

**CONVERGENCE IN THE CYBER SPACE:  
A STUDY ON ITS ROLE IN ONLINE RADICALIZATION**

by

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**Abstract:** *Radicalization is influencing a person towards extreme ideas. Convergence is defined as ‘the flow of content among multiple media platforms’. Convergence aids information dissemination and this trait is well-utilized by the individual terrorists (also known as lone wolves) as well as the terrorist organizations. Radicalization and its impact needs to be studied and analyzed for identifying innovative counter radicalization techniques and strategies that might aid in halting the proliferation of terrorism across the globe. Hence, the present paper aims to understand the role played by convergence in the cyber world that facilitates online radicalization process.*

**Keywords:** *Online Radicalization; Social Media; Convergence; Jihad; Online Media*

## **Introduction**

Radicalization is influencing a person towards extreme ideas. The terrorist organizations make use of various strategies to draw supporters for their terror activities, the youth being their special target. The spread and development of online media has given them extra strength. The content that aims to change the perceptions of the youth and draw them towards terrorism spreads much faster on Internet – it is termed online radicalization – when compared with any other medium.

Jenkins (2006) defines convergence as ‘the flow of content among multiple media platforms’. When the same or similar content flows through different media platforms, the possibility of it

reaching and influencing the media audience instantly gets increased. Convergence aids information dissemination and this trait is well-utilized by the individual terrorists (also known as lone wolves) as well as the terrorist organizations.

## **Radicalization**

The term 'Radicalization' has been subjected to varied definitions in the existing literature. Prior to 9/11, Radicalization was viewed as a social and psychological change or process that eventually leads to a violent non-State movement (Horgen, 2009). But after the 9/11 terror attack, the term has been widely associated with content or discourse related to terrorism and security issues especially in western countries, since the term gained momentum as a new area of epistemological enquiry. Choudhury (2007) argues that radicalization also involves a search for identity during a crisis situation. He suggested that in addition to exposure to radical content, the process can be linked to exclusion, displacement and poverty. The process was viewed to be aided by the development of idiosyncratic relationship between several vulnerable factors (Spaaij, 2011). In a similar fashion, the British government treats radicalization as an individual process in which connections with criminal networks facilitate conversion to radical ideas in order to overcome social exclusion and personal crisis (Huq, 2010). Halverson and Way (2012) conducted a case study featuring Colleen Renee LaRose— also known as Jihad Jane, an American citizen who was arrested in 2009 due to her connections in an Islamist terrorist plot. The study revealed that sustained discontent as a result of exclusion from the society became the basis of her online self – radicalization process.

## **Online Radicalization**

In the present digital era, online technologies serve as the primary source of entertainment, connectivity, and interaction for its audience. The continuous growth and usage of these technologies by people across the world, especially by the youth population worldwide, has got the attention of many terrorist organizations. The significant role played by the online media in the radicalization process including lone actor terrorism has been documented in several existing studies (such as Weimann, 2012; Raudler, 2014 and Peddell, et al 2016, to cite a few). Terrorists and extremists groups realized the dynamic nature of the new media platforms and have begun to utilize them in order to connect with the youth population of the cyber world intending to indoctrinate them with radical messages. The study titled 'Radicalization in the digital era - The Use of the Internet in 15 cases of Terrorism and Extremism' done by Von Behr et al (2013) showed that the internet created more opportunities to become radicalised, acting as an 'echo chamber' that accelerated the radicalization process without the requirement of physical contact. Additionally the study revealed that the internet heightened the chances of self – radicalization.

The absence of gatekeepers in the online medium makes it an effective option to be used for propaganda purposes engaging directly with like-minded people without any geographical constraints (Kaplan, 2010). Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) are being widely used

for terrorism by facilitating activities such as psychological warfare, publicity and propaganda, recruitment, planning and co-ordination, networking and fundraising, to name a few; with the initial two items being major areas of concern in terms of online applications (Weimann, 2004). Though internet is not yet used as a place to conduct full-fledged virtual training camps by terror groups, it is being intensively used as a resource bank that can be accessed by self-radicalized sympathizers (Rogan, 2006). Internet, thus serves as an ‘online terrorism university’ for developing self-taught radicals and terrorists by providing easy access to extremist content, information and resources (Weimann, 2006).

The use of online technologies by extremist and terror groups has started receiving more attention in the research communities. It is essential to analyze and investigate this area of study for identifying innovative counter radicalization techniques and strategies that might aid in halting the proliferation of terrorism across the globe (Bhui and Ibrahim, 2013). Hence, the present paper aims to understand the role played by convergence in the cyber world that facilitates online radicalization process.

### **Use of Online Tools for Radicalization**

Magdy (2016) has documented how Telegram – an instant messaging (IM) application - is being employed by the Islamic State (IS) to radicalize and recruit lone wolves across the globe. Ahmed (name changed), a young Muslim man living in the United Kingdom was a part of an IS public channel that promotes radical ideology in Telegram which had over 2000 members. He got connected with an IS recruiter through username of the recruiter, posted by the administrator of the channel. The unique security features of Telegram enables messages to be encrypted in such a way that it can be accessed only through the device in which the message was originated. In addition, Telegram also offers complete anonymity to its users where they are not required to share any personal details such as phone numbers for chatting or group subscription, only a username is required. Hence, these privacy-friendly features of Telegram have made it an ideal medium for the online radicalization and recruitment process by terror organizations.

Online applications, especially social networking platforms are claimed to be actively employed for spreading extremist propaganda and online recruitment of like-minded violent extremists present in the United States of America by terror groups (Muller, 2010). According to the 112<sup>th</sup> Congress Majority Investigative Report on ‘*Al Shabaab: Recruitment and Radicalization within the Muslim – American community and the threat to the Homeland*’, dozens of American were a part of homegrown terror plans in the United States and many have been killed in Somalia fighting for the terror organizations such as Al-Qaeda (U.S. House of Representatives, Committee on Homeland Security, 2011).

One major reason for the prevalence of Islamic extremism in the United States can be attributed to the active role played by many youth radicalizers in diverse online platforms. For instance, Samir Khan -an internet-savvy teenager- was observed to be an active online propagandist

supporting the ideologies of Al-Qaeda. He was involved in several online activities such as creation of a website named 'Inshallahshaheed' containing pro- Al-Qaeda content and posting extremist essays in English termed 'Jihad Recollection' through weblogs (Levin, 2015). In addition he had also edited Al-Qaeda's slick online magazine debuted in 2010 - *Inspire* - which was produced to target young men in English-speaking countries in order to induce self-radicalization. *Inspire* has a total of 13 editions and a manual entitled "How to make a Bomb in the Kitchen of your Mom" (Thompson, 2011; Sivek, 2013). Eventually Khan was killed along with his mentore - al Awlaki - in the September 2011 missile strike (Brown and Severson, 2011). Similar to Khan, Omar Hammami - a former school class president from Alabama - was identified to create and upload rap and recruitment videos glorifying killing and martyrdom (Elliot, 2010). Even Nidal Malik Hasan - the primary shooter involved in the Ford Hood massacre that occurred in 2009 - was found to have online connections with a Yemen-based radical mullah, Anwar Al-Awaki, playing the role of a "virtual spiritual sanctioner" (Lieberman, 2011).

Radical online magazines were also produced by Lashkar-e-Toiba particularly covering Asian countries stretching from Afghanistan to India. 'The voice of Islam' is one such magazine which covered the Kashmir conflict in an alternative way promoting global jihad. The magazine claimed that Islam is a universal religion which should be practiced by mankind across the globe, thereby extending the geographical landscape of the Islamic State (Roggio 2010; Shah, 2014).

A social connection that exists in online platforms is also observed to transcend the virtual space occasionally. A case study conducted by Ducol (2012) examining the French-speaking jihadi forum named Ansar al-Haqq using network analysis revealed that the forum was an extension of real-life radical network which constituted pre-existing social ties. Four members of the Ansar al-Haqq forum were arrested by the French police in April 2010 under the charge of incitement to terrorist violence. The only member freed after the arrest posted a testimony in the Ansar al-Haqq forum, claiming that he knew three of the other members who were arrested and revealed some details about their personal lives, mainly to gather sympathy and support for them.

### **Use of Social Media for Radicalization**

The ISIS can be profiled as a veteran in employing social media tools for radicalization and recruitment purposes. The strategic use of social media tools by the ISIS began with the use of twitter which was initially used by al-shabaab for recruitment purposes in Somalia. This activity later expanded exponentially to a wider level with the use of twitter as well as Facebook and dozens of other social platforms of the open web and the dark web (Cox, 2015) for the proliferation of organized propaganda content targeting a wider audience from diverse geographical areas (Berger and Morgan, 2016). Atwan (2015) claim that ISIS concentrate in social media platforms with the aim of building a cyber-Caliphate, also known as a digital Caliphate in support of its encroachment in Syria and Iraq.

In January 2014, the creation of Al-Battar Media Battalion – a team formed to spread radical jihadicontent and ISIS propaganda using twitter – was announced. The radical content generally included content, images or videos highlighting the violence experienced by non-believers including beheadings (Fernandez, 2015). These content are aimed at young and vulnerable individuals who feel socially isolated from the real world and tied to their devices such as smartphones or computers. Social Media platforms created a direct communication channel for the ISIS for reaching the youth resulting in high intensity of youth recruits having an average age of 27 (Dodwell, Milton and Ressler, 2016).

The use of social technologies by the ISIS is claimed to have an outrageous impact, having almost 27,000 to 31,000 foreign fighter recruits of which approximately 250 of them are thought to have come from the United States (Barrett, 2015). Also, people are claimed to be recruited for supporting the cause by Swearing bayah or allegiance online as a form of commitment to ISIS's jihad, if not for fighting (Greenberg, 2016).

In addition to the use of social networking sites such as Twitter and Facebook as propaganda and recruitment tools, the blogosphere is also documented to play a role in the online radicalization process. For instance, right-wing blog named 'Gates of Vienna'(Powers, 2014;)was observed to play a crucial role in radicalizing Anders Breivik – a Norwegian terrorist who committed the 2011 Norway attacks which killed almost 69 people in Oslo ( the capital city of Norway).

## **Conclusion**

Convergence enables multiple media and content to come together. While this largely benefits media practitioners and users, online media-which enables convergence of all the media in it-has become a tool in the hands of the terrorist organizations. They employ various techniques to pass on their well-designed propaganda to the younger generation. A thorough study of their online strategies reveals that the attractive features of social media help them in effortlessly reaching their target audience. Still, the very same online and social media provide various ways to tilt the opinion of the youth and to protect them from the evil designs of the terrorist organizations. The need of the hour is that the governments across the world should immediately rise to the occasion and effectively formulate the counter-radicalization measures which could be successfully implement through the online media.

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