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Radicalisation in the digital era

The use of the internet in 15 cases of terrorism and extremism

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Executive Summary

The internet has brought extensive change in peoples' lives. It has revolutionised how we communicate and simplified the way we create networks among like-minded individuals. We live in an era in which 84 per cent of the EU population use the internet daily, including 81 per cent of whom access it from home (Eurostat, 2012).

This development has led to important changes in the organisation and functioning of society, and as violent extremists and terrorists form part of this society, it is widely assumed that the internet plays a particular role as a tool of radicalisation (Aly, 2010; Awan, 2007; Friedland, 2009; O'Rourke, 2007; Tucker, 2010). There is, however, very limited evidence available to assess this assumption.

Testing hypotheses from the literature against primary data: the case of 15 terrorists and extremists

This paper presents the results from exploratory primary research into the role of the internet in the radicalisation of 15 terrorists and extremists in the UK. The 15 cases were identified by the research team together with the UK Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and UK Counter Terrorism Units (CTU). The research team gathered primary data relating to five extremist cases (the individuals were part of the Channel programme, a UK government intervention aimed at individuals identified by the police as vulnerable to violent extremism), and ten terrorist cases (convicted in the UK), all of which were anonymised. The team conducted interviews with the Senior Investigative Officers (SIOs) involved with the terrorists and Channel participants, and investigated the individuals' online behavior from data recovered by the police directly from the individuals' computers. The team then conducted a literature review and developed a number of hypotheses or assertions found in the literature on the role of the internet in the process of radicalisation. These hypotheses were tested using primary data from the above mentioned 15 cases.

The following five hypotheses identified in the literature were:

1. The internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised.
2. The internet acts as an 'echo chamber': a place where individuals find their ideas supported and echoed by other like-minded individuals
3. The internet accelerates the process of radicalisation.
4. The internet allows radicalisation to occur without physical contact.
5. The internet increases opportunities for self-radicalisation.

Findings

Evidence from the primary research conducted confirmed that the internet played a role in the radicalisation process of the violent extremists and terrorists whose cases we studied. The evidence enabled the research team to explore the extent to which the five main hypotheses that emerged from the literature in relation to the alleged role of the internet in radicalisation held in these case examinations. The summary findings are briefly presented here and discussed in greater detail in the full report that follows:

The internet creates more opportunities to become radicalised

Firstly, our research supports the suggestion that the internet may enhance opportunities to become radicalised, as a result of being available to many people, and enabling connection with like-minded individuals from across the world 24/7. For all 15 individuals that we researched, the internet had been a key source of information, communication and of propaganda for their extremist beliefs.

The internet acts as an ‘echo chamber’

Secondly, our research supports the suggestion that the internet may act as an ‘echo chamber’ for extremist beliefs; in other words, the internet may provide a greater opportunity than offline interactions to confirm existing beliefs.

The internet accelerates the process of radicalisation

This evidence does not necessarily support the suggestion that the internet accelerates radicalisation. Instead, the internet appears to facilitate this process, which, in turn, may or may not accelerate it.

The internet allows radicalisation to occur without physical contact

The evidence does not support the claim that the internet is replacing the need for individuals to meet in person during their radicalisation process. Instead, the evidence suggests that the internet is not a substitute for in-person meetings but, rather, complements in-person communication.

The internet increases opportunities for self-radicalisation

The evidence from this research does not support the suggestion that the internet has contributed to the development of self-radicalisation. In all the cases that we reviewed during our research, subjects had contact with other individuals, whether virtually or physically.

Recommendations and areas of future research

The results from this study are based on a small number of cases and because they constitute a convenience sample, their narratives will not necessarily reflect the way in which *all* violent extremists and terrorists use the internet during their radicalisation; however, it nonetheless allows us valuable insights relatively unexplored until now, and highlights the importance of cross-referencing, validating and challenging hypotheses from the literature with empirical evidence.

The first hand evidence gathered for this report confirmed that the internet was widely evident in the radicalisation process of violent extremists and terrorists who formed the sample for this study. The evidence enabled the research team to delve into this further, and to explore whether the five main hypotheses that emerged from the literature in relation to the supposed role of the internet in radicalisation held true in the cases studied. As indicated above, the primary evidence obtained in this

research supports the suggestion that *the internet may enhance opportunities to become radicalised*. While our research supports the suggestion that the internet has expanded opportunities for radicalisation and that it provides a means through which to filter material that is consistent with one's beliefs (the internet as an 'echo chamber'), our findings challenged other suggestions emerging from the literature. The detailed information to which the research team gained access suggested a sometimes different picture to some of the hypotheses put forward in the literature. The study therefore demonstrates the importance of gathering first hand evidence, or conducting primary research, to be able to gain a more complete picture of the role of the internet in radicalisation. The internet is one aspect of radicalisation, and it is essential for future research to look both online and offline to be able to understand the process as a whole.

Our findings suggest that this and other primary research could usefully inform the development of new strategies and policies, as well as the allocation of resources to address new security challenges raised by the internet and its role in radicalisation. This enhancing of understanding and informing policy and practice could be achieved through public-private collaborations, training and/or other initiatives.