is no reason to believe that they won't also use this new technology. They may be able to create phony images, sounds, or movies to propagate false information, create fictitious accounts of enemy crimes, or exalt their own bloodshed. They might create recruitment materials, bogus news, and extremist literature in large quantities using AI language tools. Mainstream social media companies made some attempts to censor content in response to mounting concern over the spread of racist and extremist information on their platforms, but these actions were more reactive than proactive. Platforms must continue to uphold their dedication to safety and trust while making sure that these hate movements are subject to constant pressure (Hussain, 2025).

Fighting digital terrorism is extremely difficult due of social media's special ability to cross national boundaries and get around legal restrictions. This emphasizes how important it is to comprehend the mutually beneficial relationship between these platforms and terrorism in order to create strategies that effectively combat the growing exploitation of these platforms by terrorist organizations, whether for the purposes of recruiting members, spreading propaganda, or planning operations. In order to recruit people for terrorist actions, terrorist organizations use social media platforms' wide reach to reach large audiences. To influence possible recruits, they design customized communications that take advantage of emotional weaknesses and personal crises, such feelings of alienation or particular grievances (Benigni, Joseph, & Carley, 2017).

By focusing on these personal hardships, terrorist narratives frequently aim to gain traction—a strategy that social media algorithms amplify. Users might be gradually led toward terrorist ideas by using these algorithms as a weapon to distribute content that suits their tastes. Social media also creates "echo chambers," where users are constantly exposed to material that encourages terrorist radicalization. Social media platforms use analytical tools to pinpoint those who are most vulnerable to extreme ideology and radicalize them. The use of platforms like X and Telegram for propaganda operations by the terrorist group Islamic State (ISIS) to recruit susceptible people is highlighted by case studies (Archetti, 2015).

The distribution of expertly crafted video footage demonstrating their terrorist combat actions serves this purpose. Similar to this, the terrorist organization Boko Haram uses social media for recruiting and ideological control, concentrating on exploiting their skills in intellectual and visual impact to sway opinions and establish control. First-circle peers and familial relationships are essential for enabling entrance into terrorist organizations. Qualitative information from surveys of college students demonstrates that personal relationships and family ties to terrorists are important considerations in this situation (Thomas, 2003).

When misused, a strong religious identity might serve as a catalyst for certain people to join terrorist organizations, especially those who don't feel like they belong or follow good ideology. There is a complicated relationship between religion and extremism, particularly as terrorists use skewed religious narratives to justify their actions in order to recruit new members and strengthen their ideological ties. In order to get over the restrictions placed by traditional media, terrorist organizations use social media to spread their propaganda campaigns throughout the world. They use real-time multimedia broadcasting, including films, infographics, and live broadcasts, to advertise their activities, attract followers, create fear, and spread violence, which encourages others to follow suit (Engel, 2017).

Ideological tales' psychological appeal is crucial; concepts like self-sacrifice give meaning and promote a sense of community. Propaganda's power is increased by high-quality visual content, which also intensifies emotional resonance. Furthermore, terrorist groups like ISIS use advanced media techniques to appear powerful and legitimate. By highlighting their involvement in international cyberwarfare, it becomes clear how social media algorithms automatically magnify their hostile messaging by giving priority to content that is both provocative and captivating. In the meantime, terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda and Boko Haram depend on linked digital tactics to maintain their ongoing prominence (Barrow, 2015).

An ideal setting for promoting interpersonal communication and building online communities that support terrorist organizations and strengthen their violent extremist beliefs is a platform like Telegram. According to a study, decentralization characterizes the structural structure of extremist

networks on Telegram, making it more difficult for security authorities to break up or penetrate these networks (Berger, 2014).

Following the loss of Kabul to its ideological twin in August 2021, the TTP terrorist umbrella, officially known as Fitna Al Khawarij, reorganized its media wing, Umar Media, in Pakistan to make its information warfare more advanced, dynamic, and potent. To improve its efficacy as a propaganda tool, Umar Media was modeled after the Afghan Taliban's Al Emarah Media. Some experts claim that this action was a major factor in the continued resurgence of their activities in Pakistan. But recently, popular social media sites have started to loosen their moderation guidelines, which unintentionally give terrorist organizations more leeway to function online. The scholar, who studies terrorism, radicalization, conspiracy theories, and online communities, warns that the easing of social media platforms' content moderation regulations has actually given extremist organizations more chances to spread their beliefs and enlist new members (Hussain, 2025).

Literature Review

One of the primary objectives of every nation and international organization currently in operation is to combat terrorism. Using the World Wide Web (often referred to as "the Internet") makes this work both easier and more difficult. The popularity of social networks and the dark web have made them the ideal anonymous platform for terrorist recruitment and communication over great distances, but it has also made it easier to identify terrorist activity on social networks and through browser history (Latariya, 2017).

Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Telegram, and numerous other sites are among the primary venues for recruiting terrorists. Despite the numerous security precautions taken by the social network proprietors, these platforms have been used by terrorists. For instance, Twitter removed almost 235,000 accounts between February and April of 2016, however even this effort pales in comparison to the number of accounts under the control of terrorist groups. Five new accounts are created on the social network for each one that is closed (Latariya, 2017).

The Islamic State of Iraq and ash-Sham (ISIS) has made a strong, international call to arms through a successful social media campaign. An ethnically varied group of Jihadists make identical appeals to would-be combatants in the West on YouTube, Twitter, and several other social media sites. To those who respond to their call to arms, heaven is promised in their message. Originally, this tactic was employed to encourage foreign combatants to join ISIS operations in Syria and northern Iraq (Stern & Berger, 2015).

Al-Qaeda has been active on the Internet for almost twenty years. It was among the first terrorist groups to use social media as a platform for their propaganda, anonymous communications, and information dissemination via their affiliates. According to reports, the American terrorist cells of Al-Qaeda were using the Internet to communicate with one another and disseminate their propaganda as early as September 16, 2002. The September 2011 attack on the United States provided confirmation of this theory. Evidence was discovered during the 9/11 attack inquiry that suggested the usage of encrypted messages conveyed from Afghanistan to US terrorist cells via the internet, containing attack planning details and target information (Gerwehr & Daly, 2006).

One important factor in the group's move toward decentralized attacks in the West seems to be online radicalization (Schmitt & Kirkpatrick, 2015). Promoting support for organizations or causes

that would be on one of the "tails" of any opinion distribution is known as online extremism (Lake, 2002).

Even though ISIS' online marketing campaign's tactics and goals are obviously extremist, the campaign's worldwide reach has produced a sizable amount of offline and online support. According to U.S. intelligence sources, ISIS had between 9,000 and 18,000 fighters in Syria and Iraq as of January 2015 (Starr, 2015).

Since the resistance to ISIS has grown in number along with the group's popularity, the ISIS OEC and extremist organizations in general have a tendency to be clandestine in their efforts to evade detection. Twitter now routinely finds and blocks user accounts linked to the group (Ross, Meek, & Ferran, 2015).

In fact, Twitter has launched a concerted effort to counteract ISIS's usage of the platform and declared in March 2016 that it would suspend more than 125,000 ISIS-supporting accounts within six months (Calamur, 2016).

A startling number of ISIS fighters have come from the West, despite the fact that the majority of the group's members are from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). The narrative spread by ISIS is widespread and has even served as inspiration for lone wolf attacks in other countries (Logan, 2015).

By improving society's comprehension of recruitment practices and disinformation strategies, public awareness acts as a foundation for combating extremist narratives. These programs help people, especially young people, to avoid polarization and critically assess information sources. These initiatives are in line with frameworks for comprehensive counter-violent extremism (CVE), which place a high value on community-driven engagement and education. Diverse viewpoints are provided to individuals at risk of radicalization by alternative narratives that are designed to counter terrorist ideas. Reputable messengers, such as ex-extremists, increase the impact by offering firsthand knowledge of the risks of radicalization and recruiting (Apata, 2025).

Not every member of the ISIS online group exhibits the same degree of extremism. Some argue that unconnected supporters who merely copy or retweet misinformation constitute a paradigm shift that explains ISIS's extraordinary popularity on the internet (Veilleux-Lepage, 2014). Despite being upsetting to many, the actions of these unaffiliated users frequently do not clearly violate the law or "The Twitter Rules" (Berger & Morgan, 2015).

Nonetheless, this sizable group of "passive supporters" seems to be an essential part of the ISIS social media strategy and adds to the amount of ISIS-related content that spreads on Twitter. Therefore, any effort to combat online extremism should target these individuals. A portion of these passive supporters end up being recruited. Small groups of social media users are employed by ISIS to lavish attention on prospective recruits and shift the discussion to safer online forums. Therefore, even while recruiting may not end on Twitter, there is mounting evidence that it is where recognizable recruitment trends start (Gladstone, 2015).

Research Objectives

1. To determine the primary roles that social media plays in terrorism and extremism.
2. To examine the symbolic and narrative elements that extremist organizations employ on the internet.
3. To assess policy reactions and countermeasures.

Research Questions

1. How do extremist groups create and spread their narratives via social media platforms?
2. Which symbolic and emotional arguments are most commonly used in radicalizing content?
3. What are the tangible effects of counter-narratives and platform moderation?

Methodology

This study uses qualitative research technique. It focuses on interview method to apprehend the complex, contextual nature of online extremism. Purposive sampling technique has been used while defining the sample of the study and different security and media experts have been included in the sample. Moreover, case study approach has also been considered while understanding the research objectives of the study and TTP and ISIS was kept in view.

Purpose of using social media

There are other ways that terrorists utilize the Internet to achieve their objectives besides "cyber planning." Al-Qaeda and other terrorist organizations have been shown to use the Internet to fund themselves through charitable donations and online money transactions. The money that people were "donating" to a charity ended up in Al-Qaeda's bank account, which analysts discovered was shared by several nonprofits. Several Islamic charities with headquarters in the US were shut down in an effort to stop the flow of funds (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). When asked from the experts they mentioned various goals of social media adoption by the terrorist organizations particularly TTP and ISIS. For instance, they have mentioned; creating narratives that legitimize violence (religious, political, or historical) and portray the group as morally or divinely justified. Attracting new followers, sympathizers, and recruits by appealing to grievances, identity, adventure, or sense of belonging. Afore mentioned study noted that in 2014 the numbers of individuals leaving the UK to join IS was on average 5 per week, this number has only increased in 2015. The Islamic State is filled with educated young people radicalized through the social media with different tactics that turn them against their families and friends, in order to isolate them and minimize other influences outside of the terrorist ideology. Developing an appealing visual and verbal identity (logos, colors, slogans) in order to appear current, competent, or virtuous. Moreover, publicizing violent crimes or threats in order to instill terror, demoralize opponents, or force people. Soliciting gifts or indicating ways to assist (conceptualized here; do not involve teaching). Connecting sympathizers, diaspora communities, and local cells through narrative frames (described at a non-actionable level).

Narrative endorsement by terrorist organizations

In order to take advantage of grievances, mobilize identities, and defend violence, terrorist groups deliberately create narratives on social media (Alardin, 2016). Analysts opined that the victimhood narrative, in which a specific religious, ethnic, or ideological group is shown as being persecuted or victimized by outside forces, such as states, foreign powers, or rival sects, is a prevalent topic. These organizations create a moral case for armed conflict and vengeance by portraying their audience as victims. Emotionally charged imagery, chosen historical allusions, and religious discourse that frames the group's actions as a kind of moral or divine obligation are frequently used to support this narrative. Such message increases the attractiveness of extremist ideologies by striking a chord with people who feel excluded, alienated, or disenchanting with the political

institutions that are in place. Similarly, it was also related that people who join or support the cause are portrayed as valiant defenders of justice or faith in the heroic martyrdom and utopia story, which is another prevalent narrative. Stories of "martyrs" who gave their life are amplified on social media, making them into inspirational and honorable characters. These stories frequently offer a sense of identity, purpose, and belonging—especially to young people who are feeling alienated or in search of meaning. Furthermore, some organizations advocate for a utopian future state that they control, such as a cleaned society or a resurrected caliphate. This can be particularly appealing to people looking for spiritual fulfillment or ideological clarity. In the hands of extreme actors, social media is a potent propaganda tool since these narratives are designed to elicit strong emotions, foster in-group unity, and discredit opponents (Briah, 2024).

Techniques used for extremist agenda

There are various techniques used by such terror organizations to promote their agenda. Analysts observed that drama and emotional resonance are communicated through documentaries, short films, picture montages, and expertly produced material. A narrative arc is created through the use of visuals. This creates a moral case for action by portraying target populations as downtrodden and the group as the defender redressing injustices. Establishing in-group myths, language, symbols, and rituals that promote affiliation and set new members apart from "outsiders." To normalize sacrifice and encourage imitation, offenders are portrayed as heroes or martyrs. In order to humanize the cause and reduce psychological hurdles to joining, recruits or members can provide brief, relatable testimonies. repeating catchphrases for viral impact and reducing complicated political issues to straightforward dichotomies (we vs. them). lowering barriers, normalizing concepts, and using meme culture to get content in front of younger audiences. modifying messaging to appeal to local concerns, dialects, and cultural landmarks in order to make propaganda effective in certain areas. Content that appeals to emotions, such as pride, fear, anger, embarrassment, or hope, has a higher chance of being shared and persuaded. Making involvement seem essential and meaningful by framing it as a mission, task, or rite of passage. The process of radicalization typically begins when supporters of the group begin to learn more about it, donate online to one of its causes, download papers or journals, or join a jihadi chat room. This procedure not only results in the terrorist organization's identification, but it also makes it easier for the group to track down its supporters. This creates a connection between the supporter and the terrorist organization, which can then get in touch with the supporter directly, send them terrorist materials, and, for some, give them a sense of "belonging" to a certain cause or group (Barrow, 2015).

Challenges in countering terror narratives on social media

The amount of content is enormous, making it challenging to discern between acceptable criticism, satire, and religious discourse and extremist stuff. usage of image-based content, memes, coded language, re-posts, and private or encrypted channels. Platforms and governments must choose between protecting free speech and eliminating extremist content. Participants of the study revealed that there are problems with regulatory authority and the fact that extremist content comes from several nations. Attempts to proactively filter content may clash with profit-driven goals. Extreme content may be unintentionally amplified by algorithmic designs. The ability to monitor, combat, remove, or prosecute content may be constrained due to technical, human, or legal limitations. There are a number of intricate and connected technical and ideological obstacles to overcome while combating terrorist narratives on social media. The rapidity and flexibility of extremist information is one of the main problems. In order to continue distributing their messages, terrorist organizations frequently quickly migrate to other platforms, use coded language, or set up mirror accounts in response to platform bans or takedowns. It is difficult for counter-narratives,

which are frequently less provocative, to acquire the same traction when algorithms intended to promote participation inadvertently magnify sensationalist or emotionally charged content, qualities typical of extremist propaganda (Frenett & Dow, 2015). Furthermore, radicals can create closed, self-reinforcing communities that are challenging to monitor without breaking privacy regulations thanks to encrypted platforms and private channels like Telegram and WhatsApp. Because of this, extremist content is not only able to endure online but is also protected from prompt action by law enforcement or members of civil society.

Respondents argued that the legitimacy and resonance of counter-narrative initiatives present a second significant obstacle. Young people and communities that already feel excluded or singled out by state policies are particularly skeptical of many government-led programs. Counter-narratives frequently fall short of producing real engagement when they are top-down, inadequately localized, or divorced from the lived realities of their target audience. Moreover, extreme organizations are adept at sabotaging counter-narratives by presenting them as propaganda, accusing religious counter-speakers of betraying their faith, or denigrating alternative perspectives as corrupt or westernized. Additionally, there is an imbalance of resources: many counter-narratives lack the financial resources, creative direction, and strategic planning necessary to compete in the attention economy, whereas terrorist propaganda is frequently well-produced and emotionally powerful. Therefore, battling extremist messaging on social media necessitates not just good communication but also a more substantial, sustained investment in digital literacy, community trust-building, and structural changes that lessen the underlying causes of radicalization.

Counter-Narratives and effectiveness

People who are vulnerable to radicalization would be shielded from the temptation to join or explore a terrorist organization by offering resources regarding the actual teachings of the Quran, counseling, and various support networks (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, 2012). Participants of the study believe that governments, civil society organizations, and international organizations have created counter-narratives to counter extremist rhetoric in response to terrorist organizations' increasing use of social media for propaganda. Participants also agreed that counter-narratives provide alternative frames that prioritize peace, pluralism, and critical thinking while also working to undermine terrorist beliefs and delegitimize violence. To reach the same demographics that radicals target, these efforts frequently employ comparable digital resources, such as videos, infographics, personal narratives, and religious rhetoric. For example, the United States and the United Kingdom have backed programs like "Think Again, Turn Away" and "Extreme Dialogue," while Pakistan's National Counter Terrorism Authority (NACTA) has supported efforts that highlight interfaith peace and Islamic doctrines that forbid violence. Since the resistance to ISIS has grown in number along with the group's popularity, the ISIS OEC and extremist organizations in general have a tendency to be clandestine in their efforts to evade detection. Twitter now routinely finds and blocks user accounts linked to the group (Ross, Meek, & Ferran, 2015). Additionally, religious academics and ex-extremists have been employed as reliable sources to challenge the moral and theological justification of violent organizations. These narratives function by redefining grievances as amenable to peaceful resolution and by providing actual instances of the harm that extremist beliefs inflict on Muslim communities.

Counter-narratives' efficacy is still inconsistent and heavily context-dependent, nevertheless. Campaigns that are community-led, culturally grounded, and conveyed by reliable messengers have been shown to increase awareness and resilience among at-risk communities. However, many state-sponsored counter-narratives are perceived as being unauthentic and suspicious, particularly

by young people who already have a low regard for authority. Furthermore, fanatics are now skilled at dismissing counter-narratives as "propaganda" or products of Western ideology. One major drawback is that a lot of counter-narratives are reactive rather than proactive, ignoring the more profound appeals of terrorist propaganda that are focused on identification, psychology, and emotion. Furthermore, counter-narratives frequently lack the emotional resonance, viral appeal, and storytelling complexity of extreme content. Because of this, counter-narratives are an important weapon in the fight against terrorism, but they work best when combined with other tactics like community involvement, digital literacy, and systemic initiatives to resolve underlying issues. Dispelling terrorist doctrine has been shown to be a successful counter radicalization strategy. The validity of the aforementioned terror group would be called into question, which would reduce its target recruiter base and community of support, if the teachings it promotes are shown to be erroneous and an extreme distortion of Islam. Reasonable and accurate explanations of Islam have aided in reintegrating recruits into society as large. An effort to deradicalize prisoners in Saudi Arabia, for instance, has had significant outcomes. Social media, where the majority of the radicalization process takes place, ought to be the primary forum for this method (Briah, 2024).

Conclusion

Extremist and terrorist organizations are now greatly aided by social media. It provides previously unheard-of speed, reach, and affordability, but it also carries significant risks of violence, recruitment, radicalization, and mobilization. International collaboration, platform accountability, grassroots resilience, and a delicate balancing act between civil freedoms and security are all necessary to meet these problems. Due to disparate legal systems and cultural norms, the worldwide reach of the internet makes regulation challenging and makes jurisdictional enforcement challenging. Deplatforming also lessens visibility, but its long-term effects are limited because it frequently drives extremists to other platforms. Even though existing actions like content moderation, platform removal, and user education are important first steps in reducing these risks, ongoing difficulties striking a balance between security and freedom of expression, disparate legal systems, cultural differences between countries, and the changing strategies of terrorist organizations call for a more flexible and cooperative strategy to effectively combat these threats. In the end, reducing extremist usage of social media while maintaining its advantages for expression and connection will require a mix of technology, education, counter-narratives, and research-informed legislation.

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